



## Minutes from meeting with stakeholder group

- meeting:** Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum
- date:** 6.30pm, 27 January 2011
- location:** Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Chamber,  
Royal Tunbridge Wells
- attendees:** Approx. 30 members of the Town Forum
- Martin Woodhouse – John Laing (MW)
- William Benson, Chief Executive – Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (WB)
- Nick Jones – M&N Communications (NJ)
- Julia Burton - Roberts – M&N Communications (JBR)

### Description

- 1.1 WB introduced the project team representatives and provided background on the various activities in the consultation process; stakeholder meetings, drop in sessions and workshops.
- 1.2 NJ introduced himself and gave an explanation of the how the meeting would progress. A slide show was used to explain M&N's role, the purpose of the consultation, the spectrum of possible development options, the reporting structure, the questionnaire and newsletter, consultation promotion and the five areas covered in the consultation – culture, retail, leisure, civic and public services.
- 1.3 The meeting started with a question and answer session.
- 1.4 Michael Doyle (representing Hawkenbury Village Association) asked why the questionnaires had not been received by everyone. NJ responded that the first distribution had been unsatisfactory so M&N had undertaken a second distribution. The second one was currently being finished. GPS was being used to monitor the penetration rate and the consultation deadline had been extended to allow for late delivery.



- 1.5 Discussion followed as to whether Victor Webb was eligible to ask a question – permission was declined by the Chair.
- 1.6 Maggie Fraser (representing the Over 50s Forum) stated that it seemed that blocks of flats had not received the material.  
NJ responded that this was being arranged and asked if anyone knew of anyone that had not had the information that they encourage them to get in touch with M&N.  
WB added that the whole process had been widely promoted, firstly through the Council newsletter, then with the two distributions and the questionnaire had been placed in community venues.
- 1.7 Jane Fenwick (representing The Calverley Park Residents Association) stated that in the consultation people were being asked to project their thoughts 20 years ahead. She then asked how much reference would be made to the way town halls would function in the future and what their role might be as at the moment their role was shrinking.  
NJ responded that the report would be a collation and analysis of the information that would have been provided by participants and so it would not be possible to translate this into a possible vision of the future  
WB added that it was a good question as when looking ahead, it also made one look back. He stated that a lot could happen in 20 years and there may be no such thing as a borough council by then. He felt that where services overlapped there was almost inevitably room for improvement and efficiency and that the public sector was moving towards a much more integrated approach to service delivery.
- 1.8 Councillor Neve (representing St. James' ward, Royal Tunbridge Wells) stated that he had been present at some of the stakeholder meetings and that parking had consistently been raised as an issue. He asked therefore why it had not been included in the consultation as he felt that the town needed more car parking.  
NJ responded that this was a wider comment about infrastructure and that it was an issue that had been being brought up in meetings. He continued that infrastructure was there to facilitate use of the town centre. M&N had therefore not considered it as a use in itself for the purposes of the consultation.
- 1.9 John Goodfellow (representing Banner Farm Residents' Association) stated that people had been living in the town for many years and that TWRC had told the Council that this was a once in a generation opportunity. He wanted to know why this was the case as although John Laing had said that the town was 'split into two halves' and the civic complex was in the way he felt that it linked the two halves and was the most used part of the town centre.



He did not feel that the civic complex was a blockage.

WB responded that change was inevitable regardless of what the Council decided to do. He said that the Council did not own many parts of the civic complex and other public sector bodies 0- most notable the Police and KCC were reviewing the way in which they delivered services. He said that this was a 'once in a generation opportunity' because they were facing funding constraints but this should allow the Council to work more collaboratively. KCC was facing a budget deficit of £91m and was having a huge rethink of services – it was a burning platform that he felt the Council could take advantage of. JG then asked what evidence there was that retailers wanted to come to Tunbridge Wells. The Cushman & Wakefield report did not give any material evidence.

WB replied that the rise of North Farm provided some evidence but that there was also evidence that had been submitted as part of the Town Centres Area Action Plan. He added that Tunbridge Wells had a very low vacancy rate compared to many other similar towns.

MW stated that the Cushman & Wakefield report talked about capacity and suggested that retailers who could not come to the town would go elsewhere and therefore it was important to know how people used the town centre.

NJ asked whether he could assume then that JG did not want to see any more retail.

JG responded that that was correct as it would lead to an increase in traffic and that transport could not be ignored when people could get to Bluewater so easily.

**1.10** Michael Doyle asked whether everything off the civic complex was out of the scope of the consultation.

NJ replied that people had been discussing other sites and the town centre more generally and that this was all included.

**1.11** Philip Whitbourn (representing Beulah Road Residents' Association) stated that there had already been a consultation on whether the town needed more retail and that the answer had been no. He felt that everyone considered that the questionnaire was slanted and that there was nothing on it about the fact that the buildings were listed or how it would be developed.

NJ replied that although PW felt this, his answer might not be the same as everyone else's, for example people outside the town may not use shops the most.

PW then said that he was worried about how people would respond to the first question as he felt that everyone bought food in the centre of the town so everyone would all say shopping was the thing they used most. He then asked who had devised the questionnaire.



NJ replied that M&N had devised it and that the decision had been taken to have a short and accessible questionnaire that would encourage people to get involved rather than a 25 page long one with every question every one wanted to be asked. He added that the questionnaire had to consider the main shopping areas.

WB added that people could also submit further information.

- 1.12** Jane Fenwick stated that at the workshop she had attended, what people valued had come out loud and clear. She said that Camden Road and Trinity would need to be protected if any redevelopment happened. She asked whether these valuable things would be brought out in the report.

NJ replied that everything that had been said during the consultation would be in the report and that everyone would be able to review it when it was published.

- 1.13** Philip Whitbourn asked whether NJ could assure him that his answer to question 1 that he used shops most often would not be used to suggest that he wanted more shops.

NJ replied that he could assure PW of that as M&N wanted to understand how people used the town and that he anticipated that other people, such as those who did not live in the town would answer it differently. He added that that question was only one part of the questionnaire which was only one part of the consultation.

- 1.14** Maggie Fraser stated that lots of people came to Tunbridge Wells and that they came there to shop as well as for the culture. She added that they also came to the town because they liked the look of it so she felt that she wanted to discuss how it could be improved it but that she did not want a shopping centre.

Peter Perry (representing Calverley Park Crescent Freeholders Association) added that most people who came to the town came to shop and for the town to remain viable it had to remain competitive. He did not want Tunbridge Wells to become a clone town but he suggested that the town could consider going upmarket.

- 1.15** Mary Wardrop (Hawkenbury Village Association) said she felt it was very positive that she had received copies of the material but she wanted to know whether people just over the border in Sussex would not receive it.

NJ replied that they shouldn't but if they wanted it they could ask M&N for a copy to fill in and it would still be recorded.

WB added that the material had also been sent to lists of those who used the facilities, such as the Assembly Hall.



**1.16** George Lawson (representing Inner London Residents Association) stated that he was not against the expansion of retail so long as it was not at the expense of smaller retailers. He added that he would be loath to back a project if it meant sacrificing the cultural heart of the town but that the leader did not seem to be bothered about the cultural offer and was only interested in shops. He asked whether the town could afford to keep the culture as he felt it was very good and he also thought many people shared this view. He was concerned that the Council was asking people to support regeneration without knowing the consequences of it.

WB replied that it was important to look at what the stage the process was at. He said that the TWRC had been set up two years before through an OJEU tender process and that stage one was about conducting viability tests and safety checks. He added that the TWRC board had to give its approval at the end of stage one before it went to stage two. At stage two the detail would be worked up on the issues that were being asked about but because this was such a big issue the consultation was happening at stage one not at stage two.

MW: Stage two will draw up some possibilities based on this consultation and talks will go ahead with organisations such as English Heritage.

**1.17** Jane Fenwick stated that regeneration was happening all over the country with retail, sport and culture; some was more effective than others and that some people would not be happy with a retail led project but would be interested in a culturally led one?

MW replied that regeneration was a broad term and that one would not always associate Tunbridge Wells with the term regeneration, but that there were examples where different uses can contribute to wider regeneration, including the new College facility in Hastings. He said that the Council wanted the town to remain prosperous so it was considering the mix of uses and sometimes that did include retail and that if something were to happen it needed to be sensitively done.

JF asked whether it was possible to have a culturally led regeneration.

MW replied that a mix of uses could provide a broad a varied offering for visitors and residents that would be the best solution.

**1.18** Councillor Mayhew (representing Park ward, Royal Tunbridge Wells) said she wanted to reassure everyone about the five commitments.

GL stated that the impression was that these commitments had come from Councillor Bullock and that there was huge mistrust of the Council; he said he was trying to make the point that regeneration needed to improve not destroy the town and the he did not want to lose venues and independent shops.



- 1.19 Peter Perry stated that he wanted to keep the cultural facilities but that he felt that it was very difficult to have culturally led regeneration as many were failing and he did not believe this was a practical possibility.
- 1.20 Councillor Neve asked whether it was normal practice for a company to put time and effort into something before anything was decided. He added that it was important that no facilities were shut before there were replacements. He also wondered whether the project was being rushed.
- NJ replied that there was a meeting in committee room one with the Choral Society going on at the same time and many other meetings had been held with other users, many of whom were there.
- MW added that John Laing's interest started in 2007 when the company responded to a tender for a long term partnership to look at 38 of the Council's assets and following a thorough process John Laing was selected as the preferred partner. John Laing specialises in being a partner to the public sector and the company is committed to the consultation to prevent work being down on proposals that were not necessary or appropriate for the town.
- WB added that the project was not being rushed through and that a considerable amount of work was done in 2006-7 to get it started. Following the thorough process to choose John Laing, which included a public exhibition on all the bidders, it was now time to move from something that was less tangible to something more imaginable.
- Councillor Neve commented that they had not been allowed to approve the questions on the questionnaire and WB responded that it would have taken too long if everything had gone through the committee.
- 1.21 Anne Stobo (representing Friends of the Library, Museum and Art Gallery) stated that she felt it could be culturally led regeneration. She considered the facilities to be inadequate as there was a large collection at the museum that was not shown due to lack of space. She said that culture was very important as could be seen in the Chinese lantern procession which encompassed all cultures.
- John Forster (representing RTW Civic Society) added that the current Assembly Hall was a multi-purpose theatre but had no soul; he felt a new one was needed but that best use should be made of the site by refurbishment and that it would be able to survive a short closure.
- 1.22 David Wakefield (representing Friends of the Library, Museum and Art Gallery) stated that if he could see what it might look like, he might like it better but that he would be sorry to lose Grade II listed buildings; it might not be the most beautiful building but belonged to the town.
- NJ agreed that it was difficult to engage people in something where there had been no decision. As it could be the case that nothing happens at the end of the consultation, it was not possible to ask a straight yes/no question.



- 1.23 Councillor Peter Crawford (representing Broadwater ward, Royal Tunbridge Wells, Chairman of the RTW Town Forum) stated that there was nothing for the youth in RTW to do and that the town needed something for them such as an ice rink or similar and that he thought there were many different sites that could be used for this.
- 1.24 Jane Fenwick asked KCC thought about the library. The Friends preference was for a library where there was a high footfall, near the museum with some flexible, multi-use space. As KCC did not have any funding for this anything that was done must be done through the regeneration.
- 1.25 Philip Whitbourn stated that tourism was very important and could help Tunbridge Wells to prosper. He felt that the Pantiles needed some investment as they were a major attraction and wanted to know whether some of the museum artefacts could be displayed at the Pantiles.
- NJ responded that that was a very useful contribution and that whenever tourism was mentioned in the consultation, it was always the Pantiles and the museum that people were talking about.
- Christine Phillips (representing Twinning and Friendship Association) noted that the town was linked to a spa town in Germany (Wiesbaden) that had fantastic spa facilities but that RTW did not; she felt that that would be great for tourism and local residents.
- George Lawson felt that that was an attractive proposition and should be pursued.
- Councillor Mayhew asked whether people arrived at the Pantiles and then went up to the museum and whether the Pantiles would be a better location for the museum.
- John Goodfellow asked whether the museum could perhaps be spread around the town.
- Philip Whitbourn noted that that had been considered in the past.
- Kate Sergeant (representing Clarence Road Users Group) asked about the possibility of an outdoor lido?
- John Forster noted that although tourism was good for the town it should not be over promoted as the town needed to remain a nice place to live.
- 1.26 Michael Larsen (representing Friends of the Grove) said that what he thought was starting to emerge was a need for the Pantiles to be put in order before the civic complex was looked at. He felt Tunbridge Wells was known for the Pantiles and that they needed considerable investment. He said that very few people wanted a complete reorganisation of the civic complex and that the Pantiles should come first.



Katharina Mahler-Bech (representing Telephone House Neighbours Association, Community Champion of RTW Town Forum), said that the Pantiles were not owned by the Council but by Targetfollow. She also noted that the Pump Room and the Royal Sussex Hotel were not used for the purposes for which they had been initially intended. Jane Fenwick noted that the jazz evening at the Pantiles was good but that there was nothing similar at the top end of town and that there should be.

- 1.27 John Goodfellow noted that he generally supported what had been said, including that there were many other projects which could be supported. He suggested that town should look back at its heritage and remember that it was more than just a town as it was surrounded by the Weald of Kent.

The evening concluded with a short sum up of the discussion and thanks by Nick Jones.