

Tressell Ward councillor's report

from Peter Chowney

5th December 2017



Hastings Issues

St Leonards Post Office

I met representatives of Post Office Ltd last Friday to discuss the future of St Leonards Post Office, and what role the council could play in ensuring the post office remained open and a full range of post services is provided in the future.



The Post Office Ltd. representatives are adamant that a decision to let a franchise for the St Leonards Post Office has already been taken, and that there is no prospect of retaining a Crown Post Office in St Leonards, and that the business will be passed to a temporary holding company (Potent Solutions Ltd) early in the New Year, pending letting the business to a permanent franchisee. They also made it clear that Post Office Ltd. won't consider the council buying the freehold of the building, and someone else running the franchise. They will only contemplate either leasing the building to someone taking on the franchise, or selling the freehold to someone taking on the franchise. The franchise will include a requirement to run all the current services from the St Leonards Post Office, for ten years.

My preferred option (and that of the council, as expressed in a unanimous resolution agreed by full council earlier in the year) would be to keep a Crown Post Office in St Leonards, possibly with the council owning and re-developing the freehold. But that's not on offer.

The council has put in an expression of interest to run the St Leonards Post Office, buy the freehold and run the franchise, although if we were to run the post office business itself, that would have to be via a council owned company. There have apparently been other expressions of interests, which will be considered alongside the council's application. Any purchase of the freehold of the building would have to be based on all the usual due diligence, including a valuation, survey, and a business plan that showed how the St Leonards Post Office franchise could at least break even - which would almost certainly involve other retail uses in the building.

In the end, it's a government decision to press ahead with the privatisation of Crown post offices. Government grants to Post Office Ltd., as for other public services, have been cut back consistently year-on-year as part of the government's austerity programme. Post Office Ltd's response to this has been to privatise loss-making branches, rather than attempt to bring them back into profitability themselves. But the decision to close Crown post offices is in effect a government decision, just as it is to close and discontinue council services by cutting grants. Post offices are a public service, and should remain publically owned. But as that's not on offer, we'll have to try to establish the best possible alternative post office service in St Leonards, as far as we're able to.

Heritage Angels



Local brothers Rich and Marc Moore have won Historic England's 'Heritage Angels' award for the best rescue of a historic building, for the conversion of the Old White Rock Baths into a world-class BMX and skateboard arena.

The baths were originally a very elegant Victorian structure entirely lined with decorative glazed tiles, but were 'modernised' by Sidney Little (the borough engineer responsible for all the seafront concrete structures), who stripped out all the tiles and gave the baths a more 1930s modernist feel. However, the

baths eventually closed and were turned into a skating rink, but that too closed in 1997, and the baths remained empty and abandoned until a joint project, by Hastings Council and Rich and Marc Moore, turned it into The Source BMX park. As well as providing world-class BMX and skateboarding facilities, The Source also hosts international BMX competitions and exhibition events, and has one of the biggest BMX and skateboard equipment shops in Europe.

So congratulations to Marc and Rich on their award, which was presented to them at the Palace Theatre in London last week. After all the hard work they've put into this project, and the success they've made of it, they fully deserve it!

More Awards!

And we've won two more 'Special Innovation' awards, from the Green Flag award organisation. These were for two local projects. The first was for the innovative natural water purification systems in Alexandra Park, to remove coliform bacteria and clean up the water in the stream before it gets to the sea. This uses a combination of aeration to get more oxygen into the water, and filtration through beds of vegetation and reeds.

Thanks to this project, we've been able to retain our 'good' bathing water standard at Pelham Beach. Before this project was implemented, contamination from the

Alexandra Park stream meant Pelham Beach was likely to fail the new EU bathing water quality standards. And we've also retained our 'excellent' bathing water quality for St Leonards Beach, which will help us retain our 'blue flag' for that beach next year.

The second is for using natural grazing methods to control bracken and restore maritime heather moorland in Hastings Country Park. This has been achieved using ponies and Belted Galloway cattle to graze different areas, removing the bracken and allowing the heather to grow. In this way, we've been able to restore and maintain some very rare and important habitats of international significance.



So well done to the council staff who've achieved that, and to the Country Park volunteers who give up their time to help with these projects, and help to develop these innovative ideas.

Hastings Pier

Only a few weeks ago, we were celebrating the prestigious Stirling Prize for Architecture being awarded to dRMM architects for their work on Hastings Pier. However, that was followed by the news that the Pier Trust had been dissolved because it was insolvent, and the pier had passed to administrators.

The Pier Trust had proposed a plan that required an initial funding package of £400,000 in the first year, followed by £200,000 a year in subsequent years. But former funding partners (Heritage Lottery Fund, Hastings Council and East Sussex County Council) felt they just couldn't afford that much, and wanted to see a plan that resulted in a financially self-sustaining pier.

The administrators have however made it clear that they will be keeping the pier open, and will be looking for a new operator to take it on. Heritage Lottery Fund will have a say in that, as they have some control over what happens to the pier because



of conditions they attached to their £11.9m grant. Hastings Council spent over a million pounds on the pier restoration, on compulsory purchase, clearance of debris and security after the fire, and direct grants to help the Pier Trust raise its match funding for the HLF grant. However, the council has no actual financial stake in the pier, and no control

over what happens to it. The administrators and HLF have said though that they'll work closely with the council towards a sustainable future for the pier.

Regarding the ‘community shares’ in the pier that many of us bought, the administrator has this to say:

“If we are successful then you will continue to be shareholders as regards the pier. However, if we need to transfer the legal ownership of the pier to another legal entity we will be working with any prospective new custodian, owner, funder or partner to protect your interest in the pier. We believe that any future operator would want the ‘buy-in’ of local shareholders.”

Our comments regarding shareholders are on the presumption that shareholders in a magnificent structure such as the pier are primarily interested in their connection to the pier continuing and not with any prospective financial return or ability to withdraw their investment.”

In practice the ‘shares’ were never shares in the sense of shares that are traded in a public company, they were a way of raising money for the restoration while making local people feel they were involved in and ‘ownership’ of the project. But it’s good that the administrators are recognising the social value of the community shares and the strength of the ‘people’s pier’ concept.

So for now, the administrators will do their restructuring work, and establish a plan for the pier’s future. What’s likely to emerge though is a more commercial operation, probably with more permanent structures on it. In the end, it costs hundreds of thousands of pounds a year to run a pier – it needs constant expensive maintenance, many of the steel bolts have to be replaced annually, and insurance is very expensive. That means a lot of money has to be raised from its operation, all year round. And that’s no easy task.

The Sports Village



At the Cabinet meeting last night, Hastings Council agreed to sell land to the developers of the Sports Village on Bexhill Road. I’ve covered this in some detail before, but as a reminder, the Village will incorporate various sports pitches, a sports hall, hospitality facilities, and a new stadium for Hastings United. It will be located on land that is currently football pitches, on Freshfields Road opposite the Recycling Centre. The development will be funded from the

development of Horntye Cricket ground and sports facilities as housing, the development of the Pilot Field stadium that Hastings United currently uses, as housing, and a housing development between Bexhill Road and the new Sports Village. A new charitable trust will run the Sports Village.

The sites that will be sold to the developer will be the Sports Village land itself and the nearby housing site, and the Pilot Field site, which Hastings United currently have on a long lease from the council. Disposal of the land has conditions attached

that require the developer to include an average 40% social and affordable housing across the three sites it's going to develop. The sale will also be dependent on the developers getting planning permission, and developing the Sports Village itself as specified. Planning will be complicated, because all the housing sites are in Hastings, but the Sports Village itself will be just across the border in Rother.

None of the housing will be built until the Sports Village is complete and functioning – this is because sports clubs and Hastings United will need to continue to use their existing facilities until the new facilities are ready.

So the Sports Village has taken a few more steps towards completion – but there's a long way to go, and a lot of complicated planning applications across four significant sites.

If you'd like to know more, have a look at the Cabinet report here:

<http://bit.ly/2AODMMu>

Energy Generation

At the Cabinet meeting yesterday, we approved a report on an energy generation strategy for Hastings. This is primarily part of the council's income generation programme, but it has some exciting prospects for Hastings in a wider context.

The government has said that internal combustion engine vehicles will be entirely phased out by 2040. This is an ambitious target and raises some interesting questions – what happens to classic cars? Will they be exempt? What counts as a classic car? That's perhaps not the most important question (except to those of us who own classic cars); there are more significant obstacles to overcome. In particular, the huge additional demand for electricity for electric vehicles will mean that the National Grid won't be able to cope. Increasing capacity of the grid sufficiently would be hugely expensive, so the government is encouraging local energy supply networks.

There is a potential for Hastings Council to create a local energy network, owned and run by the council, supplied by sustainable electricity generated locally. Hastings Council owns a large number of buildings and land around Hastings, some of which could be suitable for energy generation. That includes redundant farmland and commercial property roofs for PV arrays (solar panels), and seafront for wind turbines.

Hastings is well placed for this, as it's the sunniest town on the UK mainland, but also one of the windiest. By setting up a local supply network sourced in this way, the council could supply electricity to local businesses and households at well below the cost from the National Grid suppliers, and could generate significant income too. In theory, such a system could supply a third of Hastings' energy needs, although that would take a long time and a lot of investment to achieve.

It would of course be controversial. The seafront would be the best place for wind turbines, and turbines all the way along the promenade would generate substantial amounts of cheap, sustainable energy. The turbines would be 'vertical axis' rather

than the 'windmill' type, which have the advantage of being smaller, quieter and less of a threat to birds (see picture).

All of this would take some time to develop. There would need to be changes to planning policy, as well as a lot of investigation into suitability of sites, and the technicalities of establishing a local network (which would use existing infrastructure for the most part). But the potential for Hastings to become a town that generates a significant part of its own energy locally and sustainably is there. The income the council could receive from this would also make us financially self-sustaining, no longer dependent on government grant policy and austerity cuts that make it so difficult to plan for the future.



This approach to council-run local energy generation takes us full circle, to when public electricity supplies were first established. Shoreditch Council built the first public electricity supply, in what's now Hackney. The motto of Shoreditch Council, before it was absorbed into Hackney Council in 1963, was 'More Light, More Power'.

To see the Cabinet report on this, go to:

<http://bit.ly/2AQ9ngL>

White Rock Pavilion



The Cabinet also considered a report on the future of the White Rock Pavilion (although as it contained commercially confidential contractual negotiations, it was on the non-public section of the agenda).

The current contract for the White Rock Pavilion ends in January 2019. Because of the austerity cuts in the grants the council receives from

government, it's no longer possible to go on paying the £650,000 annual subsidy to HQ Theatres to run the WRP – amounting to a subsidy of around £12 per ticket sold. So the council has been investigating alternative options.

In the longer term, the council intends to develop a new performance venue in White Rock Gardens. The White Rock Pavilion is in poor condition, much of its infrastructure is worn out, and it was never designed as a theatre. It has no fly tower, minimal backstage facilities, and no wings. It was opened in 1927 as a home

for the Hastings Municipal Orchestra (council employees who entertained visitors on wet afternoons) and as a conference centre – the first event there was the annual conference of the Society of Sanitary Engineers. So its usefulness as a modern, multi-purpose performance venue is very limited.

However, the vision for a future performance venue is part of the broader redevelopment of White Rock Gardens, which you can see here:

<http://bit.ly/2AqwZVZ>

But the potential to build a new performance venue is at least five years away. Simply closing the White Rock Pavilion in 2019 is not an option. Many local groups and internationally-recognised regular events (such as the Hastings Piano Concerto Competition) need performance space of this size. The WRP holds just over 1,000 people (allegedly 1066, but there is no configuration of seating that comes to exactly that number!) – the next biggest performance venue in town is St Mary in the Castle, which has a maximum seated capacity of only around 500. The WRP does also bring in 80,000 visitors a year, whatever your view of the quality of its programming.

Initially, my preferred option was to hand the theatre to a local consortium of theatre and music groups and impresarios, along with a much-reduced subsidy for five years, while a new venue could be sorted out. But there were complications with that. Firstly, the rules on procurement mean we would have to go through a lengthy and onerous statutory procurement process, and a local consortium would have to bid for the contract. Apart from the time this takes, there is no actual consortium in place yet that could make such a bid. Also, it would raise issues of TUPE transfer of staff to the consortium, which could burden them with staffing or redundancy costs they can't afford.

So the option we're now investigating is for HQ theatres to continue to run the building at a much-reduced subsidy for five years. They would however help to create and work with a local consortium as described above. That would help take up the reduced programming with local music, theatre and comedy acts, and make better use of other spaces in the WRP, such as the Sussex Room.

HQ Theatres have indicated that they're keen to do this, as they want to continue to be involved in Hastings, because of our support for the creative and cultural sector, and the ambitious plans we have. So we will be negotiating this with them. However, as a fall back, we're also beginning a separate procurement process in case a deal with HQ can't be brokered. We'll also be helping to bring together the local consortium. Hopefully, we'll be able to keep the WRP open until a new venue is available.

Bottle Alley Lights Up!

Although the new lights in Bottle Alley have been operating for a couple of weeks now, they recently had their 'official' opening, with a wonderful programmed sequence to music. Most of the time they'll be on different 'resting' sequences, but we'll be aiming to put on special events there throughout the year.



Or it's just a nice place to walk through. The lighting completes a refurbishment of Bottle Alley, funded by Hastings Council, mostly via external grants and money that was already in the budget for essential repairs. It looks especially good from the pier, so take a stroll down there one evening and enjoy the spectacle.

Tressell Issues

Little to report this month. There is an issue with the Ore Business Park housing



development, in that homes there are now occupied, but access is being allowed to these homes from Hurrell Road. The reason given for this by the developers is that the upper part of the site is still under construction, and it's dangerous to use the road onto Farley Bank.

However, the planning permission specifically stated that access to the site could only be via Farley Bank for any purposes, both for construction traffic and for the finished homes – there should be a locked gate at the Hurrell Road end. The problem has arisen purely because of the way the developer has chosen to develop the site, starting at the wrong end.

We have taken this up with planning enforcement officers. In my view, the developers should be compensating residents of Hurrell Road and Broomgrove Road for their mistake. There's also a risk that this situation could continue indefinitely, as there is no sign yet of the upper part of the site being developed. At the very least, this arrangement should be for a specific, temporary period. But ideally, as the developers have made this mistake, they should be required to live with it, and put in place safe traffic management so the people now living on the site can use the upper entrance.

Recently, we've delivered newsletters to St George's, St Thomas's, Emmanuel and Calvert Roads. You can see all our newsletters at:

www.tressell.org.uk/tressellnews.htm

That'll do for now – if you'd like more information on any of this, leave a message on 01424 451066, or e-mail at cll.peter.chowney@hastings.gov.uk

We also have a Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/tressell

And there's the Tressell Councillors' website at:

<http://www.tressell.org.uk>