



# The Bridge Trust

*Providing a bridge from homelessness to independent living*

## THE WORK OF THE TRUST

The Bridge Trust exists for the rehabilitation and re-settlement of single homeless people in the West Kent area. Registered as a charity in 1991 and incorporated in 1995, the support we offer falls in to several categories:

- Advice – free and impartial advice on a number of housing problems including benefit advice.
- Mediation.
- Shared Supported Accommodation in one of our five residential properties that can accommodate up to 22 people. Each resident has their own support worker who will help them resolve issues that may include their physical, emotional and mental state of health and finances, etc.
- Resource and Training – advice on training, education and job prospects plus use of our computer suite.
- Supported Move On project - we will help the residents to secure more permanent housing through local housing associations and they will continue to receive whatever support is necessary from us for a period of up to two years.

Since the Trust was formed over 14 years ago it has handled over 5,000 referrals of homeless people from the three local authorities at Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells; local Citizens Advice Bureau; Social Services; Young Offenders Teams; The Probation Service; Churches and their friends and families.

## HISTORY OF THE TRUST

The Bridge Trust was formally registered as a charity in October 1991 following a series of public meetings concerned with the lack of housing provision for single homeless people in West Kent. Thus the Bridge Trust was set up to provide accommodation and support to this client group.

From its inception, the Bridge Trust was run largely by volunteers and two part time employed Care and Support Project Workers. Tonbridge Methodist Church generously allowed us to use its small vestry as an office where we stayed until 1997. Our first shared supported accommodation at Pembury Road, Tonbridge, was a large three storey house which had previously been used as a shelter by the Tonbridge Cyrenians. At that time the property was leased from Kent County Council and, after refurbishment, was converted to shared supported accommodation for six single homeless people. By 1993 a further property was leased from Bailey Housing Association in the annex at Calverley Park Gardens. Demand for our shared supported housing continued to outstrip supply and a second property, housing five single people, in Claremont Road, Tunbridge Wells, was also leased from them. In 1994 we purchased our first house in Shipbourne Road, Tonbridge accommodating four tenants. A women's refuge was also launched in this year.

By 1995 it was clear that the Bridge Trust needed a structural change to prepare itself for future growth. The Bridge Trust was incorporated and the new body took over the assets and liabilities of the original trust. At the same time it was decided that in order to become a truly professional organisation, the Trust needed to employ a full time Manager and Company Secretary to oversee its operations and re-structuring.

1995 saw our first step in Supported Move On with the leasing of a basement flat on Pembury Road, Tonbridge. Horton House was also purchased from Kent County Council with money raised from a public appeal and a mortgage. The first winter shelter also opened in 1995 in partnership with ourselves and the three Local Authorities and Bailey Housing Association.

Tonbridge Methodist Church found a buyer for the East Street property and in May 1997 we moved to 172a High Street, Tonbridge. Almost exactly two months later our new offices were totally destroyed by fire with the loss of all our records and equipment. We quickly regrouped and after a short period of homelessness secured our present offices in 1998 at 17a Quarry Hill Road, Tonbridge by which time our staff had increased to seven. Also in 1998 we launched a new Supported Move On project in association with Tonbridge & Malling Housing Association for the provision of a number of one bedroom flats for our residents. Following the success of this project a similar one was launched in May 2000 in association with High Weald Housing Association in Tunbridge Wells.

North Farm House in Tunbridge Wells, formerly Nightstop, was re-opened in September 1999 under a management agreement with Bailey Housing Association and May 2000 saw the purchase of Strang House in Tunbridge Wells, made possible by a hugely generous donation from a member of the Bridge Trust.

In 1999 we extended the Quarry Hill Road offices to accommodate the Advice Centre, which has averaged over three hundred referrals each year. Our first charity shop was also opened in 1999 in Tonbridge and a second in Tunbridge Wells followed in 2000.

Horton House was finally sold in 2001 as it was too big for our new style of shared supported housing and the money raised has been applied to the purchase of another property, Mersey House, North Tonbridge.

In 2009 we purchased a 5 year lease on a 2 bedroom flat in Southborough – Barden House. This is used as a training flat for some of our residents to experience living more independently, with our continued support, before they move to a place of their own. This increased our overall capacity to 22.

## MANAGEMENT OF THE TRUST

The Trust is governed by Trustees (Directors) under the leadership of the Chairman. The General Manager heads up the employed staff, with department managers overseeing the work of the projects, advice, accounts and the retail outlets. The Trust employs 13 people in total (six of them full time) and has around 15 volunteers.

## ADVICE SERVICE

The Advice Service began in 1999 and is unique in the area as it deals specifically with single homeless people. Acting as an independent and impartial advice service, the staff have many years experience between them dealing with homelessness and housing issues.

It is the first port of call for nearly everyone referred to the Trust. The Advice Service Manager also initially screens potential residents before referring them on to our Senior Project Worker. A calm, informal and friendly approach is essential to help alleviate the fears and embarrassment felt by anyone coming into the centre.

If at all possible, the advice will help to prevent homelessness before it happens. The advice we give covers problems such as:

- housing and other benefits
- debts that threaten the living arrangements
- risk of eviction and being made homeless
- people who are already sleeping rough
- those who have overstayed their welcome with relatives or friends
- relationship difficulties that threaten the individual's living arrangements



If homelessness is inevitable it is then time to assess whether the person should be referred for accommodation within one of our own houses. Sometimes they require more suitable accommodation and support or if there are no vacancies within our own properties, we will contact other providers to assist them in finding somewhere else.

Referrals to the Advice Centre come from a number of sources including the three local authorities, local Citizens Advice Bureau, Social Services, Young Offenders Teams, the Probation Service, Churches and friends and families.

## MEDIATION

Through the Advice Service we also have a mediation and reconciliation service. Sometimes homelessness can be avoided by people being able to sit down in a neutral place with an experienced and impartial mediator enabling a compromise to be worked out.

It is a way of dealing with arguments at home that threaten a person's living arrangements. This can be between separating couples, young people and their parents or flat-mates and tenants and landlords. By encouraging communication between conflicting parties it aims to prevent disputes getting out of hand. The mediator will work with all parties to clear up misunderstandings and help those involved to reach their own mutually acceptable agreement.

Mediation can work particularly well with young people and their parents or carers. It can be used to re-establish communication between the parties involved. It can help to prevent homelessness or delay it, enabling someone to make plans for alternative accommodation.

The aim is for a resolution agreeable to all parties. However, it can also raise issues that show it is just not viable or safe for the individual to return home. The work we do is confidential but, in agreement with the client, can be shared with housing departments. This helps to form the basis of a homeless application, supporting the reasons that exist for someone presenting themselves as homeless.

## SUPPORTED SHARED ACCOMMODATION

We currently have five properties accommodating up to twenty two people. Each resident holds a license with the Bridge Trust and the house they move into becomes their home and they have a responsibility to keep it clean and tidy. Each resident has their own secure room and shares the other facilities. The properties, two in Tonbridge, two in Tunbridge Wells and one in Southborough, all have high occupancy rates and we often have a waiting list.

Each resident has their own experienced and qualified Supported Housing Officer assigned to them. Together they look at the issues that led to the homeless situation plus any other needs that will empower them to make changes to improve their lives. This includes looking at their physical, emotional and mental state of health, finances, training, education and job prospects. To avoid repeat homelessness, this type of support is essential.

## **SUPPORTED MOVE-ON**

As part of the support plan for the residents, we look at helping them secure more permanent accommodation through the local housing associations. Single homeless people face a very long wait for help through the local authorities but with the Supported Move On project we can help them to find their own accommodation.

For some people, especially the young, this will be the first time they have lived alone and had to take responsibility for themselves so we will continue to support them in whatever way is necessary for a period of up to two years. This gives them the chance to get their lives together and changed permanently for the better.

## **RESOURCE AND TRAINING CENTRE**

Our Resource and Training Centre was opened earlier this year at our Tonbridge offices. We decorated and refurbished one of the rooms with new carpet and furniture and installed five workstations with PCs and a shared printer.

This helps us to place greater emphasis on the role of employment and training for our residents. If they are to be truly independent we believe they should ideally be in employment and not benefit dependent. The centre helps them to gain experience and confidence in a computer orientated world. Each resident has a career action plan to follow which helps them in their job and training searches, compiling CVs and completing application forms. They are also able to use the centre informally to access the internet and keep in touch with family and friends via e-mail and social networking.

