

ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

**Minutes of the meeting on Thursday, 17 September 2020
held online via Zoom, starting at 4pm.**

Members: Caroline Auckland (Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District), David Barnett (Friends of Grosvenor & Hilbert Parks), Jenina Bas-Pendry (Dudley Road Residents Association), Adrian Berendt (Tunbridge Wells Bicycle User Group), Lorna Blackmore (Grantley Court Residents' Association), Mark Booker (Culverden Residents' Association), Stephen Bowser (Residents' First), Marieke de Jonge (Tunbridge Wells Friends of the Earth), John de Lucy (Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery), Peter de Wit (Nevill Court Roads Committee), Irene Fairbairn (Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group), Jane Fenwick (Calverley Park Residents' Association), Margaret Ginman (Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery), Carolyn Gray (The Forum), Dorothea Holman (Boyne Park Residents' Association), Michael Holman (Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association), Delphine Houlton (Hawkenbury Village Association), Katharina Mahler-Bech (Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom and Telephone House Neighbours' Association), Marguerita Morton (St. John's Road Residents' Association), Sue Pound (COCA), Don Sloan (Molyneux Park Gardens Residents' Association), Dawn Stanford (Nourish Community Foodbank), Anne Stobo (Friends of the Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery), Tim Tempest (Friends of The Grove), Alastair Tod (Poona Road Residents' Association) and Carol Wilson (Inner London Road Residents' Association)

Borough Councillors: Councillors Lidstone (St. John's), Morton (St. John's), Pope (Park), Pound (Sherwood), Rutland (Culverden), Scott (Culverden), and Woodward (Broadwater)

Others in Attendance: William Benson, Chief Executive of TWBC), Rebecca Bowers (TWBC Health Improvement Team), Jane Clarke (TWBC Head of Policy and Governance), Ian Firth, Angela McPherson (substitute representative for Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District), Councillor Podbury (Rusthall) Councillor Rankin (Kent County Council), Hilary Smith TWBC Economic Development Manager), Angus Stewart (substitute representative for Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group), Adrian Thorne (Residents Against Ramslye Development)

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- 1 The following apologies were received:
 - Stuart Anderson (Beulah Road Residents' Association)
 - Tim Ball (Calverley Park Crescent Association)
 - Mark Brown (Tunbridge Wells Puppetry Festival)
 - Brian Lippard (Civic Society of Royal Tunbridge Wells)
 - Marianne MacDonald (Co-optee)

DECLARATIONS OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

- 2 The following substitutes were representing their respective member organisations:
 - Carol Wilson (Inner London Road Residents' Association)

MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

3 a) Changes to Membership

- The following changes in membership were noted:
- Nourish Community Foodbank – Dawn Stanford was now the representative

- Residents' First – Steve Bowser was now the representative with Chris Stevenson as substitute.

b) New Membership Applications

New membership applications had been accepted from:

- None

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 7 JULY 2020

4 a) Approval of the minutes as a correct record

The minutes were agreed.

b) Matters Arising from the minutes

None.

UPDATE FROM THE BOROUGH COUNCIL

5 William Benson, Chief Executive of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, provided an update, comments included –
National/Covid updates:

- Further details on the most recent government announcements were awaited, it was unclear on the powers and responsibilities of the new Covid Marshals.
- Working with KCC to understand who does what in terms of enforcement and also to ensure that we are ready in the event of numbers ticking up more.
- Tunbridge Wells numbers above the county average but well below the national average. Some of the increase follows the national trend but, in addition relates to household clusters, care settings and hospitality settings.
- Dame Mary Ney has published a report on lessons learned from the experience in Leicestershire:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-covid-19-outbreaks-lessons-learned-and-good-practice>
- Flu - Concerns of flu are down because the southern hemisphere did quite well and people are being more Covid-aware.
- Since the planning reform presentation at a previous meeting of the Town Forum, a number of meetings including all Kent MP's and Kent Leaders had been held. There had been almost universal condemnation of the proposals. It was Greg Clark MP's view that the proposals were unlikely to make it through Parliament.

Local Community updates:

- It was announced yesterday that our MHCLG bid for revenue funding has been approved. We haven't heard yet about the capital application for renovation of Crescent Road.
- The funding amounts to £153,396 and will mean we can carry on providing emergency housing and assisting those we are housing into longer-term arrangements such as private rentals and supported accommodation.
- The Council's Covid-19 Panel, on which the Town Forum is represented by Adrian Berendt, has received updates on our plans for workstreams on financial hardship, housing, community safety and health.

Local Business updates:

- Looking to see how we can help businesses take advantage of the Kickstart scheme. £2bn scheme to help the under 25s but as limited to businesses with a minimum of 30 vacancies this excludes SMEs. The West Kent Partnership is setting itself up as an intermediary and the Council will be publicising this with local businesses:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme>
- All discretionary business grants disbursed.
- Positive update from Targetfollow - no businesses on the Pantiles have closed and some new lettings in train.
- On Meadow Road Car Park there have been supply chain issues in getting the replacement lights delivered but we're expecting them in the first week of October.

Council Services updates:

- New website up and running – well done to the digital team on a smooth handover
- All three leisure centres were open. Swimming pools and classes filling up, gyms quiet. Family swim attendance at around 80 per cent. We are inspecting regularly to check for cleaning etc. We are also ramping up the marketing.
- Theatre – decision to re-open with details of the programme to be announced on 21 September. Will include a monthly residency from the comedy store and work with local community groups.
- Details of the Council's financial situation are set out in the Budget Strategy report to Cabinet. Initial projections of £1m per month losses had been tempered by a government loss sharing scheme. In-year losses were now reduced from £8m to £2m.
- There was no clarity on what would happen after 31 March. The Government's Comprehensive Spending Review ahead of the Budget was delayed.

In answer to questions the following comments were made:

- The Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce was also an intermediary in respect of the Kickstart scheme.
- The Tunbridge Wells Walking Tour app was now available.
- The Russell Hotel continued to support local homeless people and were accommodating 11 such people. 20 further homeless people were being accommodated elsewhere in the borough. The Council was aware of 2 individuals who were unable to be accommodated due to their behaviour and lack of willingness to engage with services.
- The Council just didn't know what was going to happen with its funding. As a precaution it had suspended most of its capital programme and were holding its reserves flexibly. The Government was urging Council's not to cut services and were full of praise but this was not backed up with money.
- Environmental Health and Public Health officials were working to prevent the spread of a Covid outbreak at a local school. The Kent Outbreak Control plan had been enacted. There was no indication of this being a wider issue with schools.
- Whilst numbers of infections remained steady a full lockdown was unlikely but the Council was preparing for any changes in circumstances.
- Unemployment in the borough was at 4.7%, this was lower than the current Kent average at just over 6% but much higher than the pre-Covid average of approximately 1%. Further increases were expected following the end of the furlough scheme and in the new year.

- If the Council was required to cancel theatre or ice rink tickets a full refund would be given. Ticket insurance was also available if there was a lack of confidence.
- The Town Forum was engaged in discussions around a Cultural Compact for Tunbridge Wells which was looking to promote both culture and creative industries. Any interested member could get involved either directly or through the Culture, Leisure and Tourism Working Group.

ONE YOU KENT

- 6 Rebecca Bowers, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Health Improvement Team, presented on the One You Kent service, comments included:
- One You Kent was a free adult (18+) service to help people live healthier lifestyles, tackling issues around diet, alcohol, smoking.
 - Pre-Covid services were delivered face-to-face in community centres and leisure centres. These had moved online with video and telephone support.
 - Group weight management courses were popular and had benefitted by moving online, attendance and completion rates were increased.
 - Health Walks around the borough had restarted, with advice from the Ramblers. There was a weekly group in Calverley Grounds and it was hope there would be more soon.
 - A holistic approach was adopted with clients, each contact started with an assessment which may include a number of health and non-health support services (e.g. housing and financial services).
 - Referrals to the service can be made through www.oneyoukent.org.uk or 03000 200 636.

In answer to questions the following comments were made:

- Health Walks were exempt from the rule of 6 so could take place with up to 30 but feedback has suggested that 10 is a more comfortable number. They are free to join and led by volunteer Walk Leaders. All walks have been assessed in line with government guidelines and booking is essential due to restricted numbers. More information on how to book can be found on our website.
<https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/walkfinder/tunbridge-wells-walking-for-health>
- Training is available if anyone is interested in being a Walk Leader.
- The Health Team were primarily focused on walking in order to help inactive people to become more active but could signpost to other running or activity clubs if appropriate.
- People can self-refer or refer on behalf of another, the only criteria is that the client must be 18+, a resident of Kent and have a willingness to make lifestyle changes.
- The Health Team consisted of 5 people supported by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. The team largely commissioned partners and worked with volunteers to deliver services but could take a direct role in the event that a volunteer was unable.
- Any assistance in promoting the service would be welcome, numbers of volunteers was consistent but referrals were slightly down. Further details are attached.

EMERGENCY ACTIVE TRAVEL FUND TRAFFIC SCHEMES AND LOCAL CYCLING AND WALKING INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN

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Adrian Berendt, Town Forum Chairman, and Hilary Smith, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Economic Development Manager, presented on the recent changes to the High Street, comments included:

- The High Street was now one-way northbound.
- Members of the Town Forum and representatives of the Council and the Business Improvement District visited the High Street to speak to business owners and visitors. There were some minor concerns but no overwhelming condemnation of the scheme despite negative reporting in the press.
- More than half the business owners supported the scheme, more so amongst the hospitality businesses.
- Concerns included:
 - Lack of consultation (perhaps understandably given the limited time constraints imposed by the Government)
 - Ugliness of the plastic bollards (temporary)
 - Access for deliveries and bin lorries
- Approximately two-thirds of shoppers supported the scheme. Around half had walked to the town centre and half had either driven or taken other transport.
- Initial suggestions that the one-way should be southbound was not raised as a concern by people on the High Street now that northbound had been implemented.
- The bollards could be replaced with more attractive 'parklets' which could include seating, planting or cycle parking. There was strong support for the use of these.
- The experience of engaging directly with businesses and visitors had been positive.
- The purpose of the scheme was to make the High Street more accessible to pedestrians. It is not the intention that it should solve any traffic management issues.

In answer to questions the following comments were made:

- Some businesses had commented that their deliveries could be changed and in one case it had proven beneficial to switch to smaller vehicles, but more notice of the changes would have been appreciated.
- More work needed to be done to solve the problem with bin lorries. There were so many different providers that a coordinated approach was difficult.
- Car drivers had not been spoken to as part of this exercise (except those that were encountered walking on the High Street). Nor had residents and more work was required.
- Trial or temporary road closures had been considered. Increased rat-running in Castle Street had been noticed so this would remain under review.
- The reduced traffic had resulted in a nicer environment on the High Street.
- Pedestrian welcoming (as apposed to vehicular warning) signage could be considered but these would have to be within the highway regulations.
- The Residents' Survey in 2015 had identified strong public support for widespread pedestrianisation of the town centre. A recent visit to Norwich city centre highlighted that pedestrianisation encouraged footfall and it was possible to have parking and people traveling into town by vehicle and still have a pedestrian friendly environment in the centre.

- The current scheme, whilst recognised that it was a trial and had to fit into restricted criteria was not pedestrianisation so failed to achieve all the benefits.
- The Town Forum was generally in favour of pedestrianisation but recognised that any such scheme must be done sensitively with the support of local residents and traders.
- Pedestrianisation of the High Street would, in any case, have to allow access for residents and deliveries. A trial could be arranged.
- Next steps for the High Street scheme included provision of summary of the survey results to businesses and work to design improvements to the schemes which would be subject to road safety assessment and approval by KCC.

Hilary Smith and William Benson provided an update and answered questions on other traffic schemes in the borough which included – A26 cycle route:

- ‘Wands’ had been installed along the route. Whilst not a perfect solution they were a definite improvement so far as cyclists were concerned.
- Some wands had been removed, some deliberately although not necessarily maliciously where they impacted on access.
- KCC would regularly inspect the route and replace where appropriate.
- Focus should not be lost on more permanent improvements.
- The legality of electric-scooters using cycle lanes was unclear.

Reynolds Lane:

- Plans for a physical modal filter on Reynolds Lane were not possible due to a lack of turning space. A signed-only restriction had been implemented.
- There had been a reduction of traffic on the road and no significant impact on the A26.
- It was hoped that lower traffic on Reynolds Lane could encourage its use for active travel to the schools.
- Both positive and negative feedback had been received. Most negative comments related to the loss of a route to avoid the A26.
- The longer the signed-only scheme was in place the more people may realise they can ignore it so further work on enforcement or other measures would be needed.
- There had been many more people walking the Lane since the lockdown and this was an opportunity to create a green route through town.
- Outside of the morning and evening rush, there was no time saved by using Reynolds Lane so hopefully the restriction would allow some drivers to realise this.
- Fewer vehicles would encourage more walkers, creating virtuous circle of improvement.

Camden Road:

- KCC had not supported the scheme as part of the Emergency Fund but the Borough Council was looking to progress it itself. It was important for the long term sustainability of the scheme that it enjoy the support of local businesses and residents. The Council was therefore waiting to see the outcomes from the High Street scheme before committing.

20mph Zone:

- Anecdotal evidence suggested that some of the signs and markings

for 20mph has started to be implemented but there was no official update from KCC.

- All schemes agreed by KCC under the Emergency Fund must be implemented by 20 September.
- Separate 20mph schemes were being progressed in Culverden and Sherwood. The combined schemes (with St. John's) would see a majority of residential or town centre roads as 20mph.
- KCC had implemented a town-wide zone in Tonbridge and Faversham so there was no reason in principle why the same could not be done in Tunbridge Wells.
- More than 2000 streets in Kent were now 20mph, it was becoming the norm rather than exception and this represented a significant policy change for KCC.
- Taxi firms in towns with 20mph zones reported support for the restrictions as they lowered their fuel costs. Perhaps this was one way to gain the support of taxi firms in Tunbridge Wells.

Other:

- It was important that people tell KCC if they support a scheme otherwise they will only receive the negative.
- There was a problem on London Road near the junctions with Vale Road where vehicles were trying to turn around. Wands or similar could be used to block the area being used. As a highway safety issue this should be reported to KCC.
- Timescales imposed by the Government meant that communication and consultation had been difficult but Tunbridge Wells had done comparatively well from the scheme.

Hilary Smith provided an update on the Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan, comments included:

- The plan formed part of the emerging Local Plan
- The plan covered five cycle routes and sixteen walking routes in Royal Tunbridge Wells
- Phase one of the plan included several cycle routes which were previously identified in the former Cycling Strategy but had been reviewed in accordance with revised Department of Transport guidance.
- Consultants Phil Jones Associates were working on phase two of the plan which involved looking to the Low Traffic Neighbourhood model for the urban areas of the Borough and inter-urban routes between Tunbridge Wells, Paddock Wood and Tonbridge.
- Work on phase two was nearing completion and a full presentation could be made to a future meeting.

In answer to questions the following comments were made:

- Communication had been difficult for the Emergency Fund schemes and lessons had been learnt. The Plan provided an opportunity to start discussions so that there were ready schemes for when funding became available.
- The Emergency Fund schemes had highlighted the potential of trialling schemes. The High Street would have potentially taken years under normal circumstances.
- The importance of trialling schemes should not be underestimated. Even if not delivered perfectly from the start they demonstrate the potential and offer a fast track, but responsible way, to getting things done and allow decisions to be made on evidence rather than theory.

William Benson confirmed that enforcement of the traffic restrictions on Mount Pleasant (outside the Town Hall) had commenced, initially with warning letters which would be followed by Penalty Charges in future. The Council had tried to communicate the changes to the restrictions through all available channels.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

- 8 Alastair Tod presented the report set out in the agenda explaining the proposed reforms to the planning system. Discussion included the following comments:
- Currently any residential development of over 10 units must include 35% affordable housing. This was proposed to be increased to 50 units the threshold. This will mean that in the majority of cases, developers will not be required to provide any affordable units.
 - The term 'affordable' as it applied to Tunbridge Wells was misleading as it only meant 80% of market rate and this was still too expensive for most people.
 - Of the 35% affordable housing, 25% would be 'first homes'. This meant that the amount of social housing the Council could ensure was delivered as part of any major development would be reduced to approximately 26% of the total.
 - The proposals also would mean that any infrastructure relating to new developments would have to be delivered by the Council before the construction started. This would mean that the Council would likely need to borrow money to pay for infrastructure at its own risk without any guarantee that the development would be completed.
 - The reforms amounted to a developers charter which would see very little affordable and social housing being provided. This would ultimately lead to town centre consisting only of exclusive properties.
 - Care should be taken when considering percentages because the intention of the reforms was to substantially increase the total number of properties being built. A smaller percentage of a large number may be more than a larger percentage of a small number.
 - It was important to understand the actual need for the right number and type of houses. The desire was to provide mixed communities rather than the sprawling estates of the past.
 - The practice of providing social housing by way of a deal with a developer had proved to be ineffective, in Tunbridge Wells at least.
 - The proposal to increase the affordable housing threshold to 50 was technically limited to 2 years but one must be suspicious that it was the intention to make it permanent.
 - The Council was pressing hard to get its Local Plan out to Regulation 19 Consultation before the deadline to try to avoid the higher housing targets which would come in to force if the reforms were implemented.

CLEAN AIR DAY (8 OCTOBER)

- 9 Marieke de Jonge presented. Comments included:
- Tunbridge Wells Friends of the Earth had a meeting the next week to see what it could do to support Clean Air Day on 8 October.
 - There would likely be work with school to take advantage of the anti-idling campaigns around schools and the town centre.
 - This would also provide a good opportunity to work with young people and potentially revive the Youth Forum.

- Any members with good connections with a school kindly contact Marieke as engaging with schools was particularly difficult.
- Any suggestions for further activities would be welcome.
- A motion would be considered at the next Full Council meeting which sought to implement non-idling zones around schools.

UPDATES FROM LOCAL RESIDENTS' GROUPS

10 Inner London Road Residents' Association – Carol Wilson advised that they supported the 20mph zone in the Town and had been pleased to see their suggestion for improvements to Church Road included in the bid for phase 1 of the Emergency Active Travel Fund schemes but bitterly disappointed these were not progressed. These had been long standing issues.

Civic Society of Tunbridge Wells – Alastair Tod advised that they were attempting to have the Amadeus Antique Shop on Mount Ephraim, which had fallen into disrepair, made an Asset of Community Value. The proposal was initially to highlight the issue to the owner who had previously refused to engage with the community but he had since died. It was hoped that the status would make the new owners aware of its important historical significance. The Society was still short of the 21 signatures needed to complete the application.

Boyne Park Residents' Association – Dorothea Holman advised they were concerned at the recent debate on banning pavement parking given the narrow streets. William Benson confirmed that currently pavement parking was a Police matter. If at any point in the future powers were given to district councils then a policy would be formed which would be subject to public consultation and the full decision making processes of the council before anything was implemented. Jane Fenwick advised that the Transport Working Group would be responding to the national consultation in November and individuals were encouraged to comment.

Updates were provided on the following construction projects in the town –
The Belvedere (former cinema site):

- Little visible progress.
- Discussion had continued with the Council until recently but it appeared that Covid-19 had interrupted progress.

Former Arriva site:

- Work had been delayed as more than expected asbestos had been discovered and further clean-up operations were needed before progressing.

Pantiles 1887 (former Union House site):

- Works were progressing and the public areas and water feature were due to be installed in November.

REPORTS FROM THE TOWN FORUM WORKING GROUPS

11 Water in the Wells Working Group – Michael Holman advised that the Council were trying to identify a suitable drinking water and bottle filling fountain for Dunorlan Park. This could also be installed in The Grove, St John's Recreation Ground and Calverley Grounds. It had proven difficult to find something that could do all but progress was being made.

Transport Working Group – Jane Fenwick advised that a full report would be circulated with the group's minutes and the group was working to ensure the various alleyways and footpaths were registered as Public Rights of Way to prevent their loss. The lack of discussion at the recent Licensing Committee on the Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy had been disappointing given the Working Group's engagement with the consultation process over a period of two years. This was an important policy affecting taxis and passengers across the Borough.

Culture, Leisure and Tourism Working Group – Carolyn Gray advised that a report was attached to the agenda and ask what progress was being made but the Council's Civic Complex Cross-Party Working Group. William Benson advised that since a report to Full Council in December a brief had been prepared to engage consultants which would have been due at Cabinet in June, unfortunately progress had been delayed due to Covid-19. Work would need to involve reviewing the Cultural Strategy and other policies to form the basis on any future decisions. Much of this would be undertaken when the Council progresses work on the Cultural Compact. The Council had also been exploring the potential around flexible working space. No meetings of the Working Group had been held since December but some of the recommendations from that meeting were being worked on.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

12 None.

FUTURE MEETINGS

13 19 November 2020 (AGM)
 28 January 2021
 18 March 2021