

Agenda Item: Town Centre Steering Group

Report to: Full Council

Date: Wednesday 16th March 2022

Subject: The Town Centre Steering Group (TSCG) of Rother District Council (RDC)

Recommendation:
To take on the operational projects of the Town Centre Steering Group within the town council's current committee structure.

I. Background

- 1.1 In 2018 the Bexhill Town Centre Steering Group was formed by Rother District Council (RDC).
- 1.2 It was formed as an unincorporated partnership chaired by the RDC Portfolio Holder for Bexhill Affairs and is accountable to the RDC cabinet.
- 1.3 A terms of reference is approved by RDC, with the purpose of the group as follows:

The Bexhill Town Centre Steering Group (BTCSG) is responsible for the development and delivery of a shared vision and action plan for the future of the Town Centre.

Working with a wide variety of stakeholders the BTCSG, led by Rother District Council (RDC), will create a new Town Centre Strategy and Master Plan that will clearly define and articulate the vision for the future sustainable economy of the area.

The BTCSG will also set out a proposed funding approach and will be responsible for initiating engagement with key partners to secure funding for the delivery of the Strategy's aims and objectives.

The BTCSG is tasked with being ambitious and aspirational in its plans for Bexhill. This strategy will build on the work already delivered by the group in recent years. The ultimate ambition for this work is to provide Bexhill with a town centre that works for all those who use it, as residents, businesses and or visitors.

[Bexhill Town Centre Steering Group Terms of Ref.pdf \(rother.gov.uk\)](#)

- 1.4 Membership is agreed as the following, with additional members invited or co-opted by the Chairman:

- Chair: Portfolio Holder for Bexhill Affairs
- RDC Members of Bexhill Central Ward
- Leader of Rother District Council
- Two business representatives to be nominated by the Chair
- Two resident representatives (by application process) • Locate East Sussex • East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Portfolio Holder for Transport and Environment (or nominated ESCC substitute)
- CEO of the De La Warr Pavilion
- A representative of Rother Voluntary Action
- Two Bexhill Ward Cllrs

2. Group Objectives

- 2.1 The group's objective is to develop and agree a vision, strategy and masterplan for the town centre.
- 2.2 The group does not hold a budget within the district council structure but can seek external funding for the district council by preparing bids.

[Bexhill Town Centre Steering Group Downloads – Rother District Council](#)

3. Work of the TCSG

- 3.1 The TCSG is working on the following research:
 - a) Audit of street furniture – no budget
 - b) Waste and litter collection – Cllr Courtel working with officers – no budget.
- 3.2 The group had been researching a refurbishment of Devonshire Square Toilets. This has now been transferred to the RDC in-house team to complete. There is no further budget for toilets to be considered by the group, £12,000 has been approved by RDC.
- 3.3 The TCSG is researching ideas for the RDC cabinet on how to spend the remaining s106 funds of £8,000. The funding is not available to the town council, it is funding within the RDC budget and for the RDC cabinet to agree.
- 3.4 The TCSG meetings are sometimes attended by local stakeholders that present on their own projects within the town centre. These are presentations given in the same way that these groups present to the town council and its committees.

4. The Town Council's role

- 4.1 Following the creation of the town council, RDC now considers that the town council could be better suited to the role of researching the needs of the town centre, being the organisation closest to the people.

- 4.2 The vision and master planning of the town will still be the responsibility of RDC as this forms part of the Local Plan and policy strategy of the principal authority. This does not preclude the town council from contributing to the plans through its current committee structure, as it currently does.
- 4.3 The town council was unsure about the implications of taking on the operational projects of the TCSG and nominated Cllr Brailsford and Cllr Taylor-Gee to attend the TCSG meeting to gather more information and report back with recommendations.
- 4.4 In the meantime, the town council was advised at a meeting by a RDC Councillor that there was a set of projects underway at the TCSG with funding attached that could be transferred to the town council.
- 4.5 Subsequently, the town council decided to investigate the funds available before making any decision on the future of the group.
- 4.6 RDC has confirmed that there is no funding attached to the TCSG, the group does not have any spending powers or any budgeted funds. Budgets for projects sit within the RDC cabinet and committee structure. This is described in point 3.1 above. The TCSG is a more of a research group, not a committee with budget responsibilities.

5. Next steps

- 5.1 Town councils operate within a different legislative framework to district councils (principal authorities).
- 5.2 In law, it is not a simple case of the town council shifting responsibility for the TCSG to its own structure. If the group is to be kept in the same membership format it would need to be created as a committee of the town council with co-option of external stakeholders as members.
- 5.3 As RDC is continuing with the master planning and vision setting, the operational projects left for allocation to the town council committee would be audit of street furniture, waste and litter collection and submitting ideas for s106 spending to RDC.
- 5.4 There are several options available to the town council to deal with these projects of the TCSG:
 - a) Do nothing – RDC takes its own decision on the outstanding TCSG operational projects within its own structure and the town council continues with its own strategy.
 - b) Create a committee of the council that reflects the principles of the TCSG that takes on the following projects:
 - i. Audit of street furniture
 - ii. Waste and litter collection

iii. Submitting ideas to RDC for spending of s106 funds.
This committee would co-opt the external members, but they would have no voting rights due to town council legislation.

- c) That the town council allocates the operational projects within its own committee structure and continues to work with RDC on future master planning of the town. This would mean that the town council and RDC continue to seek external funding for Bexhill projects as agreed by the respective organisations and RDC consults with the town council on future vision and strategy.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 Resources are limited within the town council and creating another committee will generate an additional cost to the council with further staffing and venue hire charges for meetings.
- 6.2 The mechanism to address the TCSG projects already exists within the town council's current committee structure at no additional cost within the Climate, Nature, and Environment Committee.

7. Summary

- 7.1 It is recommended that the town council continue the good work of the TCSG within its current committee structure (Climate, Nature and Environment Committee).
- 7.2 The TCSG would then no longer operate within the RDC structure. The town council would continue to investigate ways to improve Bexhill through its own committees and RDC would continue the work of developing the vision and master plan, in conjunction with the town council.