

## **Community Governance Review Steering Group**

**Thursday 21 January 2021**

### **Agenda Item 4 refers**

#### **Comments received after publication of the Agenda – UPDATE 1:**

##### **Bexhill Heritage**

##### **Views on Bexhill Town Council budget**

Thank you for inviting a response from Bexhill Heritage.

We recommend that one of the Council's priorities should be 'capacity building' across the community. We believe that a key role for the new Council should be to engage voluntary groups, local charities, local schools, businesses and individuals in the development, restoration, maintenance and care of the public realm.

We suggest that a substantial amount of the new Council's budget for 2021/22 be set aside to draw up a strategy to promote such community development and to identify projects and programmes that can be driven by voluntary groups in partnership with the Council. We suggest that Rother Voluntary Action, local businesses such as Hastings Direct and well-established local charities such as Bexhill Heritage be asked to support the Council in this initial phase of its strategy.

We further recommend that a significant proportion of the Council's budget for 2022/23 be set aside to support at least three community-driven projects designed for the restoration and maintenance of those community assets for which the new Council will be responsible.

Such projects could include:

1. The repair and maintenance of wooden and brick bus shelters.
2. The restoration, repair and maintenance of public clocks.
3. The further development and maintenance of Bexhill's seafront including establishing access for disabled people to the beach.
4. The development, maintenance and care of public parks and flowerbeds.

Bexhill Heritage's Trustees will be pleased to help in any way we can to support the Council in this endeavour.

Yours sincerely,

Vice-Chairman, Bexhill Heritage, on behalf of the trustees

Email: [treasurer@bexhillheritage.org.uk](mailto:treasurer@bexhillheritage.org.uk)

##### **Democracy4Bexhill**

1. We welcome the opportunity to submit our views to Steering Committee before the precept for Bexhill Town Council is set. In some other towns, the campaigning group in support of the creation of a town council has been given a role to play in this transition period as part of a shadow council. This has not been allowed here. Nevertheless, as you know we have tried to contribute to this period in the form of conversations, emails and papers submitted to councillors. Over the past few years D4B has done a lot of research about town councils both locally and elsewhere and with input from relevant organisations, on what is possible and desirable for Bexhill and we want to share it. We much appreciate the work that the Rother councillors have done

to bring about Bexhill town council, over the past years. Without them – you - the town council would not be about to exist.

2. Our vision for what the town council can do has been discussed in our various papers, website and leaflets which are all available. Our main focus here will be on the first year of the town council.
3. We do appreciate that we are in a pandemic and everyone is tired, and worried about money. However, we are keen to ensure that the Town Council has a good start and can do its job. D4B has costed and always campaigned for the town council to have three members of staff at the beginning: a town clerk, an assistant and a fund-raiser who can scope out sources of money for much-needed projects. One of these staff members could be part-time. We do not want or expect a large precept but if the budget is too low it will hobble the council from the start. This small team is surely a minimum for the first year.
4. In the publication from the National Association of Local Councils, “Power to the people” the point is made very clearly: “It is important that a realistic figure is set for the council’s first precept because setting the precept too low could create significant issues for future years...If the initial precept is inadequate to cover costs the council may need to raise the precept the following year. If this is a significant rise this can create a good deal of negative publicity in the local area about a “tax burden” on local people.” (see Page 5 of file [nalc.gov.uk](http://nalc.gov.uk)). Rother would be creating a low cost council as they promised but in the knowledge that it could do very little for the population without raising the precept substantially. Rother would be popular, the town council very unpopular. This seems to us to be a poor start, not only unfair but lacking ambition. The town deserves better.
5. The temporary town clerk has invaluable experience and will be well aware of the work involved in setting up a town council and the likely items of expenditure. Having a workable team of three is the most important, but we would also like to mention a few more which we think are important, and could be taken into consideration when looking at the precept.
6. We think it is important that the Town Council holds a community consultation. This should not just be an online survey but more comprehensive, involving the different neighbourhoods such as Sidley, Pebsham, and Little Common, not just focusing on the town centre. It should also involve different groups, such as retailers, sports clubs, organisations for the elderly, the police, the schools, and of course their umbrella organisations. Asking people what they want is just one step, since sometimes people will not know what particular projects or services are possible. It might involve a forum or discussion groups or neighbourhood meetings, when possible. The more information we have about the town, its demographics, health, trees, land, housing, and of course its citizens – their incomes, ambitions, problems and worries – the more likely we are to be able to deliver what is needed. Rother will have some of this information, but not all, and not all up to date. Such a consultation will take resources.
7. The fund-raiser would have the brief of finding out about sources of money for specific projects so that they can be matched with needs. Lottery money, government schemes, grants from other organisations, often have time-limited specific aims – to help coastal towns, or fading high streets, or young people

or green development. Writing good applications is a science and an art and a good sense of timing. This person should be appointed now, because if we wait until the permanent town clerk is in place, they probably won't start until the end of 2021. Bexhill needs to bring money into the town, as other town councils do.

8. There will also be some projects which the council would like to implement that are relatively quick and inexpensive and will help residents to feel that the town council is going to make a difference to them. It will be up to those councillors to decide what those are, but D4B has made many suggestions in the past.
9. It is also likely that the town council will want to consider starting the process of creating a Neighbourhood Plan, to help shape the future development of the town. These are major pieces of work that can take over two years, and although there can be some grant funding available, a Plan can be expensive.
10. There may also be urgent problems that come up and seek support from the town council, whether related to COVID or to cuts happening elsewhere. For example – Cygnets the Egerton Park nursery, sited perfectly by the beautiful green space and playground, was set up as a Surestart nursery. It was rated as “Outstanding” by OFSTED, but it has had to close down because East Sussex is making cuts. Nurseries are an essential resource not just for the children of Bexhill but for their working families. Rother has enabled the sister Sidley nursery to restart, run by the parent-led association Bexhill Family Collective, but is not keen to let them also take back the building in Egerton Park. Nurseries are not what district councils do, but town councils can. At least they could help to play a role in restoring it. The nursery charges a fee and with the government allowances for parents it would be self funding if the premises had a peppercorn rent. It just needs Rother to hold on the building until a solution can be found, such as making a community transfer of the building to Bexhill, (which again, is what happened in Lowestoft). The point is, the town council could benefit from having an emergency fund to be able to support its community when unexpected issues arise.
11. Allotments are the only assets to be transferred to the new town council in the Reorganisation of Community Governance Order. It would seem to be sensible to also transfer the small areas of land around them too, to allow growth. Allotments are in great demand and gardeners have been told that waiting lists are closed. Yet particularly after COVID-19 there is increasing interest in growing food. It makes no sense for Rother to hold onto that land unless it intends to build on it, and thus restrict growth in allotments. We would suggest those small areas be handed over to the council too.
12. Rother apparently has 282 assets in land or buildings – a figure we found in a Freedom of information request. However, we can't find a register of them, or the Asset Management Plan which apparently exists. We hope that the newly elected councillors will be given full information on what their "patch" includes. There might be a case for some of them to be transferred to the town council, if we knew what they were.
13. We were assuming that the town hall premises would be provided rent free, or at a peppercorn rent - as they are going to be very small initially - and without maintenance costs. There is talk now of the town council “paying their way”.

As far as we can determine, Rother did not have to pay a penny for the town hall when it took it over from the Borough, itself built by Bexhill ratepayers' money. We note that in 2017 Waveney simply transferred the town hall to the new Lowestoft Town Council. (and then rented it back from them!) We are also hoping that the officers and councillors who will be deciding where exactly the premises will be, how much space allowed, how impressive, and what signage they will have, will make decisions based on what they would expect if they were on the town council and were launching this body in what will be a historic moment. How great it would be if by the launch day, all that can be unveiled and give Bexhill residents pride in what has been achieved and what lies ahead.

14. What proportion of the grants from the Community Grants Scheme go to Bexhill? We understand that over the last ten years or so, for whatever reason, it has been only about 20%. This, despite Bexhill having the two highest priority areas of poverty in the district. It would surely make sense for the scheme to give half its funds to the town council to allocate. Half the population of Rother live in Bexhill and they presumably provide a larger proportion than 15% of the council taxes that pay for this. As things stand, the town council would be entitled to be represented on the current Panel, but it does seem an anomaly for the Rother Scheme to be making decisions on grant funding projects in Bexhill when the town council itself clearly won't have the funds to do so. Alternatively, Rother could provide those funds within the precept. Most town councils put great store by their ability to support local initiatives or needs in various ways, including grants.
15. The Jan 2020 budget referred to savings from devolution or £1.3m and £700k. The new draft budget has a line in it for prioritisation/devolution, which we assume still includes "savings" from devolution when Rother will ask the town council to take over some services. This is a big saving for the district - can this be shared with the town council?
16. When we last looked, about a million pounds was due to Bexhill from CIL money. Some of it is already earmarked but it would be reasonable to expect a proportion of that, say £200,000 to be transferred to the first year's budget of the town council. (This is what happened also in Lowestoft).

We look forward for these points to be discussed and taken into consideration by the Steering Group.

Many thanks  
Chair, Democracy4Bexhill

### **Friends of Bexhill Events**

'Friends of Bexhill Events' is a not for profit community fundraising and support group, which raises funds and offers support to events in Bexhill. We believe in the value of local events, large and small, in helping to raise the profile of the town, increasing footfall from visitors and residents, encouraging tourism and local volunteers, and promoting regeneration and civic pride. Until prevented by lockdown restrictions, we had active working links with the Information Hub in Sackville Road and worked in communication with Bexhill Heritage, Bexhill Lions, Light Up Bexhill and many other local volunteer groups. We had an 'Events Calendar' for Bexhill on

our website which was regularly used by residents and visitors. These are our views...

- We recognise that many residents are struggling financially and are not requesting for the first TC precept to rise above what was suggested in the most recent consultation.
- We would like the initial staffing of the TC to include the appointment of someone with time and expertise to set up a professional TC website and bespoke Bexhill events calendar, which would be much more effective than we have provided in the past. We like the current 1066 tourism website, but don't feel it is sufficiently proactive in supporting events in Bexhill.
- We would like the full Bexhill events grant budget to be transferred to the TC as and when this is practical, especially as the consultation indicated that residents wanted the TC to take responsibility for the Christmas lights.
- We would like the initial budget to enable the appointment of a fundraiser to access grants to facilitate a Tourist Information Centre in Bexhill.
- We hope that the establishment of a TC will not be used to transfer money consuming assets or systems from the RDC to the new TC as a cost saving exercise, and rely on the commitment to the TC from our Rother Cllrs to prevent this.
- We would like to thank the RDC for giving us the opportunity to comment'

Chair Friends of Bexhill Events

### **Councillor Richard Thomas**

Earlier in the week, I took part, anonymously, in the online survey about the budget. In that, I expressed my preference for a precept that would give the new Councillors an opportunity to perform some functions during the first year of the Council's existence.

My reasoning is that there is a clear desire for a Town Council that will make a difference and so the Council should be given enough money to perform some inexpensive functions such as funding local organisations like the Bexhill Environmental Group and Bexhill Heritage if it wishes to do so, and also to begin a scoping exercise preliminary to making a Neighbourhood Plan. The Council should be in a position to encourage new volunteering initiatives and to award grants to deserving organisations.

Therefore, I think the Bexhill Environment Group's contribution to the discussion should be given serious consideration. A precept of about, say, £400,000 would give the Town Council enough funding to provide some value-for-money services.

Could you please forward this contribution to the discussion to the members of the Committee, please?