

## ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

**Minutes of the meeting on Thursday, 19 November 2020 held online starting at 6pm.**

**Members:** Stuart Anderson (Beulah Road Residents' Association), Caroline Auckland (Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District), Tim Ball (Calverley Park Crescent Association), David Barnett (Friends of Grosvenor and 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), Matthew Brown (Tunbridge Wells Puppetry Festival), Robert Chris (Grove Hill House Residents' Association), Marieke de Jonge (Tunbridge Wells Friends of the Earth), John de Lucy (Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery), Peter de Wit (Nevill Court Roads Committee), Helen Featherstone (Upper Stone Street Residents' Association), Ross Feeney (Royal Tunbridge Wells Together), Jane Fenwick (Calverley Park Residents' Association), Margaret Ginman (Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery), Caroyn Gray (The Forum), Dorothea Holman (Boyne Park Residents' Association), Michael Holman (Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association), Delphine Houlton (Hawkenbury Village Association), Brian Lippard (Civic Society of Royal Tunbridge Wells), Marianne MacDonald (co-optee), Katharina Mahler-Bech (Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom and Telephone House Neighbours Association), Sue Pound (COCA), Veronica Segall-Jones (Banner Farm Residents' Association and Tunbridge Wells Older Peoples Forum), Don Sloan (Molyneux Park Gardens Residents' Association), Dawn Stanford (Nourish Community Foodbank), Anne Stobo (Friends of Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery), Angus Stewart (Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group), Tim Tempest (Friends of The Grove and The Avenues Residents' Association), Adrian Thorne (Ramslye Residents), Alastair Tod (Poona Road Residents' Association), Neil Williams (Warwick Park Residents' Association) and Carol Wilson (Inner London Road Residents' Association).

**Councillor Members:** Councillors Lidstone (St. John's ward), Pound (Sherwood ward), Rutland (Culverden ward), Scott (Culverden ward) and Woodward (Broadwater ward).

**Others in Attendance:** William Benson (Chief Executive, TWBC), Liz de Villiers (Chief Executive, Citizen's Advice), Lisa Glasscote (Community Larders), Councillor Mackonochie (Portfolio Holder for Communities and Wellbeing), Paul Mason, Councillor McInroy (KCC Tunbridge Wells West Division), Councillor Podbury (Rusthall ward), Councillor Rankin (KCC Tunbridge Wells South Division), Hilary Smith (Economic Development Manager, TWBC), Chris Stevenson, David Wakefield, Jasmine Whiteside and Mark O'Callaghan (Secretary to the Town Forum).

### **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

- 1 The following apologies, as noted at the preceding Annual General Meeting, were received:
  - Councillor Morton (St. John's ward)

### **DECLARATIONS OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

- 2 The follow substitutes were representing their respective member organisations:
  - Veronica Segal-Jones (Banner Farm Residents' Association)
  - Carol Wilson (Inner London Road Residents' Association)
  - Angus Stewart (Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group)

## MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

### 3 a) Changes to Membership

The following changes in membership were noted:

- Calverley Park Crescent – Peter Perry was no longer substitute representative (Tim Ball remained the nominated representative).

### b) New Membership Applications

The membership applications had been accepted from:

- Ramsley Residents – Adrian Thorne was the nominated representative and Noreen O'Mara was the substitute representative.

## MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 17 SEPTEMBER 2020

### 4 a) Approval of the minutes as a correct record

In the list of apologies for the meeting, replace Mark Brown with Matthew Brown.

Subject to the above, the minutes were agreed.

### b) Matters Arising from the minutes

An application had been made to declare 32 Mount Ephraim, Tunbridge Wells (Amadeus Antiques) an Asset of Community Value, a decision was expected shortly. It was understood that a private bid had been made for the building which would be a matter for the executors of the estate subject to probate being granted. The building had been visited by the ward councillor, the executors, the Council's Conservation Officer and a roofer. The roof was found to be in poor condition but interiors were reasonable. The executors seemed to be sympathetic to the historical nature of the building but funding repairs would be difficult. Advice was sought on the process for declaring an Asset of Community Value to ensure this did not delay the repair/sale of the building to reduce further damage.

## UPDATE FROM THE BOROUGH COUNCIL

5 William Benson, Chief Executive of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, presented –  
Covid-19 Update:

- Rates have greatly increased in Kent. Up until now Kent has been below averages in South East, especially Tunbridge Wells. Kent is now level-pegging with the England average with exception of Swale and Thanet where cases are very high. In comparison Tunbridge Wells numbers are still relatively low.
- In July cases were relatively low and as the economy was unlocked and schools returned cases started increasing but Tunbridge Wells stayed behind that curve for a while.
- We had an increase in early October which was subsequently found to be due to university students being allocated to their Tunbridge Wells GP address but the numbers are still going up. That is now finding it's way to higher hospital admissions and will in time show an increase in number of deaths.

- Public Health advise this is half term feeding through but cases are now levelling up nationally and they're hoping that into next week cases will start decreasing, but hospital admissions track behind positive cases and deaths track behind hospital admissions so it will be a little while until we see the results.
- There will either be existing or revised tiers after lockdown. The view of public health advisers is that tier 3 didn't do much to slow the increase but tiers 1 and 2 did. We won't have more information on that until next month.

#### Covid regulations enforcement:

- Residents are being generally compliant. Police report not many call outs, with those people dispersing quite quickly. 10-14 fines issued every day but tend to be in other parts of the county.
- Covid-19 marshalls have been deployed to support the police but mainly in the town centre, not in rural areas. Main issues are from Environmental Health dealing with breaches in businesses.

#### Covid testing:

- Preparation was carried out in the community with letters going out to those assessed as clinically extremely vulnerable and the number of people requiring support at home is very much lower than last time around.
- A mobile unit test site is planned in the borough going live in the beginning of December which will be attended on a needs basis frequency available for testing by appointment only via the government website for people fulfilling the criteria. An introduction of asymptomatic testing is also planned as is a venue and processes for distributing the vaccine when that goes live.
- There have been a series of grants, one of which is to support test and trace and TWBC is working with KCC on this. The national scheme has 24 hours to track people but after then if that fails it's passed to KCC who make another 4 attempts but if that then fails it gets passed to TWBC to knock on doors.

#### Business support:

- Another grant is a mandatory scheme for supporting businesses forced to close and £2.4 million (a tenth of what was awarded last time by central government, £27 million previously) is available and applies either £1,300, £2,000 or £3,000 depending on whether businesses are small, medium or large respectively.
- A discretionary grant is available for those impacted by closure for the next 18 months. A judgement has been made to spread this out between now and March which will be the period of worst impact. The mandatory grant is now live but the discretionary grant will be going live soon.

#### Emergency travel schemes:

- We have removed some of the plastic barriers along high streets and will be looking to introduce barriers which are more in keeping with TW such as planters and parklets.
- KCC have advised TWBC are in management of the scheme now. Amey is contracted for the design in consultation with local businesses.
- The Covid-19 panel and politicians felt it was important to consult beforehand therefore it is expected to be implemented early next year.
- On London Road KCC will no longer be replacing the wands and have instead replaced them with cats eyes.
- In Paddock Wood this scheme has been withdrawn.

- KCC has an allocation for £6 million and have prioritised five schemes but none in West Kent. They state there may be some flexibility where there is local support and there may be some funding available therefore TWBC have suggested a number of schemes including the London Road.
- KCC are handing over to TWBC the local sustainable transport fund scheme for the A26 which is just over £600k. A scheme will try to be designed and input from local residents will be valuable.

#### Covid recovery:

- We are currently in a response phase to the pandemic and trying to promote a recovery. The Covid-19 panel are considering a number of action plans which are going to be on the cabinet agenda for December alongside a report on the Five Year Plan.
- TWBC were hoping to be in an engagement programme for the Five Year Plan currently but this has been shelved due to limited resources and uncertainty.
- A report has been produced which summarises the effects of Covid-19 and sets out the plans for recovery. It resets the current projects, removes completed projects and those that are no longer supported politically and it adds in new priorities; one related to the Town Hall and another to the Assembly Hall. The report sets out a trajectory for the future outlining three priorities: sustainable growth, green environment and culture and leisure. Views and comments on this would be welcome.

#### Finances:

- TWBC is reliant on non-tax income as well as £8 million council tax and £4 million of growth grants. In the period covering April to May over a million pounds was lost.
- Central government have given limited funds to Tunbridge Wells as a result of the needs assessments carried out. Some councils receive more than double in comparison.
- The funding schemes for lost income come to an end at the end of March 2021 and there is a projected £3.5 million budget gap for 2021 and £2.35 million budget gap for this year. The first phase of this funding has been received.
- The pandemic is impacting on finances due to changes in benefit claims such as single person discounts and tax benefits.
- The budget and comprehensive spending review have been abandoned. Waiting for spending review on 22nd November to see how much support government can provide.

#### Other Council business:

- Businesses feedback that Christmas is a terrible time for lockdown taking place and people will be shopping online. People will be encouraged to shop locally and support the local economy. The Christmas lights have gone up and we're hoping the ice rink will be open with diminished numbers.
- In housing, emergency accommodation bookings are high. More positively there are only 2 known rough sleepers currently whereas this time last year there were 7.
- Regarding community safety, our Borough commander Pete Steinhuis was deployed into the Kent resilience forum to support the Covid-19 efforts and was therefore replaced by DCI Rachel Cumberland who has now moved on, so we will be receiving a new borough commander soon.

- The fundraising trust for the Amelia Scott has received £250,000 from Garfield Western foundation and remains the only lottery heritage fund which is on track, making great progress.
- Regarding planning, the Council has lobbied hard on the rogue algorithm proposed as part of planning reform. On the Government's White Paper we have been reliably informed that local government re-organisation is off the agenda.
- In Brexit we have potential impacts in terms of lorry parking overnight in the East of the county as far as Maidstone which might push them our way.
- On leisure centres, Fusion have now received their business interruption fund which means they can carry on operating.
- Going forward it is hoped that vaccines will make a difference. It is noted that this time around there is less tolerance towards hospital and housing staff. Anxiety about retail and threats from businesses downsizing. As people realise they can work from home we are working with Locate in Kent in a bid to promote Tunbridge Wells and offer flexible office space.

In answer to questions:

- Reserves at the moment stand at £21 million but £11 million earmarked with significant amount for Amelia Scott. Cabinet proposed a strategy to use reserves this year and next to avoid impact on essential services.
- In an attempt to increase revenue we are struggling but trying to promote businesses in Kent. The business park approval will potentially bring £250 million of economic benefit to the borough.
- Meadow Rd car Park was opened but it then flooded and was closed again.
- BHS – no update.

## **TOWN CENTRE CHRISTMAS PREPARATIONS**

- 6                      Ross Feeney, Royal Tunbridge Wells Together and Business Improvement District manager, presented:
- Royal Tunbridge Wells Together is a town centre business improvement district company which represents about 650 companies which contribute a levy - £450.00 each year.
  - It is currently in the second year of its five year term.
  - It aims to promote the economy through marketing and events.
  - Tunbridge Wells Together with TWBC have co-funded the Christmas lights.
  - Marketing and promotion running on shopping in Tunbridge Wells encouraging people to browse online and do their shopping in person. For those who cannot come into town they are promoting a home delivery service for retail and food. There is a raffle prize of £500 in high street vouchers for anyone who buys a toy for minimum of £10 and donates it to the toy appeal.

## **COMMUNITY LARDERS**

- 7                      Lisa Glasscote, community organiser with St. Philip's Church, presented:
- St. Philip's Larder scheme started in collaboration with Temple Grove school where it became evident families were struggling with food.
  - Food larders offer chance to provide food without referral and are run weekly.

- The larders are linked up with local supermarkets who supply food at the end of day with short code or damaged packaging. They also buy food such as meat, dairy, tinned products and bakery produce from a distribution centre in Ashford which, for example, may have overstocked on an item and couldn't store it or the product didn't meet requirements of sale such as being underweight.
- All the food is safe for consumption but costs are involved in having to pay for food from distribution centre.
- The aim is that families can make good meals which will last all week. Voluntary donations of £2 from families will get approx. £30 of shopping which helps to cover costs of buying from the distribution centre.
- New larders have now started at the Baptist Church in Tunbridge Wells, St. Matthews, St. Marks, another in Southborough and two in Tonbridge. St. Philips started off with 30 people and now has approximately 80 in regular attendance so demand is increasing.
- Families are visiting various larders to get them through the week.
- Social distancing, face masks and hand sanitiser are policed to keep it covid-19 safe.
- The larders have enabled the staff and volunteers who run the larders to signpost and offer advice to families in need.
- A service of delivering food parcels for those who are isolating is also running. Free school meals were also provided by the larder when the area was in need.
- Going forward this may be required again and funding for improvements to facilities in St. Philips would enable school meals to be prepared on site.
- Typical users of larders are large families and older people.
- If any food is left the end of the larder it is taken to the local school so families can help themselves. Southborough and St Matthews larder are newly opened and got advice from St Philips. With the increase in demand the delivery service is struggling to supply all larders.

## **CITIZEN ADVICE AND VOLUNTEERS**

8

Liz de Villiers, Chief Executive of Tunbridge Wells and District Citizens Advice, presented:

- Citizens Advice currently has 8 full time staff, over 35 volunteers and serves 6,000+ clients annually.
- They have several premises across TW normally which are currently closed. Usually run drop in and appointment services as well as telephone and web chat advice. Home visits support older people.
- Largely issues surrounded benefits and debt last year and clients were generally younger, from less affluent areas and those with disabilities.
- Advisors are all currently working from home via email, telephone and web chat support. Most common issues currently are employment advice issues, as well as benefit and relationship issues.
- There has been an increase in demand and there are more people accessing the service who never have before.
- The new head office is in Royal Victoria Place. The aim is to make it easier for people to access services and for CAB to be more embedded in the community. As soon as it is possible the outreaches will be reinstated.

- Emergency funding enabled investment into equipment for home working.
- A new project is underway working with the NHS with mental health services. More volunteers are needed urgently.
- There are ten hotspots of deprivation in Tunbridge Wells which are hotspots across the whole country, not just Kent, and is something which needs to be addressed going forward. CAB works hard on policy changes being implemented.
- There will be support from TWBC in the form of a campaign to recruit more volunteers.

## **ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS IN BLOOM**

- 9 Katharina Mahler-Bech, Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom, presented:
- The work that is done provides an important service in brightening up the town and Tunbridge Wells in Bloom are gold winners in all but one category in the whole of Kent. A positive news story in these troubled times.
  - In Wilman Road someone is putting knitted, embellished covers as a form of decoration on pillar boxes.

## **UPDATES FROM LOCAL RESIDENTS' GROUPS**

- 10 Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Group – Twinning Association of Wiesbaden was approached by a journalist on how Tunbridge Wells is coping with covid-19 and the article has been published in their newspaper. This has been translated into English and has been circulated. Their situation is very similar to ours.

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

- 11 Water in the Wells Working Group – The water feature in Pantiles 1887 is now nearing completion and should be functioning before Christmas with the sculpture also erected there, which has taken six years. A fountain in Dunorlan Park which is regarded as being the best fountain in Tunbridge Wells needs £20-£30k invested in it in order to not fall into disrepair.

## **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

- 12 Thanks given to everyone, including the Mayor who has purchased masks locally which has enabled them to support more local charities.

Time scale for bottle filling station at the park – Dunorlan has agreed to bottle filling station and there is a model which could be implemented here as well as in Calverley Grounds, St Johns rec and The Grove but this is now in the hands of the Parks Department and Peter Every. It was hoped it would be there by Easter 2020 but now looking more likely to be installed by Easter 2021, but progress is being made.

There is going to be a survey going out on Public Realm Phase 2 before Christmas.

Thanks to Catherine Rankin for the thousands of bulbs planted at Calverley Park.

Marieke de Jonge suggests an idea for youth town forum to involve younger people in working group, which is welcomed. They could join existing working groups as well as having their own group. In addition, if there is a need for it, could there be a group on climate issues and sustainability. Marianne MacDonald adds there was a meeting before lockdown with a youth team who were very promising which would add great value to the town forum. There is a health and wellbeing group which isn't being led currently, this could potentially be merged with the sustainability group.

## **FUTURE MEETINGS**

13	28 January 2021
	18 March 2021