

Waterlines

The newsletter of the
Sovereign Harbour Residents Association



Issue 33

www.shra.co.uk

Special Edition

Don't be distracted by Politics

This special edition of Waterlines is the first of its kind. It has been prompted by an unprecedented campaign against the SHRA, but more importantly the work it does in support of the community. Having said this I would have been loath to 'put pen to paper' if this was just 'another complaint' by a body being pressed to deliver something for the Harbour, but sadly it isn't. It relates to what appears to be a politically motivated attack, which has been launched using the most outlandish and unjustified claims, on a member of the SHRA Committee and a key piece of the work we are undertaking on your behalf.

I'm sure you're as fed up as we are with this distraction from the work we need to do. However, we believe we owe it to residents to reaffirm what the SHRA Committee stands for and to dispel the propaganda being churned out by the Liberal Democrat political machine. In particular the issue of a parish council for the Harbour appears to be central to the attacks. This issue is too important to let the politicians play games with, so I've singled it out below. Just so nobody gets confused, the terms Parish Council and Community Council are interchangeable. Under the old legislation (until April 2008) the only option is to call the most local level of council a Parish Council. However, under new legislation there will be freedom to call this a Community Council, which in our view reflects what this is about.

SHRA Strategy

It must first be recognised that unlike the Borough Council, the SHRA has no

statutory rights or powers. We care passionately about making the Harbour a better place and developing a close community in which we can take pride. This isn't meant to sound grand; we live here and want it to be better. For three years, the current SHRA Committee's underlying principles have been firstly to use every tool available to consult and engage residents. We started Waterlines and a website, and seek your views through monthly surgeries and open meetings. Secondly, we are non party-political, which is truly important since we are trying to represent *all* Harbour residents. I don't need to go over again the reasons why the Harbour has ended up without the facilities it needs, but influencing EBC and the developers remains crucial. As such, we keep Council priorities under review and keep a critical eye on what our ward councillors are doing on our behalf. We challenge them if we are concerned and make no apologies for it.

When the Conservatives were the controlling group on the Council, they felt uncomfortable with this and labelled us as Lib Dem activists. It took some time but they eventually realised we weren't political fanatics, and a productive working relationship resulted. Now the Lib Dems lead the Council and they are convinced we are Tory biased! Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised, but it is disappointing since, at the start of their term, we approached our new ward councillors and their leaders in the hope that they would share our priorities and work with us.

Where We Are and What's at Stake

Instead of seeing SHRA as partners in delivering residents' aspirations, the Lib Dem machine appears to see us as a threat. I personally find this difficult to understand, since the SHRA has a three-year track record of listening to residents and promoting their views and I expected that our ward councillors would have put this as their first priority, before any Party interests. Taking some words from a recent article in the Herald (1/2/08), it appears that our ward councillors believe SHRA is trying to undermine their authority. I personally might have an argument with the thought that by voting for a councillor I have given them authority over me, but the real issue is that the electorate places its trust in them to do the best for Sovereign Ward. I'm really not interested in re-election campaigns and platforms to get this or that Parliamentary candidate elected, whatever their political persuasion.

It's about time Sovereign Harbour was put first, and our ward councillors have power and resources to actually deliver what SHRA and residents have been fighting for – why do they think we want to undermine them? We only go on the offensive when we have doubts that residents' priorities do not appear to be their main interest. This policy has been consistent, irrespective of what administration has been in place.

There is a great deal at stake when our elected representatives refuse to engage with the SHRA. By putting politics at the top of their agenda they will undermine confidence and give comfort to those who don't have Harbour interests at heart. If Harbour residents are going to get what they want and needs it can only happen if our elected representatives are prepared to work for and with the community, as a team.

We believe that the work of the SHRA and the support given by residents has been fundamental in heading off development plans, which would have irrevocably harmed our community environment and were a key feature in

the negotiations between Carillion and EBC. Undoubtedly it also influenced the cross party motion against any further residential development on the Harbour. It is because of the work done by residents that our elected representatives start off in a better position than any former group. We could have anticipated that they would spend their energies capitalising on this and delivering what we need. If this is their priority then SHRA will be with them every step of the way.

A Community Council - Forget the Politics, Look at the Facts

Irrespective of what residents think of the attacks against the SHRA and its Committee members by the Liberal Democrats, it has been successful in giving them a platform in the press. This has enabled them to publicise their resistance to the campaign to trigger a review of the application to set up a Community Council. It might be concluded that this was the reason behind the attacks and that they underpin a political campaign against this initiative by the governing group of the Borough.

We thankfully live in a democracy and although I might not like their negative campaigning, it is clearly the right of the Lib Dems to take a stand if they wish. However, we would have anticipated that this would align with their national policy and principles and they can put up facts to back up their campaign. Let's have a look at this policy and principles

Fact: In order to better understand the National Lib Dem policy on devolving power to communities we visited their website. An article (10/1/08), relating to Lord Greaves, Lib Dem Communities and Local Government spokesperson indicates that the Party champions community empowerment in local government.

Well, perhaps these are just empty words? Not a bit of it!

Fact: The Bexhill Observer (8/2/08), reported that Lib Dem volunteers have produced a petition in support of Bexhill

having its own local council. It appears that 80% of electors approached favour having their own council. No surprise for us – our experience on the Harbour indicates an even greater level of support from our local community.

Why are Bexhill's aspirations actively supported by Lib Dems while ours are actively rejected without debate? Is it reasonable to deny Sovereign Harbour residents the opportunity to take part in the improved democratic process that the law allows? Why do our councillors believe it is against their interests to allow residents to exercise some control of their own environment at the community level? Is it something to do with this 'authority' they value so highly?

Let's look at the arguments put forward by our ward councillors in newsletters and press articles; let's try to sort out the fantasy from the facts and put the facts in context.

- “.every householder will end up with another tax bill of probably hundreds of pounds per year” This was a quote from an article in the Herald (22/2/08) from an attendee at a meeting organised at the house of one of our ward councillors.
- “This extra payment which could be hundreds of pounds per household, would be to finance a group of people debating non-existent cemeteries, allotments, war memorials and common pastures!” This was a quote from a letter in the Herald (15/2/08) written by Cllr. Bloom entitled “Drop the parish council dream, Ian” (referring to Ian Weeks, communication officer for the SHRA).

- “Just consulting residents could cost £6000 of their hard-earned money and that's before the Council's up and running, Residents could then pay upwards of £100 a year in a 'Parish Tax' – on top of their existing Council Tax”. This is a direct quote by our ward councillors from the Lib Dem newsletter, 'Sovereign Focus' a few weeks ago.

It's all scary stuff for residents, apparently 'having their pockets felt' at the whim of a wayward residents' association, but

fortunately it is misleading and wrong.

Fact: Having consulted with the Sussex & Surrey Associations of Local Councils (SALC) SHRA can quote annual council tax contributions (precepts) to support parish councils in East Sussex are typically around £40 - £60 per household per annum.

Fact: The cost will depend on what services the residents want the Council to carry out. There are parishes in East Sussex where the precept exceeds £100, but these are the largest towns often undertaking work on behalf of district or county councils. In return district or county council costs are reduced, which offsets the parish charges. SALC has confirmed that experience has shown that work can be carried out more responsively and cost effectively when it is addressed at 'community level'.

Fact: Initial figures calculated by SALC suggest that the year one cost to residents of setting up a community council will be around £6 per household, while the Year 2 cost will still remain below £10. Why so low, you might ask? The answer is that this is the basic running cost for the Council. As has been said, what it becomes is entirely down to what you want it to do. Typically, when there is a fully functioning parish council offering services to a community of Sovereign Harbour's size a Band D property would pay around £40 - £50 per annum.

Fact: The suggestion that all parish councils do is manage “cemeteries, allotments, war memorials and open pastures” shows a lack of experience and knowledge, or a cynical disregard of the facts.

Fact: Community councils are statutory bodies with a wide range of powers too extensive to cover here, but which include the following:

- The right to see and comment on all planning applications within the parish.
- The ability to enact by-laws regarding such things as pleasure grounds and open spaces.
- The power to provide community

facilities.

- The power to borrow a limited amount of money, as set by Government, for the benefit of the parish or its inhabitants.
- The power to take steps to prevent crime, such as installing CCTV, requiring and paying for additional policing of the parish, etc., working closely with Neighbourhood Panels and Local Action Teams.
- The power to maintain footpaths, light roads and public spaces, provide litter bins, provide parking for vehicles, provide traffic signs, etc.,
- The right to act as an agent for the local district or borough, county or unitary authority and deliver nearly any service or amenities that would otherwise be provided for the parish by that local authority.

Fact: The £6000 cost of consultation referred to by our ward councillors could apply. However, this will depend on the level of consultation undertaken by the Borough – it's largely up to them what they spend on the consultation exercise. This cost will be borne by Eastbourne as a whole, not just Sovereign Harbour. I think it's fair to say that, since developers have been and currently still are largely responsible for our service infrastructure, we have been contributing council tax at the full rate for some years now, without much back. In the circumstances I don't think residents need to feel too guilty about EBC carrying this cost bearing in mind the ultimate aim is to improve our community environment.

We hope this helps you to understand the situation and balances the campaign of 'smoke and mirrors' that has been promulgated. Just to be absolutely clear, the SHRA has not changed its position. The idea for a Community Council was not ours, it came from a resident on South Harbour who is not a Committee member. We have tried to inform residents and give them a choice. We would not try and force something on Harbour residents that they didn't want, and would not try to promote something

that we felt had no merit. We believe that Harbour residents, having suffered from the policies and apparent neglect of the Borough in the past, deserve the right to take as much control of their environment as possible. However, as electors, that remains your choice.

Circulation of the petition, which was put on hold while the implications of the changing legislation were reviewed, will be restarted. We hope you will now feel able to make an informed decision as to whether to add your signature.

A Plea for Common Sense

To our ward councillors and their leaders; forget the party politics, stop wasting your time and energy fighting SHRA, and put the interests of residents first. You have a great opportunity to justify the trust the Harbour electorate has placed in you, not by talking, and claiming credit for the achievements of others, but by delivering their expectations.

You are spoilt for choice. We need a health centre, and we have already waited too long, we need a community centre commensurate with the size of the Harbour community, we need recreation facilities for our children, we need a fairer deal than Sovereign Harbour Trust is giving us, and we need our drainage systems and roads adopted, to mention just a few. The SHRA will continue to fight, but you believe you have the authority and power, so please work with us and deliver what residents need.

Where now?

As Chairman of the SHRA I am proud of the spirit and commitment of our Committee, and believe we must continue to drive our existing policies.

However, we work for the members and it is they who must decide the direction in which the Association will go. The AGM on 1st May will present an ideal opportunity to express your views and decide whether changes are necessary. I look forward to meeting you there.

Rick Runalls
SHRA Chairman