



## ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

**Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 16 November 2023, held in TWBC Council Chamber starting at 6pm**

# AGM

## WELCOME ATTENDANCE AND APOLOGIES:

- 1 Member Organisations in attendance:  
 Beulah Road Residents' Association – Stuart Anderson | Boyne Park Residents' Association – Sue Bishop, Dorothea Holman | Culverden Residents Association – Mark Booker, Michael Lees | Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert Parks – David Barnett | Friends of the Commons – Joy Podbury | Friends of the Grove and The Avenues Residents' Association – Tim Tempest | Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery – Margaret Ginman | Grantley Court Residents Association – Lorna Blackmore | Inner London Road Residents' Association – Carol Wilson | Royal Wells Park Residents' Group – David Wilson | Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District – Caroline Auckland, Jill Ruddock | St. John's Road Residents' Association – Marguerita Morton | Tunbridge Wells Bicycle User Group – Adrian Berendt | Tunbridge Wells Fairtrade Town Group – Mandy Flashman-Wells | Tunbridge Wells Older Peoples' Forum – Ruth Chambers | Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association – Michael Holman | Warwick Park Residents Association – Neil Williams |

Councillor Members in attendance:  
 Culverden Ward – Cllr Martin Brice and Cllr Justine Rutland | Sherwood Ward – Cllr Hugo Pound | St James' Ward – Cllr Ben Chapelard | St John's Ward – Cllr Marguerita Morton

Others in attendance:  
 RivingtonHark – Mark Harvey and Aran Uner  
 Democratic Services – Renee Dillon  
 Clerk – Julie Reynolds

Apologies were received from:  
 Jane Fenwick, David Scott, John Taylor, Katharina Mahler-Bech, Marika de Jonge, Lisa Beaumont, Mike Lees, Cllr White, Cllr Goodship, Cllr Lidstone, Cllr Ellis, Cllr O'Connell, Cllr Pope

- A warm welcome was extended to visiting speakers and new staff members. New members of the group were welcomed.
- Congratulations were extended to Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom team, led by Katharina Mahler-Bech, on the Gold Award achieved in the Britain in Bloom Small City category.

## REGISTER OF MEMBERS

- 2 The Chair returned the list of Members of the Town Forum as set out in the Agenda.

## VOTING ENTITLEMENT FOR MEMBER ORGANISATIONS AND COUNCILLORS

- 3 Voting arrangements were clarified per the detailed breakdown distributed as part of the Agenda pack.

## MINUTES OF THE 2022 AGM

- 4 The chair noted that the minutes had been agreed in principle at the meeting 30 March 2023 but were submitted here for formal approval.  
**Resolved – That the minutes of the AGM held on 24 November 2022 be approved.**

## CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT

- 5 The Chair gave a precis of the report- submitted in full within the Agenda pack.  
The Chair was formally thanked for bringing his experience to the group as Chair of the Town Forum during challenging times. Advice from the wings as he stepped down from the role of Chair would be valued and appreciated.

## ELECTION OF OFFICERS

- 6
- As detailed in the Agenda, it was acknowledged that this was proving a challenge as there were currently no nominations.
  - The view was shared that understanding the direction of the group would likely be helpful.
  - The Vice Chair, Adrian Berendt, offered to stand as Interim Chair until the direction of the group was more clearly established as set out in the Agenda. Issues such as funding, provision of support services, greater financial transparency, the democratic deficit and the role of the Town Forum would all need to be resolved as would a working relationship with the Borough Council.
  - The view was shared that the Town Forum should make more noise and, if necessary, be more confrontational with the Borough Council to establish a voice in the absence of a Town Council.
  - It was identified that there was no provision for this situation in the TF Constitution so a proposal was the only requirement to move this forward. The proposal to elect Adrian Berendt as the Interim chair was put forward by Michael Holman and seconded by Stuart Anderson. It was confirmed that Adrian Berendt was duly elected as Interim Chair.
  - It was suggested that the official formalities of an election be held in 3-4 months' time.

# ORDINARY MEETING

## ATTENDANCE, APOLOGIES & MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

- 7 Adrian Berendt, newly appointed Interim Chair, led the Ordinary Meeting. Attendance of Member Organisations, Councillors and others remained as AGM Agenda item 1.  
Apologies remained per AGM Agenda Item 1.
- a) **Changes of representatives** - David Wilson was welcomed as the Rotary Club representative standing in for John Taylor. Lisa Beaumont

was due to be representing the Access Group but was not present. Tony Mole no longer represents St. John's Road Residents Association.

- b) **New membership applications** – None.

## MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

- 8 a) Resolved – That the Minutes of the meeting 13 July 2023 be approved as a correct record.  
b) Matters arising – none

## UPDATES FROM MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

- 9 An update on the Twinning and Friendship Association with Wiesbaden was given. Wiesbaden would be holding a Wine Festival and had invited a vineyard in the Hastings locality to attend. Approximate dates 9-20 August 2024 TBC. A group from Tunbridge Wells would be organised. Any expressions of interest to Michael Holman. The Town Forum would be kept up to date.

The Civic Society written statement included as an addendum to the Agenda pack was acknowledged. Any comments were to be submitted to the Interim Chair.

## CHANGES AT ROYAL VICTORIA PLACE

- 10 Introduction was given by Cllr. Ben Chapelard, Leader of the Council, and Cllr Justine Rutland, Cabinet Member for Economic Development.

The council remained focused on the key 5 priorities:

- Safeguarding the finances
- More vibrant and safer towns and villages.
- Carbon reduction
- Generally affordable housing and social rental housing
- Transparency, local government and local democracy.

It was recognised that the internet was putting a strain on the High Street but that there was an opportunity to compete with an offering that was different with an emphasis on opportunities for human interaction.

It was clarified that TWBC now owned the RVP buildings and freehold so had direct control of the High Street offer.

RVP was seen as a positive step for the Town and Borough.

Development of the centre would take place over the next few years with some quick fixes and some longer term strategies.

Mark Harvey and Aran Uner, RivingtonHark Asset Management team delivered the presentation. Key points included:

- A brief overview of RivingtonHark Asset management company and team was given including how they work with clients.
- Examples of current and historical centre redevelopment successes were shared – including private clients and centres under Local Authority ownership.
- The RivingtonHark asset management approach reflected the identified needs for each individual town.
- The role of asset management was explained. In this case TWBC as the investor, had employed RivingtonHark (RH) to run the asset using expertise and skills they have in the field. They work to achieve the business plans of the investors and run the project teams that manage the centre running contracts, leasing agents etc. They report to the investor.

- RH were currently managing 12 shopping centres of varying size across the UK, all requiring varying degrees of intervention. Some were privately owned and some Council owned. RH had been working in these centres to create an offering that was different and drew people into the town centres for things other than just shopping. Food and Beverage (F&B) was one of the options that had proved to be successful in diversifying and maximising income and generating a positive impact on footfall.
- RVP work included understanding and retaining existing tenants, agree longer term leases and investment in 'fit-outs'.
- Historical approach of previous owner resulted in empty space. Space activation through short term, local, pop-up, community group spaces was being investigated to improve footfall – identified as critical to success for occupiers to convert to 'spend', generating a positive trading cycle.
- Repositioning options and opportunities were being explored to facilitate the rebalancing of retail space with alternative options.
- Ely Court changes were well underway.
- Working with the local community was a focus to ensure the offering reflected demand as closely as possible.
- It was reiterated that RVP was the heart of the town as the Council had identified and that RH intended to deliver that.

Discussion and questions from Town Forum included:

- It was confirmed that Parking arrangements remained under the directive of TWBC but had been identified by RH as requiring improvement to improve the RVP customer experience. It was clarified that parking charges data identified that there had been no adverse impact on usage following the most recent charge increases.
- The term 'key anchors' was given clarification as being a major retailer that anchors the rest of the tenant mix and typically occupies a large trading area. In the case of RVP, the anchor store is Fenwicks which then attracts further tenants with customers of similar demographic. Some examples of key tenants were given for clarity; JD Sports, Next, Zara.
- The various defined trading areas of the town, such as The Pantiles, The High Street and Camden Road, were acknowledged as all building into the overall 'story' of the town and serving different tenant mixes. Not all tenants would want to occupy space in RVP as it might not fit with their trading demographic.
- Creating a clear platform and story for where RVP fitted within the town centre mix was identified as being essential. The RVP tenant mix was being considered carefully and holistically.
- The old food court end/Palm Court needed careful consideration given to use. Zoning of trading areas within RVP would be undertaken.
- It was clarified that RVP was purchased as a capital project which sits separately to the day-to-day budget which is currently sitting in a deficit. For this reason, the purchase of RVP has no impact on provision of day-to-day services. It was confirmed that a condition of the sale was non-disclosure of the price paid. It was confirmed that the price paid would reach the public domain through the accounting process.
- TWBC ownership of RVP was confirmed as being a long-term stewardship. The end goal did not involve cannibalising what was already in the town but to offer something different and would include leisure, food and beverage offerings. The long term goal was being broken down into a series of steps that would navigate achievement of the goal efficiently and sustainably for all stakeholders/customers.
- It was confirmed that the reallocation of trading spaces would allow space

to be allocated/zoned for leisure. Consideration would have to be given to how this would be facilitated.

- It was confirmed that provision for young people would be given consideration as part of the plan.
- A cinema provision within the centre was confirmed as being an option that could work as part of the solution. This was welcomed as an option.
- Later retail opening hours had been seen in other projects where cinemas have been part of the centre. This was noted to have helped the evening economy.
- The Town Centre Plan working group would be looking to develop the plan including RVP.
- The RVP email address was shared with the group as a means of sharing ideas and giving feedback. Reassurance that this is being monitored and that council representatives are monitoring and responding was given. The appointment of the Council Property Manager specifically for RVP was shared. Outreach sessions and surveys are planned – within the bounds of confidentiality.
- It was noted that TW was founded on fun and enjoyment. The view was shared that RVP should pay attention to that focus to draw people in. A clear set of objectives to do this was required so that residents considered coming in to town an adventure. An experiential focus was considered the best way forward.
- The use of revolving boards for local group event sharing was proposed as a means of engaging the whole community and would be raised with them as part of their renewal options.
- It was confirmed that the purchase of RVP was made with a view to making a profit which could be ploughed back in to Council services.
- It was noted that leisure occupiers do not pay the same levels of rent as retail occupiers. Empty units still incur costs. There would be short term steps that need to be taken to meet the longer term goals. Business cases would need to be made at each step.
- It was noted that RH are passionate about Town Centres. RVP used to have significantly more visitors than currently and Rh are tasked with turning this around.
- RVP catchment is potentially huge – 5<sup>th</sup> in the South East with the ranking being Bluewater, Maidstone, Crawley, Eastbourne and the Tunbridge Wells. The aim is to move RVP to second place.
- The need for a traffic strategy to support the additional visitors was considered helpful. The need for pedestrian and cyclist provision was noted.
- It was requested that the uniqueness of Tunbridge Wells be maintained throughout the process.

## **UPDATE FROM THE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

11 The update was delivered by Councillor Justine Rutland, Cabinet Member for Economic Development.

- Thanks were delivered on behalf of the council to all members of the Town Forum for all their work and support over the past year.
- The success of In Bloom was acknowledged. It was noted that Work had begun for next year with a possible football theme as Tunbridge Wells would be hosting the Subbuteo World Cup next summer.
- The council development of a new corporate plan was underway. Results of the residents' survey and engagement event indicate that the themes will be along the lines of:

- Vibrant economy
  - Climate action
  - Sustainable growth – includes housing
  - Environment
  - Community wellbeing
- The Mt. Pleasant highways scheme in front of the War Memorial and the associated petition will be discussed at the JTB on 15 January.
  - Town Square had signed the lease to go ahead with re-purposing the offices in the Town Hall for co-working.
  - The parking strategy was underway with a Christmas offer at RVP and Meadow road – free parking Sundays in December. Cabinet had visited RVP car park to look at where improvements and maintenance were required. BP Pulse had signed a contract with the Council to install 14 Electric Vehicle (EV) chargers in Crescent Road, Great Hall, John Street, Pantiles and Torrington car parks. All were 24 hour opening so overnight charging of vehicles would be possible.
  - Better Street for St John's and St James: Local residents were invited to a Collaborative Design workshop at The Hub in Grosvenor and Hilbert park from 10am -1pm Saturday.
  - A night time travel survey was being undertaken. Engagement was requested and the link shared. Safe Travels Tunbridge Wells | Talking Point Tunbridge Wells (engagementhq.com).
  - Following the Inspector's feedback, the council had a revised development strategy recommending that the Tudeley Village allocation be withdrawn from the Local Plan, in combination with other changes to the strategy. This was going through the usual decision-making process and would be debated at Full Council in December.
  - Christmas events organised by the Bid were noted: three light switch-ons, the ice rink and the Ferris wheel.
  - A temporary inexpensive fix had been found for lighting up the front of The Assembly Hall Theatre. A more permanent solution was still being sought.
  - The Mayor's Toy Appeal was launched this week. Please visit: Teddy Mayors Toy Appeal 2023 (twmta.co.uk).
  - The Bid's first five-year term was coming to an end and a new business plan was being prepared. There would be a ballot of all levy payers over the month of February that would determine whether there would be a second term.
  - The Bid, the council and architects Kaner Olette were working together on a scheme to improve the High Street one-way scheme and street furniture, most recently holding meetings with nearby businesses.
  - It was noted that an effective way for residents to stay in touch with Council news was to sign up to the weekly email (twbc.online) or social media : Facebook, Nextdoor, Twitter/X and Instagram.

Questions and discussion included:

- It was clarified that TWBC are responsible for Street Cleaning. A written schedule would be investigated and fed back. A complaint had been raised regarding this but difficulties in getting through to seek help remained ongoing.
- It was clarified that the Town Centre Plan had a specific boundary which included: roads, infrastructure, buildings, access to green space, buildings, shopping areas. There had been three workshops attended by residents of the public and Town Forum, one of the key points raised was safe pedestrian passage between the town centre and The Pantiles for all members of the community.

- It was confirmed that the removal of Tudeley Garden Village from the Local Plan did not mean further building in Tunbridge Wells, or other parts of the borough, over and above that which was already in the plan. The revised plan would likely be a ten year plan rather than fifteen year. Due process was being followed in regard to officer recommendations. If the recommendations were approved, 6 week they would culminate in a period of public consultation starting in the new year. This would all be fed back to the inspector. The Inspector would put forward Main Modifications. There would be a further period of public consultation. The process was acknowledged as being lengthy and complex but it was moving forward.
- The sale of Decimus Burton buildings was raised. The process leading up to the proposed sale was clarified. The Civic Society had been given time to prepare a business plan which had been due consideration by a cross party panel. The plan had not been considered viable. There remained ongoing correspondence regarding possible options to move forward. The financial implications of the current business plan were presented further costs to the council, with additional financial risk to the tax payer should the business plan fail. It was noted that the current suggestion put forward to The Civic Society was for them to put forward a purchase bid, alongside other bidders, for consideration. The cross party panel would review the situation before a sale was agreed. It was clarified that, while there was no rush to make a decision, ultimately the Council could not afford to support the Civic Society business plan. The group were reminded of the Council budget deficit and increasing inflation and costs.

### **RTW TOWN FORUM GOING FORWARD: MODERNISING**

- 12
- As previously discussed, it was confirmed that a working group would be set up.
  - It was requested that ideas and suggestions be sent to the Interim Chair.
  - Contributions from all members of the group were requested and welcomed.
  - Volunteers to stand on the working group would be welcomed.
  - The Interim Chair would communicate next steps with all interested parties in due course.

### **REPORTS FROM THE TOWN FORUM WORKING GROUPS**

- 13                      No questions or discussion points raised.

### **URGENT BUSINESS OR TOPICS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS**

- 14                      The next meeting should consider the report of the working group.

### **FUTURE MEETINGS**

- 15                      Date will be set when the Working Group report was ready to be presented. This would be led by the Interim Chair.

**Meeting closed at 19:50**