

Parish Council

Update

Separating facts from fiction



Why the harbour needs a Community Council

The SHRA committee has always recognised that the proposal to petition for the creation of a Community Council for Sovereign Harbour would not be universally accepted by harbour residents.

In the lead-up to the open meeting that took place at the Haven School on 2nd October, we made every effort to allow opponents to put their case, despite their attempts to frighten residents with misleading statements about potential costs; indeed, their whole case against the proposal is based around cost.

However, having carefully examined the pros and cons, we came to the view that the benefits far outweighed the disadvantages, and took the decision to start the process by collecting signatures for the petition that would trigger the Local Governance Review that eventually led to the referendum that will take place during October.

It is perhaps not surprising that the SHRA committee and very many Harbour residents feel that a local council would better represent their interests than the Borough Council that abjectly failed to ensure that the necessary social infrastructure was planned in along with the 3700 flats and houses.

The popular cry from the politicians is that this is all history and we shouldn't keep going on about it. Perhaps we could accept this if it wasn't patently obvious that they have done nothing to rectify the situation and don't seem to learn from their mistakes.

Harbour residents are very angry that they were misled by developers and

are demanding that their grievances are heard. A Community Council would provide a formal voice for the community that could not be ignored, and a major step forward in the management of our own future. So why do the EBC administration continue to feel threatened by something that would be of major benefit to the Harbour?

Anyone attending the recent Open Meeting would have heard David Tutt, Leader of the Borough Council say that he was neutral as far as a Community Council is concerned. Very reasonable, but within minutes a Sovereign Ward councillor was arguing that residents should vote 'No' to a Community Council because the Borough Council would do everything that the Harbour needs.

An article, by this Sovereign Ward councillor in the Eastbourne Herald said that residents had been excluded from discussions on future harbour development at Carillion's request, because the discussions would include 'financially confidential' information that it would be inappropriate to share, and that was totally reasonable. The article also denied that Sovereign Ward's County Councillor, Cllr. Elkin, had also been excluded from the meeting.

At the open meeting, however,, Cllr. Elkin personally confirmed that he had in fact been excluded from the 'technical' meeting. He pointed out that, since Cllr. Morris, who had attended the meeting, had taken the same oath of office as he had, there was no reason that he should not have been there. How can we have any faith in ward councillors and the current administration when negotiations

of such importance to the future of the harbour are taking place between the very parties who were responsible for the current situation.

The driving force behind the exclusion of SHRA and the Conservative Group from development discussions, and the campaign against the Community Council appear to be politically motivated. The misleading statements that are still being made by members of the EBC administration and their supporters, and the personalised attacks against the SHRA and members of its committee are hardly likely to convince residents that EBC is fully committed to justice for the harbour.

Our Ward Councillors say we don't need a Community Council because we can put our trust in the Borough Council to do right by the Harbour. History says that we would be very naive to put our faith in such a statement.

It is a sad fact that our Ward Councillors have consistently failed to engage the SHRA, and have cynically taken every opportunity to undermine it by opposing any initiative designed to put residents in control of their own future.

The time has come to empower residents through the creation of a Community Council that will represent the local

area, without becoming embroiled in party politics.

We are all painfully aware that the additional financial burden that has been placed on harbour residents through 'Marina Rent', the Sovereign Harbour Trust and management charges could not have been put in place without the consent and cooperation of the Borough Council.

We also know that as individual residents, we are never likely to uncover the facts behind this huge injustice. Even the strong collective voice of the SHRA has made little difference in getting to the bottom of this scandal.

A legally constituted, democratically elected Community Council could not be denied access to the facts.

A legally constituted, democratically elected Community Council could not be excluded from discussions with the land owners.

Without the scrutiny of a legally constituted, democratically elected Community Council, it will be 'business as usual' for the Borough Council and the land owners.

These alone are very important reasons that you should vote **YES** in the referendum.

Separating fact from fiction

Opponents of a Community Council say that administration of the Harbour is best left to the Borough Council and not a Community Council because costs can be spread across the rest of the Borough through Council Tax revenue— doesn't that sound good? The reality is very different.

For twenty years, harbour residents have been contributing to the maintenance of Eastbourne highways, but we have also been paying again for our local roads, most of which are still unadopted.

Harbour residents pay for our own flood defences while the Borough Council uses Environment Agency funding for everybody else. Perhaps the water that

breaches harbour flood defences will stay on the harbour. Think again EBC!

So, will EBC be spreading these costs across the Borough. We don't think so!

Cllr. Tutt says he is neutral on the issue. However, he has done nothing to prevent Sovereign Ward councillors and their supporters in the local Liberal Democrat association from publishing misleading, scaremongering newsletters and attacking the SHRA and its committee members in the local press. As leader of the council, he must realise that the ability of our ward councillors to take a balanced view in the decision that the council must take has been seriously compromised. Indeed, it is very difficult

to see how they have not breached the members' Code of Conduct.

Of more interest is a letter from four harbour residents that has been delivered around the Harbour urging residents to vote 'No' to the proposition of a Community Council. We would never attempt to stop reasoned debate, but there are a number of statements that must be challenged.

The Community Council, they say, "may well be just a talking shop".

However, it is much more likely that it will be a body that will address the problems of the harbour and take action to redress the problems. Members would be elected by, and accountable to, harbour residents who could, if necessary, replace them at elections. There is certainly sufficient awareness of the Harbour's problems to make the prospect of a talking shop very unlikely.

"The extra cost to residents" they say, "is not yet known".

Actually it is, and has been addressed in the special March 2008 edition of Waterlines. According to the Surrey and Sussex Association of Parish Councils, the cost of setting up and getting running a Community Council would be about £6 per household in the first year and £10 in the second. That is an annual cost, less than £0.25p extra per week.

The letter quotes an average annual precept for established Parish Council as £73.9, per household – £1.50 per week. This is higher than that previously quoted on EBC's own web site, but nevertheless seems a relatively small price to pay for local representation. What the letter fails to address is the services that are provided by the councils and the size of the electorate.

Community Councils only provide the services that are required by the local people. The level of charges will be reflected by the services local people want, and for which they are prepared to pay

Opponents are spreading the myth that

a harbour council would set its budget by plucking a number out of the air and then look for ways to spend it; that is total nonsense.

There are also a number of fixed costs that will apply, whatever the size of the community. For example, if the Clerk to the Council is paid £15,000 per year, this would represent a cost of £30 per year for each household in a village of 500 homes. In Sovereign Harbour, this would be just £3.75 per year. There would be other very similar economies of scale.

Quoting an average cost for the County is frankly misleading since the Harbour is a unique community with unique issues.

They say: "There will be somewhere between nine and sixteen additional councillors for a development the size of the Harbour, all of whom will be entitled to claim allowances if they want to".

Perfectly correct, but what they don't say is that in the vast majority of cases parish councillors do not claim the allowance because they feel a responsibility to support their local community, not draw money from it. I wonder how many ward and county councillors can say the same?

Even in the unlikely event that they did, and say, for example there were sixteen of them, and they were each paid a similar of amount to Borough Councillors, about £3,000. That would amount to just £0.23p per household per week. Not bad for sixteen dedicated servants of the harbour.

The letter suggests that most of the things a Community Council may choose to take on are already the responsibility of the Borough Council and we will pay twice for the same service. This is just not the case.

If residents are not happy with a service provided by a District or Borough Council, Community Councils can negotiate with that body to take on the service.

The council currently providing the service will usually offer to pay the

Vote YES

Community Council for the service at a rate below the current cost, to the benefit of all Council Tax payers. By using local services, the Community Council will almost invariably be able to provide the service for less than the amount received from the District or Borough Council. The services become responsive to the needs of the local community rather than the district, and the savings can be used to provide additional local services, or to reduce the local precept.

This isn't just 'theory', many District and Borough Councils are forward thinking enough to see the value of working in partnership with the community, rather than fighting against it. Wouldn't it be nice if members of Eastbourne Borough Council could see beyond the politics.

Rather than the negative spin put on it by opponents of the Community Council this partnership working produces a win-win situation. In fact residents with a Community Council save twice.

The letter states that a Community Council has to be consulted on planning applications affecting the community, but will not be able to participate directly in the decision making process.

Perfectly correct, but what they fail to say is that even that concession is progress.

As things stand, without a Community Council in place, EBC does not even have to consult the Harbour Community. We would strongly argue that its better to be consulted than be ignored. At least residents have the opportunity to respond to planning applications that may be detrimental to the community.

Many of you will remember the recent application by Jones Homes to vary a planning application for sixteen two-bedroom apartments and eight three-bedroom apartments to thirty two two-bedroom apartments. With your support, the SHRA contested this application, on the basis that it breached the Borough Council's policy that there should be no further residential development on the harbour. Because of the strength of your

protest, the Planning Committee ignored the recommendation of the Planning Officers and rejected the application.

The applicant appealed and asked for the case to be decided by 'written representation'. The SHRA asked the Planning Inspector to make the decision at a public hearing at which residents views could be put.

About 120 of you wrote to the Planning Inspector supporting the request for a public hearing but, because both Jones Homes and Eastbourne Borough Council refused to support this request, the decision was taken without the Inspector even bothering to visit the site.

Planning law is heavily stacked in favour of the applicant, and it is very common for planning officers to recommend acceptance of an application that is contested by the local community rather than risk the financial penalties that could be incurred by a successful appeal.

True, people power managed to win the day in the B&Q and 'Five Sites' applications but, have no doubt, it is very likely that had the appeals not been withdrawn they would have been successful.

You should also be under no illusion that Carillion has abandoned its ambitions to cover every available remaining area of the harbour with more flats.

The SHRA committee has made every effort to give residents the opportunity to make up its own mind on the value of a Community Council. We will accept and support the majority view of those who vote in the forthcoming referendum and hope that the members of the Borough Council will do so too.

All we ask is that you consider the needs of the Harbour community and not let yourself be influenced by misleading propaganda, politically motivated or otherwise.

Finally, be in no doubt that opponents of the proposal will take every opportunity to thwart your wishes so:

Please vote - and please vote YES.