

Icklesham DC Report July 2017

1. Sussex Police

Following the latest terror attacks, Sussex Police are continuing to review their policing to ensure appropriate security is in place in our communities and at public events across Sussex.

Armed policing capabilities across Sussex have been increased and Sussex Police have provided enhanced high visibility patrols at key locations for reassurance and community engagement. Upcoming public events are also being reviewed to ensure there are appropriate security measures in place.

Community intelligence is crucial helping prevent future atrocities. Any suspicious activity should be reported using the anti-terrorist hotline number 0800 789 321 or 999 in an emergency.

For more information please visit Sussex Police advice page and watch the Run, Hide, Tell video.

2. RDC's position in relation to the sad tragedy of the Grenfell Towers fire.

Under Building Control there are many standards and much guidance on fire precautions and means of escape from flats offered to landlords and private tenants.

The requirement for sprinkler systems for flats does not apply until you get to blocks of flats with a floor level in excess of 30.0m above external ground level. There is advice regarding the effectiveness of sprinkler systems and life safety but it is often an expense that is avoided by the freeholder. With regards cladding of buildings of this size, building control would, whilst carrying their checks, ensure the materials meet the appropriate British Standards and fire safety regulations. The cladding at Grenfell Towers is currently being investigated but we have not received any detail or direction on this matter from the Government.

As regards private sector purpose built apartment blocks, RDC Private Sector Housing Team (the Team) routinely asks for a fire risk assessment to cover the common parts of the building. If the Team comes across an obvious fire risk either due to design or disrepair, it is taken up with the person responsible. Where a converted building doesn't meet the 1991 Building Regulations, RDC refers to the LACORS Fire Safety Guidance. The Team tends to follow this guidance if there is no documentation stating when the conversion was carried out and so must meet this standard.

In Rother District, there is a mix of buildings classed as high rise. Most of these are situated along the sea front in Bexhill. Officers have over the years visited the majority of these buildings and on such occasions also sought assurances on fire safety. Whenever new work is carried out to these buildings, planning consent is followed up and Building Control visit and sign off work to ensure the appropriate standards are met. This should serve as an assurance that all is being done to limit the fire risk.

With regards social housing stock, RDCs main providers Optivo and Orbit are reviewing all their relevant buildings and reporting to DCLG.

With regards to the "stay-put" advice policy for the evacuation of flats, there will be discussion. We will have to wait and see what lessons are learnt and acted upon.

As more information comes from Government, I am assured that RDC will act upon it as appropriate.

3. Cabinet Meeting 3rd July 2017

3.1 Bexhill Community Governance Review: This may well impact on all Rother residents. RDC received a petition for a Community Governance Review (CGR) for Bexhill in March 2015. The petition was valid as it contained the signatures of at least 10% of the electors in Bexhill. The petition called on RDC to undertake a CGR for Bexhill, recommending that an Area Committee be established for Bexhill - an additional layer of local government. The current administration pledged to conduct a CGR within Bexhill to consider all possible governance options, including parishing. A steering group was duly appointed to lead the CGR. The Stage 1 consultation was launched on 9th January 2017 and closed on 31st March. Councillors from all over the District worked hard to ensure full participation. The consultation was promoted well in advance of the launch with press releases, social media, messaging etc. Overview & Scrutiny Committee made recommendations to Cabinet of four options to be taken forward to form the basis of the Stage 2 Consultation, including one Parish Council (Town Council), 4 Parish Councils on the ESCC north/east/south/west boundary system, retaining the status quo and the creation of an Area Committee for Bexhill.

Cabinet was also asked to approve the proposal to undertake a leaflet drop to every bexhill household, promoting the Stage 2 consultation at an estimated cost of £14,000.

There was much discussion, particularly from your rural Councillors. Both Cllr. Paul Osborne and myself were concerned that the cost of the leaflets would be borne by all RDC residents. We also do not want any possibility of rural residents paying towards the cost of establishing another tier of local government for the benefit of a small number of Bexhill activists. If an Area Committee is created for Bexhill it would also require the establishment of at least an additional area committee(s) covering the rural areas of the District - something which would come at some cost and for which there has been no demand. Cllr. Osborne and I were also robust in our argument that in spite of the number of residents who had signed the Petition (being 3, 816 - 10% of Bexhill residents) only 928 responses had been received in total (i.e. less than 3% of Bexhill residents) and only 714 of these responses had provided their postcodes, as requested for data mapping purposes. I am concerned that this is an important and costly issue and such a pitiful response is disappointing, particularly as we cannot stop due process. It was reported, however, that the response was actually better than average. It was also clear that those pushing for the Petition had provided misinformation to the public.

Cabinet decided not to recommend to Council that we should undertake a leaflet drop at the cost of £14,000 (or £30,000 in the case of an Area Committee, as every Rother household would need to be leafleted). It was proposed that the Stage 2 Consultation should be carried out in the same way as the Stage 1, with Councillor participation face to face contact with residents at various specific events in Bexhill. It was also stated that we must ensure as a Council that accurate information must be provided to the public and that misinformation provided by third parties should be robustly challenged. We need to ensure that the rights of a very small minority do not negatively impact on the needs of the silent majority.

3.2 Waste, recycling and street cleansing services contract: Cabinet approved the recommendation to Council that RDC will remain committed to a waste partnership with other local authorities for the joint procurement of waste, recycling and street cleansing services. RDC will enter into a mirror Inter Authority Agreement as previously. Such an Agreement is cost effective and provides a fair and workable basis to govern the delivery of the procurement of a new waste services contract.

3.3 Community Led Housing project: this is really positive and good news! The Government announced the Community Housing Fund (CHF) as part of the 2016 Budget, aimed at helping 150 councils tackle the impact of second homes in their communities. RDC has been allocated by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) a substantial sum (the largest allocation in East Sussex) of £748,899 to support the delivery of Community Led Housing (CLH) projects in Rother District. The aim is to grow the CLH sector as an alternative and additional

mechanism for delivering affordable housing. This provides a great opportunity to support CLH schemes across the District. It is proposed that a Sussex Community Housing Hub be developed to deliver CLH and meet the key principles set out by the DCLG. RDC will ensure that it has a sound framework in place to provide knowledge and expertise to deliver advice and support to community groups in the setting up of organisations such as Community Land Trusts, and financial support to ensure delivery of such affordable housing schemes.

4. Camber Inquest

The inquest of the 5 fatalities in August 2016 was held last week. The coroner also determined his previous inquest into the two fatalities in July 2016 in order to hear the evidence together. I attended the first day of the inquest.

Forty nine witness statements and interviews were provided to the inquest, including visitors to the beach that day, the RNLI, police, RDC, experts on risk and oceanography.

The families' lawyers focused on the 2013 risk assessment carried out by the RNLI, which was highlighted by the media last year. This recommended that RDC 'consider the introduction of lifeguards'. The families asked why lifeguards were not introduced on the basis of that risk assessment. Between 1.2m and 1.5m visitors come to Camber each year and there had been no drownings at the beach until 2012. That year, a woman drowned - she had been paddling fully dressed (with long clothes) in the water, tripped, ingested water and unfortunately drowned. At that inquest, recommendation was given by the Coroner to improve education by RDC. RDC reviewed the website, produced a leaflet and reviewed information signs.

The known hazards at that time were sandbars, tidal currents, offshore winds and fast incoming tides and these were all displayed on entrance signs. This information was supported by the 10 beach patrol staff whose duties included ushering people off the sandbars as the tide came in. This has been a known hazard for many years and accordingly acted upon. The coastal control officer would brief the staff every morning on the tide, sea conditions and when to guide visitors off the sandbars. This practice had been operating for a number of years effectively and confirmed by beach patrol staff who worked on the beach and witnessed by the RNLI.

At last week's inquest, a risk expert, Professor Ball, gave evidence that the actions RDC were carrying out at that time were considered entirely appropriate taking into account the safe record of Camber Sands. He said the RDC risk approach was much more in keeping with the Health and Safety Executive recommended practice.

The coroner has made it clear the inquest was not about seeking blame but about understanding the cause of death and future actions. He gave his verdict on the seven fatalities. As regards the July incident, the men entered the water and got into difficulties. The August drownings were attributed to the men entering the water at the time the tide was coming in and becoming trapped on a sandbar.

All verdicts were recorded as 'death by misadventure'.

The Coroner will be issuing a 'Prevention of Future Deaths' letter. This cannot be ignored. He will be sending this to the SoS for Transport and will include the National Water Safety Forum, RoSPA, HSE, Local Government Association and all interested parties (RDC, RNLI, Family Lawyers). In it he will draw out his concerns which were:

1. Lessons learnt to be shared with others
2. The history of events and actions taken to minimise risk up to present day (he specifically said he was satisfied with the actions RDC had taken following the 2016 fatalities in addressing this for future years)

3. There appeared to be no formal governance or control as there is no legal duty upon local authorities to provide lifeguards. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency should be given more responsibility rather than rely on a charity (that being the RNLI). The future of management of beaches needs to take into consideration future climate change, changing population profiles, better communication with the public and especially better education of pre-arrival knowledge of the dangers of the sea

4. Resources available to local authorities need consideration and a need of a review of risk assessment management as provided by Professor Balls paper.

The verdict delivered by the coroner of 'death by misadventure' and the work that RDC has put in place for 2017-2020, along with the previous arrangements in place have shown RDC to be responsive and a responsible authority. The media has at times reported a wholly different set of circumstances.

I am satisfied with the outcome of the inquest. From the start, my stance has been that RDC's safety measures were appropriate at that time, but that the deployment of lifeguards should and would be considered in the safety review following these tragic incidents. We immediately set up a Beach & Water Safety Group and held meetings with all the relevant agencies. Lifeguards do not guarantee lives, a point reinforced by the Coroner, and I have lobbied for all communities to be better educated on beach and water safety before they get to the beach, particularly in schools. Via our MP, Amber Rudd, I have been reassured by Justine Greening that -

'The Government absolutely agrees with Mrs Hart that swimming and staying safe in the water are important skills for life. Learning about swimming and water safety is compulsory as part of the National Curriculum for PE at primary level. Pupils should be taught to swim competently, confidently and proficiently over a distance of at least 25 metres. They should learn to use a range of strokes effectively and perform safe self-rescue in different waters based situations.

Last year, we announced that we are doubling the primary PE and sport premium, which goes directly to schools to improve their provision. Schools can choose to use this funding to provide additional training and instruction in swimming and water safety.

Although there are no current plans to include additional content on swimming in the National Curriculum from Key Stage 3 and beyond, secondary schools have the freedom to tailor their wider school curriculum and PSHE programme to include further teaching on water safety. We are working with the sector, including the school swimming review group, to help ensure that no child leaves school unable to meet a minimum standard of capability and confidence in swimming. In addition, we regularly provide social media support to schools to direct them to free resources and schemes, including the Swim safe Scheme run by the Amateur Swimming Association and the RNLI'

I would urge all schools to ensure that each pupil meets a minimum standard of capability and confidence in swimming. To be able to swim is a necessary life skill.

SAH