

BEXHILL-ON-SEA TOWN COUNCIL

Council Hub Accessibility

Background: Bexhill-on Sea Town Council Finance and General Purposes Committee has asked for the council to investigate how it might utilise the facilities of its town centre Hub premises for public meetings. When the premises was first obtained, whilst it was noted that small meetings may be able to take place downstairs in the open area, it was intended that the Hub would be a front facing customer service desk and an office working space for staff, and not suitable for general public meetings.

Public meetings aren't currently possible at the Hub due to the very limited access available to people with disabilities. Members of the public have a right to attend Town Council meetings except in certain defined circumstances under the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960.

Additionally, failure to allow those with disabilities to attend could be deemed discriminatory under The Equality Act 2010 (Disability) Regulations 2010. This Act protects people against discrimination, harassment or victimisation in employment, and as users of private and public services.

The Town Council Hub.

The Town Council Hub is rented from a private landlord and is subject to a lease with no sub-let or alteration permissions. The Hub is located at 35 Western Rd in central Bexhill. The building is around 120 years old with a later extension (which now forms the kitchen/toilet area) It is a shop front with 2 storeys above it. Access to the upper levels is via a stairway towards the middle of the ground floor. (Please see appendix one.) There is a short additional staircase from the back of the first floor to the large area that would be used as the meeting room. There is another staircase leading to the upper floor to the right (As you walk into the meeting room.)

Access Issues.

There are a number of access issues that will need to be addressed before the first floor can be used as a public meeting room.

These include:

- A method of getting members of the public with ambulatory disabilities up to the first floor – this will need to be either a stairlift of some kind or an internal (Through the floor) lift.
- Flattening off the first-floor area (or building a ramp.)
- Looking at the width of corridors, doorways and any turning areas a wheelchair may have to manoeuvre around.

There may be additional issues that haven't been considered so a qualified Disability Access Consultant is recommended to be contracted to give professional advice.

Lifts and Stairlifts.

It is worth noting that lifts and other lifting equipment are complex machinery. These are primarily governed by two regulations in public buildings under The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974

- LOLER – Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment regulations 1998. This states that lifts need to be inspected every 6 months by a 'competent person'. This would necessitate a maintenance contract with the installer.
- PUWER - Provision and Use of Work Equipment 1998. This states work equipment must be suitable for its intended use, safe to use and only used by people with adequate 'information, instruction and training'. My interpretation of this is that a member of staff may have to be available

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to operate the lifting device and that a domestic stairlift may not be suitable to use in this environment.

Room Capacity.

The room has an area of just under 34 sq metres (366 sq feet).

This would give an approximate capacity of 50-55 people. However, this doesn't take into account furniture or the strength of the floor. Additionally, room capacity for public events is also related to fire exits and corridor widths. With that in mind, I would estimate maximum capacity is in the 30-40 person range including councillors, staff and members of the public, though the issue of a single means of escape may reduce this even further. We would need to consult a means of escape consultant, the fire brigade and/or a surveyor to ascertain suitability for this.

Domestics.

Another factor to consider are the domestic arrangements. These are as follows:

- **Toilets.** Toilet facilities at 35 Western Rd consist of two cubicles on the ground floor. Neither are currently suitable for use as a disability toilet though these could be upgraded reasonably easily. The fundamental issue is that to use them a member of the public would have to come down from the first floor. It may be possible to convert a small area (Currently a storage cupboard) on the first floor to a toilet.
- **Heating and Lighting.** There is no heating currently on the first and second floors of the building. Heating would need to be provided by either temporary heaters or a central heating system extended from the ground floor (If possible.) or newly installed. Lighting is inconsistent around the first floor. The short corridor into the proposed meeting room is particularly dark. This would need to be upgraded and we would also need an emergency lighting system to allow escape in the event of a power failure. This would probably involve dual purpose lights being installed (Basically they have a rechargeable battery installed) on the ground and first floors.
- **Cleaning.** Obviously, increased numbers of people in the building will result in more cleaning. Our current contract would have to encompass this extra area (Currently, only the ground floor is cleaned.) This would cost an additional £14 per session from our existing cleaner.
- **Privacy, security and confidentiality.** Sole access to the meeting room is through the general office area. This is currently out of bounds for the general public. The office staff would need to review security arrangements for equipment and documents. This could be accomplished by purchasing some lockable cupboards and a clear desk policy.
- **Cosmetics.** The room itself is in a poor state of decoration. It would be desirable to update the decoration and floor covering.

Fire escapes and means of escape.

As stated above. Access to the room is via a single staircase in the centre of the shop. This could be a problem if there is a fire, and we may need to consider what alternatives are available. The escape signage is currently either absent or incorrect on the first floor and would need to be updated for a relatively small cost.

The main office door would need to have some kind of easy open mechanism (Pushbar)— currently it is either locked or open. It should not be locked whilst members of the public are in the building as if a key holder is incapacitated, any escape will be delayed or compromised.

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Advice from the fire brigade needs to be sought.

Staffing.

There is a likelihood that additional staffing will be required if public meetings are held in 35 Western Rd. Extra duties would include.

- Managing the public coming into and exiting the building.
- Manning the lift/stairlift.
- Security of the office space.
- General assistance.
- Assistance in emergencies.

These tasks are in addition to what is undertaken by the Town Clerk and other staff at the meeting and would result in either paid overtime or time off in lieu.

Risk Assessment.

A full risk assessment will need to be conducted and revised to take into account the additional potential hazards listed above and having members of the public in this new location.

Policy.

Bexhill-on-Sea Town Council will need to formulate and agree a policy on conducting meetings in the Hub. This should cover issues as discussed above as well as procedures for declining access or if the meeting is full.

Further Actions.

Landlord has been contacted and will not authorise any changes to the building without full plans and details.

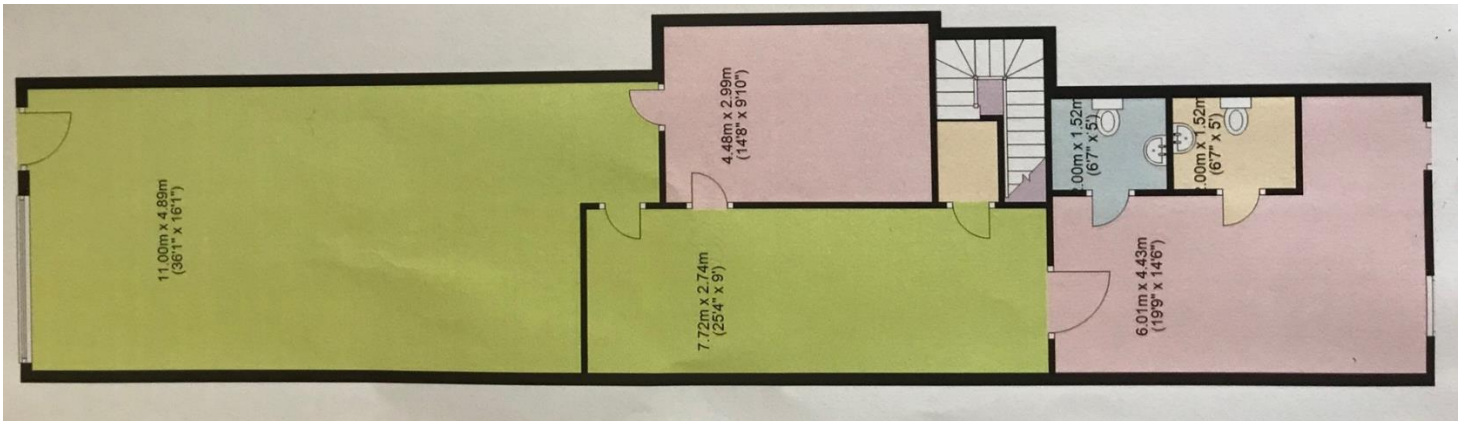
Contact Disability consultant for access advice.

Contact Fire brigade to assess means of escape and room capacities.

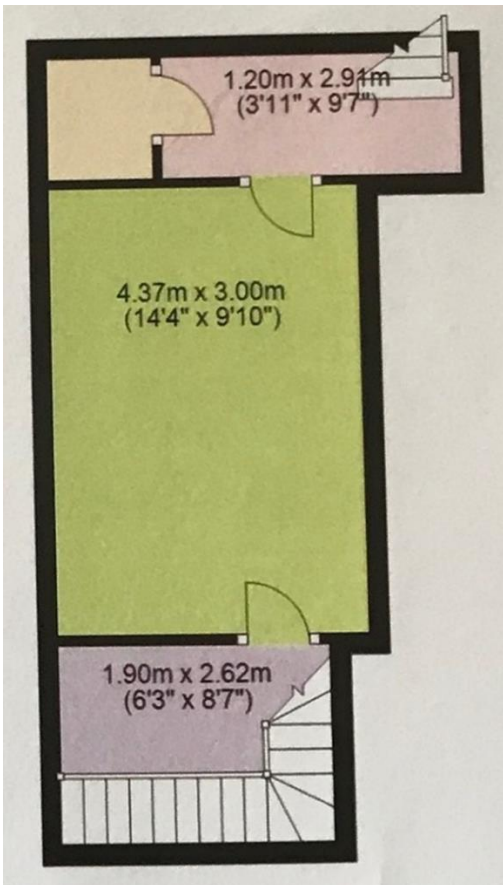
Feasibility study with costings conducted.

Approval for project expenditure sought from councillors.

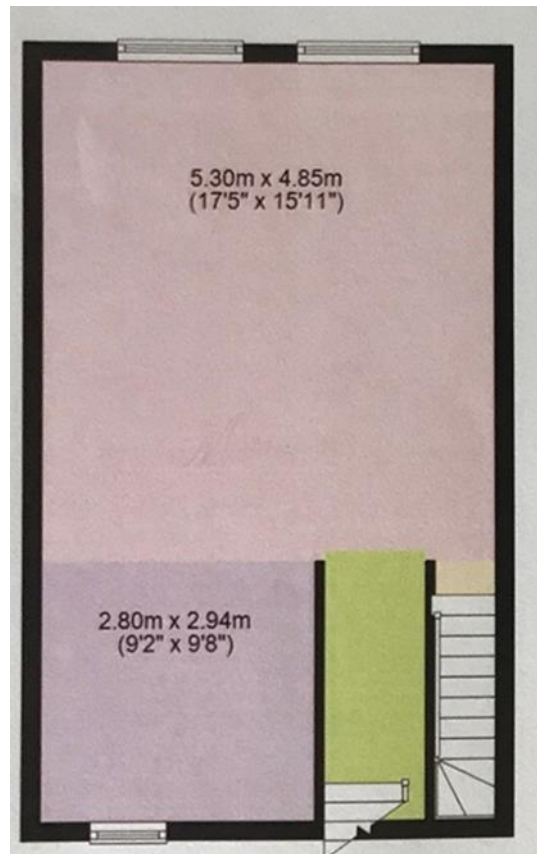
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Ground floor



First floor – From Stairs



First floor – suggested meeting room