

Playden DC Report December 2017

1. Just a reminder that Rother District Council will waive the usual parking charges in its off-street pay and display car parks in Bexhill, Rye and Battle on Saturdays throughout December.

2. Cabinet Meeting 4th December, of note:

2.1 Bexhill Governance Review: This is a really important decision which includes the creation of an additional layer of government, additional elections and the potential to establish an additional tax raising body. Cabinet resolved that it warranted extensive discussion at Full Council later this month on the four options available (no change, Area Committee, Town Council, four parish councils).

Councillors were advised not to campaign for any option during the review consultation process. However, it is disappointing that some members of the opposition actively did, even a councillor who was on the impartial Steering Group. RDC received a pitiful response to the first stage of the consultation (around 900 responses from 44,000 population) considering that around 4,000 had signed the original petition. A considerable response was received from the second stage (around 9,000), the majority expressing a preference for a Town Council - which is what Democracy4Bexhill (Labour run pressure group) and various opposition councillors were campaigning for. Do we assume that the vast majority of Bexhill residents (more than 30,000) did not vote because they are content with the current governance arrangement? Other options, such as that of parish councils, were not promoted and lobbyists against the parish council option reported that it would cost too much money, when in reality, monetary figures are difficult to estimate until we know to what extent powers would be devolved. A Town Council serving around 44,000 residents would need a full time Town Clerk and premises, administration staff etc. Four Parish Councils serving approximately 10,000 residents each would require part time parish clerks and no administrative premises. If money was the issue, I believe that the people who are responsible for petitioning for the review would not have contemplated an extra layer of government at all. I have a strong suspicion that the issue is really about power and the fact that the Labour Party has no elected district councillor's at RDC leading to some, if not many, residents indicating that they do not feel part of the decision process and a feeling of a sense of injustice here. I can understand why they would wish to look at other ways of exercising this. I also believe that the issue may be more about localism for many residents - Bexhill has different needs within the Town. Sidley is very deprived and somewhat different to for example, Little Common, which is different in turn to the Town Centre. 'It may be challenging to have one Town Council when the needs are so different' (Sussex Police response to consultation).

I have had a couple of emails from one or two Bexhill residents and several letters from Democracy4Bexhill asking me to vote in favour of a Town Council. I am strongly in favour of devolution and localism and wholly take on board the benefits of Town and parish councils for communities. One resident felt that a Town Council would take out party politics from this local tier of government and help bring the community together. However, in my experience of Bexhill, there are many competing organisations led by people with differing agendas and so I do not believe having a Town Council will take party politics out of Bexhill. In fact, the campaign for a Town Council for Bexhill has been somewhat hijacked by the Labour Party, whose supporters feel a sense of 'injustice' and 'do not feel part of the decision process' because Labour has no elected representatives on Rother District Council.

Rye Town Council responded to the consultation and mentioned some of the benefits of of a Town Council - responsiveness to local needs and interests and community activity. Bexhill is lucky to have RDC and the Town Hall on its doorstep, which neither Battle nor Rye have, and RDC is responsive to the needs of Bexhill. For example, through the Bexhill Town Centre Steering Group, chaired by Rother Cllr. Ian Hollidge, £27,500 has been secured: £7,500 towards the 2018 summer train poster campaign promoting Bexhill visitor events as well as a dedicated PR campaign for Bexhill events; and £20,000 to contribute to the high quality sense of place within the town centre

through ongoing maintenance works, repairs and future public realm projects. This contribution will ensure higher quality materials for repair works and enhance features such as post and telephone boxes, street lighting etc. See also paragraph 2.3 below. Rother actively facilitates community activity and supports local events, promoting community spirit and inclusiveness and focusing on civic pride. To have a Town Council in Bexhill is an additional layer of government which would somewhat duplicate what RDC can and already provides - we need to ask what extra could it give to Bexhill residents and would the costs be justified. The same applies to the four separate parish council option.

Whilst I understand why many residents in Bexhill may want a Town Council, I wonder whether enough residents are aware of the effort their dedicated and elected representatives are making on their behalf - Bexhill already has a number of elected representatives at RDC who make huge commitment in volunteering their efforts and skills. In reality, the majority of people are generally only interested in their local authority when things go wrong! One of the arguments put forward by Democracy4Bexhill, proponents of a Town Council for Bexhill, is that rural councillors, who are not elected by Bexhill residents, get to decide and vote on decisions about Bexhill and can 'outvote' Bexhill councillors. Apparently, rural areas 'get more' than Bexhill! As a rural member, I do indeed focus on my ward, but I am also a councillor for the District and I am passionate to ensure, to coin a well known phrase, that we are for the many, not the few. We are all committed to the District.

All options warrant due consideration and I am sure there will be robust and healthy discussions on this issue later this month, in what I expect to be a particularly lively Council Meeting!

2.2 Council Chamber Audio/Visual Equipment Upgrade - cf last month's DC Report, para 2.1. There was a 'Call-in' to reconsider the level of investment considered appropriate and the type of capabilities required of the audio/visual offer within the Council Chamber. There is a very valid argument as to why we would need to video meetings by helping prevent members of the public with an axe to grind or point to prove from doctoring videos that they have taken. This has unfortunately happened very recently. Cabinet did not change their position on this issue. It was felt that an extra £14,000 to install fixed cameras to provide video capability and possible future webcasting of meetings was not, at this stage, an appropriate sum to pay for equipment, particularly as Council has not yet decided whether it will be videoing meetings at all, let alone which and webcasting was not felt to be a necessary expense for the level of public interest (£12,000 per annum).

2.3 Capital Programme investment of £300,000 to meet the costs of creating a new skate park and Multi Use Games Area and improve the BMX facilities at Sidley Recreation Ground. This is fantastic project in terms of regeneration and young people, benefitting a large catchment of children and young people. Together, the facilities will bring into use an under-utilised area of Sidley Recreation Ground and significantly increase the recreational value of the open space to the local community and the wide town. Regarding financing, the idea is that £99,970 will be reimbursed through future S.106 contributions and the remainder through grant applications/donations. RDC will underwrite in case any of the grant applications are not successful. One of the arguments put forward by Democracy4Bexhill, proponents of a Town Council for Bexhill, is that rural councillors, who are not elected by Bexhill residents, get to decide and vote on decisions about Bexhill and can 'outvote' Bexhill councillors. Apparently, rural areas 'get more' than Bexhill! As a rural member, I do indeed focus on my ward, but I am also a councillor for the District and I am passionate to ensure, to coin a well known phrase, that we are for the many, not the few.

2.4 Via the enabling service aimed at developing the community led housing sector, Sussex Community Housing Hub by Action in Rural Sussex, the Council is proactively looking for and considering sites for affordable and community led housing schemes which we so badly need in the District. In 2016, RDC was allocated £748,900 of Community Housing Fund by central Government. The purpose is to grow the community led housing sector as an additional mechanism of increasing the supply of affordable housing.

2.5 Cabinet recommended to Full Council that the Council Tax Reduction Scheme currently in place for 2017/18 be continued for 2018/19.

2.6 Local Government Association - Corporate Peer Review Challenge. This took place in the summer. The approach for this can be found <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/sli-local-government-pdf--f4c.pdf>

The key principles are based around that councils are responsible for their own performance; stronger local accountability leads to further improvement; councils have a sense of collective responsibility for performance as a whole and the role of the LGA is to help councils by providing the necessary support.

The peer team involved officers and councillor peers from across the sectors and beyond. Their ambition was to help RDC to respond to its local priorities and issues in its own way to greatest effect.

The Review was essentially very positive and included pointers for improvement, much of which RDC is now implementing, such as not allowing caution to temper ambition, particularly regarding financial risk aversion, and prioritising focus on income generation (and IT projects). This reinforced my observations earlier this year, reported to you, that looking at our investment return (somewhere in the region of £130k on £28 million investments) we needed to consider taking a more riskier approach to investments in order to maximise income for the Council. We now have a £7 million pot to invest in commercial property or such higher return investments. The idea is to account for risk rather than avoid it. It was suggested that whilst Councillors and staff are clearly committed to the District, they - particularly Councillors - should be supported to become more strategic.

Remember our residents in everything we do!

3. Rye Harbour Discovery Centre Project. As explained in my September DC Report, I am in favour of this exciting project for various reasons, primarily in respect of tourism and the benefits I am convinced it will bring to Rye Harbour residents. I know that some residents of Rye Harbour are concerned about traffic congestion in the village and the negative impact the Discovery Centre may have on local businesses and services. I take on board these concerns and hope that we can discuss them with representatives from Rye Harbour Nature Reserve and the Sussex Wildlife Trust at the next parish council meeting.

I attended the launch event held at the Kino Cinema in Rye and was asked to say a few words. Tourism, UK wide, is an important part of the rural economy and has huge potential for growth, particularly here in the Southeast. In 2015, direct expenditure generated by tourism in Rother was £238.1 million, supporting over 20% of jobs in Rother. I am determined that tourism is made, if not the heart of Rother's economic strategy, at least a major part. Rye Harbour Nature Reserve is a site of international importance with the potential to attract international wildlife visitors, as well as domestic, if we have a modern, ambitious and state of the art visitor attraction discovery hub. The new Discovery Centre will not only benefit Rye Harbour, but also Romney Marsh and the Dungeness Complex - giving a major tourism boost to East Sussex and Kent.

It is not just about tourism. This is eco-tourism and is a great example of where tourism and conservation can work together and inform people about the environment. It is about opportunities for research, education, skills development - especially for young people - and employment. I believe the Discovery Centre will contribute to a thriving community at Rye Harbour and help preserve local services such as bus transport, shop, pubs and cafes.

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