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**ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM**  
**THURSDAY 7 FEBRUARY 2008**

**Present:** Daniel Bech, Jennifer Blackburn, John Cunningham, Michael Doyle, Malcolm Foy, Michael Holman, George Lawson, Dan Long, Altan Omer, Tony Pratt, Kate Sergeant, Alastair Tod, Gill Twells, Mary Wardrop, and Philip Whitbourn.

**Other Members:** Councillors Bulmer, Edwards, Miller, and Scholes, Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities.

**Officers in Attendance:** Sean Clark, Head of Financial and Property Services, Neil Weeks, Head of Legal Services, Angela Woodhouse, Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager and Kat Hicks, Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer.

### **Overview and Scrutiny Debate on Urban Parishing**

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee had been asked by the Management Board to investigate the issue of Urban Parishing. As a first step in this process the RTW Town Forum, which had been established to represent the views of the only unparished area in the Borough, invited the Overview and Scrutiny team to hold a workshop on the theme at their meeting in February.

#### **THE DISCUSSION**

The following is a summary of the main points made:

#### **APPETITE FOR URBAN PARISHING**

A representative of the Rusthall Village Association informed the meeting that the people of Rusthall were interested in finding out more about the logistics in becoming an urban parish. They believed themselves to be a defined community with a high street, church, recreational grounds and community identity. He added that there were no volunteers as yet and he believed there would need to be further information presented and publicity in order to take the scheme forward.

The group felt there was a desire to receive the benefits of a parished community, however, there was concern over what the responsibilities and financial burdens might be. This was exacerbated by the feeling that rather than share benefits, the Council wished to reduce them such as the recent move to take away planning call-in rights from Parishes.

The group was aware that if the whole area became parished it would mean the likely loss of the Town Forum and it was felt that a larger number of groups could divide issues and dilute their voice. There was also concern at the difficulty in obtaining democratically elected councillors and volunteers to take part in regional groups. When even long established parishes such as Pembury were struggling to find councillors to stand. This

raised questions on sustainability and whether the areas that could be parished drew from a large enough population.

The group was informed that seeking an urban parish in some areas did not necessarily mean the end to the Town Forum, similarly, the choice of seeking a community governance review rested with the community themselves to decide and the boundaries of each potential parish and community were open to interpretation, debate and decision by the residents themselves.

It was stated that Royal Tunbridge Wells had a population of almost 46,000 residents, constituting roughly half the Borough. The group felt that dividing the area into the existing eight wards would not be practical. Three areas were specified as being established communities that could possibly benefit from being parished, these were Rusthall, Hawkenbury and Sherwood where it was felt the community was already functioning strongly.

### **ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF PARISH COUNCILS AND ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS FOR THE URBAN AREA**

The group identified that if some areas were to become parished, it would allow them the ability to act outside the confines set by the Borough Council. In the case of Rusthall, this would include being responsible for public conveniences, which was locally very popular and in demand for revival.

The responsibilities that the Borough shouldered such as parks and common ground, public conveniences, bus shelters etc were recognised and the group felt that although ownership of these at a local level would be advantageous, they were concerned at the cost implications.

Other than cost, the group also expressed concern over the levels of bureaucracy a new system could create and wanted more information on the advantages and disadvantages of any change to structure.

The group expressed concern that there was very low representation and input from Ward Councillors at their meetings. They conveyed their sense of frustration at their perceived lack of power and were concerned that their reports, which took both time and effort, did not seem to have any positive effects. They were curious to ascertain which powers a parish council would have and which changes could be made outside of Borough Council decision-making. They sited wanting to take action on the recent advent of Sunday car parking charges and dealing with the old cinema site which had fallen into disrepair.

The Forum was informed that a possible advantage to becoming an urban parish lay in an elected body having a greater perceived authority than a non-elected forum. However, the group was also informed that they could already apply for funding within the established wards to benefit community projects and this may be an easier process to achieving gains, than having the responsibilities of a parish.

The group felt that although they were not democratically elected, many, if not all of them had been elected in one way or another and were there as legitimate representatives of the towns' people. The committee felt that there were shortcomings in their voice being heard and acted upon, and were aggrieved that they had no budget to back up their recommendations. Although were grateful for the use of Council premises and administrative support. Officers assured the group that the Town Forum did have presence

and was heard by the Council but they were aware that more needed to be done to help with its development. The Head of Financial and Property Services informed the Committee that it could be possible to grant them an administrative budget through special expenses.

The group suggested that a process could be started where a Councillor would be obliged to take forward an issue that received a majority vote for action from the forum.

Councillor Edwards informed the group that as soon as he could establish costings for the process he would send out proposals on urban parishing to the residents of Rusthall to identify levels of interest.

The Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager informed the Forum that there was a meeting on 1 March 2008 in Maidstone to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being a Parish. She invited those present to join the meeting and advised the group that she would send an email detailing further information and would also deliver a summary to the group after the event. She added that she would invite Parish representatives to come and speak to the Forum for their next meeting so that a greater insight could be developed.

**AGREED:**

- (1) The Head of Financial and Property Services investigate the possibility of granting an administrative budget through special expenses expenditure;
- (2) The Forum be invited to the parishing discussion taking place in Maidstone on 1 March 2008;
- (3) The Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager provide a summary after the meeting; and
- (4) Parish representatives be invited to the next Town Forum meeting on 6 March 2008.

**FINANCE**

The Head of Financial and Property Services gave an overview of what Special Expenses entailed and highlighted to the group that currently £1.7 million a year was raised through special expenses to equalise the spending demands across the Borough. He advised that the specific cost of parishing would depend on the geographical boundaries of the area, the population, the responsibilities of the Parish Council and the recreational grounds within the borders. Traditionally the Council provided the service level agreements for items within RTW such as parks, any area parished would be required to take this on and therefore the service level would have a bearing on the cost of the precept. Rusthall, having large grounds in its location could result in a large precept.

He advised that a review of Special Expenses was currently being undertaken which would aid with the evaluation on costings and would give greater clarity of how Parish Council expenses function. He warned that this work would take some time before completion. The officer agreed to find out costings in relation to the recreational grounds in RTW and the amount of money they raised and also advised the group that Dunorlan Park was no longer paid for through Special Expenses.

The Head of Legal Services updated the Committee on the role of 106 agreements; if a suitable community project were identified near to a development site then money could

be raised through the developer to fund a local project. The earmarked money had to be applied by the Council to the specified project within 10 years or would be returned to the developer if it had not been used within that time.

It was agreed that the Head of Financial and Property Services would work with the representatives of Rusthall Ward to develop costings for a possible urban parish there. He also agreed to provide comparative figures to the Committee on Capel, the smallest Parished area and Southborough, the largest.

**AGREED:** That

- (1) The Head of Financial and Property Services work in association with representatives from Rusthall Ward to develop costings for a possible urban parish; and
- (2) The Head of Financial and Property Services provide the Forum with comparative figures on Capel and Southborough.

**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would take place on 6 March 2008 at 730pm at the Town Hall.

Notes:

- (1) The meeting closed at 9.00pm.

RTW Town Forum Minutes 7 Feb 2008 are part of the next Meeting of the TWBC Corporate Services Select Committee on 4 March 2008