



Lewes District Churches HOMELINK

Minutes of the Annual Meeting held at Christ Church, Lewes at 7 pm on 19th May 2022

HOMELINK Office 01273 921272 Website: www.leweshomelink.org.uk

Attendance and Apologies: 34 people attended the meeting and 20 sent apologies.

Welcome: Neil Fisher (Technical Co-ordinator) welcomed the Lord Lieutenant, local mayors, councillors and HOMELINK supporters to the meeting.

1. Opening Prayer: The Revd Barbara Evans-Routley, HOMELINK's Methodist patron, prayed for all involved with HOMELINK, clients, staff and supporters, giving thanks for our many blessings and asking for guidance with our decisions.

2. Welcome and Chair's Report: Joan Wignall (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting. She extended thanks to the HOMELINK staff, acknowledging that they do far more than their agreed hours, and congratulated them on working so well together. HOMELINK is still seeking a job-share Client Manager (CM), should anyone be aware of a possible candidate. Gary Brettle (CM) was particularly thanked for his hard work in helping to cover this vacancy, whilst also fulfilling his own duties. The invaluable work of the Trustees was also acknowledged and the contribution of the many volunteers. The Church Representatives were thanked for maintaining the important link between HOMELINK and their congregations.

3. Finance Manager's Report: Gabrielle Hill (Finance Manager) advised that the report is in the process of being audited. She highlighted that the cost of small grants, made by HOMELINK to those in need, had increased to £25,103. These grants fund the purchase of small essential goods for clients trying to set up a new home, and the increase reflects the demand brought about by the pandemic and cost of living crisis. Welcome financial support was received from a number of Trusts, including EKCT and Enjoolata, and there was also support from LDC.

4. Client Managers' Report: Gary Brettle (Client Manager) highlighted record levels of activity for a number of key performance indicators, outlining the loans and small grants HOMELINK had continued to offer, despite the pandemic. HOMELINK had successfully adapted its processes and interview methods; supported new and existing applicants; and maintained contact with existing clients during this period.

Applicants continue to experience difficulty in finding a home, due to the low housing stock; some discrimination against individuals on benefits; agents and landlords having elevated requirements for guarantors often requiring them to have large cash deposits or earned income; and the reluctance of some landlords/agents to accept the Rent Guarantor insurance scheme. Local housing benefits still do not reflect local housing costs. These difficulties have led to a 26% conversion rate with 86 applicants successfully finding homes, whilst many more are unable to find properties, although HOMELINK endeavours to support them with advice, signposting and, on occasion, a grant. This support has been an important focus in recent months and it will be even more important if the cost of living crisis continues.

Small grants had increased and thanks were due to Joanna Slaughter and Gill Short for their hard work in supporting clients with basic items for their new homes. Again, it is anticipated that this will continue to be an important part of HOMELINK's offer in the current crisis.

Loan repayments have been steady at 85%, and all HOMELINK staff and Trustees acknowledge the excellent work of Frances Hymas in achieving this level. Recent data shows a small decline to 83% and the economic situation suggests that this will decline further. HOMELINK may be obliged to offer even more flexible payment options to clients. There are plans for Gary to meet LDC staff to re-advertise HOMELINK's offer and role.

In response to questions, Gary confirmed that HOMELINK still offers support to applicants leaving Ford Prison and the relationship with Lewes HMP will be re-established, following the pandemic.

5. Development Officer (DO) Update: Georgina Clare advised that HOMELINK has joined the Homeless Link Forum, a national organisation focussing on homelessness. HOMELINK continues to work closely with LDC and is grateful for their support. The funding from Enjoolata had been important and the associated trip to the ice rink provided some seasonal fun. The relationship with EKCT continues and HOMELINK particularly acknowledged their match funding pledge of up to £20,000. This had attracted other funding sources to donate to HOMELINK.

A range of activities promoting HOMELINK's community outreach had continued, notably Morrison's Community Champions scheme, and it was possible to hold the Christmas Concert with audience members attending via zoom or in person. More events are planned and details will be circulated. **Please keep in touch with Georgina** if you have any event in mind or if you can help.

6. Thinking Inside the Box: LDC's approach: HOMELINK is grateful to Sarah Tye, Commercial Business Engagement Project Manager at LDC-Eastbourne, who gave the presentation as her colleague Leighton Rowe had been obliged to send his apologies.

There is an acute need in the area for 1 and 2 bed properties. LDC is meeting this challenge by using existing car park areas and garages, no longer needed for cars, to create attractive modular-built houses, flats and bungalows. This provides sustainable, attractive homes in central areas at low cost. Existing one-bed flats which come onto the market are also being acquired.

In response to questions, Sarah advised that the modular builds have a life expectancy of 50 years. She acknowledged that recent 'right to buy' policies had reduced the number of council-owned properties, although receipts on these sales were now used to improve housing stock in an efficient way and there are restrictions on re-selling a 'right to buy' property within a few years of purchase.

The issue of 'voiding' a property when it falls vacant was discussed, as some HOMELINK clients find their new rental is without flooring or curtains. Sarah confirmed that new build properties are not affected but it is likely that older builds will continue to be cleared.

LDC is anticipating reaching its target of modular homes on the car park areas in the near future and consideration is being given to an acquisition programme, to secure more land, in order to extend the scheme and to promote traditional build projects.

Sarah was thanked for a very informative and interesting presentation.

7. Closing Prayer: Bishop Richard Moth of Arundel and Brighton gave thanks for the work of HOMELINK in promoting the dignity of every person and working for the common good of all.

The meeting closed at 8.15 pm with thanks to all those who had contributed and those who had attended. An informal discussion followed over tea and biscuits.

26.5.22

HOMELINK is Charity No. 1174895