

Seaford Environmental Alliance – SEA Climate Hub

SEA held a consultation meeting on 20th July this year and this is the short report that was presented before the main participatory part of the meeting:

So where did it all begin?

A group of us met up originally through Climate Activism in 2019, it was the year when everything seemed to be happening! Climate Emergencies were being declared by councils and authorities up and down the county almost on a daily basis and feelings of cautious optimism began to grow.

However along came the pandemic in 2020 – even though it was a symptom of ecological breakdown – it became a distraction from our longer term goals. We all knew we had to find a way to carry on campaigning and to broaden the base of involvement in Climate Action, to build a movement of movements, which would get more people involved and would be stronger and more sustainable. The pandemic showed us the importance of building a resilient community and what could be achieved when people came together.

As well as being Climate Activists many of us were (and still are) involved in different groups working to improve the environment in a variety of ways – but these groups tended to exist in silos. How much more effective we could all be if we reached out to each other, started linking up and working together? We looked about for models we could use to achieve this and found the network of Climate Emergency Centres. They had a handbook which set out how to create a local Climate Emergency Centre bringing together an alliance of diverse groups and individuals in the local community to build solutions, relationships and resilience in the face of the Climate Emergency. We found out that CECs could self-fund by using a business model that enables owners of vacant business premises to reduce their rates by up to 100% through leasing the property to a charitable organisation. However, having physical space seemed a pipe dream in 2020, so we parked this idea and focussed on setting up as a charity and getting a presence online.

After much behind the scenes work and relying heavily on the CEC manual and lessons learned from elsewhere we established SEA as a Charity in February 2021. We were still in lockdown at this time so the website became central to our operation; advertising talks and webinars and showcasing peoples stories and ideas. With the raising of lockdown in spring 2021 we dared to think of planning an actual physical event, and although it was still considered by some a risky idea, we worked with groups across the town and the Council to put on our Eco Fair – A Greener Seaford in August 2021. Many of you here were involved of course and thanks to many groups getting involved it was a great success – but a lot of hard work!

At the same time thanks to the tireless work of Gemma McFarlane, in particular, the premise dream was becoming a reality. Long negotiations with NatWest paid off and in October 2021 just before COP26 we had the keys to the hub. But that was just the start! There was a lot of work to get the building ready and fit for purpose. We had a small team of volunteers who over a couple of weekends transformed the place from dingy and dirty to the vibrant and welcoming hub you see today. It was all hands to the pump and people answered the call with time, resources, elbow grease and creativity! I look at the hub now and marvel at the things people have done; the derelict backyard transformed into an amazing Pollinator Patch

thanks to Debbie and Tiny, the once grime encrusted windows - now a display area for campaigns, news and What's On, the comfy cosy children's area, and our growing a library of books and resources. It's hard to believe we've only been open 9 months but in a way that time period seems quite appropriate – it's been a sort of gestation period and now we're looking to get our baby out into the world!

During that time, we've attracted many more volunteers, linked up with partners and stakeholders across the community. The Hub has been used as a meeting space for local groups such as Friends of Sutton Downs and Friends of Seaford Bay, we've had workshops on gardening, biodiversity, textiles, ethical finance, natural cleaning products and active travel to name but a few. We've run story times and children's activities and hosted a fascinating exhibition on Treasure from Trash. We offer a space to store resources and be a collection point for other organisations such as Plastic Free Seaford. We have regular events such as the Climate Café, as well as our Community Larder to redistribute surplus food, and the Reuse store to make sure that useful stuff does not go to landfill but gets to the people who can use it. Recently we have focused on developing the free School Uniform store. Initiatives like this are proving very popular especially as the cost-of-living crisis bites deeper. It demonstrates that what's good for the planet is also good for people and their pockets.

We have found that being here and open to everyone in the middle of town we are providing a very useful service: a place to chat, share ideas, ask questions, cool off and sometimes just see a friendly face. There is certainly a need for this in Seaford – a place where people can come together to get to know and help each other. In the future as the climate and ecological situation deteriorates, as sadly we know it will, we will need to rely on each other to adapt and thrive.

So what's next for the hub? Initially we had a guaranteed year in the hub. This time expires in October, but from then the lease rolls on with each party being able to give a months' notice. NatWest have a further 2 years to run on their lease. It seems very unlikely that they will be able to sub-let to another party to fill that time, so informally the leasing agents are saying that we would get much more than a months' notice to quit the premises. We are trying to negotiate another guaranteed year so that we can relax and focus on making the building really work for us – improve the displays, make it more comfortable and warmer in the winter! This time would also give us an opportunity to look for another, perhaps more suitable space. We think the past few months have shown the benefits of having a physical Hub but we are also conscious that outreach (like the eco fair and participation in community events such as schools fetes) is really important. There is no doubt the Hub has been our main focus this year. It's been a steep learning curve, but we have now built up an amazing network of 30 plus hub volunteers, over 400 people on our mailing list and 1,200 on Facebook. We are confident with this support that we can continue to grow and be a catalyst for positive action on Climate and the Environment in our community.

20th July 2022