



Town Forum's Response to

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council 5 year plan 2017 – 2022

(Consultation Tuesday 25 April 2017 – Monday 5 June 2017)

While the Town Forum welcomes many aspects of the Borough Council's 5 year plan, it has a number of observations and suggestions for improvement.

The Vision statement is a good encapsulation of Royal Tunbridge Wells, both its heritage and its future as a centre of culture. References to quality of life, the financial challenges that the Borough faces and the need for new homes are clearly described.

The Corporate Priorities on pages 3/4 add little to the document. Better would be to explain HOW the projects listed later will deliver the Vision.

The Context on pages 5/6 is useful, but some items are solutions rather than context. The linkage between congestion, highways infrastructure and growth through housing is misleading. Building the right sort of housing in the right place near to local services is more effective in solving congestion than building new roads, as the Campaign to Protect Rural England pointed out in its recent report <http://www.cpre.org.uk/magazine/opinion/item/4576-road-building-time-for-a-new-direction>.

The reference to Royal Tunbridge Wells as a destination town does not belong in Context. It is a key generator of economic activity which helps the whole borough to prosper and its development needs to be stated as a strategic aim.

The Town Forum has commented elsewhere on the new Local Plan, but the key is for housing to be built where it's needed and for the people that need it, often in the villages, where children and grandchildren can't afford to live in the place where their grandparents grew up. The National Planning Policy Framework requirement to meet the current Objectively Assessed Need for housing with 50% affordable needs to be included in the Context section. In recent years housing in Tunbridge Wells has been low density and expensive and concentrated in Royal Tunbridge Wells. The five year plan needs to explicitly redress this imbalance.

The description of how the Borough Council provides its services is thorough but the limits of its powers and responsibilities could be clearer:

- In areas such as health, transport & education, the Borough Council's strategy can and should be laid out, but it should be stressed that it cannot deliver the desired outcomes and can only be an enabler in these matters.

Formed in 2005, the Town Forum is a partnership between Residents' Representatives and ward Councillors in the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells, the unparished area of the Borough of Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

Town Forum Management Group

Adrian Berendt (Chair); Alex Green (Deputy Chair); Alastair Tod (Deputy Chair); David Wakefield (Finance); Jane Fenwick (Transport); Linda Lewis (Culture, Leisure & Tourism); Mark Booker (Strategic Planning); Michael Holman (Water in the Wells)

- More needs to be made of the fact that little of the money raised locally is spent on local services – most residents do not understand this point.

There is an absence of projects relating to the Council's objectives other than Leisure, Culture and Tourism, with the overall effect of an imbalance in the document towards services and their delivery.

The strategic compass on page 25 seems to be an attempt to address a key concern of the Local Government Association's Peer Challenge from October 2016.

"The council needs to develop a 'strategic narrative' for Tunbridge Wells that conveys what the borough and the council are all about to help people understand the strategic direction of the borough."

However, it is rather complex and fails to explain how the projects underpin the Vision.

Recent government guidance to Local Authorities on cycling and walking and on clean air should be referenced to support the Borough's objective of more people travelling actively. Unfortunately the references to active travel lack prominence under Social and Health Inequalities. Active travel is not an afterthought. Of all the issues that face the town, the one that many people highlight as bringing most benefit is the need for facilities that get people walking and cycling the shorter distances into town, rather than being forced into a car, as at present.

This desire for active travel is undermined on page 12 by the projects to "improve" highways and to have more car parking, both of which lead to more cars, and thereby more congestion, more pollution and worse health. As we have stated elsewhere, we would not endorse the need for more parking in the absence of a comprehensive parking strategy which integrates all aspects of parking, including non-residents parking on residential streets.

Educational needs are understated. We have blackspots of need at primary, secondary and tertiary level, although we accept that the Borough Council is limited in what it can deliver.

Royal Tunbridge Wells is implicitly excluded by the reference to supporting neighbourhood plans of parish and town councils. We would welcome a reference to the need, in the absence of a local council for RTW, to consult with the RTW Town Forum in implementing the Plan.

In summary, the Town Forum asks the Borough Council to consider whether it has fully implemented the recommendations of the Local Government Association's Peer Challenge in this five year plan.

"The council should take all the transformation activity that is already underway, build on it and develop it into a strategic approach and programme with application across the organisation focused on helping to fulfil the council's ambitions."

Adrian Berendt
Chair, Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum