

Rother District Council

Report to: Cabinet

Date: 7 September 2020

Title: Bexhill Citizens Advice

Report of: Malcolm Johnston, Executive Director

Cabinet Member: Councillor Kevin Dixon

Ward(s): All

Purpose of Report: To recommend a financing plan to allow Bexhill Citizens Advice to refurbishment their new premises.

Decision Type: Key

Officer

Recommendation(s): **Recommendation to COUNCIL:** That a loan of up to £40,000 be granted to the Bexhill Citizens Advice and the Capital Programme for 2020/21 be increased accordingly;

AND

It be **RESOLVED:** That:

- 1) Bexhill Citizens Advice be invited to apply to the Council's Community Grants scheme;
- 2) any amount awarded under the Community Grants Scheme will be deducted from the loan amount; and
- 3) the Executive Director, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Performance Management, be authorised to agree an appropriate rate of interest and repayment schedule for the loan.

Introduction

1. As Members may be aware, Bexhill Citizens Advice (CA) is currently located in Bank Chambers, Buckhurst Road, Bexhill. The building was sold some years ago, but Bexhill CA remained in occupation while the rest of the building was redeveloped into flats. The current landlord has worked closely with the CA over that time in order to facilitate them remaining in the building until they can find alternative premises. He now, however, wishes to progress with the redevelopment of the remainder of the property.

2. The CA have located an alternative premise in St Leonards Road, Bexhill that, with some modifications, meets their specification. The current landlord has agreed to purchase the premises and give a lease to the CA. He has also agreed to make a contribution to the modifications. Bexhill CA have funds of their own and are proposing to use these towards the costs but there is still a shortfall of some £30k to £40k. They have approached the Council as to whether we would be prepared to fund the shortfall. It should be noted that CA have contacted other funding bodies/organisations to see whether they can reduce this gap further.
3. In order to meet their timetable for the relocation of their offices, the Bexhill CA need to undertake the refurbishment works of the new premises as a matter of urgency.

Options and Discussion

4. When Cabinet discussed the Service Level Agreement for Bexhill CA at their meeting on 13 January 2020 (Minute CB19/84 refers) a commitment was given to assisting them finding and locating to alternative premises in Bexhill. The Council's Member representative and the Executive Director have met with the Bexhill CA and a number of options have been discussed regarding their future location. These have included:
 - a. Bexhill CA move into the Town Hall – this was discussed but is not practical within their timetable (or the Council's) given their need to move quickly and before the winter. Furthermore, although CA can see benefits to co-locating with the Council there are also benefits in them being separate and clearly seen by users to be so.
 - b. Rother DC to give a grant to cover the costs – given the approach taken with other organisations applying for assistance from the Council at this time, this was not considered appropriate.
 - c. Bexhill CA to apply to the community grants fund for a grant – this is an option but the maximum grant is £30,000 so that may still leave a gap.
 - d. The Council to provide a loan of up to £40,000 – this could be an option and was not rejected by Bexhill CA.
 - e. RDC reject the request for funding – given the service provided by Bexhill CA and the on-going need for that service this is not a recommended course of action.
5. There is a hybrid option involving a mix of c. and d. above. As previously stated, Bexhill CA needs to move quickly and therefore a further option could be considered. To enable the refurbishment work to be started soon RDC could agree a loan of up to £40,000, any grant given will be deducted from the outstanding value of the loan. Bexhill CA have indicated that in principle, this arrangement would be acceptable to them.

Conclusion

6. Bexhill CA provide a valuable service to the Council and to our community and therefore it is felt to be important that they are supported to move to new premises.

7. For the reasons stated in the report, the premises in St Leonards Road, Bexhill appears to provide an ideal location.
8. Following constructive discussions with Bexhill CA it is recommended that the options outlined in paragraph 5 are agreed and that the Executive Director, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Performance Management, be authorised to agree an appropriate interest rate and repayment schedule for the loan. It will be necessary to increase the Capital Programme in 2020/21 to reflect the advance of a loan to the CA.

| Other Implications | Applies? | Other Implications | Applies? |
|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Human Rights | No | Equalities and Diversity | No |
| Crime and Disorder | No | Consultation | No |
| Sustainability | No | Access to Information | No |
| Risk Management | No | Exempt from publication | No |

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| Executive Director: | Malcolm Johnston |
| Proper Officer: | Malcolm Johnston, Head of Paid Service |
| Report Contact Officer: | Malcolm Johnston |
| Appendices: | None |
| Relevant Previous Minutes: | CB19/84 |
| Background Papers: | None |
| Reference Documents: | None |