

BRIDGE BULLETIN



BRIDGE
TRUST 

A BRIDGE FROM HOMELESSNESS

AUTUMN 2021

An Exciting New Chapter

Here at The Bridge Trust we are very proud to be part of a charity that has successfully operated in the West Kent area for well over 30 years, but the world changes and if we are to remain relevant and continue to have an impact on our local community, we need to change too.

As a very small, independent charity we have achieved much – supporting up to 800 homeless people into housing and assisting many thousands more with other help and advice. However, over time we have found it increasingly challenging to provide or grow our service to single homeless people in our region. Having to adapt to the many changes and challenges that we have faced in more recent years has meant the Trust's work has had to decrease; the opposite of what is needed. Therefore, in order to be able to continue to provide our service, we have made a tough, although ultimately exciting decision - to merge with another charity.

Since 2007 we have depended on an income model based on Housing Benefit to pay for our accommodation and contracts from Kent County Council to pay for our accompanying Support Service. These never covered all of our cost so we have depended upon additional charitable donations and grants to make up the shortfalls.

In April 2019, KCC changed their policy from giving homelessness Support Contracts to small providers like us to only commissioning large, multi-million-pound organisations instead. We have continued without a contract since then, through a transitional arrangement with one of those larger organisations, who were paying us the same amount as our old KCC contract. That rapidly decreased by around 60% and we were informed that this arrangement would end completely in March 2020, although the pandemic delayed that until March 2021.

This situation forced us to reduce our staff resources and other costs as much as possible and to increase our sustainable income from any other sources we could find. However, we remain under-funded and very vulnerable and it is unlikely that we would survive any future adverse changes. We have therefore looked for the best way of becoming financially robust again, whilst also increasing our minimal staff resources and giving us the potential for growth needed to meet the anticipated future demands for our service.

Over the past two years the Board have reviewed the best way to assure the long-term future of the Trust's service, within the context of the regulatory, commissioning, political environments and more, that we now have to work in.

The result is that having reviewed the options available to us we have decided that it is the best interests of the Trust and our beneficiaries if we merge our services with those of YMCA West Kent.

Although affiliated to YMCA England and Wales, each YMCA is its own, independently constituted charity – they are not one huge, nationally controlled organisation as some believe. YMCA West Kent are therefore like us, a separate charity. They are however a subsidiary of YMCA Thames Gateway, although they retain their autonomy and operate specifically in the local community of West Kent. This is extremely important to us as like YMCA West Kent, we need to retain that local focus, knowledge and involvement for our service.

YMCA not only have remarkably similar values to those of the Trust but also have similar working practices, policies, procedures and staffing structure and as their services have evolved and expanded over many years, they no longer only support young people but also have services for adults. In fact, their housing related support already overlaps with that of the Bridge Trust's service where we offer the same service to some of the same clients.

We have concluded a full review on YMCA West Kent and Thames Gateway and are satisfied that they are the best option to ensure the long-term survival of our service and have agreed with them the main criteria for a merger to take place, which will be that they will:

- Protect the Christian principles and ethos that has always underpinned our work
- Protect our existing service provision for single, homeless adults in west Kent
- Protect the use of our existing properties specifically for this purpose
- Protect our staff

The YMCA do not plan to change our service as we fit so well with their own model of support. In fact, both of us will continue our services in the same way, for the same clients, in the same region. As YMCA West Kent are a subsidiary of the larger YMCA Thames Gateway, we will remain as a completely West Kent focused service, but with the added security of being part of the larger and financially robust YMCA Thames Gateway Group.

We consider there to be several advantages to this arrangement. The main ones being: The longer-term security for the work of The Bridge Trust and its clients, the ability to quickly upsize our staff resources and gain access to more expertise, to provide job cover and succession planning, and the potential for future growth.

Further to the above, cost savings would be within reach by combining our resources and taking advantage of economies of scale. We have already identified that by sharing for example IT, finance, training, compliance, insurance, premises, Health & Safety and more, significant cost reduction and efficiencies can be gained.

We already know that contracts are now firmly targeted at larger organisations, so with YMCA Thames Gateway being a £9.5m charity with the management and staff structure that comes with this size, we would once again be eligible to apply for future contracting opportunities.

The Bridge Trust name has stood tall in our region, gaining much respect and support from our community over many years, and the potential loss of this name has been much debated by the Board. YMCA also see the value of retaining the name of The Bridge Trust, so it is likely to continue after the merger, albeit acknowledging the Trust as one of several projects and service that are all part of the YMCA Thames Gateway Group.

We invited all registered Members of the Trust to a General Meeting in September, to discuss our proposal and to vote on whether they agreed to a merger or not and with a unanimous vote agreeing to the proposal, we will now become part of YMCA West Kent. The legal and regulatory processes may take some time but we are planning for this to happen before the year end.

As stated above, this will have little effect on the continuation of our services, but operationally we will be part of YMCA West Kent and The Bridge Trust will cease to operate as a separate charity and limited company.

As many of you support the Trust's work financially we will contact you in due course with any new details you may need to continue that support. Any donations made will be ring-fenced for the Trust's service – i.e the specific service we will continue to give to support single homeless adults in West Kent.

Needless to say there is some degree of sadness to see the passing of a charity that has done so much for the local community, but the good news is not only that this work will continue, but will now be able to continue long into the future and have the potential to develop and grow to meet future needs.

Although one part of The Bridge Trust's story closes this is by no means "goodbye", but the start of an exciting new chapter and we hope and pray that you will want to stay along for the ride!

CONTACT US

17A Quarry Hill Road, Tonbridge, TN9 2RN.

T: 01732 368363 • 01892 3152823 • E: Info@thebridgetrust.org.uk

 Like us: facebook.com/thebridgetrust

www.thebridgetrust.org.uk

 Follow us: [@bridgetrust1](https://twitter.com/bridgetrust1)

Reg. Charity No. 1050291.

DATA PROTECTION: If you do not receive our Bulletin directly and would like to please let us know in writing, specifying your address or email address. If you already receive information from us and no longer wish to you can opt out any time by letting us know in writing. Any information you give will be used for The Bridge Trust purposes only.