

## **Notes of RTW Town Forum Zoom meeting 7 July 2020 (4.00-5.30pm)**

### **Attendance**

#### Representatives of Member Organisations:

- Caroline Auckland
- Dave Barnett
- Jenina Bas-Pendry
- Adrian Berendt
- Lorna Blackmore
- Steve Bowser
- Matthew Brown
- Robert Chris
- Marieke de Jonge
- Jane Fenwick
- Margaret Ginman
- Carolyn Gray
- Dorothea Holman
- Michael Holman
- Delphine Houlton
- Mark Lavenstein
- Brian Lippard
- Marianne Mac Donald
- Katharina Mahler-Bech
- Wendy Owens
- Don Sloan
- Anne Stobo
- Alistair Tod
- Neil Williams
- Carol Wilson

#### Councillors:

- Cllr Bruneau
- Cllr Hickey
- Cllr Lidstone
- Cllr Mackonochie
- Cllr March
- Cllr McDermott
- Cllr Morton
- Cllr Podbury
- Cllr Pope

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Formed in 2005, the Town Forum is the voice of the 50,000 residents of Royal Tunbridge Wells on issues of common interest

#### **Town Forum Management Group**

Adrian Berendt (Chair); Alastair Tod (Deputy Chair); Don Sloan (Deputy Chair); Carolyn Gray (Culture, Leisure & Tourism); David Wakefield (Finance); Jane Fenwick (Transport); Marianne MacDonald (Wellbeing); Mark Booker (Strategic Planning); Michael Holman (Water in the Wells)

- Cllr Rands
- Cllr Rankin (KCC)
- Cllr Rutland

#### Other Speakers

- William Benson
- Steve Budden

### **Membership changes**

- One new membership application from the Nevill Court Road Committee
- There has also been an application for a membership form from another group

### **Update from Steve Budden – Warden of the Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators**

- Steve has been the Warden for the Commons of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall since 1992 and continues to carry out the management plan for the Commons that was set out post the storm of 1987
- Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Common was a grazed common and the group is trying to get back some of the heather and grass that has been lost in the past 100 years (95% has been lost). They have got back some of the scrub and opened up the rocks and some grazing ponds, but it is a long-term project
- Over the past few years they have seen some progress and the heather is regenerating quite well and, starting a few years ago, there is now enough to be able to harvest its own heather seeds
- The Friends of the Commons play a big part in this success, with lots of volunteers that have been involved in such things as 'Tree Poppers', which allows easier removal of invasive seedlings, holly clearance (which had taken over large areas of the Common and reduced its biodiversity) and removing cherry laurel (Rusthall Common is one of the places in the UK that is most infected with cherry laurel)
- Ash dieback has particularly affected Rusthall Common and £10K was spent on this alone last year
- Much of the budget has been spent on pure maintenance, with funding coming from Friends, freeholders and grants
- COVID-19 has had an impact on the Commons. It has been far more heavily used during lockdown with huge numbers that saw it being overwhelmed and unable to empty bins fast enough, not enough benches, for example. Also a huge number of people on bikes – although there is a byelaw against this it is not usually enforced but there have been some conflicts recently.
- The numbers now are returning more to normal but post-COVID there are hopes that the greater use will encourage more people to become Friends and increase budgets over the coming years

- Carolyn Auckland asked specifically about benches as the Soroptimists have undertaken a Benchmarking initiative around the town. These have not been able to be maintained recently and commemorative benches are a particular issue. Some cast iron benches had been found during clearing and a pattern has been made of these in Hastings, they are 'pretty bullet proof' with 2 inch thick oak. Requests for benches can be made via the Commons Facebook group, it has been made clear the cost of refurbishing benches and people have volunteered to help out as they are an important part of the Commons infrastructure. The cost of installing a new bench is £650 plus the cost of a memorial plaque. One issue with these is that people often want them in the same place (around the cricket pitch)
- Adrian commented that Happy Valley looked great. Steve added that it had been seeded but with the recent weather, more may need to be done.
- Adrian extended his thanks to Steve and issued an invite to have him, and anyone from other Friends groups to speak at future Town Forum meetings
- Michael Holman added that the Friends of Common does a very useful newsletter
- Steve added that the coffee van on Fir Tree Road is a welcome source of information and acts as an unofficial lost and found

### **William Benson: Council Update**

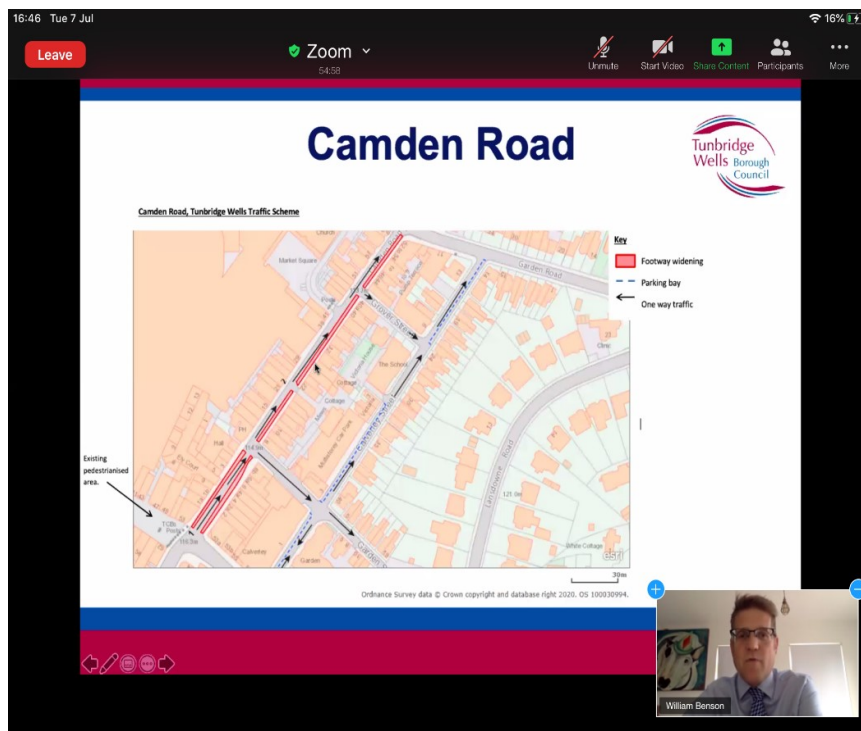
- TWBC is a Category 1 responder with specific duties in Major emergencies and business continuity. It is part of the Kent Resilience Forum that also includes all local authorities, emergency services, NHS Environment Agency, Utilities and the Coastguard
- In peacetime each organisation produces its own emergency plans and tests them and undertakes training exercises for this, e.g. disaster that takes out one of your sites
- At the start of COVID-19, TWBC was part of a Gold Command Group that met every day and a group across the County every single day. It followed all the rules and closed all the services and there was anxiety initially on whether it could continue to run services. Daily updates from staff that were in raised questions of resilience as anyone that contacted COVID had to isolate and, therefore, critical services, such as the crematorium had to stop. Some 25% of staff were redeployed to the crematorium and supporting the finance team to get grants out
- **Current state of services:**
  - Bin collections running normally – this has been a real struggle, with staff numbers, then McDonald's opening, then the tip reopening plus new contractors that have had to learn the rounds
  - Car parks all open except Meadow Road

- Environmental protection is open and food safety opening shortly
- Licensing not open
- Council meetings - partial
- Venues (Assembly Halls, leisure centres and Community Centres) shut but the latter can open once approved – most likely to be the creche in the Camden Centre
- Not opening Tourist Information as 1) social distancing issues 2) currently just locals not tourists 3) staff redeployed
- Toilets have all been open throughout
- Changes for online demand (via TWBC webpages):
  - Business support and advice up 1000%
  - Business rates up 400%
  - Bonfires up 360%
  - Council Tax support up 320%
  - Bin collections up 210%
- COVID-19 has been “Absolutely catastrophic for us financially”. In the past decade central funding has completely gone and the Council is now effectively a business – with revenue from theatres, leisure and carparks. Currently losing £1m a month (£8m this year), with additional costs over the norm, e.g. housing people, running the community hub
- Particularly adversely affected by cash flow. Bills for Council tax and rates have been issued and the Council has to pay upfront, with monies yet to come in (Council Tax paid over 10 months with February and March as fallow, for those in difficulty, this has been moved to the start of the financial year, i.e. April and May)
- The Government has provided two tranches of funding: £24K in the first tranches did not cover 24 hours of Council costs. The second tranche was £1m and this covered one month. The Government announced last week that it will cover 75% of costs so this reduces the cost from £18m to £2m
- **Support for business:**
  - COVID-19 grants
  - Business rate relief – made 1,952 payments (total of £26m+) to 97% of eligible businesses. Scheme described as “chaotic” changing every 5 minutes, in addition, handed out 125 discretionary grants totalling £1.2m
  - Flexible on car parking and delivery/collection models and processing requests for on-street furniture. Govt looking at moving street furniture to Council and looking at doing that as a fast track
  - Business Improvement District (BID): Advice, ~twodelivers and reopening kit
  - Kent and Medway Growth hub: satisfaction rate of 90-95%

- **Support for residents (initial):**
  - Housed all rough sleepers and tried to prevent evictions
  - Flexing with Council Tax (see earlier), advice and support and liaising with Parish Councils
  - Free parking got NHS and care workers and permit holder use of multi-storey car parks
- **Supporting vulnerable people:**
  - Extraordinary support for vulnerable people – set up in 72 hours – to provide emergency supplies, signposting to organisations that can help and providing wellbeing calls to isolated/lonely residents
  - A 24/7 Kent Together helpline
  - Volunteer co-ordination and support
  - Shout out to Nourish and Age UK and MHRC – all of whom benefitted from Lend a Hand crowdfund to raise £10k for those charities
  - TW social – set up in a matter of weeks
- **Communications:**
  - Massively upweighted
  - Regular updates on social media and through media
  - Daily briefings with Group Leaders and MP
  - Extensive member engagement
  - COVID-19 panel
  - Weekly parish and town council chairmen meetings
  - Regular discussions with the Town Forum
  - Regular meetings with BID, FSB and individual businesses + business phone ins
  - Facebook Ask Me Anything – reach of 10K+ people
  - Sent out a leaflet through the Borough
- **Reopening and recovery**
  - Recovery the likes of which the Council has never usually encountered
  - There are two phases running side by side, i.e. response and recovery and never had a response phase that has gone on for 100 days. Public health team believe this will not be over until a vaccine is due, prompting a second wave, plus the UK is overdue a severe flu outbreak and then there is the consequence of Brexit
  - Locally though Cabinet and Scrutiny Board a set of overarching principles for recovery have been identified
    - Businesses to return to operation and survive in the most challenging economic times
    - Support residents that are affected and the restrictions placed on them
    - Health and safety of Council staff – while maintaining and prioritising Council services
    - Protect the vulnerable
    - There have been some positive outcomes in terms of reduced traffic and better work-life balance and community spirit has been fantastic

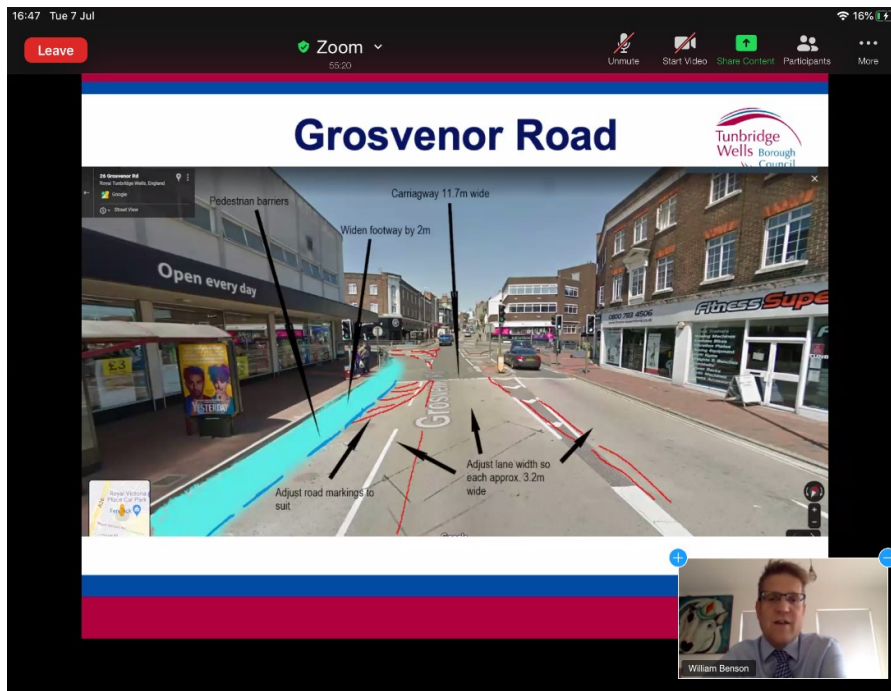
- Council to remain financially solvent
- **Support for business**
  - Worked with BID on reopening kits and had ambassadors/information officers in town
- Changes to High Street
  - Back at beginning of May Govt announced it would make sizeable monies to local authorities to make changes to the High Street
  - They announced it and then 3 weeks later we get details and allocations and rules - £8m for Kent but only 20% upfront. Kent got totality of Kent of £1.6m. TWBC put forward a long list
  - KCC looking to take forward:
    - One way system for High Street to allow pavement widening
    - Modal filter on Reynolds Lane (Southborough) A26 Cycle route – allow safer walking and cycling
    - Commercial Road Paddock Wood – one way northbound – to allow pavement widening
    - 20mph zone in town centre – tribute to the working group for the COVID panel to get all of this
  - TWBC are also looking to take a couple more forward: Grosvenor and Camden Roads (see later)
- **Culture and Arts**
  - From the earliest stages of the pandemic TWBC has raised concerns about the impact on culture and arts as impact has been cataclysmic. Raised at every contact with minister, Council and co-ordinating group etc. Really pleased that the £1.57bn has been announced but we need to see detail
  - Leisure not resolved and query is that is covered by funding package
- **Sustainability of financial support**
  - The monies last till the end of March
- **Statistics**
  - **Finance:** Council tax down nearly £900K in May, due to flexing of Council Tax in April and May so this should increase in June
  - **Unemployment:** Usually around 1% it has gone up to over 5% and largest increase in younger age group. Resolution Foundation has shown a third of young people have either lost their jobs or being furloughed and that is double other groups
  - **Empty business properties:** has increased from just over 315 in Feb to around 338 in May
  - **Car parking** – usually £350K a month and practically nothing in April/May but spending £100K on business rates for car parks and the same on maintenance
  - **Planning applications** – bellwether for the local economy – number of major projects validated in May is lower than for the same month for the past two years

- **Homelessness** has been rising
- Deliveries by Nourish - peaked in April at 1000 for the month and declining to 800 in May – but still double the average
- **Wider recovery issues:**
  - The end of the furlough scheme in October – businesses will go under and unemployment will spike
  - The Council – sustainability of financial support
  - The Community – there are some scary stats on children going back to school and inequalities and digital divide
  - Locking in the good, e.g. environment and sustainability
- **Road changes:**
  - Camden Road: One way and widen pavement to allow business to expand onto pavement

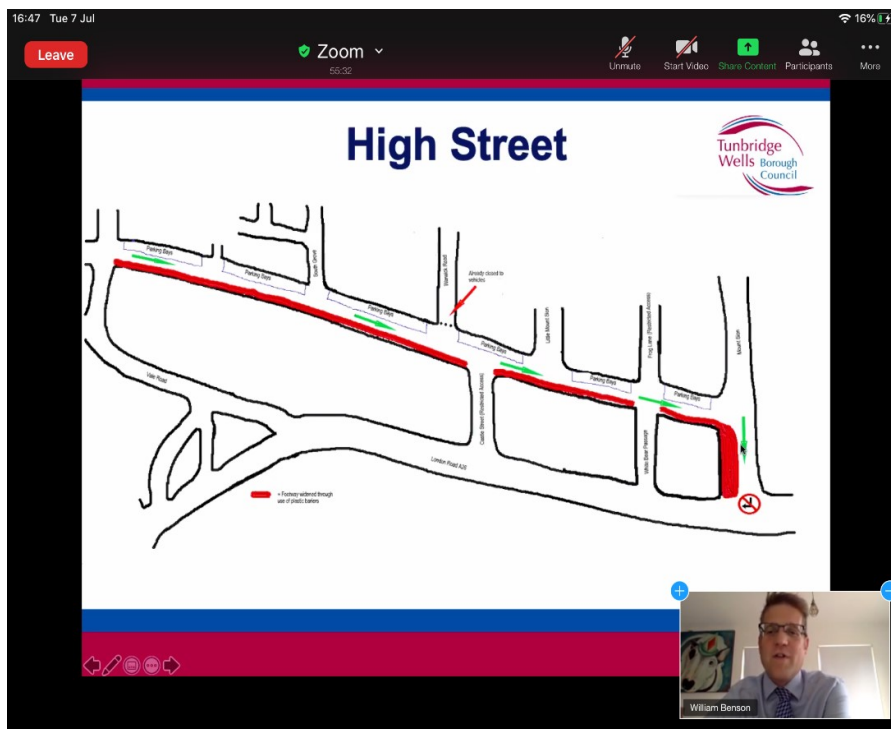




- Grosvenor Road – widen pavement there



- High Street – looking at Southbound one way but KCC want Northbound





**Questions:**

**Peter Lidstone:** Challenge the High Street being Southbound. It is very southbound at the moment, making the High Street northbound would discourage people using it as a cut through and will have more of an impact on the feel of the High Street will feel less like a road that gives pedestrians permission to join the car and more like a retail area

**WB:** KCC would rather Northbound to avoid evening/afternoon rat running taking place

**Brian Lippard:** Apart from financial what do you regard as the biggest problem?

**WB:** We are probably going to enter the biggest recession on record with unemployment the likes of which we have never seen before. Unemployment gone up highest in Tunbridge Wells, Dartford and Canterbury (i.e. areas with low unemployment). For the Council, the financial consequences are very serious indeed

**Caroline Auckland** – Younger people loss of jobs is that to do with working in cafes, bars, etc? They have to sign on in Tonbridge, will that move back here?

**WB:** We are looking to set up a triage system is the number of new entrants coming into the system, e.g. jobs, housing etc. Looking at setting up some online triaging to allow people to do that more quickly. Younger people more affected – they are overrepresented in the service sector, plus they tend to be last in, first out and they are less expensive for redundancy and more on zero hours contracts

**Jenina Bas-Pendry** Easing of planning process to turn commercial and retail premises into housing more easily since more premises seem to be closing?

**WB:** Clear there will be changes to planning system but no details wrapped around that. When we had the last set of changes to permitted development rights, we lost 200,000 sq ft of office space plus local jobs. As a destination town we would want to curate the use / mix of each area – retail, offices, residential – otherwise we risk becoming less appealing as a town. Cultural centre is important and hopefully monies announced will help those institutions. Amelia Scott build is now at the first floor.

**Robert Chris:** Is there any green dimensions to the recovery plan?

**WB:** There are positive consequence and the fact that emissions are vastly down. Having conversations on some principles that should underpin recovery for that. Wealth recovery – working on a recovery strategy pan-Kent and that is coming out imminently and we are looking to recover very well

**Carol Wilson:** Is there any likelihood of changes in size or design of Borough Councils. Is TWBC at risk of being merged?

**WB:** There is going to be a White Paper in September. This might include a package of measures that we have had hints of in the past – greater devolution for unitary

Government or mayoral for greater funding. We have seen changes at national government level, e.g. DfID and Cabinet Secretary and Security Advisor and would be surprised if we did not see changes for local Government.

**Marieke:** Is the Council getting ideas from CEAP (Climate Emergency Advisory Panel) on sustainable recovery? Has the CEAP been active since the Climate Emergency Declaration in July last year?

**WB:** Advisory board have stopped meeting but increased overview and scrutiny and COVID recovery. The emphasis for the first 70 of 100 days was to get food out and remain solvent but there is work ongoing

### **Public Rights of Way (PROW) – Adrian Berendt**

- Project going on around Kent to ensure that Public Rights of Way are all on the definitive map of Kent (some have been lost). The Ramblers are leading this work.
- We also need to ensure that those routes / paths which we think are rights of way, but are NOT PROWs are added. A recent example is Elphick's Place, which KCC are making a PROW, thanks to the efforts of Mark Brown, a local residents
- If we are all going to be cycling and walking more, it's even more important that rights of way are preserved. It would be quite good to set up a small taskforce to look at these that

**Mark Lavenstein:** There has been a Rambler's campaign: Don't Lose Your Way. There is a formal process for adding a PROW, but it does require a lot of form filling and legal work. I will try and check with Kent Ramblers if there is any way we can leverage work being done on their projects on what we can do locally. At moment it is done on a piecemeal basis – Elphick's Way was done on a personal basis. I will make a call to Kent Ramblers who are close to the Rambling Association. There is a facility on KCC website if you see a problem with PROW you can log it like you do with a pothole They are being worked through, not as quickly as we would like. Ramblers have sponsored gates etc

**Jane March:** I do quite a few of these in the rural areas. Jonathon Biggie is the KCC officer and the one we have done in our local area took about 2.5 years to achieve it. We had to get affidavits from people to say they had used it for over 20 years (we had over 60 years) and it still took that time, We also have an issue with one that is locked, a public footpath, and that is causing an issue, It does need quite a lot of investigation and work but it is possible. 30m long in Horsmonden

**Adrian Berendt:** It is slightly different in the town as it is short routes connecting one road with another road, e.g. Top of Castle Street is registered as a PROW, but the bottom is not. It would be good to have them regularised as we don't have them done by 2025, we can lose them. We would like to hear from KCC is that if we have a package or routes, can we go through a streamlined process as it is generally very painful. And if we can get a working group/taskforce together

## **Working Groups Update**

### **Culture, Tourism and Leisure – Carolyn Gray**

CG has been chair since lockdown – thinking about changing her Working Group to “The lack of culture, tourism and leisure”. No word on the amount available from the funds from last week. Parliament saying we have a lot of money but not how it is going to get to anyone. As we know, most places we think of for culture have been shut and are trying to do fundraising. For the future, we have little idea about to gather people for events indoors

### **Transport – Jane Fenwick**

Has not met, we had had a Zoom meeting, there has been a lot going on but not a lot we have been able to contribute in time because of the speed of things happening. Difficult for us to pitch in when we have not been consulted on things.

One thing we have done is to revise the Town Centre transport plan in 2018 and submit it to the Council for the COVID recovery scheme; it is pretty much unchanged, but we have updated.

With Lorna Blackmore, we have looked at taxi and private hire regulations consultation. We first created a response to this in 2017. It now looks completely different, which we welcome many changes, but we still have some comments. To be resubmitted by the beginning of August.

Pleased to see mini roundabout roundels repainted – thanks to prompting from Catherine Rankin.

### **Water in the Wells – Michael Holman**

Building has continued on Dandara site and have been told the water feature basin has been formed and waterproofed and is waiting for masonry and sculpting to be finished. First section including the fountain to be delivered in autumn this year.

Peter Everyhoping to push forward drinking fountain in Dunorlan – good to go at Easter but because of COVID-19 it was delayed but hoping to get back to this as soon as possible. Also looking to push forward in St John’s. Beacon is looking to restore the cold bath and to build a wellness suite – plus possible hot bath – and applied for permission to build 4 accommodations.

Pantiles – no dippers as no tourists.

## Questions

**AB:** What is the update on the Amelia and is there fundraising going on?

Jane March: We are up to first floor level. Fundraising – we have just received notification that we are now a charity and because of lockdown we have not managed to get a bank account organised as the charities section of the bank has been closed. Counterculture who are doing our fundraising for us have identified various funds for us and we are ready to go once we have a bank account and now we are a charitable Trust.

**AB:** Question from Marieke re CEAP

**Marguerite** – have started on the green audit and looking to do workshops in August and making some reports in September/October with a final report in November (?)

**Peter Lidstone** – 20mph zone

**AB** – Consultations closed recently and hoping they are going to go through. The Town Centre I think will go through as the emergency order don't know if there will be a consultation on that

**AB:** Blocked drains and Town Centre market on the FB group

**Carolyn Gray:** There is a FB community group and they were saying if we have any ideas how we get them through to council. One idea was a group of people that could report blocked drains, but they can do this individually. But if they have ideas, how can they get these to Council?

**WB:** If its blocked drains – the online report to KCC via webform. Ideas for Council is they write/email their local Ward Councillor

**AB:** Could we encourage all residents to cut back their hedges and not park cars on the pavement so people can walk up and down

**Justine Rutland** – Litter in the parks

**AB:** Presumably being emptied but there are just so many more people using the parks