



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

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Thursday 19 January 2017

Attended: Caroline Auckland (sub), Lindsay Barker, David Barnett, Adrian Berendt (Chair), Lorna Blackmore, Mark Booker, Stephen Bowser, Cllr Peter Bulman, David Bushell, Cllr Ben Chapelard, Cllr Mrs Barbara Cobbold, John Cunningham, Michael Doyle, Jane Fenwick, Alex Green, Tim Harper, Kyrios Kyriacou, Linda Lewis, Brian Lippard, Katharina Mahler-Bech, Paul Mason (sub), Cllr Tracy Moore, Chris Morris, Marguerita Morton, Nick Pope, Cllr Don Sloan, Tim Tempest, Alastair Tod, Adrian Twiner (sub), David Wakefield, Denise Watts, Cllr Lynne Weatherly, Philip Whitbourn, Pat Williamson (sub) and Cllr Chris Woodward

TWBC officers present: Jane Clarke (Head of Policy and Governance) and Mike McGeary (Democratic Services Officer)

Also present: Cllr David Jukes (Leader of the Council), Cllr Jane March (Portfolio-holder for Tourism, Leisure and Economic Development), Cllr Alan McDermott (Deputy Leader and Portfolio-holder for Planning and Transportation), Cllr Joy (and Mr) Podbury and Cllr Mrs Julia Soyke (Deputy Mayor)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were reported from: Bill Acker, Cllr Bob Backhouse, Sally Balcon, Cllr Ronen Basu, Chris Gedge, Michael and Dorothea Holman, Sue Kaner, Bill Kern, Altan Omer, Angela Phillips, Charles Pope, Cllr Catherine Rankin, David Scott and Mary Wardrop

2. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

Mike McGeary advised that the Mereworth Road Residents' Association had disbanded and would not, therefore, be sending representatives to future Forum meetings. He added that Rachel Jenman had resigned from her position as Town Centre Manager, although the organisation which she represented – Royal Tunbridge Wells Together – remained as members of the Town Forum.

3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman drew attention to the re-ordered agenda, with its focus more on the work and activity of the Town Forum's five working groups. He also reported that Katharina Mahler-Bech had been officially recognised for her unstinting work in support of the annual Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom initiative by the 'So Tunbridge Wells' magazine in their December edition. He added the Town Forum's grateful thanks for her hard work and commitment towards this much-loved event.

4. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting dated 23 November 2016 were submitted for approval. The minutes of the Forum's AGM, held on the same date, were presented for noting.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2016 be approved and those of the AGM be noted.

5. ACTIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

3(2) Pavements – encroachment, clutter and enforcement

In response to the outstanding actions for the previous meeting, attention was drawn to an update statement prepared by Stephen Baughen, TWBC's Development Manager. In his response, Mr Baughen had provided a summary of what further initiatives TWBC had taken to address the concerns raised by Town Forum members at the September meeting. The Chairman added that he would invite Mr Baughen to attend either the March or the May meeting, to provide a further update.

Brian Lippard said that he was keen to see the Town Forum maintaining a close watch on this issue and asked that it remain as an action point until such time as the situation improved.

8 Aircraft noise

It was noted that, subsequent to the November meeting, a list of action points recommended by TWAANG had been circulated to Forum members. It was noted that TWAANG had also expressed an interest in becoming members of the Town Forum.

10 A vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells

This follow-up action is covered under minute 7 below.

12(b) Junction improvements – transparency of process

The Chairman advised that he had raised this matter at the most recent meeting of the Joint (TWBC and KCC) Transportation Board. He asked that the minutes of this meeting be circulated to Forum members in due course.

12(d) Warwick Park drainage

The Chairman advised that he had been sent a copy of the action list relating to this matter, which had been drawn up at a meeting held in September between TWBC, KCC and Southern Water – all agencies who had a role to play in finding a solution to the drainage problems in this area. Cllr Jukes added that he had been responsible for Southern Water's engagement in this process – a key factor in bringing about progress. He warned, however, that while some short-term measures would improve the situation, a longer-term solution was likely to require significant infrastructure investment by Southern Water. He added that the Borough Council's role was compounded by the pressure it was facing from central government to provide additional housing, some of which was bound to feed into the existing drainage system for this area.

The Chairman advised that, now that he had been made aware of the action list, he would seek regular updates on progress.

6. UPDATE REPORT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Cllr David Jukes, TWBC Leader, provided an update on some issues of general interest as follows:

- (a) Devolution** – Cllr Jukes reported on progress in discussions held with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, Sevenoaks District Council and KCC regarding possible partnership working in operational areas for which the County Council was currently responsible. He said that public health and highways were the most advanced in terms of progress. Cllr Jukes said that further work would be progressed through the West Kent Integration Board, which had been established to co-ordinate this initiative.

Jane Fenwick asked what functions would be covered under ‘public health’ and what budget would be provided to operate the service. Cllr Lynne Weatherly, within whose Cabinet portfolio-holding this fell, said that these would be largely preventative measures that were currently the responsibility of KCC, relating to activities such as smoking cessation, weight management etc. As for the budget available, Cllr Jukes advised that this approximately £1m across the three West Kent authorities.

Paul Mason enquired what types of highways activities the district councils were hoping to have transferred. Cllr Jukes advised that it would be functions such as on-street parking, pedestrian crossings, mending potholes, speed limits initiatives etc and not strategic schemes.

John Cunningham asked whether the district councils were seeking to take on responsibility for the siting and enforcement of ‘A’ boards but Cllr Jukes said that this level of detail had not yet been determined.

- (b) Civic development and future of existing Town Hall** – Cllr Jukes said that the RIBA Stage 2 (concept design) reports from the appointed consultants had been submitted to the Council for examination, ahead of any decision to move to Stage 3 (developed design). He added that the authority was no longer looking to construct a car park under Calverley Grounds but was looking at the option of providing a reduced number of spaces beneath the new office building.

Jane Fenwick sought further details of the proposed car parking element of the proposals. Cllr Jukes said that the alternative scheme would provide for 250 spaces beneath the new offices, would be less expensive to provide and involve a minimal loss of mature trees. He added that more details would be provided at the stakeholders’ event on 24 January.

Tim Harper asked if the new offices and theatre project was a ‘fait accompli’. Cllr Jukes advised that a final decision on whether the authority went ahead with the project would be made at the end of the summer. He stressed the benefits of the scheme: the costs were favourable in comparison to the very high cost of upgrading the Town Hall and the Assembly Hall Theatre; a new theatre would generate a significant boost for the local economy (estimated at possibly £20m per annum, based on the experience of the new Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury); and a significant revenue income to the Borough Council through the rental of new office space.

- (c) Cultural and Learning Hub** – With this project, Cllr Jukes advised that the RIBA Stage 2 position should be complete by the end of April, by which time the name of the hub will have been agreed and operational and business plans would be in place. He added that this would be followed by the end of July with the completion of Stage 3 alongside an Arts Council funding bid and a planning application being made, with August being the deadline for the submission of the next stage of the Heritage Lottery Fund funding bid.

(d) Fiveways public realm scheme sign-off – Cllr Jukes said that there remained some minor snagging issues which had to be resolved before the first phase could formally be signed-off, such works to be completed very shortly. He added that TWBC would not progress the next phase of this scheme until it was fully satisfied with phase 1.

Cllr Jane March provided an update on a number of leisure and tourism-related issues. First, she reported on the success of the ice rink across the Christmas period. She advised that over 39,000 people had undertaken skating sessions, which had broken previous records for the venue. Cllr March next advised that over 20,000 people had been to the Assembly Hall to enjoy performances of the pantomime. Finally, Cllr March said that the campaigners for the Calverley Grounds children's play area had raised £150k towards their target, with some grant application results still awaited. Cllr March added that the campaigners were to be congratulated for their strong community engagement role with local schools in seeking support.

Jane Fenwick asked if the ice rink had generated a profit for the 2016/17 season. Cllr March advised that the final financial figures were not yet known, adding that the ground reinstatement costs still had to be finalised.

There were no action points arising from this update.

7. REPORT OF THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP

Mark Booker summarised a document which had been prepared by the Town Forum's Management Group, entitled 'Vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells 2017-2033 – enabling sustainable growth in an historic town'. He explained that the main purpose of the paper was to provide Town Forum input into the Borough Council's new Local Plan. Mr Booker added that it had used as its basis the outcomes from a number of Town Forum consultation responses over the past 10 years and that it drew together some important conclusions on the key issues of: planning; transport; cultural development; and leisure and tourism.

Mr Booker summarised the key findings as follows:

- There is no wish to enlarge Royal Tunbridge Wells into a different scale than at present;
- The town should play to its strengths in terms of its historic assets, its culture and its exceptional setting;
- There should be an expansion of leisure and tourism facilities and in the quality of employment;
- Housing expansion in the town should be constrained;
- There is a recognised need for (i) affordable social (not market) housing and (ii) more employment sites;
- 'Areas of Change' have been identified to meet some of these needs; and
- There is a good case for the creation of one – or more – sustainable garden village.

Cllr Alan McDermott, TWBC Cabinet Portfolio-holder for Planning and Transportation, advised that, on the issue of garden villages, if central government were unable to

provide funding to evaluate the feasibility of such a settlement, then the Borough Council would have to allocate suitable monies.

The Chairman invited Town Forum members to comment on the draft vision document.

Brian Lippard advised that, in the past, the RTW Civic Society had examined the respective merits of the 'top down' (e.g. TWBC agreed policy) v 'bottom up' (e.g. through the Site Allocations DPD) approaches to creating a vision of the town centre. He added that neither option took account of the occasional whims of individual developers. He also added that while attracting 'highly-skilled' people to come and work in the town had clear merits, there would be some who would not wish to attract that.

Tim Harper voiced his support for the draft vision but queried how some of its aspirations could be achieved. Mr Booker acknowledged the point; he added that, arising from discussions with TWBC Planning staff, the Town Forum would like to see more detail added to specific site allocations, so that potential developers would have a much clearer idea of what type of development was wanted. Mr Booker accepted that, while this was a good example of how to set aspirations out, it did not guarantee complete success.

Mr Booker said that, for 'areas of change' the current descriptions were not sufficiently detailed, adding that, if the Borough Council were not the land owner in question, it made achieving the desired outcome more difficult.

The Chairman added that, despite not being able to provide answers in every case, one of the document's principal benefits was in setting out a clear framework of issues and practical actions that can be taken.

Cllr Tracy Moore advised the Forum that she was a member of TWBC's Planning Policy Working Group, which was at the stage of considering a draft 'issues and options' report as part of the current review of the Local Plan. She added that the 'issues and options' would be subject to a six-week period of formal public consultation in May.

Cllr Moore said she was grateful for the Town Forum's Management Group vision paper, which had very usefully collated a number of key themes from the recent past into a single document. She added that she had long-believed that there was huge potential to improve the economic development of the town.

Cllr Moore sounded a note of caution: she said that, while the Town Forum members on the Planning Policy Working Group were advocating on behalf of the Forum, it was important to ensure that the vision document contained pragmatic and realistic recommendations based, not on opinions, but on issues of fact.

Cllr Moore also advised on two related matters: (i) on the garden village aspect, the likelihood was that only one such new community would be proposed, adding that this, in itself, would not be sufficient to match the 'objectively assessed (housing) need' of the Borough; and (ii) she confirmed that the 'London migration' factor was most definitely being taken into account in the Working Group's examination.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Moore for her very helpful input and added that he would welcome her offer to provide further, detailed, comments on the draft vision document.

Marguerita Morton raised three aspects of concern, namely: (i) air quality – which she felt had been addressed in the draft document only in part and which she considered

could be extended to a call for a 'clean air zone'; (ii) greenfield development – and the potential loss of a 'buffer zone' between Tunbridge Wells and Southborough, despite the current 'protected' designation; and (iii) public transport – under which she felt the 'not available for improvement' comment failed to provide any reassurance.

Mr Booker responded: (i) he acknowledged the importance of air quality, adding that the vision document could be changed so as to call for an extension of the Air Quality Management Area along St John's Road; (ii) he shared Ms Morton's concerns over protecting the buffer zone, adding that he had discussed the inclusion of this specific site with the Planning officers, who had confirmed that its inclusion had arisen from the 'call for sites' process and, crucially, there was no presumption of development.

With point (iii), Jane Fenwick said that, while the preferred option of a by-pass was unrealistic, the Town Forum should be urging for active improvements in public transport options across a range of formal strategies.

Cllr Lynne Weatherly said that she was grateful for the inclusion and acknowledgement of the need for more social housing.

Paul Mason felt that, once the vision had been adopted and was in place, its impact would be improved through the addition of some quality artist's impressions.

Cllr Don Sloan felt that a key aspect as part of any future development was in having the right infrastructure to accompany growth. He added that the provision of a garden village would, by definition, have the required level of infrastructure provided.

Cllr Peter Bulman commended the draft vision document, with its emphasis on the importance of the special character and status of the town. He added that the visionary aspect of the paper was particularly welcome, which marked a contrast from the piecemeal way in which development took place – although he acknowledged that, as the Borough Council did not own all of the potential redevelopment sites, a comprehensive approach was not easy.

Pat Wilson asked how the vision would link with TWBC's strategic plan and objectives for the next few years. He also asked what resources the Borough Council was prepared to put into the strategic interests of the town.

The Chairman advised that the vision document had been produced at this stage to feed into the Borough Council's review of its Local Plan, thus it was both relevant and timely.

Caroline Auckland said that she welcomed the support for the retention of brick paving set out in the document under the 'heritage' section. She also supported the encouragement for more people to walk for health benefits. Her concerns, she added, were centred upon the noticeable increase in pavement parking. Cllr McDermott acknowledged the point, but said that, unless motorists were seen by the Police as they drove onto the pavement to park, they could not take any action. He added that the Borough Council had, on occasions, acted to prevent pavement parking in priority areas.

The Chairman sought the Forum members' views on whether the draft vision document should be agreed and adopted, and subsequently submitted to TWBC, KCC and any other statutory body, where this is relevant. This was fully endorsed by Forum members.

Mr Booker also drew attention to the general update report of the Planning Strategy Working Group, set out on page 37 of the agenda. He added that the Borough Council

had also produced a helpful guide on their website for people wishing to receive notification of, and respond to, planning applications. This can be viewed from the following link:

http://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/132038/Final-Procedure-on-Public-notification-of-applications-21.12.16.pdf

Action point: That the draft vision document be agreed and adopted and submitted to TWBC, KCC and any other statutory body, where this is relevant.

8. REPORT OF THE FINANCE AND OTHER ISSUES WORKING GROUP

David Wakefield, Chairman of this Working Group, summarised the proposed response to TWBC's draft (a) budget and (b) corporate priorities, both for 2017/18, which had been circulated with the agenda.

The Working Group's proposed response to the draft budget was agreed for submission to the Borough Council.

With the proposed response to the authority's corporate priorities for 2017/18, Mr Wakefield said that residents of the town centre were very likely to have significantly different actions which they wish the Borough Council to take. These, he added, were based around: tackling congestion; the provision of affordable housing; and a more co-ordinated approach to the local economy, including the tourism function.

Mr Wakefield expanded on the 'affordable housing' element: he felt that the Borough Council's asset holdings were such that they could take more of a lead in making land available for housing associations to build on. He also believed that the Borough Council was in a unique position to dictate to developers that there be a significant increase in the provision of key workers' housing.

Pat Wilson endorsed the approach suggested by the Working Group in its draft response.

Jane Clarke, TWBC's Head of Policy and Governance, advised that, at the meeting of the Finance and Governance Cabinet Advisory Board, held earlier that week, an additional corporate priority had been proposed as follows:

'Work with Town and Country Housing Group and our partners to address the pockets of social deprivation and health inequalities across some wards in the Borough and provide a new solution for vulnerable homeless families in the Borough'

In response to Mr Wakefield's comments, Ms Clarke added that: (a) the Borough Council already worked very closely with housing associations that operated in the Borough, to deliver a greater number of affordable homes; and (b) the authority had to be careful if it were to build any residential properties for rent because of the 'right to buy' implications.

Marguerita Morton said that, while more social housing was needed, she sought reassurance that it was of the right quality, with particular reference to reversing the trend for smaller units.

Lorna Blackmore picked up on the 'right to buy' aspect. She agreed that the authority had to be careful, adding that from when the policy had first been expanded so dramatically through the 1980 Housing Act, the capital receipts from the sale of homes had not been used to provide replacement housing.

Cllr Peter Bulman said that Town Forum members had the opportunity to respond to the draft corporate priorities and urge that the provision of 'affordable housing' be added, within the context of having 'key worker' accommodation available, to support aspects of the local economy such as the hospital etc.

Mr Wakefield asked Forum members specifically about corporate priority no.6 ("Continue to develop a scheme for a new theatre"), where the Working Group had proposed that "...the starting point for the project should be the certain redevelopment of the existing building and its surroundings and the new complex should be consequential upon that". Alastair Tod felt that it would be better expressed if the word 'redevelopment' were replaced by 're-use in an intelligent way'. This was agreed.

Action points: (1) That the proposed response to the draft budget 2017/18 be agreed; and (2) That the proposed response to the draft corporate priorities 2017/18 be agreed, subject to the above amendment to the response to priority no.6.

9. REPORT OF THE CULTURE WORKING GROUP

Linda Lewis, Chairman, had circulated a copy of the key issues which had been discussed at the Working Group's meeting held on 16 January, where an update presentation had been provided by TWBC officers leading on the provision of the cultural and learning hub.

Mrs Lewis invited Forum members to contact her if they had any questions on the update.

Mrs Lewis also reported on progress in securing replacement murals at the railway station, following the work of a selection panel. She advised that three of the 22 applicants had been selected for interview, which would take place on 23 January, adding that two of the shortlisted artists were Tunbridge Wells based, the other being from another part of the county. It was noted that the selection panel comprised: Michael Holman, Nicky Blanchard, Brian Senior, Steve Lewis (SE Rail) and Mrs Lewis.

The Chairman congratulated the selection panel members on the significant progress they had made to date.

10. REPORT OF THE TRANSPORT STRATEGY WORKING GROUP

Jane Fenwick, Chairman, reported on the key issues discussed at the meeting of the Working Group held on 9 January, a summary of which had been circulated with the agenda.

Mrs Fenwick drew attention to one specific element of her report, namely TWBC's consultation on proposed changes to permit parking in zones A and C, which she advised had been extended to 31 January. She added that it appeared that the consultation responses to date had been generally supportive from residents but that a number of businesses had raised objections. Mrs Fenwick urged interested or affected members to respond to TWBC.

Michael Doyle advised that the hours of operation within the residents' parking zone from Monday to Friday might not be appropriate for Sundays, adding that he was aware that a number of members of the congregation of King Charles the Martyr Church, as well as the Vicar, had made representations.

Nick Pope added that parking in the Grove Hill Road area was a particularly controversial matter, adding that whatever changes emerged there would be both winners and losers.

Cllr Don Sloan felt that, although there was merit in achieving consistency over timings across the town centre parking zones, he was more in favour of local conditions prevailing, even if it resulted in slightly different times of operation across the zones. He added that he was pleased to see some residents' associations having convened meetings to discuss this issue. He warned that there might be some displacement parking issues which might arise from these proposals.

Cllr Sloan also said that he was aware that TWBC officers were keen to see the authority's Parking Strategy implemented but were aware that this was not a straightforward task.

Cllr Peter Bulman, speaking as the Chairman of the Joint Transportation Board, said that he had withdrawn the residents' parking item from the agenda for the 9 January meeting, as he felt that there had not been sufficient consultation at that stage. He urged individuals and groups to submit their views by 31 January, adding that the issue would be considered at the JTB meeting scheduled for 24 April.

On another parking-related matter, Michael Doyle said that AXA, at their offices in Hawkenbury, had previously obtained planning permission to provide 123 additional spaces within the grounds of their building, by means of a 'non-material' amendment to their application. He added that, subsequently, they had decided that they did not require the spaces within their grounds. Mrs Fenwick added that she was aware that TWBC's Parking Service was working with the affected residents of Hawkenbury, to try and address the subsequent on-street parking impact.

11. REPORT OF THE WATER IN THE WELLS WORKING GROUP

Attention was drawn to the update report of this Working Group, which had been prepared by its Chairman, Michael Holman, and circulated with the agenda.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Post Office – threat of closure – Tim Harper asked whether the Town Forum had a role to play in terms of supporting action to prevent the threatened closure of a post office. He felt that the possible loss of a much-needed local service might have wider implications which would justify a collective Town Forum response.

Jane Clarke advised that she would investigate whether the 'list of community assets' procedure might be relevant and would advise Mr Harper accordingly.

Action point: Ms Clarke to investigate and advise Mr Harper.

13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 23 March 2017 at 6.30pm

The meeting concluded at 8.30pm.