

stonepillow

Helping homeless people

Stonepillow, Homelessness, and a Pandemic.

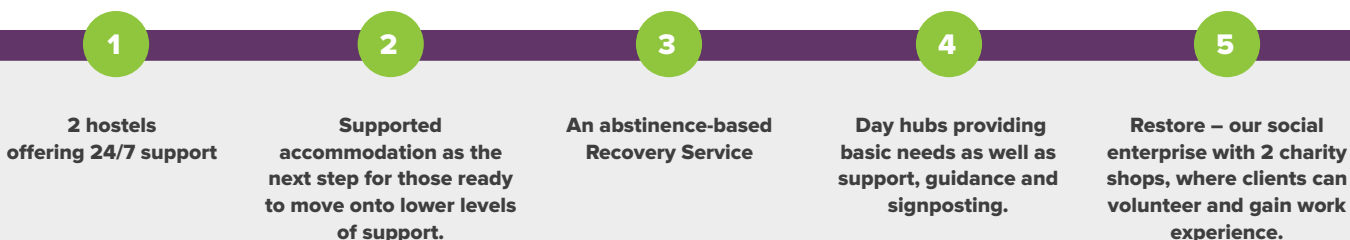
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Where were we before, and 2 years later - where are we now?

Despite our privileged, first world society in the UK, homelessness has always been with us. We can all identify with the feelings of shock, shame, helplessness and compassion we feel when we see someone in a sleeping bag in a doorway – how did they get there? Who is helping them? What can I do?

People become homeless for lots of different reasons, but there is normally a combination of social problems; a lack of affordable housing, poverty and unemployment - and life events at play; simply no longer affording the rent, leaving prison, care or the army, or escaping a violent or abusive relationship. Relationships breaking down, losing a job, mental or physical health problems, or substance misuse put people under considerable strain. Being homeless can, in turn, make many of these problems even harder to resolve. But with the right interventions, homelessness is almost always preventable; and in every case it can be ended.

Our understanding of the solutions needed to make this happen have come a long way since Stonepillow was founded 33 years ago, but have developed apace over the last 3 years. In 2019, before the pandemic struck us, Stonepillow was operating 5 different services that sought to meet the needs of our vulnerable clients:



These services reflected the traditional homelessness pathway – from homeless, to hostel co-habitation, to supported accommodation, to independence. They were full, busy and productive; but the complexity of the challenges, traumas and needs with which clients were presenting were growing and too many were falling between the gaps. We knew that to help them in a sustainable way, we needed to offer more choice, to tailor support packages to be more person focussed. We couldn't just expand to meet the growing demand by increasing the capacity of our existing services; we needed to identify distinct challenges and open bespoke services for those whom the traditional pathway was failing.

Is co-habiting with 16 men in a hostel the right solution for a woman fleeing domestic violence?

Does an ex-offender, discharged from prison with nowhere to go, have a hope of securing private rented accommodation alone?

Can someone who has been alone for years sleeping on the streets, cope with the social demands of sharing accommodation and bathrooms in a traditional hostel?

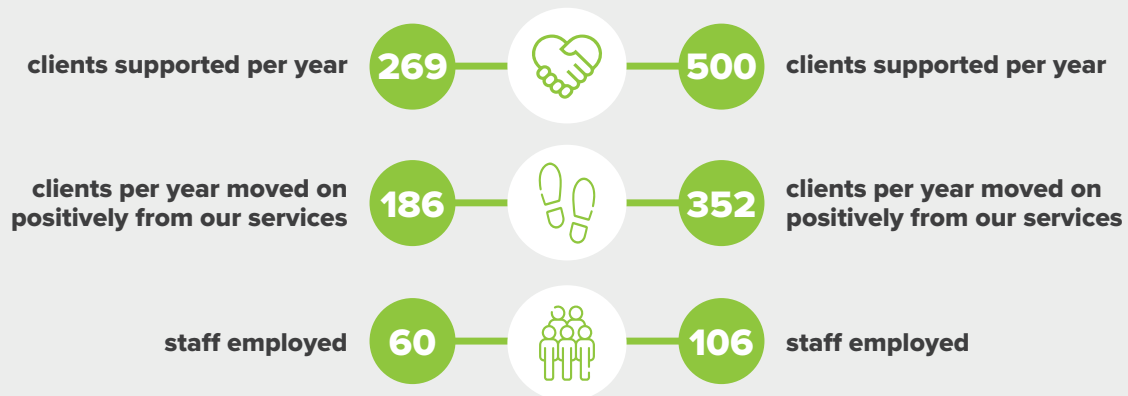
Should a support worker in receipt of basic training be expected to cope with serious mental health crises?

And how many of those coming to our doors needed to end up here – wouldn't it be better to have intervened earlier?

We had ideas and had developed a strategic plan – then in March 2020, our world changed overnight. Suddenly, the focus changed to the day-to-day of keeping clients safe and service continuity. Our commitment to our clients never faltered, and the collective strength and generosity in our communities supported us; businesses, community members and statutory services pulled together and collaboration with Chichester and Arun District Councils, the hotel and leisure industry and 3rd sector providers including Stonepillow and their volunteer base gave rough sleepers a safe place to sleep and protection from COVID-19. We set up site offices at Butlins and Travelodge and provided additional keywork support to those in emergency self-contained units - an additional 60 people to our normal 97. We set up a donations collection and delivery service to provide them with meals, critical items eg kitchen equipment, bedding etc and mobile phones where needed. Our day hubs remained open, adapting and repurposing their delivery to support this operation and to keep clients safe, engaged, and mitigating against the isolation they suffered.

The planning and execution of this project was a huge logistical exercise; but for many was the first time they had slept in a warm bed for years. Those removed from all forms of society, system and support engaged in co-produced support plans for the first time. Entrenched rough sleepers who had struggled to accept help managed to stabilise and accept the support they needed. As a result, between April 2020-April 2021, we supported 41 rough sleeping clients into hostels, tenancies, Housing First or supported accommodation.

BEFORE COVID



AFTER COVID

Central and local government, trust and foundation, Lottery and community support have all been instrumental in the changes we have been able to make since then. A real recognition of the perils of homelessness and both the personal and social damage it causes, put into the context of a worldwide health crisis, has led to a commitment to address the problem. The financial support followed; and despite the restrictions posed by the pandemic we drove forward to implement our plans. We kept our doors open throughout while others closed theirs; providing a vital safety net.

“The pandemic gave us all a common enemy. It galvanised a coalition of the willing to pick up the mantel and protect the most vulnerable within our communities; teamwork which has matured into an effective set of partnerships. These partnerships have gone from strength to strength, enabling the levering in of funding to improve services for our clients, identify and address gaps in provision and collectively improve systemic working to enable a ‘no wrong door’ approach for people needing to access help and support. Stonepillow has been a driving force at the heart of this collaboration, without which the learning, development and positive outcomes for clients set out in this report would not have been possible. This legacy will live on, Stonepillow will not sit back on its laurels; we will build on this challenging experience and continue to pursue these partnerships with the aim of ending rough sleeping and supporting those who have experienced homelessness and complex traumas to rebuild their lives.”

– Hilary, CEO

Recognising the trauma most of our clients have experienced, we transformed our services to become trauma-informed, embedding a non-punitive culture which led to an 80% reduction in evictions – necessary in the pandemic. The emphasis on trauma informed care helped us target the intrinsic and sometimes systemic barriers preventing many clients from moving forward; and the huge leaps forward in partnership working that COVID precipitated meant we could address these and double the number of services we offer. Since April 2020, we have launched a range of more bespoke targeted services to meet the increasing complexity of the clients coming to us;

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Housing First - launched mid-lockdown in the summer of 2020 as an innovative approach to reducing homelessness by moving rough sleepers who struggle to cope with shared living in a hostel, straight into their own home and tenancy. Working closely with social housing providers, we secure appropriate 1 bed accommodation and provide daily intensive support. Housing First has a huge capacity to succeed for some clients with the most complex needs, and to date Stonepillow has had a 100% success rate with 16 of our most complex clients moved into their own home and no failed tenancies. It has been supported by the National Lottery, Crisis and the Henry Smith Foundation.

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HARP – Hospital Admissions Reduction Pathway - launched in October 2020 placed a homelessness support worker in St Richards Hospital, who worked to ensure revolving door clients repeatedly coming to A&E had the multiagency support they needed put in place, and that clients discharged with no accommodation had a housing plan in place. 78 clients have been supported to date in Bognor and Chichester; avoiding relapse into rough sleeping.

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Pathways Home, commissioned by West Sussex County Council, launched in April 2021. The Pathways Home team carry high caseloads and work with referrals from local council housing options to assess the reasons why people's tenancies are about to fail and to help them put measures in place to sustain their housing. This is a crucial preventative approach to limiting the social impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis; and in its first 9 months, prevented 51 households from losing their homes.



Lockdown deliveries to our Chichester Hub.



Food deliveries to our Chichester Hub.

“I joined Stonepillow during the first lockdown. Covid had not impacted working practises that much aside from the wearing of PPE – but as we came out of lockdown, other services started opening up, making it a lot easier to connect clients with the services that they need. A stand out moment has been supporting John*, one of the most entrenched rough sleepers in Arun, to break the cycle of rough sleeping and to get his own flat.”

– Toby, support worker

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Programme of Activities – seeking to alleviate the disintegrating mental health and isolation clients were suffering, we partnered with external providers including Cobnor Activities, Tuppenny Barn, Westgate and Pallant House and launched a programme of activities that gave clients the opportunity to join in kayaking, raft building, climbing, bushcraft, sailing, horticultural therapy, gym attendance, football and art. These opportunities have lifted spirits, built resilience and even led to practical qualifications being achieved.

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In July 2021, the building of **Hicks House** was completed and the service opened up to 12 rough sleepers who had their own, secure studio apartment from which to stabilise. Many of these clients have been supported into Housing First.

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In August 2021 and funded by the National Lottery, our **Women's Therapeutic Service**; a shared home for 6 women with complex needs, opened its doors. These women would have been unsuitable for refuges and unable to cope with mixed gender hostel accommodation; here they receive the specialist support they need to recover and regain independent lives. 2 women, having stabilised and improved their health and wellbeing, have already graduated from the service into longer term accommodation

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Also in August, we launched our **accommodation for ex-offenders programme**; helping those with nowhere to go upon discharge to find accommodation and to reintegrate into the community. Without this, their chances of their ending up on the streets and very quickly reoffending are incredibly high.

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Finally – on April 1 2022, we are incredibly excited to open our **first service for young people** aged 16-18. Commissioned by West Sussex along with our provision for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, we will take on the support of 10 new young people who are leaving care and preparing for independent living when they enter adulthood. This we see as another tenet to our preventative work, since shockingly research from Crisis tells us that 1/3 of care leavers become homeless in the first two years immediately after they leave care.

The impact of this service expansion has meant that in the last 6 months alone, 199 clients have been moved on in a planned and positive way.



Kayaking at Cobnor Activities Centre: 28 Stonepillow clients enjoyed multi-activities at Cobnor in the autumn of 2020.

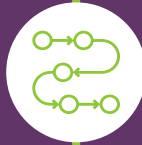


Stonepillow students on graduation day from their bridging course at Chichester University. This innovative course continued throughout Covid; Stonepillow installed WiFi across all services and ensured all students had access to the tech they needed.



March 2020

54 rough sleepers housed and supported in emergency accommodation with Butlins and Travelodge.



July 2020

Housing First service launched with emergency Lottery funding; a new pathway to help rough sleepers avoid returning to the streets.



August 2020

Trauma informed care rolled out across the organisation; enabling a drop in evictions of **80%** pre to post pandemic



Sept 2020

The **Activities programme** launches; with clients enjoying kayaking, raft building, climbing, bushcraft, sailing, horticultural therapy, gym attendance, football and art.



Oct 2020

HARP launches at St Richards Hospital, supporting clients to avoid discharge onto the streets



April 2021

'Pathways Home' service launched to support individuals & families at risk from losing their homes



'Restore' charity shops open post-lockdown to record donations and sales



July 2021

Newly built Hicks House service opens adjacent to Chichester Hostel; 6 additional self-contained studios as an additional pathway away from the streets for rough sleepers



August 2021

Our **Therapeutic Women's Service** opens in Bognor; 6 rooms and specialist support for women with complex needs



Service launched to support homeless ex-offenders as they return to the community; finding housing and reducing reoffending



January 2022

New mental health worker starts, improving our response to clients with acute mental health needs and supporting staff with strategies to cope.



April 2022

Service for young people leaving care launched in Chichester.



What next?

Now we are closing the door on a time of such huge change and upheaval, what are the challenges that lie ahead?

How will we find the accommodation we need to move people into?

In Chichester and the surrounding areas, accommodation is in huge shortage – especially affordable/ 1 bedroom accommodation. This is the biggest barrier we face to being able to move people out of temporary accommodation and into a new home. Stonepillow work closely with social housing providers to enable our clients to access their own home: we need to strengthen our relationships with private sector landlords in order to do the same. Negative preconceptions about our clients can lead to a reticence to lease to them; but there are huge benefits on offer to private sector landlords; we will stick around once someone has moved in, helping them to integrate, manage money, and make sure their rent is paid.

How will we find sufficient funding to continue to provide a growing number of vulnerable people with the support they need?

In the 2 years since the pandemic started, Stonepillow has launched new services courtesy of c£850,000 awarded in grants from trusts, foundations and the National Lottery. But almost half of this was emergency Covid funding – now at an end. Yet our salary spend has doubled across the organisation; including for those involved in charity administration/ central support – necessary posts that are extremely challenging to fundraise for. For every £1 spent on fundraisers, we raise £10 for the charity!

We need to embed these new services and ensure that we can stabilise following a period of rapid growth. We need to find ways to address the mental health crisis in our clients; since the pandemic mental health issues have worsened dramatically and suicidal ideation / self-harm become commonplace. We anticipate the demand for our services will escalate further, driven by the social impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis – yet the government wants to see an end to rough sleeping by 2025. How will we get there?

How will we end rough sleeping by 2025?

We will need to really focus on prevention, and to an extent are doing that already. We have added 14 new temporary accommodation bedspaces since pre-pandemic, and we have a new team working to support households with a social or private housing tenancy that has become at risk. They will seek to mediate, negotiate and advocate for the tenant with their landlord, provide budgeting and support with debt and help them to access the support they need to reduce harmful or anti-social behaviour and to deal with past trauma. Our work in the hospital and with ex-offenders prevents discharge onto the streets.

We have come a long way in 2 years, but there is much more to do. Our clients' challenges, and the systems they are trying to navigate, are becoming increasingly complex. The cost of living crisis is only going to exacerbate their situations and sadly cause more lives and homes to destabilise. We need to consolidate, reflect, and plan for what lies ahead.

“As an organisation, Covid has been transformational and a catalyst to positive change that enabled growth linked to the needs of our clients and our community. Covid came with immense frustrations, sadness and stress but we were also able to find great kindness and strength within the services that we provided and in the clients that we supported. I hope we carry with us the acts of kindness we have been part of and witnessed during this exceptional time. I hope we remember that our actions really do matter and the positive impact that we have created influences long-term resilience.”
– Anja, Stonepillow Head of Operations.