

## A RESPONSE TO COVID-19

### INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HOLMSTROM, CEO

**‘COVID19 has brought huge challenges and opportunities. Having acted and responded, we should reflect on it, on the whole response and actions taken. Build on the relationships that have been created and not return to unhelpful old habits, working patterns and silos.’**

**“Turning Tides has been at the heart of the system response in West Sussex with partners”**

The charity’s mission is to end homelessness through the provision of emergency, residential and outreach services. They provide advice, assistance and, crucially, tailored support for each individual so they can rebuild their life. With a team of 138 staff and 250 volunteers, they provide high support residential services and move on services in West Sussex, covering Adur and Worthing, Littlehampton, Horsham and Mid Sussex, accommodating around 200 homeless men and women in 20+ properties. They support a further 300+ people through their outreach work. Services include community hubs offering practical and emotional support along with an outreach team operating in Horsham and Mid Sussex; an in-house multidisciplinary team of specialists providing social work, mental health, dual diagnosis and complex needs support.

Turning Tides takes a systems leadership approach, recognising that the challenges and barriers clients face are systemic. They work alongside colleagues in other related systems such as housing, health, social care, substance misuse and criminal justice to create a *‘coalition of the willing’* to end homelessness.

**How they responded** There were two distinct but inseparable aspects to their response to the pandemic: their organisational approach to infection control across internal services and their contribution to a systems leadership response in collaboration with cross-sector partners drawing on their homelessness pathways expertise.

In anticipation of lockdown, the management team developed a rapid organisational response that anticipated public health guidance and accommodated huge logistical change. The main priority in planning their response was to keep everyone well- clients, volunteers and staff- so dramatically reducing footfall in services is key to this along with a number of other interventions to make their projects Covid-secure. It was essential that the hostels remained in service whilst managing the health risks associated with clients with a high degree of multiple and complex health vulnerabilities. Their community hubs and outreach work adapted quickly, within a week the staff developed an outreach delivery plan adhering to social distancing. Maintaining contact with the clients was essential so arrangements were made to increase phone contact and outdoor meetings. This proved to be more successful than anticipated, especially in the rural outreach programmes. Staff spent less time travelling creating capacity for more frequent and flexible casework by phone alongside outdoor meetings.

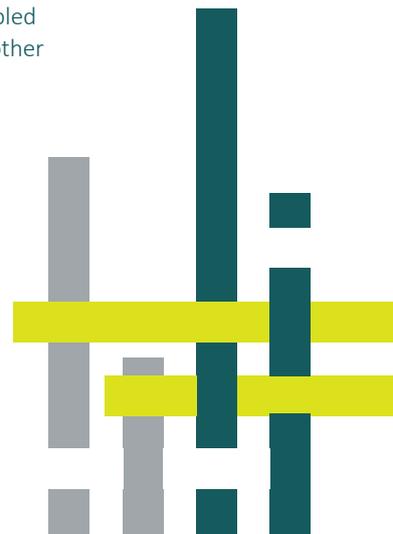
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**Supporting and keeping staff safe was an imperative.** HR systems were shifted to implement a high level of monitoring, ensuring availability of staff to maintain services and shifts whilst protecting those who needed to shield or self-isolate. Just four members of staff were furloughed. John described the staff response as *“just brilliant”* describing how the teams displayed immense maturity in their judgement calls to continue working with clients, who at times struggled with the need for social distancing. Despite the potential risks to themselves, their commitment enabled Turning Tides to keep working as an organisation and as part of a broader systems partnership with other statutory providers.

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**The volunteer response was magnificent!** Since the early origins of the organisation by a group of volunteers in 1992, there are now 250 volunteers who remain at the heart of the organisation today, creating an incredible support network of community warmth and making a huge contribution to the delivery of the wide range of services across West Sussex.

As services adapted to social distancing, Turning Tides recognised the loss of the volunteering opportunities might cause challenges for the volunteers in terms of reduced opportunities for social engagement, routine and structure. The organisational response ensured that volunteers



remained involved, maintaining regular communication and involving them in solution design and development, using Zoom, a Facebook group and regular updates. With the staff team, they developed a befriending service with the use of video calls, facetime; delivering mini workshops by Zoom for example, Tai Chi and wellbeing workshops. A virtual wellbeing scheme run by staff and volunteers was mobilised quickly, providing round the clock mental health support, enabling frequent check-ins with clients, identifying any needs for additional specialist support and making appropriate referrals. The service was overwhelmed with client demand. In addition, volunteers worked from home batch cooking, creating food parcels, isolation packs and donating food from their allotments. Volunteers contribution and the opportunities afforded by technology were hugely instrumental in the adaptation of services.

Then in June this glorious team of volunteers were awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service!

**'Lovely to see the volunteers' response and to work with wonderful, kind human beings. My colleagues and I have been overwhelmed with their offers of support'**

Alison Nicholson, Community Development Manager at Turning Tides

Turning Tides needs to generate an annual income of £5m. A new Head of Fundraising and Communications was appointed in January, just before the pandemic. The loss of their planned £500,000 fundraising community activities was the biggest risk and challenge to their financial plan as they moved into the new financial year. The team took advantage of the short-term emergency grants available, particularly through Homeless Link and The National Lottery Community Fund, to stabilise finances and make the necessary adaptations required during the pandemic, ensuring digital inclusion across the services and for clients. Additionally, they had to mitigate any risk of income loss if residential projects had to close due to infection control. They launched a successful emergency fundraising appeal through local media whilst adapting their community fundraising to using digital approaches. As Covid continues to take jobs and livelihoods the charity continues to work hard to adapt its income generation and respond to the growing need for its services.

## SYSTEMS RESPONSE

The national response to COVID19 'Everyone in' led by [Louise Casey](#)<sup>1</sup> "...was a golden moment. In 10 weeks, we were achieving 10 years of work - so long as we can keep the engagement and find the right move on from the hotels. The temporary accommodation is not a long-term solution."

For some time, Turning Tides has led a systems leadership group in Worthing with a range of senior figures from agencies including Police, mental health, Local Authority, homelessness and substance misuse services in Worthing to develop a multi-agency approach to tackling multiple needs.<sup>2</sup> Making Every Adult Matter is embedded in their approach, to redesign the system around people. This approach informed and shaped the wider <sup>3</sup>[West Sussex](#) multi agency approach to implementing 'Everyone in'. The wider West Sussex Response Team was crucial but had to overcome the complex system challenge of working across a two tier authority where the housing duty is held by the six District and Borough Councils, whilst West Sussex County Council (WSCC) holds responsibility for the critical supporting services: Primary Health and Mental Health, Probation, WSCC Drug and Alcohol Team/Public Health, Adult Social Care and Sussex Police- all key to successful multi-agency working for people who are having to sleep rough.

Two groups were developed as part of the wider response:

- A strategic West Sussex Rough Sleepers Response Team, including the District and Borough Councils, WSCC, West Sussex Police, and the mature homelessness charities – Turning Tides (A&W, Littlehampton Horsham, Mid Sussex) Stone Pillow (Chichester & Bognor), Bognor Housing Trust, Crawley Open House and Change Grow Live (addiction support).
- The 'homeless multi-complex disadvantage group' - a sub group – aimed at developing support for approximately half of the county's rough sleepers experiencing the most multiple and complex needs.

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/dame-louise-caseys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-31-may-2020>

2 Partners include (Adur and Worthing Council Committees and Wellbeing Team, Sussex Partnership Foundation Trust, Adur and Worthing Council Housing Service Change Grow Live. West Sussex County Council, West Coast Rehab Team- KSS CRC and Safe Lives West Sussex

3 <http://meam.org.uk/area-details/?area=3722>



'Everyone In' required every rough sleeper to be housed, directing local authorities to block book empty hotels. In response, Worthing Borough Council block booked the Chatsworth hotel, a 90-bed hotel – *"it was the most extraordinary thing, filling it with 85 rough sleepers; those who were at risk of homelessness and those requiring COVID protection because of underlying conditions, who needed their own rooms for infection control purposes"* Worthing Borough Council needed the support of other Sussex District and Borough Councils to increase the numbers to make the booking work financially but to also provide reciprocal support from those councils to provide continuing support to their clients whilst in residence. This demanded strong cooperation and trust amongst all partners, each working across normal working housing boundaries, utilising their individual expertise and assets.

15 of the 'most revolving door clients' (frequent prison stays, addiction and mental health issues), those who struggle to work with support services and with whom it can be difficult to engage, also moved into the hotels. They coped and responded well, with some of the most disadvantaged clients managing to trust, for the first time, that they can accept and receive help. This was a living demonstration of the benefits of the 'Housing First' principle comprising the essentials: shelter, security and food with caring staff.

**An unforeseen challenge** arose during lockdown when the hotel received eight days' notice that their insurance cover was to be removed leaving the partnership with just six working days to rehouse the clients. The Council, alongside Turning Tides, mobilised a rapid response under extreme and unprecedented circumstances, demonstrating the strength of their partnership and local place. Within four days an offer of accommodation was available to all clients; some were accommodated out of area, in Crawley, where colleagues mobilised accommodation; 17 clients were offered accommodation by Turning Tides who created additional rooms in common way areas and unused spaces. 'Eviction' day was calm, 54 people moved out in one day. John talks of his pride in his team and Council outreach staff, making significant logistical arrangements outside of normal planning regimes and risk assessments whilst providing reassurance to the clients themselves, already victims of severe trauma, were confused and distressed, not understanding why they were being evicted from their lockdown accommodation having complied with everything that had been asked of them.

**Innovation** Going further, recognising that multi-disadvantaged groups require special attention, the 'homeless multi-complex disadvantage' group conducted a detailed audit of 540 clients pan West Sussex. 50 % of these clients are in COVID temporary accommodation which ends in December, and some are once again rough sleeping. The audit identified 200 clients in provider accommodation who were ready to move on within the homelessness pathway, freeing up high support places for those with multiple complex support needs in the COVID temporary accommodation who will need rehousing in December. Turning Tides identified 70 of their current 195 residential clients who with preparation and support will be ready to move on, freeing up a significant number of spaces.

Crucially, this consistently applied 'audit' approach across West Sussex has provided the multi-agency group with a detailed picture of the ongoing support needs of individuals (including those with mental health and substance misuse needs) to inform planning for the next phase, ensuring that no one is returned to the streets in December and provides for continuing essential move on support. The group is expanding its work to engage landlords in more tolerant approaches to people who have been rough sleeping and who may need support with housing and tenancy management.

**Learning** This work evidences the critical necessity of multi-agency approaches in tackling multiple disadvantages. It is not enough to simply place people in accommodation. The wider support that some homeless people need requires the input of multi-agency specialists working together to formulate a holistic support system for each individual.

**Successes, opportunities and future development** The collective systems response 'may well have saved lives. However, rebuilding lives is a different matter – and that process requires stability and commitment.' John sees systems cooperation and continued joint approaches as a longer-term solution. *"Cooperation has helped the coalition of the willing. This is where perhaps COVID can lead to profounder systems change."*

There were 175 new cases of people sleeping rough in Worthing alone in the year to 31 Mar 2020, noting that included the first month of Covid-19 conditions. The preconditions that create homelessness are ever present and John believes that this rate of homelessness is set to continue as we brace ourselves for the full economic impact of the pandemic. A combination of increased unemployment, minimal to no savings and, a relaxation of the rules around private renters will result in many people being unable to meet their housing costs. However, there are opportunities to build on the multi-agency approach emanating across West Sussex. The West Sussex Response Team including the Adult Social Care Team and SPFT, continue to meet weekly, to address urgent continuing need. There are particular challenges in addressing the profound health problems that rough sleepers develop, leading to care needs that require Care Act assessments. Due to the chaotic nature of their lifestyles, mental health problems and addiction issues, homeless people cannot access assessments easily and traditional residential care cannot fit their needs, sometimes leading clients into further crisis.



Given, the serious financial challenges of Adult Social Care departments, John believes that the VCSE, holds within the sector an extraordinarily high safeguarding risk and a wider systems approach. John hopes that out of the Covid experience, District and Borough councils and NHS have developed an appetite to trial something out in systems terms, on the ground, developing joint approaches to dual diagnosis for interrelated health and addiction issues. He advocates for work to be carried out at a place and neighbourhood level to accommodate the stark differences in the housing market at this level.

The response to COVID19 has demonstrated the adaptability of the sector and their ability to work well within systems. It has highlighted the maturity and depth of experience of the homeless sector in West Sussex and the trust that exists between organisations, enabling strong collaborative cross sector work and leadership in some areas. He believes that systems have developed an appetite to continue to explore collaborative opportunities and solutions.

The implementation of systems leadership<sup>1</sup> in Worthing for more than 5 years has created a coalition of the willing intentionally, enabling systems connectivity in solving complex problems.

John believes that solutions lie in system leadership and describes, opportunities and future developments as being founded on cooperation:

**“Identify what wicked issues we are dealing with, who are the systems involved in that wicked issue and who in the system is willing to work as a coalition of the willing around the shared purpose to address that wicked issue? Then act, start somewhere, do something, a project, an intervention, learn from it, keep connecting. Always surface the data, don’t make assumptions. Make those deep authentic relationships which become load bearing, then you can do stuff together”**

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1 <https://www.leadershipcentre.org.uk/>

