

Chairman's Report

Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the 2015 annual general meeting of the Bexhill Town Forum. To start this meeting I would like to tell you a bit about what your committee has been doing in the last year.

This committee was elected in September 2014 and so has now been in office for ten months – a very interesting and challenging ten months! We took on a remit to serve the people of Bexhill by providing a link between them and the District and County Councils, as well as others who take leading and influencing roles. However it soon became clear that the Forum had not moved forward to meet, and benefit from, the demands and expectations of today's world. Most especially it had barely begun to avail itself of the facilities and benefits offered by electronic communications, especially the Internet.

As a result of this, the Forum's activities, inputs and decisions were being limited to an audience of those who were able to attend the public meetings – perhaps 70 or so people out of a population of more than 40,000. Something like 0.02% of the population!! Clearly this was neither fair nor desirable.

We therefore set about enhancing our email contacts list, and publishing our email address as broadly as possible. We then established and publicised a new Facebook page (the previous one had been abandoned by a former committee member who left the new committee with no access to it). Finally we set up a website that enables everyone to be kept completely up to date about the Forum, and to contact the committee easily.

We looked also at the minutes of Forum meetings. These were taking weeks, even months, to produce and costing a great deal of money – more than 80% of the Forum's budget for the period 1 April 1st to September 30th 2014. This was not an effective, or value-for-money, way of doing things. We took on the minute-taking work within the committee and began producing brief, to-the-point, minutes, which serve as reminders of meetings' contents, enabling people to come to us, or approach speakers, to learn more if they need to. We also now only send the minutes out electronically (Facebook, email, website) this has further increased savings and has led to very positive feedback.

Our next concern was to restore the public's positive awareness of the Forum. What did that entail?

- Meetings that would be positive, informative and enjoyable
- Content that would be well prepared
- Plenty of publicity and communication

The meetings we have run over the last ten months have been based on planned content, focusing on topics that are of key importance to the community of Bexhill. This did mean the first three meetings were all around the issue of local governance, but we felt that there was a great deal needing to be said and understood about this – a matter of the highest importance to Bexhill's future. (We will give a further update on this later this evening.) In holding three different sessions on this topic we communicated directly with 200 members of the public – a valuable achievement. And while doing this we were able to develop our understanding of what works best for operating the Forum.

Instead of attendees at meetings raising topics that have not been prepared in advance, we have set up the means for people to contact the committee outside of meetings in order to raise issues. This means that we can prepare for all matters that are to be discussed at meetings instead of spending valuable time discussing topics that haven't been investigated. Consequently the two

hours we spend together, four times per year, can be packed with valuable and interesting information. We are pleased to be able to report that these changes have been widely welcomed.

Learning how few people have been attending the Forum's meetings in recent years, we realised that it would be essential to bring the Forum back into Bexhill's focus. In the past there have been large turnouts: the parking-focussed meeting filled St Barnabas's church; previously the De La Warr Pavilion had been filled for general meetings. Clearly people are interested in a well-run, interesting forum. But those people had, apparently, stopped coming. We have therefore been trying out ways of reminding people of events, and attracting their attention back to the Forum. In addition to the electronic communications already mentioned, we have experimented with posters, flyers and handouts, trying to find out which are the most effective. We have also increased the frequency and positivity of press articles, ensuring that the widest number of people are aware of the Forum's meetings. In addition we have begun holding a Town Forum stall at public events.

But, we are well aware that the greatest impact on public opinion, interest and involvement can come only from building a positive reputation that leaves people recognising the Forum as a force for the good of Bexhill. We do not pretend to be anywhere near that goal yet but it has been made clear to us from many quarters that we are moving steadily in that direction.

Disappointingly we have had setbacks. We have had to deal with some unhelpful challenges, based, it appears, on unfounded assumptions that this committee is not working for the good of Bexhill and its residents. I mention this only to emphasise that this is an open and honest committee of volunteers, working hard to provide a service to this town.

To achieve what Bexhill needs of us we need constructive feedback. When we make mistakes – as we are bound to – do let us know – but also accept that any we make will only arise from sincere attempts to act as Bexhill needs us to.

I hope that this report has clarified what the Forum's Executive Committee is doing, and has so far achieved. I will be happy to take any questions before we move on to the rest of the agenda for this AGM.

Alan Peirce

Chairman, Bexhill Town Forum