



**Minutes of the ordinary meeting held on Thursday 19 January 2023, at 6pm  
Council Chamber, Town Hall, Royal Tunbridge Wells, TN1 1RS**

## **Attendance**

**1 Member Organisations:**

Beulah Road Residents' Association – Stuart Anderson and Chris Morris | Boyne Park Residents' Association – Sue Bishop and Dorothea Holman | Calverley Park Residents' Association – Jane Fenwick | Civic Society of Royal Tunbridge Wells – John de Lucy | Friends @ The Amelia Scott – Helen Mitcham | Friends of Grosvenor & Hilbert Parks – David Barnett | Friends of The Grove and The Avenues Residents' Association – Tim Tempest | Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery – John de Lucy | Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery – David Bushell | Grantley Court Residents Association – Lorna Blackmore | Inner London Road Residents' Association – Carol Wilson | Molyneux Park Gardens Residents' Association – Don Sloan | Nourish Community Foodbank and Sherbourne Close Management Committee – Marianne MacDonald | Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District – Caroline Auckland and Cat Mennell | St John's Road Residents' Association – Marguerita Morton | The Forum – Carolyn Gray | Tunbridge Wells Bicycle User Group – Adrian Berendt | Tunbridge Wells Friends of the Earth – Steve Walter | Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association – Michael Holman | Upper Stone Street Residents' Association – Helen Featherstone | Warwick Park Residents' Association – Neil Williams.

**Councillor Members:**

Culverden ward – Cllr Justine Rutland and Cllr Martin Brice | St James' Ward – Cllr Ben Chapelard | St. John's ward – Cllr Marguerita Morton.

**Others in Attendance:**

Borough Council Officers – Lee Colyer (Director of Finance, Policy and Development (S151 Officer), Hillary Smith (Economic Development) Lara Mort (Youth Forum) Secretary – Louise Kellam

## **Membership Changes**

- 2** It was confirmed that Julia Soyke has replaced David Wakefield as Substitute representative for Tunbridge Wells Twinning Organisation.

## Spotlight on Safety in Tunbridge Wells

- 3
- Caroline Auckland, Soroptimist International Tunbridge Wells and District outlined some of the survey findings which outlined the safety issues faced by women in Tunbridge Wells
  - 'Reclaim the Night Walk' was undertaken between Rushall and Tunbridge Wells along with other members of the community
  - Along with Greg Clark, zoom calls had been held to address the issues of Catcalling and street harassment.
  - Followed by an invitation from Greg Clark to attend his second reading private member's bill on protection from sex-based harassment in public
  - This passed unanimously amongst all political parties, which will not go to the third reading in the House of Lords, to become an act of parliament and there by Law.
  - Tunbridge Wells Police are also in support of the bill
  - Additional Police patrol has led to decrease in violent crimes.
  - There have been several incidents of indecent exposure and the Community are being asked to continue to be vigilant and report anything suspicious
  - Disappointment was expressed - that there will be no S106 funding available to improve the unlit cycle path through Grosvenor and Hilbert Park.
  - Funding has been allocated for walking and cycling routes by KCC
  - A list of unsafe transport routes has been compiled and a Safety Walk has been set up in Rusthall Common to highlight these issues.
  - Cuts in bus routes (Rusthall, High Brooms, Sherwood, and the Hospital) will put those without their own transport at risk walking in the dark.

## Environment

- 4
- The Chair introduced Marieka de Jonge — local coordinator for Tunbridge Wells friends of the Earth.
- Marieka provided an update on the group and its activities they were doing as a group to raise awareness of climate crisis and encouraging people to take positive action
  - Connect with a network of local groups such as Soroptimists, Tunbridge Wells Fair Trade Group, Tunbridge Wells Bicycle user group to enable several events to be organised such as litter picking and tree planting
  - Using the car less shopping local and reducing packaging, as well as reducing food waste and recycling more goes a long way to helping the environment
  - Electricity and home insulation as well as solar panels would help with this
  - Work is currently under way with Greg Clark to organise a public meeting get a local electricity bill passed by government to allow communities to sell locally produced electricity directly to residents.

## Trinity Theatre Update

5            The Chair and board of Directors at Trinity Theatre, Steven James provided an update on the financial position of Trinity Theatre.

- Last three years has proven to be exceedingly difficult due to covid closures and other restrictions, and rapid inflation and the rise in cost-of-living has not helped.
- Pre covid levels of attendance are not returning which is alarming
- The Theatre relies heavily on ticket sales and café takings and people walking through the door
- However, seven hundred members and many valuable community groups do use the theatre. We were fortunate to received community grants which have now ended
- The theatre now has no national or local government funding, and it stands purely on its own
- Significant changes have been implemented along with some exceedingly tough decisions made to reduce staffing levels and costs by 20%
- Trinity is extremely fortunate that it has over one hundred volunteers which has been critical in supporting its operation.
- A new streamlined management team focusing on a new set of priorities which are combining a broad and interesting programme with the right commercial focus.
- The creative team are working extremely hard to on reaching out to many young children and helping with their speech development needs.
- Key object is making theatre more robust and self-sufficient financially for a sustainable future.
- The heritage clock tower is now due to open in April 2023 only made possible with the funding received from the National Heritage Lottery Funding and TWBC
- Trinity Theatre have expressed an interest in taking over the Pump rooms based in the Pantiles which will open Trinity to a new audience
- A fundraising campaign was launched at the Trinity latest AGM where it set a challenge to raise £15k by end of Jan and £100k by end March if achieved it will allow reserves to be built and will place the Trinity in a strong position to start 2023/24 Budget.

## Budget and Special expenses

6

Lee Colyer spoke about the Budget and Special Expenses.

- It was highlighted that the population in the Tunbridge Wells borough had stagnated
- The census showed a decline in younger population <15year olds had declined by 12%
- Whereas the older population >64 and over had increased what the data did highlight that the decline was focused primarily on the age range between 64- and 65-year-olds.
- This age range change could have significant implications for the borough going forward.
- Further information can be found on the ONS Website around the datasets and characteristics of the Borough's demographic by individual wards.
- TWBC Council is experiencing an increase in employment costs £835k due to high levels of staff turnover of >25% coupled with staff retention issues.
- Elevated levels of utility expenses have had an impact on the Council's costs. These do not include the running of the leisure centres.
- External contracts are running at an indexation rate of 16% which is adding an additional £1.3m costs to the running of the waste contracts, grounds maintenance and Leisure provision.
- The new administration reviewed several sales fees and charges which has resulted in additional income will come from Crematorium, Planning, Garden Waste and Car Parking.
- Council tax increase was capped at 3%.
- Council will receive additional grants from the Government to deal with homelessness, along with other grants which have been received.
- TWBC base line funding level which is £2.4 the first 4% of all business rates have been collected. For the first time in six years the borough council be receiving revenue support grant.
- Less new homes bonus is being received along with the removal of the lower tier two service grant.
- The current year's budget was balanced needing to draw on reserves of £944k therefore leaving the council with an issue where its income has not been sufficient to cover its expenses of around £1m.
- TWBC is not alone with this issue and all councils are facing major underfunding from government and are having to take extraordinary measures.
- The council's reserves of £20m will fall dramatically as it needs to carry out major capital works which require significant investment to keep safe and operational.
- Budget Survey has been sent out with a purpose to help educate and inform the types of services the council is responsible for along with the costs of running them.
- The survey information will be taken to feed into future decision and spending so far there has been over one thousand respondents feeding into the survey which adds more weight to the council's decision making.

## Answers to questions included:

- Why has the population not grown as expected – it was advised that although there was a large influx of new homes being built, well over a third of them are claiming single person discounts.
- A question was asked whether TWBC were aware of the number of empty properties in the borough, it was stated the number was a few hundred. The new administration has now introduced a council tax premium for empty properties to try and encourage these homes to be brought back into use.
- A question was asked whether the additional income had been calculated from the coworking space. This had not been calculated as the Town Square agreement had not been signed
- How does TWBC compare to other councils, as there are many councils going bust? It was advised that the majority of councils that have struggled is due to increases in children and social care costs which are draining those authorities, and the result of the poor decisions around assets. District councils do not have this type of exposure, but the deficits are real, due to the broad range of discretionary services being offered.
- Why have Employee costs increased?. It was explained that the increase in staffing cost was due to an increased establishment with the integrated service offered by the Amelia and staff from KCC have been TUPEd across, and the cost-of-living increase put in place.
- Will the reduction of working age people will this have an impact on the shared service working space,? It was explained that you need a balanced local work force, and when the data moved the council needs to react to it.
- What is the demographic mix of single persons claiming single person discount? This data of the population is not available, and it is thought the aging population is influencing this demographic.

## Civic Centre and Co-working Space.

7 Lee Colyer spoke about the Town Hall co-working space and what this means

- The Town Hall is over one hundred years old and now is far too big to meet the council's needs.
- TWBC costs to keep the town hall in good repair runs into the thousands, therefore TWBC advertised the space for a co-working opportunity
- A contract will be issued to Town Square for a 15 year term, which will enable the capital cost to be funded from them paying rent to the council.
- Town Square are also a business so will be left alone to run the remainder of the space and encourage other businesses to rent out space etc.

## Answers to questions included:

- The Town Forum asked how these changes would affect its usage of the Town Hall. They were advised that they would have to approach Town Square like all other organisations contact Town Square and agree a room hire rate etc.

## Update on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund/Levelling Up

8

Hilary Smith, Economic Development Manager provided an update

- TWBC received over £1m of funding over 3 years, from monies allocated amongst districts around the country which replaced European Union funding.
- It was explained that the money is split out over the 3 years as follows: (year 1 £91k) is allocated, (year 2 will be £182k) and the remainder in (year 3 will be £725k). These are rounded up figures.
- An investment plan, advising which projects TWBC intended to take forward, was submitted Aug 1. The confirmation to go ahead on these projects was received in December.
- RTW Street scene improvement spend is still not finalised and suggestions are welcomed from the Town Forum of any other ideas on how monies can be spent on improving the town centre.
- It is also hoped that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund might be matched by funding from the business improvement district and further ideas from the Town Forum members would be helpful.

## Answers to questions included:

- These negotiations started about 18 months ago why has there been such a delay? It was confirmed that Central Government was the issue.
- If the money is not spent is it lost? Due to lateness in response the government have allowed a level of flexibility to flow the money into year 2
- Creative Tunbridge Wells - will the work ~~roll on~~ undertaken since before the pandemic roll on? Initially the Arts Council England provided some funding and were keen to develop strategic partnerships to support the cultural and creative economy. This was renamed Creative Tunbridge Wells.
- £54,500 has been allocated to West Kent Business Support Scheme, can you expand on these schemes? It was confirmed that these schemes are focused on supporting people who are looking to set up new businesses or are new to business.
- A question was raised around micro businesses and what was meant by that term? It was confirmed as 5 members of staff or less.
- What are the criteria around Green Grants?, These small community grants are not available now and would be opened to others until years 2.

## Town Centre Area Plan

9 Sharon Evans, principal Policy Planning Officer provided on the progress on Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan.

- RTW local plan will focus on the vision and strategy for the town centre to ensure prosperity and success.
- LDA design have been commissioned to carry out work to look at retail and economic issues and city sights on transport and movement of decarbonisation
- Work started in early October which involved a walking tour with the consultants and members of the working group along with workshops, pop up shops and talking points consultation
- KCC, Highways team and neighbouring authorities, bus operators, RVP all provided input into the meetings to produce ideas for the town centre
- A public survey had 606 responses with 178 suggestions, along with a separate survey for local businesses.
- Major area for improvement was creating better links between the top and bottom part of the town along with creating more green spaces as well as addressing the congestion in the town
- More activities for younger families as well as better utilisation of RVP.
- Consultants are currently pulling all these ideas and suggestions together which will provide a master plan framework, to ensure all parts of the town work well together.

### Answers to questions included

- Would it be possible to advise what is meant by quick wins? These were in reference to the soft projects i.e., street scene improvement, working with business etc.
- Is there an expectation that the consultants will look at things which are contradictory, i.e., traffic congestion and air pollution on one hand and free parking on the other etc. It is important to look at the areas that have been identified and come up with a plan which steers the town towards more cycling, green spaces and Public transport which all came out very strong in the surveys etc.
- How did you address communicating with older people in the population as this sector may not have access to the internet or find form filling difficult. Regarding the engagement it was confirmed that close links were developed with the comms team to ensure the message was well publicised ~~to ensure~~ and a wide cross section of people was reached.
- Was the traffic enforcement at the top end of town and a Farmers Market within your remit?. The enforcement was not part of their remit, however the TCAP is heavily involved in the reintroduction of a farmers' market.
- Can a proper consultation/presentation would be delivered to the Town Forum before publication.? – It was confirmed that several the TCAP working group sit on the town forum, where a presentation would be given, and all parties would be able to feed into the consultation.

## Update from Borough Council

10 Update provided by Justine Rutland (Cabinet Member for Tunbridge Wells Town and Local Areas.

- KCC have awarded TWBC £25k to deliver active travel plans including Langton Green/Rusthall to TW incorporating the Commons cycle route (£15k) and Low traffic neighbourhood in St. Johns (£10k). Funding to be spent by Jan 2024
- KCC Consultation which is being carried out in relation to Ark Children Centre in Broadwater which will be affected – further detailed to be circulated via a link after the meeting
- The Bid Director Sarah James Adams has moved onto a new opportunity. Five ways will receive 5 new planters to replace the old black plastic ones
- Changing Places toilets will open in RVP towards the Fenwick's end to replace the original one at the old Gateway, and a new one opening soon in Bedgebury.
- Amelia Scott is continuing to prosper with an increase in children visiting and borrowing books.
- An invitation to tender for a Farmers Market Concession has been placed on the Kent portal and can be found at ([Kentbusinessportal.org](http://Kentbusinessportal.org)). Please spread the message, to anybody who may be interested
- Plans for a council resident survey, have been postponed until later in the year.
- Community Support Fund, where six applications were received for the £100k, which was created to help provide financial assistance to help organisations within the community to support residents during the cost-of-living crisis, the community grant panel are hoping to meet next week to decide on the applications.
- Thanks was expressed to all Officers for their hard work and dedication.

### Answers to questions included:

- A question was raised whether the Council had £100k to give away. – It was confirmed that the Council had raised income during its in-year budget review and have allocated revenue from that.
- Mount Pleasant traffic enforcement will commence in early April

## Town Forum Working Groups

11 Detailed reports were distributed prior the meeting

- A tribute was paid to Bob Backhouse, and thanks was given to his contribution to the Green Network report in 2013/2014.  
A memorial service would be held in Sherwood later in January.



# Agenda Item 5

- Sally Balkan was also remembered for her contribution as being a founding member of the Town Forum and people were advised a memorial service will be held in March, details to be provided.
- The Culture, Leisure and Tourism Working Group are hoping to meet in shortly to kick start their activities.
- Finance and Other Issues Working Group, David Wakefield asked for support to input more effectively into the Budget for 2024/25

## **Urgent Business**

There was no Urgent Business raised

## **Future Meetings**

Next Meeting to be held Virtually on the 30 March 2023.