



RTW Town Forum Chairman's Report 2022 – 2023

At our first meeting immediately following the AGM in November 2022 we had a full agenda as usual; this time with presentations on Safety in Tunbridge Wells, the environment, the Electoral Arrangements consultation for our Borough and the Cost of Living Crisis. We also had our regular Update from Cllr Justine Rutland. We report on some of these topics below.

RTW Town Forum has continued to be a source of community action responding to issues and problems in the town, and in urging appropriate action. We have participated in Council Partnership Groups, responded to consultations and have updated our information sheet summarising our outputs and achievements over recent years.

Meetings

We held meetings as follows:

24 November 2022 (AGM followed by regular meeting)

19 January 2023

30 March 2023 (virtual meeting)

25 May 2023

13 July 2023

(14 September 2023 - cancelled)

There was just the one virtual meeting in the last 12 months, while in the previous year in the aftermath of Covid we only had one face to face meeting (the Forum Focus) meeting. The final meeting of the current (22-23) year scheduled for 14 September had to be cancelled due to the Council Chamber being needed for other purposes, and the unavailability of Council staff to host a virtual meeting.

Council Support

Secretarial support and provision of space for our meetings by TWBC has increasingly been an issue during the year. Towards the end of 2022 we lost the invaluable secretarial support from Mark O'Callaghan who moved to another local authority. Louise Kellam took over and provided considerable support both for full meetings and for management meetings, though there were limitations on her time. We also had help from Emer Moran, Renee Dillon and Caroline Britt.

At that time it was becoming apparent that the Council had constraints on staffing and space for meetings. In April we received confirmation from William Benson that the Council was looking to reduce its occupancy of the Town Hall by two thirds and to sub-let the remaining space to Town Square Spaces to provide co-working space for local residents and businesses. It was further indicated that the Council was facing both acute financial pressure and pressure on its staffing capacity as a result of challenges in recruiting staff, and this applied nationally.

Since then we have had a couple of meetings with CEO William Benson and we now understand that these constraints are easing, but we may still be required to take on more management and secretarial responsibilities. In recent months this has been found rather demanding on some of our management group, though we may be able to further share responsibilities. This has yet to be discussed by our full membership and resolved with the Council.

However, it was helpful that we were recently given access our mailing list so we can now send out messages directly to our members.

Councillor Convention

In May the Council held a Councillor Convention to set the scene for the preparation of a new Strategic Plan. At the invitation of the Council's CEO, William Benson, our Chairman presented a paper at the event on the challenges that are likely to be faced in developing such a plan. Councillors were divided into groups then brainstorming sessions, chaired by Council officers, were held to consider possible ways forward in key activity sectors.

Consultation, Engagement and Participation

Some of our members had felt for some time that the Council, while periodically offering formal public consultations on matters of concern, was not engaging sufficiently on a regular basis to explain its thinking and to encourage public interest, as in a vision and plan for the town centre.

Members had wondered whether the Town Forum could also be more active in this respect. However, it was acknowledged that the Council engages with *stakeholders* through its *partnership groups* in which the TF has participated. Some are reported on below.

At our July meeting when this topic was on the agenda Brian Lippard (Civic Society) presented a survey that asked members present to assess their level of engagement with TWBC using the established method developed by Sherry Arnstein - '*The Ladder of Citizen Participation*'.

He argued that while local government does give people a voice there is no agreement on how 'engagement' can be effective. He asked how, representing our own organisations, we consult with them. This is all particularly relevant at this time when the *Town Forum is reviewing its own ways of working and interactions/communications with its members and the public*.

Cooperation with businesses

We have had several meetings and discussions with Alex Green the new Director of Together for Tunbridge Wells (BID) which is one of our members. He informed us of a meeting of Pantiles businesses he was arranging to discuss walkways there, and issues of access. Our Deputy Chair, Jane Fenwick was able to attend and contribute to the meeting.

We'll be supporting BID's recently announced new A26 Cycle Path initiative. We've been pressing for a cycle path there for several years. We are also encouraging our members to support a Box Art project, which BID is sponsoring, and has the backing of Refresh Tunbridge Wells. The project is for the painting of telephone and other junction boxes around town with attractive artwork, improving the street scene.

Electoral arrangements consultation and final recommendations

In May the Local Government Boundaries Commission for England (LGBCE) published their final recommendations for our borough

(<https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/tunbridge-wells>).

This followed their consultation which we had responded to last year. They noted our concerns over anomalies for High Brooms (partly in and out of Southborough) and have remedied it. The Commission has also adopted our suggestions of using the already familiar names for the redrawn inner wards: Culverden, St John's, St James', Sherwood, Park, and Pantiles.

There was a concern that Tunbridge Wells town might have been underrepresented, had they taken a different approach to the rural areas. This turned out *not* to be the case.

Council Partnership groups

We have continued to participate in partnership groups set up by the Borough Council to take forward projects or respond to particular needs. The idea is to involve stakeholders by getting their views, suggestions and other help as appropriate. Members of the groups have typically included RTW Town Forum, Councillors, voluntary organisations, Parish Chairs, and others.

In particular we have contributed to:

Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) – This is part of Levelling Up. A number of modest projects we had proposed last year were absorbed into larger projects this year, following Government approval of the Council's investment plan. Tunbridge Wells is benefitting from grants to improvements to the Street Scene in the north of the town (RTW Street Scene Improvements), Creative Tunbridge Wells to grow the creative and business economy, and Visit Tunbridge Wells Marketing Plan for which a brochure has been produced for the Tunbridge Wells and the wider borough. Follow-up improvements to the High Street, including street furniture are being introduced. In the current year support is being given to reintroduce the Royal Tunbridge Wells Farmers Market. Our Chairman continues to represent the Town Forum on this partnership group.

Town Centre Area Plan – We have been represented on this partnership by Chair and Deputy Chair (Adrian Berendt) since its inception last year, and several of our members have participated in stakeholder workshops. We receive regular updates on the plan at partnership meetings, and have commented on questions proposed for a public Issues and Options consultation due to take place early next year. There have also been discussions following the Council's recent call for Town Centre sites for potential development. Particular attention is being given to the Council's work with BID on an Economic Development Strategy and on an emerging Vision (with the underlying principles) for the town.

Our Town Forum efforts have continued to be directed at providing information on the evolving plan and keeping our members interested. As regards the former, detailed presentations were given at our full TF meetings by Carlos Hone, TWBC Head of Planning and Cllr Hugo Pound.

We have also been urging the Council to give careful consideration when introducing the coming consultation on their proposals for the town centre to *how* the Vision can be best explained to the public and how to encourage criticism and comments, as well as showing themselves still open to new suggestions at this stage.

See also *Strategic Planning Working Group* below.

Environment

At the meeting on 24 November last year following the AGM Radu Lepure Caroles from the Environment Agency showed a video on Carbon Data and explained the work of the Agency. At a more recent meeting Marieke de Jonge Town Forum member and Local Coordinator for Tunbridge Wells Friends of the Earth gave advice on how we can personally reduce our carbon footprints.

Membership and attendance

There were no new member organisations this year. We have 60 membership organisations comprising 20 special interest groups and 40 residents' associations.

The average attendance rate has dropped again this year. A number of organisations appear to have let their membership lapse by not attending any meetings, and we'll need to find the reasons for this and advise on appropriate action.

Year	Average attendance including Councillors	Average attendance excluding Councillors (member organisations only)
2022/23	37%	33%
2021/22	42%	45%
2020/21 (covid continues until May 2021)	57%	60%
2019/20 (covid from March 2020 onwards)	52%	56%
2018/19	Not recorded	62%

Cinema Site

We have received regular briefings on the Cinema site and we are informed that work on the site is due to start early in 2024

Safety in Tunbridge Wells

This was reviewed in some detail at our full meeting on 24 November which followed our AGM. Caroline Auckland, Soroptimist International Tunbridge Wells and District outlined the findings of their survey on safety issues faced by women in Tunbridge Wells.

This was a great opportunity for members to put their concerns and questions to a panel comprising:

Terry Hughes, Community Safety Manager, TWBC

Roz Heaton, Business Crime Manager, Town Safety Partnership

Inspector Jones, Kent Police

Gill Ruddock, Soroptimists.

This was further reported on in the minutes of the meeting of 24 November which appeared in the agenda papers for our March 30th meeting.

Town Forum Working Groups

Our working groups are our backbone. Without them our impact and effectiveness would be lost. The groups have continued to produce reports, disseminate information and monitor Council and other proposals and plans.

Leisure, Wellbeing and Culture

As previously reported Carolyn Gray needed to step back from chairing last year. Members of the group had a busy year personally and so found they could only meet once during the year.

At the informal meeting on 19 June the Group reviewed of all that had happened in the past year regarding The Pantiles spring, Pantiles events; the Decimus Burton Museum project; The Amelia Scott; The Assembly Hall; Trinity Theatre; The Forum, the Town Hall; the Local Plan, including Hawkenbury Sports Centre and TW Football Club; and finally local parks funding, including RTW In Bloom. Some of these are reported on under the other working groups

The working group feels it needs “new blood” to take it forward, and would welcome anyone willing to take on Chairing, also a secretary to take and type the minutes, and new members with an interest in the future of the town’s leisure, wellbeing and culture.

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Water in the Wells group:

The group maintained a watch on established water features, reporting non-functioning ones to the relevant authorities when necessary. The greatest concern had been with the water feature at The Potteries (Pantiles 1887) which has frequently been without water. At the time of writing it appears to be functioning with lights working and water flowing.

The most significant development over the year was the reformation of the Chalybeate Spring and Dippers Hall. Although not all working group members were happy with the result, one member gave regular support and advice to the businessman who conceived, financed and realized the project. After many years of neglect, not only does the right-hand basin have a small gushing fountain, but modified chalybeate water, bottled and in a variety of flavours is on sale. We now have water in several forms at either end of the Pantiles.

Another notable development has been the restoration of the vandalized Joseph Love Fountain in St John’s Park and Meadows. Members of the Working Group came together with the Friends of the Park and the Council Parks Department to bring the project to a successful conclusion, marked by an official opening by the Mayor in June.

The working group has continued to lobby the TWBC Parks Department to install more bottle-filling stations. Bottle filling stations have been installed in several more public parks, including Grosvenor and Hilbert Park, The Grove and St John’s Park and Meadows. The group is currently liaising with the Director of the Business Improvement District (BID) to investigate where bottle filling stations might be installed in the town centre.

For developments still at the pre-construction phase and those already nearing completion, members have maintained contact with Retirement Villages (the developer of the former ABC Cinema site) and with Elysian (the developer of the former Bus Depot – now renamed ‘The Beckett’) to ensure that the water features included in plans are actually installed. In both cases the working group has been assured that the envisaged water walls remain firmly in the plan..

The group continues to lobby the Council and the Parks Department to produce a long-term plan for the renovation and maintenance of the Dunorlan Victorian Fountain with its attendant cascades and channels.

Finance Working Group.

After many years of excellent, diligent work leading the Finance Working Group, David Wakefield handed over the reins and David Scott has kindly agreed to chair the group.

At the end of last year a response was submitted to the *budget* consultation for 2023-2024.

The usual task of reviewing the annual budget and actuals of the Borough Council for 2022-2023 proved to be more challenging than usual. The working group has recently provided a commentary/report with analyses of the Council's annual accounts for the last financial year which are of some complexity. The complexities result from the usual frequent short notice of changes of government policy with regard to council funding, and this time there have been particular uncertainties induced by the Covid pandemic. For many of us the Working Group report has helped to explain the accounts and untangle the complexities.

The working group also spent some time examining Special Expenses - the 'precept' paid by resident members of the Town Forum - and will continue to investigate the process for deciding which town amenities it funds, mainly the town's parks.

The very recent news about TWBC buying British Land out of their lease on Royal Victoria Place has yet to be fully digested, but will surely have a significant impact on council finances in future years.

On all these items, the group is grateful to Lee Colyer, Director of Finance, and colleagues for their time and cooperation in what has been a busy time for them. We look forward to further cooperation next year.

Finally, more volunteers are welcome, indeed needed, on the Finance Working Group in what is likely to prove an equally challenging year for local councils throughout the UK in 2023/24

The Strategic Planning Working Group

The group, efficiently chaired and managed by Mark Booker, has had another very busy year with the Local Plan and has responded to consultations and to questions raised by Government inspectors/examiners. Mark is looking for someone to take over from him.

As far as the general public are concerned the Draft Local Plan will appear to have made little progress since the Public Inquiry into the draft closed last November. This reflects the extreme difficulty which seems to be facing the Planning Policy Team and their consultants in satisfying the Inspector that the various aspects of the proposed Garden Village at Tudeley can be adequately co-ordinated and implemented within the proposed delivery time.

The Working Group has great sympathy for officers faced with unrealistic and often moving planning targets from central government and having little autonomy actually to plan what should be done to meet the Borough's actual needs. Proposed Major Modifications to the draft were finally due to be announced at the beginning of October but the Cabinet Advisory

Board meeting on 9th October was cancelled, presumably because there are still some unresolved issues. The next possible date for public information will be the Cabinet Advisory Board on 13th November.

The Working Group has also monitored and commented on the Town Centre Area Plan which is reported on separately above.

Transport Working Group

Jane Fenwick chairs our *Transport Working Group*. This year the group largely focussed on supporting ideas to promote more 'active travel' so as to reduce pollution and benefit the health and wellbeing of people living and working in the town, while also recognising that it is important to have a viable and affordable range of transport options for all types of journey.

Actions taken include the following:

- Proposing a 'whole town' 20mph scheme for local councillors to consider.
- Giving support to making the High Street one way scheme permanent. The Group also called for improved planters, wider pavements and other design improvements. Lorna Blackmore conducted a survey of retailers views and presented the result to the Joint Transportation Board meeting.
- Supporting the BID (Business Improvement District) in their attempt to secure funding for the design of new cycle routes from Rusthall using some Commons land, and pedestrian and cycle improvement in the St John's/St James residential area.

There is concern that double decker buses are still parking on London Road and around the town all day after transporting children from around Kent and Sussex to local schools. The main bus stand was always full so that tourist coaches could not stop, and views of the Commons were blighted. We continue to support local residents in urging the TWBC to find alternative locations for all this bus and coach traffic. So far no solution has been proposed.

The Mount Pleasant 'bus gate' scheme in front of the Amelia Centre and Town Hall (also affecting residents of York Road and Dudley Road) had been operational for some time before it was finally enforced this year. It resulted in many complaints, confusion and anger at fines imposed. Our Transport Working Group had alerted TWBC to the inadequate and confused signage when it was first opened but drivers had got used to driving through without enforcement. As a result there has been difficulty in changing driving habits to enforce the scheme. Local residents most affected are very unhappy and continue to press for solutions. TWG members helped with traffic counts in the area.

Town Forum management

Our thanks go to the Council for the support they were able to provide us during the year in the face of staffing difficulties and issues related to planning for co-working. (See Council Support above).

Thanks to all those who have supported us during the year. I am especially grateful to our management group and to chairs of working groups and all who have served on them.

Thanks also to Katharina Mahler-Bech who has continued to efficiently manage our website and social media, providing vital sources of communication for our organisation.

Finally, despite the problems over the current year of reduced Council administrative support and difficulties over arrangements for meetings we have, as outlined above, continued make significant inputs through our members, Working Groups and management group towards improvements in Tunbridge Wells.

Don Sloan OBE,
Chairman RTW Town Forum
October, 2023

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