

## **Bexhill Town Centre Steering Group**

### **Report for the Bexhill Town Council**

#### History:

The Bexhill Town Centre Steering Group (TCSG) was set up in October 2010. The first meeting considered the background on Bexhill's current position and considered possible opportunities for the future, given the shift in population make-up and spending habits in the UK. It was tasked with looking at the image of Bexhill having regard to three drivers for change namely: Environment, People and Image.

In 2012 £100,000 S106 money was made available to support town centre developments, with proposals for spend to be worked up through the TCSG before being considered by Cabinet.

2013 saw the publication of the Strategy for Bexhill Town Centre which drew on the research work of the Rother Core Strategy and the Retail Health Check. The strategy called for the development of a Town Team. The TCSG supported the development of the Bexhill Town Team in 2012 as part of the Portas Review and worked with the Town Team to submit Coastal Community Fund applications, the first of which delivered improved signage along the seafront and into the town centre.

In 2015 the Bexhill Town Centre Steering Group terms of reference were revised with the aim of achieving the ambitious objectives set out in the 2013 Bexhill Town Centre Strategy. The refreshed steering group, chaired by the Portfolio Holder for Bexhill Affairs brought on board key stakeholders including the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, Town Team (Bexhill Forward), DLWP and Locate East Sussex.

Focus was given to key strategic priorities for the town centre. These, as identified within the Bexhill Town Centre Strategy were; 1, Branding and Image, 2, Investment and Development Opportunities, 3, Built Environment, 4, Traffic Management, Connectivity and Public Realm, 5, Housing, 6, Vitality.

These priorities were combined into four steering group priorities with an individual lead assigned to each area;

- **Branding and Vitality** around which we developed the Bexhill Modern Vintage PR campaign, and the summer events posters for South East and London train stations.
- **Built Environment, Transport and Public Realm** which undertook a public realm audit in 2018 and instigated the Bexhill Town Centre Traffic Management and Accessibility Improvements work package bring it together with the Bexhill East Proposed Cycle Route Network and the Bexhill A269/B2182 Movement & Access Improvements. It further supported initiatives such as the Marina Court Gardens and London Road Corridor schemes. Tree planting in Devonshire Road and The Bexhill Farmers Market were also initiated and overseen through this group.

- **Investment and Development** the Steering Group worked with planning officers on the development of the Local Plan, worked with the Chamber on a proposal for the covered market in Western Road, worked with RDC enforcement officers to ensure upkeep of properties, and with Locate East Sussex to ensure commercial developments meet growth areas.
- **Housing**, worked with housing officers in 2013 for funding to tackle rogue landlords, and in 2018 as part of the Housing Issues Task and Finish Group.

In 2019 a series of workshops were held at the De La Warr Pavilion to ensure the work of the Steering Group would continue to drive growth and future strategy planning. The results of these workshops shifted the focus to the following:

- a. The future sustainable economy of the Town Centre
- b. Movement and access between key economic assets
- c. Improving the residential offer in the town centre
- d. Urban design and public realm;

These areas of focus, together with a change of administration following the 2019 District Election resulted in the establishment of 3 new sub groups, namely:

- Live lead by Cllr Courtel
- Work lead by Cllr Bayliss
- Relax lead by Cllr Timpe

These are the current focus areas for the work being developed by the TCSG.

### Current work:

In light of the changes all town centers face following the Covid 19, long term strategic work is on hold. However, it has been acknowledged by TCSG that Bexhill Town Centre is in a good position to make a strong recovery given the prevalence of independent retail units. The current focus is therefore on immediate remedial work that can take place under these three key themes.

### **Live**

- What actions are needed to improve the quality of housing stock in the Town Centre? What powers already exist to address quality issues and what steps are needed to improve the current situation. Look to other authorities for enforcement success?
- The issue of landlords and rents - housing benefit and affordability gap - sources of advice and support for Bexhill Central tenants
- Conduct the waste collection and litter review. Daily collections were introduced into the Town Centre in 2019 - this group to review its effectiveness. New bin collection contract also introduced in 2019 - is this working effectively.

## **Work**

- Supporting businesses in the town centre – In line with the RDC Economic Recovery Plan what more can be done to support businesses in the Town Centre? Evaluate the success of Reopening High Street Safely funding.
- Supporting tourism - new funding for promoting Bexhill based tourism. Develop a policy around overnight accommodation and growth in self-catering holiday lets in line with that of 1066 Country marketing.
- Moving business online - promote new ways of doing business. How can we work with the Chamber of Commerce to promote online sales? Do we need a Bexhill Town Centre Website to promote a Business directory?
- The need for space: office / light industrial - Feed into the development of the local plan.

## **Relax**

- Promoting the town as a destination; branding and the Modern Vintage campaign - evaluate success? Commission research?
- Promoting the status of the pedestrian - Make the shopping streets more pedestrian friendly. Investigate dual use of highways - encourage more 'French market' type events in the town centre as opposed to events centred on the seafront and lawns?
- Looking at the public realm - Making sure the quality of the public realm is maintained. How do we ensure that ESCC maintains its 'street furniture' and replaced dead or damaged trees.
- Train and transport - encouraging night-time economy and evening bus services - pick up the campaign run by the Chamber of Commerce.
- Support and develop the events programme so that the Town Centre retailers benefit more from events.

## **Section 106 Spend to date:**

The TCSG has used the Section 106 funding from M&S at Ravenside to fund much of the work delivered by the group to date. This has been made up of the following projects:

- £35,786: Refurbishment of Devonshire Square Toilets, CCTV contribution
- £6,868: Cycle racks, Monolith sign and artwork for Marina Court Gardens
- £926: Tree planting in Western Road
- £3,719: 2016 railway poster campaign
- £6,830: 2017 railway poster and postcard campaign

- £3,253: 2019 railway poster campaign
- £20,000: ringfenced for public realm work spent on seafront shelters

Total spend to date: £77,382

The remaining budget of £22,618 has been devolved to the Head of Place and Climate to agree spend. Projects are worked up through the Live, Work, Relax working groups and then discussed and agreed by the TCSG.

#### Hand over to the Town Council:

With the establishment of Bexhill's own Town Council, a Rother District Council run group is no longer appropriate. Rother District Council members consider that the work sits best within the remit of Bexhill Town Council. We also need to ensure parity with Battle or Rye where the Town Councils oversee the regeneration and covid recovery plans. With that in mind, Rother District Council propose handing over the remit of the group to the Town Council. The cabinet have agreed that this should take place by the end of the 21/22 financial year.

There are numerous options for this transfer of ownership which could range from us disbanding the RDC Steering Group and the Town Council reforming it as it chooses to RDC handing over the Terms of Reference as they currently stand (see ANNEX A) to be adopted by the Town Council, and a range of options in-between.

What remains clear is that whatever approach is taken RDC would be happy to continue to work alongside the Town Council in its work to develop Bexhill Town Centre.

We look forward to discussing the future of the TCSG and working with the Town Council to facilitate an efficient transfer of the work.

Melanie Powell

Regeneration Officer

Rother District Council