

ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

Thursday 5 July 2018

Attended: Stuart Anderson, Caroline Auckland, David Barnett, Adrian Berendt (Chairman), Mark Booker, Stephen Bowser, John Cunningham, Margaret Ginman, Carolyn Gray, Cllr Lawrence Heasman, Dorothea Holman, Michael Holman, Linda Lewis, Cllr Peter Lidstone, Katharina Mahler-Bech, Helen Mitcham, Marianne Mac Donald, Cllr Tracy Moore, Marguerita Morton, Peter Perry, Cllr James Scholes, Tim Tempest, Alastair Tod, David Wakefield, Denise Watts, Cllr Lynne Weatherly and Pat Wilson.

TWBC officers present: William Benson (Chief Executive), Jane Clarke (Head of Policy and Governance), Steve Baughen (Interim Head of Planning Services), Amanda Doran (Museum), Jasmine Farram (Project Co-ordinator, Cultural & Learning Hub), Nick Peeters (Overview and Scrutiny Officer), Paul Taylor (Director of Change and Communities), Jo Wiltcher (Museum Director) and Mike McGeary (Democratic Services Officer)

Also present: County Councillors Paul Barrington-King and James McInroy, Borough Councillor Tom Dawlings and Mr Don Sloan.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were reported from Sally Balcon, Lorna Blackmore, David Bushell, John De Lucy, Irene Fairbairn, Jane Fenwick, Tim Harper, Angus Stewart, Adrian Twiner, Lucy Willis and from Cllrs Ronen Basu, Ben Chapelard, Barbara Cobbold, Mark Ellis, David Jukes, Alan McDermott and David Scott.

2. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

Mike McGeary reported on the following membership changes: (i) Margaret Ginman had been appointed to replace Angela Phillips as the representative of the Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery; (ii) Caroline Auckland had been appointed to replace June Bridgeman as the representative of the Soroptimists; (iii) as a consequence of that, Caroline had stepped down from her representative role from the Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery, with John De Lucy promoted to first-named representative; (iv) Bill Acker, the substitute representative of the Friends of Trinity Churchyard had resigned; and (v) the May 2018 Borough Council elections had resulted in three new town centre ward members being part of the Town Forum, namely Cllrs Mark Ellis (St John's), Nick Pope (Park) and David Scott (Culverden).

3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman said how pleased he was that the meeting was taking place at the TN2 Centre. He expressed grateful thanks to Cllr Lynne Weatherly for helping to arrange this and added how impressed he had been with the positive changes that had been achieved within the Sherwood community.

4. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting dated 22 March 2018 were submitted for approval. It was noted that there were no specific action items requiring an update to be given.

Mike McGeary drew attention to one correction required to be made to the minutes, namely the addition of Tim Ball to the list of representatives present at the meeting.

RESOLVED – That, with the above correction, the minutes of the meeting held on 22 March 2018 be approved.

5. UPDATE FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

In the absence of Cllr David Jukes, the Leader of the Council, Cllr Tracy Moore, Cabinet Portfolio-holder for Economic Development and Communications, provided an update report on a number of issues of interest.

Cllr Moore began by saying that the Leader of the Council had been unable to attend that evening, because he was travelling back from the Local Government Association Annual Conference held in Birmingham and needed to return home to his wife who was very poorly.

Cllr Moore provided a summary of what issues at a national level were currently impacting on local government, including: (i) this year's pilot scheme on the retention of business rates – in which Kent local authorities were taking part; (ii) the Government's proposals for changes to the National Planning Policy Framework and on how to deal with 'negative Revenue Support Grant' – a situation which this authority still faced; (iii) a government green paper on adult social care; and (iv) the possible impact on local government funding as a result of the NHS 'birthday present'.

At a county level, Cllr Moore advised that KCC would shortly be producing an 'enterprise and productivity strategy', details of which would be circulated in due course.

Finally, Cllr Moore focused on three major issues within the town centre: (i) the new theatre and civic offices – now known as Calverley Square – where planning consent had been given, contractors appointed, and full engagement was continuing with interested parties as part of the land assembly phase; (ii) a meeting had been arranged with the new leaseholders and managers of the RVP shopping centre, British Land; and (iii) discussions were continuing with the developers of the cinema site in order to establish the exact timeframe for their scheme to begin.

A number of questions were raised by Town Forum members as follows:

(a) Progress with the Union House development (Michael Holman) – Cllr Moore said that the demolition phase had been successfully completed. Steve Baughen (Interim Head of Planning Services) reported that a significant amount of material had been moved around the site since the end of the demolition phase, adding that, as far as he was aware, there were no delays being experienced in the developer's overall timetable.

(b) Roll-out of Universal Credit (Marianne Mac Donald) – William Benson confirmed that it was still the Council's intention to introduce Universal Credit across the Borough in November. The Chairman asked if there was a role the Town Forum could play in this roll-out. Ms Mac Donald drew attention to a recent Joseph Rowntree report and the significant concerns it had at the implementation of

Universal Credit; she added that Nourish was gearing up for a big rise in demand for its service.

Cllr Lawrence Heasman said that, from his continuing discussions with (i) the Revenues and Benefits section of the Borough Council and (ii) the Town & Country Housing Group, he felt there was a high state of preparedness for this roll-out.

- (c) **New Theatre** (Linda Lewis) – Cllr Moore provided some more detail in response to this request for an update. She said that the contractors Mace had been appointed for this scheme, adding that it would take until early in 2019 for the design details to be fully worked up, leading eventually to the opening of the new theatre in 2022.
- (d) **Town centre retail/visitor numbers/impact of Brexit** (Marguerita Morton) – Cllr Moore said that she would happily meet with Ms Morton to discuss the latest data on visitor numbers. Mr Benson added that, after the scheduled meeting had taken place with British Land, he would be happy to submit a report to the Town Forum on their views on retail trends.
- (e) **Town centre flooding** (Cllr Peter Lidstone) – Mr Benson provided a brief summary of the known extent of the flooding that had occurred in the town centre that afternoon. He said that some effective resilience measures had been put in place after the last serious incident and that KCC had only recently cleaned many of the town centre gullies; he added that the Head of Environment and Street Scene would be providing a full report on the extent of the damage very soon.

There were no action points arising from this update report.

6. TWBC'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Cllr Tom Dawlings, Chairman of TWBC's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, explained the functions of the Committee. He advised that it was possible to examine matters of community concern, even if they were not strictly within the direct remit of the Borough Council. This was possible because of the community leadership position the Council held, where it might be able to work with agencies and voluntary organisations towards finding solutions.

Cllr Dawlings said that, at the beginning of each civic year, the Committee would establish its work programme. He added that the usual method of working was to have no more than two 'task and finish' groups working at any one time, adding that now was the ideal time to feed in suggestions for inclusion in the work programme. He added that it was possible to view past overview and scrutiny work from the Council's website:

<http://democracy.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/meetings/ieListMeetings.aspx?CommitteeId=359> and see where studies had led to reports being presented to the Cabinet, with specific recommendations.

It was agreed that it might be beneficial for the Town Forum to 'sieve' through suggestions for possible inclusion in the work programme, before making any formal request to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED – That, should any Town Forum member have a suggestion for topics to be included in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work programme for 2018/19, they have an initial discussion with a member of the Forum's Management Group.

7. CULTURAL AND LEARNING HUB

Jo Wiltcher (Museum Director) and Jasmine Farram (Project Co-ordinator) gave a presentation on progress with the proposed cultural and learning hub, with illustrations of some of the 'RIBA Stage 4' internal designs for specific areas and setting out the key next stages.

Linda Lewis, on behalf of the Culture, Leisure and Tourism Working Group, welcomed the positive update report given.

Caroline Auckland signalled her enthusiastic support; she also sought details of accessibility and wc facilities for disabled people and where the Gateway centre would be. Ms Wiltcher said that wc facilities would be provided in the same position on all four floors, adding that the Gateway would be at ground floor level, with other dedicated staff on level 2. With accessibility, Ms Wiltcher said that the challenge of the different levels of the existing buildings had largely been overcome, leading to a very high level of overall accessibility.

Denise Watts asked whether customers of the Gateway would have the option of phoning in to discuss their issues. Paul Taylor confirmed this service would be available.

Tim Tempest asked what arrangements would be made for a Library service during the construction period. Ms Wiltcher advised that options for providing existing services throughout the construction period were being considered, with an assessment of the cost and the practicalities currently being undertaken.

John Cunningham stressed the importance of having archive facilities and a local history study area and asked if they would be included in the redesigned building. Ms Wiltcher confirmed that there would be an archive storage area plus a purpose-built reading room as well as a local studies centre. She emphasised that the illustrations which had been shown to the Town Forum did not cover the whole of the redesigned building, merely provided a summary of some of its key features.

Linda Lewis asked whether the new building would include spaces for events such as poetry readings or small performances. Ms Wiltcher advised that a number of spaces would be provided for such events and added that occasional larger performances could be accommodated through clearing movable bookshelves to the side.

Linda Lewis noted Ms Wiltcher's statement that both she and Miss Farram would shortly be leaving Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. She wished to place on record her grateful thanks to Ms Wiltcher for her hard work and dedication to the scheme and for the part she had played in the authority securing significant sums of external funding.

Marianne Mac Donald felt the design details shown in the presentation were inspiring; she added that she particularly welcomed the 'Makers' Gallery' and asked whether that might eventually provide 3D printers. Ms Wiltcher said she saw no reason why such printers could not be provided in the future, adding that if this inspired an interest in science that would be an added benefit.

Dorothea Holman asked what the impact would be on the existing Adult Education Centre services. Ms Wiltcher said that her understanding was that some of the specialist courses would be moved to other centres within the town.

Stuart Anderson asked how the courtyard area would be integrated into the redesigned building. Ms Wiltcher said that there were some exciting plans for this

area, which would see a programme of activities taking place, including use as a performance space.

Michael Holman sought an assurance that the paving/highway treatment to the area fronting Mount Pleasant Road would be properly co-ordinated with the separate plans for the next phase of the public realm initiative, which included the war memorial. Mr Taylor confirmed that the two projects were being closely monitored and provided reassurance that the planning of each scheme would be properly sequenced.

Michael Holman also asked whether the redesigned building would be able to incorporate drinking fountains. Ms Wiltcher said that she would speak to the project architect, to see if this were viable.

The Chairman concluded the discussion by thanking the officers and wishing them well for the remaining stages of this exciting project.

There were no specific action points arising from this report.

8. SHERWOOD – AN UPDATE BY WARD MEMBER CLLR LYNNE WEATHERLY

Cllr Lynne Weatherly, one of the three Sherwood ward councillors and the Cabinet Portfolio-holder for Communities and Wellbeing, described how, through various initiatives and the hard work of a number of committed individuals, pockets of deprivation and sub-standard housing and facilities within Sherwood had been tackled and the area vastly improved.

Cllr Weatherly introduced John Beadle to the meeting, a long-term resident, who described some of the community activities and initiatives that began the process of improvement.

Cllr Weatherly described the recent regeneration of the area, achieved through collaborative work amongst the Town & Country Housing Group, the Borough Council and the County Council, together with partner organisations and working very much with the local community. She said that this had built upon the earlier initiatives and through the provision of a large amount of mixed housing. Cllr Weatherly said that a particular statistic of which she was very proud was the current unemployment figure: 1.3% for the Sherwood ward, compared with the overall figure for the Borough of 0.9%.

The Chairman enquired whether the issues of deprivation and poor housing still existed within the ward but had been displaced; he asked that, if that were the case, how the situation could be remedied. Cllr Weatherly felt that there still remained a small part of the ward where deprivation existed, which she felt could be addressed by means of the same mixed housing being provided.

The Chairman acknowledged that a mixed-agency approach had been at the heart of the regeneration success. He asked how that had occurred. Cllr Weatherly said that the Sherwood Partnership had been key in the process, with funding having been obtained through central government. She said that one feature of that had been to focus on specific families, where a range of different agencies provided support with parenting skills, proper budgeting etc.

Marianne Mac Donald expressed concern over the Government's social housing policy and asked how that was having an impact within the ward. Cllr Weatherly said that there was currently no new '60% of market value' social housing being built. She added that a group had been set up by the Borough Council to look at the implications

of this across the Borough. William Benson felt it would be helpful if Bob Heapy, the Chief Executive of Town & Country Housing Group, to address the Town Forum, to lead a discussion on social housing.

Marianne Mac Donald and Denise Watts asked about the future of the TN2 Centre for community use. Cllr Weatherly advised that the building was leased from the YMCA but, of particular significance, while it was a much-valued and well-used facility, she said that there was little use by the local community.

Peter Perry repeated an offer he first made 12 months ago of possible funding and places on courses arranged by the Prince's Trust, aimed at helping 18-30 year olds, with their employment prospects. Mr Benson felt this might be of interest to those working on the Horizon Project led by the YMCA, and Jane Clarke wondered whether this might be of interest to Jackie Sumner from the Town & Country Housing Group. It was agreed that Mike McGeary would pass on Mr Perry's contact details.

Tim Tempest gave an illustrated talk on the success of the Men's Shed initiative, including a history of the Sherwood Lake and adjacent woodlands. He said that the key focus of the work was to provide a meaningful role for the minority members of the community – those who were experiencing loneliness or mental health issues – in order to meet the needs of the wider community.

Mr Tempest said that he was also involved in another local project, namely the 'I dig for Sherwood' initiative, which helped to provide a supported process of social intervention, with the benefit of people being able to grow their own vegetables.

Caroline Auckland asked if there were a 'Women's Shed' equivalent project. Mr Tempest confirmed that there was such an initiative, using the same shed as its base, and with more of a focus on handicrafts.

Marguerita Morton asked if there were any provision for football activity as part of this initiative. Mr Tempest advised that this could not be provided as the lake was surrounded by natural woodland.

The Chairman warmly thanked Mr Tempest for his work and his very interesting presentation and Cllr Weatherly for her very informative and insightful talk.

There were no specific action points arising from this presentation.

9. GENERAL 'QUESTION AND ANSWER' SESSION

Town Forum members had been invited to come forward with questions on matters of concern or interest.

(a) Resident Parking – Dorothea Holman enquired into progress with the proposals to amend the parking scheme at the southern end of town. Mr Benson said that the original proposals had been based on addressing the concerns of residents but in view of the representations from business interests, the amended scheme was under review. He added that only limited progress had been made due to the departure of two key members of staff. However, he said that, with a new Parking Manager in post, work would re-start and possible solutions worked up.

Katharina Mahler-Bech felt that separate solutions needed to be found for the two resident parking zones A and C, which were the subject of the review.

(b) Crescent Road car park – Dorothea Holman asked what impact the current repair works were having on the operation of the car park. Mr Benson said that the

scheduled repair work would continue for some months yet and emphasised that there was sufficient capacity elsewhere in the Council's other town centre car parks. He added that planning consent had been obtained for an extension of Crescent Road car park, with work starting in 2019.

- (c) Maintenance of streets and grass verges** – Within the context of the 'love where you live' ethos, Dorothea Holman also raised the issue of the neglectful appearance of many town centre streets. Mr Benson advised that the Parish Chairmen's group had made exactly the same point the previous month. He said that the Borough Council's Cabinet had been trying for some time to persuade the County Council to devolve some highways functions, in order to be able to tackle their deficiencies in service provision.

Under the same 'love where you live' heading, Cllr Peter Lidstone said that there was plenty of evidence from elsewhere as to how roundabouts can relatively easily provide a welcoming appearance along gateways to a town. Mr Benson agreed, and said that this was all part of the same Kent Highways issue.

The Chairman asked whether the County/District relationship required a more formal systematic change. In response, Cllr Moore said that she had been enthused by the concept of a 'district deal', adding that she would like to see TWBC achieve something similar. Mr Benson said that this concept had been in existence for a while, adding that a draft district deal for Tunbridge Wells existed. He explained that it had different forms and was intended to set out how a county and its districts could agree on a more effective way of working and delivering specific projects, tailored more towards local demands.

Mark Booker expressed the views of many in saying that the maintenance of highways and gulley cleaning by KCC was unacceptable, to the extent that the Borough Council could reasonably withhold payment of KCC's element of council tax collected. Mr Benson acknowledged the point but, in KCC's defence, he said that the county was spending 60% of its budget on adult social care, leaving insufficient for other services. Denise Watts felt that adult social services was in need of proper funding, a point which Mr Benson readily acknowledged, adding that, in the absence of an acceptable solution at a national level, it was always local government that had to deal with the financial consequences.

- (d) The views of young people** – Marianne Mac Donald said it was a shame that the views of young people were not represented on the Town Forum. Mr Benson concurred, adding that the projected demographic profile for the Borough meant that this section of society would grow as a percentage across the next 10-15 years. The Chairman said that he had hoped to have at least one school represented on the Town Forum by now, adding that he would welcome younger persons' views as part of the debate.

Alex Green responded to the suggestion that there were only limited opportunities for young people in the town centre, including the fact that there was no cinema. He said that, in addition to a limited programme of cinema screenings, Trinity provided an extensive and growing set of activities for young people. He added that, in conjunction with venues such as the Museum, the Assembly Hall and the Forum – amongst others – there was a good degree of engagement with younger people. Mr Green agreed, however, that there was more that needed to be done, both in extending these activities and promoting them more effectively; he said he was hopeful that this would gradually take place.

Dorothea Holman felt that facilities for younger people in the town were quite poor. She cited the example of the swimming pool at the Sports Centre where, unless you were a member of a swimming club, it was difficult to join in with this recreational sport. Dr Holman also felt that Trinity Theatre had the potential to attract greater numbers of younger people, perhaps through its café facilities.

Marguerita Morton said that it was common practice for 18 year olds to go to university and not return to their home town, which was possibly a significant factor for Tunbridge Wells. Cllr Lidstone felt that this underlined the strength of the case for the existing civic centre becoming an education facility, once the Borough Council had vacated the buildings.

- (e) Planning issues** – Mark Booker complimented the Borough Council for (a) its purchase of Dowding House for homelessness purposes and (b) placing Article 4 Directions on particular office buildings, to try and halt the loss of office space in the town centre. He asked for an update on the current review of the Local Plan in respect of the apparent lack of a five-year housing supply.

Steve Baughen, the Interim Head of Planning Services, said that his Planning Policy team was still working hard on the review of the Local Plan, adding that it had been necessary to revise the date when the 'preferred draft Local Plan' came forward for decision. He explained that this had been because of the need to establish further evidence, in support of the draft Plan. Mr Baughen added that his team had also been undertaking work with parish and town councils in their intention to complete 'neighbourhood development plan', including organising workshops in support of the local councils.

As far as the five-year housing supply was concerned, Mr Baughen said that the team was focussing on how best to deal with potential planning applications from developers where no current housing allocation existed within the current Local Plan.

Mr Booker said he was reassured by that update, adding that his working group would appreciate the opportunity to hold further discussions with the Planning Policy team on the earlier 'call for sites' submission made, in respect of the town centre. Mr Baughen welcomed such discussions, adding that it was always possible for the town to develop its own neighbourhood development plan, if that were considered appropriate.

The Chairman welcomed the concept of some formal plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells and urged progress with that.

Marguerita Morton expressed concern that the current planning system did not require the necessary infrastructure to be in place before development took place. Mr Baughen said that his service had been engaging with infrastructure providers throughout the Local Plan review period; he added that their position was that they required certainty over proposed development, before they made their investment in costly infrastructure schemes.

The Chairman asked whether the proposed 'community infrastructure levy' (CIL) would bring about advantages to the process. Mr Baughen advised that the authority had now commissioned consultants to look at the viability of CIL and advise on which might be the better route for the Council to follow. He added that his view at this stage was that it depended upon both the type and the scale of the development.

On that point, the Chairman asked whether there was a difference between 'total' and/or 'conditionality'. Mr Baughen said that CIL allowed for different options to be followed and added that a 'blended' approach might prove best, i.e. part-CIL.

- (f) **Flooding** – John Cunningham extended the infrastructure issue discussed above and reiterated his concerns over the seriousness of the problems of linking so much new housing to a foul and storm drainage system that had been built in a very different era.

Mr Baughen acknowledged the constraints associated with the existing combined sewer system. He said that that was why the Borough Council was now encouraging all developers to hold surface water within their sites, for later discharge into the combined sewers. He said that the Borough Council had been very successful with this approach to date, which was achieving what was described as 'betterment' in planning terms. Mr Baughen said that the authority's aim was to achieve a 50% reduction in surface water flow into existing systems, with the intention of eventually writing this into formal policies, to strengthen the requirement.

Mr Cunningham was only partially reassured by this, repeating that it was the capacity of the existing systems that remained as the principal issue. Mr Baughen acknowledged the point, but added that the planning process had no powers to resolve existing infrastructure matters. He stressed that the intention at this stage was to achieve betterment.

There were no specific action points arising from this item.

10. REMAINING BUSINESS

Due to the lateness of the hour, none of the update reports of the various Working Groups were considered.

The update report of the Water in the Wells Working Group, which had not been available in written format ahead of the meeting, is attached as an appendix to these minutes.

11. DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

The agenda had set out revised dates for the September and the November meetings, as follows:

In place of Thursday 6 September and Thursday 15 November, the following dates are proposed:

Thursday 27 September and **Thursday 22 November** (starting with the AGM), both at 6.30pm.

The meeting concluded at 9.02 pm.