



**Local Governance for Bexhill
Friday 13th March 2015
St Peter's Community Centre**

Speakers: Sue Prochak, District Councillor, Salehurst
Stuart Earl, District Councillor, Bexhill St Mark's
Keith Stevens, Chairman East Sussex Association of Local Councils, Parish Councillor
Sam Souster, District and Town Councillor, Rye
Diane Smith, Former Parish Councillor, Greenham
Simon Elford, District Councillor RDC, Bexhill St Michael's

A point of order was raised by Paul Plimm regarding a leaflet in the public domain stating Councillor J Hughes is Rother's independent councillor on the Bexhill Town Forum committee. He stated that he believed Cllr J Hughes to be a Conservative councillor. Cllr J Hughes responded that she is on the committee in an independent capacity, on behalf of RDC and has no vote.

The floor was opened to the public for questions.

- Q. Bill Cody: The Charter Trustees, including the mayor, are funded by precept - if we change the governance system would these funds be used elsewhere?
- A. Stuart Earl: The Charter Trustees was formed from what remained in Bexhill after RDC was formed and the borough council was disbanded in 1974. There would no longer be a need for the Charter Trustees but it would be a good thing to have a mayor still.

Keith Stevens: Parish and town councils are essentially the same with a town council having a mayor and a parish council having a chairman.

Sam Souster: Was a chartered trustee in Lichfield – a town council would replace Charter Trustees but there would be either a mayor or a chairman still. A town council does not have to have a mayor, it could have a chairman instead.

- Q. Simon Read: A town or parish council would be funded through the district council – if it were precepting, would it get additional funding and have a bigger budget?
- A. Stuart Earl: The Charter Trustees would be obsolete - a town council and future mayor would be funded through the normal precept.

Q. Lorna Extence: The Communities Minister, Stephen Williams, on 8 January 2015, set out measures to make it easier for community groups to set up town or parish councils. How will that impact on changes here?

A. Keith Stevens: Eric Pickles (Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) wants to make it easier and an area committee could force change without the need for signatures. Developments related to this are awaited over the coming months. Mr Pickles is currently providing funding for town and parish councils but it is not guaranteed this will continue.

Simon Elford: It has been guaranteed that a review will take place whatever the outcome of other activities.

Sue Prochak: This government is very much in favour of localism and there is an Act of Parliament in favour of it. It is unlikely this will change in future. Decisions made at a local level are the best. Changes may cost more at first but will save money in the long term.

Keith Stevens: Neighbourhood planning does not give power over district planning but it does give a greater local say in the decisions.

Sue Prochak:

- Can confirm from experience in Robertsbridge that the town council does have much more say.
- Offered her congratulations to the Independents for getting the needed signatures on their petition.
- The Community Infrastructure Levy is a charge on landowners that must be paid up front on building developments - a local council would receive 15% of it.
- Parishing wouldn't work in Bexhill: it works in rural areas but the parishes are too unequal in the town.

Diane Smith: Gave the example of Belle Hill where the parish boundary is in the middle of the road leading to confusion for residents.

Sam Souster: You need an enthusiastic steering group to make a neighbourhood plan.

Q. Nigel (surname unknown): Bexhill is under pressure to build houses – would a town council be able to curtail building until we have a proper by-pass?

A. Simon Elford: There is no reason not to campaign. A by-pass has already been under discussion for twenty years.

Stuart Earl: It is longer than twenty years.

We destroy green land purely for homes but do not add the infrastructure needed to support them. Our road system is not growing with the new housing.

Q. Jim Milne: Believes a town council or an area committee are the only viable options whereas Simon Elford is proposing the *status quo* or parishing.

Would an area committee have the power to make decisions for the people of Bexhill?

A. Keith Stevens: No it would not.

For clarification there are four choices:

- No change (*status quo*)
- Area committee, which would be toothless, still leaving decisions with RDC.
- Town council, ie a single council
- Parishing, perhaps with a town council at the centre and parishes around it

Q. Cllr Paul Lendon: Would a local form of government have so readily given away the parking space at 31 Station Road?

A. Simon Elford: The space has been rented for 3 years to the Coroner in order to bring in revenue of £7,500.

Stuart Earl: Bexhill Borough Council assets were handed over to RDC when it was formed in 1974 and would still belong to RDC if a town council or other local governance were established.

Q. Cllr Paul Lendon: Has the Bexhill local action plan been updated?

A. Simon Elford: There is no funding for these plans. The old one is still in existence and its objectives are being met.

Q. Steve Davis: What is happening about decriminalisation of parking?

A. Simon Elford: There are no current plans to for this.

Q. Adam Smith: What are the benefits of an area committee over a town council?

A. Sue Prochak: The Liberal Democrats campaigned for years for RDC to set up area committees across the district because the ruling group were anti-devolution and anti any say for the public, especially since the set-up of the cabinet system. The public can speak at area committee meetings and help to make decisions – the right decisions; the committee can invite whoever it likes to be involved; it can bring the district councillors together. However an area committee is still controlled by the ruling group. It can take over budgets and other responsibilities if the ruling group devolves them.

A town council can raise its own precept and so have its own money to spend; it would mean that it has some control, and decisions for Bexhill could be made by the people of Bexhill.

Keith Stevens: A town or parish council has statutory powers and, with the Power of Competence, can raise money as it chooses, even by running its own business, eg a pub.

Sam Souster: The few area committees that exist cover whole districts, not just a town such as Bexhill. RDC are already opposed to an area committee.

Bexhill deserves local representation – the district council needs to devolve responsibilities but lacks local governance to do so.

There is a possibility of Rother and Wealden being combined – would Bexhill want an even bigger authority leading it?

Diane Smith: What does Bexhill want? It has no Tourist Information office. A town council could take over public toilets, parks, gardens etc.

Stuart Earl: The people of Bexhill have said through 3,800 signatures on the petition that they want a say in their future. The current cabinet system has 41,000 people in Bexhill represented by three councillors with the other 45,000 people represented by 6 councillors.

Q. Hazel Tempe: It seems that everyone wants a town council so what action will be taken to make it happen?

A. Simon Elford: We have the petition handed in and the governance review is definitely going to take place. Action will then be taken in line with its outcome.

Q. Alan Whitt: What will be the cost benefit of each of the four options?

A. Keith Stevens: We do not know at present. A town or parish would set a precept which would, in theory, raise the same income as now. The council must discuss with the people and agree what needs to be done and paid for.

Simon Elford: Rye Town Council has a special expense budget collected by RDC to cover what RDC do not look after in Rye.

Sue Prochak: Folkestone's and Seaford's precepts are £500,000 and they are similar to Bexhill. On a Band D this would mean £50 per year and so would not be expensive.

Richard Farhall: Budgets vary enormously depending on the council. There are various sources of income available, not just council tax. The council can run theatres, pubs etc to make money.

Keith Stevens: Crowborough are currently trying to set up a business enterprise centre.

Diane Smith: Greenham's precept is shrinking due to the growth of housing and the council has taken over the old control tower to make it a museum and tea room

Q. Paul Courtel: A town council could raise £1.2m. What does a resident pay for it?

A. Keith Stevens: In Seaford it is £50 per year for each resident. It has to employ a Town Clerk or Steward but then can decide what else to spend on.

Q. Simon Read: Town councils can get grants, for example ESCC has a local infrastructure fund that is helping Uckfield with pavements etc. How would RDC obtain such funds from the county council?

A. Stuart Earl: Any town council or area committee is able to apply for funding to make improvements for pedestrians. Similar funding is currently in place for the development that is under way between Sackville and Devonshire Roads.

Simon Elford: Agreed, we do already receive funding. For example, signage has been funded from the EU.

Q. Julie Rossall: How supportive is our current council for a change to more local governance. The terms of reference for the review - who will write them and who will sign them off?

- A. Simon Elford: We have agreed to a governance review and it will happen. We do not know yet about the ToR but expect it will be started off by the Council and then be expanded.

Stuart Earl: It is currently rather an unknown territory and decisions have yet to be made about who will do it and how. But the key is not so much in how it is done but in the result. Whatever the outcome of the review there must be a referendum – it has to be decided by the people and not by the council. No get-out clauses can be allowed.

Is completely open to accepting whatever this outcome proves to be.

Keith Stevens: Agreed: the review will report on what is found to be best but then it has to be voted on through a referendum.

Alan Peirce: The Town Forum will keep close to the review and see that it goes as required by the town.

Sue Prochak: Perhaps the ToR should be passed through Town Forum before it is signed off.

- Q. Paul Plimm: Who will decide on doing the review? Should a referendum be an election issue?

- A. Simon Elford: We are currently shooting in the dark on this matter as we do not yet have all the answers. It will start with the council and they will involve someone like Keith Stevens. They will also probably visit other councils, hold consultations and use working groups.

- Q. Will Carl Maynard be making decisions?

- A. Simon Elford: It will definitely not be any single person making decisions – it will be a joint effort.

- Q. Alan Peirce: Will RDC listen to the outcome of the review?

- A. Keith Stevens: If the numbers are correct then they will have to listen – that is what localism is about.

It is clear that Bexhill wants change – the question now is what, not how.

Sam Souster: If you decide on a town council, find a town of a similar size, follow their model for how to initiate and run it.

Keith Stevens: Recommended the former clerk of Queensgate Council, Westminster as a valuable reference – agreed to ask her if she would help.

- Q. Janet Dixon: What functions will be left for Rother and would Bexhillians still have to pay council tax to Rother and Sussex?

- A. Stuart Earl: Bexhill would not take over everything. Contracts such as waste management are more economical when negotiated in conjunction with other authorities. However (a personal view) things like toilet maintenance are better managed locally so that contractors spend their time providing service and not in traveling between locations as happens now.

Simon Elford: It would depend upon what the new council wanted to take on but RDC would have to retain responsibility for some statutory services.

Council tax therefore would still need to be paid to Rother and Sussex

- Q. Simon Read: What pressure do the Town Forum propose to put on candidate councillors?
- A. Alan Peirce: We do not get involved politically. We have a Facebook page where we could take questions and forward them to councillors but we will not put any pressure on them.
- Q. Simon Read: It seems from the local paper many people feel as town council is what is wanted. If the ruling group after the next election is the Conservatives then they may not agree to change.
- A. Keith Stevens: The decision is in the hands of the people of Bexhill.

Cllr Maurice Watson: The Labour Party support a town council, parishing would spilt Bexhill. A referendum is the answer.

- Q. Alan Whitt: Morecombe would provide a good model for Bexhill. If the government has proposed local governance then surely it can provide a process to follow?
- A. Mark Plews: People have signed the petition to secure a review not a specific outcome – ask your candidate to support the review then the council will have no choice.
- Q. Lorna Extence: It is clear from Steve Williams' edict (mentioned earlier) that no-one can now stop the review from happening, and Simon Elford confirmed at the last meeting that it would – it is in the minutes – so that question has been fully answered.

There is a website for those who want to know about the process.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/making-it-easier-to-set-up-new-town-and-parish-councils>

- Q. Ron Storkey: Could the Forum circulate the papers Sam Souster spoke of?
- A. Sam Souster: Yes and now the budget has been agreed it is also available.

(Note: When we are in a position to circulate these papers electronically they will be sent out, separately.)

- Q. Emily Leach: Bexhill won't be the first town to do this so there must be plenty of precedents available to refer to for good practice and advice.

The process must be independent and follow the best practice of previous experience.

- A. Sue Prochak: Senses a lack of trust and feels that Simon Elford has a lot of persuasion to do on the council as there has been a lot of opposition in the past. The process must be fair and transparent.

Simon Elford: It will happen, and be fair and transparent. Setting up the process in the first place is what matters most.

Stuart Earl: Some in the council chamber have said the people of Bexhill have no taste for change - they did not know the depth of feeling, and the petition has proven them wrong. Thanks to Tony Mansi and Doug Oliver for their hard work in bringing the petition to fruition.

Q. Simon Read: Rother has previously ignored such as the result of the consultation on raising council tax, so he lacks faith that any choice reached in a referendum will actually happen.

A. Keith Stevens: Current policy on localism means that it will have to be accepted.

Q. Geoffrey Bastin: What would satisfy people would be if the council were to make an open statement of intent to spend time and effort on it. An area committee would be the best way forward and would be a stepping stone to a town council.

A. Simon Elford: We have agreed to a governance review regardless of who is in after the election, it has to happen.

Finally the Chairman asked the speakers to make their closing statements.

Stuart Earl: I am thrilled that the Town Forum and others have taken this subject seriously and supported getting the review under way. I am also delighted that more people turn up at each meeting to take an interest and hope that in twelve months' time we will have a clear mandate for the way forward.

Sue Prochak: There is no army that can stop an idea that is right for its time. This has been a long fight for democracy for the people of Bexhill – congratulations to the Town Forum for keeping going and making sure it happens.

Keith Stevens: The process has begun – experts who have done this before must now be called in – they do exist.

Diane Smith: I hope that Simon will take back to his colleagues that it is no longer possible to deny democracy to Bexhill.

Sam Souster: I have been very pleased to come here and offer some advice on town councils – the decision is now with Bexhill but if you choose an area committee you will soon be asking 'why didn't we go for a town council?'

Simon Elford: I have enjoyed these debates and am keen for the review to consider all prospects including maintenance of the *status quo*. Not everyone wants the same outcome.

Sam Souster: I think that most agree that the *status quo* is not the right option.

Simon Elford: There are people outside this room who do support the *status quo*.

The Chairman thanked the speakers and the floor for their questions and closed the meeting.

The next Forum meeting will be on 22nd May 2015 at St Peter's Community Centre, Old Town, Bexhill-on-Sea.