

Lewes District Churches HOMELINK



Minutes of the Annual Meeting

Held at The Phoenix Centre, Lewes, on Thursday 18th May 2019

HOMELINK Office 01273 478541 Website: www.leweshomelink.org.uk

Attendance and Apologies: 70 people attended the meeting and 29 sent apologies.

1. Welcome: Joan Wignall (Chair) welcomed all **Friends of HOMELINK** and refreshments were enjoyed. Twenty tea lights surrounded the anniversary cake, representing the diverse roles undertaken in furthering the work of the charity. Joan invited representatives from each group to light one, as she told how HOMELINK had developed over the years, with contributions from so many Friends, helpers and supporter organisations.

2. Opening Prayer: The Rt Revd Richard Jackson, Bishop of Lewes, passed on thanks from the wider community and opened the annual meeting with a prayer.

3. Chair's Report: Joan thanked all those who are connected with HOMELINK and who help us to meet our aims and objectives. She set out the priorities for 2019, which included the need for more volunteers.

4. Treasurer's Report: John Howes thanked everyone for their support in 2018 and noted the 95 new tenancies facilitated in 2018 alongside the 40 small grants, contrasting this with the single figure tenancies in the first years of HOMELINK's work. He showed how the new loans and grants were financed: 60% from tenant repayments with the rest from grants (LDC and EKCT), donations and Events. The workload now includes paperwork for the 300 tenants currently repaying loans, necessitating the employment of a part-time helper in the office. The change from a Trust to a CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation) had meant setting up new bank accounts, bringing the need for supporters to sign new Gift Aid declarations and to pay Standing Orders into the new account. Crucially, the banks now require cheques to state 'Lewes District Churches HOMELINK' or 'Lewes HOMELINK' rather than just 'HOMELINK'.

5. Service Manager's Report: Pippa outlined the changes she had encountered in her first year in post: the Homelessness Reduction Act, the roll-out of Universal Credit in Lewes District, the anniversary celebrations, the new website, new logo, and the change to a CIO. All this had been set against a background of increasing homelessness in the South East and decreasing budgets for councils. Pippa explained that she had responded to a drop in referrals from LDC by working with other referral agencies: Sussex Pathways, Job Centre coaches, CAB, East Sussex Children's Services, Home Works, Foodbanks and women's refuges. She has made good use of clause UC47 in the Universal Credit legislation, which allows for rent to be paid direct to landlords. Pippa noted that the best part of her job was in seeing how having a home transforms lives: contact with children and the outside world is re-established, qualifications gained, jobs found. Of the 31 ex-offenders given small grants for temporary accommodation, 8 now have a loan for permanent accommodation and all but one are in full-time work, repaying their loan regularly. The conversion rate from applications to tenancies, rose in 2018 from 30% to 56%, partly due to fewer referrals, allowing for more support in finding accommodation. Pippa paid tribute to her great team of interviewers and to John, as Treasurer. Fran's office role in encouraging repayments is very helpful. There will be challenges in 2019, as we need to engage more supporters via the Glyndebourne concert and by taking the new film of our work, made by students at Southdown College, out to churches and other organisations. Having assisted 420 individuals in 2018, through our loans and small grants, we are likely to continue to have a '*unique role in the LDC homelessness strategy*' as described in an accolade from LDC.

6. New Logo, new Website and new Film: Jane Lee, HOMELINK Management Committee's Vice Chair and Data Protection Officer, explained the need to appeal to a wider audience and a younger demographic, who would respond to an updated website which had facilities to find information quickly and to make donations on-line. She explained the attributes of a good logo and showed how our new logo met them. The website will showcase events and note the £1,000,000 already expended on loans since the charity began, assisting 2,500 people. There will be a section for clients to ask about their repayments, as well as

testimonials from clients. Ten tenants had welcomed student film-makers into their homes and Jane had felt privileged to accompany them. A clip from the new film was then shown, to give a flavour of what was to come. The new website should be 'up' very soon.

7. Guest Speakers:

- (i) **Revd Neil Weston**, HOMELINK's first Chair, sent his congratulations and best wishes on screen. He recalled the contribution made by Revd Jim Cooper, as Chair of the local homelessness Action Group.
- (ii) **Tessa Ricketts**, Social Concerns Advisor for the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton, brought greetings from Bishop Richard Moth and outlined various initiatives taking place across the diocese.
- (iii) **David Griffiths**, Chair of Open Door, congratulated HOMELINK and described the work that his group was undertaking, which includes a drop-in centre from 1 pm to 3 pm for those in need of exchanging clothes and bedding. He noted how social media often denigrates the marginalised and passes on damaging misinformation. Open Door depends on donations of money and materials from the public, so David very much welcomed the support of councillors, churches and Maria Caulfield, MP, as well as the police who have just awarded some funding. Open Door members assisted the council with the rough sleeper count in November, at which 8 people were recorded. As those sofa-surfing or hidden in woods cannot be counted, the actual number of homeless people could be twice as many. Open Door is hoping to run a night shelter this coming winter but more volunteers are needed. An event is being held on 27th June at 6.30 pm in Harvey's yard to spread the word. Eventually, premises and a support worker will be needed, as homelessness brings with it other issues, often related to physical and mental health.
- (iv) **Cllr Stephen Gauntlett, Chair of LDC**, referred to HOMELINK as a '*most valuable resource*' and a scheme which is '*creative and sustainable*'. He quoted Gary Hall, head of Homes First, in characterising HOMELINK as a '*pro-active homelessness prevention tool*' which is '*well-run and robust*'. 33 local people, referred by LDC, had been helped into tenancies. LDC will seek to build on this in future years.
- (v) **Maria Caulfield, MP**: Maria recalled how comforting it is to have a home and how vulnerable one would be without the security it brought. Anyone can become homeless and many are only a pay cheque away from it. As a local MP, Maria has tried to sort these issues in parliament by supporting the Homelessness Reduction Act (making councils responsible for taking earlier steps to prevent homelessness), the abolition of tenants' fees, and making tenancies secure for a longer period of time. She highlighted the problems faced by ex-prisoners with no home to return to, which increases the likelihood of reoffending. The probation service has been taken back 'in house' to better address such issues.

8. Some Reflections from Peter Field, the Lord Lieutenant: As we mark 100 years since the cessation of World War One, Peter Field recalled his own experience in combatting homelessness in Brighton. Homelessness, like war, is not easily prevented, with no magic solution. Just as in a jigsaw, there are various pieces of a solution to fit together: more social housing; use of private rented housing (along with provision of the deposit and rent in advance); addressing addiction and mental health issues; offering support networks to integrate people into society. Peter Field asked everyone present to '*keep going*' and to support HOMELINK in bringing back strong community links.

9. Events: Joan spoke of an exciting year to come. She highlighted the **Open Garden in Bishopstone on Saturday 20th July from 1.30 pm to 4.30 pm**, encouraging everyone to publicise it and to bring their friends. She appealed for gazebos and sun-shades, in the hopes of beating the weather. Jane Lee gave an update on the **Glyndebourne Gala Concert on 17th November at 3 pm**. Performers, include Dame Felicity Lott, Brighton College dancers, the Eusebius String Quartet, the Ashdown Singers, and the Baroque Collective playing Handel, during which the Street Funk Dance Group will perform. The Lewes Priors Staff Choir, prepared by John Hancorn in the Gareth Malone tradition, will give a one-off performance. Local celebrities, including Katie Derham, Steve Coogan, Zoe Lyons, Nimmy March, and Eddie Izzard, will present the performers. Tickets will cost from £30 to £60, with priority booking from 7th - 13th June for those on the HOMELINK supporters list, via the website. Public booking will be available from 14th June.

10. The meeting closed at 7.20 pm with the HOMELINK prayer and informal discussion followed.