THE STORY OF HOMELINK

1999 – 2019





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Picture insert

1. 2007 Sainsbury's collection: Vivienne Challis
2. 2011 May Board: Geoffrey Cleave, Miranda Hedges, Jaqueline Wootton, Vreni (forehead and nose) Paula Burr, Joan, Amy Cronshaw, Linda Fisher, Maggie Jakeman, Terry, Jane Keal, John Shaw, Diane Lower.
3. 2012 January: House of Friendship: Joan at door
4. 2012 March Strategy Group: : Vreni, Joan, Diane, John Shaw, Geoffrey, Terry
5. 2012 August Mayor's Reception: (Front row) Rita and Peter Harper, Joan, Michael Chartier (Mayor), Mayor's consort, Liz Mandeville, Grace Blaker, Ann Cross, Diane.
   (Back row) Gretel Scott, Geoffrey, James , Terry, Mike Tryers, Chris, Maggie Jakeman, Catherine Fletcher, Alex Kirby,
6. 2012 August cheque handover from Caburn Housing Cooperative: Liz Mandeville, John Shaw, Terry, Joan, Diane and three Caburn Housing Co-operative members.
7. 2014 December Christmas Concert at Seaford
8. 2015 Oct Reps' Tea: John Howes
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THE STORY OF HOMELINK

Chapter 1

On a crisp November afternoon in 2019, a gala concert for a charity took place at the world-famous Glyndebourne opera house, a venue which has seen singers such as Pavarotti launch their careers. The presenters included the actor, comedian and producer, Steve Coogan, and the stand-up comedian and great charity fund raiser, Eddie Izzard, and Katie Derham, the well-known BBC presenter. The acts ranged from the famous soprano Dame Felicity Lott and guitarist Richard Durrant to the Lewes Prison Staff Choir and youngsters in the Streetfunk Kriticool Crew. In the audience, Grace Blaker, Chris Tutt, Terry Howell, Linda Fisher and Malcolm Mazey must have pinched themselves. Their minds must have wandered back to the time when they had helped found Homelink, a charity to aid the homeless. Could they have imagined in their wildest dreams that little over twenty years later they would be sitting in a seat in Glyndebourne witnessing a concert which would raise £36,000 for their cause and… that their charity would still be needed?

By the early 1990s, the housing market was in a mess, made worse by a recession, the selling off of council houses and the lack of new houses. It was the era of "negative equity", whereby people were unable to keep up the payments on their mortgages and had their homes repossessed by their mortgage lenders. The Rev. Neil Weston, an early chair of Homelink remembers, 'as a result they were homeless and penniless.' They couldn't easily enter the rental market which required a month's rent in advance and a damage deposit. It was particularly difficult for single people, especially men. For the first time since the 1930s there was the sight of people sleeping rough on the streets. There was also the invisible homeless, those who didn't qualify for help from the council or had no savings and found themselves sofa surfing or sleeping in cars.

The newly formed Churches National Housing Coalition marched on Parliament to petition for changes. Grace Blaker, a Quaker, recalls that 'Christians were using different strategies trying to meet the needs of homeless people within their parishes. They felt as they were offering practical measures to help them they were entitled to speak out about the injustice.' During a rally at Westminster Hall, there was an exhibition in which various groups presented what they were doing. Grace learnt about rent and deposit guarantee schemes, including one from Littlehampton.

After the rally, there was a packed meeting at the Quaker Meeting House in Lewes. Local councillors came, even a blind one with his dog. Grace, described as 'a tower of strength' by colleagues, gave a presentation about rent/deposit guarantee schemes and people from Littlehampton came to talk about theirs. Among the listeners was Peter Mettyear, the Director of Parker Pens in Newhaven, who promised his support. This was followed by a public meeting at the Sacred Heart Church in Newhaven in November 1997, chaired by the Reverend Jim Cooper of Seaford. (Cooper's son, Niall, was a director of the Churches National Housing Coalition in Manchester and was influential in his father becoming involved). As a result, an Action Group on homelessness was formed, primarily of representatives from various churches but not exclusively so. They included Mabel and Jim Cooper (chair), Ann Cross (secretary), Grace Blaker, Marion Smith, Chris Tutt, Terry Howell, Malcolm Mazey and Verena Smith.

Ann Cross, a trained nurse and health visitor, was an atheist and a passionate social and political campaigner. She was married to one of the most decorated West Indian pilots of the Second World War, Ulric Cross – a film, *Hero*, was eventually made about his life. Ann had worked in Tower Hamlets and had written articles in nursing magazines about the impact of poor housing on health. She remembers, '*my bosses told me it was rubbish but I was proved right about changes in conditions and money making a huge difference to*

peoples' health.' Ann had been an intrepid traveller and had been to India, Cuba and had lived in Africa for many years. Grace Blaker, also a health visitor (in Brighton), remembers Ann as a great campaigner who would badger the local MP and the council about action on homelessness. Grace believed that although the selling off of council houses contributed to the crisis, not enough houses were being built.

Chris Tutt was a newly retired secondary school French teacher who had an interest in homelessness and had volunteered locally for Shelter, a homeless charity. She said 'I have always enjoyed helping people in a concrete way. I had a strong religious background. My father was an artist. In his later years he moved into making crucifixes. He was a gentle faith-filled man… I have always been brought up with the idea that you are your brother's keeper and am thankful that I was given a way to do it.' She remembers

> *'when it became apparent in the 1990s that there were people all over Lewes sleeping on park benches etc., we realised something had to be done. That's when I joined the Action Group. I had lived in France where the culture was that you lived in a flat, not necessarily owning it, but had security of tenure which was lacking in this country. This insistence on owning your own house seems to be a particularly British phenomenon … when we started we thought we would only be needed for a maximum of ten years as Tony Blair when he came to power was saying "housing, housing, housing". We thought that would be the end of it but sadly no.'*

Chris was to become Homelink's long service secretary and one of its most long-serving trustees.

After doing feasibility work, the Action Group appointed a committee of twelve to set up Homelink with Neil Weston as chair, Chris Tutt as secretary and Eric Dearmun as treasurer. Most of the committee had been in the Action Group. Three "Churches Together" groups consisting of forty churches in Lewes, Newhaven and Seaford

who supported Homelink, were invited to nominate a representative to co-ordinate fund-raising and provide a channel of communication between Homelink and their respective church. Representatives were encouraged to maintain contact with their local trustees on the newly formed Homelink Board and with other church reps within their locality. Neil Weston's wife, Maureen, remembers that, 'we were very clear that the charity should be seen as a Christian enterprise, albeit one which would seek to enlist support of every kind from those outside the churches as well as those within, and so the name "Lewes District Churches Homelink" – "Homelink" for short – was chosen with care.' It was a collective decision.

Terry Howell, a retired educational adviser, went to the initial meeting of the committee and became a crucial figure in Homelink's development, helping to draw up its constitution[1] before submitting it to the Charity Commission. In 1996, estate agents were contacted about the possibility of Homelink guaranteeing the first month's rent and damage deposit. In the beginning only a handful were interested, usually the smaller ones. Local people who were willing to act as guarantors were enrolled and Peter Mettyear generously put up £10,000, the major financial guarantee. The scheme was to run in partnership with Lewes District Council's new scheme of lending homeless people up to four weeks' rent in advance and the deposit on a private property. Contact with the council was facilitated by an early supporter of Homelink, Peter Harper. He was a local councillor and also on the council's housing committee and was instrumental in facilitating contacts between the two. Because of a possible conflict of interest, he was not allowed to be a trustee – although his wife Rita was – but he was on its fund-raising committee.

Applicants for the guarantee scheme were to try to find their own accommodation through the named agents or independently.

[1] The Trust Deed was signed by Neil Weston, Ann Cross, Terry Howell and Verena Smith on 27/2/1998 with Chris Tutt and Malcolm Mazey as witnesses.

Also, in meetings between agents and applicants the Homelink representative was to be a "silent witness". Initially, only two agents, De Vere's and Marshalls, agreed to help. Eric Dearmun was opposed to any fee being paid to agents as a matter of principle. Most agents wanted a fee and so applicants were expected to pay one and also to pay for a credit check.

Linda Fisher was another important figure in Homelink's early days. She had moved to Lewes from Carlisle with her husband Neil. Both have been great supporters of the charity. *'I had no idea about homelessness at the time but thought it was a wonderful idea. I couldn't imagine anyone being homeless… I went to the same church as Verena Smith and got sort of "press ganged!"*". Linda had a working background in county council accounts and Neil had been a transportation engineer. She described their early roles,

> *I was like a finance officer. My prime duty was to collect pledges from a gang of people who were guarantors at the end of the year. We got people from the churches to pledge 10p in the pound of our losses or more. They could pledge as much as they wanted to. We had to pay the landlords if the clients reneged on their rent. Neil was like a technical support officer. He did the booklets and fliers and helped with technical problems. We have been a team.*

It was Linda's first venture into charity work. She found it completely different from being in paid work. '*There is something you can get out of charity work which you can't get out of paid work. You meet same-minded people and often see the job all the way through*.' She eventually replaced Eric Dearmun as treasurer.

From the start Homelink's remit was clear: "helping people into housing" was its motto. It wasn't to be a campaigning charity – it was not allowed to be under its constitution – although it did provide evidence to an organisation called "Housing Justice" which it was a member of. It was to be non-political and was to have as its patron

whoever the local Lewes MP was (along with the Lord Lieutenant of East Sussex). At the annual AGMs, councillors were to be invited irrespective of their political affiliations.

The referrals for Homelink were to come from the council and the scheme was aimed, initially, at only people over 25 without children who the council did not have a duty to house according to the new Housing Act of 1996, but who wanted to stay in the district. Terry Howell, (who replaced Neil Weston as chair when he moved to Nottingham) recalls that

> *We guaranteed the first month's rent and deposit which was accepted by the landlords. The tenants paid the rent at end of the month rather than at the beginning. We started to do an inventory of what it was like before. If someone was there for two years how much would estate agents allow for wear and tear? We never really got a clear answer. Sometimes we would pay £200 damage and the tenant was not required to pay us back so almost giving money not loaning it.*

Anna Dawney was appointed the first co-ordinator, initially in a voluntary capacity and Ann Cross was her line manager. It had taken two years from Homelink's launch in December 1996 to become fully operational in partnership with Lewes District Council in November 1998. By the time of the first Annual Report in January 1999, one applicant had been housed. Anna remembers,

> *I was not brought up in a religious way although I went to church in my teenage years. I abandoned it for a while but on trips abroad I would visit all the churches so still had an interest. Eventually I came back to the church. Although I had a PGCE, I had mainly worked in research: in London for the Economist Intelligence Unit writing quarterly reviews and later at Sussex University as an editor. I started to attend St Anne's church in Lewes. One day I remember a slip of paper went round the congregation to say that*

that this organisation [Homelink] was looking for someone to co-ordinate. At the time I was looking for something interesting to do. It kind of fitted in with my new commitment to the church.

Anna had no experience with the homeless but just felt that more needed to be done. She thought the scheme was quite ambitious and wondered whether it would work or not. She admitted that in the early days it was a bit of a struggle to convince local estate agents to join it and found more interest from the smaller ones. Most of the places she looked at were on the coast in Newhaven and Seaford as Lewes was usually too expensive. Anna explains how it worked:

Initially Ann [Cross] and I would interview clients referred from the council. Ann used to say to applicants, "Are you sure you can afford that extra bit as benefits don't cover the rent. You've got to eat. Don't forget. Don't say 'yes' and then not have enough money to buy food to eat". It made them more focussed. We were already thinking about a duty of care before guaranteeing any money. Would they be alright there? The other thing was whether they should be referred for mental health problems or whether they were entitled to more help. And could they live on their own in a very vulnerable state? To give you a typical example, men in tied accommodation in a pub etc. The pub goes bust so no home, no job and they are adrift. All these variables: run of bad luck, sudden life events that plunged people into unknown territory and they were struggling. Also, ex-military men who couldn't cope without the structure… Then I would go along with an agent and try and find them places to visit. I would sometimes go with the client to see them. If the client liked a flat then I, the agent and client would meet at the property and check the inventory and sign the agreement. The guarantee was instead of the deposit. Sometimes we couldn't help because we couldn't find a suitable property.

Anna recruited some volunteers from friends for interviewing and with Ann Cross started to run volunteer training courses. Initially client

interviews took place in rooms in Lewes, before Age Concern offered a free room in Lewes High Street at The House of Friendship. Mrs Mettyear generously donated £1,000 towards decorating and equipping the office. Anna's husband, Mike, got a free computer and sourced a desk and chair at a good price. She remembers that she and Ann Cross rarely turned anyone down. '*Sometimes they turned us down! Some couldn't face it. We never knew quite why. Perhaps they got offered an alternative. It was wonderful the moment someone got their flat. We did have this policy of following up; either me or the volunteer. We would follow them up for six months and also ask them to get in touch if there were problems. I seem to remember that we rarely paid any money out but it was good to have funds as an insurance.*'

In fact, financially the charity was in a strong position. In February 1999 Treasurer's report, Eric Dearmun recorded that they had guarantees of £26,000 (including Peter Mettyear's £10,000) from 93 guarantors and donations totalling £15,000 from churches and individuals. He wrote,

> *In several cases it has been clear from the covering letters that giving has been the result of careful planning by generous donors with very limited resources, but wanting to share their little with the homeless…Most moving donation was from a lady who asked relatives to make their 90th birthday presents to her in the form of donations to Homelink.*

Anna admitted that in the beginning '*things looked a bit shaky. It was very small and didn't look like it could expand*'. By July 1999, Homelink had only had 20 applicants and had housed only three tenants so it was agreed in exceptional circumstances to include couples. By September the applicants had risen to 28 and total housed to 4, including one couple. There was a severe lack of accommodation in the district and one had been housed in Uckfield. Anna, who worked two days a week, was given an honorarium of £1,000. The

following year Lloyds TSB gave a grant of £5,000 so Anna could be paid a salary for three years. Up to now only two agents were in the scheme. Neither were based in Lewes. Anna and Ann Cross arranged to meet five Lewes estate agents in a bid to involve them. Only two showed any interest. So far, the council had referred seven applicants who wanted to live in Lewes. None had been successful in finding a place. But there were successes, one man who slept rough over Christmas 1999 and then in his car, found a flat through Homelink in March 2000.

A crisis arrived in 2001 when only one applicant was housed and Terry Howell, the chair at the time, later admitted that '*the amount of committee time etc. seemed so excessive compared to the number housed that we seriously thought of giving up*.' Other rent/deposit schemes were not having much success either. In total there were only seven Homelink tenants. Most of those accepted were finding it difficult to find affordable accommodation and the hiring of a caravan was seriously contemplated. It was rejected when it was discovered that caravan sites were not open all year and the length of stay was restricted to one month. Another idea was to wind down the service, offer Homelink's trained volunteers to the local CAB and to perhaps buy a property with the funds available to offer as emergency accommodation. And it certainly wasn't encouraging when the Action Group – which dissolved the following year – wrote to the three general election candidates that year and received only one detailed response, a "meagre" one from another, and nothing at all from the third.

In 2002, Lewes District Council asked Homelink if they could refer families who were not eligible for statutory help. A six-month trial was agreed and this led to a dramatic increase in applications with eight new tenancies secured. The trial was a success and became permanent.

*

Apart from donations, from its earliest days Homelink had a very active fund-raising committee. The driving force behind it was Vivienne Challis, a prominent donator, who was its first chair. When running a market stall, she reputedly "never sold anything cheaply"! She died ten years ago and left money to Homelink in her will. Her successor was Malcolm Mazey who had been a youth education officer for East Sussex for nearly 40 years. He was brought up in Oxford and in the late 1940s remembered an incident that influenced him for the rest of his life:

> *There was a covered market in Oxford at Christmas time. I was a child and saw an unkempt, scruffy man begging. My father, who was an engineer, gave him half a crown. I said to my father, "Why did you do that? He may not spend it wisely." He replied, "I don't care if he doesn't spend it wisely. I can't do anything about that but on the other hand it could make a difference and help him turn his life around. You never know that one day any of us can find ourselves in a similar situation and be grateful to another human being for helping us."*

For Malcolm, even if Homelink helped only one person, it was better than doing nothing. He wrote Homelink's first code of practice and for many years was a trustee. After becoming chair of fund-raising, he was well supported by Rita and Peter Harper and Margaret and Brian Slattery who had all been recruited by Vivienne Challis. Rita and Peter had had their own difficulties in finding housing when they got married after the Second World War and for a couple of years had to live with their parents because of the housing shortage. Rita recalls that '*as soon as we heard about Homelink we were determined to do what we could*.' They were great supporters of the charity; Peter even attending the gala concert in a wheelchair after a serious stroke.

For some time, Margaret and Brian Slattery ran a "Homelink" market stall at the Martello Tower, Seaford, selling bric-a-brac and for eighteen years became key fund raisers. They had been guarantors for

Homelink but had never had to pay anything out. Margaret (who took over as chair of fund-raising in 2010) was a retired teacher and although having no particular interest in homelessness, had done a lot of fund-raising for her school. She remembers being "*impressed most by the team effort of the volunteers*". She and, Brian, a retired police officer, also helped out with the refreshments at various events.

Malcolm remembers organising a fund raising "Breakfast at Denton" on Saturday mornings for men at the local church hall. He organised speakers to give a twenty-minute talk with a religious theme followed by the breakfast: cereals, cold meats, cheeses, fruit, yogurt, bread and honey. The breakfasts started at 8am and finished at 10.30am. There were also quiz nights in Seaford, Spanish nights, opera nights, fish and chip nights, coffee mornings, home baking events, raffles and gardens parties. In terms of the latter, David Allam, Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Sussex and Karen his wife, opened up their garden in the summer of 2019 to raise money. It was spectacular, as it was a four-acre downland chalk countryside garden with beautiful herbaceous borders, a vegetable garden and a pond all surrounded by enchanting woodland. Volunteers provided refreshments and live musical entertainment such as Lewes Ukulele Band and Seaford Handbell Ringers etc.

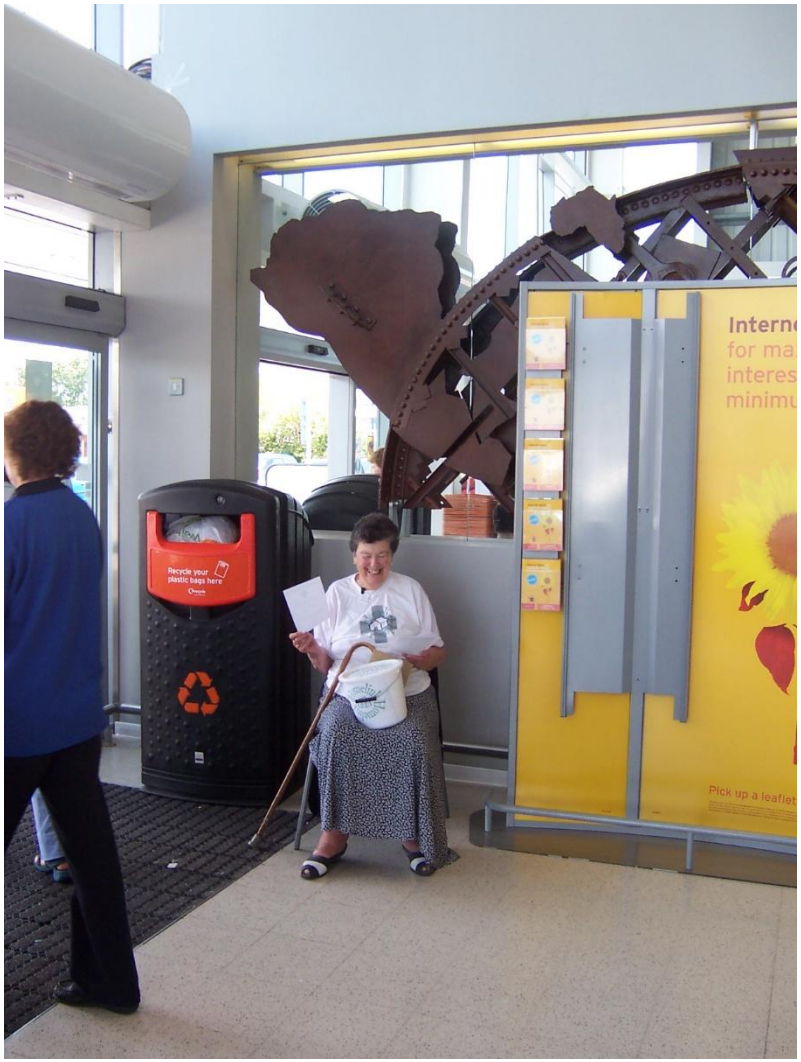
However, the most lucrative annual fund-raising event – which continues to this day – was the annual Christmas concert performed by the Ashdown Singers, a chamber choir based in Uckfield. For many years the concerts at the St Thomas More church, Seaford, have regularly raised £800. Their involvement was due to Peter Harper, who apart from being a councillor was also a teacher at the Priory School in Lewes. From there he knew Terence Steele, who was Head of Music but also happened to be the director of the Ashdown Singers who were among the leading choral groups in the area. They had already sung to raise money for "Aid to Poland" and their concerts would become the highlight of the fund-raising year

Chapter 2

After four years, Anna left Homelink because she had other things she wanted to do. '*I went back to college and sat Spanish A level. Then I went onto to have two books of poetry published*.' She described her time at Homelink as' very challenging as there were so many different things to do but a brilliant experience. I met so many people. I got on very well with Ann Cross. Our personalities worked well together and we did training sessions for the volunteers. It was exciting because it was brand new. It was a brilliant idea having all these churches working together. They really put their souls into it.'

Howard Harbert, who had been recruited by Anna as a volunteer, was appointed co-ordinator in 2003. During his time in office there was a great change. Instead of guaranteeing deposits, Homelink started to give interest free loans for the first months' rent and deposit. This was mainly because agents/landlords were demanding money in advance rather than guarantees. "Buy to let" was becoming a popular form of investment, and as these new owners were paying a mortgage, they needed the money upfront. So, the role of guarantors was suspended and all the Friends of Homelink were invited to donate annual amounts by direct debit. In effect, guarantors became subscribers. (By 2004, Homelink had 112 subscribers guaranteeing £4,600 a year). Howard recalls

> *I had never previously worked in an office or done face to face interviews with clients. My one advantage was having the computer skills needed as the service expanded. Previously, I had done voluntary work for the homeless in London so after I moved to Lewes decided to volunteer for Homelink. My role was usually to assist Anna Dawney with interviews at the House of Friendship. When I succeeded Anna, we started to give out loans to clients. This made the job much more challenging, having to loan large sums of money to more and more clients. Fortunately, I was well*.



1. Sainsbury's collection 2007: **Vivienne Challis**



2. May 2011 Board: **Geoffrey Cleave, Miranda Hedges, Jaqueline Wootton, Vreni** (forehead and nose), **Paula Burr, Joan, Amy Cronshaw, Linda Fisher, Maggie Jakeman, Terry, Jane Keal, John Shaw, Diane Lower**.



3. January 2012 :House of Friendship: **Joan** at door



4. March 2012 Strategy Group: : **Vreni, Joan, Diane, John Shaw, Geoffrey, Terry**



5. 2012 August Mayor's Reception:

Front Row: **Rita and Peter Harper, Joan, Michael Chartier (Mayor), Mayor's consort, Liz Mandeville, Grace Blaker, Ann Cross, Diane**.

Back row: **Gretel Scott, Geoffrey Cleave, James, Terry, Mike Tryers, Chris, Maggie Jakeman, Catherine Fletcher, Alex Kirby**,



6. August 2012 cheque handover from Caburn Housing Cooperative:

Liz Mandeville, John Shaw, Terry, Joan, Diane and three Co-operative members (Abigail Warren and two others).



7. December 2014 Christmas Concert at Seaford with Terry Steele



8. Oct 2015 Reps' Tea: **John Howes**



9. August2017: **Margaret Slattery** at Open Garden for 3 charities



10. April 2018: **James** handing over to **Pippa Grace**

x



11. 2019 May: Annual Meeting showing cake, **Linda Fisher, Joan, Caroline Pybus**



12. August 2019: Glyndebourne with **Jane Lee** and **Pippa Grace**

supported by my line manager, Liz Mandeville, who I saw every week.

The most difficult part of the job was deciding who we should give loans to. Sometimes, I would get a gut feeling that a client was not to be trusted but if they passed our criteria would feel obliged to help them. My gut feeling often proved to be correct and the loan would not be repaid. This was a disappointing aspect of the job.

Whilst co-ordinator, myself and the Homelink Board initiated several changes. Firstly, we decided to hold some interviews in Newhaven and Seaford. This made sense as most of our clients came from those areas. Secondly, we decided to do credit checks on all the clients we offered loans to in an effort to eliminate possible defaulters. Thirdly, we decided to apply for County Court Judgements against clients who showed no interest in repaying us. I felt strongly that, even if applying for judgements cost Homelink extra money, we had a public duty to do so. Even if we didn't get our money back at least it might stop the client from exploiting another charity's goodwill.

Looking back on my six years as a coordinator, I sometimes feel I might have stayed just a little bit too long. When you are let down by people who you are trying to help it can, sometimes, make you feel a bit cynical. However, my overriding feeling now is that I was very fortunate to be in a position in which I could help some people completely turn round their lives. For me this was hugely rewarding.

Howard's dedication to the job was such that on one occasion he went and cleaned a flat up which had been left in a poor state by a tenant in order to save Homelink money. His point about having a "gut feeling" about a possible defaulter was shared by other co-ordinators and volunteer interviewers. For many of the latter, being involved in

interviewing was, in Margaret Slattery's words "a real eye-opener". She believed that '*some clients had never been taught to budget; others perhaps never had the opportunity to*.' All interviewers were encouraged to be as non-judgemental as possible. There was often a delicate balance between wanting to give someone a chance and protecting the charity from abuse of its funds. The vast majority of clients were given a chance and in one or two cases even a second one. It was pointed out to them that every repayment they made went towards helping another person, thus they were making a positive contribution to someone else's future.

The great advantage of the Homelink loan scheme was the speed at which it operated. Once clients had been accepted and affordable repayments agreed (sometimes over a lengthy period), they could immediately look for a place. If successful, they were required to ask the landlord to send in an invoice which the Homelink treasurer would pay once the loan agreement was signed by the client. It wasn't unknown for someone to have an interview at the beginning of the week and be in accommodation by the end of it. A quite unique service, due in part to the excellent efficiency and dedication of the volunteer treasurers who paid the invoices as soon as they could, even when they were on holiday!

Amy Cronshaw, who succeeded Howard in 2009, developed a website and at Easter that year described some of the people appealing for help:

> *Alan's partner threw him out in October and he has spent the winter sleeping in the back of his van. He's had a string of chest infections.*
>
> *Joe's been sofa-surfing with friends since he lost his job; he didn't know that he had to have a tenancy agreement, and the landlady put him and his possessions into the street when he signed on, in*

case the Benefits Office discovered that she wasn't paying tax. His friendships are wearing thin.

Sally's partner emptied the bank account of their shared business and disappeared, and she lost her home. The Council would house her and her two little girls eventually, somewhere in the district, but she doesn't want to take her daughters away from their school.

Alan, Joe and Sally are among those Homelink has been able to help. Alan has a one-bedroom flat, and his small son can now spend week-ends with his dad. Joe has a flat, too, and has been able to spruce himself up and start applying for jobs. Sally and her girls have a small house near the school, and she is working part-time. And all of them are repaying Homelink's loan, so the money can be recycled to help others in need.

Finding single men private rented accommodation was still proving difficult. Without it they stood to lose contact with their children and with the world of employment. Amy commented at the time, '*almost the best gift you can give someone is the chance of a home*.' Diane Lower, who was the then chair of Homelink, saw '*the service as an example of practical Christianity – but of course you don't need to be a Christian to receive our help*.' Two years later, Homelink had to temporarily cap the number of loans as there was a danger of running out of money but it was only for a few months. It was then helped by a three-year grant from the Henry Smith Foundation to fund the co-ordinator's post.

During the next few years there was a major expansion. Firstly, co-ordinators and volunteers started to visit Lewes Prison (in partnership with the Sussex Pathways mentoring scheme) to interview and offer loans to prisoners who were in danger of being homeless on their release. Prisoners were only given a small sum of money when they left and unless they had supportive friends and

family faced starting their freedom living on the streets. Linda Fisher, who had originally worked as an educational administrator at the prison, became a volunteer for the prison chaplaincy and helped facilitate Homelink visits. Secondly, the government decided to give their "crisis loans" directly to county councils – in this case East Sussex County Council – to distribute to the most vulnerable in the community. Lewes District Council were already giving Homelink an annual grant and now decided to pass on this extra money to be used specifically for loans to people who were considered to have a higher risk of defaulting. It is ironic that over the next few years there was very little difference between the repayment rates of the latter and the normal loans. Thirdly, Homelink started to offer small grants – usually around £250 – for white goods, ie cookers, fridges, furniture and carpets etc. to people who were moving but who could not afford essential items. Lastly, in exceptional cases, loans were given to people who wanted to move out the district and even self-referrals were accepted.

Homelink also started working closely with "Homeworks", a free service which provided short-term housing-related floated support across East Sussex for vulnerable people, aged 16+, who required support to live independently. Often their staff would support clients at their interview, help with budgeting advice and encourage them with their loan repayments. They became an invaluable source of support to Homelink co-ordinators, as did office administration help from a volunteer, Jan Newbury, who had experienced being homeless.

All the time during this expansion, volunteers from different denominations continued to raise money for the charity with garden parties, annual raffles, choir performances and teas. This was always an important and constant source of money as well as donations from individuals which made up fifty percent of income. Over a five-year period, the number of tenancies trebled particularly after the government austerity measures initiated in 2010. Benefits were cut,

rents rose and Section 21 – “no-fault evictions” – which was introduced by the government in 1988, was now being frequently used. The law meant that landlords could give tenants two months’ notice to leave a property and did not have to give a reason. Historically, homelessness had often been the result of relationship breakdowns, now, increasingly it was being caused by evictions. And as some landlords were refusing to take people on housing benefit, getting a loan didn’t guarantee finding a place.

In 2017, for the first time, over a hundred loans were given out. The following year, one of Homelink’s clients, Anna Burns, won the Booker Prize for her novel *Milkman*. Her glowing praise for the charity led to Terry Howell, the vice-chair, being interviewed by the *Guardian* significantly raising Homelink’s profile. Another highlight, although perhaps a less heralded one, occurred in about 2016. A woman who had defaulted on a loan given many years before came to the House of Friendship and handed over a cheque for £800. Homelink had lost contact with her and, in fact, had written the loan off. She said she had just come into money and had always felt very guilty about not repaying. It had been on her conscience for years.

During this period, the treasurer, John Howes, on the advice of the Charity Commission, changed Homelink from being a charitable trust into a charitable incorporated organisation. This meant that the organisation would have liability rather than individual trustees. But the change did bring its own problems as John, volunteer treasurer for eight years, remembers

> *Rather than being a charity and a company, the new status welded the two together, but we hadn’t foreseen the complexity of the bank account change. As we were now a different body the banks would not continue with the same accounts so we had to inform the clients to make their repayments to a different bank account. In the event, less than a dozen didn’t make the change*

so we lost their contribution, but the vast majority very helpfully switched their repayments to the new account.

In 2013, John, a retired accountant, had agreed to replace the previous treasurer, John Shaw – who was involved in many charities – after a casual conversation in church with Homelink's long serving chair, Joan Wignall. He had had no specific interest in homelessness before this time, but had worked with the local authorities in East Sussex and also had a good recent experience with some larger charities. During his tenure, the charity expanded so much that he admitted that *'I don't think I really knew what I was letting myself in for!*' He witnessed incredible generosity, not just from organisations like the Ernest Kleinwort Charitable Trust, who donated £100,000 over a period of three to four years, but also from individuals. For example, a former trustee left a legacy of more than £75,000 which covered the part-time co-ordinator's salary for several years. And then there were the modest amounts very regularly donated over a long period by supporters. Overall, John found being the treasurer

a very rewarding experience and very satisfying. Homelink clearly fills a need which there is and fills a gap in provision. It is doing something which is not being replicated in the rest of the country. It's unique. The great asset that Homelink has is that it is all money that has been given to us. There is no borrowing. However, if it lost money, would your benefactors stay with you? That's the question.

The last question emphasized the importance of individuals continuing to give financial support.

Chapter 3

In April 2018, a new co-ordinator, Pippa Grace, was appointed after being a volunteer interviewer. She had never heard of Homelink till one day she listened to a rep giving a talk in a church in Ringmer. 'It made me sad that not many people had heard about them.' She knew little about homelessness but once appointed she was determined Homelink should be better known and the operations more sustainable. The latter was achieved by recruiting experienced volunteer Frances Hymas to concentrate on chasing repayment defaulters. Fran's contribution soon transformed cashflow, client relationships and the day-to-day working of a more professional, upbeat office. She has ensured that the repayments rate has been 80% and above. Her philosophy has always been simple: 'empathy and understanding cost nothing.'

An idea for increasing its profile came to Pippa during her interview for the post when she learnt the charity was coming up for its 20th anniversary:

> *It popped into my mind that we had this huge local venue, Glyndebourne – the house manager was one of my best friends – and that we could have a gala concert there. Even if it was half full it would make our name. We couldn't let this opportunity go.*

Setting up such a concert was a daunting task. Twenty thousand pounds would be needed just to cover the costs apart from recruiting performers to attract an audience. With the great assistance of a trustee, Jane Lee, who Pippa described as "*having a brain the size of a troopship*!", they set about their task of organising the concert. Thirty local companies were contacted and agreed to offer raffle prizes in exchange for free advertising. Next, it was necessary to attract sponsorship, while John Hancorn, a well-known Sussex musical director, was recruited to put a programme together. Pippa remembered.

Although it was Glyndebourne, I hoped it wasn't just going to be classical music. I asked Glyndebourne if we could have street dancers, a homeless choir etc. Tentatively, as a one off, they agreed and let it be a community gala. I wanted the acts to reflect all the performing talent in Sussex that we could find….Reflect all ages, all backgrounds; not just be a concert for posh audiences. It was also important that some of our clients came.

Fifty clients were given free tickets for the event. One of the particular challenges was organising a staff choir from Lewes Prison who had no choir at the time. Pippa went to the governor, Hannah Lane, who agreed to the formation of one. Because of staff shifts, John Hancorn had to rehearse two groups in small shifts.

Eventually over 360 performers – some as young as ten – and nine celebrities (including Anna Burns, the Homelink client who had won the Booker prize) and a sell-out audience filled Glyndebourne on 17th November 2019. Pippa had been advised beforehand to book more acts than was actually needed as "people always drop out at the last moment". As it happened, no one did and some acts were merged, making the concert longer than had been envisaged. One of the highlights of the concert were films (on a giant screen) of clients being interviewed in their homes about Homelink's impact on their lives. They were filmed as part of a project by six 18-year-olds from Lewes Community College. Here are some of their testimonies printed in the concert programme:

Less than four weeks after our first meeting I got my new flat. I was treated with respect and kindness, and never felt judged once. Homelink is run with the professionalism of a business, but the heart of a charity – you have given me a base to rebuild my new life around.

The hour I first spent at Homelink was the most help I've had with my homelessness since I was 14. Your support made me feel more positive than I have done for five years.

I was living in a woman's refuge a long way from my children. Homelink were generous, kind and empathetic and actually listen to people who are in genuine need.

With your help I am now able to start to rebuild my life after spending 10 years in prison. I am a testament to how you are helping to change lives.

At the end of the concert, Margaret and Brian Slattery came on stage to conduct the raffle. Zoe Lyons, the comedian, also presented and provided humour during it along with Steve Coogan. All the prizes were donated, and a team of volunteers before and on the day of the concert sold tickets. A total of £5,537 was raised from the raffle alone. One winner wanted to swop their prize; another to have their crate of wine sent long distance! But it was a great success.

It was unfortunate that within a few weeks of the concert, Covid struck, and other ideas for major fund raising had to be put on hold. Despite, the nation-wide horrific consequences of the virus, Homelink still carried on with Pippa working from home. Eighty-seven loans were made in the first year of Covid and by the time Pippa left in 2021, due to ill health, the grants given had ballooned to 80 per year, with a grants committee in place. During her time, she had had the additional challenge, due to the council's referral system delays, of going out publicising the service to make sure clients were not falling through the net. She made partnerships with job centres, rough sleeper projects, local women's refuges and services for young people locally.

Looking back, Pippa believes that

> *Homelink was a lifechanging part of my career. It took me to places where I had never been before. I developed skills which perhaps maybe I never knew I had! I could see the tangible results of what we were doing… The highlight of the gala was seeing all the clients in the top row…Afterwards they said "it was so great to know you all cared so much".*

Without diminishing the work of previous co-ordinators – more recently called client managers – Pippa Grace, apart from attracting greater finance and substantially expanding Homelink, gave it a greater profile and made it a much more professional organisation as well as modernising the website and logo with Jane Lee.

As mentioned in the first paragraph of this brief history, none of the early founders could have foreseen that the charity would have still been needed more than ever twenty years later: higher rents, housing benefit shortfalls and the lack of affordable accommodation have steadily increased along with the use of food banks. (In fact, Homelink now (2022) gives out food vouchers and is contemplating giving out electricity vouchers). Older people who privately rent often have to work well-beyond retirement age because of rent increases. Younger people can't get on the housing ladder because of the high cost of living. Homelink has had to develop, expand and adapt to meet the needs of these changing social and economic conditions and looks to have a secure future. It started with one part-time volunteer co-ordinator. Now there are five part-time paid staff: two client managers, a development officer, a finance officer and a loans officer. At the time of writing, Homelink has given an astonishing £1,000,000 in loans and has helped nearly 3,000 people into homes. It is expected to give out £25,000 annually in grants.

The lifeblood of the organisation remains the great time and effort of the trustees, volunteers, fundraisers etc. who have put in and continue to put in an astonishing number of hours. (There are still

more voluntary hours than paid hours; a ratio of three to two). Without them this short history could not have been written. Unfortunately, it has been impossible to mention them all. Doing so would have made this document of inordinate length and of no greater value. Joan Wignall, the present chair and its longest serving one, summed it up when she said ‘Homelink is underpinned by an amazing group of people’. They have simply been motivated by the Christian idea of care and compassion for neighbours in need; a spiritual philosophy embedded in the heart of Homelink.

Author's Note

I was Homelink co-ordinator from 2012-2018. I was lucky that I had worked previously with my predecessor, Amy Cronshaw, who after leaving continued to support me through the minefields of the computer literacy required to do the job. (I was a staunch computer illiterate!). Like Howard, perhaps I stayed a bit too long. The job could be emotionally draining – listening to the terrible circumstances people found themselves in – and disappointing when people defaulted on their loans. Although, in my experience, only a very few did so wilfully. Mostly it was a case of people not having enough money to live on or to even pay their day to day bills. Overall though, working for Homelink was a hugely rewarding experience. It was humbling to work alongside so many volunteers giving freely of their time, including my line manager, Liz Mandeville, who was a great support. It was also satisfying being given the opportunity to help someone else. Homelink gave and continues to give people the hope of a better future. A simple but wonderful aspiration.

James Garner
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