RTW Town Forum Statement on the proposed pause of Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Council

8 October 2026

The proposed motion to pause work on the new Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Council is a retrograde step.

On 15 July 2026, following an extensive Community Governance Review and public consultation, Full Council unanimously agreed to create the Town Council. Residents were subsequently told that the Reorganisation Order was being prepared. Even after the Government paused Local Government Reorganisation in Kent, TWBC confirmed on 22 September that the Order remained on track and elections would take place in May 2027.

As recently as 23 September 2026, the Leader of the Council (Cllr Ben Chapelard) confirmed that work was continuing despite the LGR pause. No clear explanation has been given of what subsequently changed or what new advice prompted this reversal. The pause is now being proposed without further public consultation and with residents given only a week's notice.

The proposal directly contradicts national Liberal Democrat policy adopted at the party's recent Autumn Conference. The party's *Defending Democracy* policy expressly supports "the presence of community, town and parish councils" as an essential part of "a vigorous local democratic culture". Halting a Town Council that was unanimously approved following extensive public consultation would therefore represent a clear departure from the party's recently adopted policy and its stated commitment to local democracy.

Maidstone and Tonbridge have completed their Reorganisation Orders and will elect town councils in May 2027, while Sevenoaks already has a successful Town Council. If Royal Tunbridge Wells pauses its plans while neighbouring towns proceed, it risks falling behind them in securing dedicated local representation and decision-making.

The Town Forum has long supported restoring a Town Council to Royal Tunbridge Wells—something the town had for almost a century before 1974. Residents already contribute £2.9 million a year through Special Expenses towards the Commons, parks and other local amenities. It is time that they had greater democratic accountability and transparency over how that money is spent and how these services are managed.

The pause in establishing a West Kent unitary authority strengthens rather than weakens the case for proceeding. It provides the time to establish the Town Council carefully, without the competing demands of creating a new unitary authority. The Town Council could begin on a modest scale, working with the Borough Council, and develop gradually in response to the wishes of residents.

The Town Forum urges the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) to think again, respect the outcome of the consultation and its unanimous July decision, and continue the preparatory work needed for the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Council to be elected in May 2027.