

Alternative Futures Project Evaluation

An effective and vital project for those experiencing detrimental mental health problems.



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“Our evaluation finds that Cyrenians’ mental health project, Alternative Futures, is providing accessible and vital mental health support with significant long-term results for beneficiaries.

Alternative Futures sits advantageously within Cambridge Cyrenians’ service offering. The organisation’s role as an essential and proactive service provider and partner is self-evident. The organisation has a valued role in tackling Cambridge’s constantly increasing levels of homelessness.

Alternative Futures provides person led high-quality mental health support, without the relentless appointments, referrals and eligibility criteria that feature within so many other services for homeless individuals and which can create further obstacles for them in obtaining the right support.

The approach undertaken has proven to be highly successful in the eyes of the beneficiaries it has supported; more widely, it is a service model that other providers locally are beginning to adopt.

The Alternative Futures Project is highly impressive creating lasting, meaningful change for the beneficiaries, supporting them to build confidence, self-esteem and manage their mental health on a day-to-day basis, improving their overall wellbeing. The project has exceeded the outcomes and output targets, meeting all of the four major outcomes.”

Dot to Dot Training & Consultancy, June 2021

Beneficiary Comments

"I found having someone to listen in a non-judgemental way with professional knowledge of mental health issues like anxiety and low self-esteem really helped me to overcome these difficulties."

"I feel really settled. The Cyrenians' support team are so useful and helpful whenever needed; the support is really beneficial and not everyone needs it, but I did. I needed lots of support when I first moved in."

"The Cyrenians support is excellent, they really take an interest. It feels like a real home to me and not just a hostel. Cyrenians are amazing and really helped me."

"I cannot express my eternal gratitude to Cyrenians and more importantly, their mental health practitioner for helping me process and overcome the issues caused by homelessness."

"I feel really settled in the house with it being women only and I feel very relaxed. The Project workers welcomed me and I instantly felt at home here."

"Every time I have needed support, the Cyrenians team have given it; for example, helping me to order a birth certificate to help me with employment."

Beneficiary Comments

“In my opinion, Cyrenians were brilliant, and I thank everyone who has been a part of my journey to help me gain independence again.”

“I have benefitted from the mental health practitioner’s work; so now I am alive – thanks to her – I was half dead before! My depression has been diagnosed recently as ‘mild’. This was a drop from very ‘high’.”

“Being able to see a mental health professional through Cambridge Cyrenians has been priceless for me. When I arrived at Cyrenians, I was suffering from an emotional break down, anxiety and stress. I was lucky to be referred to the mental health practitioner. She taught me breathing techniques for anxiety, mindfulness and positive thinking, but most importantly I was listened to.”

“Since working with Cyrenians’ Mental Health practitioner, I have completed a business course; I have represented myself in family court and I have started a part-time cleaning job. I am getting ready to live on my own again.”

“My mental wellbeing has vastly improved while attending the Cyrenians’ mental health service. I was able to attend group meetings and one-to-one appointments. The mental health practitioner assisted me to write my life story, which helped me to process all I have seen and experienced. This led me to gain a valuable place in rehab treatment and begin to rebuild my future.”

“The Cyrenians team have helped me with bedding and lots of items that have made me feel at home, instantly.”

About Cambridge Cyrenians

Cambridge Cyrenians was founded in 1970 to provide an alternative to hostel accommodation for individuals with experience of homelessness in Cambridge. In 2020, Cambridge Cyrenians marked their 50th year of working alongside the homeless community in Cambridge. Cambridge Cyrenians' broad aims are:

- **To offer a genuine alternative to hostel accommodation for single homeless individuals.**
- **To serve those who are homeless or vulnerable to homelessness and to make a positive difference to the quality of their lives.**
- **To raise awareness among the general public of homelessness and the work of Cambridge Cyrenians.**
- **To raise awareness among commissioners of services for homeless people of the work of Cambridge Cyrenians.**

Cambridge Cyrenians currently support over 230 residents and beneficiaries per year. 103 accommodation units providing supported housing and move on accommodation, 35 spaces in their older people's housing service. Alongside, 30 who access the organisation's therapeutic allotment project, these beneficiaries are a combination of residents and service users from other homeless sector services.

The supported housing element is the organisation's largest income stream, the operating budget for the organisation is just over £1 million per annum.

During the lifespan of the Alternative Future Project grant, Cyrenians have expanded significantly, with the number of residents increasing from 68 in 2015 to 103 in 2021. In addition, unlike the homeless sector more widely, Cyrenians' occupation levels are consistently high in 2020-21 as these were maintained at 97%.

While this increase in number may not seem huge in comparison to larger housing providers, for Cyrenians, this represents a percentage increase of 51%. This increase demonstrates Cyrenians' ambition, adaptability, dedication and responsiveness to need.

The levels of homelessness in Cambridge since 2010 have dramatically increased and the responsiveness of small voluntary organisations such as Cyrenians has proved to be an enormous asset in the joint response to an increasing number of homeless individuals. In addition, Cyrenians are dealing with a much higher proportion of complex cases than previously experienced.

The organisation and the leadership are held in high regard by their partners. Cambridge Cyrenians are an integral part of the homeless sector contributing to multi-agency working at a City and County level. It works in partnership with over forty voluntary and public sector organisations.

“I have seen how complex and varied the problems are of those to whom the Cyrenians offer assistance. There is no other organisational equivalent as far as I can tell.”

Dr Liz Belham, Cambridge Access Surgery

About the Evaluators

Dot to Dot Training and Consultancy were commissioned to conduct an external evaluation of Cambridge Cyrenians' flagship mental health project entitled: Alternative Futures.

Dot to Dot Training and Consultancy is led by Simon Pickering who has a long track record working within the Youth and Homeless Sectors. In the last six years, he has delivered in excess of 15 external evaluation reports.

Dot to Dot have supported over fifty organisations to improve their monitoring and evaluation practices and increase their income respectively since the company's founding in 2015.

Dot to Dot provides a bespoke and diverse range of services to Charities and Social Enterprises in the VCSEF Sector (Voluntary Community Social Enterprise and Faith).



The Alternative Futures Project

The Alternative Futures Project was developed in 2017 as a direct response to the reduction of publicly funded services in Mental Health and developed in co-production with Cyrenians' residents. Cyrenians built up evidence of need in the three years leading up to securing a Reaching Communities grant in 2017. This early research identified that:

- 70% of the ex-offenders the organisation housed claimed Employment Support Allowance/ Universal Credit due to mental health issues.
- 60% of those were also misusing drugs and/or alcohol.

Furthermore, residents with an assessed mental health need were significantly more likely to be evicted, hospitalised or return to prison, even whilst living in supported housing. Cyrenians staff found that the residents commonly self-harmed or overdosed to bring relief or draw attention to themselves, which in turn would reveal deeper, underlying and often undiagnosed mental health issues.

Ex-offenders with assessed mental health issues were found to spend two to five times longer in temporary housing than those without a diagnosis. The project employs one full time Mental Health Practitioner who performs a number of key functions:

- Provides an in-house and easy-to-engage mental health professional who is able to give responsive support to residents.
- Acts as a gatekeeper and sign poster for Cyrenians residents who need mental health support or diagnosis.
- Can work in tandem with the wider support staff team and management at Cyrenians to provide more holistic mental health support.

The project is currently in the final year of a four-year Reaching Communities grant, a Lottery Community Fund grant stream. The project is due to complete in July 2021.

Who the Project Helps

The Alternative Futures Project supports homeless individuals, including those that have been recently released from prison, to access high quality mental health support directly through Cyrenians. The Alternative Futures Project meets a substantial gap in mental health services for Cyrenians' beneficiaries.

Cyrenians identified that traditional routes to gain assessment and diagnosis was slow and time consuming, with a high number of beneficiaries not meeting the increasingly high threshold for Mental Health often meaning that issues would go und dealt with until they reached crisis point.

Crisis point would mostly culminate in an individual being sectioned, self-harming, attempting suicide or reoffending to deal with their worsening mental health.

The beneficiaries of the project face significant barriers with regard to their mental health including anxiety, depression, personality disorders and psychosis and dual diagnosis.

The Alternative Futures Project is fast, responsive and professionally resourced with a full-time mental health practitioner who leads the project, completing assessments, communicating and signposting to partners, alongside providing one-to-one support sessions within Cyrenians' properties and in the community.

The complex and lived experience of Cyrenians residents means that an intervention of The Alternative Futures Project needs to be reactive and accessible. The full-time mental health practitioner compliments the support team at Cyrenians on a daily basis and ensures that residents receive the right support and mental health intervention in a timely and consistent manner.

The Alternative Futures Project supports individuals with lived experience of homelessness and those released from prison. Supporting individuals with complex and exceptionally challenging mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, personality disorders, psychosis and dual diagnosis.

Monitoring & Evaluation

The Alternative Futures Project is evaluated within Cyrenians existing monitoring framework that includes:

- Cyrenians yearly residents survey
- Residents' direct feedback to The Alternative Futures Project practitioner
- Individual feedback
- Monitoring of referrals received and referrals made to partner organisations
- Number of sessions of one-to-one and group work delivered by the mental health practitioner.

The Alternative Futures Project Outcomes

Outcome 1:

Homeless ex-offenders will report improved mental health and wellbeing.

Outcome 2:

Clients will report improved interpersonal skills such as confidence, self-esteem and coping strategies, leading to reduced offending and substance misuse.

Outcome 3:

A reduction in the number being sectioned, evicted or returning to prison leads to less demand on the 'crisis' in public services.

Outcome 4:

Cyrenians as an organisation has increased organisational capabilities.

Homelessness & Mental Health

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic homelessness has grown consistently since 2010. In addition to increasing levels of homelessness, there have been a number of notable research reports that reference the considerable correlation between homelessness and mental health issues.

The issue still remains challenging and overlooked. The dual-diagnosis approach widely adopted in the sector has been positive however the statistics for mental health and homelessness remain startling:

- 80% of homeless people in England reported that they had mental health issues, with 45% having been diagnosed with a mental health condition.

- Studies have reported a higher prevalence of mental health problems in the homeless population in comparison to the general population, including major depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Statistics suggest the prevalence of mental health conditions in this population to be at least 25–30% of the street homeless and those in direct access hostels.

- The most prevalent health problems among homeless individuals are substance misuse (62.5%), mental health problems (53.7%) or a combination of the two (42.6%). In England, given that these problems are causally linked with homelessness, they add significantly more costs to homelessness due to the need for health and social care support.

- 26% of homeless people cite mental health problems as the primary reason for being homeless; this is double the percentage of that in the rest of the EU.

Research dated 2014 is the most comprehensive and detailed study completed specifically focussed on the homeless sector. Homeless Link's "The Unhealthy state of homelessness: Health and audit results 2014":

<https://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/all-research-reports/homelessness-and-health-research>

Evaluation Methodology

The Alternative Futures Project evaluation was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and this is reflected in the chosen methodology for the evaluation in the data gathering process. As evaluators, we carefully selected the adopted methodology carefully in conjunction with Cyrenians and their beneficiaries.

Our perspective was that conducting focus groups with beneficiaries was not appropriate, given the complex nature of homelessness and individuals experiencing severe mental health issues. Beneficiaries were consulted by Cyrenians' support staff who confirmed that they would prefer to participate in one-to-one phone interviews led by the external evaluators.

Beneficiary Surveys

As part of the Cyrenians' annual survey with all beneficiaries, a section on Mental Health and Wellbeing was included in order to gain valuable insights from a broader range of Cyrenians beneficiaries.

Beneficiary Interview

In addition to the approach outlined above, the evaluator completed 15 one-to-one beneficiary interviews with current and former beneficiaries. These interviews have formed the basis of the qualitative data, insight and feedback for this evaluation.

Partner Surveys

We completed a partners' survey to collate evidence on the importance of mental health support for those experiencing homelessness. We were eager to learn more about Cyrenians' position and the quality of their relationships in terms of partnership working.

Desktop Review

We conducted a desktop review of documentation supplied by Cyrenians, including annual reviews and organisational reviews. In addition, we completed a desktop review of national research, documents and evidence related to homelessness and mental health.



Case Studies

Rachel's Story

Rachel had been on and off homeless since she was sixteen. Her first major term of homelessness was between 16-19 years old; the pattern of homelessness continued into her twenties. She was unable to sustain accommodation for longer periods of time; she had been in and out of the majority of supported housing projects in Cambridge during this period of her life.

At 26, Rachel moved into a Cyrenians property and received support from her Cyrenians Project worker. She struggles with trusting people and has been diagnosed with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) developed from her time living on the streets and being involved in an abusive relationship.

Rachel was immediately introduced to Cyrenians' mental health worker and began seeing her regularly. The regularity of these appointments was a success in itself, as Rachel didn't trust 'people from the system'.

"The mental health practitioner has been a real friend to me, not just another professional. The service she provided and the wider support provided by Cyrenians has been the best service I have ever been through in terms of housing and homelessness."

As a result of the support received from the mental health service, Rachel has managed to maintain her accommodation. She stated that the improvement in her mental health has contributed to improving her physical health and her entire outlook on life.

"Cyrenians have made a real difference in my life. I know that I could go to them at any point for help and they would offer it gladly. The management have been so good to me, helped me to become independent. For me personally, the mental health support provided by the mental health practitioner sparked the change for me personally."

"Cyrenians should do loads more of this sort of stuff - it's been brilliant for me and so many others, not having to fight the system and go to appointments at scary new places. The mental health practitioner really worked with me from where I was and I never felt pressured to engage with her. Towards the end, we used to meet for coffee and I looked forward to these meetings - helped me immeasurably to move forward and become settled at last."

Case Studies

Ellie's Story

Ellie moved into one of Cyrenians' women only houses in December 2019. Ellie became street homeless through a combination of circumstances which included debt, an abusive relationship that turned violent and declining mental health.

Ellie ended up sofa surfing and sleeping rough before being offered a place within a local hostel. Ellie said: "I found the hostel environment very difficult; the staff were brilliant but I was surrounded by men, in an environment that I found very intimidating. I stayed in the hostel waiting for a room at Cyrenians to be offered to me."

Ellie is now settled into the shared house, where she receives support from the Cyrenians Team, including the mental health team who promptly supported her when she first moved into the house. She is feeling more confident and positive about the future as a result of her time living in the house.

Ellie said: "Cyrenians has been the right sort of place for me. I feel really settled and I have been through therapy. I moved in on Friday and the following Monday I had my first counselling session which has really helped me while I sought help from outside agencies; it so valuable. The homelessness system causes so many mental health issues, so this is really valuable to help overcome the difficulties with the support of Cyrenians."

Case Studies

Dominic's Story

Dominic was living in a Cyrenians property when three years ago his Project worker visited him as part of their weekly support visits. Dominic wasn't coping well; he couldn't touch the walls, was constantly hand washing and had covered his room in clingfilm. It was very clear that something was not right; he had considered suicide and the situation was very serious.

His Project worker referred him to the Alternative Futures Project where he received support straightaway. Over time he began to improve. The mental health practitioner worked with him to treat his whole body and supported him with some of the immediate barriers he had to overcome, including gaining important ID documents that he had lost.

Dominic said when asked what the biggest difference the support had made: "The difference for me is huge; I was suicidal and homeless. Without Cyrenians, I wouldn't have survived. They helped me a great deal."

"I now feel more equipped to manage my mental health and avoid crisis point again in the future. I feel lucky to have had Cyrenians and their mental health service at the time that I did. I honestly don't think this service could be any better; they offered me far more than a room - their care and support has had such an impact on me."

Dominic is now doing well; he has maintained his accommodation and is in the process of bidding on properties to move onto independent accommodation.

Case Studies

Steven's Story

Steven returned from working abroad in 2012 where he worked as a head chef; he spent a number of years in sofa surfing and street homeless without asking for help because of the stigma and the thought of going into a hostel was too much for him. Eventually, he got into a privately rented flat but he couldn't afford to keep up the rent which meant he returned to homelessness.

Steven lived in a Cyrenians house from September 2017 until December 2020 when he secured, with support from Cyrenians, a social housing flat in Cambridge.

The period from 2012 to 2017 had had a hugely detrimental impact on Steven's mental health. He spent three months feeling isolated and felt that there was no future for him.

Steven said: "Cyrenians are amazing and really helped me. I didn't see my children for three years and I missed them so much. The mental health practitioner at Cyrenians helped me to go to family court to gain access to my children again. When I first moved into the Cyrenians house, I was stressed and found myself snapping at everyone. I did not realise I was suffering a mental breakdown as a result of my life experiences. I could not continue to work in that emotional state. I was lucky enough to meet Cyrenians' Mental Health practitioner; her help was invaluable to me."

"Alongside helping me achieve my transition into my own place, navigating the overly complex social housing process, Cyrenians helped me to complete a gardening and business course which boosted my confidence and self-esteem hugely."



“Cyrenians should do loads more of this sort of stuff – it’s been brilliant for me and so many others, not having to fight the system and go to appointments at scary new places. The mental health practitioner really worked with me from where I was and I never felt pressured to engage with her. Towards the end, we used to meet for coffee and I looked forward to these meetings – helped me immeasurably to move forward and become settled at last.”

Rachel

Findings

According to research, poor mental wellbeing and more severe mental diagnosis have risen sharply within the homeless sector. Within the homeless sector, poor mental wellbeing is common with national homeless charity, Homeless Link, estimating 80% of homeless individuals have poor mental health, with 26% attributing poor mental health as their primary cause of homelessness.

Cambridge Cyrenians have supported 564 unique individuals with accommodation and support between 2017-21. In that same timeframe, The Alternative Futures Project has supported 170 people, equating to 30% of all Cyrenians' beneficiaries requiring higher level mental health support from the project.

The Alternative Futures Project has performed exceptionally well, especially in light of the delayed project start due to the challenge of recruiting a qualified Mental Health Nurse and the need to refresh the project budget. In addition, the beneficiary numbers in 2020-21 are reflective of the adapted service delivered in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

As evaluators conducting beneficiary interviews the majority communicated the importance and value The Alternative Futures Project provided during the Covid-19 pandemic and it was widely noted that beneficiaries faced increasing pressures as a result of multiple lockdowns.

It was noted that clients have access to a wider range of complementary services (activities, courses, social opportunities etc.) as a result of The Alternative Futures Project.

In year two of the project, the chosen monitoring

and evaluation tool WEMWBS was abandoned in direct response to beneficiary feedback. Beneficiaries reported that it was jarring and not complementary to the overall ethos and approach of Cyrenians. This demonstrates the organisation's ability to be beneficiary-led at all times, coupled with a determination to be a genuine alternative to the hostel and other sector providers.

Beneficiaries clearly communicated that use of WEMWBS was a barrier to engagement and that it did not reflect the value, nature and approach experienced. The main reflection was that Cyrenians' residents had been 'through the system' and they wanted to differentiate their approach in working with beneficiaries. The organisation wanted the project to be more closely focussed on how the project could work with people, rather than to make beneficiaries fit into a pre-set model of monitoring that was not beneficiary-led.

Findings from Beneficiary Interviews

One interviewee who had previously spent time in a psychiatric hospital and recently had significant mental health difficulties said: ‘It was nice to know there was someone you could talk to who was there in the good times and didn’t just wait for things to get bad. It’s the sort of support I could have done with last year before I came to Cyrenians - the ability to pick up the phone and get support has been so beneficial to me.’

The beneficiaries interviewed all talked about the obstacles they experienced in accessing statutory services such as their incompatibility with local primary care trust eligibility criteria and the lack of compatibility with the specific issues (including dual diagnosis and substance misuse) and associated medications.

Beneficiaries referenced the importance of the support the mental health practitioner gave them in negotiating ‘the system’ to find the right support. A high number mentioned the value the mental health practitioner offered attending appointments with them to advocate on their behalf, often in environments perceived to be intimidating.

It was evidently clear that the practical nature of the delivery approach adopted contributed significantly to the project’s impact beneficiaries; for example, by attending family court or assisting with obtaining ID documents. These interactions may seem inconsequential but to the individual beneficiaries, they were perceived as primary reasons or contributors to their poor mental wellbeing.

The approach of embedding mental health practices into daily support tasks to enable beneficiaries to implement the tools learnt or provided by the mental health practitioner is a compelling asset to the project’s approach and overall success.

There was a strong sense of learning new skills to build healthy independent lives as part of the project. Beneficiaries made it clear that this approach had significantly helped them and had not been part of their experience in other services, where the majority adopt a more traditional therapy approach.

It was noted that clients told us about the importance of having access to a wider range of complementary services, including activities such as the therapeutic allotment, alongside courses and social opportunities. A number talked about how the mental health practitioner had encouraged them to participate.

Some beneficiaries mentioned that they found the transition out of The Alternative Futures Project difficult as the level of support reduced once they were well enough; a number mentioned that the addition of step down support would have been beneficial to them.

Case Studies

Alan's Story

Alan formerly had a good job in London, was married with two children and life was comfortable. He began to drink heavily which eventually led to his relationship breaking down and losing his job. He then went into a downward spiral spending three terms in prison (twelve months overall). On release the third time, he was homeless. He was offered a space in a hostel in Cambridge for a week before being offered accommodation at Cyrenians.

“When I arrived at Cyrenians I was struggling big time - I was suicidal, not taking my medication. The support team got me to see the mental health practitioner straight away. I didn't think it would make a difference but it did big time - she was down to earth, straight talking and encouraging. She got me taking my medication again after crying regularly and several attempts at committing suicide.”

Alan referenced the high quality, person centred approach as being one of the key unique features of the Alternative Futures Project. He stated how difficult it was to be seen for mental health related issues as a single homeless person and that the support he received from the mental health practitioner was paramount to his recovery and staying out of prison again – the path that he thought he would now stay on.

“The mental health practitioner helped me to rebuild my life; she supported me seven times at family court so that I could reconnect with my children, then helped me to be re-banded for housing which meant I gained my own place again that enabled me to have my kid. Slowly, over a period of time, she helped me. It was amazing. I think we should have more workers like her within Cyrenians. It wasn't sitting down therapy: we used to

meet and work alongside one another at Cyrenians' allotment project”.

While Alan still struggles with his mental health, the severity is far lower and he is now looking for work and is wanting to work in the support housing sector to help others benefit from his lived experience.

Case Studies

Peter's Story

Peter came to Cambridge in 2010 following the death of his partner and another set of family deaths. He was homeless; he was in hostel accommodation before being offered accommodation in a Cyrenians' property.

In the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in 2020, he was diagnosed with anxiety and paranoid schizophrenia. At this point he self-referred to the service as he knew he needed help.

He said: "It really helped me. I didn't have to wait weeks and months for support; it started straight away. The mental health practitioner taught me some valuable tools and techniques to help me cope, for example breathing techniques that I

knew nothing about. If I do feel anxious or hear voices, I know these as warning signs. The mental health practitioner supported me to attend important medical appointments - to have gone through all of this alone and in isolation would have been unbearable."

"The project and support have helped me greatly; the tools and coping strategies they gave me, I couldn't have done without. My mental health issues really impacted the housemates that I share with and the mental health practitioner and the Project workers have done so much to help us all live together successfully, even with the mental health challenges I have."

Case Studies

Adam's Story

Adam was released from prison into Cyrenians' Jubilee offender project in June 2019, moving out in May 2021. He worked with the mental health practitioner the whole time he stayed in the Jubilee project, seeing her weekly at the accommodation.

"The mental health practitioner was very compassionate and easy to talk to; she helped me practically with forms, getting the right medication and sorted out lots of issues that I was having. With this weight shared with her, I began to be able to process all the baggage I was carrying around with me. The mental health practitioner encouraged me to work at the allotment with her. I started to feel more confident leaving the accommodation, something that I really struggled with. I have been in and out of prison my entire adult life; she got me to shift my mindset from living between times inside to think more long term that wasn't necessarily the compulsory path for my life."

Adam found living in supported accommodation very difficult and he credited the mental health support he received as having been the most impactful aspect of being with Cyrenians. He stated that by working with the mental health practitioner he learnt to manage himself positively.

"I felt very isolated when I first got released and went into Jimmy's, then at Jubilee I was very withdrawn and rarely left my room. Working with The mental health practitioner and the mental health service made me think differently. I wouldn't change any aspect of it; it's been a life saver for me and many others - Thank you."

Case Studies

Alex's Story

Alex was originally from Cambridgeshire. Following a separation from his partner, he relocated to Plymouth to have a fresh start but after two years he was sentenced to prison for assault of his new partner.

On release he returned to Cambridge and was accommodated in Cyrenians' Jubilee project. He found it was not an easy place to live. He had not previously been through the prison system and he found it very difficult living in.

Alex stayed in a number of Cyrenians' properties as he progressed towards independent living again over a three to four-year period. Alex was referred to the Alternative Futures Project as his Project worker identified he was struggling with his mental health.

"Cyrenians and the Alternative Futures Project are inseparable from each other; they are so complementary to each other"

Alex was supported by the project initially to explore a diagnosis for Asperger's; the process led him to be diagnosed with ADHD. The mental health practitioner and his Project worker then worked with Alex to build structures around him to help manage these diagnoses.

"The mental health practitioner would meet with me every week without fail; we met in Costa as I needed to be away from my surroundings where I was living to talk properly. If anything, I was difficult for them to work with; however, they could not have done more to help me - I am very grateful."

Case Studies

James' Story

James returned from working abroad in 2012 where he worked as a head chef; he spent a number of years in sofa surfing and street homeless without asking for help because of the stigma and the thought of going into a hostel was too much for him. Eventually, he got into a privately rented flat but he couldn't afford to keep up the rent which meant he returned to homelessness.

James lived in a Cyrenians house from September 2017 until December 2020 when he secured, with support from Cyrenians, a social housing flat in Cambridge.

The period from 2012 to 2017 had had a hugely detrimental impact on James' mental health. He spent three months feeling isolated and felt that there was no future for him.

James said: "Cyrenians are amazing and really helped me. I didn't see my children for three years and I missed them so much. The mental health practitioner at Cyrenians helped me to go to family court to gain access to my children again. When I first moved into the Cyrenians house, I was stressed and found myself snapping at everyone. I did not realise I was suffering a mental breakdown as a result of my life experiences. I could not continue to work in that emotional state. I was lucky enough to meet Cyrenians' Mental Health practitioner; her help was invaluable to me."

"Alongside helping me achieve my transition into my own place, navigating the overly complex social housing process, Cyrenians helped me to complete a gardening and business course which boosted my confidence and self-esteem hugely."

Findings from Partners

A broad range of Cyrenians' partners across the spectrum of public and voluntary sector organisations were asked to contribute to an online survey identifying their view on the strengths of The Alternative Futures Project.

The fourteen received were very positive, with all partners describing Cyrenians' services as 'excellent'; thereby they clearly communicated an enormous level of respect for Cyrenians and the mental health project. The importance of mental health support and solutions was highlighted by all the partners.

"Working as a GP for people who are homeless, there is a huge unmet need around mental health. Some patients have a clear mental health diagnosis, others do not, but suffer from mental health issues often related to past emotional

traumas in their life. It can be hard to get people the help and support that is needed. Having a Community Practitioner Nurse working with Cyrenians gives them direct and immediate access to this help. It is invaluable."

GP, Cambridge Access Surgery

"I have seen how complex and varied the problems are of those to whom the Cyrenians offer assistance. There is no other organisational equivalent as far as I can tell. Supporting the Cyrenians is supporting community values, plus allowing for vulnerable adults to find a place where they can grow and learn how to believe in a better future." **Manager, Counting Every Adult**

"Cyrenians not only solve the short-term issue of homelessness. They aim to equip their service users with the life skills necessary to successfully move on to independent living."

Volunteer Counsellor

Findings from Partners

“The mental health service is valuable as it allows individuals with underlying mental health difficulties to be triaged and offered support without having to go through a complex referral/assessment process which people are often unable to complete or thresholds [are] too high for a service to be offered.” **Manager, CPFT - DDSP**

“As mental health is integral to the problem of homelessness, services like these in accommodation settings are vital to ensure residents get the right support from a qualified professional for their mental health in order to maintain their tenancy and move on through the housing pathway to independent living. We need more of these types of services in accommodation providers.” **Services Manager, Wintercomfort for the homeless**

Partners form an essential part of the Alternative Futures Project; the mental health practitioner has

established an excellent reputation with medical and therapeutic service providers locally. Having a full time qualified mental health practitioner is a significant asset to the project’s success.

Partners have fed back that Cyrenians having a qualified practitioner has enabled them to work more closely together to ensure Cyrenians’ residents get the right support from the right partner. However, it’s worth noting that this is getting more difficult to achieve especially with public sector partners.

Partners communicated that the practical approach and accessibility is a powerful element of the project’s success. A number of partners cited the project’s mental health practitioner’s accessibility and approach as a key driver behind the beneficiaries’ willingness to engage in the project and the support offered.

Exceeding Outcomes & Outputs

Outcome One:

Homeless ex-offenders will report improved mental health and wellbeing.

Overall, 95% of beneficiaries interviewed reported an improvement in their mental wellbeing. They cited examples such as being active and taking more control of their lives, increasing their sense of self-agency.

Outcome Two:

Clients will report improved interpersonal skills such as confidence, self-esteem and coping strategies leading to reduced offending and substance misuse.

Overall, 90% of beneficiaries interviewed reported an improvement in their confidence and self-esteem, with a high number referencing the coping skills the mental health practitioner taught them. The overall sense from the fifteen one-to-one interviews conducted was that the project had contributed to beneficiaries, improving their physical health, reducing their offending and helping them to manage their substance misuse.



Exceeding Outcomes & Outputs

Outcome Three:

A reduction in the number being sectioned, evicted or returning to prison leads to less demand on the 'crisis' in public services.

Outcome three has been difficult to build reliable evidence for as it appears beyond the scope and reach of the Alternative Futures Project. A correlation is evident for the individuals the project has supported who have not been sectioned, evicted or returned to prison as a direct result of the project - however the data is not robust enough to apply any reliable statistics.

Outcome Four:

Cyrenians as an organisation has increased capabilities.

Integral to achieving this outcome to increase Cyrenians' organisational capabilities, an organisational review was conducted by Charity Fundraising Limited with a final report presented in January 2018. The organisational review enabled the leadership and trustee of Cyrenians to have an opportunity for reflection, which has led to the growth and success for Cyrenians.

Year:	Beneficiaries actual:	Beneficiaries target:
Year 1 - 2017-18 (2 Quarters)	23	40
Year 2 - 2018-19	63	40
Year 3 - 2019-20	50	40
Year 4 - 2020-21 (3 Quarters)	34	40
Total:	170	160

Exceeding Outcomes & Outputs

The Alternative Futures Project has exceeded the project's output and outcome requirements for the Reaching Communities grant that supports the project.

The Alternative Futures project supports individuals with complex and very often multiple needs in relation to their mental health. The mental health practitioner operates an effective system of support based upon an assessment of each individual's needs. Following assessment, the level of support is tailored to their need. More complex need beneficiaries receive in the region of three hours of support per week.

The complex nature and the layers of multiple need mean the project outcomes are smaller than a less specialist service. Moreover, the longer-term progress and outcomes are found to be richer and more wide-ranging as a result.

3

successfully made applications to the family court/CAFCAS for access to their children.

10

moved into independent accommodation

6

successfully won appeals and tribunal hearings in relation to their benefits, based on their mental health needs rather than physical wellbeing.

20

engaged in additional meaningful activities to improve their mental and physical wellbeing.

Recommendations

Funding

The Alternative Futures Project is evidently excellent value for money and returns enormous value for beneficiaries. Furthermore, the Project contributes to reducing the number of individuals who are sectioned, imprisoned or return to street homelessness.

The recommendation is to seek further funding to maintain the project and continue to provide timely interventions to those who are at the highest need. The current project was delivered on a budget of £152,681 which represents just £38,170 per annum - a relatively smaller amount compared to £44,600 per

year for an individual held in prison (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1202172/cost-per-prisoner-england-and-wales/>) or the high cost to the NHS for an individual being accommodated in a mental health unit at an average cost of £3,003 per week (Cost of an enforced detention in a mental health unit: <https://www.cchr.org.uk/cost-detained-psychiatric-ward-treated/>).

Recommendations

Monitoring & Evaluation

The outcomes selected for the project are not individualised enough and are too broad to produce reliable evidence to support their achievement. We would suggest that the outcomes of a continuation project were revised and made more measurable, quantifiable and focussed in the impact the project will have on beneficiaries rather than the wider 'system' or society which is more challenging to measure reliably.

Lack of reporting and monitoring/impact and value added is real down side to this overall project. It's clear that the project is delivering above expectation and there are far more outcomes and outputs than this evaluation has been able to evidence. We entirely understand why the initial impact monitoring plans were abandoned, however there is scope to introduce a more realistic and suitable monitoring plan. More widely within Cyrenians the development of a Theory of Change model would add overall value monitoring and evaluation.

Recommendations Summary

1.

Seek continuation funding to support the delivery of the highly valuable Alternative Futures Project. In new funding applications, ensure the learning and key evaluation recommendations are adopted.

2.

Explore ways to further develop the voice and impact of beneficiaries with lived experience in shaping and developing the future of the project.

3.

Develop a robust and clear impact measurement framework for the project to enhance monitoring and evaluation with a meaningful and evidence-based approach. Hence the project's outcomes and achievement are more clearly captured and communicated.

4.

Consider the value added by the development of a Theory of Change -what it would bring to the project and the wider organisation impact reporting.

5.

Explore how the project could be delivered in closer partnership with other homeless sector organisations locally.

6.

Explore how the project could be extended to further support beneficiaries whose mental health has improved and no longer require such intensive support, through the possibility of a befriending project.

7.

Consider how the project's approach and model could be offered to those living in Cyrenians' properties who are not at point of crisis as a route to building confidence, self-esteem and skills development.

8.

Explore the role that peer support within each property such as mental health champions who support other residents to build mental resilience.

9.

Continue to train Cyrenians' support staff with mental health awareness and procedures for getting residents the right support.

10.

Contribute more widely the findings of the project to continue raise awareness of the high levels of poor mental health for beneficiaries within the homeless and criminal justice sectors.

Conclusion

At the inception of the Alternative Futures Project, a partner of Cyrenians provided this quotation of support:

'The beauty of having a single mental health worker would be 1) ease of contact for homeless services 2) expertise and knowledge 3) trust in that person from patients.' Dr Liz Belham, 2016.

Our evaluation finds that the project is having a strong positive impact in the lives of homeless and vulnerably housed people in Cambridge and fulfilling its objectives to their fullest extent with the time and resources available.

Our evaluation and feedback find that the project has achieved not only the four main outcomes, but has delivered significant additional outcomes for the beneficiaries of this support. The real strength of this project is having a qualified retained mental health practitioner, who is very accessible for beneficiaries and support staff.

"When I first moved into the Cyrenians house, I was stressed and found myself snapping at everyone. I did not realise I was suffering a mental breakdown as a result of my life experiences. I could not continue to work in that emotional state. I was lucky enough to meet Cyrenians' Mental Health practitioner; her help was invaluable to me."

"Cyrenians and the Alternative Futures Project are inseparable from each other; they are so complementary to each other."

"I felt very isolated when I first got released. Living at Jubilee, I was very withdrawn and rarely left my room. Working with the Mental Health practitioner and the mental health service made me think differently. I wouldn't change any aspect of it; it's been a life saver for me and many others - thank you."

"It really helped me. I didn't have to wait weeks and months for support; it started straightaway. The mental health practitioner taught me some valuable tools and techniques to help me cope."

"Cyrenians should do loads more of this sort of stuff

- it's been brilliant for me and so many others, not having to fight the system and go to appointments at scary new places. The mental health practitioner really worked with me from where I was and I never felt pressured to engage with her. Towards the end, we used to meet for coffee and I looked forward to these meetings - [they] helped me immeasurably, to move forward and become settled at last."

"Cyrenians has been the right sort of place for me. I feel really settled and I have been through therapy. I moved in on Friday and the following Monday, I had my first counselling session which has really helped me while I sought help from outside agencies; it so valuable. The homelessness system causes so many mental health issues, so this is really valuable to help overcome the difficulties with the support of Cyrenians."

Acknowledgements

The evaluators would like to thank all those who shared their perceptions of the project's impact to assist with our evaluation of The Alternative Futures Project, but particularly those individuals with lived experience of complex and poor mental health, homelessness and being vulnerably housed.

More importantly, we interviewed a number of beneficiaries who have overcome substantial barriers and very complex mental health issues who were brave enough to revisit those darker days to support this evaluation.

This is a testament to the quality of the approach adopted by The Alternative Futures Project staff and more widely, to the support offered by the Cyrenians staff team.

We have been exceptionally impressed with the leadership and staff team at Cambridge Cyrenians who were supportive and always highly professional. It has been evident to us that it is their skills, expertise and training which have contributed to The Alternative Futures Project's resounding success.

Our thanks go to the wider partners of Cambridge Cyrenians for supporting our evaluation and feedback with all of their comments and evaluation feedback.

