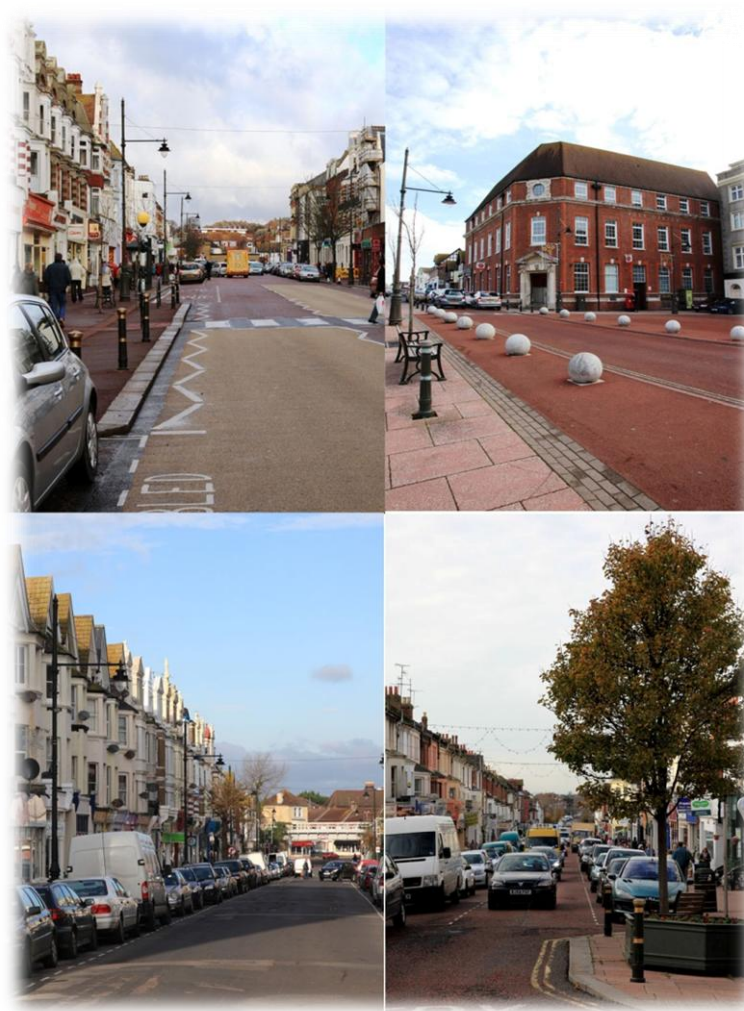


# Strategy for Bexhill Town Centre

June 2013



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# CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. Our Objectives
3. A Portrait of Bexhill
4. What our Research told us
5. Issues and Challenges
6. Opportunities and Constraints
7. Strategic Aims & Actions
8. Management and Co-Ordination

Appendix 1 – Policy Context

Appendix 2 – Economic & Social Context

Appendix 3 – Spatial Context



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Large print, Braille, audiotape/CD or in  
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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Bexhill-on-Sea is by far the largest settlement in Rother district, with a population of approximately 43,500 people, equivalent to some 48% of that of Rother district as a whole. The town has much to offer due to its coastal location, historical legacies of buildings and open spaces and broad range of amenities.

However, like many coastal towns, Bexhill faces an uncertain future in the face of changes to the global economy, changes in social attitudes and patterns of behaviour. The challenge for Bexhill today is to plan for a more prosperous future and avoid the risk of economic decline.

The town centre has a key role to play in this.

The **Bexhill Town Centre Strategy** is intended to set out a comprehensive approach to planning the future of the town centre. Although drafted by Rother District Council, **this strategy is for everyone who has a stake in the town centre.**

Everyone acknowledges that town centres are important to us. Town centres provide services to local people, act as a focal point for employment and leisure, and are regarded as a yardstick of a town's prosperity. The health of our town centres, measured by the quality and variety of shops, restaurants and places of entertainment, is important to residents, to visitors, and to investors.

National and local planning policies over the years have tried to favour town centres to ensure that they continue to thrive, yet the future of our town centres is under question now more than at any time - due to the economic downturn, competition from out-

of-town stores and retail parks, and changes to our shopping habits brought about by the internet. Recent years have seen unprecedented numbers of vacant town centre shops, with many well-known and established high street brands disappearing for good.

The Government recognised this when it asked Mary Portas to undertake her own review and make recommendations about how to face up to today's challenges. The Portas review, published in December 2011, made a number of recommendations and suggestions, some of which will require Government legislation, and some of which are aimed at galvanising local communities.

Whether all of these recommendations are followed remains to be seen, however at the heart of the Portas review is the recognition that **economic and social change is inevitable, and that town centres must rise to this challenge if they are to survive.**

In addition, the Government is strongly promoting the concept of **localism**, encouraging local people and communities to take collective responsibility for their own well-being and to take the lead in driving change.

## 2.0 OUR OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this Strategy are:

- ❖ To achieve enhanced commercial vitality in the town centre
- ❖ To reduce levels of deprivation in the town centre
- ❖ To maintain and enhance the quality of the built environment in the town centre, including the public realm

This strategy is intended to complement and support the draft **Rother Core Strategy**, which sets out the planning policy framework for achieving these objectives. The Core Strategy policies are set out in Appendix 1.





### 3.0 A PORTRAIT OF BEXHILL

Bexhill-on-Sea is not alone but is typical of many seaside towns in England in the changes that it has undergone since the late 1970s, from a popular holiday destination through gradual decline due to many external factors such as the availability of the car; cheap overseas travel; and changes in consumer expectations, attitudes and habits.

Appendix 2 (Economic & Social Context) describes how Bexhill's economy has been influenced by historical trends and changes, and the current economic context that provides the background to this strategy.

The loss of higher-spending visitors, and the increased popularity of seaside towns as retirement destinations, has presented an image problem for many seaside towns; heightened by in-migration of people on low incomes, often on state benefits, and in particular incapacity benefit encouraged by the availability of cheap rented properties. This has in some cases not been helped by other local authorities actively choosing to re-house people with care needs in coastal towns. Whilst Bexhill has undoubtedly fared better than some, these trends have nevertheless had a profound impact on the economy of the town.

The challenge for Bexhill-on-Sea is to re-position itself in the context of the wider economy to attract more and better employment and generate new wealth. The town centre has a key role to play in this. Town centres provide a focal point for commercial and social activity as well as services, and are often seen as a measure of the prosperity of an area. The quality and variety of shops, restaurants and places of entertainment are important to residents, visitors, and to investors.

However, Bexhill town centre presently functions primarily as a service centre for local residents, rather than as a destination capable of drawing significant numbers of visits from elsewhere.

Surveys of residents and targeted groups including young people and people in nearby towns have revealed a very consistent view about the positive aspects of Bexhill town centre. These are: its proximity to the sea; its unique selection of independent shops; and the fact that it is safe and quiet.

However, face-to-face interviews with people within Bexhill's potential catchment (Hastings, Eastbourne, Polegate, and Pevensey) revealed that over 50% had not visited within the last 12 months and the principal reason for this was that they felt no reason to go. In other words, many potential customers do not find a sufficient offer / product in Bexhill's town centre to regularly make the journey.

Whilst all this may appear to paint an unduly negative picture of Bexhill, there are many positives to draw upon.

Bexhill has retained its human scale through its many small shops, and we know that people enjoy Bexhill's peaceful ambience, and the fact that the shopping area is so close to the sea.

The De La Warr Pavilion enjoys an international reputation both as a building and as a centre for contemporary arts, and the seafront is a significant asset and draw. There has been significant public investment in recent years to improve the De La Warr Pavilion, the seafront, Bexhill Museum and Egerton Park.

The town has a loyal local customer base that has enabled it to fare better than many town centres through the recent economic downturn. The number of vacant shops has remained consistent over the past few years, representing some 7 % of the total stock.

Bexhill is able to offer a customer experience that differentiates it from its competitors, and it needs to draw upon these advantages if it is to prosper in the future.



## 4.0 WHAT OUR RESEARCH TOLD US

In drawing together this Strategy, we have carried out surveys of local residents and targeted groups, including young people and people in nearby towns.

We have also taken into account the research carried out for the draft Rother Core Strategy, in particular the Retail Health Check which researched shopping and spending patterns in and around Bexhill.

### What people like about Bexhill

Our research has revealed a very consistent picture of what people like about Bexhill town centre:

- its proximity to the sea
- its unique selection of independent shops
- its safe and quiet ambience.

### Why don't more people come here?

Face-to-face interviews with people within Bexhill's potential catchment (Hastings, Eastbourne, Polegate, and Pevensey) revealed that over 50% had not visited within the last 12 months, and the principal reason for this was that they **felt no reason to go**.

In other words, there are many potential customers who live within easy travelling distance who do not regularly come to Bexhill, and this is because they don't think there is enough here to interest them to make the journey. Bexhill is seen as pleasant, safe, quiet - but dull.

A survey of residents in connection with the Core Strategy revealed that some 20% of residents felt that no changes are necessary to Bexhill town centre, 36% sought improvements to car parking arrangements and provision, 26% would like to see a wider range of non-food retailers within the centre, and a further 20% felt that more national multiples would increase the attraction of the centre.



## 5.0 ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Town centres face their most challenging times in a generation. The current economic downturn, coupled with changing customer behaviours and expectations and the impact of technology, has had a dramatic effect on high streets up and down the country.

If Bexhill town centre is to prosper in the future it must find ways to **increase customer spending**. This means not simply attracting more footfall, but footfall coupled with spending power.

**At the heart of our strategy for the town centre must be the stimulation of opportunities for jobs and wealth creation.**

Looking to the future, those with wealth will be in a position to pick and choose to live in places which meet their aspirations. They will make those decisions based on the environment and image that is presented to them.

By contrast those without wealth tend to be less mobile. There is a danger that Bexhill will continue to decline in prosperity unless Bexhill can change its image and environment to attract more people with wealth and disposable income.

**Bexhill needs to be able to appeal to the aspirational, to the wealth generators of the future.**



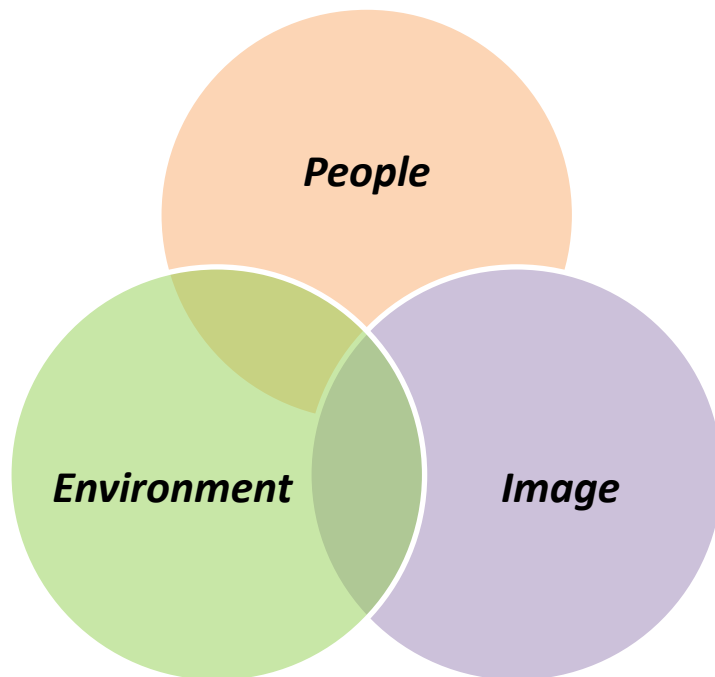


## Drivers for Change

The three factors that define a place and influence investment are:

- ❖ **People** – the type of people who live there (demographic, skills, spending power)
- ❖ **Environment** – what a place has to offer (facilities, activities, employment, leisure, culture)
- ❖ **Image** – how a place is perceived and presents itself

Each of these drivers are interlinked and each has an influence on the other.



**In Bexhill, the current position could be described below:**

### **People:**

Bexhill has a relatively low proportion of people of working age, rising as one gets older to a significantly higher-than-average proportion of elderly retired; and resulting in a restricted labour market.

### **Environment:**

Bexhill is seen a primarily residential town that is quiet and safe, but not stimulating. It is not perceived to offer opportunities to future investors or to potential customers, as evidenced by research and the low rental values.

### **Image:**

A safe and quiet town for the elderly with little to offer for younger people.

***If positive change is to happen, this strategy must seek to effect changes in all three of these areas.***

## 6.0 OPPORTUNITIES & CONSTRAINTS

In seeking to stimulate change, we need to have an understanding of the **opportunities** and **constraints** that have an influence on the town centre:

### Opportunities

**North East Bexhill** – significant growth is planned at North East Bexhill, which will provide in due course ½ million square feet of employment space and 1300 new homes. These people will need to shop somewhere!

**Retail Development** – The draft Core Strategy identifies that by 2028 Bexhill will need an additional 2,500 sq m (27,000 sq ft) of convenience retail floor space and 4,000 sq m (42,500 sq ft) of comparison floor space. The impact of any given scheme on the town centre will need to be carefully assessed through the planning process.

**The De La Warr Pavilion and seafront** – the continuing success of the De La Warr pavilion and the recent seafront refurbishments combine to attract visitors and potential spending power to Bexhill. Investment in cultural assets and public realm helps to enhance Bexhill's appeal as a place to live and work.

**Changing customer trends** – town centres are facing many challenges from changing customer behaviour and expectations. *Customers will make the effort to find something that is unique and of high quality.* Bexhill has the potential to take advantage of this due to its unique combination of seaside location, its large number of independent shops, and its attractive environment.

**Independent shops** – Collectively, Bexhill is able to offer a unique shopping experience due to the predominance of small, independent traders. The town's small businesses pride themselves on customer service and attention to detail, and this can be exploited as a competitive advantage for the town.

**Town Centre Residents** - Bexhill benefits from a significant residential presence in the heart of the town centre, which provides a readily available customer base.

## Constraints

**Low spending power and limited footfall** – The town centre's customer base includes a high proportion of people on limited or fixed incomes which limits the spending power available to businesses.

**Resistance to change** – Bexhill is seen by many of its residents as timeless and unchanging, and for some this is a significant factor in their decision to live here. This can lead to a strong resistance to change in some sections of the town's residents.

**Proximity of competing centres (Hastings & Eastbourne).** Each of these centres are within a half-hour travel time of Bexhill and each offers covered shopping centres and more multiple outlets. These will always draw customers from Bexhill and the majority of the High Street chains that choose to locate in Hastings or Eastbourne will not consider Bexhill for that reason. Bexhill cannot therefore expect to replicate what is offered there but must develop its own unique offer that differentiates it.

**The town is geared to serving a local market** – because of the nature of its customer base and the competing centres nearby; the town centre presents itself as catering for its existing local market rather than as somewhere to make a special visit from outside the area.

**Low prevailing commercial rental and capital values** means that new commercial development is hampered by lack of viability.

**Fragmented ownership** - there is no single major landowner with a controlling interest in the Town Centre. Town centre properties fall within a large number of different ownerships, some local to the area, some remote. As a consequence of this there is no strategic driver guiding investment decisions and no forward strategy for growing asset values.

**No natural focal point** - due to the grid layout of the town centre the shopping offer is spread out across a relatively wide area. Devonshire Square is the nearest thing to a focal point but currently it does not function in that way.

**The railway line** imposes a physical barrier that divides the town with limited connection points. There is no prospect of providing further vehicle connections, and additional pedestrian connections would need to be via footbridge, which would require the co-operation of Network Rail.

**Few development opportunities south of the railway line** and these are limited in size. It is unlikely that any major development scheme will come forward south of the railway due to the complex site assembly that would be required and the viability issues referred to above.

## 7.0 STRATEGIC AIMS & ACTIONS

This strategy seeks to stimulate change in the following ways:

- ❖ **By influencing the key drivers for change – People, Image, and Environment:**
- ❖ **By building on the town's existing strengths and responding to opportunities**
- ❖ **By overcoming the limitations imposed by the town's constraints**

We have therefore identified **six Strategic Aims**, which are set out opposite.

1. **Branding and Image:** Bexhill should develop and promote itself as a place to live, work and spend, by creating a strong brand identity that appeals to 'wealth generators' and enables it to attract investment.
2. **Investment / Development opportunities:** Bexhill should encourage and facilitate commercial development as close to the Town Centre as possible, to increase the employment base of people working in and around the town.
3. **Built Environment:** Bexhill should capitalise on its distinctive architectural character and ensure a joined-up approach to managing and improving the built environment and public realm.
4. **Traffic Management, Connectivity and Public Realm:** Bexhill should develop a cohesive approach to town centre traffic movement, connectivity and the public realm, and prioritise areas for improvement
5. **Housing:** Bexhill should improve the quality of housing stock in the town centre to attract people on higher incomes while maintaining an active, safe and relaxed town centre.
6. **Vitality:** Bexhill should develop and encourage events, festivals and activities within the Town Centre, and strengthen the marketing and promotion of the retail and leisure offer.



## 7.1 Branding and Image

Bexhill should develop and promote itself as a place to live, work and spend, by creating a strong brand identity that appeals to 'wealth generators' and enables it to attract investment

Mention 'seaside towns' and people generally have a mixture of responses and associations. On the one hand, many of us have positive (nostalgic) associations from childhood family holidays; on the other hand they are often seen as anachronistic backwaters in a state of terminal decline.

More recently, however, seaside towns have enjoyed a positive shift in their image, as quirky and exciting places to live, with a unique cultural blend. A good example is Brighton, which has transformed its image and identity over the past 20 years.

Bexhill is already well placed to benefit from this shift. It has a unique cultural asset of international reputation in the De La Warr Pavilion; and the town does not have the same negative associations of deprivation and crime suffered by its neighbour Hastings.

Our research tells us that Bexhill's image at the moment is pleasant, safe, but dull. However, the architectural heritage of the De La Warr Pavilion and its role as a centre for contemporary arts offers Bexhill some very different associations that it can capitalise upon, such as risk-taking, unusual and 'cutting edge'.

The 'Next Wave' refurbishment of the seafront also reflects this by deliberately creating a contemporary seafront that challenges tradition and offers something different. This has been very well received by the majority of local residents and, particularly, by visitors.

At the same time, Bexhill has retained many of its independent retailers and our research has shown that this is a characteristic that **distinguishes Bexhill from other competing destinations** in the eyes of customers.

Typically a 'brand' would seek to reinforce positive associations with a place or product - through key messages and slogans, the use of images, logos and graphics, and by 'telling the story'. Brighton, for example, has produced a Brand Guide for anyone using the 'Visit Brighton' brand and logo, which gives some very clear guidance on what makes the Brighton 'brand' what types of wording and images should be associated with it, and how to use it. The more businesses embrace this, the stronger the message.

**Bexhill should take positive steps to manage the image that it presents to the rest of the world.** The town and its businesses should aim to compete on the basis of quality, not price. It should develop an identity that promotes its uniqueness, and that places an emphasis on quality products and services.

## ACTIONS: Branding & Image

### 7.1a We need to develop an effective brand for Bexhill, and encourage as many businesses and stakeholders as possible to use it

We believe that Bexhill's brand should draw upon its seaside location and reflect its unique blend of cutting-edge modernity mixed with Edwardian elegance, with an emphasis on quality.

### 7.1b We need to strengthen the links between the De La Warr Pavilion's marketing and the rest of the town

The De La Warr Pavilion promotes Bexhill to a national and international audience, through its status as a modernist icon and through its exhibitions and events. This is the most potent promotional tool that the town has and we should make full use of it.

### 7.1c Develop and promote our 'niche market' independent shops

Bexhill has a number of unique 'niche' retailers, which should be more strongly promoted collectively. At the moment these businesses are spread around the town and in the long term it would be good to encourage a 'cluster' of businesses to act as a focal point.

### 7.1d Collaborate on information and promotions

There are many examples of towns that have joint promotional campaigns or loyalty card schemes, etc. all of which can help to underpin and support the town's brand. There is potential to do the same for Bexhill.



## 7.2 Investment & Development Opportunities

Bexhill should encourage and facilitate commercial development as close to the Town Centre as possible, to increase the employment base of people working in and around the town.

The economic health of Bexhill town centre will depend on the economic health of the town as a whole. For that reason the strategy for the town centre must have regard to the future investment planning in the rest of the town.

As stated earlier, at the heart of our strategy for the town centre must be the stimulation of opportunities for jobs and wealth creation.

The single biggest economic driver for the area will be the development of North East Bexhill, providing ½ million square feet of commercial floor space and 1,200 new homes, enabled by the Bexhill-Hastings Link Road.

### Employment

The town's single biggest employer is Hastings Direct. Their office is however situated too far from the town centre to be easily accessible to its staff for lunch breaks, etc. Hastings Direct are continuing to expand and there are opportunities for the town centre to benefit from this.

We should encourage and welcome speculative office development. The office developments that have been undertaken in Hastings' Priory Quarter, for example, would not have happened without significant public subsidy. In Bexhill, Hastings Direct represents the most likely source of 'demand' that could stimulate office development in, or near to, the town centre.

Other local employers may be encouraged to expand and help to stimulate interest from other occupiers in the future.

Apart from North East Bexhill, the sites with *potential* for providing employment use in the future lie at the *periphery* of the town centre.

- ❖ Sainsbury's store (Local Plan policy area BX 6)
- ❖ North side of Station Road (Local Plan policy area BX7)
- ❖ Beeching Road (Existing employment area)
- ❖ Former High School site (Local Plan policy area BX9)

These sites are highlighted in the Map in **Appendix 3**.

Of these locations, Beeching Road perhaps represents the best opportunity to create more job opportunities in the future. As freeholder Rother District Council will have a direct influence on any future development in that area. This will require careful forward planning and discussion with the many commercial interests there.

Elsewhere the Council may need to take the lead, by acquiring key sites in order to bring these forward where the private sector will not.

### Education Facilities

There may also be opportunities for expansion of education facilities in Bexhill, for example should there be further expansion of the University Centre Hastings, or other educational institution. This should be encouraged as close to the town centre as possible.

### Hotel

The draft Core Strategy identifies a need for both a boutique style hotel close to the De La Warr Pavilion catering for the top end of the market, and a 'travel inn' type hotel geared more towards business occupiers and friends & family visitors.

There are no obvious opportunities for the 'boutique' hotel at present, which would ideally have a seafront location and be as close to the De la Warr Pavilion as possible.

There have been tentative enquiries from operators seeking a location for a business class hotel; however no firm proposals have come forward.

### Leisure Facilities

The Council would like to provide for a new combined swimming pool and leisure complex on a single site. The relocation of the High School means that there may now be an opportunity to expand the existing Leisure Centre site.

The significant capital outlay involved means that external funding would need to be found.

### Food store

There is active interest from a number of food store operators who are seeking to fulfil the capacity requirement set out in the draft Core Strategy. At present the majority of interest has focussed on Beeching Road as a potential location.

The Council's policy position is that this requirement should be met in the town centre where possible. In the event of an application coming forward elsewhere it will be for the applicant to demonstrate why other options have been ruled out.

The Council must be aware of the possibility that Beeching Road may be demonstrated to be the most central viable and deliverable location for such development. In such

circumstances the Council would seek to maximise the benefits to the town centre of any such scheme and to make pedestrian access between the two as easy as possible.

### In the Town Centre

South of the railway line, opportunities for development are limited. In recent years the only developments of note south of the railway have been the predominantly residential schemes at the southern end of Sackville Road.

The creation of a **station entrance onto Devonshire Square** would enhance the use of that area and provide a much more direct access for rail passengers into the town centre. Discussions in the past with Network Rail about this idea did not prove fruitful, but this remains an opportunity worth pursuing.

The **Post Office** may also provide an opportunity for redevelopment or conversion to modern office accommodation if the depot facility were to be relocated.

**Western Road Market** has scope for upgrading and has potential to become a greater draw for the town, possibly by developing a specialist theme or niche market.

The former **Playhouse Cinema** in Western Road is, at the time of drafting, the subject of a planning application for redevelopment. Leisure facilities such as cinemas help to bring vibrancy to town centres and whether or not this is achievable in the existing building, we should seek to encourage such uses.



## **ACTIONS: Investment & Development Opportunities**

### **7.2a Prepare a 'Masterplan' for the Town Centre**

This will be delivered through the forthcoming Development and Site Allocations Development Plan Document (DPD) and if necessary, by a further Supplementary Planning Document. This will provide a spatial framework on which future investment decisions could be made, both by the private and public sector. It will also provide a statutory basis for raising future funding, whether that be through public sector sources or through private investment or development contributions.

### **7.2b Encourage the expansion of Hastings Direct into premises as close to the town centre as possible**

Should Hastings Direct need to expand beyond its present site, we should encourage them to do so in the town centre or close by. As the single largest employer in Bexhill, Hastings Direct staff brings considerable potential spending power to town centre businesses.

### **7.2c Explore opportunities to redevelop Beeching Road to provide for improved employment and growth**

Much of Beeching Road comprises low-density 'trading estate' uses which employ relatively few people. As freeholders the Council should plan for more high-density redevelopment to create more jobs and develop the town centre's customer base.

### **7.2d Acquire key sites to stimulate development, using compulsory purchase powers if necessary**

Commercial development is unlikely to take place if complex land assembly is required. The Council can take a proactive role to assist this process.

### **7.2e Re-open discussions with Network Rail with a view to establishing a station entrance at Devonshire Square**

This would help bring rail passengers into the heart of the town centre and improve the appearance of the northern side of Devonshire Square

### **7.2f Explore opportunities to make best use of the Post Office building**

Should the Post Office seek to relocate or rationalise its use of the building at Devonshire Square we should seek to make the most of that opportunity. For example the upper floors could provide managed workspace for start-up businesses.

### **7.2g Explore opportunities to refurbish the covered market in Western Road**

This has potential to become a themed market with specialist retailers that could be a genuine attractor for Bexhill.



### **7.2h Encourage 'clustering' of high quality retail outlets to stimulate change**

A proactive approach should be taken to encourage particular types of retail business to create a 'cluster'; possible measures include business rates incentives, or by agreement with property owners and managers; or by direct acquisition and management.

## 7.3 The Built Environment

**Bexhill should capitalise on its distinctive architectural character and ensure a joined-up approach to managing and improving the built environment and public realm.**

The town centre provides a fine example of an unusually complete Edwardian townscape built principally between 1880 and 1905. The architecture here is particularly consistent, with a variety of examples of competent Edwardian detailing.

The quality of the built environment plays a key part in defining the character of the town centre, and well-planned maintenance, management and improvement are key for the town's future aspirations.

### Conservation Area

Bexhill Town Centre is designated a Conservation Area and the boundary is indicated on the map in **Appendix 3**. When considering planning applications within, or affecting the setting of, the Conservation Area the Council has a statutory duty to ensure the 'desirability of preserving or enhancing the character of the area'.

In the past the Council had secured funding through the Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS) to support improvements to the historic built environment, which included a successful programme of restoring shop fronts to their original Edwardian design.

### Public Realm Management

Despite the town's Conservation Area status, there are aspects of the town centre's public realm that are poorly maintained, and there is currently little motivation for outside bodies who have statutory rights in the public realm to maintain high standards of repair and decoration. For example, utility companies regularly carry out works to the highway and do the bare minimum to 'make good' afterwards.

The Council has taken active steps to improve the appearance of the built environment through a targeted approach and by ensuring that issues such as graffiti and rubbish build-up are dealt with quickly.

### Private Properties

Whilst the public realm is, of course, the responsibility of the public sector, it is the responsibility of individual property owners and occupiers to maintain their premises.

Where properties are poorly maintained the Council has a statutory powers under a variety of legislation to require owners to carry out repairs to buildings. However, whilst these powers can be applied in cases of physical dereliction, they do not apply where, for example, a vacant shop is simply left looking untidy or where there is a build-up of uncollected mail. Few would disagree that such properties also create a negative impression.

Ideally no property owner should want to allow their property to fall into disrepair. The reason why this happens varies from case to case, however, dereliction is ultimately a sign of low values and the long-term solution is to enhance property values and stimulate investment.

### Grant Assistance

In the past, the Council has used English Heritage grant funding through the Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme, to encourage property owners and shop proprietors within the Conservation Area to upgrade their premises. The most visible result of this was the restoration of a number of town centre shop fronts to their original Edwardian design, and opportunities for funding for further work could be explored.

### Shop fronts and Signage

The Council has developed and adopted the Bexhill Town Centre Conservation Area Shop front & Signage Guidance, in order to control the design and appearance of shop fronts in the town centre. However, even in a Conservation Area there are a number of shop signs which do not require any permission for the Council. The only recourse against visually obtrusive signs in this respect is the serving of a 'Discontinuance Notice', for which there are strict statutory parameters.

### The Shopping Experience

Shopping in Bexhill on a warm sunny day is a delightful experience. However, the town centre offers little protection from the elements when the weather is poor, in contrast with the covered facilities available in Hastings and Eastbourne. Devonshire Square in particular and Devonshire Road could benefit from the provision of canopies to provide weather protection to customers.

### Trees & Planting

Devonshire Road and Sackville Road retain many of their mature trees, however there are several gaps where trees have been lost and not replaced. Bexhill Environmental Group has expressed an interest in trying to restore the full complement of trees in these streets.

This is a complex area as there are numerous hurdles to overcome, however Bexhill Environmental Group should be encouraged and supported in this initiative.

Floral displays, hanging baskets, etc. all help to brighten up the street scene and this should also be promoted and encouraged.



### Public Conveniences

The condition of public conveniences is known to have a strong influence on the public perception of a place, and traditionally these are owned and operated by the local authorities. Although councils are not *obliged* to provide these there is an expectation that they will do so.

Should future pressures on Council budgets put the maintenance regime at risk there will be a need to explore alternative models for the management and maintenance of public conveniences in the future.

## **ACTIONS: The Built Environment**

### **7.3a Establish a code of practice for works to the public realm, maintenance and replacement of street furniture, etc.**

This will help to underpin the town centre's Conservation Area status by ensuring that organisations responsible for carrying out works in the street, or who have equipment there, agree to a minimum standard for their repair and maintenance.

### **7.3b Maintain a high standard for addressing litter and graffiti**

Prevention is always better than cure and residents, businesses and the public at large clearly have a key role in maintaining 'pride of place'. The Council has a team dedicated to dealing with graffiti, fly-tipping etc. as part of its Planning Enforcement & Environmental regime.

### **7.3c Prevent and reduce the number of derelict properties**

The Council will continue to use its statutory powers to address derelict premises in the town centre. It's in the interests of property owners to avoid allowing properties to fall into disrepair, to maintain value and improve the return on their investment.

### **7.3d Keep vacant properties clean and tidy**

Property owners and their agents should be diligent in maintaining the appearance of empty properties. Common sense also suggests that this should enhance the prospect of re-letting.

### **7.3e Encourage temporary uses of empty shop properties**

There have already been examples in Bexhill where this has happened, for example through local artists' groups; and this can bring life into otherwise 'dead' frontage. However this action is dependent on the goodwill of owners and agents, for whom such arrangements can be time-consuming to put in place.

This approach is therefore best adopted for premises that have been vacant for some time, or that are in a particularly visible location.

### **7.3f Provide weather protection in Devonshire Square and Devonshire Road**

This will first require a technical assessment to establish what can be realistically achieved. Delivery would be dependent on the availability of external funding.

### **7.3g Restore trees to the Town Centre and encourage planting**

Bexhill should support and encourage proposals to restore trees to the town's key streets of Devonshire Road and Sackville Road. This is an opportunity for voluntary groups and businesses to collaborate.

### **7.3h Extend the programme to restore Edwardian shop fronts**

Ideally this would be led by property owners and occupiers; however it is likely that grant funding of some sort will be needed as an incentive to stimulate investment. This will depend on the availability of external funding. In addition the Council can use its regulatory powers to secure quality design, both through considering applications and enforcement.

### **7.3i Seek funding opportunities to support investment in the built environment and public realm**

External funding opportunities are limited and highly competitive. Having a clear strategy and defined objectives will be essential to making the case for any investment or public funding.



## 7.4 Traffic Management & Circulation

**Bexhill should develop a cohesive approach to town centre traffic movement, connectivity and the public realm, and prioritise areas for improvement**

Responsibility for transport and traffic management issues rests with East Sussex County Council. The County Council's Local Transport Plan (LTP3) sets out the County's overarching policies and priorities for funding.

Locally, Rother is working with the County Council to develop a **Traffic Management Framework** which will explore the feasibility of initiatives to improve traffic management and circulation in and around Bexhill Town Centre; which will then guide future investment by the County Council.

This Framework recognises that traffic management, the use of public spaces, and access in and out of the town centre will have a significant impact on the overall success of the Town Centre.

The Framework will cover the following issues:

- ❖ Sustainable transport strategies (including integration between modes of transport, and improving pedestrian, cycle and public transport initiatives).
- ❖ Accessibility of the Town (investigating vehicular, pedestrian, cycle and public transport routes into and out of the town, including linkages to the rest of Bexhill and strategic transport routes)
- ❖ Traffic Management within the Town Centre (e.g. investigating car-parking provision and location, 20mph zones, junction design, pedestrian zones, shared space,

direction of traffic flow and general connectivity and circulation)

- ❖ Public Realm design, management and maintenance (this should include all forms of signage, reflect the approach in the document 'Streets for All: South East' *English Heritage / Department for Transport 2006*)

There are a number of key areas that the Framework should consider. These include:

- **Seafront / Marina – improving pedestrian priority to encourage movement between the seafront and town centre**
- **Devonshire Square – consider how to make better use of this space as a focal point.**
- **Town Hall Square – make more pedestrian friendly**
- **Terminus Road / Sackville Arch / Beeching Road – improving pedestrian access**
- **Devonshire Road – making best use of its width to accommodate pedestrians and vehicles**
- **Western Road – improving the customer experience for pedestrians and vehicles**
- **Sackville Road – improving the junction with Marina and encouraging greater footfall**
- **St Leonards Road – looking at ways to encourage greater footfall**

Any recommended changes emerging from the Framework will require consultation with residents, businesses and other stakeholders.

The County Council has also recently been successful in its bid to the Government's Local Sustainable Transport Fund, which will provide funding to support a range of measures across the County aimed at encouraging the use of public transport, cycling and pedestrians.

A copy of the Local Transport Plan and the Local Sustainable Transport Fund bid can be viewed here:

<http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/roadsandtransport/localtransportplan/funding/default.htm>



### **Bexhill-Hastings Link Road**

The recent decision by the Government to fund the development of the Link Road will mean that there will be a direct route into Bexhill Town Centre from Hastings and the surrounding villages from the southern end of the Link Road via London Road. This creates an additional opportunity for the Town Centre to attract more customers from Hastings, for whom the travel time will be significantly reduced.

### **Car Parking**

Bexhill town centre enjoys free on-street parking in all of its shopping streets and this is seen by many as an advantage over competing centres such as Hastings and Eastbourne where on-street parking is charged. Parking is also free along the whole of Bexhill seafront.

The main public car park, adjacent to the De La Warr Pavilion, has capacity for 150 vehicles, with a further 39 spaces at Eversley Road. The car park at Wainwright Road has capacity for a further 80 vehicles but despite its being only a short walk for the town centre it is hardly used by town centre shoppers. This is mainly due to the poor connections to the town centre and the availability of on-street parking in the town centre itself.

Responsibility for the enforcement of parking regulations rests with Sussex Police however this is given a low priority in terms of manpower and as a result enforcement is poor. There is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that time-limited spaces are regularly 'tied up' all day by people working in the town centre.

Many local authorities have opted to deregulate on-street parking, in order to bring it under local authority control. In most cases this results in street parking charges (although this does not have to be the case). This approach has not been supported by Rother District Council to date.

The approach to managing on street parking should be considered in further detail. The Portas Review suggests for example that a two-hour parking limit discourages shoppers from staying in town centres and creates a 'park, grab and run' mentality. The potential impact of any changes in Bexhill would need to be carefully considered.

The draft Core Strategy refers to a need to increase overall car parking capacity and this aspect should be explored when considering any redevelopment proposals at the periphery of the town centre.

### **Pedestrian Signage**

A key challenge for the town centre is to capitalise on the many visitors that are attracted to the seafront and the De La Warr Pavilion. Research evidence indicates that visitors from outside who come to Bexhill to enjoy the seafront spend little in the town itself.

The geography of the town means that the town centre is not obviously visible to visitors on the seafront. Bexhill needs to capture more of the spending power offered by visitors through better promotion (see below) but also by more visible signposting, particularly from the seafront.

## **ACTIONS: Traffic Management & Circulation**

### **7.4a Complete the Traffic Management Framework and publish the results**

The purpose of the Framework is to develop a holistic pedestrian and traffic management strategy and explore where highway improvements could be made to improve access for both vehicles and pedestrians.

### **7.4b Prioritise and deliver improvements in the public realm based on the outcome of the Framework**

Individual projects will be subject to formal consultation in accordance with statutory requirements and would be delivered by the County Council as the Highway authority, subject to their inclusion in their programme of works.

### **7.4c Car Parking**

We should take a holistic approach to examining the current car parking arrangements and consider alternative approaches for regulation and enforcement.

### **7.4d Improve Signage**

Identify where signage can be improved to assist pedestrian circulation around the town and particularly from the seafront.





## 7.5 Housing

**Bexhill should improve the quality of housing stock in the town centre to attract people on higher incomes while maintaining an active, safe and relaxed town centre.**

Most large town centres are predominantly commercial with few residents living in the midst of their retail core. Bexhill is unusual in that there is a resident population living in its shopping streets, which is why Bexhill retains a strong 'service centre' role, catering for a local resident population that lives in the town centre itself or within walking distance from it.

However, housing in the town centre varies considerably in quality and there are clear distinctions between different parts of the town centre. Properties in primarily residential streets are generally sought after and well maintained; whereas much of the housing stock above the shops is of poor quality and contains a high proportion of occupiers on low incomes.

This is reflected in deprivation statistics which tell us that Bexhill town centre is one of the most deprived areas in Rother district.

However the general shortage of affordable accommodation means that there are plenty of potential tenants on low incomes looking for cheap accommodation. There is therefore little motivation for owners to invest in upgrading, because demand for budget accommodation is strong. This can lead to a cycle of decline, in which the condition of the building stock deteriorates and the area becomes unattractive as a place to live *except* for people with low incomes.

The challenge for the Town Centre is to stimulate investment into the existing housing stock to drive up rental and capital values; whilst providing a balance with affordable properties, to avoid pricing out younger people in particular.

### Public Sector Role

The Council has a number of statutory powers that it can use to stimulate investment:

- ❖ We have issued an Article 4 Direction for the Town Centre which requires planning permission to subdivide flats into bedsits and create Houses of Multiple Occupation:
- ❖ We can serve improvement notices on property owners whose premises fail to comply with environmental health or other statutory regulations:
- ❖ We can use Home Improvement Grants to assist landlords to invest in the necessary improvements, in exchange for granting Nomination Rights to the Council. This means that the Council will source suitable tenants from its Housing Register.

Taking this a step further, the Council's housing service is also able to offer landlords a comprehensive lettings and management service, on the basis that premises are brought up to standard and well-maintained thereafter.



Social Landlords, such as Housing Associations, can also contribute by acquiring and refurbishing town centre properties. This may also create opportunities to develop work and training opportunities for the people living in the town centre, in partnership with local businesses.

### **The Role of the Private Sector**

Where poor quality private rented accommodation exists, we should encourage a transition to owner-occupation or shared equity ownership.

Property owners should understand the long-term benefit from investing in the quality of the accommodation stock, which will be to drive up the value of their investment. Property agents and owners therefore have an important role in driving change.

Property owners should be encouraged to upgrade the quality of the housing stock. This will depend on individual circumstances, including the availability of capital. There also needs to be a strong business case for investment supported by evidence of proven success.

## **ACTIONS: Housing**

### **7.5a Use statutory powers to take a targeted approach to ensuring properties are well maintained**

By taking a targeted approach, focussing on one particular street or section of a street, it is expected that other property owners will be encouraged to invest in upgrading their own properties.

### **7.5b Encourage social landlords to acquire and refurbish town centre properties**

Social landlords have a role to play in accessing funds to improve the quality of the housing stock.

### **7.5c Offer assistance in managing town centre properties**

The Council will take a proactive role by offering a lettings and management service to town centre property owners. This may be coupled with grant funding to help towards the cost of improvements.

### **7.5d Encourage landlords to investment in refurbishment of poor quality housing**

As set out above, the public sector can lead by example and help stimulate activity. Managing agents should also be working with clients to make the case for investment, particularly where properties are in a poor condition. In the long term, better quality housing should lead to greater demand and stimulate higher values.



## 7.6 Vitality

**Bexhill should encourage and develop events, festivals and activities within the Town Centre, and strengthen the marketing and promotion of the retail and leisure offer**

### Events and Festivals

Bexhill has a range of events taking place throughout the year; including **Bexhill Carnival**, **Bexhill 100 events**, **Bexhill Horse Show**, and the **Bexhill Music Festival**.

Often these events are managed by local volunteers with minimal resources, whereas promotion can be a significant cost.

Some events, such as the annual sea rowing regatta, attract competitors from all over the country but do not necessarily have 'mass market' appeal.

In addition, the **De La Warr Pavilion's** programme generates activity throughout the year and is promoted on a regional, national and even international basis. Exhibitions of work by internationally renowned artists such as Anthony Gormley and Andy Warhol are complemented by festivals and activities.

There are two main benefits to developing local events:

1. Events can (and should) attract additional trips to the area, (whether from local residents or further afield), generating additional spend:
2. Events are a good way to enhance a town's profile and image to the world at large.

There have been many suggestions put forward for new or enhanced events for Bexhill. In considering how Bexhill should develop events to its benefit in the future, we should at all times

consider whether an event will contribute towards these two objectives.

Our research indicates that events could be an attractor to encourage trips from neighbouring towns such as Eastbourne and Hastings. The success of events such as Hastings' Seafood and Wine Festival, Jack In The Green, etc. also provide evidence that events drive footfall.

Most recently the Council has been working with the Bexhill Sea Angling Club to establish a Sea Angling Festival, the first of which took place in September 2012.

However, events which attract large numbers of people are not universally popular, particularly with residents who are directly affected by road closures, congestion, noise, litter etc. Organising and promoting major events and festivals takes a lot of time and can be expensive. Major events tend to be supported by commercial sponsorship, however this has proven difficult to achieve in the past.



## Activities and Animation

As an alternative to large 'showpiece' events, town centres can add interest to the shopping experience through other, low-level activity. Street performers, art exhibitions, markets, cooking demonstrations, etc. all add vibrancy and create a sense of fun.

The Portas Review highlights the role of markets and recommends a review of street trading regulations, along with a 'National Market Day' to encourage start-up businesses to test their ideas.

## Markets

Our research indicates that a regular market would be a popular addition to Bexhill's offer, and would be a draw for local residents and people from outside the town alike. The Portas review also strongly promotes markets as a way of generating interest and activity.

A successful market also creates its own 'buzz' that encourages people to explore and spend. It can also offer a useful testing ground for start-up retailers without the financial risks associated with taking on shop premises.

For a number of years the Chamber of Commerce has organised an 'Anglo-Continental Market' in Devonshire Road; and Bexhill Environmental Group is currently seeking to establish a regular farmers' market in Devonshire Square.

## Marketing & Promotion

The tourism and retail offer of Bexhill is promoted in a number of ways.

- Individual businesses and attractions carry out their own personal marketing, mainly to local markets. This ranges from door-to-door leaflets, newspaper advertisements, websites, etc.;

- Tourism marketing – the Council supports the umbrella 1066 Country Campaign and also contributes to locally-branded tourism marketing carried out by the Chamber of Commerce;
- Independent websites such as Discover Bexhill also promote the town;
- The De La Warr Pavilion carries out its own promotion and marketing to its target market, which complements other destination marketing.

Historically there has been no concerted promotion of the town centre's retail offer. However, recently this has become the focus of activity by local traders, who have organised Christmas promotions and produced a Shoppers' Guide. Other initiatives could be considered, including customer loyalty schemes & joint promotions, a dedicated website and greater use of internet technology such as QR codes; and targeted promotions and events around key dates such as Christmas, Easter, and Bank Holidays etc.

## Community Facilities

As well as the familiar shops, banks, cafes and the like, there is an opportunity to encourage new and innovative facilities and businesses. Bexhill is already fortunate in the range of goods and services it provides; facilities such as a crèche, or start-up premises for small businesses could help to add interest and new ideas.



## Devonshire Square

Devonshire Square offers a potential focal point for the town centre, however currently it only fulfils that function when there are events taking place there; for example at Christmas as the location for the Christmas tree and carol singing. The removal of car parking some ten years ago continues to be a contentious issue for some.

Devonshire Square is still classified as public highway and as such any activity which might cause an obstruction requires a road closure, even if it is taking place on the pedestrianised area. As public highway the area falls under the management responsibility of the County Council, however it is often assumed that Rother District Council is responsible, and Rother tends to be the first point of contact for enquiries about the use of the space.

There is no doubt that Devonshire Square should be better used as a place for events and activities; and that the complex legal and administrative arrangements act as a barrier to achieving this. One solution could be to declassify the pedestrianised area as public highway, and for Rother to take on the management of the area on behalf of the County Council.

The area is also governed by byelaws which regulate the types of activity that can be carried out. At present the byelaws only permit events to be carried out by non-profit making organisations, such as the Chamber of Commerce or voluntary groups. However, Devonshire Square has potential to host a range of commercially-led activity, such as promotions or street markets, which would be prohibited under the current byelaws.





## ACTIONS: Vitality

### 7.6a Encourage events and activities that attract greater footfall to the town centre

Events and activities should ideally help to build upon and contribute towards developing the brand identity for the town in support of **Action 7.1a**. The Council can support this through its regulatory role and assisting in promotion through the 1066 Country campaign.

### 7.6b Promote the retail offer

Our research has suggested that Bexhill's key selling points are its seaside location and its range of independent traders. We should make the most of promoting these, as part of developing the town's **brand identity (Action 7.1a)**

### 7.6c Establish Devonshire Square as a market venue

At time of writing Bexhill Environmental Group are currently seeking to establish a regular Farmers' Market at Devonshire Square. If this is successful this may help to encourage more similar events, for example other themed markets that could attract a wider catchment.

### 7.6d Review the management arrangements for Devonshire Square

To encourage people to make better use of Devonshire Square, the Council will work with East Sussex County Council to review how this area is managed and operated.

### 7.6e Encourage the provision of facilities such as a crèche, 'pop-up' shops for start-up businesses, artists' workshops, etc., to add variety and interest to the town centre offer.

As with encouraging temporary uses (**Action 7.3e**), this will depend on the co-operation of landlords and agents, as well as having organisations able and willing to come forward with ideas and proposals.



## 8.0 MANAGEMENT & CO-ORDINATION

**As we state in the Introduction, this strategy is not just about what the Council can do.**

**If Bexhill's town centre is to flourish it will need the commitment of all of those who have a stake in it.**

The Council has established a Town Centre Steering Group which has overseen the development of this strategy, including the research and consultation that has taken place to date.

In addition, the Steering Group has worked hard to establish closer working relationships with East Sussex County Council who have responsibility for the highway and much of the public realm, which is a key aspect of this Strategy.

Following discussions with town centre retail businesses through a series of workshops in 2011, a number of local businesses decided to form the **Bexhill Traders Group** to develop ideas and projects that promote the interests of the town's retailers. The Bexhill Traders Group have organised activities around Christmas and have developed a **Shopping Guide** for Bexhill.

The **Portas Review** recommends that a partnership approach is taken to driving changes to town centres, bringing together all of the interested groups and statutory bodies to form a **Town Team**.

In response to the Portas Review the Government has made funding available to support a number of pilot schemes to test the Town Team approach. In March 2012 the Bexhill Traders Group submitted a bid to the **Portas Pilot** fund, one of over 330 applications for 12 pilot schemes, but this was unfortunately not successful.

Funding issues aside, a partnership approach, whether called a 'Town Team' or something else, is essential if real, positive change is going to happen. This will need to bring together residents, businesses, councils, landowners and community groups. **Bexhill should embrace the 'Town Team' approach and help to make it work.**

### Who's going to do the work?

It's vital that the people involved in the Town Team are fully committed to putting time, energy and enthusiasm to make it work.

However, we know it can be difficult for volunteers, particularly businesses, to keep this momentum going over a period of time. This may sometimes be due to the demands of running their own businesses, or due to the fact that results can sometimes take a long time to achieve and require a great deal of time and perseverance.

In addition, it is human nature to disagree! Anyone involved in leading projects and initiatives is likely to receive negative comments or criticism at some time or another. This can lead people to lose the motivation that drove them to get involved in the first place.

**We should recognise that there is a limit to what can be achieved by relying on the goodwill of volunteers alone.**

Many towns employ Town Centre Managers, whose roles vary from town to town but typically involve co-ordinating marketing, promotion and events, and working with businesses, the police and local authority to help reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

Most commonly the cost of a Town Centre Manager is met by a combination of funding from the Local Authority and from local businesses; although there are examples where the cost is met wholly by the local Council.

Whilst Bexhill does not employ a dedicated Town Centre Manager, many Council officers are already closely involved in supporting the town centre and delivering services there; whether that be through planning, waste collection, environmental health, licensing, tourism, parks and gardens, etc. However the Council does not currently have a dedicated officer with specific responsibility for co-ordinating the development of the actions set out in this document.

## Funding

When the Council was holding workshops with retailers last year, one comment made was; 'If there's no money on the table what's the point in coming up with projects?'

This Strategy is intended to set out the areas where projects should be developed in more detail, and to show how these contribute to the prosperity of the town centre.

There is no doubt that on-going reductions in public spending mean that public sector funding, including from the Council, will be increasingly difficult to come by. When funding opportunities do arise these are invariably highly over-subscribed and extremely competitive (like the Portas Pilots).

**This means that only very good projects that have been well thought out and with a clear rationale, stand any chance of receiving public sector support.**

Fundraising is more likely to be successful therefore where a degree of project development has already taken place and projects are 'oven ready'.

If a 'Town Team' for Bexhill is put in place it will need to look at many different options for raising funds, and not just look to the Council or public sources such as the Lottery. Many town centres have established **Business Improvement Districts**, whereby businesses and public bodies jointly fund an agreed set of activities over a specified timescale. This would require businesses to collectively agree to contribute to this process.

Other sources of funding should also be considered, depending on the nature of the activity concerned; this could range from development contributions from planning permissions to jumble sales.

## **ACTIONS: Management & Co-ordination**

### **8a Establish a 'Town Team' for Bexhill**

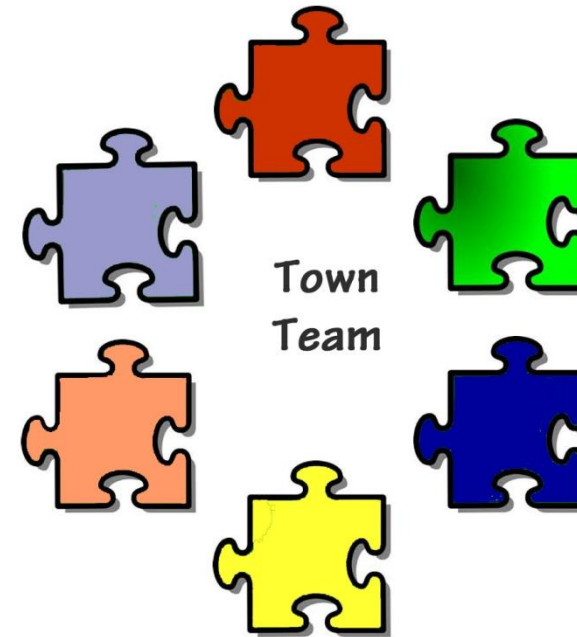
This should bring together businesses, residents, community groups, public services and property owners to oversee the implementation of this Strategy

### **8b Investigate the possibility of establishing a Town Centre Co-ordinator**

The role of a Co-ordinator will be to provide advice and support to the Town Team and assist in project development with partners. This is different therefore to the more traditional role of a 'town centre manager'.

### **8c Develop an implementation plan and secure resources to support delivery**

This should be led by the Town Team who will need to prioritise actions and identify how implementation will be resourced.



## APPENDIX 1: Policy Context

The Proposed Submission version of the Council's Core Strategy contains the following policy specific to Bexhill Town Centre:

### **Policy BX2: Bexhill Town Centre**

**The Strategy for Bexhill Town Centre is to:**

- (i) Promote a co-ordinated town centre initiative to improve its use for shopping, services and leisure, including through investment in the public realm, increased parking capacity, links to the seafront, activities and marketing;**
- (ii) Develop a holistic pedestrian and traffic management strategy that combines improved accessibility for buses and additional parking capacity with ensuring a more attractive shopping environment;**
- (iii) Provide for some 2,500sqm additional convenience goods and 4,000sqm comparison goods floor space, primarily through 'edge of centre' retail expansion on the north side of the railway, as well as effective use of town centre accommodation;**
- (iv) Provide for hotel accommodation, well related to the town centre and/or the De la Warr Pavilion;**
- (v) Facilitate leisure, office and high quality residential developments within walking distance of the centre;**
- (vi) Ensure that development and change respects and, where appropriate, enhances the late Victorian/Edwardian character of the Conservation Area.**

While policy BX1 'Overall strategy for Bexhill' includes the following section regarding wider Bexhill transport issues:

- (i) Improve road, rail, bus and cycling access within Bexhill and between the town and Hastings, via an integrated sustainable local transport strategy for the Bexhill and Hastings area, key elements of which will be:**
  - (a) the Bexhill to Hastings Link Road, associated 'greenway' and new 'quality bus corridors';**
  - (b) provision for a new railway station adjacent to Ravenside Retail Park;**
  - (c) a cycle network that focuses on 'utility' routes to the town centre, schools, colleges and workplaces, and recreational routes into the Countryside Park and along the seafront**



## APPENDIX 2: Economic & Social Context

### History

Bexhill-on-Sea is typical of many seaside towns in England which have undergone a decline since their heyday as coastal tourist resorts. This was due to many external factors such as the availability of the car; cheap overseas travel; and changes in consumer expectations, attitudes and habits.

This has led to a general economic decline relative to more prosperous parts of the South East, as the loss of tourism income was not replaced by growth in other commercial activity. Poor road and rail links, and a limited catchment meant that coastal towns such as Bexhill were not seen as favourable locations for manufacturing or distribution, or as a business headquarters.

Many former hotels and bed-&-breakfast properties were converted to rented accommodation or nursing homes, which coupled with a relative decline in property values led to an in-migration of people on low incomes, encouraging a trend towards a local economy becoming more dependent on retirement or benefit populations. This has not been helped in some cases by local authorities in London actively choosing to re-house people with care needs in coastal towns.

Bexhill, in common with many other coastal towns, suffers from some structural economic weaknesses. With spending dependent on predominantly retirement or benefit populations many seaside towns have found it difficult to overcome this spiral of decline. Alternative economic strategies have proved difficult as their location puts them at a disadvantage for attracting other

industries such as manufacturing and distribution. The decline in visitor numbers; 180 degree catchments (i.e. the sea forms 50% of the border); reduction in rail networks; older poor conditioned housing attracting an in-migration of the less well-off and economically inactive; an out-dated offer; tourist accommodation lag; higher maintenance requirements of the public realm; ageing population; negative perceptions; centres of multiple deprivation; weather dependency; and urban design conflicts: - these have all proved to be key factors leading to the decline of seaside towns in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

It is also recognised that the economic boost of a holiday season is no longer sufficient to sustain many resort towns and therefore seaside resorts must look to alternative economic drivers to improve their prosperity.

### Demography

Bexhill's economy reflects a combination of the town's history, seaside location, and quiet character, with relatively low house prices compared to the wider South East. There is a significantly high proportion of older people, with 36.5% of the population aged over 65 years, which compares with 23.4% for East Sussex and 17.3% for the South East. The proportion of children, younger adults and people aged 30-44 are all notably lower than county and region averages. Employment is highest in the service industries and there is a relatively high dependency on the public sector. Unemployment is higher than the rest of the District, with pockets of particular disadvantage. Despite its size, more people commute out of Bexhill than come to it for work.

**Bexhill's customer base is therefore dominated by those on relatively low or fixed incomes.**

## The Town Centre

Bexhill town centre is mainly made up of small unit shops, with a relative shortage of larger units that would suit national multiple retailers. The pattern of ownership is dominated by owner-occupiers or private investors, many of whom have limited available capital to invest in refurbishment or redevelopment. Importantly, the absence of institutional owners means that there is no investment-led strategy to drive change.

The town centre is strong in the service sector, but relatively weak in the convenience (food) and comparison (clothing, etc.) sectors.

The chief competition to Bexhill town centre comes from Eastbourne and Hastings. In addition, competition comes from nearby Ravenside Retail Park (which also captures a significant number of shoppers who might otherwise go to Hastings), as well as out-of-centre stores such as the Asda store at Sovereign Harbour and the enlarged Tesco store at Churchfields.

Despite the current economic downturn, vacancy rates in the town centre remain low compared to national averages. Rental and capital values are low however, when compared to other towns of similar size.

This reflects the fact that the town centre currently functions mainly as a service centre for local residents, rather than as a destination capable of drawing visits from elsewhere. **The town centre is currently not attracting significant spending power from higher-earning customers.**

The chief threats to the town centre come from nearby competing towns, in particular Eastbourne and Hastings. In addition, competition comes from nearby Ravenside Retail Park (which also captures a significant number of shoppers who would otherwise have gone to Hastings), as well as out-of-centre stores such as the Asda store at Sovereign Harbour and the enlarged Tesco store at Churchfields.

The town centre is predominately made up of small unit shops, with a relative shortage of larger units that would suit national multiple retailers. The pattern of ownership is dominated by owner-occupiers or private investors, many of whom have limited available capital to invest in refurbishment or redevelopment. Importantly, the absence of institutional investors means that there is no investment-led strategy to drive change.

The town centre is strong in the service sector, but relatively weak in the convenience (food) and comparison (clothing, etc.) sectors. It functions primarily as a service centre for local residents, rather than as a destination capable of drawing significant numbers of visits from elsewhere.

This is borne out by survey evidence carried out both in connection with the draft Local Development Framework, and by the Town Centre Steering Group.

## APPENDIX 3: Spatial Context

Previous studies have identified some key spatial principles to help improve the vitality of the town centre that this strategy will adhere to:

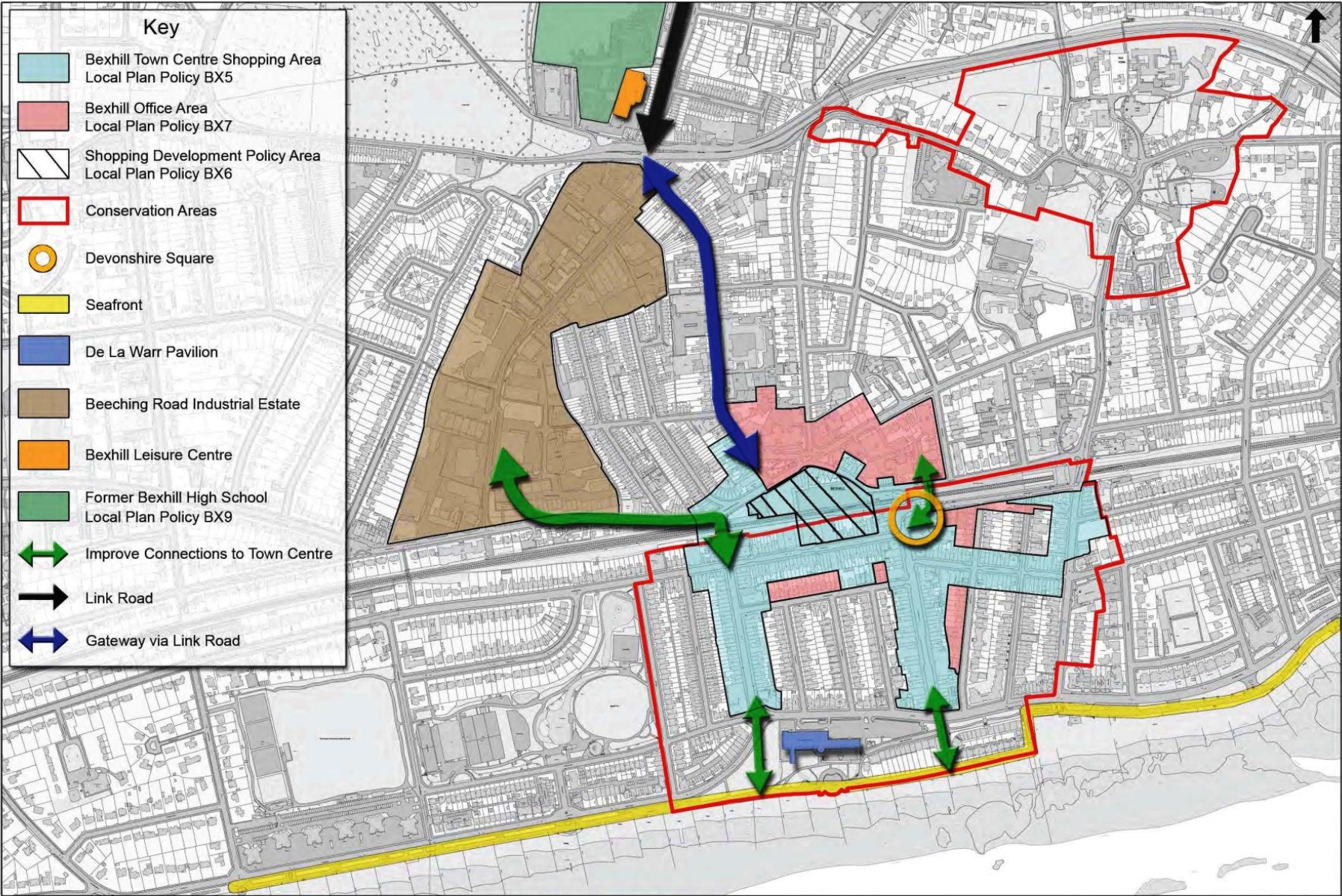
- To improve and encourage pedestrian flow between the seafront and the retail 'core'
- To encourage better pedestrian movement around the town
- To improve connectivity between the areas north of the railway line and the retail 'core' to the south of the railway line
- To achieve a station entrance at Devonshire Square,
- To improve pedestrian movement between Beeching Road and the Town Centre
- To improve the appearance of the built environment, in particular the key 'gateway' route of London Road

Meanwhile there are some major changes expected in and around Bexhill through a variety of planned and potential developments, most significantly:

- The Bexhill-Hastings Link Road
- The North-East Bexhill Development Scheme (a major urban expansion to the town, including some 1,300 dwellings and 50,000 sq m of business space, dependent on the Link Road)
- Future developments at Ravenside Retail Park by way of intensified retail presence and the Core Strategy policy regarding a potential future rail halt at Ravenside.
- Additional food store provision as set out in the Local Plan and draft Core Strategy
- Possible redevelopments at Beeching Road
- Potential to redevelop or re-use the existing Sainsbury site and land on the opposite side of Station Road
- Potential to redevelop or re-use the Post Office site at Devonshire Square.
- Potential for an enlarged leisure centre, possibly by expanding the existing facility as part of a redevelopment at the former High School site



# APPENDIX 3: Map of Bexhill Town Centre



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