



Minutes of the meeting on Thursday, 23 September 2021, held online starting at 6pm

Attendance

Member Organisations:

Banner Farm Residents' Association and Tunbridge Wells Older People's Forum – Veronika Segall-Jones | Beulah Road Residents' Association – Stuart Anderson | Boyne Park Residents' Association – Dorothea Holman | Calverley Park Residents' Association – Jane Fenwick | Civic Society of Royal Tunbridge Wells – Brian Lippard | Clarence Road Users' Association – Alec Taylor | COCA – Sue Pound | Dudley Road Residents' Association – Janina Bas-Pendry | Friends of Grosvenor and 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 Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery – Anne Stobo | Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery – Margaret Ginman | Grantley Court Residents' Association – Lorna Blackmore | Inner London Road Residents' Association – Carol Wilson | Molyneux Park Gardens Residents' Association – Don Sloan | Nourish Community Foodbank – Dawn Stanford | Poona Road Residents' Association – Alastair Tod | Ramslye Residents – Adrian Thorne | Royal Tunbridge Wells In Bloom and Telephone House Neighbours' Association – Katharina Mahler-Bech | Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District – Caroline Auckland | St John's Road Residents' Association – Marguerita Morton | The Forum – Carolyn Gray | Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group – Angus Stewart | Tunbridge Wells Bicycle User Group – Adrian Berendt | Tunbridge Wells Puppetry Festival – Matthew Brown | Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association – Michael Holman

Councillor Members:

Broadwater ward – Cllr Chris Woodward | Culverden ward – Cllr Justine Rutland | Pantiles and St. Mark's ward – Cllr Wendy Fitzsimmons | Sherwood ward – Cllr Hugo Pound | St. John's ward – Cllr Mark Ellis and Cllr Marguerita Morton.

Others in Attendance:

Co-optee – Marianne MacDonald | Borough Councillors – Cllr Harry Allen (Speldhurst and Bidborough ward), Cllr Tom Dawlings (Leader of the Council) | Borough Council Officers – Stephen Baughen (Head of Planning Services), William Benson (Chief Executive), Hilary Smith (Economic Development Manager) | Guests – Lindsay Barker, Angela McPherson Louise Taylor | Secretary – Mark O'Callaghan

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- 1 The Chairman noted that long-standing member of the Town Forum Stephen Bowser, representing Residents' First, had recently died. He had made a considerable contribution to the Town Forum and the town generally, particularly with his in-depth knowledge of transport matters.

The Secretary advised that the minutes of the meeting on 17 June 2021 would be presented to the next meeting.

The Chairman asked members to feedback on whether meetings should return to in-person, remain online or a mixture. Comments to the Chairman or the Secretary.

The following apologies were received:

- Sally Balcon (Friends of the Commons)
- Mark Booker (Culverden Residents' Association)
- Peter de Wit (Nevill Court Roads Committee)
- Valerie Le Moignan (Friends of Hawkenbury Recreation Ground)
- Councillor Peter Lidstone (St. John's ward)
- Councillor Nick Pope (Park ward)
- Councillor David Scott (Culverden ward)

DECLARATIONS OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

2 The following substitutes were representing their respective member organisations:

- Veronica Segal-Jones (Banner Farm Residents' Association and Tunbridge Wells Older People's Forum)
- Angus Stewart (Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group)

MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

3 a) Changes to Membership

The following changes in membership were noted:

- Alec Taylor was now the primary representative for Clarence Road Users' Association, previously Lucy Willis. Paul Sinclair was now the substitute representative, previously Kate Sergeant.
- Peter de Wit had retired from representing Nevill Court Roads Committee, a new primary representative was awaited. David Kershaw remained the substitute representative.
- Sally Balcon had retired from representing Friends of the Commons, a new primary representative was awaited. Ian Beavis remained the substitute representative.

b) New Membership Applications

New membership applications had been accepted from:

- None
- Enquires had been made by the Tunbridge Wells Repair Café, an application was awaited.

UPDATES FROM MEMBERS ORGANISATIONS

4 Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group

Due to technical problems, Angus Stewart was unable to give his update verbally but written details were circulated after the meeting and are summarised below:

- We have enjoyed many months of tranquillity from Gatwick's flights and it has been appreciated by many, if at a dreadful price. However, flight numbers are picking up, Gatwick is pushing ahead with its plans for substantial expansion and the review of airspace for the South East is making progress. All these have significant implications for Tunbridge Wells.
- We express our thanks to Councillor Alan McDermott, who has agreed to be the Borough representative on Gatwick's Noise Management Board. You may remember that the Board was reorganised to enable and encourage elected representatives from Councils to be members

of the Board's Community Forum to ensure that their communities were fully represented. Alan is now actively engaged in this role, we keep in touch with him.

- Gatwick's activity has been at a very low level since the start of the pandemic crisis. This has been slow to pick up again but, with the relaxation of travel rules this is changing and in the spring we can expect a return to historically normal levels of flying and the consequent overflying of the town.
- In July, Gatwick announced that it was pressing ahead with its planning application to convert the existing Standby runway for regular use. If their ambitions for growth are fulfilled, Gatwick will become almost as busy as Heathrow with all the implications for us that this carries.
- In an extraordinarily inept piece of timing, the Gatwick CEO Stewart Wingate announced this application with all its environmental implications just days after the UN warned that the world is facing a Red Alert over the Climate Crisis.
- Gatwick is currently conducting a public consultation on their planning application. We will shortly be updating our Web site (twaang.net) with full information about all this.
- The Government's review of airspace in the South East is an important and necessary development which should result in significant improvements for some but carries a potential threat for Tunbridge Wells and the surrounding countryside. Present navigation methods for arrivals into Gatwick result in a spread-out swathe of tracks, the peak often being over Langton Green. When the review's changes are implemented, perhaps around 2026, more precise routing is likely to be introduced as well. This involves the introduction of narrow 'motorways in the sky' and the positioning of these will be a highly contentious matter for communities to resolve. Step in, Councillor McDermott. Again, more details will be on our web site (twaang.net).

YOUTH TOWN FORUM

- 5 Councillor Chris Woodward (Borough Councillor for Broadwater ward and present Mayor of the Borough) presented:
- A working group of Town Forum members, referred to as the Youth Support Group, had been set up to help establish a separate Tunbridge Wells Youth Forum. Once established the Youth Support Group would assist the Youth Forum and provide a liaison between the Youth Forum and any schools who become involved.
 - Purpose of the Youth Forum would be to represent the interest of young people, starting with 16-18 year olds but potentially extending to younger people.
 - The Youth Forum would both allow young people to hear from and question civic leaders and provide a method by which civic leaders can consult young people.
 - The expectation is that the Youth Forum will set its own agenda and be self-supporting with officers appointed from amongst its members. Assistance will no doubt be offered from other sources including the Kent Youth Hub.
 - 6 of 13 schools had so far been approached with further appointments in the near future. Each school would appoint 2-4 representatives, 2 schools had already done so.

- The first meeting was planned to be held by Zoom on 20 October 2021. The draft agenda was expected to include introductions, setting the purpose of the Forum, agreeing organisational arrangements and starting on a work programme.
- It was hoped that young people leaving school but remaining in the area would continue to be involved and connections with North Kent College (formerly West Kent College) may be a focus for the future.
- The Youth Forum was a general interest body separate from any Citizens' Assembly. The Forum may have some involvement with other groups but that will be for the Forum to decide.
- A Youth Forum was a welcome initiative. It highlighted a lack of provision for people in the young-adult age group. The Youth Forum would hopefully equip young people with the skills to influence their world which could have longer term effects on how decision making would take place in future. Access for young-adults in the meantime was a separate matter.
- The Town Forum could be more proactive in helping establish new residents' groups, particularly in new developments. New housing tended to attract younger families and Town Forum membership could address some of the lack of representation. New residents of the town would also bring new ideas and best practice from elsewhere.

UPDATE FROM THE BOROUGH COUNCIL

6 Councillor Dawlings (Leader of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council) presented and took questions on –

Finances:

- The Council's finances were difficult but not as bad as previously expected, largely thanks to Government support.
- The majority of the Council's income came from fees and charges (£24million) rather than Council Tax (£8.5million) and with fewer people coming into town to work, the recovery was not expected to be quick. The shortfall in the budget for 2021/22 was currently £1.7million.
- Unemployment was down and there were signs of labour shortages in the rural economy, hospitality and haulage sectors.
- Lack of HGV drivers was also impacting on the waste collection services and the garden waste service had been suspended to protect critical services.
- The recent visit by the Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick MP, had been well received and suggested improvements to funding sources appeared to have been welcomed. Unfortunately the Secretary of State was subsequently sacked and efforts would have to restart with the new Secretary of State, Michael Gove MP.

Town Hall:

- The Council's cross-party working group had progressed in looking at options for re-purposing the Town Hall for co-working space. Market testing had demonstrated demand for such services. Three companies had been interviewed and whilst each took a slightly different approach all agreed that the small-office configuration of the Town Hall was desirable. A full invitation to tender and procurement process was being prepared.
- Using the Town Hall in this way would ensure the Council retained control of the use of the building (a clear desire following the Calverley Square project), provide an income stream for the Council, improve conditions for staff and draw workers into the town centre with its wider economic benefits.

Environment:

- The Council had reduced carbon emissions by 43% as at the last audit. New solar panels at the Amelia Scott would supply all the building's needs and provide a surplus back to the grid.
- Recently converted properties on Crescent Road had been done to high standards with air-source heat pumps.
- The Town Hall was about to undergo roof repairs which would reduce leaks and install new insulation. A grant application was being prepared which hopefully would allow further solar panels and secondary glazing to be installed.
- The Council was focused on reducing its own carbon emissions. Standards through the Local Plan and building regulations may improve things across the borough but carbon reduction outside the council's operations was not within its control.
- The efficacy of a Citizens' Assembly was currently under debate, the Council already had the access to expertise to reduce its own emissions.

Transport:

- The Council had worked for several years on getting a cycle path on the A26 but unfortunately these ultimately were unsuccessful as Kent County Council would not support it on safety grounds. Inter-settlement connections was important so the new focus would be on finding an alternative link to Tonbridge.
- Views were sought on the traffic measures on the High Street via an online consultation. Proposals for improvements could also be submitted via the consultation.
- The Borough Council needed to work with the County Council on highways matters. Considerable time and money had been spent working up the plans for the A26 and KCC had been hesitant all along. Similarly, the Council had been working on plans for electric vehicle charging in car parks, charging on street would require approval from KCC which was currently not forthcoming so any money spent here was at risk.

Culture:

- It was hoped the funding from the transport scheme could be redirected to the Amelia Scott. Work was progressing well. External construction was complete and internal fit out was on target to be complete by the end of the year.
- The Council was leading a steering group on the Cultural Compact comprising representatives of Kent County Council, 6x local creative businesses, 2x cultural organisations, Business Improvement District, West Kent Enterprise Advisor Network, Tunbridge Wells Health Action team. A bid for funding was being prepared for the Community Renewal Fund.

Afghan Refugees:

- The Borough Council currently employed 3x former Afghan translators who had been resettled to Tunbridge Wells in 2013. They reported that they and their families back in Afghanistan were under pressure from the Taliban and the Council was liaising with the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office to see whether more could be done to evacuate the families.
- The Council had committed to funding the resettlement of 5 Afghan families who previously worked for British military or diplomatic services under the Government's refugee scheme. Demand for social housing was so great that private landlords were being asked to put their properties forward.

- The Council did not have powers to compel housing providers but was actively working to encourage as many as possible. There had been many offers of individual rooms which unfortunately were unsuitable.
- The former Job Centre building on Grosvenor Road was in private ownership and could not be used for housing refugees. A planning application had been submitted to convert it to residential but this was a private development.
- The council was aware of a number of empty properties through the Council Tax records. Many of these properties were empty because they were not in a fit state but the Leader would speak again to the Housing team to see what more could be done to return these buildings to use.

LOCAL PLAN AND TOWN CENTRE AREA PLAN

7 Stephen Baughen (Head of Planning Services, TWBC) presented – Town Centre Area Plan:

- With the exception of the old cinema site in the town centre and the Hendy's site on Mount Ephraim there were no site allocations for development in the town centre contained within the Local Plan, instead the Local Plan provided for a Town Centre Area Plan (TCAP) to be created.
- The TCAP would be a separate and smaller plan dedicated to the town centre alongside the Local Plan for the Borough.
- Benefits included: would provide an anchor and framework for various plans and strategies affecting the town centre (parking, economic development, culture, etc.), it would align and focus efforts to allow the town centre to grow and prosper, act as a firm vision and reassurance for those looking to invest in the town.
- Evidence gathered as part of the wider Local Plan indicated a rapidly changing economy, generally and as a result of the pandemic. A TCAP would be much more responsive to the changes.
- The Local Plan consultation had closed and officers were considering the responses ahead of submitting the plan. Work on the TCAP would commence soon after the Plan was submitted, expected early in the new year.
- A Town Centre Working Group consisting of representative of the BID, Town Forum, infrastructure and utility service providers, county advisers, youth groups and borough councillors would be established.
- A collaborative approach would seek to create a vision and a flexible framework which would allow the market to flourish.
- The Town Centre Working Group would be formed as soon as possible after the completion of work on the Local Plan.

Permitted Development:

- The Government had announced proposals to make it easier to convert commercial buildings to residential through relaxed permitted development rights.
- Evidence showed, despite the changing economy, there was still a lack of office space in the town. 22% of office space had been lost since 2013 and a further 22% was at risk.
- The Council had moved to protect certain office buildings through the use of 'Article 4 Directions' (A4D) which removed the assumed permitted development rights and meant any proposed conversion would require planning permission.
- 20 such A4D, originally served in 2018, had been renewed and 2 new A4D had been served recently.

- A further 9 A4D had been served outside the town centre, mainly village shops where the loss of such facilities would have a disproportionate effect on the whole community.

Local Plan:

- It was expected that the Local Plan would be submitted to the inspector in Q3 of 2021 with examination occurring in 2 blocks of 2 weeks in January and February 2022.
- Last year, the Government had announced plans to change the calculation of housing need which would have seen many more houses needing to be built in the borough. The Council was proceeding with its Local Plan on the basis of it coming into effect during the transitional phase saving the borough from the biggest changes and would have met the deadline. In the event, the Government back down from the changes which removed the risk.

THE PANTILES

8 Carolyn Gray (Leader of the Culture, Leisure and Tourism working group) reported:

- A number of concerns relating to the Pantiles had been received, including:
 - The state of the spring
 - Plans to manage the well privately
 - Lack of accessibility when markets and events were taking place
 - Infringements on the public right of way, particularly during Jazz on the Pantiles
 - Unwelcoming signage
 - Lack of public toilets and whether the new Pump Room had publicly accessible toilets
 - The ability of the Town Centre Area Plan to protect and enhance the Pantiles considering its private ownership
- Answers were being sought.

Stephen Baughen (Head of Planning Services, TWBC) advised:

- The Pantiles would be within the town centre area boundary and subject to the Town Centre Area Plan.
- The Pantiles was also within a conservation area so any development or alteration would require planning permission at a higher level of scrutiny, particularly so in the case of listed buildings.

ELECTORAL CONSULTATION

9 Mark O'Callaghan (Scrutiny and Engagement Officer, TWBC and Secretary to the Town Forum) presented:

- A review of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council was being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission.
- The Commission was independent of the Council and the Government.
- The Council had last been reviewed in 2001 since which a number of wards had drifted outside the acceptable ratio of electors to representatives.
- The review would form 2 parts: 1) To determine the number of councillors; 2) To determine the number and boundaries of the internal wards.

- Ahead of the review, the Council would be considering its own electoral cycle (whether to elect 'by thirds' or 'all-out'). This was not a matter for the commission but would impact on the options available to the commission:
 - If the Council retained elections by thirds, the total number of members must be divisible by three and the new warding arrangements will be based on a uniform pattern of three-member wards.
 - If the Council switched to all-out elections there could be a variety of 1, 2 or 3 member wards or all one-member wards.
- The Council would be invited to submit its evidenced proposals on council size by November 2021. The number of councillors should be based on what is needed taking account on the number needed to effectively run the council and represent the people.
- The Council undertook a consultation on whether to change electoral cycle and what number of councillors was needed:
 - For electoral cycle – there was no clear preference. Unless the Council resolved to change, the default position is to retain election by thirds.
 - For council size – 49% felt there should be fewer councillors, 40% the same and 11% more councillors. A wide variety of reasons accompanied the results.
 - Full details were available in the report to the General Purposes Committee.
- The Council would decide its submission to the commission at the Full Council meeting on 6 October 2021.
- In the new year, the commission would publish its decision on council size and initial plans on warding arrangements and commence a public consultation.
- Responses would be received and the commission would consult on a second draft in July – September 2022.
- Final recommendations will be published in November 2022 and a draft order will be laid before Parliament in early 2023.
- Subject to agreement, the first elections under the new arrangements will be held in May 2024.

Discussion included:

- The Town Forum had made a representation in the council's consultation and would welcome a further update around the start of the first consultation by the commission.
- Members of the Town Forum could make representations to the Full Council if they wished.
- The response rate to the council's consultation was roughly as expected.
- Plans were underway to make consultations more engaging with a view to improving them in future.
- The Council was currently generously representative with one councillor per 1700 electors, the average for similar authorities was 2200 electors.
- Election by thirds and a reduction in numbers will result in huge rural wards which was bad for democracy.
- Such a technocratic question would require a more engaging consultation to achieve a full answer.
- It would be difficult to find a single solution to warding arrangements given the different needs of the urban and rural areas of the borough.

- Engagement was made more difficult by a lack of presence by the councillors, nobody had come out to the community to discuss the issues.

OURTOWN - COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH TOWN FORUM

10 This matter would be addressed at a future meeting.

REPORTS FROM THE TOWN FORUM WORKING GROUPS

11 Water in the Wells

Michael Holman presented:

- The fountain outside the Pantiles 1887 had officially been opened.
- A planning application had been submitted by the businessman proposing to take over the wells on the Pantiles. It had been reported in the press that the crowdfunding campaign had only raised £2k of the £120k target so there were now questions over the viability of the venture. Members would be watching the progress of the planning application and other activities closely.
- Some remedial work had been carried out at the Victorian fountain in Dunorlan Park. It was noted at a recent meeting with the Council that a plan was needed to save the fountain for the future with a plan in place, funding could be sought.
- It had been suggested at a recent meeting with Dandara who may be looking to develop a site on Eridge Road that a fountain would provide an appropriate link to the town.

Transport

Jane Fenwick presented:

- The next meeting of the working group was in October at which work would commence of formulating a vision for the town.
- The bus company which was using the London Road bus stand was also reported as causing problems in the narrow roads in Culverden. It was hoped that alternatives to the London Road bus stand could be put forward at the forthcoming Public Transport Forum however a long term solution was needed.
- The future of school travel would likely involve smaller electric buses limited to local capacity providing a shuttle-style service between transport hubs. In any case, all parties, including the borough council, had an interest in planning and preparing for the future.
- Bus parking on London Road was creating an eyesore out of what should be a beauty spot and key attraction for visitors.
- Parking on and around Boyne Park was becoming problematic again. Previous proposals for a permit parking scheme had fallen, supposedly due to a lack of interest from residents. Non-resident cars should be parked in the car parks earning money for the council and, by extension, the town.

Culture Leisure and Tourism

Carolyn Gray presented:

- The report on the agenda included a number of events and activities put on around the town. The list was not exhaustive. There was a sense of optimism amongst event operators.

- The Food and Drink Festival in Calverley Grounds and the Puppetry Festival were coming up. All support was welcome.

ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS OR TOPICS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

12

William Benson (Chief Executive, TWBC):

- Tunbridge Wells had the highest covid rates in Kent, regular contact with Public Health and neighbouring authorities was maintained. The peaks were mainly associated with outbreaks in schools. Precautions were being stepped up and the situation was closely monitored.
- A new PCR test centre was opening in Sevenoaks which should help save people needing to travel to Maidstone or Ashford. Health officials were looking into the possibility of providing test through local pharmacies.

Tim Tempest:

- The Council was thanked for organising a thank-you picnic in Calverley Grounds recognising the contribution of volunteers. The event had been well attended by many voluntary groups and had facilitated contacts which was hoped to lead to a second Men's Shed in Tunbridge Wells.

Anne Stobo:

- The Friends of Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery were organising a poetry competition. First prize £100. Details would be circulated.

FUTURE MEETINGS

13

11 November 2021 (AGM)