

Bexhill Town Board

MINUTES OF MEETING 07 March 25

AGENDA

Venue: Rother Town Hall, Bexhill – Committee Room Time 14.00 to 17.00

Meeting Attendance

Board Member	Attendance	Attendance comment
Abi Newbury, FCA (Chair)	Y	N/A
Dr Binodh Bhaskaran (BB)	Y	online
Dr Mandy Curtis (MC)	Y	N/A
Eleanore Gordon (EG)	Y	N/A
Dr Kieran Mullan MP	Y	online
Cllr Doug Oliver (DO)	Y	N/A
Cllr Paul Wilson (PW)	Y	N/A
Simon Morris (SM) on behalf of Katy Bourne, OBE (KB)	Y	N/A
Nicola Walker, Police and Crime Commissioner Office	Y	N/A
Stewart Drew (SD)	Y	N/A
Ollie Jeffs (OJ)	Y	N/A
Kim Richards (KR)	Y	N/A
Cllr Ian Hollidge (IH)	Y	N/A

Secretariat/Governance

Anne Rathbone – Bexhill Town Board and Partnerships Manager (RDC) (AR)

Joe Powell, Acting Director of Communities (RDC). For Governance and Accountable Body function. (JP)
(on behalf of Anna Evett).

Observers/guests:

Frances McKenna (FM) with Dr Kieran Mullan MP joining online

Yazmin Taylor (YT), DPB/MHCLG joining online

Will Wright (WW), Economic Development Lead (Estates), Rother District Council

Apologies:

Anna Evett, Rother District Council

Item 1: Chair's welcome and purpose of meeting; minutes of last meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were taken as approved and are uploaded on the Bexhill Town Board website.

The Chair reiterated the purpose of the meeting as follows:

- Today is about starting to make things happen. We have just received the new Government guidance for our funding stream which is now called Plan for Neighbourhoods. We will send out the link for anyone who has not seen this, and AR will provide a summary of the prospectus for us next week. So, we are already actively working to the new guidance. It is important to stress that the work we have already done is not going to be undone and is seen by the Government to be of great value. We still need to wait for further detailed instructions, but we are actively moving forward with our plans, making sure they fit precisely with the new guidance. The plan should give us more flexibility, not less.
- It is great to see that the new government has listened to our representations to them and can see how important collaboration is, which is something that Bexhill Town Board is becoming known for, locally and nationally.
- A key focus of this meeting will be on the need for a Bexhill Town Plan, hence our invitation to key RDC and ESCC colleagues and partners. Their input will help us maximise alignments and synergies going forward.
- We will also be starting to think in more practical detail about the way forward for some other key ideas for possible Town Board investment, which were introduced at the last meeting.

Action: AR to provide a summary of new government prospectus and more detailed guidance and update the website with a summary for public information. To be completed by end Friday 21 March.

Item 2: Declarations of interest for Members and Officers

The Chair read out the statement on Declaration of Interests as follows:

In doing Town Board business, it is essential that we follow strict procedures in declaring our interests. Members are reminded of the need to declare any financial or non-financial interests immediately prior to the commencement of the agenda item in question. Please could you bear this in mind as we go through the agenda today. Please also remember you are abiding by the Nolan Principles which I intend to ensure the Board stand by in all its business.

AR confirmed that the Register is up to date.

Item 3: Action Log

The action log had been shared with Town Board members. AR confirmed that all actions were up to date and a revised action log would be prepared to take us into the next phase (see below).

Item 4: Current situation re Plan for Neighbourhoods and Terms of Reference; Implications of the Procurement Act 2024 for Town Board investments

The prospectus for Plan for Neighbourhoods is now received (see above). What can be funded is wider than previously, rather than more restricted. Revised Terms of Reference can now be finalised to take into account the new guidance. A governance arrangement between RDC as the accountable body and the Town Board will also be prepared.

The timescale for our first return to government for the new Plan for Neighbourhoods process is 22 April 2025. Due to availability of key people over this period, we need to prepare as much as possible in advance.

Action: AR to revise the Terms of Reference as a draft and send out drafts/update by 03 April 2025 to Town Board members.

Action: AR also to undertake consultation for comment and seek approval from legal and Section 151 officers at RDC as the Accountable Body.

AR to produce a specific proposal for community and business engagement and working group structure as part of this exercise above.

AR gave a brief update on the implications of the Procurement Act 2024:

- The Procurement Act 2024 has had cross party support and is broadly welcomed by small and medium businesses and charities for promoting fairer access to contracts using public funds.
- The processes and greater transparency required mean that procurement is likely to take longer and require greater capacity on the part of the specialist procurement team (the ESCC Procurement Hub) and from the Town Board officers.
- This means we need to be realistic about our timescales and that we give good information to the community and business, so that everyone realises that the big capital projects that will be in our investment plan may take 2 years or more to complete, depending on the project.
- One option is for us to share the cost of extra specialist procurement support with Eastbourne and Hastings Town Boards, as the existing specialist procurement team are likely to be very stretched for the next few years.

After discussion, it was agreed that AR should reach out to neighbouring Town Boards to see what the possibilities might be for a shared dedicated procurement officer at the ESCC Procurement Hub.

Action: AR to investigate possibilities regarding dedicated specialist procurement across Eastbourne and Hastings.

Item 5: Town Board branding and communications update

The specification and invitation to quote for branding and support has been circulated to Board members. The sub group checked 8 Expressions of Interest and shortlisted 3 suppliers to put in a quotation, in line with RDC procurement rules and procedures. One of these has since confirmed that they will not be doing a full quote, but we have 2 strong applicants to interview on 27th March. RDC as the Accountable Body will need to be satisfied with the process and decision in terms of risk and deliverability, but the sub group, on behalf of the Town Board will lead the proposal for who to appoint.

Timeline:

3 people invited to submit a full quote: 18 February 2025

Deadline for receipt of quotes: 5pm Wednesday 19 March 2025

Interviews: Thursday 27 March 2025

Project begins: 1st April 2025

Action: AR to ensure an update is sent to Town Board members following the selection of a brand and comms support supplier, by 1st April 2025.

Item 6: Capacity support arrangements and costs

JP outlined proposed support arrangements and costs. This included:

The funding from the Town Board for the post of Bexhill Town Board and Partnerships Manager to be reduced to 60% of the cost of that role. This is in recognition of AR taking on some additional responsibilities for RDC in relation to strategic partnership development. Some of the more administrative aspects of the Bexhill Town Board and Partnerships Manager role would be taken on by the Town Board Project Officer role that has previously been agreed but not recruited for to date, because of the uncertainty about the government funding.

Specifically, advantages of the proposed arrangements for going forward are:

- The Town Board and Partnerships Manager would continue to work closely with the Town Board, and in the interests of the Town Board and their capacity will be prioritised and protected.
- Most of the additional responsibilities that the Town Board and Partnerships Manager would be taking on would be of direct benefit to the Town Board and to Bexhill on Sea, as well as wider benefit.
- The additional responsibilities would be focused on ensuring that local (Bexhill on Sea) needs are right at the heart of Local Government Reorganisation/Devolution.

Following discussion, Town Board members were unanimous in their support for the proposal and the good sense in the idea of the Bexhill Town Board and Partnerships Manager role operating across RDC and the Town Board functions and linking with ESCC as part of Local Government Reorganisation plans.

It was noted that the level of costs were broadly in line with what had been previously agreed, and it was also agreed that a level 6 Assistant would bring more benefit for a small additional cost.

It was agreed for AR to progress the recruitment with a Town Board member on the recruitment panel.

Action: AR to progress with agreed recruitment and capacity arrangements.

Item 7: Focus on a Bexhill Town Plan

Guest contributors for this item were Will Wright, Joe Powell, Cllr Penny Di Cara

The idea of a Bexhill Town Plan with visuals of what the town could look like with combined plans of ESCC, RDC, BoSTC and the Town Board over the next ten years (part of which would be the proposed new Mayoral Authority covering the whole of Sussex, alongside a new Unitary Authority covering the geography of East Sussex (which will join RDC with ESCC and other Districts and Boroughs in the East Sussex geographical area into one Unitary Authority).

Part of the process of developing this would be the three Councils looking at how best to align their priorities and make best use of the buildings and land in the town.

WW outlined how Bexhill Central was in particular need of attention, in addition to Sidley and Pebsham areas.

RDC owns a large part of Beeching Road industrial estate –Wainwright Road, the South part of which could be developed more in terms of making best use of vacant land and properties. There is a growing creative scene at Beeching Road and London Road. It is potentially an exciting site with a lot of opportunity to improve walking and cycling routes into the town, providing more housing for Bexhill residents and creating a vibrant open space that felt safe to walk through.

This could be a good contribution to the developments in the town centre.

AN stated that a whole town plan that provided visual images of what Bexhill could look like with key developments will really help make the best use of Town Board funding. Beeching Road is essentially part of the town centre picture.

KM said that other Town Boards he had sat on did exactly this and it was useful. It should include projects we already have in mind across the partnerships. It should be a focused piece of work that is kept contained as such plans date very quickly.

IH and DO said they supported the proposal. Also, it is important to note that there have been many consultations in the past and what needs to be done is already well documented, so the work is about pulling ideas together into a coherent plan.

IH said that Bexhill is like an octopus with eight legs (outer areas) and the head (the town centre). Each ward has a different identity, and the town centre is what holds the town areas together. We need to define a geographical area for the plan which should focus on the needs of the town centre and how it can best serve the whole of Bexhill. EG said that outer areas were fragmented and needed something that could attract and pull them into centre, and for the centre to be accessible and meaningful to everyone.

With regard to business involvement, the town plan will be a tool for us to show why people visit Bexhill, find opportunities to boost these reasons to visit, say what we are doing to encourage this, why Bexhill is a good business opportunity.

There was agreement that the commissioning of a visual plan was a good idea and should be commissioned out as soon as possible, with a Town Board working group that brought in all three councils, advice from specialist colleagues and other key stakeholders. This should consider:

- How all three Councils can best be represented.
- Representation of heritage and environmental (PW) and others with specialist knowledge of the public realm.
- Specialist advice from Will Wright (Estates), David Marshall (Planning); Thomas Atkinson (Capital Development), RDC

The plan should link closely with the ESCC strategy, including how we can address skills, employment and education for people in Bexhill. Engagement with young people is key but we are strong in this regard in terms of our engagement focus and our Town Board membership.

It should be a high level statement of intent, shown visually but that links capital and revenue funding streams.

Action: AR to work with the Chair to establish a working group to commission a whole town plan including visuals and to report back to the next Town Board meeting. An investment summit could advertise to corporates identified sites and opportunities.

Action: AR to take forward idea of business conference to follow on from town plan publication

Item 8: Break and networking

Item 9: Exploring priorities progress and discussion:

Repurposing vacant buildings

AR had sent out a short paper on repurposing vacant buildings, with a focus on the Town Centre. The Town Board members welcomed this idea as a pragmatic focus that would make the best use of Town Board funding. This focus would bring buildings such as the old banks etc. back into public use and prevent them from deterioration and giving a sense of decline in the town.

There are many different ways a multipurpose building might be used for example:

- Co-working hub
- Site for skills development for young people in partnership with schools and other youth provision
- Meeting space
- Youth hub area

KR, MC and OJ emphasised that this would not duplicate the Community Hub which has a different focus, being a site for local voluntary organisations to deliver services to residents. There is a distinction between community and business development enterprises, co-working is an untapped opportunity in the town. Co-working spaces promote innovation and collaborations that build the business community.

Safety and Security should be considered in all Town Board projects including repurposing of vacant buildings.

Possibilities of Fountain Repair

This is being looked into, to check whether it is feasible and good value for money. It needs a critical appraisal of previous reports. Who would pick up repair and maintenance costs is a key issue that needs to be addressed. There are some issues to be worked through, but the Town Board are committed to a joint effort in this. Town Board members recognised how symbolic the fountain was/is for Bexhill and that this was a high priority in community engagement.

It was agreed to establish a working group to look in closer detail at the possible repair of the Fountain.

Action: AR to work with the Chair to establish a working group to investigate Fountain repair.

Item 10: Next Steps

Action: AR to provide update for Town Board on ideas for increasing footfall in Town Centre.

Item 11: Any other business

Hotel update

Action: Frances to give update on hotel working group next time.

The Chair thanked everyone especially the guest attendees.

Next meeting of Bexhill Town Board:

13 June 2025 from 14.00 to 17.00 at Rother Town Hall, Committee Room.

Forward dates and agenda plan

Proposed dates	Forward agenda notes
13 th June 25 2.00pm to 5pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Action log• New prospectus implications and return• Updated Terms of Reference draft (following new prospectus)• Approve interests policy (following new prospectus)• Governance agreement between Town Board and RDC• Budget update• Highlight report on Community and Business Engagement• Progress on feasibility for potential priorities
19 th September 25 2.00pm to 5pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Action log• Budget update• Highlight report on Community and Business Engagement• Investment plans draft
12 th December 25 2.00pm to 5pm (or Extraordinary Meeting if required for Investment Plan sign off)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Action log• Highlight report on Community and Business Engagement• Investment plans sign off

Action Log

Outstanding actions - last updated by AR 19/03/25

Action	Who	Deadline	RAG	Comments
Provide a summary of new government prospectus and more detailed guidance and update the website with a summary for public information.	AR	21 March 25		Added 19 March 25
Revise the Terms of Reference as a draft and send out drafts/update	AR	03 April 25		Added 19 March 25
Undertake consultation for comment and seek approval from legal and Section 151 officers at RDC as the Accountable Body.	AR	22 April 25		Added 19 March 25
Investigate possibilities regarding dedicated specialist procurement across Eastbourne and Hastings.	AR	Report to next Town Board meeting		Added 19 March 25
Update is sent to Town Board members following the selection of a brand and comms support supplier, by 1 st April 2025.	AR	01 April 25		Added 19 March 25
Progress with agreed recruitment and capacity arrangements.	AR	Update to next Town Board		Added 19 March 25
Establish a working group to commission a whole town plan including visuals and to report back to the next Town Board meeting. An investment summit could advertise to corporates identified sites and opportunities.	AR/AN	04 April 25		Added 19 March 25
Take forward idea of business conference to follow on from town plan publication	AR	Update to next Town Board		Added 19 March 25
Establish a working group to investigate Fountain repair.	AR/AN	04 April 25		Added 19 March 25
Provide update on hotel working group next time.	AR/FM	Update to next Town Board or earlier		Added 19 March 25

Provide update for Town Board on ideas for increasing footfall in Town Centre.	AR	Update to next Town Board or earlier		Added 19 March 25
Register of interests developed Detailed Interests policy developed.	AR	Revised to after new prospectus received	G	Picked up on reconfirmation but needs to comply with new prospectus. To be finalised and presented for Town Board approval after new prospectus is received
Town Board members kept informed of face to face engagement opportunities	AR to update members	ongoing	G	Ongoing
Revisit other Towns with LTPfT/Town Deal funding for examples x 10 in December 24	AR	X 10 in December 24	G	Has been used to inform Town Board papers and Town Plan work. Is continually updated. Can be made available to members on request.
Contact Fiona Hemsworth Golden Marigold to arrange consultation	AR	Before 13 December meeting	A	Pick up post reconfirmation of LTPfT funding
Comms procurement	AR with MC, S D, AN	As soon as possible	G	In progress and on schedule to begin 01 April 25