

Community Governance Review Steering Group

Thursday 21 January 2021

Agenda Item 4 refers

Comments received after publication of the Agenda – UPDATE 2:

Councillor John Barnes – Member of the Steering Group

Since I have to chair the Fire Authority's Scrutiny and Audit Panel on the 21st, I may not be able to get to the meeting at all and will certainly miss a great deal of the deliberations.

I have a number of questions and some observations which I should like drawn to the attention of fellow members.

There seem to me two matters of transparency, one of far greater import than the other. The more minor is that we are, I assume, not budgeting for a full year. I think it behoves us to make clear what the full year costs are, although precepting for less. The difference I suspect will be about six weeks spend I imagine. The more serious point to be addressed is the question of the special expenses, principally the cost of the parks. While I understand and broadly support the principle that it is not for us to determine what the new Council should do, I think it may well be misunderstood and more than a little misleading if the District Council as well as the Town Council is taxing the town for what are services provided for the town rather than the District as a whole. The more I reflect on the subject, the more convinced I become that it is right to transfer the parks and the bill for them immediately and do away with the special expenses council tax as far as Bexhill is concerned. The only question in my mind is whether the museum is a Bexhill only facility or whether it serves the District as a whole.

While I made the case for the transfer of special expenses on grounds of transparency, since the same people will be paying for those services as are paying for the Town Council, including that quite large sum to the initial base, while it will not alter any one's total tax bill, it will have a mildly beneficial effect for Town Council finances in future years.

While I am not without some sympathy for the views expressed in some submissions and by Councillor Thomas that the budget should not be minimal, on balance I think it right to stick to two basic principles. While it must have the capacity and in particular the staff to carry out a consultation and develop a plan, it is not for us to determine or budget for enterprises like a Neighbourhood Plan - that must be for elected members of the new Council. I am afraid that will mean a slower start than some would wish, but I do not think we have a mandate to determine what the new Council should undertake, hence we cannot anticipate their wishes when setting the budget.

The other principle that I think needs to be explicit is that we serve the whole District and not just the town. Even if we had the legal power to do so, and I suspect we do not, we cannot subsidise the structure and activities of one council where we do not do the same for any other town or parish in Rother.

As a Parish Councillor myself, I wish the new Council well. I know just how valuable local councils can be, but it is for them to set their course and budget accordingly, not for us to do so, nor should we privilege one minor authority over any of the others that we serve.

Cllr John Barnes
Rother District Councillor for Burwash and the Weald