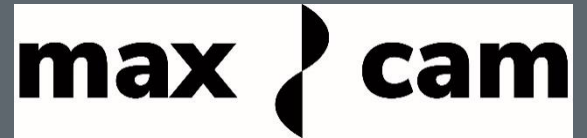


Cambridge Centre
for Housing &
Planning Research



Modular Housing Project: preliminary findings

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Contents

Executive Summary..... 1

1. Background 1

2. Residents’ initial experiences..... 4

3. Project development process..... 6

4. Lessons learned..... 10

5. Conclusion 12

Executive Summary

Like many other cities in the UK, managing homelessness and rough sleeping is a challenge in Cambridge. This modular homes project is a collaboration between social enterprises *Allia* and *New Meaning Foundation*, and local charity *Jimmy's Cambridge*, which provides emergency help, support and accommodation to people experiencing homelessness in Cambridge. In one of the first schemes of its kind in England, six modular homes have been installed on a temporary site in Cambridge to house local homeless people.

The project is the first scheme in the city to combine modern methods of construction and supported living in order to provide housing for people experiencing homelessness. The project has received wide media coverage both locally and nationally, and there is considerable interest in developing similar initiatives on other sites, both in Cambridge and further afield.

The University of Cambridge is providing research support to the project. The research is exploring the role that modular housing can play in housing the homeless. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the benefits of the project to the residents living in the modular units, to project stakeholders and to wider society. The research primarily draws insights from interviews with the residents of the modular homes and with key stakeholders who have been involved in different aspects of the project.

The study is being conducted by researchers from the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) and is led by Dr Gemma Burgess, from CCHPR, and Dr Johannes Lenhard, from the Max Planck Cambridge Centre for Ethics, Economy and Social Change (Department of Social Anthropology).

This report summarises preliminary insights from the residents who have moved into the modular units:

- Residents are very impressed with the design configuration of the modular units, the user spaces provided, the quality of the units and their interior, and the extent of furnishings provided.
- Residents feel optimistic about the future and are keen to be involved in efforts to build a thriving community.

- The quality of the modular units, the welcoming disposition of the local community and the on-site support service offered by Jimmy's have contributed significantly to a smooth 'settling in' experience for the residents.

1. Background

There are 160,000 households experiencing homelessness in Britain and this number is projected to increase.¹ Homelessness has both an individual cost and a cost to society. The former include shorter life expectancy, social isolation, barriers to education, training and paid work, and loss of dignity.² In the UK, the cost to society for a single person being homeless for 12 months is estimated to be about £20,128.³

Cambridge, like the majority of cities in the UK, grapples with the problem of homelessness. A recent report by Shelter⁴ found that, as of March 2019, the estimated number of people who were homeless in the city was 181, meaning that 1 in every 695 people in Cambridge is homeless. 'Preventing and tackling homelessness and rough sleeping' is now listed as a priority in the Greater Cambridge Housing Strategy (2019-2023).⁵

1.1 The Modular Housing Project

The modular housing project is a collaboration between three local organisations. *Jimmy's Cambridge* (Jimmy's) is a local charity which provides emergency help, support and accommodation for people experiencing homelessness in Cambridge. *Allia* is a social enterprise that supports social and environmental impact organisations with space, support and access to capital. The *New Meaning Foundation* is a social enterprise which specialises in individual attitude development, ethical construction and social action.

The primary aim of this project is to provide individuals experiencing homelessness with housing, complemented by support services designed to help residents overcome substance abuse and other life challenges, thereby improving their quality of life and supporting a

¹ Crises (n.d). Everybody in: How to end homeless in Great Britain. Available at

https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/238960/everybody_in_how_to_end_homelessness_in_great_britain_2018_es.pdf

² Pleace, N (2015). At what cost: An estimation of the financial cost for single homelessness in the UK. Available at

https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/20677/crisis_at_what_cost_2015.pdf

³ It takes the city (2018) Cambridge Summit for Homeless. Available at https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/01c5f5c3/files/uploaded/Summit_Briefing%20Paper.pdf

⁴ Shelter (2019). This is England: A picture of homelessness in 2019. The numbers behind the story. Available at https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1883817/This_is_England_A_picture_of_homelessness_in_2019.pdf

⁵ Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council (2019). Homes for our future: Greater Cambridgeshire Housing Strategy 2019-2023 Available at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/01c5f5c3/files/uploaded/GCHS%20Appendix%20A%20-%20Housing%20Strategy%202019-2023%20FINAL.pdf>

transition to fully independent housing, equipped with the life skills needed to reintegrate into society. The project is also expected to contribute to reduced demand for services including the NHS and the criminal justice system, thereby reducing public expenditure.

On 6 November 2019, Cambridge City Council granted a three year planning permission for the design and build of six modular housing units on a piece of land on Newmarket Road. Leased from Christ the Redeemer Church, the land was to be used to provide accommodation for homeless people under the care of Jimmy's. The custom-built units were specifically designed to be relocatable to another free or low-cost site in the city when the site is redeveloped by the church, with opportunities for the occupants to continue their residency.

The modular housing project is unique in several ways, making innovative use of both modern methods of construction and underutilised land to provide much needed homes for local homeless people. Welcomed and supported by both the leadership of Christ the Redeemer and the City Council, who supported the planning application, the project draws on a collaboration involving multiple stakeholders across Cambridge. Several local businesses offered financial support while other professionals and consultants offered their services pro bono, for example, putting together the planning application and the installation of utilities. This collaborative approach underscores a shared sense of 'social conscience' and the collective awareness that tackling homelessness requires a concerted effort by multiple parties.

The project was designed to contribute to the skills development of vulnerable people who may be disenfranchised, unemployed, and who have struggled with traditional learning environments. The New Meaning Foundation, as a social enterprise, enables individuals to achieve meaningful personal and community outcomes through community enterprise and ethical construction. It trained eleven people through the process of building the units.

The modular units offer people who have experienced street homelessness, and who would typically be living in Jimmy's hostels or shared accommodation, the opportunity to experience independent living. Although they are given 'their own front door', individuals are supported to develop those personal management skills that are crucial to enabling them to move successfully on to long term housing. An official at the Cambridge City Council made this observation about the project:

"Hostels don't work for some people, but this project has the chance to do something different – a chance to work with people more intensely and give them a place to grow

from....the sizes of the modular units were deemed suitable as a 'mid-range' transition housing for the homeless" [Official, Cambridge City Council]

Jimmy's provides comprehensive, on-site support services in substance abuse, benefits and long-term housing, health and medication, and life skills (e.g. cooking) to each resident individually and in groups. Dedicated key workers meet regularly with residents (at least times several times a week) in order to ensure that residents receive the best possible support.

2. Residents' initial experiences

This section summarises the initial experiences of the residents who have moved into the modular units.

2.1 Moving in and initial settling period

Six residents (five males and one female) were selected to move into the modular housing units. Section 3.5 details the residents' selection process and criteria. Of the six, one resident was selected to take the role of a warden and be the first port of call in case there is a problem or concern at the site. Five of the residents moved into the units in the first week of July 2020, but one resident was not able to move in, having extended their stay in a rehabilitation programme. Another Jimmy's client is in the process of being admitted to the scheme to make best possible use of the six units.

Residents' moving in and their initial settling in ran very smoothly and there is generally a very positive feeling about the modular units, the environment and the support services available. This is summed up by a support worker at Jimmy's:

"The first weeks have been great - we couldn't have asked for any better. There haven't been any issues, there haven't been any problems, no complaints. You couldn't have envisaged it any better. It has been brilliant." [Key Support Worker working on site with residents regularly]

2.2 Impressions of the units

Both residents and key support workers alike were pleased with the specification and interior finish of the modular units. These included: a) the design configuration and spaces (each unit has a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen/living room and a porch); b) the finish within the units (the units have laminated wooden floors and all wall surfaces are painted); c) the furnishings and appliances provided (the units have a bed, window blinds, sofa, kettle, TV, washing machine); d) ancillary installations (e.g. bins, internet, post boxes); and e) the quality of the support services offered (including having an on-site warden). The following extracts capture the high level of satisfaction expressed by the residents and support workers:

*"It's wicked. They done us proud. I am quite surprised actually - how new everything is. It's quite unreal. I was told this morning, this could be somewhere I stay forever [...] and I am hoping for that one."*⁶ [Resident 3]

"When we look inside the mods, we are really pleased with the quality of the stuff in there and the residents are excited about it" [Key support worker].

The small size of the units was felt to be a positive aspect. Not all residents are used to living independently – after years in different institutions – and the additional pressure of being responsible for too large a home was seen as daunting by one resident:

"It is about the right sizing. Any bigger, and listen.... I get lost in it." [Resident 4]

2.3 Residents' settling-in and living experience

The fact that the units are fully furnished and each resident has their own front-door made settling in a smooth process. This was helped by the regular presence of support workers from Jimmy's six days a week, supported by an on-site warden to help when needed. Support workers have been helpful in assisting residents procure further necessities (e.g. kitchen utensils, rugs). The quotes from residents capture their positive settling in experiences. For some, this is their first experience of living alone for a long time:

"It is brilliant, I am settled in fine. It is much better living on your own." [Resident 2]

"I have been sharing for so many years and it's just getting used to being on my own, in my space again. It is very good." [Resident 1]

Equally important for the positive start was the welcome that the residents received from the local community. Staff from the church have been very welcoming to the residents and have given them access to a common space where communal dinners will be soon be hosted regularly. A company in the nearby retail park donated duvets, bedding and curtains when they learnt the residents were moving in.

⁶ It may appear contradictory to suggest that a resident could have long-term use of a unit when the site is temporary but the principle is that if they still need the unit at the point it moves to a new location they will have the option to remain – subject to whatever interim period of accommodation they will need during the relocation process. The offer of stability is potentially valuable in achieving positive outcomes even if in practice alternative accommodation steps are encouraged over time, as this will also free up a unit for a new resident.

As the residents learn to live in community, there is a positive attitude on site, despite the odd small issue (such as complaints when one of the residents does their laundry in the middle of the night), and everyone seems to be getting along well. Overall, the warden and the support workers are content with the residents' behaviour and the communal spirit on the site.

Some residents consider the location of the modular units to be slightly too far from the city centre, despite being accessible via bike and bus (although this is made more complicated by Covid-19 restrictions). There is, however, a benefit to this location: the support workers feel that it allows the residents to thrive on their own, away from negative influences and relationships. Residents are particularly happy with the presence of a warden and the sense of security he provides.

2.4 Suggestions going forward

A few suggestions for additional support were made during the interviews, including having clearly designated communal times (e.g. dinner once a month) to meet together and with support staff. It was also suggested that a written 'rule book' for general conduct (e.g. quiet periods) will be helpful. It was recognised that that it is important that the residents are well prepared for independent living, and that they are able to cook healthy meals, and are able to organise their home and keep it tidy.

3. Project development process

This section summarises the main activities undertaken during the project development process. It is organised around: a) project leadership and coordination, b) project planning, c) manufacturing of the modular units, d) on-site installation, and e) resident selection.

3.1 Project leadership and coordination

The project has experienced the lifecycle of a typical construction project. The modular housing project benefitted from both monetary and in-kind donations from different stakeholders, all of whom had to be approached individually and engaged with sensitively. This required strong project leadership and coordination. Having someone who is passionate about the project, has experience in delivering social enterprise projects and has good social capital played an important part in the project's success. Martin Clark, CEO of the Allia Impact division, was instrumental in nearly every aspect of the project, from site search to furnishings. His leadership, coordination and enthusiasm have been widely acknowledged by several key stakeholders involved in the project:

"Had it not been for Martin, I think the project would have taken longer, even though we were all fully in support of the project.[...] I know him quite well...and when he says he'll do something, I trust that will happen." [Project Stakeholder 1]

3.2 Project planning

The delivery of the project depended heavily on finding suitable land on which to install the modular units. An extensive search was conducted in order to source a plot of underutilised land, available for temporary use for at least two years, and in a suitable location. In order for the Jimmy's support workers to be able to readily visit residents, and to help residents to stay connected to wider society, the site needed to be reasonably close to the city centre.

During the planning application process, the Church needed to demonstrate to the County Council that leasing the land for the modular units was consistent with "using the site for religious purposes". Furthermore, Allia had to make a case for the Council to approve the size of the modular units (25sq m), as this fell short of the 37sq m required for a standard one-bedroom dwelling by the Council. Convincing the Council of the value of the project required a demonstration that the units would not be permanent housing, but rather a transitional phase designed to help tackle homelessness in the city. The City Council granted planning permission for three years, starting from mid-October 2019.

3.3 Manufacturing the modular units

A core value of New Meaning Foundation, the social enterprise that manufactured the modular units, is to use every project to provide training and skills development. In line with this, opportunities were given to eleven adults who were out of work, including a qualified ex-Army draughtsman who had served with the Royal Engineers. Another army veteran who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was also recruited as a carpenter.

3.4 On-site installation of modular units

Before New Meaning Foundation could install the modular units on the project site, Allia had to discuss the practical issues surrounding sewerage, electricity, water and broadband connections with the landowner. A local contractor offered to undertake groundworks and lay sewerage pipes for the units to be connected to a nearby mains. Building on the trust between the vicar of the Christ the Redeemer Church and the CEO of Allia Impact, an agreement was reached for water, electricity and broadband to be connected from the church premises prior to the onsite installation of the units.

The logistics of transporting the units to site required careful consideration. The units were designed to be the maximum width not to need a second person in the cab of the transport vehicle, or at a greater width still to need an escort vehicle. The location of the site – adjacent to the A1303 – meant that approval needed to be sought for a partial road closure so that the haulage lorry and crane could be well-positioned, ensuring smooth and safe installation. Ensuring that this was done safely and with precision was particularly important given the attention the project had received in the city and beyond. Small ad hoc remedial works were made on site after a building inspector assessment made it clear that the units needed a different step configuration.

3.5 Resident selection and support services

Being the first of its kind in Cambridge, the Jimmy's modular housing project has attracted a lot of media attention. From the very beginning, some stakeholders were keen to know how the residents for the modular units would be selected, the criteria for their selection and the kind of support services that would be offered on site. As a key local charity providing shelter and support services to homeless people, Jimmy's keeps a log of all the people it supports, and this served as the starting point for shortlisting thirteen potential candidates for the modular units. Six people, five men and one woman, were then put forward by Jimmy's. Of the six, one resident was chosen as a warden (as required by the planning permission), a

person more closely resembling a 'responsible neighbour' with experience of homelessness but successfully moving on. This shortlist was presented to and narrowed down by representatives from the following key stakeholder groups across the city:

1. Cambridge City Council
2. Street Outreach Team - Cambridge (Change Grow Live)
3. Jimmy's

The selection of the residents was informed by a combination of individual housing needs and the level of support that residents would require to help them move on into permanent housing. It was felt that a balance needed to be struck between people who were considered 'high risk' and would need more support to live independently, and those who exhibited promising signs of being able to live on their own with little or no support. Overall the involvement of the council in agreeing the selection of residents was a condition of the planning consent.

The support provided by Jimmy's for the residents occupying the modular units requires support workers to be on site for about six hours during each visit. The support offered includes assisting residents to claim housing benefits from the City Council, picking up prescriptions and helping them undergo detox treatment (where appropriate, subject to the needs of each individual). Regular drug testing for residents will also take place to ensure that residents have the necessary support.

4. Lessons learned

The planning and execution of this project suggests some helpful lessons that could inform similar projects in the future.

4.1 Project team formation and leadership

- Having a central figure (a 'champion') who is passionate and knowledgeable is vital for driving and managing the project.
- In order to gain local support, attract potential funders and convince local authorities, promoters of such projects need to be very clear about what the project aims to do, how the goals will be achieved, and what direct and indirect benefits the project will deliver.

A supportive local network has been crucial to the success of the Cambridge project. The early formation of a project team comprising key stakeholders, i.e. landowners willing to lease their unused lands, professionals willing to offer their services either pro bono or at discounted rates, and manufacturers able to design and build the units, is essential for successful project delivery.

The resources needed for successful project delivery should not be underestimated, and commissioners of such projects need to carefully consider how to strategically appraise these costs.

4.2 Manufacturing of the modular units

Project commissioners looking to use a social enterprise approach to the manufacture of modular housing units need to strike a balance between the extent to which the project can be used to advance a specific objective (e.g. training) and the potential implications that this approach might have on cost effective and timely project delivery.

To guard against potential cost overruns, and to keep manufacturing costs within budget, it is important to ensure that the modular system selected from the onset is used as planned. Variations in such a system can lead to additional costs that may not be within the project budget.

Securing adequate storage spaces to hold the modular units after they are manufactured should be considered at the project planning stage.

An examination of local building regulations relevant to the design, manufacture and installation of modular units is imperative in order to avoid ad hoc onsite remedial works.

4.3 On-site installation of modular units

The ease of connection to utility services such as water, waste and electricity must be considered when selecting a suitable site. Whilst the site may be temporary, connections to utilities may need to follow the same regulations as a permanent build.

Road and highways regulations concerning the transportation of large units are also crucial and need consideration as they have cost implications and may require special permission to close sections of road.

4.4 Residents' selection, support services and living experiences

Shortlisting six residents from a pool of homeless people (originally agreed on by several of the homeless institutions in Cambridge) who were all looking forward to having their 'own front doors' was a difficult decision. There is a need to carefully consider the criteria and process by which residents will be selected, and this needs to be in line with both the aims of the project and local homelessness needs.

In this case, the selection of the original set of residents was arrived at by balancing both demanding and less demanding individuals (e.g. those with and without a history of substance abuse) and with an established history of stability (e.g. being able to live successfully in short-term accommodation) in all individuals. There was a clear understanding that, given the longer term opportunity that the modular homes can provide, choosing some less 'secure' residents was important, and key to establishing the real benefits and possibilities for such schemes going forward.

Evaluating the overall success for such a project goes beyond understanding the individual benefits to the residents of the modular units and their move on into long term accommodation, i.e. the immediate relief of homelessness. There is also the potential for an improved sense of dignity, growth in confidence and the development of wider life skills. Other measures of success include the benefits that accrue to the local community through reduced demand for local services, including for GP, emergency and police services. All of the above should be considered when appraising the overall success of the project.

5. Conclusion

The Allia/New Meaning/Jimmy's modular housing project has demonstrated that the Cambridge city community cares about the homelessness situation in Cambridge and is willing to support projects that offer innovative solutions for tackling the problem. The initial responses of the residents living in the modular units are very positive, and bode well for the future.

It is too early to be able to appraise the full range of benefits that may come from tackling homelessness through modular housing and supported living for residents, the local community and the city. But for now, it seems appropriate to commend the key stakeholders who have contributed towards making the project a success, especially given that the project delivery was heavily impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 public health crisis, both in terms of the restrictions imposed on the construction industry, and the slowing down of the moving in process.