

**Bexhill**

**Town Team**

Response to

Consultation on a Strategy for  
Bexhill Town Centre  
published November 2012 by  
Rother District Council

## **Bexhill Town Team - Context**

Bexhill Town Team was formed in September 2012 and was established as a result of the Bexhill Portas Bids. The formation of the group was facilitated by officers at Rother District Council and championed by Rt Hon Greg Barker the MP for Battle & Bexhill.

The Town Team comprises representatives of Bexhill Traders Group, the Chamber of Commerce, Rother Voluntary Action, Bexhill Tourism, Bexhill Farmers' Market Association, Bexhill Police, the De La Warr Pavilion, Rother District Council and others.

The group is chaired by Hillary Randall (Silver Nutmeg) and the executive group includes Patrick Stapleton, Vice Chair (Redwell Estates), Martin Fisher, Vice Chair (Rother Voluntary Action) and Stewart Drew (De La Warr Pavilion). Hillary led the Town's Portas Bids in March and June 2012, which considered a number of items outlined in the Consultation.

The Portas Bids subsequently led to the securing of funding for a new weekly Farmers' Market to be based in Devonshire Square from the spring 2013.

## **Our response approach**

The Town Team broadly supports Rother District Council's ambitions for Bexhill Town Centre. The group also acknowledges the significant investment into Bexhill over the last seven years, including: the De La Warr Pavilion refurbishment, Bexhill Museum, the seafront, Egerton Park, Elva Way and the work that has now started on the Bexhill – Hastings link road.

We also recognise that there are frustrations around the Town Centre: a number of run down premises, the Cinema site, the lack of attention to Council run premises e.g. Devonshire Square Toilets and long running issues with orientation around the town. We welcome the enforcement action on the s215 Town and Country Planning Act 1990 Order on the owners of the Cinema as announced to us on January 18<sup>th</sup>.

We appreciate that some of the actions we require are not, strictly speaking, the statutory responsibility of Rother District Council, for example, the provision of public toilets. However, there are hundreds of tiny businesses in the Town Centre. It is not realistic to expect them to act as one body or to be in a position to provide these facilities. We need the local authorities to work with the Town Team to find funding where we can and make these things happen for the Town.

The Town Team notes that the Consultation on a Strategy for Bexhill Town Centre identifies 'people' as one of the factors that 'define a place' but describes the Bexhill population in terms of

"significantly higher-than-average proportion of elderly retired; and resulting in a restricted labour market." (page 9)

Further, Town Centre residents are seen in terms of

"limits the spending power available to businesses" (page 11)

and the consultation notes a:

"strong resistance to change" (page 11)

The main focus of the Consultation, we feel is, thereafter, environment and image.

The Town Team approach sees the townsfolk as central. In the Portas bid we said:

"Our MP said recently 'there's plenty of Bulldog spirit down there'."

We added:

"There is also a wealth of talent, experience and ability."

Some of our retired population have shown themselves keen to support us and have taken on some of the work. The Farmers' Market would not have happened without them. A retired, primary head teacher walked the Town Centre streets surveying them for our Signage Audit. A retired member has made a considerable contribution to our work on Town Centre parking. We feel we must make use of all our assets, strengthen our community and develop our residents; young and old alike.

## **Our Response**

The Town Team feels that we should take a clear short and long term approach to a strategy.

### **Short Term**

Bexhill has sound foundations:

- A large number of good quality independent traders
- A reputation for being clean, tranquil and safe
- Excellent amenities
- Good car parking potential
- Good bus links and a railway station
- Established annual events such as the Bexhill Festival of Music, Bexhill Carnival, Bexhill Horse Show and Bexhill Triathlon.

We recognise that some of these foundations need improvement. We are also mindful that there are a number of issues that have been discussed over a protracted time and should be addressed in the short term as a matter of urgency.

We suggest a 'can-do' or entrepreneurial approach to these issues, as we believe that there is the support within the town to help make things happen. The Town Team has already started to research and audit a number of these issues and this work compliments research completed by others including Rother District Council.

We understand that funding and 'red tape' are always challenges, but feel that quick wins are now essential to build confidence in any resulting strategy and ultimately the Town.

The basic issues:

- Signage - the Town Team believes that simple, clear pedestrian signage will help orientation around the town to businesses and amenities alike.
- Grotbusting - we see how the town is presented and perceived as important. The Town Team has already started to work on this in cooperation with Rother's Planning Department.
- Empty shops - the Town Team has already started to work on this and is delivering a programme of pop-up shops, addressing the presentation of empty shops and developing the relationships between commercial agents.
- Parking - current parking management, both on and off street, is a challenge to customers and traders alike. High pay and display charges discourage customers; the free un-patrolled bays are abused. We believe there is the opportunity to develop and make more of the Wainwright Road Car Park site.
- Cycling - we believe that given the recent investment in cycle routes and access we need to improve cycle parking within the town centre. There are no cycle racks in Wickham Avenue, Sackville Road, Western Road, St. Leonards Road.
- Toilets - the presentation of public toilets in the town centre is an important reflection of the state of the town. We also believe this is especially important to the elderly, to those with families and for the new Farmers' Market in Devonshire Square.
- Events - we need to continue to work collectively to help facilitate and support markets and events within the town. Rother District Council already promotes Bexhill, the festivals and activities via its web site, Rother Views and the Bexhill Guide. We feel that Rother District Council needs new, twenty first century promotional strategies to promote the town and its events.
- Fundraising – through the experience of the Portas bid, it is evident that we are able to access funds to develop projects within the Town Centre. Rother District Council and the Town Team need to jointly improve the intelligence to take advantage of such opportunities.
- Develop post 16 education and training opportunities within the Town Centre.

The short-term goals are important in this challenging economic climate not least to the businesses that are already established in the town.

## **Long Term**

For the longer-term ambitions we base our broad approach on the Consultation on a Strategy for Bexhill Town Centre but we emphasise the importance of getting the basics right in place first.

## **Our Aims and Objectives**

### **Aim 1. Branding and Image:**

Develop and promote Bexhill as an active community on a beautiful seafront with a vibrant sporting life, world class cultural facilities at the DLWP and close connections to historic 1066 sites.

### **Objectives**

- Rother District Council - actively promote Bexhill as a visitor destination and a place to **stay**
- Rother District Council – actively promote Bexhill's festivals and events to a local and wider audience
- Rother District Council - promote the achievements of local world class sports people
- Town Team - develop a style guide for use of the town's businesses
- Rother District Council – Town Team - support the De La Warr Pavilion in developing high quality and high profile cultural events and develop a marketing strategy to build stronger links between De La Warr Pavilion's visitors and the town.
- Rother District Council – Town Team – De La Warr Pavilion - Develop tourism packages, e.g. B&B packages, retail offers to encourage secondary tourism spend directly in the Town Centre.
- Rother District Council – De La Warr Pavilion - use links between Rother District Council Arts Development and the De La Warr Pavilion to develop cultural projects within the Town Centre.

We strongly believe that tourism and related overnight staying visitors are vital to increasing spends within the town. Marketing to this audience is important and should build on the improved cultural and leisure facilities in the Town.

Local image, however, is also important and we should seek to improve return visits into the Town Centre from the local catchment. We have the opportunity to build and promote an attractive offer that is different to Hastings and Eastbourne.

## **Aim 2. Investment/ Development opportunities:**

Support commercial activity within and around the Town Centre.

### **Objectives**

- Rother District Council - Develop the Council owned properties on Beeching Road to provide attractive and useful Business Spaces with parking (clean premises in good condition, redevelopment opportunities)
- Rother District Council - East Sussex County Council - Town Team Provide support for micro businesses (training/ premises)
- Rother District Council - Encourage hospitality businesses - hotels – boutique B&Bs
- Rother District Council - Provide central facilities for leisure activities i.e. a community centre incorporating soft play and after school activities with facilities for adults
- East Sussex County Council - Town Team - Provide support for existing businesses (professional development), improve links between the education sector and the Town Centre
- Rother District Council/ East Sussex County Council - Provide support to develop sports businesses
- East Sussex County Council - Connect London Road to public transport
- Rother District Council - Buy and develop unused capacity (i.e. Cinema, Grand Hotel)
- Rother District Council - Build transport links between the Town Center and Ravenside Retail Park
- Structure out of town / new development strategies (e.g. Ravenside / Beeching Road) so that they compliment town centre initiatives and reinforce it as the central shopping area.

### **3. Built Environment:**

**Aim** Rother District Council will lead by example and present a clean, attractive, safe and accessible environment for all who use the town.

#### **Objectives**

- Rother District Council - Provide and maintain up to date toilet facilities in the Town Centre and on the Seafront
- Rother District Council - use its statutory powers to prevent the dilapidation and dereliction of buildings
- Rother District Council - Town Team – provide a code of practice for landlords and agents of commercial properties in the Town Centre
- Rother District Council - improve key problem sites in the town such as the indoor market and the cinema site
- Rother District Council - encourage community involvement in street planting.

### **4. Traffic Management**

#### **Aims**

- improve accessibility throughout the Town Centre
- move to more pedestrianised or shared areas
- provide facilities for pedestrians (particularly first time visitors) to be able to orientate themselves and navigate the Town Centre
- reinforce routes via shopping streets linking visitor destinations
- encourage visitors to explore Bexhill Town Centre beyond their planned destination for that visit
- support and improve environmentally sound methods of transport, including facilities for cycles.

#### **Short term Objectives**

- Rother District Council - publicise the car park at Wainwright Road
- Rother District Council - install CCTV in Wainwright Road Car Park
- Rother District Council - repair and improve the pedestrian access to Wainwright Road Car Park or make the owners do it
- Rother District Council - issue free parking permits for Wainwright Rd Car Park to local businesses so they don't block roadside spaces (other than from the permit spaces - which are empty - there is practically no income to lose)
- Rother District Council - provide cycle racks
- Rother District Council - provide seating and attractive street features to encourage pedestrians and encourage visitors to linger

**Long term Objective** - Decriminalise parking enforcement so that the income stream produced from it can be used to pay for the enforcement of parking restrictions. This does not necessarily mean that parking meters will be introduced nor does it necessarily mean an end to free roadside parking. The Town Team have started working on a detailed long term Town Centre parking strategy.

### **Circulation of pedestrians/visitors**

Last year, in the Portas bid we had to describe the challenges facing Bexhill Town Centre but also have a vision. So, we noted that local incomes are low and provided the statistical evidence for this. We therefore deduced that income from visitors is important to the town. We noted that visitors are mostly on the seafront, that it is 3 miles long and has 2 zebra crossings. We bid for a crossing to link the southern end of Sackville Rd to the seafront. A crossing would not only make crossing the road easier it would invite people to cross.

Also, in the Portas bid, we noted that there are no signs or 'orientation aids' (You Are Here boards) at any of the gateway sites in the town. Traders have been raising this issue with Rother District Council for years.

### **Objectives**

- East Sussex County Council - provide a crossing from the south side of Marina Rd to the southern end of Sackville Road
- Rother District Council - provide pedestrian way finding signs in strategic places
- Rother District Council - provide You are Here Boards at gateway sites
- East Sussex County Council - make some provision for pedestrian crossings in Town Hall Square.

## **5. Housing**

**Aim:** Rother District Council will improve the quality of the housing stock in the Town Centre for the benefit of those who live in it.

### **Objectives**

- Rother District Council - support tenants and landlords in maintaining and improving rented accommodation.

## **6. Vitality**

**Aim:** to provide support to those individuals and organisations providing events, festivals and activities and marketing and promoting the town.

### **Objectives**

- Rother District Council will designate one officer to support events and activities. It should be made clear to all voluntary and commercial groups who that person is and exactly what they can do. The role of that person is not to prevent access to other officers as needed.
- Rother District Council - repeal by-laws which outlaw commercial activity in Devonshire Square and Devonshire Road because there is no point in talking about organising events if we're not allowed to organise events unless we are a charity.
- East Sussex County Council / Rother District Council - Re-classify Devonshire Square's pedestrianised area so that it is no longer classified as a public highway.
- Transfer the management of Devonshire Square from East Sussex County Council to Rother District Council.

### **In conclusion**

The Town Team supports the long-term ambitions to continue to attract investment into Bexhill and for major improvements in the public realm. It is hoped that this in turn will increase the affluence and spending power of both local people and visitors alike.

In the short term, however, we see a pressing need to join up recent investment in the town, to improve its presentation and to animate the town centre with events and festivals. In order to achieve this, the stakeholders need to continue to communicate effectively and be entrepreneurial in delivering urgently needed results.