



IVAR

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Action Research

# From Settlement to Community Anchor

The enduring value of Cambridge House

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# Introduction and Background

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Cambridge House is a multi-purpose community organisation in the London Borough of Southwark ‘where people fight poverty, tackle injustice, and realise their potential together’ (Cambridge House, 2008). This report sets out the findings from a study of Cambridge House carried out by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) which looked at what it means to be a multi-purpose community organisation.

In this introduction, we look briefly at the history of Cambridge House, the national policy context in which it operates and some of the existing knowledge about multi-purpose community organisations. The introduction concludes with a short description of how IVAR’s research was carried out.

## 1.1 History of a settlement

Cambridge House was established in 1889, one of the first wave of university settlements founded during Victorian times to tackle poverty. Samuel Barnett, the founder of the very first university settlement, developed the idea that university students or ‘settlers’ would ‘share their best with the poor and learn

through feeling how they live’ (Barnett, 1894, quoted in Smith, 2000).

The settlement’s history has been well documented in Colin Rochester’s ‘Cambridge House: the first hundred years’ (1989). Since its early days, Cambridge House has offered a range of services, activities and facilities such as free legal advice (one of the earliest services, initially provided by volunteer barristers and solicitors), play schemes for children and clubs, including the famous Boys Club which continued until the 1960s.

What marked out Cambridge House from the very start was that these services were always planned and delivered in a way that is mindful of a wider social and economic context, as well as being embedded in the communities they served.

*The new Cambridge House would... hope to become a centre of community rather than a mere community centre, penetrating the neighbourhood, with the co-operation of its residents, rather than restricting its influence mainly to those who come to take part in activities sponsored by the House under its own roof.*

Cited in Rochester, 1989, p20, from undated archive material

Two examples from the settlement’s recent history exemplify the distinctive way in which new initiatives and services have come about. First, in the 1960s and 70s, Cambridge House pioneered a massive literacy campaign which spread right across the capital and sowed the seeds of 133 education schemes. The scheme, which became known as the Right to Read, began in the 1960s when Cambridge House recruited volunteers to teach young people on probation to read and write.

Second, Cambridge House’s innovative work with children and adults with

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learning disabilities grew out of the organisation's involvement in plans for the permanent closure of Darenth Park, the long stay hospital, which took place in the 1970s.

Throughout its history, Cambridge House has contributed to the settlement movement and to the development of social action centres nationally. This has continued to the present day with close ties between the organisation and the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac). Today, Cambridge House is one of the largest remaining settlements in England, and is ranked among the top three in terms of income (Banks, 2001). Like most other organisations of its kind, Cambridge House no longer has resident volunteers and has found new ways to pursue social change, an overarching goal that remains unaltered since its foundation.

## 1.2 National policy context

Over the past five years, the Government has set out a vision for strong, prosperous, cohesive communities, where local people are able to influence what goes on in their neighbourhoods and experience a palpable boost to their general health and well being (CLG 2008; DCLG 2006, 2007; HM Treasury, 2007; Home Office, 2004). Central to achieving this vision for communities are three major economic proposals: transferring physical assets to community ownership, promoting social enterprise as a means of handling asset transfer and of boosting local economic wealth more generally, and bringing employability to the forefront of community development work.

Government has identified multi-purpose community organisations as key drivers for community building and now describes them as 'community anchors' (Home Office, 2004; HM Treasury, 2007). In 2008, the Government

demonstrated its commitment to community anchors by choosing Cambridge House to host the launch of the Empowerment White Paper, Communities in Control: real people, real power (CLG, 2008).

The term 'community anchor' embraces a collection of existing multi-purpose community organisations which range from the Victorian settlements, such as Cambridge House, to Bromley by Bow founded in the 1980s. In its 2004 strategy on community capacity building, 'Firm Foundations', the Government acknowledged that community anchors 'take many forms' but identified four common features:

- they are controlled by local residents and/or representatives of local groups
- they address the needs of their area in a multi-purpose, holistic way
- they are committed to the involvement of all sections of their community, including marginalised groups
- they facilitate the development of the communities in their area

Home Office, 2004, p19

Elsewhere, Government policy indicates that community anchors are also perceived as 'large' (HM Treasury, 2007, p40) and part of an independent third sector (CLG, 2007). They are also seen as being in a good position to facilitate community voice in relation to local authorities and to assist statutory authorities in discharging their new 'duty to involve' (CLG, 2008). Crucially, they are seen as capable of bringing about significant 'change' (Home Office, 2004, p19).

So, community anchors are favoured by Government, because they are rooted in local communities and because they are multi-purpose, insofar as they provide a range of services, facilities and activities from a single physical

hub, which can support local individuals and small community groups. They are also perceived by Government as powerful conduits through which major economic ambitions can be realised.

In the context of this heightened policy interest, a significant challenge now facing community anchors is to find ways to assess their social impact in ways that reflect the complex, multi-purpose nature of their work. This will not only enable community anchors to evidence the difference they make, but to plan strategically for the future.

### 1.3 What can previous research tell us?

It can be hard for outsiders to understand what multi-purpose community organisations do and, as a result, their value can be under-estimated (Thake, 2006). Other researchers in this field have argued that, by explaining themselves better and by doing this in ways that reflect prevailing values, multi-purpose organisations are more likely to survive (Hasenfeld and Gidron, 2005). Below we provide a few illustrations from the literature on settlements and social action centres which may be helpful to multi-purpose community organisations seeking new ways to describe their activities.

#### What does local mean?

Harrow notes that 'A university settlement (...) was, classically, a deliberately dominant building located in a poor urban area, providing the basis for a range of social services activities for and with the local community' (Harrow, 2001).

One of the tensions for many community anchors, however, is that whilst they are valued for being rooted in their local areas, to survive they must win at least one or two big service delivery contracts which may take them well outside

their neighbourhoods - however loosely defined. Thake suggests that 'local' is a matter of context and can be taken to mean a whole village, a few streets, or, where the community of need is especially dispersed, a whole borough or sub-region (Thake, 2006).

The history of Cambridge House and other settlements provides precedents for this. The pioneering Right to Read initiative took Cambridge House well beyond Southwark, but contracted back into the local area as new provision sprang up to meet the need further afield:

*'Time and again, work pioneered in settlements has been 'handed over' to other agencies or encouraged to develop as an independent entity'.*

Matthews and Kimmis, 2001, p64

What is the relationship between service areas and the organisation as a whole?

The ability of settlements to adapt and change according to need and the external environment can have the less desirable effect of causing the organisation to fragment into separately funded, unconnected projects. Banks (2001, p231) notes that this is a common experience among settlements:

*'One of the key concerns of settlements in recent years has been the relationship of the projects run by the organisation to the 'core' or central operations. As more and more separately funded and often short-term projects have been established, in some settlements there has been a tendency towards fragmentation, with each project having its own staff and identity and the relationship with the settlement itself being unclear or forgotten.'*

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How do multi-purpose organisations describe themselves?

In a study of another London settlement carried out in the 1990s, researchers found that ‘no one we met, from clients to the lowest staff employees to members of council, was entirely sure what it is that Toynbee does’ (Milofsky and Hunter, 1993, p8). Multi-purpose community organisations can find it hard to communicate to others the totality of their organisation’s activities. Descriptions tend to emphasise the diversity and multiplicity of services, clients and venues.

So commentators turn to other clues to the distinctive nature of multi-purpose community organisations in general or settlements in particular. Researchers may uncover a striking ethos (Milofsky and Hunter, 1993), a commitment to social change (Gilchrist and Jeffs, 2001) or a collective understanding of the needs of the organisation’s community (Thake, 2006).

Finally, settlements may highlight their history as a part of their identity and use it to demonstrate their ability to survive massive shifts in national social and economic conditions as well as changes to government policy and funding regimes:

*Their distinctiveness lies in their past... The fact that settlements have, in many cases, been in existence for a 100 or so years is very consciously used in some of the literature to give them credibility with funders and users, to indicate stability as well as flexibility and willingness to change with the time.’*

Banks, 2001, p215

## 1.4 About this research

IVAR’s research was carried out in March 2009 and comprised 14 semi-structured interviews with staff (seven) and trustees (two) of Cambridge House, local authority officials (three), one Cambridge House tenant organisation and one local voluntary sector organisation. The perspectives offered by interviewees are synthesised anonymously in Section 3 of this report; direct quotations from interviewees are indicated in italics. Additional material was gathered from documents referenced at the end of this report and from IVAR’s standard form for collecting organisational information.

For the purposes of this research, we have been guided by the broad, inclusive description of community anchors provided by the Community Alliance: ‘Community anchors are what we call multi-purpose – they provide a range of affordable and accessible activities, services and facilities, which are as varied as the communities they serve’ (Community Alliance, 2007).

## Cambridge House today

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Cambridge House is a university settlement with a long history of involvement in the pursuit of social change. It has an annual turnover in excess of £2 million and a major asset in the form of five Georgian houses, a Victorian hall and a series of annexes, all of which are in need of renovation. Cambridge House is a multi-purpose community organisation, also known as a ‘community anchor’, thought to be well placed to make a significant contribution to the creation of sustainable communities.

The purpose of this section is to provide some basic background material that will aid understanding of Section 3 which focuses on interviewees’ thoughts about the multi-purpose model and the benefits and challenges that it presents.

### 2.1 Mission

‘Cambridge House is a multipurpose voluntary organisation working in Southwark to alleviate the local effects of poverty and to support social change; a place ‘where people fight poverty, tackle injustice, and realise their potential together’

Taken from the Cambridge House website

### 2.2 Services

Cambridge House provides a wide variety of services and activities including: legal services; advocacy; young people’s projects; learning disability services including play and respite care; nursery and crèche; services and activity space to support other local organisations; and community development.

### 2.3 People

Cambridge House services, activities and facilities are accessed by several different communities of interest including: young people; people with learning disabilities and mental health issues as well as their families; people needing legal advice; and families with children. Many of the people in these communities of interest can be described loosely as poor and vulnerable.

Seven independent community organisations rent office space from Cambridge House; a further forty groups use the resource room or hire meeting and training rooms.

### 2.4 Geography

Cambridge House services are for:

- People of Camberwell and Walworth where services need to be very local, such as youth work and community development work.
- People of Southwark who have a particular need that Cambridge House can meet, for example legal advice.
- People who live outside Southwark and who have a particular specialist advocacy need. One example of this is the Independent Mental Capacity Advocate (IMCA) service which covers 14 London Boroughs.

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A high proportion of services are delivered away from Cambridge House: 'Cambridge House is not [just] the building'. Legal advice is offered to users of Sure Start centres and solicitors still make home visits where appropriate. Play schemes, after school provision and respite care are all delivered in venues right across the borough (and beyond in the case of IMCA); youth projects take place in neighbourhood halls and venues near where the young participants live.

## 2.5 Building

Cambridge House comprises five Georgian houses at the end of a terrace set back from the busy Camberwell Road, and with its main entrance on a quieter side street. In addition to office accommodation, the property includes two halls and three large meeting rooms, which have been added over time and are hired out to local organisations.

All of the space is well used including the small resource room, where community groups can arrange to use the phone and computer. Cambridge House is landlord to seven community organisations which have offices in the building and use the meeting rooms and halls as they need them.

Plans to renovate the meeting spaces and halls are well advanced and will provide Cambridge House with more appropriate community space, as well as high quality, attractive venues to hire out and generate an income. Disabled access is, currently, a problem; it will be partially addressed by the renovation.

## 2.6 Staffing

The multi-purpose nature of the organisation calls for a diverse staff team with the skills and experience to deliver its services; this includes people with professional affiliations outside the organisation. So, for example, advocacy staff will wish to adhere to the Advocacy Charter, a set of nationally agreed standards, as well as committing to Cambridge House's own policies and procedures.

Cambridge House employs many part time and sessional staff. The latter tend to be recruited locally, demonstrating commitment to the local area. Being a large, multi-purpose community organisation, Cambridge House can offer progression opportunities to staff and volunteers and can ensure enough work, sometimes in different parts of the organisation, to be able to retain good sessional staff.

## 2.7 Funding

Currently, the organisation receives about three quarters of its funding from statutory sources, with about half of the total funding from the London Borough of Southwark, and smaller amounts from other local authorities, the Primary Care Trust and Legal Services Commission. The need to reduce the organisation's dependency on these sources of income by generating funds itself (which will also raise the total unrestricted income) and securing more funding from Trusts and other grant making bodies is widely recognised.

## A multi-purpose community organisation

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This research set out to explore the idea that the core strength of Cambridge House lies in its very complexity, in its multi-purpose nature. This section uses material from the interviews with key stakeholders to discuss how ‘multi-purpose’ can be explained; what it means for an organisation’s mission and service delivery; what are its benefits and what challenges it presents.

### 3.1 Understanding multi-purpose

At its simplest, interviewees said that, for Cambridge House, ‘multi-purpose’ means providing different services, for different people in different ways:

*For us it means offering lots of very different things to different people. One strand of the idea of this is that some people will benefit in a number of different ways.’*

These services are affordable and accessible; people can walk in off the street and be signposted to relevant services even though users are normally referred and seen by appointment. As one interviewee put it, ‘it’s a very busy building with lots happening’.

But there is a second dimension to ‘multi-purpose’ at Cambridge House which, interviewees suggest, marks it out as distinctive and more than a set of unconnected services and activities. They commented that there is depth as well as breadth to the work of Cambridge House, because it uses the services it provides to bring about social change within the wider social and economic policy context in which the organisation works. They also noted that Cambridge House has a long history of engagement with the community and that all its services are perceived as being well embedded in the communities they serve - both geographic communities and communities of interest.

Interviewees would like Cambridge House to be seen as a ‘safe haven for local people [from Camberwell and Walworth] to hang out’, and not just in times of crisis, but for pleasure too. They suggested that Cambridge House has the potential to become a hub for community groups and that community development workers are best placed to facilitate this. Its staff have a track record in creating an exchange of information between community groups and Cambridge House.

Like other settlements, Cambridge House has found it harder to fund community development work in recent years. The loss of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and the shift towards Working Neighbourhoods funding was thought to be behind a significant reduction in such work.

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## 3.2 Mission in a multi-purpose organisation

Cambridge House staff describe the organisation's mission as tackling poverty and injustice and tend to see this in terms of services for individuals. In contrast, local authority officials are more likely to perceive the mission in terms of community engagement and support.

When talking about the organisation's mission, interviewees also discussed the geographical scope of Cambridge House services. They wanted Cambridge House to renew its focus on the Camberwell and Walworth area. As one interviewee put it, '...when I think of the mission and vision, I think of the people who live near Cambridge House. There is a geographical closeness that is important.' They also wanted to consider whether Cambridge House needed to do more to reach particular groups including newly arrived communities. Interviewees looked to community development work to achieve this and suggested that this would also boost Cambridge House's role in facilitating community voice and its profile as a community anchor:

*'I think our immediately local presence is patchy and we need to think through harder about who we need to reach, why and how.'*

The fact that some services now reach right across Southwark and beyond was not seen as problematic, but realistic and appropriate. Instead, interviewees suggested that a focus on Camberwell and Walworth could coexist with projects that have a broader geographical focus.

## 3.3 Managing the multi-purpose role

Decisions about service development are managed according to a set of criteria and formal processes shared between the senior management team and the Board. But interviewees were keen to point out that, in a more general sense, decisions about service development are influenced by three main factors:

- Needs: staff become aware of the need for a service based on their experience of delivering services on the ground.
- Policy: senior staff describe this as 'scanning the horizons' for new opportunities or needs arising from a change in the law or local policy.
- Funding: some decisions are driven by the availability of funding. This includes decisions to tender for major contracts, such as the Independent Mental Capacity Advocate (IMCA) service, which in turn can lead to geographic expansion of Cambridge House services.

Parts of Cambridge House's buildings are in a poor state of repair. Interviewees suggested that the current condition of the meeting rooms and halls makes it difficult to hire them out at market rates and conveys the wrong message to service users: 'Its appearance needs to say: these people can help me, you can have confidence in us.' In some ways, this restricts the potential of the organisation: 'It's a fantastic resource if they can get the fabric of the building improved.' It was noted that it is very common for multi-purpose community organisations to own a major asset, but lack the relevant skills to manage them. Cambridge House, however, is seen as fortunate in having secured staff with these skills.

### 3.4 Benefits

For Cambridge House, being multi-purpose is said to have produced a range of benefits which are grouped here under two headings: community and management.

#### Community

Interviewees suggested that Cambridge House takes a ‘whole person’ and a ‘whole community’ approach to the provision of services, facilities and activities. For individuals or families, this means that a wide variety of provision can be accessed at a single point. Interviewees commented on the value of an organisation that provides a range of services and activities that are calibrated to the needs of the community.

For community groups, Cambridge House offers a spectrum of support from advice through to office accommodation. Interviewees gave examples of groups that have moved along that spectrum according to their capacity and needs:

*‘I see them [Cambridge House] as a very good host, a seedbed organisation, giving space to organisations to grow.’*

*‘The Afro Asian Advisory Service used to be a tenant project but it now has its own premises. There is the potential to support an organisation to get established until it can stand alone.’*

As a provider of a wide variety of services, Cambridge House was thought by interviewees to be ideally placed to make a success of the new Southwark Local Involvement Network (LINK) : ‘Part of the success of LINK is to get the participation base as broad as possible; this is easy for Cambridge House because we deal with a wide spectrum of the community...’

Further on in this section, we look at the challenges of joining up these services.

#### Management

- **Flexibility:** the scale, skills and expertise that come with a larger organisation and more varied staff team make Cambridge House well placed to respond to changing needs and new opportunities.
- **Trust:** there is trust between staff of different services where there might be suspicion or competition if they worked in separate organisations.
- **Knowledge:** as the provider of multiple services and activities to a wide variety of people, Cambridge House has a rich base of experience to draw from and is well placed to provide community voice: ‘Single issue organisations won’t necessarily have that perspective.’
- The multi-disciplinary team was seen as a key strength of the organisation, enabling Cambridge House to respond swiftly to changing needs and new opportunities.
- **Financial stability:** Cambridge House can ‘weather the knocks’ if funding is withdrawn from one service.

*‘Cambridge House gives me a degree of confidence because they have fingers in enough pies, so if one of those pies was taken away we’re not talking about [it affecting] the viability of the organisation.’*

‘[Being multi-purpose] gives us scale and solidity; and having our history, a track record of delivery and [being] financially stable makes us a safer bet for investment.’

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## 3.5 Challenges

Interviewees focused on the challenges for Cambridge House as a multi-purpose organisation in relation to management, cross referral and joint working.

### Management

By far the greatest challenge of being multi-purpose appears to be the management and governance of the organisation as a whole: ‘...organisationally it’s a bit of a nightmare managing services to people, strategic influence, use of the building and managing connections between them.’

Specifically, interviewees identified the following challenges:

- Juggling relationships between different parts of the organisation and also with multiple stakeholders: ‘As an employee you can sometimes feel that senior managers are not focused on your bit of the service.’
- Handling multiple funding streams and the multiple reporting requirements that go with it.
- Communicating to funders and other stakeholders what Cambridge House does.
- Managing staff with different skills and qualifications and professional affiliations outside Cambridge House: ‘They [staff] will have different values and will also have clear principles and standards usually set at a national level and related to the field they work in.’
- Managing services that are required to comply with different professional standards that are set by external bodies.

*‘There’s a weight of evidence against multi-purposeness: it’s difficult to manage, there’s a lack of focus, the synergies are often illusory, it’s hard to form a common point of view and hard to establish a governing body and management team able to cover the breadth.’*

### Cross referral and joint working

The extent of joint working between services in general, and referrals between services in particular, is not recorded formally. What little is known suggests that where joint working including cross referral does take place, it is appropriate and effective and is sufficient to provide a basis for further development. Cross referral is ‘informal’ and happens ‘in a fairly organic way’ relying on individual staff members’ initiative. There is widespread enthusiasm for collecting information about cross referral in a systematic way:

*‘The advantage [of joint working] is that in theory people tell their story once and they can be referred on in a safe environment.’*

At the present time, joint working appears to be most active between the Law Centre and other parts of the organisation. The Law Centre has provided training on aspects of the law, for example the Mental Health Act, and advises on or takes on cases where clients of other Cambridge House services present with complex legal problems. One reason for this may be because the Law Centre is the longest running service in the organisation, is easily understood and offers a unique area of expertise.

Cross referral is also thought to occur regularly between the children’s advocacy worker and the respite playscheme. In the past, members of community groups being supported by community development staff would be

## What next for Cambridge House

referred for individual support services in a discreet way when the need arose. Other examples of joint working include the LINK project, which has the ability to bring different parts of the organisation together.

Interviewees would like to see more joint working: 'Cross referral happens much less than we'd like. There is no formal structure; there is not enough training and awareness and people have not seen the advantages.' The following barriers to joint working were identified:

- Services are 'issue specific' and driven by their own funding, targets and policies. There is no cross disciplinary funding to encourage services to work together: '...funding pressures put people in silos and encourage them to use narrow definitions. So, the ideal of the multi-purpose culture is struggling against centrifugal forces working against.'
- It is hard for staff to meet one another in an informal way. This situation is slightly improved when the garden is in use during warm weather.
- Staff who deliver services, and also some team managers, do not know enough about the services that their colleagues provide: 'We are not fully aware of what each other do all of the time.'

The people we interviewed for this research made many positive comments about Cambridge House and the benefits of the multi-purpose model. Here we summarise their ideas and suggest ways in which the potential of the model might be realised more fully.

- Cambridge House's mission is underpinned by core values: embedding services in the communities it serves, whether geographic communities or communities of interest; and using these services to bring about social change within the wider social and economic policy context.
- These core values also connect and build on Cambridge House's long and distinguished history as a settlement.
- Community development work in the Camberwell and Walworth areas could, if strengthened, renew the close connection between Cambridge House and its immediate neighbourhood.
- There is, however, no suggestion that Cambridge House should define its geographical remit more tightly. The reasons for operating the IMCA at sub regional level, for example, are well understood and accepted.
- Key benefits of being a multi-purpose community organisation include: flexibility and responsiveness to changing needs and new opportunities; trust between services; financial and organisational stability; and a

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- knowledgeable, multi-disciplinary workforce.
  - Managing a multi-purpose community organisation is seen as a complex operation, made more difficult by the ways in which policy and funding systems can discourage joint working across disciplines.

### Integration

Whilst staff and trustees would like to monitor the extent and nature of referrals between different parts of Cambridge House, there is little appetite for introducing formal mechanisms for cross referral within the organisation. On the whole, staff were keen to maintain an informal system; indeed, it was pointed out that each service is likely to have a different approach to referral, meaning that coming to a common agreement could be onerous and the resulting system cumbersome.

Instead, there is general agreement that Cambridge House needs to collect information about the current extent of cross referral: ‘we need something to capture how much it does happen.’ In addition, interviewees suggested some simple measures that could help capitalise on the very sound foundation of existing arrangements:

- Improving staff knowledge and understanding of one another’s services. This might start where cross referral has been most successful and then grow from there.
- Gathering and sharing information about the extent and nature of cross referral in order to demonstrate both the benefits of cross referral itself and the value of being a multi-purpose organisation. It was suggested that this would also encourage others to think about cross referral.

- Building on the knowledge and experience of reception staff in Cambridge House and at the separate entrance to the Law Centre.

### Strengthening communities

Community anchors are a key plank of the Government’s vision for strong, healthy communities where people are able to influence local decisions. Interviewees felt that Cambridge House has the potential to make a more significant contribution to this agenda and to the growth of participatory democracy:

*‘We cover various strands of charitable activities, but ultimately all of it comes back to the community; it’s about helping the community.’*

*‘[LINK] is about empowerment and community leadership; promoting the engagement of people in decision-making processes about issues that will fundamentally impact on their lives’*

At the present time, that contribution includes highly specialised services for adults with learning disabilities and their parents, enabling those people’s lives to function more smoothly, and providing a platform for local people to have a voice in the borough of Southwark via the LINK initiative.

Interviewees for this research wanted to see a stronger focus on the area around Cambridge House, Camberwell and Walworth: ‘they should be a community anchor for Camberwell. They need to strengthen that and its local presence.’ Specifically, it was suggested that Cambridge House might be a hub for local community groups and could provide these with grassroots community development support:

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*‘Our history gives us a position, that we are rooted in this community, here to stay, here before the council. The world is changing but we are here to stay.’*

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