

John's Story at The Bridge

John was a middle-aged man who came to use our services in November 2019. His relationship had broken down, he was unable to stay with friends or family and so found himself sleeping rough. He was very upset, and there were concerns regarding his alcohol and possible drugs. Our case worker ensured that he felt safe when he used our facilities by spending time with him. Time spent with our guests is viewed as an important part of our service provision. This quality time with John allowed the case worker to explain to him how we work, and John was asked how he felt about coming to The Bridge and how he felt he could keep himself safe. The caseworker gently built trust with him by checking in with him regularly, sending a text or making a phone call, and having hopeful conversations that reassure him when he came into The Bridge.

As trust was built, John was referred to Leicester City Centre Outreach team and accessed emergency accommodation. As well as support with accommodation he used all The Bridge food services and would be at the centre whenever possible chatting with staff and volunteers. Sometimes those conversations were very social in nature, discussing life, music, and culture over some food. Mid-week food services were especially helpful to get to know guests such as John as he could relax, eat food and chat about areas of life other than homelessness and his problems. The caseworker was then able to secure supported accommodation for him through a local housing provider. He continued to use the food services even once he had been accommodated.

During the Covid-19 period, he had little support from his housing provider. Fortunately, he had recently begun to engage with his mentor on The Lighthouse Projects. At this time, he started having problems with the anti-social behaviour of another resident. We were pleased that he felt able to tell his mentor and case worker about this ongoing problem. His situation at the hostel had become so difficult that it had pushed him to sofa surf with a friend as he felt so unsafe. We supported him through this difficult time he was having by liaising with the hostel staff and advocating for John's safety. The matter was resolved, and John was able to move back in with ease.

Soon after this situation, we were contacted by the Job Centre Plus who were proving an opportunity via PA housing for employment with a tenancy. We immediately put John forward to apply as we were confident, he could be a suitable candidate. John was very anxious about his CV as it had been some time since he had worked. With his mentor he had various telephone conversations to talk through his experiences and qualifications. The case worker was then able to create an up to date CV for John and prepared him for the interview and induction days. Unfortunately, John was not successful in this application however he felt proud of himself for trying. It gave him confidence to start applying for other jobs and he remained positive throughout the experience. He continues to engage with his mentor on a weekly basis who continues to support him in his job searches.

The Bridge Pathway

As seen in the story above, we always strive to support the homeless and vulnerably housed in a welcoming non-judgmental manner. Our volunteers, staff and trustees work directly with guests, and partner with other charities and agencies to open doors to a wider range of services. Each stage in the graphic below helps to build a trusting relationship which we believe is essential to the wellbeing and positive outcomes of our guests. This provides a 'pathway' of support for guests on their personal journey from homelessness to hope. We believe that this pathway should be circular, sustainable and enrich the lives of those in our community. The benefit of this is threefold; firstly, it enables us to offer sound lifelong support to those that need it, secondly, it provides an opportunity to those who have achieved independence to receive the benefit of helping others and finally it offers new guests the unique welcome and support they can only get from peers.

Each guest is unique and each journey towards a fulfilling life will be different. This journey is rarely linear, with setbacks as well as progress, and it may take any length of time. The support we give is therefore based on the strengths and circumstances of the individual, and offered with patience, understanding and flexibility. Within these 5 stages, is the consistent use of Reflective Practice using the ERA Cycle¹ which runs throughout every aspect of the organization. We all start with our own experiences; we reflect on this experience and then act accordingly. We use this module throughout our work to ensure we consistently use the best practice possible and learn together.



¹ Jasper (2013) 'Beginning Reflective Practice.' <https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit/models>

We believe that as we become a hub and a community café, our focus should be on the improvement of both physical and mental wellbeing. Our aim is to be a Psychologically Informed Environment (PIE) and a trauma aware service.

Based on the 2012 Good Practice Guide² this means our services are consciously designed to consider the psychological and emotional needs of the people using the service. We recognise that this is particularly important where people have complex and entrenched needs or have experienced acute trauma as often trauma and adverse childhood experience are prevalent in the narrative of people's pathway to homelessness³. We know that insecure childhood attachment strongly impacts upon the ability to have healthy social relationships in adulthood⁴. Some have difficulty managing their emotions, appear impulsive and do not consider the consequences of their actions. Some may be withdrawn, isolated and reluctant to engage or exhibit anti-social behaviour.

The purpose of a PIE is to help staff and volunteers understand where these behaviours are coming from and therefore work more creatively and constructively with challenging behaviours. Central to PIE is the idea that real development of services arises from reflective practice and must come from within the team.⁵ The primary tool for change is relationships. It is through good relationships and support that staff and volunteers can help a guest start to make positive changes in their life. It is also the responsibility of staff and volunteers to 'model' healthy relationships that we know many of guests struggle to create as adults. Furthermore, there is no fixed or 'correct' model but rather a set of elements that allow the development of services in a psychologically informed way. For more information on these elements of PIE, please see Appendix 1.

Creating a PIE at The Bridge

This is how we meet or are working towards the elements of PIE:

1. **Psychological Awareness** Staff, volunteers and trustees are trained to be trauma aware. They are always striving to be aware of the importance of meeting the psychological needs of our guests. An awareness of guest's sense of security and safety is of utmost importance. There is also an understanding that this requires constant reflection and adaptation depending on differing needs.
2. **Spaces of Opportunity** The environment needs to be sanitary whilst remaining welcoming and multi-functional. The physical space is an opportunity for guests to meet different members of the community, whether they are staff, volunteers, trustees, or partner organisations. Every interaction is a space of opportunity to learn from each other.

² (2012) Psychologically Informed Services for Homeless People: Good Practice Guide.

<https://www.pathway.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Psychologically-informed-services-for-Homeless-People.pdf>

³ FEANTSA (2017) 'Recognizing the link between Trauma and Homelessness'

⁴ FEANTSA (2017) 'Recognizing the link between Trauma and Homelessness'

⁵ Haig et al. (2012) "Psychologically informed environments and the 'Enabling Environments' initiative.'

3. **Staff Support and Training** All staff and volunteers are trained in Trauma Informed Care allowing them to be confident in working with often very damaged people. The staff team have regular reflective practice meetings to discuss caseloads and challenging behaviours. Staff receive support and supervision sessions to debrief regularly. Staff wellbeing is viewed as an essential part of the success of the organisation.
4. **Learning and Enquiry** The evaluation of outcomes is consistent and part of our everyday practice. Outcomes are reviewed during reflective practice sessions and challenges are discussed openly. Positive outcomes are celebrated and recorded consistently. Services are not determined by strict funding obligations but rather the needs of guests and the development of new services is consistently encouraged and inclusive.
5. **The Three R's (Rules, Roles and Responsiveness)** Relationships between guests, staff volunteers and trustees are crucial to the success of the organisation and these relationships are viewed as spaces of opportunity to interact positively with the community. The written rules of the organisation are clearly communicated to staff, volunteers, trustees and guests and breaches are challenged. However, the way that interactions with guests are managed is always considered based on their roles within the organisation. For example, guests who have faced traumatic situations are worked with flexibly. Whilst, staff are held to account with different 'rules' than volunteers. The responsiveness of the organisation includes the involvement of volunteers and guests in decisions that builds confidence and creates opportunities of new services, new volunteers and peer mentoring. The responsiveness or unwritten rules of how the service works is constantly reviewed in the staff reflective practice meetings.

Our Pathway in Practice:

A warm welcome

Our guests: may struggle to access the fundamentals in life such as food, sanitation and a friendly face. They may feel vulnerable, alone and let down.

Our support: staff and volunteers provide breakfast with access to showers and washing for those on the streets, an evening meal or a call at home to those living alone. Our new Community Café will help create a warm welcome.

Our partners: help run our meal services.

Our impact: safety, sanctuary and dignity amidst chaotic and painful lifestyles. The knowledge that somebody cares for and respects them and is on their side.

PIE: in our welcome we create a space that is safe for all. New guests are welcomed using the basic provision of food and sanitation in a warm and sanitary environment. We do not ask many questions but allow them to access the services that they choose to use. We respond to guests at their pace.

Crisis support

Our guests: may reveal a crisis over a meal or call or come to us for urgent help.

Our support: outreach and casework.

Our partners: provide welfare, housing, and urgent healthcare assistance.

Our impact: 'the basics' that we can take for granted but offer a way to a safer and more stable life; trusting relationships to open the possibility of further support.

PIE: we do not judge but accept the experiences of our guests. Staff are trained to listen carefully and find solutions with the guest that they are comfortable with. We are always honest about the limits of our service and manage the expectations of those facing severe difficulty. The staff routinely reflect on their practice and endeavor to learn from experience.

Wellbeing & self-care

Our guests: may feel ready to share their story, work through physical, emotional, and mental health needs, and start to take more care of themselves.

Our support: on-going casework, volunteer mentoring, social and therapeutic activities. Access to a community psychiatric nurse and health services.

Our partners: work with us in a multi-agency approach to provide targeted, specialist support (e.g. addiction, mental health). Our Community Café will provide a 'hub' to enable partners to offer services on site.

Our impact: guests feel able to identify their hopes and needs, take part in healing, social activities or engage with specialist support.

PIE: staff and volunteers receive regular supervision, support, and training to ensure they feel able to support our guests using the best practice possible. There is an honest culture of mutual respect and self-care which transcends all levels of the organization. The physical environment is built to provide everyone who uses the building with the privacy they need to feel safe and supported.

Rebuilding lives

Our guests: may feel ready to regain control of their lives, taking steps to greater independence.

Our support: further mentoring, therapeutic and social activities including celebrating guests' achievements and life events such as birthdays. Our Community Café will provide volunteering opportunities and life skills.

Our partners: we are exploring new partnerships to help guests access employment support and help to reunite with their families.

Our impact: guests develop skills and support to gain work, live independently and rebuild social networks. Activities help build confidence, self-esteem, and hope.

PIE: rebuilding lives looks different for every individual and so plans for change move at the pace of the individual. Every interaction is viewed as a space opportunity for self-growth and improvement. Staff and volunteers are trained to work with guests using a strength-based approach. The Bridge is a multi-functional space where people at different points in the journey feel included.

Peer support

Our guests: may feel ready to offer support to others, acknowledging their unique capacity to help others who are experiencing similar struggles.

Our support: further support and training to help peer supporters reflect and manage their own coping mechanisms. Our Community Café will provide a space to meet and develop peer relationships.

Our partners: we are exploring new partnerships to help train and support peer supporters.

Our impact: guests benefit from offering a helping role which allows them to positively influence others, allowing them to feel valued and improving their self-esteem, confidence, and knowledge. Their unique capacity to relate to and understand the experiences of new guests will enrich the warm welcome they experience completing the circular pathway.

PIE: volunteering roles are created for those with lived experience to give back to the community at The Bridge. However, this is done in trauma-informed way to ensure that guests are not set up to fail. They receive support at all stages of their involvement in The Bridge and are encouraged to give peer support to others. They too can access benefits of training that other volunteers receive, are encouraged to share their lived experienced and are part of the development of new services.

Appendix 1

The 5 elements of a PIE are:

1. **Psychological Awareness** this is the bedrock of PIE and provides a consistent approach to care of service users. Generally, staff and volunteers will be trained to work in a trauma informed way to help service enact positive change in their lives and to challenge negative patterns of behaviour.
2. **Spaces of Opportunity** It is important to view the whole environment from the viewpoint of the user. The space should be a place where service users feel they have choice and control. These spaces are an opportunity to meet the service user where they are at and engage with them effectively.
3. **Staff Support and Training** All staff and volunteers are trained in Trauma Informed Care allowing them to be confident in working with often very damaged people. All staff have regular support and supervision sessions to debrief and discuss caseloads through reflective practice.
4. **Learning and Enquiry** The evaluation of outcomes is an opportunity to know if what is being said and done is effective and to develop new ways of working. However, defining relevant outcomes is problematic, with complex and entrenched problems. Hence learning and enquiry describes an attitude of mind within an organisation or service that allows reflection to take place.
5. **The Three R's (Rules, Roles and Responsiveness)** the rules of the service, that govern the day-to-day operations; the roles that are available - for both staff and users - within the social structure; and finally, the more un-written ways in which the service actually works - the responses or responsiveness to events. This trio aims to focus on immediate and practical expressions of the way a service works.