

## **DEMOCRACY FOR BEXHILL: HOW A CAMPAIGN WAS TRIGGERED TO CREATE A NEW TOWN COUNCIL IN BEXHILL, EAST SUSSEX**

### **Introduction**

Bexhill is the only area in the Rother district not to have any form of direct democracy in the form of a parish or town council. It did have its own borough council from 1902 but this disappeared in the reorganisation of 1974. The people of Bexhill want to have more of a voice for the town. Volunteers from the community stepped forward and created an all-party group called Democracy4Bexhill (D4B), and this led the campaign for Bexhill to have a town council. This followed a petition for a community governance review which gained over 4,000 signatures, and Rother District Council was then obliged to launch a Community Governance Review (CGR). D4B ran an extensive campaign to engage with the public. Through their hard work and initiative, a record 9,227 residents (around 24% of the electorate) responded to the CGR with 93.5% of these respondents supporting the formation of a town council in Bexhill: 8,631 votes. Only 3.9% wanted “no change”. However, no change is what they got. This poses the question, is it time to reform the absolute powers of district councils to reject major efforts by their residents to increase local governance. Is it time to change the law?

### **Headlines**

- Bexhill is in East Sussex and falls under Rother District Council
- Rother District Council was obliged to hold a CGR on receipt of 4,000 signatures from residents.
- The CGR gained 8,631 responses in favour of a town council in Bexhill and Rother District Council had to decide on whether Bexhill should have a town council
- The Full Council voted for no change to the governance of Bexhill. (although only 3.9% of responses had asked for no change)
- This case study will outline what D4B did to gain such a large response and what challenges they faced during their campaign

## **Theme - Carrying out a community governance review**

Principal councils have the power to carry out a community governance review and put in place or make changes to local community (parish) governance arrangements. A review can consider a number of issues, including whether to create a new parish council, or an area committee, whether to alter the boundary of an existing parish council or whether to group a number of parishes together in a grouped parish council. Reviews can be triggered by local people petitioning to their principal authority to undertake a community governance review.

### **Contextual Issues**

NALC would like every area in England to be parished. Currently there are around 10,000 town and parish councils in England, usually found in rural and coastal areas. Since 1997 there has been an increase in the number of town and parish councils created. Currently there is no legislation for principal authorities to obligate them to pass changes that are called for in a CGR. The judgement of a decision to pass changes called for is solely down to the principal authority who is carrying out the CGR. Bexhill Town Council would have become one of the biggest town councils in the country covering an area which has the population of 43,478.

### **Who are the partners / stakeholders Involved?**

D4B led the campaign to gain votes in favour of a town council to represent the community in Bexhill. D4B is a non-party-political group made up of passionate volunteers from the community chaired by an independent Rother District councillors. They were formed to campaign for the creation of a town council in Bexhill.

Surrey and Sussex Association of Local Councils (SSALC) and National Association of Local Councils (NALC) have also been providing support and guidance to D4B throughout the campaign.

### **What were the key issues / challenges?**

Although very much a community, Bexhill is a large area with a population of around 43,500, which made it a difficult task to publicise and make everyone in the area aware about the community governance review. When Rother launched its consultation under the CGR, it was assumed that they would contact every resident to ensure their participation at every stage, and after lobbying, in Stage One they did indeed enclose with tax bills, a brief flyer with some information

about the consultation. However in Stage Two Rother District Council decided not to write to every household on financial grounds. This was despite D4B offering to organise volunteers for a massive distribution free of charge of Rother's own literature about the Review. D4B then took on this task themselves.

About 900 people took part in the first phase of the consultation. In the second phase, over 9,000 did. In the consultation, Rother offered residents four options – no change; a parish council to be termed a town council; an area committee; and four new parish councils. Rother initially insisted that the only way in which residents could respond was online. If people wanted to respond in another way, they had to obtain a specific postcard produced by Rother but they had to go to the town hall or three other un-publicised collection points to get it, or ask their councillor who had only been allocated a handful. D4B made a legal challenge, and Rother then agreed that any communication would be valid.

It was made clear to D4B that Rother District Council would only respond positively to the desire for a town council if the numbers supporting it were “overwhelming”. D4B set about producing leaflets for every household, listing all four options, and inviting people to respond online or by returning an enclosed postcard to Rother.

From the outset of the consultation, the Leader of RDC and some of his colleagues indicated the CGR was a distraction and made unfounded accusations that D4B was a subversive plot by political parties, or that “revolutionary socialist Momentum is on a seditious, stealthy path in Bexhill”. (where the Conservative majority is 22,000!). Residents saw through these allegations and responded overwhelmingly to a consultation response for change.

### **How were these issues / challenges overcome?**

D4B had just over a year to engage as many voters as possible and meet these challenges. They used a number of imaginative engagement techniques to engage the public.

Their poster campaign visually highlighted that Bexhill was the only un-parished area in the Rother district by highlighting the area in yellow. “See that yellow bit? It's Bexhill. The only part of Rother where the residents do not have a town or parish council”). The posters were found everywhere in Bexhill and highlighted exactly how residents



could respond if they wanted a town council to represent their area.

D4B had a professional & talented communications team who galvanised massive local awareness & support, through posters, leaflets, clear signage, videos, press coverage, social media, personal canvassing and anything which would gain greater visibility. They also took seriously the challenge that a large proportion of people in Bexhill do not use internet, partly because of their age, and organised and addressed meetings in self-managed housing for people who were less mobile, or for groups and organisations. They also held a number of events which saw hundreds of people attending to hear what a town council could do for the community.



They ran a Twitter campaign which encouraged people who were in favour of a town council to shout it loud and tweet it, from which the D4B Twitter account would retweet. They also held a countdown to the final days left to vote, which constantly reminded people about voting (see left).

For those not on social media they also visited places where they knew there would be a lot of people such as a queue for a flu jab, mother and toddler groups, as well as roadshows at public events such as markets, the Sea festival and Bexhill100 car festival.

They also even managed to secure the support of local celebrity, Eddie Izzard who stated in a video his support for a town council to be formed in Bexhill. This picked up press attention and was included in the Bexhill Observer.

They acquired a shop in the town centre to act as an information centre during Phase One, had roadshows, linked up with BBC Sussex and BBC SouthEast Politics for live interviews, lobbied and wrote to all councillors several times to clarify certain points and provided detailed reasons why having a town council would be good not only for residents but also for Rother District Council itself. The D4B newsletter went out regularly to its database of the almost 2,000 people who had signed up to help, and 138 volunteers were coordinated to leaflet every residence. £3,500 was raised or donated for a fighting fund to cover costs. A member wrote, performed and videoed a song which was widely featured, and a rally outside the council on the night of the big decision was followed by live

streaming the council meeting to hundreds who could not gain access to the full chamber!

## **Result**

Despite the sheer number of responses received - being sixteen times the size of previous consultations and therefore a record in itself - and the 93.5% support for a town council as opposed to 3% for “no change”, Rother District Council could not support creating a town council. Rother District Council’s Leader referred to “the silent majority that haven’t voted because they’re happy with the status quo”. It should be noted that in some wards the proportion of people “voting” was higher than the proportion who had voted for Rother councillors themselves.

This is not the first time that Rother has resisted attempts to improve local governance in Bexhill, other attempts had been made led by independent councillors, involving a devolution working group in 2012-13 that met seven times and did detailed work, but it has been the first to engage with the public and elicit wide support.

## **Outcomes**

What have been the key elements of success in mobilising the population of Bexhill?

The campaign was driven by D4B and the group was key to the CGR receiving so many votes in favour of a town council for Bexhill. Having an anchor organisation/structure really helped during the campaign process and gave residents an identifiable group to support. They led a really effective campaign which targeted a variety of different audiences.

Although the campaign did not win, D4B will not go away and is currently continuing to canvass support for candidates of all parties who will stand in District Elections next year and who will support the desire for a Town Council. In February 2018 it held a public meeting to discuss the way forward. 140 people packed the hall for a very successful meeting, at which £480 was donated to D4B.

## **What has been learnt?**

D4B has shown that an eye-catching and consultative campaign is key in engaging the public. They went above and beyond to engage with every resident in Bexhill and it really paid off in securing votes in favour for the creation of a town council.

Keeping the message simple has also been a key figure in their campaign. They laid out exactly what a town council can do for residents, what it will cost the tax payer and how it will be run. Making it simple for the public to understand was really effective.

Despite 24% of the electorate in Bexhill responding to the consultation in favour of the creation of a town council, the District Council still rejected the notion. We argue this could show there is a need for a reform to the laws around CGR decision making. It is currently solely up to the District Council to make the decision on whether any changes to governance is made. D4B feels it is time to change this and for an independent appeals procedure to be reinstated, to give communities more voice.

### **Who can I contact?**

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### **Other Information**

CGR review from Rother District Council:  
<http://www.rother.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=29558&p=0>

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