

Rother Association of Local Councils (RALC)

Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 July 2007 at The Watch Oak, Battle

Present: Cllr Peter Benn (Etchingham), Valerie Bennett (Whatlington), Cllr Pat Brazier (Camber), Cllr Richard Comotto (**RALC Executive Officer**), Cllr Ann Cook (Ticehurst), Richard Farhall (Rye) (**RALC Clerk**), Cllr Paula Fisher (Battle), Cllr Maureen Getley (Iden), Cllr Colin Harmer (Mountfield), Cllr Ron Harris (Battle), Cllr George Hensher (Fairlight), Cllr Jim Hobbs (Playden), Cllr Carole Kynvin (Brede), Cllr Corinne Merricks (Icklesham), Cllr John Overall (Catsfield), Cllr Kate Pomeroy (Brede), Karen Ripley (Salehurst & Robertsbridge), Cllr Graham Peters (Bodiam), Cllr Trevor Seemann (Ticehurst), Cllr Sam Souster (Rye), Cllr Paul Stapley (Pett), Cllr Mary Upson (Crowhurst), Cllr Mary Varrall (Etchingham) (**RALC Chair - until item 2**), Cllr Caitlan Wheatley (Sedlescombe), Cllr Ruby Willis (Mountfield), Cllr Brian Woodstock (Pett), Cllr David Young (Ewhurst) (**RALC Chair – from item 2**)

Trevor Leggo (SALC Director), Derek Stevens (RDC CEO)

2.30 *The meeting commenced.*

Minutes taken by Richard Farhall.

The meeting began with Round Robin introductions.

Cllr Varrall relayed a message from the District Monitoring Officer, Trevor Leggo: he had received a full set of Register of Financial and Other Interest forms from just 17 parishes.

1 **Apologies**

Cllr Charles Bronsdon (Icklesham), Cllr Claire Bruce (Udimore), Cllr Pauline Glew (Sedlescombe), Joy Hollister (RDC Director of Resources), Cllr Michael Rix (Salehurst & Robertsbridge), Cllr Alan Stainsby (Crowhurst), Cllr Tim Underhill (Whatlington).

2 **Election of officers for 2007-08**

(a) **Chairman**

Cllr Varrall proposed and Cllr Hensher seconded, Cllr Young. There being no other nominations **Cllr Young** was declared appointed and took the Chair.

(b) **Vice Chairman**

Cllr Young proposed and Cllr Souster seconded, Cllr Varrall. There being no other nominations **Cllr Varrall** was declared appointed.

(c) **Treasurer**

There being no nominations it was agreed that the duties would be incorporated within the Clerk's role.

(d) **Executive Officer**

Representatives were advised that this post was created specifically for a former Councillor who wished to play an active role in RALC. It involved principally formulating draft policy

and supporting the Clerk - but had included previously editing and publishing the RALC newsletter.

Cllr Young proposed and Cllr Hensher seconded, Cllr Comotto. There being no other nominations **Cllr Comotto** was declared appointed.

(e) Other Executive Committee Members

Representatives were advised that the Executive Committee met typically 4-5 times a year – principally to agree agendas for full RALC meetings and discuss topical issues affecting local councils.

RESOLVED To appoint Cllrs Cook and Fisher to the Executive Committee.

3 Appointment of representatives on outside bodies 2007-08

(a) Battle Partnership

It was confirmed that RALC had the right to nominate one representative.

Cllr Harmer proposed and Cllr Overall seconded, Cllr Stainsby. There being no other nominations **Cllr Stainsby** was declared appointed.

(b) Rye Partnership

The Clerk advised that RALC had no nomination rights but that both **he** and **Cllr Souster** were Directors of the Rye Partnership and would report anything of interest.

(c) WARR Partnership

RESOLVED To accept Cllr Peters' offer to continue to provide updates.

(d) Sussex Association of Local Councils

Trevor Leggo confirmed that, contrary to RALC's Constitution, the organisation was eligible to nominate 6 – not 5 - representatives to the Sussex Associations of Local Councils (SALC). He advised further that there appeared to be nothing in SALC's Constitution to prevent a District Association from nominating a representative who was a clerk.

RESOLVED To appoint the representatives following: Cllrs Bronsdon, Cook, Harmer, Varrall, Young – **and** Richard Farhall.

(e) Rother Standards Committee

Cllr Varrall advised that Rother DC was considering increasing the number of RALC-nominated Members from 2 to 3.

RESOLVED To appoint Cllrs Souster and Varrall to the Rother Standards Committee.

(f) Battle & District Community Transport

RESOLVED To accept Cllr Harmer's offer to continue to provide updates.

4 Clerk

RESOLVED to re-confirm the appointment of Richard Farhall.

5 Accuracy of minutes of the meeting held on 11 April 2007

The Minutes were approved subject to the amendment following:

Page 1, Those present, line 5 delete Pommery insert Pomeroy

6 Matters arising from meeting held on 11 April 2007

Page 2, 4 Financial Report, final para (reviewing subscription levels at AGM).

RESOLVED To review the subscription rates for 2008-09 at the January meeting.

Page 2, 6 Assessment of the Annual Parish Conference (thanking Trevor Elliott) Actioned.

Page 4, 9 Resolution (Executive Officer job description) A summary of the role appeared on the main agenda under item 2(d).

Page 5, 10 (improving communications between parishes and principal authorities) Derek Stevens advised that Joy Hollister [formerly Cooper] was leading on this matter. One idea being explored was 'pairing up' senior officers with groups of parishes.

7 Finance Report – including Statement of the Annual Accounts 2006-07

The outgoing Treasurer, Cllr Young spoke to his report (attached).

RESOLVED That the Statement of Income and Expenditure for 2006-07 and Account Balance as at 31 March 2007 be received and noted.

The Chairman advised that the current account balance was c£2,500. Etchingam, Ticehurst, Mountfield and Whatlington had not yet paid their 2007-08 subscriptions and a reminder would be issued.

8 Proposal for special resolution

There was one proposal for special resolution to consider.

The Clerk advised that it was usual in organisations for proposals seeking to change the governing instrument to require a 75% majority of those present and voting in order to be successful. Trevor Leggo advised that the SALC Constitution required a two-thirds majority. It was agreed that a two-thirds majority would be sufficient.

**PROPOSAL That the RALC Constitution be amended as follows:
Omit in the first sentence 'who are themselves members of the Sussex Association of Local Councils'**

Under the heading Membership replace the first sentence with: 'Whilst membership of the Sussex Association of Local Councils is not compulsory, it is strongly recommended'

Under Election of Representatives replace the word 'shall' in both sentences with 'may'

Proposer: Fairlight PC

Seconder: Rye TC

On behalf the proposer, Cllr Hensher advised that the present Constitution required a parish council to be a member of the Sussex Association of Local Councils (SALC) before it could join the Rother Association of Local Councils (RALC). This placed a considerable financial burden on small parishes and prevented them from joining an important network and interface with the District Council.

Speaking on behalf of the seconder, Cllr Souster advised that a significant number of Rye's 'new council' had queried the value of SALC membership but appeared to be satisfied that membership of RALC was worthwhile. Furthermore, long-serving Members who attended past SALC AGMs had found them to be rather uninspiring. Speaking as a Rye representative, the Clerk added that this debate in Rye had been prompted by the introduction of SALC's new 'equitable banding structure', which saw quite a number of Rother local councils presented with subscription increases between 36 and 62%.

Trevor Leggo advised that RALC could not unilaterally decide to change the rules applying to District Associations. The SALC Constitution was very clear. Section 14 states:

. . . The membership of each District Association which may, if appropriate, be arranged into regional groups, shall include all the members situate within the District and each member shall be entitled to appoint two representatives to attend, speak and vote at meetings of its District Association. The terms of reference of District Associations may be made and varied from time to time by the Annual General Meeting [of SALC] [See Section 11] but within these terms of reference each District Association may arrange its own business and procedure and may appoint such honorary officers as it may deem necessary. . .

If the meeting agreed to such an amendment it could be only a motion to the SALC AGM on 9 November when the RALC representatives to the AGM could seek to persuade other members of SALC from East & West Sussex of the benefits of such a change.

Referring to the 2007-08 subscription rates, Trevor Leggo advised that these had been agreed by the Sussex and Surrey Executive/Management Committees, having considered the advice of an independent Treasurer. For the preceding 3 years membership subscriptions had not covered SALC expenditure and the Executive/Management Committees had chosen to finance this shortfall from reserves. This was no longer an option. However, it had been recognised that some councils would receive 'not insignificant' percentage subscription increases and so he had been authorised to negotiate 'stopgap' reductions utilising projected 'surplus funds'.

He suggested it was up to member councils to decide whether SALC represented value for money. At any one time SALC was providing practical assistance to around a dozen councils. In practice, if a council got into difficulties it has few places to go for advice and support. 98.5% of all parish and town councils across East and West Sussex were SALC members and Clerks, in particular, valued having access to its range of services. SALC provided regular training and also bespoke training. However, it was acknowledged that RALC could arrange its own training – perhaps with the assistance of Rother DC.

Responding to a question from Cllr Harris, Trevor Leggo advised that RALC could exist separately from SALC but would not be permitted to affiliate to it.

A number of councils observed that SALC/NALC represented good value when compared with the standard fees charged by firms of solicitors. However, others considered that NALC was not-so-good at providing urgent legal advice.

Other comments from the representatives present included: if SALC's membership declined it would be less influential and its services could suffer; RALC was akin to a pressure group and it relied on SALC for advice; it would be difficult for RALC to arrange/deliver training to the same standard as SALC; RALC could pursue any concerns that it had via its 6 SALC representatives; when a council has serious problems SALC assistance can be indispensable; individual councils were entitled to pursue directly a change to SALC's constitution.

Winding up Cllr Hensher stated that he had been instrumental in getting Fairlight to join both SALC and RALC but considered that councils should not have to join SALC to participate in RALC. Cllr Souster acknowledged that the chances of success at SALC's AGM were slim but considered that tabling a proposal would at least air concerns.

The proposal was put to the vote and declared lost – with more councils voting against than in favour.

9 Appointment of an independent examiner

Representatives were advised that both Peter Mills (Battle TC) and Carol Hodgson (Catsfield RFO) had offered their services.

RESOLVED To ask the Executive Committee to make an appointment.

10 Sussex Association matters - including a presentation on the Government's proposed Planning White Paper

Trevor Leggo spoke to his PowerPoint presentation (distributed by SALC to all Clerks before the meeting – together with a copy of the consultation paper and link to the Executive Summary) – adding:

- The deadline for responses was 17 August
- At a recent LGA Conference Hazel Blears, Sec of State for Communities and Local Government had stated that the objective of the White Paper was give local people a greater say in how money is spent; however, he had written to her because there had been no mention of parish councils. As a result, the LGA CEO would be raising this with the Sec of State shortly.
- The 3 Sussex and Surrey Management Committees would be considering a joint response to the White Paper on 24 July.
- The Prime Minister had announced that 60,000 new homes are to be built on surplus public sector land

Derek Stevens advised that Rother would shortly be considering its own response. The White Paper proposed allowing planning authorities to raise their fees; given that the Planning Grant is to be reduced this was a useful development.

Cllr Harmer suggested that the proposal that some minor householder developments – such as small extensions – should not require planning permission would be contrary to the interests of those whose amenity would be adversely affected and who were not sufficiently confident to raise the matter with their neighbour.

11 Rother matters – including an update on the new waste and recyclables collection contract

Waste and Recyclables Contract

Derek Stevens stated that RDC accepted that there were problems but the authority was determined to address them.

The Government required all waste authorities to collect at least two 'recyclables' from domestic properties by 2010. Well before Serco's contract expired on 31 March 2007, RDC set up a panel of Members and Officers to examine best practice elsewhere and draw up a workable scheme for Rother.

The waste collection contract was awarded to Verdant, which was given a 6-month lead-in, rather than the usual 2. Envirocomms were appointed to publicise the new collection system, which included engaging John Craven, producing and displaying 'localised' posters and distributing Information Packs. Envirocomms claimed to have distributed Packs to every household, even though no-one in Bexhill (16,000 properties) reported receiving one! RDC arranged for them to be reprinted and redistributed. There were problems also with the 'hangers' delivered.

Rother lost 8,000 boxes and wheelie bins in an arson attack. Even so, the distribution of boxes and wheelie bins had gone reasonably well – although some areas had been overlooked. 70% of the District was receiving a 'normal' service and 1000 households were in receipt of 'assisted collections'.

Although RDC originally employed 3 extra members of staff for the start of the contract, it became apparent quickly that they could not cope with the volume of complaints. Consequently, there were now a dozen staff members clearing the complaints backlog and the number of new complaints had reduced.

The current situation (after the 3rd recyclables/residuals cycle) was that there were still some people who had not received boxes or were not receiving a collection. There remained a few 'stubborn' areas – including those where crews could not get down lanes. Unfortunately, Verdant's decision to split up crews meant that local knowledge had been lost. Existing crews had not been consulted about vehicle size in relation to lane access.

RDC was having regular meetings with Verdant's MD and CEO. Its workforce recently 'walked out' to meet with Derek to discuss pay, conditions and operational problems.

The green waste wheelie bins would be delivered in August – with the collection service commencing in September. RDC's Waste Management Working Group would be meeting in a fortnight to scrutinise Verdant's performance.

Derek confirmed that it remained Rother's intention to collect old dustbins and that large families could apply for bigger bins. Until further notice the Conservation Areas – which tended to have access problems – would continue to have a black sack collection service. He stated that Rother would utilise parish councillors' local knowledge and confirmed that, on a temporary basis, green waste was going to landfill.

Cllr Harmer reported problems with Verdant's staff not putting bins and boxes back from where they were collected and in dangerous positions on the A21. Additionally, many properties in Mountfield were still not receiving collections. Irregular/No collections of domestic waste increased the likelihood of fly tipping. Cllr Comotto flagged up RDC's excellent on line fly tipping reporting facility.

Cllr Souster advised that, whilst a District Councillor, he had been a member of the working group charged with investigating, assessing and recommending recyclables collection methods. In 18-24 months, Rushcliffe BC had increased its collection of recyclables from 10 to 50%. Rushcliffe believed its success was down largely to getting the public 'on board' well before the new service was introduced. He suggested this was where the Rother scheme had failed.

Derek advised that Rother was looking into collecting glass and cardboard but, unfortunately, there was no market for the latter. It was not possible to make available smaller bins/boxes.

Housing

Responding to a question from the Vice Chair, Derek advised that Rother had identified new parcels of brownfield land for possibly development.

12 Training for new Members

Representatives were advised that RALC and RDC had organised jointly a basic introduction to planning control for Councillors with no previous experience (although all Councillors and Clerks were welcome to attend). It would be held on 23 July at Brede Village Hall, 2.15-4.30pm.

13 Any Other Business – including correspondence

Because the meeting was running longer than intended, there was insufficient time for the usual reports from representatives on outside organisations.

Paul Carey The Chairman proposed a vote of thanks to former Cllr Paul Carey who had supported and promoted RALC over many years - including representing RALC on Rother's Standards Committee. **Clerk**

Closure of rural post offices It was considered generally that these are the lifeblood of village life.

RESOLVED To refer this issue to the Executive Committee and consider it further at the next meeting. **EC**

InterReg Catsfield reported on a bad experience with an application for InterReg funding in relation to its new pavilion appeal. The application process had proved to be very bureaucratic and the anticipated contribution of 40% of Catsfield's expenditure had not materialised. When GOSE had been asked for the reason, it responded that the work on the pavilion would have been undertaken regardless of the application! A party from the 'matched' French community would be visiting in August and parishioners felt obliged to continue with the arrangement and provide hospitality.

14 Dates of future meetings

The Clerk advised that Rother Homes was no longer accepting bookings (free to RALC) more than 3 months in advance – so it might prove necessary to meet elsewhere on occasion. It was confirmed that the next meeting would take place at **Watch Oak on 10 October at 2.30pm.**

The meetings dates for the remainder of 2007-08 were agreed as: 16 January, 23 April and 9 July.