



Thursday 9 January 2013

Attended: Sally Balcon, Cllr Bob Backhouse, Cllr Ronen Basu, Lorna Blackmore, Stephen Bowser (sub), June Bridgeman, Cllr Bulman, David Bushell (sub), Cllr Chapelard, John Cunningham, Cllr Derrick, Michael Doyle, Helen Featherstone, Jane Fenwick, Maggie Fraser, Alex Green, Tim Harper, Dorothea Holman, Michael Holman, Glen Horn, Sue Kaner, Kyrios Kyriacou, Katharina Mahler-Bech, John Mattei, Cllr Mrs Mayhew, Chris Morris, David Morris, Marguerita Morton, Altan Omer, Peter Perry (sub), Cllr Trevor Poile, Cllr Scott, Kate Sergeant, Anne Stobo, David Wakefield (Chairman), Mary Wardrop, Margaret Watts, Victor Webb, Philip Whitbourn (sub), Cllr Williams and Cllr Woodward

TWBC officers present: Adam Chalmers (Democratic and Community Engagement Manager), Ian Hirst (Interim Business Delivery Unit Manager), Holly Goring (Policy, Performance and Partnerships Manager) and Mike McGeary (Democratic Services Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were reported from: Betsey Dix, John Forster, Léonie Harrington, Jim Kedge, J Paul Lambert, George Lawson, Angela Phillips, Jon Weller and Cllr Neve.

2. DECLARATIONS OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The following declarations of substitute attendance were made: Stephen Bowser for Jenina Pendry, David Bushell for Angela Phillips, John Cunningham for John Forster and Peter Perry for Betsey Dix.

3. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

The Democratic Services Officer advised that the Chairman had approved the following requests to become members of the Town Forum:

- (a) Alex Green from Trinity Theatre; and
- (b) Jon Weller from Voluntary Action Within Kent (VAWK).

He added that the Friends of the Grove had decided to withdraw from membership of the Town Forum.

The Chairman also introduced Glen Horn, from the Pantiles' Traders.

Both the new members present were welcomed to their first meeting.

4. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 October 2012 be agreed.

5. ACTIONS FROM PREVIOUS MINUTES

25 October 2012

77 Working groups

MMcG The Democratic Services Officer undertook to contact those Town Forum members unable to attend the meeting, to invite others to join in the work of each working group. Action completed.

The Chairman of the Town Forum highlighted two further action points:

- (a) He urged any members interested in becoming a member of the Planning and Development Strategy Working Group to make contact with the Chairman, Michael Doyle; and
- (b) He also urged representatives to ensure that they provided evidence of their formal appointment to the Town Forum from their respective resident association (or other group), in accordance with the earlier request. Details, he added, should be submitted to the administrator for the Town Forum, Mike McGeary.

6. WORKING GROUPS

Update reports were made from the working groups as follows:

Water in the Wells Working Group – The Chairman, Michael Holman, had circulated an update report with the agenda. In summarising the work of this group, Michael highlighted two key aspects: (a) he warmly welcomed the positive response received from Berkeley Homes for the former K&S Hospital site to include a significant water feature; Michael also drew attention to TWBC's Strategic Compass and its reference to supporting the implementation of a water feature in the town; (b) Michael also advised that the working group was seeking legal advice on the establishment of a community interest company, as a basis for raising revenue towards the cost of water features in the town. He asked if there were any Forum members or contacts who could offer expertise in publicity/fund-raising, who could assist the group. Finally, Michael invited Forum members to submit photos/details of water features which they particularly liked, to add to the working group's design list.

Michael also drew attention to a 'So Create A Difference: Tunbridge Wells' exhibition taking place in Tunbridge Wells on Saturday 26 January between 9am and 5pm, when local architects would be inviting the public's views on what the town should look like in the future. The exhibition would take place in the RVP shopping centre. Further details can be found via the following link: <http://www.architecture.com/RegionsAndInternational/UKNationsAndRegions/England/RIBASouth/W hatsOn/Exhibitions/2013/SoCreateADifferenceTunbridgeWells.aspx>

RESOLVED – That the progress report be noted and the next stages be endorsed.

Action – Any Forum members who: (a) have any publicity/fund-raising expertise they are willing to offer the working group; or (b) have details of a water feature they would particularly recommend, to contact the Chairman, Michael Holman at michaeldekholman@gmail.com

Leisure, Culture and Tourism Working Group – June Bridgeman, Chairman of this group, summarised the background to her group's summary memorandum on the 'Tunbridge Wells tourism and cultural offer', which had formed part of the agenda distribution. June explained why the group had met urgently to consider this issue and make their report at this point. The focus, she added, had been on: (a) what is the Tunbridge Wells brand; and (b) how the refurbishment of the civic centre could help significantly in making better use of the exceptional existing cultural facilities.

June acknowledged that some of the key aspects to the proposal were: how does TWBC manage to overcome the associated planning issues? How does TWBC fund such a scheme? How does TWBC gain popular support for the proposal?

Attention was drawn to the six specific action points set out in the report which, June stressed, could be considered separately. As for the next stages, June asked for the Town Forum to support the following recommendation: "The memorandum should be submitted as soon as possible to all councillors as a contribution to their thinking, making clear that, at this stage, pending the work of other groups, it is presented simply as a working group memorandum".

The Tourism, Leisure and Economic Development Portfolio-holder, Cllr Jane March, was in attendance for this item and thanked June and her working group members, for their detailed work. Cllr March reiterated the Borough Council's commitment to work with the Town Forum on the impending Cultural Strategy and on the Destination Marketing Strategy. She added that there were significant financial constraints which had been imposed on the Borough Council, through greatly reduced central government funding. However, Cllr March also drew attention to the commitment made in the Council's Strategic Compass under its list of community projects, specifically "We'll improve our cultural facilities by developing the concept of a 'cultural and learning hub' in the centre of Royal Tunbridge Wells" set out in the 'Confident' sector of the Compass.

The Leader of the Council, Cllr David Jukes, also thanked June and her group for their work and report. He responded to a number of specific points raised in the report, including the option for museums to be operated by community groups, which he advised he would raise direct with the Forum's Chairman in due course. He accepted an invitation to address the Friends of the Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery on this issue.

Cllr Jukes also provided a response to the concerns raised about the **future of the cinema site**, providing the Forum with an analysis of the issues which the Council faced and was attempting to overcome. The Chairman enquired how the Town Forum might assist the Borough Council – e.g. through lobbying or raising the profile – in bringing about action on the part of the site owners. Michael Holman suggested that the collective voice of the resident groups represented on the Forum would amount to a sizeable protest, if the Leader felt there was merit in organising a petition; Cllr Jukes responded by saying that any practical help like this would be welcome.

In summing up the response to her group's memorandum, June Bridgeman thanked the Leader and Portfolio-holder for their positive comments. The Chairman of the Town Forum thanked June and her working group for the detailed work they had undertaken in producing a report of substance and value which, he added, might serve as a useful model for other working groups to produce in the future.

RESOLVED – That the memorandum should be submitted as soon as possible to all councillors as a contribution to their thinking, making clear that, at this stage, pending the work of other groups, it is presented simply as a working group memorandum.

Action: The Town Forum's administrator (Mike McGeary) to forward a copy of the memorandum to all other members of the Council who are not ward members who sit on the Town Forum.

Traffic Strategy Working Group – The acting Chairman, Jane Fenwick, led a presentation by a number of her working group members, namely Lorna Blackmore, Stephen Bowser and Peter Perry. Jointly, they shared the working group's initial thoughts and views on the Transport Strategy 2012-26, a joint TWBC and KCC document which was due to undergo a formal consultation process via the TWBC website. Town Forum members were invited to comment on the working group's views, ahead of the preparation of a formal response to the consultation document, which would follow.

The working group had developed 10 specific response issues, which are appended to these minutes. Members were generally supportive of the recommendations presented. There was particular interest in KCC's policy of traffic signal application, with some members favouring their removal in specific locations, with a belief that KCC's approach suffered from being too risk averse, which hindered improved traffic management.

In conclusion, Jane Fenwick asked all Forum members to read the consultation document when it appears (due 14 January on the TWBC website; link given below) and feed back their comments to her and other members of the working group. After that, Jane added, a recommended response would be drawn up by the working group; this would be circulated and comments invited.

http://consult.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/portal/economic_development_regeneration/transtrat/transtrat?pintId=1358181336642

Finally, Jane advised that her working group planned to develop some 'congestion-busting' ideas as part of their work and she invited Forum members to submit their thoughts and suggestions, to help with this initiative.

RESOLVED – That Town Forum members: (1) read the consultation document when it appears on the TWBC website and feed their views into the Traffic Strategy Working Group; and (2) suggest any 'congestion-busting' proposals to the same working group, as a separate but related initiative.

7. TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL'S DRAFT STRATEGIC COMPASS

Holly Goring, TWBC's Policy, Performance and Partnerships Manager, provided a summary of the purpose and structure of the Borough Council's Strategic Compass. Her focus was very much on the list of 24 community projects planned for 2013/14, which had been formed in support of the authority's corporate priorities and based upon feedback provided by residents.

The Town Forum Chairman advised that the Finance and Other Issues Working Group had met to consider the draft Strategic Compass and had formulated a set of questions and comments on the draft document; these had been circulated with the agenda.

Jane Fenwick believed that a key area which was missing from the document was tackling the problems caused by traffic congestion. She strongly believed that it should be a major aspiration of the Borough Council to work with KCC in trying to resolve this increasing problem. Jane supported all of the other comments and questions raised by the working group.

Michael Holman enquired about the Town Centre Area Action Plan (TCAAP), specifically if this process was still going ahead and if so on what timescale. He asked this within the context of the Water in the Wells Working Group and their aspirations. Adam Chalmers, TWBC's Democratic and Community Engagement Manager, advised that a detailed TCAAP would be the subject of a formal public consultation process due to commence on 18 March. The TCAAP now formed part of the Site Allocations DPD and was not consulted on separately.

June Bridgeman felt that the Town Forum's response to the list of community projects should ideally come at a later stage, once the Town Forum working groups had had a chance to formulate their views and recommendations, particularly issues which might flow from the draft Transport Strategy. She added that the Town Forum's support for the Finance and Other Issues Working Group and its views and conclusions should be prefaced with the words "in the limited time available".

A number of ward councillors commented on the Strategic Compass, including: Cllr Scott, who felt that, from its content, the Strategic Compass was much more like an 'operational plan' for the benefit of staff and not a strategic document; and Cllr Woodward, whose concern about the document was that it did not explain what the Borough Council was trying to create. He asked how the Town Forum could help to shape the Council's strategic plans, in respect of the town area, and how there could be a better connection between the two.

The Town Forum Chairman noted that, from the feedback provided by the wider group, the Finance and Other Issues Working Group should, in future, take a broader view of the draft document.

RESOLVED – That the initial views and comments of the Finance and Other Issues Working Group be supported but added to, to take account of the specific aspects set out above.

8. TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL'S NEW WEBSITE

Ian Hirst, TWBC's Interim Business Delivery Unit Manager, provided a demonstration of how a new Borough Council website was being developed, in order to overcome the navigational and presentational difficulties of the existing site. He showed how the revised 'home' page was based upon a 'top tasks' approach, i.e. based on past experience of what information customers were seeking from the website, in order to direct them to the required information with far greater speed, focus and clarity.

Ian responded to the various aspects raised as follows:

- (a) Would there be a key word search facility? Yes, the search function would be able to examine the content of pdf documents as well;
- (b) Would there be a link to parish and town council websites? Yes and to the Town Forum website as well;
- (c) Would the website provide an obvious and quick link to who was responsible for dealing with highway-related issues, i.e. KCC? Yes, the new website could include a direct link with who at KCC Highways was responsible for each different aspect, e.g. pot hole or street light etc;
- (d) Would the colour of the text and background take account of people who had a sight impairment? Yes, advice would be sought on this aspect;
- (e) Could there be a direct link to 'Friends of...' groups and resident associations? Any 'social media' linkage would be best provided through the TWBC Twitter site, Ian advised. If any resident associations or other groups wanted a direct link, they were asked to provide all relevant details to the Town Forum administrator, Mike McGeary.

Cllr Scott suggested that the 'Looking local' service, which could be accessed via tv and mobile phones, was a helpful alternative access tool to information about local public services, traffic news etc.

RESOLVED – That the improved TWBC website be welcomed and Ian Hirst be thanked for his presentation.

9. DRAFT TUNBRIDGE WELLS BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

The Chairman of the Finance and Other Issues Working Group, David Wakefield, summarised the key findings of his group, who had met to consider this formal consultation document and supporting papers, produced by the Borough Council.

The wider Town Forum was asked to comment on the following elements and indicate their support or otherwise:

- (a) Opposed to 'raiding' reserves in order to balance the budget – There was general support for this view;
- (b) Increase council tax by the full amount or even higher – This was not supported on the basis that, to go beyond the Government's imposed limit would require a referendum of residents, the cost of which would be greater than any increased revenue;
- (c) Utilise TWBC assets to the maximum – There was support for this view, with an emphasis on encouraging more tourism in order to improve the viability of the Borough;
- (d) Increase parking charges – This was not supported;
- (e) A more commercial approach in the use of reserves, especially in property development and capital projects – This view was supported;
- (f) Commercial sponsorship of cricket week – This was also supported;
- (g) Share TWBC Chief Executive with another authority – This was not supported;
- (h) Reduce the number of TWBC directorate areas from two to one – This was supported;
- (i) Appoint consultants to achieve reduction in staffing costs – This was not supported. On that basis, it was agreed to delete the reference in the agenda report to reducing staff costs. Cllr Scott added that the process of examining opportunities to share services under the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership would continue, where it could be demonstrated that savings could be achieved at the same time as maintaining services and increasing its resilience. The issue, he felt, was determining whether some non-statutory services should continue to be provided.

The Town Forum also considered the issue of the number of councillors – and their associated costs – and the argument for changing the election cycle from the current one third each year to an ‘all-out’ election once every four years.

Adam Chalmers, TWBC’s Democratic and Community Engagement Manager, provided a summary response to the issues raised, specifically:

- (i) The Cabinet was committed to setting a balanced budget, without the use of reserves;
- (ii) At the end of the consultation process on the budget, all representations made would be presented to the Cabinet Advisory Board and to Cabinet and full Council;
- (iii) The Portfolio-holder, Cllr James Scholes, would be providing a response to each of the elements raised by the Town Forum, as part of the report going to the above member groups;
- (iv) On staffing, he advised that he would request the Chief Executive to attend a future meeting of the Town Forum, to explain the new structure, effective from 2 January 2013, if the Town Forum would find that helpful; the Chairman accepted that offer on behalf of the Town Forum;
- (v) Adam explained how the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had recently examined the ‘election cycle’ and its recommendations would be considered by the full Council shortly.

RESOLVED – That the Town Forum’s draft response to TWBC’s consultation on the draft budget for 2013/14 be amended to reflect the above views.

10. CHANGES TO COUNCIL TAX EXEMPTIONS, RELATING TO EMPTY HOMES

The Chairman of the Finance and Other Issues Working Group, David Wakefield, advised that his group had met to consider this TWBC proposal, which formed part of a formal consultation process. He added that the paper accompanying the agenda set out an agreed response to the questions raised in the consultation and that this had now been submitted by the deadline for responses, namely 7 January.

RESOLVED – That the submitted response be noted.

11. DOG FOULING

Cllr David Elliott attended the meeting, to share with Town Forum members how an Overview and Scrutiny Committee initiative had been applied successfully at the Ridgeway playing fields in Southborough, where dog fouling had been identified as a significant concern to users.

By means of a ‘bag and flag’ event, the purpose of which was to try and change the behaviour of dog owners who did not clear up after their pets, the initiative proved to be a successful way in which to raise the issue amongst the local community and bring about an improved outcome.

Cllr Elliott advised that, should any residents’ association or ‘Friends of ...’ group wish to involve their community in a similar event, he could arrange for the toolkit and instructions to be made available.

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Cllr Mrs Mayhew, endorsed the benefits of the initiative and urged those for whom this might be of benefit to find out more.

David Bushell on behalf of the Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery expressed an interest. Jane Fenwick suggested that all open space groups should have this scheme drawn to their attention.

RESOLVED – That Cllr Elliott send further details to the Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery and any other groups responsible for open spaces be invited to contact him, via the Town Forum administrator, Mike McGeary.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Due to the late hour, no AOB items were raised.

13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Town Forum administrator advised that meetings for the remainder of the year had been arranged as follows:

Thursdays 7 March, 23 May, 25 July, 26 September and 28 November (to include the AGM), all starting at 6.30pm.

The meeting concluded at 9.20pm.

The Town Forum says the Transport Strategy

1. Must contain aspirations for a longer term than 14 years
2. Grossly understates the impact of congestion in Tunbridge Wells
3. Has inadequate proposals to eliminate congestion from A26 and A264
4. Must contain a comprehensive study of congestion, including consideration of relief roads
5. Must contain plans to keep heavy vehicles out of the town centre
6. Must recognise that new developments within the town centre should not attract significant increase in vehicle traffic
7. Must return control, management and budget for local roads from KCC to TWBC to enable solutions to congestion and other issues to be local and effective.
8. Must give a very high priority to improving roundabouts
9. Must increase bus travel with high quality, well marketed and energy efficient bus services linking local communities
10. Must prioritise pedestrians and cyclists over vehicle traffic, and provide cycle routes from feeder communities.