

Helping Cambridge's Homeless People

"The budget hasn't kept up" – Brian Holman.

Who are they?
CAMBRIDGE
CYRENIANS.

Where are they?
Cambridge.

What do they do?
Provide accommodation and support to homeless people

How big are they?
14 FTE staff

What did they receive?
MS Office Professional 2003,
Windows XP Professional;
Symantec Norton Antivirus
2008.

The outcome?
Office software has been completely upgraded.

www.cambridgecyrenians.org.uk



"Traditionally," says Brian Holman, reflecting on the difficulty small charities face in raising money for computers and software, "if you need to get hold of IT equipment, your best bet is to go to local firms and see if they have any second-hand items they can give you."

Brian works for Cambridge Cyrenians, a charity that provides accommodation and shelter for homeless people in the city, as well as a range of associated support services to do with, for example, mental health. Cambridge is, of course, known as a technological centre, and those local firms' generosity had provided the charity's back office systems for some time.

However, it became clear that this model just wasn't sustainable.

"We had a selection of second-hand and donated computers, running a mixture of software," recalls Brian. "And we did network these, using an existing computer. However, we really needed a dedicated server – which then wouldn't support the software we had."

"For example, our accounting package was actually DOS-based," he says. "Nobody was supporting this. We also have funders, including local authorities, who require us to use specific software."

Aside from supporting the operational side of the charity, some computers are made available to service users – often to fulfil a process that those not familiar with homelessness issues might find surprising.

"If you want to be housed, you have to bid for it," explains Brian. "And the best way is to bid online. About 85% of people do it this way. So we make networked computers available to our users."

It was a local man, brought in to provide IT support, who pointed Cambridge Cyrenians towards the CTX programme. And following a process that Brian describes as 'very straightforward', the charity has been fully equipped with donations of Office and XP from Microsoft, and the Norton Antivirus suite from Symantec.

Whilst businesses can be extraordinarily generous to local charities, IT is one area that has perhaps outgrown the 'making do' culture that charities have succeeded with in the past. It's clear that CTX has filled a big funding gap for many. "We started off with one machine," recalls Brian. "And now we have eighteen. That's been over ten years – and the budget hasn't kept up."