

## **Bexhill Town Forum Constitution**

As the chairman has said, when this committee was elected, last September, the first thing we discovered was that the Forum had been declining in reputation and attendance and that RDC were reluctant to release funds to it. The new committee members had to look long and hard at what was behind this and take steps to restore the Forum to its rightful standing.

The principles that we felt should be pursued were professionalism, positivity and ensuring that as many of the people who fund us – ie all Bexhill residents – should get as much benefit from the Forum as possible.

- Positivity meant ensuring that the Forum's activities – especially the few precious hours that are available for public meetings - are made informative, helpful and supportive. We have led four meetings from this perspective and the feedback has been incredibly supportive and resulted, so far, in 200 individuals attending, with increasing numbers at each meeting and a good number of people coming for the first time or returning after having previously given up.
- In order to reach more people we have opened communications through electronic means – website, Facebook and email. We have also begun using Internet surveys and our first is now under way, asking people their views on Forum meeting organisation. Now anyone who is interested can be involved without having to be physically present.
- We approached professionalism in various ways including quality of communications, record keeping and minute taking. We also decided that it would be helpful to publish a brief constitution that would define the Forum as it is today.

We set out to provide a simple, brief document that would state what the Forum is about. It is not a procedural manual nor is it a Guide to how the Forum operates – simply a statement of what the Forum is about. We made the original draft public through the usual electronic means and requested feedback on it, so that it could be finalised tonight. It was then out for comment for two months. What should have been a straight forward process has instead led to some quite unexpected reactions from a small number of people. However we did receive some very helpful input that has enabled us to complete the document to a higher standard than the initial draft had achieved, and we thank the contributors for that.

Before I move on to the completed version I will explain why some suggestions were not included in it.

There seemed to be two themes coming through in the suggestions that were not adopted. First were suggestions suited to quite different organisations such as limited companies, charities, and clubs that have registered members who pay fees – organisations with buying powers, premises, employees and so on. It seems that the simplicity of what the Town Forum is and does has been misunderstood. So let me remind you:

The Town Forum is about communication. It is not a decision maker; it has no powers; it does not spend large sums of money. Its role is to inform the people of Bexhill of what is happening and planned in our town, enabling them to ask questions of experts and to express opinions that are then passed to the councils or others who are responsible. It also then reports back to residents from the council etc on what has been done in light of responses received and progress made. The role of the committee is to facilitate that communication. There have been numerous suggestions that are way beyond the needs of the Forum - for example, voting rights and controls were proposed – but what is being voted upon at Forum meetings? No vote held here can lead to

binding decisions – these votes lead to agreement about what should be proposed to the council – or other organisation. They are a simple show of hands from the people in the room - that is all. I should add also that, were voting rights and restrictions required we would have an impossible task to try to prove who was voting and whether they were entitled to do so since we have no formal register of members.

The second theme that came through was rather disappointing – it was that this committee is in some way intending to be underhand in what it does and making changes that are undemocratic. This latter was the most astonishing since increased democracy is precisely what is achieved by making the Forum available to all the people in Bexhill! We were sorry to have to read such suggestions but now prefer to put them behind us.

Below is a copy of the constitution showing the amendments that have been made as a result of the consultation process:

### **Purpose of the Forum**

Bexhill Town Forum exists to provide a conduit for the residents of Bexhill to communicate with the local and county councils, and other agencies. It also aims to provide liaison between the various agencies working in the interest of Bexhill. The Forum holds regular public meetings which are organised by an executive committee of volunteers.

### **Executive Committee**

Committee members are elected by the public at the annual general meeting (AGM) and serve for two years. The committee consists of from eight to ten full, voting, members from whom it elects officers for the roles of chairman, vice chairman, secretary and treasurer. In addition, non-voting places are held by a representative of the local council, in a non-political, advisory capacity, and by a representative of Bexhill's youth council. Specialists may be co-opted or associated to the committee, by majority agreement of the committee members, on a temporary basis to meet specific needs that may arise.

When a vacancy arises during the two year period then a replacement may be co-opted at the discretion of the committee and by majority vote, with the option of subsequently being adopted as a full, voting member.

The committee has the right, by way of a majority vote, to remove any member whose behaviour is deemed not to be conducive to the smooth and efficient running of the Forum.

The committee holds formal meetings, normally on a monthly basis, as well as occasional extra meetings, as required. A quorum of four full committee members, including either the chair or vice chair, is required for a meeting to proceed. Members are required to attend a minimum of 75% of the formal committee meetings unless there are special circumstances, which have been agreed with the chairman.

Decisions made by the committee are based on a majority vote of the full members, with the chairman having the casting vote.

## **Public Meetings**

Public Forum meetings are held throughout the year at appropriate locations, and address issues of public concern. Key influencers are invited to speak, and to liaise with residents, at these meetings.

**Residents of Bexhill** are invited to propose topics of interest and concern to the committee; the committee will then investigate and address, at public meetings, the topics that prove to be of broad concern.

**An annual general meeting is held each July to enable a review of the last year's activities, agreement of a financial report, and, when required, the election of officers.**

**Should urgent business arise during the year that cannot wait for the next AGM's attention then the Chairman, or his/her deputy, may call a special general meeting (SGM).**

**To be quorate, any AGM or SGM requires that two thirds (rounded up if necessary) of the committee attend, and a minimum of four times the number of attending committee members be represented by the public attendees.**

## **Minutes**

Minutes are taken of public meetings and made available in electronic format.

## **Finance**

The Forum is funded by the local authority and accounts are regularly approved by the council's financial department.

All monies received are used for the Forum's activities, in accordance with the agreed **purpose of the Forum**. Cheques are signed by two nominated officers.

Should the forum be dissolved, after payment of all outstanding debts any remaining funds will be returned to their provider(s).

## **Amendments to this constitution**

Any proposed amendments to this constitution will be **agreed in the first place** by the executive committee and submitted to the AGM – or if a decision is needed sooner, to an SGM – for discussion and sign off.

Finally, I will now comment on the extraordinary accusations that have been levelled at us recently by a very small number of people, whose agenda we are struggling to understand.

It is being said that we have not allowed appropriate consultation on the constitution and that we should be debating it word by word in a public meeting – indeed that we should hold a meeting specifically for this purpose.

Where do I begin in replying to this? Well, it is interesting to note that there is a good deal of enthusiasm around for Bexhill to have a town or parish council and some say that, until there is a local council, the Forum has to be the next best substitute. Well, a local council is under no obligation – other than in a small number of statutory cases – to consult the public before making decisions. And even when it does consult it is not obliged to act on the results of that consultation. So the extensive efforts this committee makes to consult with the residents of Bexhill is already beyond what can be automatically assumed of a local council.

Here are some facts about this committee's drive to consult with the people of Bexhill:

The constitution was out for comment and feedback for two months – open to everyone to access online, and received 7 sets of feedback. Let me put some context around that.

The previous committee discussed matters in meetings which generally involved around 70 people, less than 0.02% of the residents of Bexhill, and posted or emailed materials to their list of just 150 people. (These figures are based on the data passed to the new committee when we took over.)

As I have said, this committee is determined to involve as many people as possible since the Forum is for everyone and is funded by everyone. So we publish material on our website, on Facebook and by email, and here are a few statistics regarding how many people we reach:

Our Website has been visited by 254 people.

Our Facebook page has reached 978 in total. 964 have viewed it in the last week. 441 have looked at the post that announced the agenda for tonight.

Our emails go to 220 people.

Through these approaches we can safely assume that at the very least, 1000 people are receiving our messages and so 1000 had the opportunity to comment on the constitution.

As I expect you are aware, we communicated a survey through all these mediums – that survey received 36 responses on the first day it was out and has now received 63 responses.

Meanwhile, the constitution, over two months, has received feedback from just 7 of the (at least) 1000 people who were contacted about it. I believe that it is very safe to assume that the constitution has not given any general cause for concern.

As is clearly stated in the last paragraph, it can always be updated if requirements change but now we would like to get on with the business of providing Bexhill with the service it deserves.