Briefing Note: Future of Community Centres in Hastings

Purpose:
To give an initial analysis about the issues facing community centres in Hastings, what challenges and opportunities exist and how partners might work together to address them. Community centres differ widely from one another but have the common aim of improving community life and social cohesion. To link this to a possible joint approach with the sector in Rother.

Background
- Community centres serve either **geographical communities** or **communities of interest** (e.g. cultural, faith-based, youth, older people) or the service priorities of a funder sometimes a mixture of these.
- Their functions vary from **social interaction** to **service delivery**, and sometimes both.
- Historically, local authorities provided centres—particularly on social housing estates. Many of these are now under **Southern Housing**, with a smaller involvement from **Orbit**.
- In areas dominated by private rented housing, provision is **more fragmented**, often led by faith-based groups or third sector organisations e.g. Kings Church, Hastings Mosque, Education Futures Trust.
- Community facilities are under intense pressure. The Isabel Blackman Hall in St Leonards is closed; The Bridge is closed and future uncertain. The Isabel Blackman Centre is Hastings Old Town was saved and relaunched thanks to third sector leadership.
- Identity of place and shared culture may be going through rapid change in the social media age. Younger people's self-identity might not be so tied to place or people.

Current Challenges
1. **Uneven Distribution**
   - No borough-wide strategic plan has guided community centre development. No policy exists for their support and no one statutory partner exercises leadership in this respect.
   - Some centres (e.g. The Bridge) were poorly located or designed, and others have closed e.g. Isabel Blackman Centre, St Leonards despite evidence of elevated levels of community needs.
2. **Capacity & Viability**
   - Many centres struggle due to declining local organisational capacity, especially as older residents step back from Residents Associations.
   - Newer developments (e.g. Robsack) included facilities that are not locally sustainable and must be operated by external service providers (e.g. FSN). Such premises are built without business planning or understanding of a local community.
   - Increased health and safety legislation, safeguarding vulnerable people, and insurance requirements mean enormous responsibility is often placed upon volunteers. These pose powerful disincentives to assuming leadership and responsibility.
3. **Shifting Institutional Behaviour**
   - Housing associations and statutory bodies (NHS, Councils, Police) increasingly engage individuals through digital platforms, weakening collective, place-

based relationships. This adds to the challenges of loneliness that many people face.
- o Agencies often operate within performance silos, hindering joined-up responses to local needs.

4. **Changing Social Dynamics**
   - o Older people are increasingly working longer or caring for grandchildren to enable parents to work. This may reduce the pool of volunteers.
   - o Particular groups within communities are not heard e.g. young people, retired. Agencies find it more difficult to understand community life and trends.
   - o In the case of young people they are often excluded due to fear of antisocial behaviour by older people or other groups using community centres.
   - o Rise of social media and IT reshapes how communities interact and self-identify. Many people feel IT based communication is foisted on them and is not as effective as face-to-face contact.
   - o Communities of interest (e.g. faith, youth) have become more prominent in-service provision.
   - o Community power has shifted from geographic organisations to more targeted/single issue forms. Working class activism and interests have been particularly impacted.
   - o Since the demise of the Hastings Trust no community-based development agency has existed covering Hastings and Rother. There is little capacity to help centres address issues of maintenance, repair, or expansion of physical facilities, statutory or commercial enterprises bring this expertise. The voluntary sector cannot address this within current structures of funding. Particular circumstances enable success like The Pelham in Bexhill which has drawn together the strategic support, expertise and community support required. HVA/Age Concern/HOTRA achieved a similar success for older people at Isabel Blackman in the Old Town.

Strategic Context
- **Southern Housing** is currently reviewing its community assets across its national portfolio. Likely drivers include:
  - o Maintenance and compliance costs.
  - o Inconsistent management models.
  - o Lack of viable resident organisations.
  - o Internal focus on housing/tenancy outcomes rather than wider community impact.
- **National Policy Trends**
  - o Government "devolution" agenda is creating large-scale governance (e.g. county-wide Mayoral Combined Authorities), potentially diluting focus on places, many of which are losing their own councils.
  - o Lack of granular data on **demographic and housing turnover** undermines strategic planning, particularly on estates where current and future demographics need to be more widely understood.

o The government says the "devolution" agenda should be tied to greater neighbourhood and local approach. This needs to be reconciled with the upward trend on local authority and health structures. It remains to be seen how innovative approach role out and how much is devolved rather than just locally packaged. At a Hastings level devolution is "upwards" even is a Town Council is established leaving far less control and influence locally.

Opportunities

- The **Neighbourhood Fund (NF)** offers a potential vehicle for:
  o Capital investment in priority centres.
  o Capacity-building for community-led governance.
  o Piloting models of joint investment with NHS, ESCC, Foreshore Trust and national funders.
- A Hastings and Rother **strategic framework** for communities centres could:
  o Clarify the role of community centres in improving health, economic, and social outcomes.
  o Map needs and assets by geography and community of interest.
  o Foster partnerships between statutory bodies, the third sector and residents.
- The government has recently published its 10-year health plan. This speaks of transferring hospital services into the community, one stop hubs and integrated services of the VCSE, social care and councils. It also highlights preventative actions which may be particularly appropriate in a community setting.
- Likewise, the recent commitment to children and families speaks of increased local provision. The government's skills agenda might also make use of centres for certain kinds of outreach or delivery.
- Both these developments speak to a more strategic approach to the use of community buildings. Given the forthcoming "devolution" and likely county unitary authority it would be potentially exciting to plan such provision across Hastings and Rother accurately reflecting the urban and rural areas and how (or not) they are interconnected.
- A future Town Council might provide a focus for local joined up thinking and support. A wider debate about how the resources of the Foreshore Trust is used is important. Powerful cases from the cultural sector will be made which may be more attractive to decision makers than community centres.
- Hastings Voluntary Action and Rother Voluntary Action are about to commence work to jointly assess community centres and how they can be supported and encouraged.
- In Hastings other "community" assets like the Pier and St Mary in the Castle provide other focuses for campaigning and attention. They are under threat of decay and neglect. However, they do not impact upon the poorest communities directly. They may also be competing for limited locally based funding.
- A mixture of optimism and brutal honesty is required if future approaches are to be sustainable. This includes thinking about where stable staffing, advice and other support may be located realistically.
- The situation in Rother is different again. Sidley and Bexhill share some issues with Hastings. Rye and Battle are smaller urban areas with strong identities. Rural Rother has a strong network of rural village halls serving communities very different from one another.

A Complementary Statutory/Community Approach

Although there is other evidence of elected members being committed to community provision securing premises for community provision in partnership with local authorities has not always been easy: -

- In 2018 East Sussex County Council (ESCC) announced the closure of the services it provided at Isobel Blackman in the Old Town as part of service cuts in Adult Social Care. It put the building up for sale. A substantial campaign raised nearly £450k for its purchase and it is now a thriving centre for older people run through Age Concern. HBC supported residents by giving the building Community Asset status which allowed a bid to be developed. However, the ESCC approached the issue from a predominantly business and service perspective rather than positively supporting it.
- Action in Rural Sussex (AIRS) runs a service for village halls employing two village hall advisors. For £150k per annum village halls committees can access: -
    o Advice for queries (one hour free)
    o Ninety specialist information sheets
    o Online advice
    o E-newsletters/bulletins
    o Access to reputable consultancy services
    o Community development services

    Both the above point to a need to reappraise urban community support in a future era with no urban district councils. Without strong town level accountability or currently a mechanism to support community centres things may grow <u>more</u> distant. As the new unitary council will be the sole provider and determine community asset applications early discussion about support for community centres in urban areas will be required. Influencing the current Borough Councils planning policy may help establish some policy links about the support of new community facilities in new communities as well as the support of existing ones.

Recommendations
1. To support a review of community centres and the communities they serve. This work has begun led through the Hastings Community Network (HCN). HVA currently supports a community centre group. Assessment of potential should include the needs of the geographic or interest served and the other provision that is being made.
2. To review community centres in terms of: -
    - Physical condition and suitability
    - Management and leadership capacity
    - Finances
    - Provision of services and activity
    - Community Development
    - Partnership in provision with others serving the same community

- Inclusivity – how easy is it for unusual parts of the community to utilise and benefit from the facility
- Management and governance capacity

3. To extend this appraisal for centres across Hastings and Rother. More thought is required about if this should be for urban areas or include village-based activity.

4. To invite the Director of Public Health to consider convening a conference about developing an approach to supporting and improving community centres accessibility and relevance through a progressive partnership.

5. Explore how expertise in terms of building maintenance (particularly planned maintenance) and substantial repair and alteration project can be provided to community centres. In particular: -
   i. The planning of a regular maintenance schedule, its delivery and quality control.
   ii. Developing and delivering more major schemes and how they are established, budgeted, and controlled.
   iii. Utilising professional expertise.
   iv. Developing relationships between community centres and colleges, housing association, and others. A particular approach could be including maintenance and projects as part of college curriculum. This might also improve community centres relationships with young people.
   v. Access to project planning skills, contract/technical expertise and approaches for control and oversight of projects. This can be expensive but helps ensure effective use of finance, probity, and achievement of targets.
   vi. To investigate if a support service of the type offered by Action in Rural Sussex could be useful in an urban context.

6. Examine how community centres can be supported to make a positive contribution to carbon reduction increasing energy efficiency and reducing costs. This might involve support from Energise East Sussex.

7. Leadership and management development, including attracting new high-level volunteers into community centres.

8. To explore the possibility of a cross-sector approach working through HVA/RVA to develop and support a programme of development and planned delivery with community centres. Potential partners might be: -

   - HVA and RVA
   - NHS Strategic Planning
   - Colleges

   - Community Centres
   - Integrated Local Teams
   - East Sussex activity through Public Health, Children's Services, Adult Social Care, and skills training functions.
   - HBC and Foreshore Trust and Town Council if created.

9. To approach the new Council and mayoral authority resulting from local government reorganisation about a proactive support to encouraging community centres and facilities. This might be best done through agreeing a way forward with the existing Borough and District councils.