



## **Local Governance for Bexhill**

**23<sup>rd</sup> January 2015**

**St Peter's Community Hall**

***Contact us at [bexhilltownforum@gmail.com](mailto:bexhilltownforum@gmail.com).***

***See our Facebook page: The Bexhill Town Forum***

### **1. Welcome**

Alan Peirce, chairman, welcomed everyone and introduced the speakers and the executive committee members.

He also announced the retirement of Margaret Jones from the Executive Committee, thanking her for the excellent contribution she has made over the years since inaugurating the original forum.

### **2. Minutes of 7 November 2014 meeting**

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed subject to the following amendments:

- Correction of the spelling of Alan Whitt's surname.
- The reply to Nick Hollington's question on page 4 should have said:

'Rye Town Council's first meeting following their election was 1974 with this being the only real option if they wanted a lower tier of local government. Area committees were first investigated (SWOT Analysis) and rejected by RDC in March 2006, some 32 years later.'

### **3. Notes issued by Councillor Sam Souster - RDC for Rye - Town Council**

#### **GOVERNANCE OF BEXHILL (FOLLOW UP)**

Before I start I have seen the interesting and informative report in today's Bexhill Observer. Although a Labour District and Town Councillor, what I have described is the workings of Rye Town Council as an example of what can be achieved, and is in no way politically biased.

You will recall at the last Forum meeting on 7th of November last I gave a comprehensive report on Rye Town Council which covered:-

- Practical Considerations (suitable building and staff)
- Elected Members
- Powers Legal and Specific

- Commitments (as a Quality Council)
- Council Committee System
- Annual Town meeting
- Relevant Publications/Guidance Notes

I have background information to support each of the defined areas, these can be at your disposal.

During the Q&A a lady asked a very relevant question - this was for me to differentiate the functions laid down for Town and Parish Councils in England. The information I gave is supported by a paper produced by the Sussex Association of Local Councils together with the services and functions Rye Town Council actually achieved. I was able to mention a number of assets and services administered by Rye Town Council, but since then I have made available to the Forum full details of both. With RDC services being reduced and only mandatory ones being provided, Town and Parish Councils are being pro-active to reduce the impact. For example, Rye town Council has:-

- Employed a Town Steward who is to help maintain the public realm in other words improve the appearance of the town, which has deteriorated lately (job description and specification is available). A Vehicle has been provided to support this service.
- Rye Town Council is also considering the appointment of a Tourism and Events Officer whose main function will be to support local events and festivals. A Service Agreement with RDC has provided £9k towards this service provision. Support of the Heritage Centre's Visitor Information Service (owned and managed by Rye Town Council) is also a requirement, and this is especially important as the town's TIC is to close (a draft job description is available). This matter is to be considered at RTC's policy Resources and General Purposes Committee on Monday next, 26th January 2015. The budget is also to be considered at this meeting for 2015-2016. I have produced a list of income and expenditure, but the figures will not be available until they have been approved.

There is not much more that I can say, the observations I have made are as a Rye Town Councillor of 15 years, with a further 4 years in the Midlands. At the next meeting of the Forum you will have the advantage of having Councillor Keith Stevens, Chairman of East Sussex Association of Local Councils to advise you. Richard Farhall, Rye Town Clerk for 14 years, highly qualified and Secretary of the Rother Association of Local Councils (RALC) would be happy to assist if that is your wish. I would recommend Charles Arnold-Baker's "Local Councils Administration" for reference as it is the recognised authority.

Finally, it is Bexhill that will take the decision on the way forward, but of the three options I will comment briefly.

- Status Quo - Bexhill deserves a voice other than Rother District Council which just happens to be camped here because it is the biggest town.
- Area committees - Where area committees have been introduced, and there have been very few, they have always, as far as I am aware, been District wide (complete coverage), if an area committee was possible would you later regret this half way house?
- Town Council - most large towns have acquired Town Council status over the forty years that have elapsed since the 1972 Local Government Act, which lost Bexhill its borough status. Two large towns have in the last few years become Town Councils so it is never too late.
- The Local Government Act mention provides this opportunity as to be part of the Local Government structure.
- With the Localism Act which encourages devolution of services and neighbourhood planning, this would give Bexhill some independence and a voice other than RDC, the choice is yours to make.

### **Questions from the floor to Councillor Sam Souster:**

Q. Jackie Bialeska: Would any decision made by a town council still be subject to scrutiny at RDC?

A No.

Q. Diane Smith: Would it prove too onerous to elect councillors as well as district councillors?

A: This hasn't happened elsewhere. Rye has one town councillor who is also a district councillor while all the others are town councillors only.

Q: Paul Plim: This week's Observer reported a proposed increase in expenses for district councillors - what are the expenses for a town councillor?

A: Unlike district councillors they get nothing but travel expenses. People are town councillors because they care about their local area.

Q:

John Zipperlen: Are the remits of district and town councillors sufficiently differentiated?

A: They are clearly defined. The Local Government Act sets out clearly what each does.

Q: Simon Read: I am new to Bexhill but have been a parish councillor for 15 years elsewhere and know from experience that parish councillors do not normally wish to be district councillors, which brings variety and is a great benefit.

A: Town council meetings are usually in the evening and so attract a good cross-section of people – often business people who bring their professional expertise to the council.

Q: Jackie Bialeska: How do you get the funds for projects such as Rye's Heritage/Tourist Information Centre change?

A: The district council can devolve responsibilities to the town council – in Rye the town clerk is fully aware of sources of funding.

With a town council Bexhill will be far better represented and looked after.

### **4. Notes issued by Stuart Earl - RDC for Bexhill West - area committee**

Following the first presentation regarding improved democracy for Bexhill we were asked to make a further presentation to give more detail and to invite questions. We were also asked to indicate what our personal preferred choice was and why.

Without spending too much time on the previous presentation and the history of how we came to be here. The only reason we are here at all relates back to a group of Independent Councillors calling for a governance review. We started a campaign and launched a petition which is still running, we have almost reached the target but if anyone hasn't yet signed we would urge you to do so, it is important, because if we don't show very clearly there is real desire for change, some others may say obviously Bexhill people are not bothered and are happy with what we currently have, so there is no need to do anything. NOT TRUE

This petition is not political in any way it simply asks for a governance review, it does not encourage anyone to change their political beliefs and it will never affect the way people vote. Its aim is to reestablish the residents' voice and return the decision making process to the residents of Bexhill without any interference from outside.

Tonight we are hoping to encourage and stimulate our residents to support our preferred option of an area committee.

However for that to be effective we must be assured from the very beginning of the process that the principal authority will listen and respect the views of all those who are part of the consultation. For this review to be credible we must consult with as wide a spectrum as possible, The young, the young families, employers and business leaders, the Forum, social organisations, voluntary groups and of course those who are not so young but play a huge part in our community.

With the request that we deliver more detail on the advantages of an area committee I have travelled to other authorities to research as much as possible how they deliver good services at a price that is not prohibitive. How they directly include the residents, how they create the budgets required to make a difference, how they finance projects and the role of the officers and administration.

Every now and then I allow myself the indulgence of banning political parties from local government, and then just for once we could elect people with talent who care passionately for their town. No political whips just common sense.

Back to reality I along with my Independent colleagues and some other elected members share the ambition to restore what we once knew, true local government and decision making back to those elected by Bexhillians to represent Bexhill.

To achieve our aims and objectives we will require all sections of the community to embrace change and work together to put in place a structure that is workable, affordable and effective.

All area committee meetings would allow residents to speak. This would be controlled with each person speaking for or against being given 5 minutes to present, we would have to limit the amount to three people on each side of the argument.

The area committee would consist of 2 members from each ward, the items which would fall under their remit could include and hopefully will include, planning, traffic management, leisure facilities, street cleaning, public amenities and most importantly finance and fund raising. All of these items will have to be discussed and agreed with the full Rother council, so as to meet and comply with the local policies and plan where possible. However it would be pointless for the area committee and residents to have positive ambitions if they were to be blocked at every opportunity. It is essential that all residents feel their point of view is listened to and valued. At the moment too many decisions are taken by those who do not live here. We have to be realistic, for this to work we have to accept we will not all agree on everything but democratically we will accept the decisions of the majority, we would like the elected councillors for Bexhill to be in the driving seat, sadly at the moment we are not even on the bus, because of the cabinet system, which is dominated by rural members.

Sadly many of them do not have any idea what is important to our residents, any more than we know about their villages and parish needs. Although we are part of a district how can it be right that this cabinet system destroys the value of your vote and your opinion?

We must be aware that democracy costs money, our critics will exaggerate how much our preferred system would cost, a tactic designed to put people off, but we believe the advantages far outweigh the extra costs.

So the questions we need to ask are:

1. Will Rother agree and adopt and implement the changes if it is the wish of the people?
2. Will they listen to the people and the organisations involved in the consultation?
3. Will the review be officer led without political interference?
4. Who will draw up the terms of reference?
5. Who will collate the evidence and who will report on its findings?
6. What is the timescale for the review and its implementation?

Now assuming we reach our target and the petition is presented on time and we receive a favourable decision for Bexhill we must agree to accept its findings and all work for the greater good of our town and its future whatever the outcome.

From the evidence supplied we believe an area committee could deliver so much more for under £100,000. This would include hire of premises for meetings and an administrator. The ward councillors would retain their RDC remuneration and would only be entitled to extra expenses for extra work undertaken.

At each full area committee meeting a senior officer from both the district council and the county council would be required to attend and in the case of either planning or finance the appropriate officers would be asked to attend to offer advice and guidance.

We would plan to have one public meeting every six weeks to discuss policy issues including planning, finance, and projects. At each meeting a summary would be presented as to progress on items previously discussed. Details on long term programs and reports would be led by the administering officer unless a sub-committee had undertaken the task, in that case it would be their chair person.

We would then have a committee meeting where we would go into delivery details and also formulate questions to be put before the district council of RDC. Many of the details on bidding for grants would be developed at a later date once projects had been selected.

From evidence gained we believe an area committee must work closely with all agencies, the district council, business groups and associations, schools, colleges and voluntary groups.

My colleagues who have spoken on their preferred options all of which would cost considerably more, obviously have different ambitions, however I am sure they will agree it will be very difficult in a town of this size to find sufficient people willing to stand for election. It is estimated for a town council we would need at least 25 extra people to stand plus administrators and treasurer and if parished we would want 45 more councillors plus clerks for each parish. All this would deliver a confused muddle and nothing would change or get done. The phrase divide and rule springs to mind.

I will admit one of the major hurdles for an area committee is finance; we would need the cooperation of the district council and the senior officers to agree a funding mechanism to make the new system work. Nothing is impossible if we want it badly enough.

Currently Bexhill tax payers contribute £819,000 to the public purse as special expenses.

Following the brief given for this meeting, some questions are easy to answer; some answers will actually have to await the outcomes of the local governance review itself. I will try to answer all of them as listed in the brief for tonight's presentation.

- A. It is cheaper, it makes the current local councillors answerable and does not require another round of elections and associated costs. It saves both, money in administration and servicing costs.
- B. Community Involvement, Bexhill councillors working directly for Bexhill and may just encourage people to stand for election because they would believe that their involvement made a difference
- C. Accountability, local people deciding what their priorities were and delivering value for money.
- D. It would allow local people to express their concerns or support and witness just how their elected members reacted to the issue. I believe that it would be a very brave district council that would refuse to listen unless it was either illegal or completely unaffordable.
- E. I am assured that for £100,000 or less we could deliver an area committee, this would equate to 4% on a Band D rate or approximately 10p per week.
- F. Not much (duplication of effort) at all, because we would only discuss and deliver Bexhill items, the time spent on District council affairs would be the same as it is now.

- G. (People would be involved) by being given the opportunity to bring concerns to the area committee either verbally or email, by attending the forum or by phone to the clerk.
- H. Hopefully local involvement will identify the major concerns of all Bexhill residents, there is no magic wand but instead of being the minor concerns of a larger district council it will receive greater attention and become a more personal local priority.
- I. Part of the problem is Bexhill is predominately a small business town, however I believe an area committee working with local employers, schools and colleges could help support and encourage on job training and apprenticeships. Tourism was and still could be a large seasonal employer but we currently keep cutting the budget so how can it improve?
- J. On local projects and issues, I believe we could make decisions quickly and with the support of outside agencies attract funding to deliver.
- K. (Would be different because of) open direct local government, where local people will be empowered to decide on their priorities and work quickly to either deliver advice or support local voluntary groups with advice and help.
- L. The only way we can protect local services is to be prepared to make tough decisions, either to make savings on some things we cannot afford or stop wasting money on things that do not deliver any direct advantage to our residents.

I feel that an area committee delivers better governance that is easier to administer, we need no extra councillors, it does not affect the political balance, it also costs less than the alternatives but a little more than the status quo. For that we have so much more, councillors elected to serve the people, whose activities are transparent and who can be held to account if they don't listen.

Remember that expenditure which is currently taking place on Bexhill marina is costing in excess of £57,000 Rother money, and £1 million ESCC, given the choice would you have made that a priority.

To retain the status quo would be a dereliction of duty by our generation, we owe to all residents both current and future the opportunity to express themselves and be proud of where they live. We must restore civic pride, improve and care for facilities, everything from public toilets to parks; we must have the discretionary powers over car parks and recreation grounds. We must be able to assist all residents to have access to those who can influence change.

#### **Questions from the floor to Councillor Stuart Earl:**

Q. Jim Milne: Would parishing cost the same as an area committee?

A: Area committee members and parish councillors are not paid.

Q. Sandra Faulkner: How would an area committee have resolved an issue such as the car parking charges?

A: The local governance review will look at how this would work but an area committee would take on the responsibility for maintenance and running of the car parks. How much to charge and by what method would be decided through negotiation with RDC.

Q. Paul Courtel: An area committee would not be able to raise a precept and so if RDC were scrapping non-mandatory services the area committee would not be able to stop them.

A: It is true an area committee would be unable to raise a precept but after a year would formulate a budget and request to negotiate special expenditure. The existing special expenses would not just stop.

Q. Simon Read: How could you provide certainty at the time that people are choosing between the local government options? An area committee does not employ staff the way the district council does.

A: The current £819,000 special expenses would still be there to spend. The important issue at present is to give people a voice by choosing between an area committee and a town council.

Simon Reade: The Banbury precept is £1.20 per household.

- Q. Paul Plim: There is a time limit for the petition for the governance review to take place, people need to go and sign. Where is it? 10% of the population are required to sign.  
A: It is at various places around town and copies are here tonight.

(Note – the petition is now at Collington Newsagents and at No 48 in Devonshire Road.)

- Q. Diane Smith: Bexhill, as the largest area within RDC, gets the most property development. Can this be devolved to an area committee? A: No it cannot.

- Q. Barry Storker: Can you put a cost to an area committee?

A: We need to wait for more information regarding details such as numbers of councillors and premises. Any attempt to put a figure on it now would probably mean changing it later when we know more.

- Q. Ian Hollidge: Would having an area committee in Bexhill mean that Battle and Rye also had to change to area committees?

A: No.

- Q. Paul Courtel: Would an area committee be cheaper due to the cuts in things like buses?

A: No – they have nothing to do with an area committee.

- Q. Adam Smith: Do you have any model in mind for an area committee?

A: Eastleigh is seen as a great success as an area committee and its size is similar to Bexhill.

Further comment from Cllr Sam Souster:

- A town council would have a say in how £819K is spent.
- There is no need to feel pessimistic about finding candidates from a population of 41,000.
- Town councils do not have to consult with the district council on matters within their remit.
- Banbury is a similar size to Bexhill and so can be used as a model for a town council.

## **6. Notes issued by councillor Simon Elford - Bexhill St Michaels – Parish Councils**

Now the leader of the council has agreed to hold a governance review after the next election it is good that the forum has dedicated meetings to discuss all the options, it is very hard for the councillors who have stood up and tried to put across the case for each, without the findings of the review we do not have precise figures until we know what shape a different form of governance will take and what functions they would take over from RDC, having said that we have heard some interesting debate, it is quite easy to put a case for and against each idea but I believe if after the review the decision is to for another layer of local government parishing Bexhill would be the answer.

Parishing offers several benefits over the other options; it is certainly going to be less costly to the tax payer, each parish would need a clerk and a number of councillors, clerks in rural Rother seem to average about £400 per month.

Money would be raised by way of a council tax precept as is the case for town councils but not for area committees, they have no tax raising powers and must rely on existing budgets. The main advantage of a parish over the other options is that money raised locally within the parish would be

spent only in the parish on what local people wanted; also monies are available for parishes from other sources like for instance the CIL (community infrastructure levy) which puts a levy on each house built in the parish, which goes to RDC, but a parish is entitled to 15% of this levy. This is the same for a town council but that would be over the whole of Bexhill. Being a parish means you get that money for your own neighbourhood to spend where you want it to go.

We must not forget that the fourth option of the status quo is not necessarily a bad thing. We already have a council with hard working councillors and staff and by asking for more governance there is a cost to all Bexhill residents. The forum has to ask itself what do you hope to achieve by going for one of the other options and whichever one that is, will it really do what you want? The governance review will cover all of this and look at all the options and have discussions within the council and councillors as well as all the community groups and interested parties, and the forum will certainly be one of those groups.

Although I am sure we all have our favoured option, I for one will be waiting for the outcome of the review before making a final decision

### **Questions from the floor to Councillor Simon Elford:**

Q. Hugh La Trobe: Who is Trevor Leggo and is it certain there will be a local governance review?

A: Trevor Leggo is an expert in local government.

The Leader of the council has said there will definitely be a review. It will be after the general election.

Q. Paul Plim: It is however true that there is no guarantee of a review without the petition. Would changes have affected the recent resignations?

A: No there would be no effect.

Q. Lorna Extence: How strong is the commitment that the governance review will take place? Is it not true that costs will rise anyway if the status quo remains as people will have greater expectations of the council?

A: The Leader has promised the review and there is a strong appetite for it due to the challenges faced regarding costs and cuts. We have to find different ways to function re discretionary services. Increases in costs from a town council etc would be even greater.

Q. Diane Smith: 800 years ago we chose to pay to have a democracy – why does Rother DC choose to deprive Bexhill of its democratic voice?

A: As a Conservative, want to keep costs down but also mindful of the cost of democracy. The review will evaluate all options.

Q. Cllr Maurice Watson: It is the review that is the most important, whatever the outcome. Will there be a referendum at the end?

A: The review will make recommendations on this also.

Q. Cllr Adam Smith: Is there a risk that RDC officers will make their own choice and circumvent the wishes of the people – hence the need for a referendum? A: The review will come back with the results re the best option for Bexhill.

Q. But would RDC accept the people's choice?

A. RDC will look at the results of the review.

Q. Emily Leech: Is the government review to be undertaken by officers of RDC or by independent people?

A: The government review will be set in motion with terms of reference and a working group. More than that is not yet known – all options will be on the table.

Q. Cllr Stuart Earl: The Local Government Association could do it.

A. That will be looked into.

Q. Paul Courtel: Why can't the cost of parishing be worked out – the costs for comparable parishing elsewhere are available to base it on.

A. Real costing has not been done – the scale in Bexhill is different to elsewhere and decisions are yet to be made as to what services would be taken over.

Q. Cllr Sam Souster: Banbury and Folkestone do compare with Bexhill – enquiries could be made there.

A. Details are awaited.

Q. Kathleen Fulton: The status quo have been responsible for changes that have spoilt the town, especially where external money has been committed to changes that the people did not want. Would other options stop this from happening?

A. Other models would still be faced with such external challenges where funds are put forward for specific purposes.

The chairman closed by announcing that the next Forum meeting will be an Any Questions format session.

**Date of next meeting: Friday 13th March 2015**

**Venue: St Peter's Community Hall, Old Town, Bexhill on Sea**