



Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum - Meeting (Zoom & Telephone) 12 May 2020

Notes compiled Town Forum Members

William Benson, TWBC Chief Executive, presentation:

TWBC participates in existing Kent Resilience Forum for emergencies, now managing response and recovery from Covid to ensure business continuity; longer and deeper crisis than any previous.

TWBC had well-rehearsed list of services with priority to life and limb, other services continuing; staff response excellent and morale good; starting to reopen services, daily updates to website; tip reopening with one visit by appointment per four weeks.

All TWBC meetings now on-line; social distancing in offices; 18% of staff redeployed; staff absences from planning but no redeployment; working as normal with fewer site visits; Local Plan on course.

TWBC distributes Govt grants to business (three changes to business rates); 99% of requests met; has flexed parking and planning regs to help shops move to delivery and takeaway; reduced hygiene inspections; all homeless housed, trying to make this permanent.

Community response in TW extraordinary – more offers of help than can be managed; private individuals and business donations; Assembly Hall is full of food; 3500 shielded cases receiving help from Council; working with parishes and local groups; with food and medicines under control TWBC priority shifting to mental health; TW Social set up in 3 weeks, making outbound calls for well-being.

Charities, voluntary, sports and cultural organisations have been badly hit; nothing from DCMS; TWBC helping with fundraising to ensure all survive to resume operations.

Testing centres at St Johns, Hop Farm (also Ebbsfleet and Gatwick), and TWBC trying to get mobile centre operated by military for borough.

Over ten years TWBC has lost £4.6m pa in central Govt support and evolved into something more like a business; Covid costing Council £1m a month in lost income; emergency Govt grants gave TWBC 35p per head from first tranche, £1.1m (total) from second tranche;; more help expected but Govt reluctant to help councils which have speculated; Greg lobbying; TWBC in relatively good position with reserves; report to Cabinet in June.

Essential to ensure recovery takes root in TW but world won't be the same; TWBC must remain solvent; likely to operate differently and be asked to do new things; wants to capture surge in volunteering; could benefit recruitment to Council, eg. social workers.

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Answers to questions (selective):

Local Plan: enormous number of responses may affect timetable; update in early June.

Relations with Govt: usually policy evolves from consultation; in this situation Govt makes unilateral announcements with frequent changes (e.g. a dozen changes on business rates/grants).

Arts and cultural organisations: frontline supported with £750m but others facing crisis; councils allowed to offer business rates relief; otherwise TWBC supporting crowdfunding initiatives.

Relations with Govt: UK has become highly centralised; Govt recruiting 18,000 people centrally for contact tracing; not clear what role of environmental health officers will be (there is shortage and facing increase in complaints during emergency).

Economy: RVP will reopen and response awaited from Elysium (Cinema site); last year appalling for high street and Easter season lost; big question who will re-emerge after crisis.

Lockdown: expect local variations in relaxation.

Promoting walking and cycling: active leadership at KCC on this; TWBC and Canterbury seen as pioneers but looking for evidence of public support; chastened by reaction eg. on A26; no new money but money brought forward; not clear how it will be allocated.

Schemes: KCC putting together a list of schemes to aid social distancing and promote active travel; schemes should meet these objectives, not be long-term wish-list; should support town centre, e.g. wider pavements, improvements to existing cycle routes; ideas to V Hubert by early next week.

Powers: TWBC could use powers to close roads etc for events; consultants already at work on active travel (LCWIP) to support Local Plan in centres like TW; TWBC supporting BID and local business (deliveries etc); ideas could be experimental and become permanent (or not) later.

Events: need to facilitate things that people enjoy doing without enabling virus transmission; possibility of moveable events in small venues; help local business as they emerge from lockdown.

Social distancing: Council has powers in relation to workplaces.

A.R.T./Town Forum/Meetings/Edited Summary 130520

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If you missed the meeting or want to see it again, you can watch it here:

https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/v-1lpLU7kpLZLfWxFD0C64NQKHEX6a81yIKrvQNmBx-5eBv4Yub3lIFyiVp_VNM

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KMB/20.05.2020