

Royal Tunbridge Wells (RTW) Town Forum

5 July 2005 (First Meeting)

Draft Minutes

Present: Jenny Alexander, Daniel Bech, Graham Bradley, Michael Doyle, Matt Goodwin, Brian Harper, John Higgs, Val Joy, Dr Michael Larsen, George Lawson, Kalpa Patel, Keith Perry, Patrick Shovelton, Patricia Smith, Jeremy Syers, Christopher Thomas, Mary Wardrop, Dr Philip Whitbourn, Cllr Alfred Baker, Cllr Roy Bullock, Cllr Barbara Cobbold, Cllr Peter Crawford, Cllr Peter Davies, Cllr Chris Gillmore, Cllr Mary Lewis, Cllr Catherine Mayhew, Cllr David Neve, Cllr Leonard Price, Cllr James Scholes, Cllr David Wakefield

Apologies: Jenny Blackburn, S Casey, S Dutton, Michael Hicks, Neil Treslan, David Webster, Cllr Peter Bulman, Cllr Melvyn Howell, Cllr Frank Williams, Cllr Bob Wratten,

Introductions and Welcome

Cllr Davies welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the forum. He explained that the forum would need to 'find its own way', to evolve, and that his hope was it would be a partnership, not 'run' by the Borough Council, and be a forum to which other agencies might be invited to debate and progress issues. In other parts of the Borough, he said, residents were represented through Parish and Town Councils. But RTW does not have a Town Council.

He then invited everyone to introduce themselves, to say who they represented and to outline their key interests. These included Planning, Community Safety, Transport, Parking, Shopmobility, Access & Disability, Environmental Issues, Housing, Shopping, Elderly, Education, Young Families, Anti-Social Behaviour, Cleanliness and Licensing.

Background

Cllr Mrs Mayhew summarised the genesis of the Forum: that it followed a year-long review of Council communications, of both how it interacts with itself, and with the public and others. She said the review had coincided with adoption of a Borough Community Plan which she described as 'not our's but your's'. She explained that a partnership network of forums was developing, built around a central Community Plan Partnership, with forums focused on different issues, minority groups, or areas. The Town Forum brought together people with different interests in the town.

Ellie Broughton, Head of Corporate Marketing & Communications, had been the lead officer of the review and said that a key message which had emerged from residents and others is that they want to be a part of what the Council decides and does: to have a role in shaping the future.

She made reference to research data and some of the differences between Royal Tunbridge Wells and the rural towns and villages in the borough, in particular commenting on the higher expectations of those in Royal Tunbridge Wells.

She talked about changes in the Council's culture: that greater emphasis is placed on public involvement and of requirements on managers to demonstrate how they have involved residents in the development of policies and local services. Councillors too, she said, were introducing a training and development scheme for themselves.

Finally she advised that the Government has put local authorities on notice that it expects them to make 'neighbourhood arrangements'. They are not generally advocating local budgets or decentralised services - which can prove costly - but influence in decision-making.

Vision for the Forum

Cllr Davies summarised some ideas of how the Forum might function.

- **Host surgeries** - opened up to all members of the public to come along to meet their ward Councillor or particular Cabinet members.
- **Host public meetings** - perhaps around a particular subject, or part of the town.
- **Invite agencies** along to say what they're doing, how they're tackling an issue.
- **Undertake or commission research**, eg amongst residents, to gauge strength of feeling, the capacity for a local 'task force'; or to look at what happens in other towns on a particular issue to learn from good ideas elsewhere.
- Act as a **support network** for residents' associations, providing advice and information to each other and to those thinking of setting up an association. The Council would be willing to consider hosting a Residents' Association section on www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk, and you could exchange ideas between yourselves about your experiences - what's worked well and what hasn't.

- Work up **joint proposals** to submit to the Council or other body for an improvement or change in the area. Working jointly with Councillors and/or Council officers may help ensure the proposal has a certain level of support, or that critical related issues are given early consideration.
- Generally **build relationships** with others active in the town, either other residents or those who work for, or represent, you with the aim of improving trust and understanding between each other.

These suggestions were not intended to be exhaustive, he said, but to illustrate how the forum might work.

Open Spaces Project

By way of illustrating how the forum might involve itself in local improvements Gary Stevenson (GS), Head of Environmental Services gave a slide presentation examining some of the town's open spaces, highlighting problems with street furniture, graffiti, fly posting, discarded gum, damaged paving, derelict buildings and scruffy advertisement hoardings. The Councils, he said, were taking steps to pilot new ways of working to tackle these issues which would seek to improve co-ordination with other agencies and focus efforts on improvements. He suggested that the Forum could seek to involve residents in setting acceptable standards for the Council and other agencies to adhere to, and as acting as 'eyes and ears', reporting items for attention.

Mr Doyle expressed surprise that the Cinemas site had not been included in the presentation given its high profile position and abandoned state.

Mr Thomas asked if anything could be done about abandoned shopping trolleys and GS replied that whilst supermarkets were responsible for their trolleys the Council will step in and take action if they are not dealt with in a reasonable time. He said that the Council had allocated more money to staff resources for taking remedial action against problems, although explained that improvements would take a little while to show through.

Mrs Wardrop expressed delight that something was happening and that the project was getting support. She asked what restrictions were placed on temporary signs and whilst Cllr Bullock outlined the current rules she expressed doubts that the rules were being applied and asked what might be done. Dr Whitbourn highlighted choices of lamp standards in different parts of the town saying that choices weren't always appropriate. He praised the Council's care of the town's brick pavements whilst criticising utility companies who dig up paviers and back fill with tarmac.

Mr Shovelton asked what powers existed to control frontages and whether it was true that the Council had elected not to use them. In particular he was concerned about frontages in London Road and Inner London Road. He was used to 'demanding' action and nothing happening.

Mr Bech raised problems with noise, asking what can be done to enforce acceptable noise levels. GS said noise went beyond the scope of the particular set of proposals he had presented but explained that action depended on whether the noise constituted a 'legal nuisance'. He said he was 'very keen' to use legal powers to bring improvements.

GS went on to urge everyone to look out for Pubs' and Clubs' applications for extended hours under the new Licensing Act and to make representations to the Council's Licensing Committee if they had concerns. Unless the Committee receives representations then the Committee would not consider the applications which could be approved automatically. Only where representations are received must the Committee meet to consider them.

Mr Thomas asked about the extent to which shopkeepers can use the pavement. Sometimes pavement use might enhance the environment - for example tables and chairs outside a café - whilst other times use might constitute a hazard. He felt that any interpretation of the rules needed a balance. GS said that it would be for the County Council to act and generally that shopkeepers should not be using the pavements unless they own a part of them: circumstances vary. Mr Higgs referred to A Boards on pavements, for example on the High Street, which are a nuisance and a hazard for pedestrians. Mrs Wardrop suggested that it would be helpful for members of the Forum to be given guidance as to who to contact for different services, thus enabling resident representatives to help members of their associations. GS said in time he hoped it would be possible to give a single point of contact. Cllr Scholes suggested that resident representatives go back to their members and ask them what they consider to be the most important problems in the town for feeding back to the Forum next time. This would enable the Forum to prioritise its efforts.

Cllr Bullock suggested that it would be useful for everyone to know what powers the Council has to take action. For example in answering Mr Shovelton's question about frontages he understood that the Council could take remedial action in certain circumstances and recharge the owner. A list of byelaws and powers would help determine what might be done.

Cllr Mrs Lewis said that concerns with frontages can be reported to the County Council who will take action.

Val Joy asked who owned the Greyhound Pub, featured in GS's presentation as badly graffitied, GS said that he thought the Council did know who the owner was.

One delegate drew attention to traffic on the road by the Body Shop in one of GS's slides. He pointed out that the road is meant to have traffic restrictions which are being flouted and not enforced. Cllr Davies offered to look into the matter and report back. **Action: Cllr Davies**

In summary GS said that a team of graffiti busters was in the process of being recruited and asked for patience in expecting improvements to come through. It was agreed that GS would report back to a future meeting with progress and more about how residents could become involved. **Action: Gary Stevenson**
Community Plan Review

Estelle Grant (EG), Community Planner, presented a summary of the current Borough Community Plan and the timetable process for its review and spoke about the network of forums previously highlighted by Cllr Mrs Mayhew. She encouraged the Forum to take an interest in the review and said that there was an opportunity, if feedback were received by September, to have early influence in budget decisions for 2006/7. She also summarised the scope and process for the Local Development Framework, effectively a replacement of the Local Plan, which considers the land use impact in the Borough and controls its development.

Mr Thomas suggested that more might be done to encourage employers to work with their communities and gave an example of how his association works with Turners locally. EG greeted this as a good idea. Cllr Price said that whilst the Community Plan had an objective to promote health and wellbeing the area was served by a lousy hospital. He asked how can we be expected to achieve that objective. Jenny Alexander asked if there was an objective to preserve the heritage of RTW, something she considered paramount. Cllr Wakefield referred her to the Environment chapter in the Community Plan. Mr Thomas said that, in defence of the hospitals, people could do more to prevent spread of disease by being clean. He wished to see hygiene standards promoted.

Future of the Forum

Cllr Davies said he hoped the two presentations had 'whetted the appetite' and the Forum should next consider how it is to conduct itself and its priorities. Given that time had run out for full discussion he proposed a process for progressing matters prior to the next meeting. It was agreed that the minutes be issued and that members of the forum be asked to comment on the draft terms of reference meanwhile. Mr Syers asked that general planning issues be discussed at a future meeting and it was agreed that a presentation on Planning Policy Guidance might be useful. Mr Thomas said that he would be happy to present something about the Pensions Service, who he worked for, if this was of interest.

Mr Bech asked a general question about the Forum: would it undermine the role of Councillors' Commander Lawson also wished to know how it fitted in to the democratic process - would the Forum compete with Councillors and was this right, and would it get residents anywhere? He said it had been described as an experiment and one should consider whether it was worth the time, particularly as residents already have elected representatives. He counselled against a 'talking shop' and said that he was not convinced that Councillors and Council staff were willing to listen or to act. To illustrate this point he spoke of having twice made representations about brick pavers not being restored and on both occasions nothing had been done for some time. He can point to dozens of holes in the pavements. Unless the Forum were effective it would be a waste of everyone's time. He said the reason that people were present was because they were unsatisfied.

Mr Goodwin took a different view: he said that the Council's proposal for a forum was the best way of it staying in touch. He encouraged members to continue with the Forum - 'we need to try'. He said it was unfortunate to focus on the terms of reference and the scope of the Forum to ensure it could be effective, and he stressed the need for strong leadership. He said the first meeting had been frustrating - with items discussed in the wrong order: the scope should be agreed first.

Cllr Davies asked if there was a willingness to move on with the Forum and on to a second meeting and there was unanimous support.

Cllr Bullock said that there was no point in having a Forum if issues were not addressed. Councillor Price had already given an example of where Councillors had been frustrated in not having answers to concerns raised. He urged the Forum to consider what can be addressed and what can be dealt with, and to prioritise those things where results could be achieved. He said that if there were a recognition that not all issues could be solved and that if the terms of reference were right then gradual improvements could be achieved.

Date and Start Time of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting should take place in early September. The most acceptable start time for future meetings was 7pm.