



Lewes District Churches HOMELINK

Minutes of the Annual Meeting

Held at Denton Island Community Centre, on Thursday 7th June 2018

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Attendance and Apologies: 37 people attended the meeting and 16 sent apologies.

1. Welcome: Joan Wignall (Chair) welcomed all **Friends of HOMELINK**, and thanked the Community Centre for providing the venue.

2. Opening Prayer: Rev. Jac Parson, of Newhaven Baptist Church, prayed for the work of HOMELINK.

3. Chair's Report:

Joan thanked everyone for their continued involvement, including partner organisations, Housing Officers, local councillors, James (HOMELINK's retiring Service Manager) and Liz (retiring from her Line Manager role after 13 years of supporting 3 Service Managers). She spoke of challenges in 2017 and challenges for 2018, welcoming those taking on new roles, including Pippa, the new Service Manager. Priorities for 2018 include prayer for the homeless, meeting the increasing need for help, finding new volunteers, data protection, and preparing to celebrate HOMELINK's 20 years of housing the homeless.

4. Building more Homes in Lewes District:

Cllr Ron Maskell, Cabinet member for Housing on Lewes District Council (LDC), was very pleased that new homes had been handed over in the past year, with rents kept below the local housing rate. New modular units are now at the planning stage (6 x 2 bed bungalows with disabled facilities) to be built by a local building company. On a further (complicated) site, 6 homes will be built for sale on the open market and 6 more for shared ownership, with profits funding the building of a proposed 198 units elsewhere, all at 'affordable' rents. As Housing Associations are unable to purchase all the affordable units built within the smaller developments, LDC are proposing to purchase them and to add them to their housing stock. This could be around 50 units. The Lewes Community Land Trust (CLT) is working to provide more homes on LDC land, with Government grants, and there is another CLT being proposed in Ringmer.

Cllr Maskell explained that the Housing Revenue Account receives rents from its tenants and some grants, with which to maintain the housing stock. There is a cap on the amount of borrowing on this account so, in order to build more homes, the council has joined with Eastbourne to set up two Housing Companies. Unlike councils, these companies can borrow money on the open market and from the LDC general fund. Having learnt from past experience, valid objections to building on particular sites will be respected: if there is a valid reason not to build, building will not go ahead. LDC are in negotiations for a suitable site locally, to install around 18 'crane in, crane out' modular-type units of temporary accommodation. These will be produced locally and sited temporarily on unused sites for up to 10–15 years, after which it will be possible to refurbish them and move them to a new site. In response to questions, Cllr Maskell confirmed that the new homes outlined above would not be subject to the right to buy (which applies to social housing) and that if Brighton houses tenants in Lewes District, it is for Brighton to ensure the standard of that accommodation.

5. New Housing Legislation

Andy Chequers, Head of Homes First (for Eastbourne and Lewes Councils) has worked in housing since 1979, the year when all councils had to stop building. He noted that as of 31st March 2018, there were 1,221 households on the LDC Housing Register, with only approximately 180 council properties becoming vacant each year. As 135 households are in dire need (band A), there is little stock left for those who are in overcrowded or sub-standard accommodation (band B), and a lesser chance for those in band C or for those with no housing need (in band D).

Rough sleeping has gone up nationally by 134% in the last few years, and Lewes District reported 17 rough sleepers over the year. Under the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol, emergency accommodation was provided when required. Locally, 847 households asked for advice and 444 made homeless applications, of

which 53 were accepted. Under the new Homelessness Reduction Act, councils have a duty to assess people 56 days before eviction takes place, rather than when actually homeless, which is a great benefit to those in need. The number of assessments made has risen by 50% with each assessment taking 2 hours. This huge increase in workload swallows up funding for the implementation of the Act. Of those seeking assessments, 80% are families and 20% single people. 13 households are currently in B&B accommodation, which is very expensive, and 74 in other temporary accommodation. Evictions are up, with Universal Credit causing cash flow problems. The Local Housing Allowance has not increased in 4 years, driving landlords to seek tenants in the 'professional' classes. The four duties under the new Act are to **assess**, to **prevent**, to **relieve** (through interim temporary accommodation); and to **refer** (this applies to other agencies making referrals to LDC). The Council is grateful to partner agencies, such as HOMELINK, who take referrals. In response to a question, Andy noted that refugees and asylum seekers are not within the Council's remit to house.

6. Service Manager's Report (i) James

James detailed the figures for 2017, noting that the expected rise in the number of tenancies had culminated in 103 loans, another record year. He noted that in England the private rented sector had doubled since 2002, with tenants paying an average of 47% of their net income on rent. In Britain, 150 families are made homeless every day, meaning a million families will be homeless by 2020, if nothing of sufficient scale is done. Among HOMELINK applicants, eviction is now a greater cause of homelessness than relationship breakdown, whilst uncertainty about the future is resulting in mental health problems. Rents are up and benefits frozen. The need to seek cheaper accommodation has led to an increase in repeat loans, whilst benefit caps have led to requests for reduced HOMELINK repayments.

James outlined repayment strategies and explained the use of grants to assist with moving costs and for temporary accommodation for those newly released from Lewes prison. One man had been released with no money at all but had been given a tent. James suggested that rent controls and longer tenancies (as on the continent) would be helpful, with more co-operation between homelessness agencies. On a positive note, James told of full repayment from an author, which came with thanks and a newly published book.

(ii) Pippa

Pippa thanked all concerned for her induction to the post of Service Manager, and noted the 40 interviews (of which 14 in Lewes Prison) and 19 new tenancies set up 'PJ' (post James), as well as the continuing small grants. She is working with the Lewes Brokerage Trust, Sussex Pathways and the Probation Service in relation to former prisoners. Four ex-offenders have moved into accommodation with a HOMELINK loan, three of whom now have full-time employment. Professional mentoring is available from a Barclays scheme for assisting former armed service personnel and HOMELINK may become a pilot scheme. Assistance upon release can reduce re-offending rates and have an impact on the local scene. Pippa ended by appealing for **new volunteer interviewers in Lewes** (full training provided).

7. Treasurer's Report:

John Howes, HOMELINK's Treasurer outlined the scale of assistance given to applicants: almost £173k for 103 loans in 2017. Repayments come in over 3–5 years and there is a current cap of £2k per loan, as reserves have diminished. In 2018, up to 7th June, 43 loans and 13 small grants have been made. Thanks to generous donors (individuals and churches), and a better monitoring system, John judged HOMELINK to be sustainable for the foreseeable future. He also explained why CIO legal status has been granted, keeping the same charity name, the same trustees, and the same objectives. HOMELINK now has assets of nearly £500,000, making it too big to remain a Trust. Some donors may have to move their standing order to a new bank account if changes to bank accounts have to be made.

8. Events: Joan spoke of events in 2017/8: the Open Garden in Seaford, the annual Christmas concert and the Old Tyme Music event. There is to be a Coffee Morning and Plant Sale in the near future, in Ringmer.

9. The meeting closed at 9 pm with the HOMELINK prayer and refreshments followed.

15/6/2018