



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

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Thursday 24 March 2016

Attended: Bob Atwood, Caroline Auckland (sub), Adrian Berendt, Lorna Blackmore, Mark Booker, Stephen Bowser, Cllr Peter Bulman, David Bushell, Adrian Cory, John Cunningham, Jane Fenwick, Alex Green, Tim Harper, Cllr Lawrence Heasman, Dorothea Holman, Michael Holman, Sue Kaner, Brian Lippard, Katharina Mahler-Bech, Helen Mitcham (sub), Kyrios Kyriacou, Marguerita Morton, Altan Omer, Charles Pope, Jacqueline Rowlands (sub), Cllr James Scholes, Cllr David Scott, Kate Sergeant (sub), Cllr Don Sloan, Tim Tempest, Alastair Tod (Chairman), David Wakefield (sub), Mary Wardrop, Denise Watts, Philip Whitbourn (sub), Pat Wilson and Cllr Chris Woodward

TWBC officers present: Adam Chalmers (Head of Partnerships and Engagement), Jane Clarke (Head of Policy and Governance), Alan Legg (Urban Designer), Jonathan MacDonald (Director of Planning and Development) and Mike McGeary (Democratic Services Officer)

Also present: Mike Westphal

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were reported from: Bill Acker, Cllr Bob Backhouse, Sally Balcon, David Barnett, Cllr Ronen Basu, Michael Doyle, Shauna Dupuy, Ann Hughes-Wilson (sub), Bill Kern, Chris Morris, Cllr David Neve, Angela Phillips (sub), Cllr Catherine Rankin, Anne Stobo and Cllr Lynne Weatherly

2. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

Mike McGeary reported that the Calverley Park Crescent Association had asked if their attendance at Town Forum meetings could be on a rota basis until such time as a permanent appointment had been made. Jacqueline Rowlands was welcomed to her first meeting on that basis.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting dated 28 January 2016 were submitted for approval.

Michael Holman referred to the next-to-last paragraph on page 4 of the minutes. He asked if the Director of Finance's response to the Town Forum's representations on the Council's draft budget for 2016/17 could be provided.

Jane Clarke, TWBC's Head of Policy and Governance, advised that the Director's response formed part of his report to the Full Council, made at their meeting on 24 February, where the budget had been set. A link to that report – containing a response to the points raised by the Town Forum – is given below:

<http://democracy.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/documents/s26233/Item%209%20-%20Budget%202016-17%20and%20MTFS%20update%20-%20Appendix%20C%20-%20response%20to%20draft%20budget%20consultation.pdf>

Katharina Mahler-Bech asked if the membership of each of the working groups could be provided, for listing on the Town Forum's website. The Chairman agreed that he would like to see both the membership and the minutes of the working groups accessible on the Town Forum's website.

RESOLVED –

- (1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2016 be approved; and
- (2) That each working group chairman provide a list of the names of their respective working group members for adding to the Town Forum website, as a first stage.

4. UPDATE REPORT FROM TWBC'S CABINET

The Forum was advised that, because the Borough Council was now in what was known as the 'Purdah period', there was no-one from the Cabinet available to provide an update. The 'Purdah period' was explained as the time leading up to each year's Borough Council election, when publicity, in all its forms, of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the election was prohibited.

5. TWBC'S PLANS FOR THE TOWN HALL AND THE ASSEMBLY HALL

Alastair Tod, the Chairman of the Town Forum, introduced his discussion paper, which set out the background to TWBC's proposals for the future of the Town Hall and the Assembly Hall.

Mr Tod explained how the Borough Council was planning to implement a major capital programme of expenditure – likely to be in the region of £35m, he advised – to dispose of the current civic buildings, move its staff and civic functions to newly-built premises in Mount Pleasant Avenue and replace the Assembly Hall with a purpose-built theatre.

Mr Tod's report explained the stages which the Council had undertaken thus far, towards the achievement of these schemes. He also listed a number of key considerations which he felt Town Forum members should be aware of and express a view on, including what was likely to be the future use of the current civic buildings.

Mark Booker advised that his working group had been supportive of the proposals when they were first announced, subject to two key provisos, namely: (i) the architect's brief should include a statement that the new buildings should create a strong sense of civic stature and that they should not adversely affect the amenity and environment of Calverley Grounds; and (ii) there should be no final commitment to the project without first having a clearly agreed plan for the existing Town Hall complex and a robust financial plan for delivering the whole project. On this latter point, Mr Booker added that it had been agreed that the Town Forum's Finance Working Group would examine the details.

Dr Philip Whitbourn could not support the proposals for the replacement of the Assembly Hall Theatre. He felt there was a strong argument for the proper refurbishment of the existing building, with greater wing space being provided through an expansion across the Police yard. He added that, with the existing art deco features and its facilities for symphony and choral concerts, the resultant building would produce a facility of which the town would be rightly proud.

Michael Holman advised that the Boyne Park Residents' Association noticeboard currently featured a number of illustrations of the town centre planned projects. He felt it important that the Town Forum avoided establishing too strong a position on the proposals at this stage, in the absence of further detail. For instance, he added, was

TWBC considering anything more than Council offices to be provided within the new building, in other words, what facilities (including public access) were envisaged?

The Chairman advised that he understood the Council intended to provide a completely new civic centre, which would include meeting rooms to which members of the public would have access.

Jonathan McDonald, TWBC's Director of Planning and Development, complimented the Chairman on the detail and balance of his report. He added that approval for all expenditure to date had been in accordance with the Council's formal governance procedures, to ensure there was total openness and transparency.

Mr MacDonald provided some background to the Council's plans, starting with the premise that neither the Town Hall nor the Assembly Hall Theatre were considered to be 'fit for purpose' for the 21st century. He added that it was known that the cost of refurbishing the Town Hall to bring it up to the required standard (energy efficiency and modern-day working methods being key considerations) was in the region of £10m. Thus, in 2014, the Cabinet had approved the appointment of consultants, whose remit was to report on how the Council could (i) extract the best value from its property assets and (ii) deliver a new theatre.

Mr MacDonald focused on the current viability gap of some £25m to achieve the above programme. He stressed that this sum had emerged from the outcome of the consultants' report. He added that, since November, the authority had been working closely with the consultants GVA and Allies Morrison on the 'master planning' aspects of the Council's plans and further testing and understanding the full extent of the cost of the proposals. Mr MacDonald said that a key issue was to establish whether the Borough Council could generate an income stream from the development, in large part due to the ending (in 2018) of central government's grant support for this authority to help provide services.

Mr MacDonald turned to the detailed work surrounding the new office building, advising that work was currently taking place on how much office space was required by the Borough Council and what would be available for a tenant. He advised that, currently, an assessment was taking place on the viability of the overall project, stressing that if it proved to be unaffordable then it would not proceed.

Mr MacDonald said that consultation with key stakeholder groups was just about to begin, adding that there would be plenty of opportunities to be engaged in the process.

The Chairman asked at what stage the authority would come to a conclusion as to whether the scheme was viable or not.

Mr MacDonald advised that it might be possible to 'de-couple' the new office building from the Council's wider ambitions. He emphasised the importance of tying in the plan with a commercial tenant, to ensure a proper income stream. He said that a judgement on the viability of the proposal would be made when a view was finally formed about the current civic centre site.

Mr MacDonald stressed that the approach being followed by the Borough Council was very different from that taken at the time of the Regeneration Company, in terms of the type of development partner; he added that the previous 50/50 profit share approach would not apply.

Lorna Blackmore enquired why the Borough Council had allowed the current Town Hall and Assembly Hall Theatre buildings to reach their current condition and was now having to spend significant sums on consultants. Mr MacDonald said that, on that latter

point, any scheme promoter needed to spend a sum on obtaining expert advice in order to be able to take an informed commercial decision.

David Wakefield asked how Borough Councillors felt about the proposals. Cllr David Scott advised that, while the Borough Council had an important heritage role, it also had an obligation to ensure its own buildings operated efficiently. He added that the Town Hall could no longer be said to operate efficiently, with costs being substantially different from running a viable modern day office. He added that the cost of upgrading the Town Hall to the required standard was substantial.

Cllr Peter Bulman said that he was quite neutral over the proposals. He did query the need to spend as much as £10m to bring the Town Hall up to modern day standards and also whether an 'open plan' approach to the new offices was a more efficient working environment. Cllr Bulman was also keen to learn more about the viability of the current civic buildings, as and when that study reached its conclusions.

John Cunningham expressed some support for Philip Whitbourn's view of the Town Hall and the Assembly Hall, buildings which he described as much-admired but also flawed. He added that he was not against the scheme to create a new civic centre in Mount Pleasant Avenue, on the basis that it would be self-funding. He felt that a new theatre was, however, a different matter, with affordability a major factor. He added that, with Tunbridge Wells being only an hour's journey from London theatres, there must be a doubt as to whether the town could attract the top shows it was seeking to achieve.

Mr Cunningham understood that the Assembly Hall was only in use for approximately one third of its available time, in other words well short of achieving a high level of usage of the facilities. He asked what assessment had been undertaken of the changing nature of entertainment and thus whether a theatre of the type envisaged was fully justified.

Mr Chalmers queried whether the 'one third' figure was accurate, adding that a consultant had been commissioned to examine that very point, as well as linked matters such as the potential catchment area, what would the on-going costs be etc.

Cllr James Scholes said he was positive about the proposal for a replacement theatre, adding that he was also content for the open approach being followed. Cllr Scholes believed that the Borough Council had been forced into having to take action over the Town Hall building due to it no longer being fit for purpose, adding that he supported the plan to provide new premises.

Cllr Chris Woodward felt that the case still had to be made for a replacement Assembly Hall. He advised that his greatest concern with the plans for new offices was the future use of the existing civic complex. He felt it was important that whatever replaced the Town Hall use added to the quality and attractions of the town; he felt this would not be achieved through the provision of housing.

Cllr Lawrence Heasman felt that it was still early in the process; he added that he welcomed the openness with which the Council was proceeding, through exploring options and gaining a full understanding of the issues. He felt that the proposals for new Council offices were the only option, on the basis that the existing building was not fit for purpose and refurbishment was not viable. Cllr Heasman was unsure whether a new theatre was needed, adding that he was keeping an open mind on the option.

Helen Mitcham felt that, with Tunbridge Wells town being linear in its layout, a new civic complex at the foot of Mount Pleasant would help to link the different parts.

Mr MacDonald advised that no decisions had yet been taken on the best alternative use of the civic complex site. He added that he would be willing to return to provide a further update for the Town Forum in due course.

Caroline Auckland said that she was in favour of new civic offices but she felt that the public generally might not be supportive of the Borough Council spending such a large sum on a new entertainment venue, in place of more funds being spent on, say, health services.

Cllr Scott acknowledged the point made. He added that, while the Borough Council was not a direct provider of health services – or another important area, education – it could still use the power of political persuasion to press for improvements to these important areas.

Bob Atwood supported the view expressed by Philip Whitbourn. He added that the reality was that the Borough Council was already committed to spending £2m on consultancy costs.

Mr Atwood hoped that the Town Forum could play an active role in the Council's consultation process. Towards that end, he asked if it were possible for a decision chart – with relevant timeline and trigger points – to be shared, which would help with an assessment of where the Forum's input could be the most helpful.

Finally, Mr Atwood reiterated his concerns over the future use of the existing civic buildings, urging the Council to provide answers as soon as was practicably possible.

Mr MacDonald reassured the Town Forum members that there would be plenty of opportunities to feed in views on the Council's proposals.

Jane Fenwick read out a response on behalf of the Chairman of the Friends of Calverley Grounds, Nick Pope. The key aspect of the response was that, while the Friends group welcomed plans that would enhance Calverley Grounds and the immediate area, any development on or nearby the boundary needed, they felt, to be sympathetic to the historic, grade II listed park.

Alex Green welcomed the Borough Council's proposals for new offices and the investment in the town's cultural offering that a replacement theatre would bring, adding that he understood the resistance to change that some people would express. He also felt that the positioning of the new development would help to join the separate parts of the town.

Michael Holman acknowledged that the proposals for both the new offices and a replacement theatre were at an early stage, at which assessing the options available was a vital part of the process. He stressed that the focus should be on what opportunities existed to help shape the future of the town. A very important aspect, he added, was to ensure that stakeholders were fully engaged in the process. Mr Holman advised that he was supportive of the proposals for a new theatre.

Mr MacDonald thanked Mr Holman for that helpful summary, adding that the Council's approach was very much based on creating an outcome that was essentially positive for the town. He reiterated that the Borough Council would soon arrive at a point where an informed decision could be made on whether the proposals could move to the next stage.

Kyrios Kyriacou asked whether the development programme for new offices and a replacement theatre was the Council's own or that of consultants; he reiterated the request made earlier for the programme details to be shared.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked Mr MacDonald for his attendance and helpful responses to the questions put and said he was very grateful for the many issues raised by Forum members and for their high level of engagement.

There were no action points arising from this report.

7. URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT

Alan Legg, TWBC's Urban Designer, summarised the above document. He advised that, while the preceding issue looked at one specific part of the town, this document looked at opportunities for the rest of the urban area, with a specific focus on: (i) the public realm, i.e. its streets; (ii) how people move around the town; and (iii) improving the quality of the environment. He added that the document itself was broken down into two main elements: a framework for future development in the town centre; and opportunities, which provided illustrative concepts on how some of the key development sites and public realm could be taken forward.

Mr Legg added that issues upon which the Town Forum members had expressed past interest, such as materials and art in the public realm (e.g. water features), were aspects of the supplementary planning document (SPD). He also advised that the SPD would act as a bidding document, to assist with the funding and realisation of some of the potential schemes.

As for some specific schemes, Mr Legg advised that the Borough Council had approved proposals for the expansion of the RVP shopping centre, which included a public realm element at the junction of Camden Road, Monson Road and Calverley Road.

Mr Legg provided an illustration of a scheme for a crossing point at London Road, by the King Charles the Martyr Church, which formed a part of the 'opportunities' section of the SPD. The Chairman asked what would be necessary to enable such a scheme to proceed with S106 funding. Mr Legg advised that this would involve a number of engineering elements, adding that he would like to see a focus more on wider objectives other than just the dominance of road traffic.

Mark Booker said that his working group had welcomed the original draft SPD document and had supported the subsequent amendments and the fact that the topic would have SPD status. He added that the reference to green links within the document was also very welcome, as these supported much of what was set out in the Town Forum's Green Network Report.

Mr Booker also said that he was pleased to see reference to improvements to Carrs Corner and the emphasis placed on the use of distinctive materials generally. He added that he would have liked to have seen more detail about how schemes might be financed, a factor which, he said, had been recognised by Cllr Stanyer at that week's Cabinet Advisory Board meeting. Mr Booker said that he was not particularly supportive of the illustrative scheme for a crossing point at King Charles the Martyr Church.

Mrs Auckland suggested that it might be better for the town to have a number of these schemes implemented rather than spend the sum of money proposed for a replacement theatre.

Dr Whitbourn advised that he had attended the Cabinet Advisory Board meeting where this topic had been discussed. He said that he had made the point that 'locally listed' buildings within the town centre made a significant contribution to both the character and the local distinctiveness. He felt that the SPD document should acknowledge this point – instead of the sandstone rock outcrops, which was a far less relevant factor, he believed.

Lorna Blackmore asked why there was no consideration within the document of the London Road and Vale Road junction. Mr Legg responded by saying that it had not been possible to focus on all appropriate sites within the 'opportunities' section of the SPD; he added that, at that particular junction, there was the potential to return some tarmacked parts to the Common.

Alex Green thanked Mr Legg and his fellow staff for the work undertaken to achieve the SPD document. He asked whether there might be some LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) funding for future stages of the public realm project. Mr Legg advised that the stage 1 work had been funded jointly by KCC and TWBC. As for the next stage, he advised that a bid had been made for support through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund. Cllr Scholes believed that, as this was essentially a highways project, it should be KCC-led, including financially.

Sue Kaner advised that the Camden Road Guild would have preferred to see the planned RVP public realm improvements extended along the whole of the length of the road, rather than the fragmented approach being taken. If Section 106 monies were part of the planning approval, Mrs Kaner asked if there were a case to extend the enhancements. Mr Legg advised that, under the provisions of S106 agreements, there had to be a direct link between the development and any proposed enhancement/improvement work.

In that regard, Cllr David Scott said that the Government's proposals for greater devolution of powers to councils might provide more flexibility for development-funded (currently S106) improvements.

In respect of the Urban Design Framework SPD document, Michael Holman felt the most important aspect at this stage was in having a list of schemes ready and available; he added that past experience had shown that funding opportunities would arise.

Mr Legg was thanked for his helpful and interesting presentation. There were no specific action points arising from this report.

8. WORKING GROUPS

Update reports were made from the working groups as follows:

Tourism and Leisure – Dorothea Holman, Chairman of this working group, summarised her written report, circulated with the agenda. She advised that TWBC did not have a specific tourism budget, which made it occasionally difficult to work together effectively due to a 'mis-match' of ideas. Mrs Holman highlighted one other aspect, namely the Penshurst to Tunbridge Wells leisure cycle path, mentioned in her previous report. She advised that Mike Westphal, of the Penshurst Off Road Cycling Club, had shown her round the route. She added that this route formed part of TWBC's Cycling Strategy, although there were different land ownerships involved, she added.

Transport Strategy – Jane Fenwick, Acting Chairman of this working group, referred to her written report, which had been distributed with the agenda. This had covered a wide range of key topics, including: the main items discussed at the Joint

Transportation Board on 15 February; Cllr David Scott's ideas for reducing congestion in the town centre; representation at the Cycling Forum and at the Public Transport Forum; and Gatwick aircraft noise.

Planning and Development Strategy – Mark Booker, Chairman of this working group, had provided a written update report, circulated separately from the agenda. He highlighted the following aspects: RVP – where the working group's representations for the retention of the corner buildings had been unsuccessful; Response to the Site Allocations DPD – the full response of the working group had been appended to the agenda papers; Union House – where revised scheme details were reported upon, leading to the working group concluding that, while the project was far from ideal, the developer had shown a willingness to respond positively to further improvements in design; Green Network Report – which had been specifically included in the revised Urban Design Framework evidence base.

Mr Booker also advised that a joint working group trail leaflet – 'Water, Rocks and Royalty' – was now available as an additional Tunbridge Wells Commons route.

Water in the Wells Working Group – Michael Holman, Chairman of this working group, highlighted the following aspects of his update report which had been circulated with the agenda: Art in the public realm – once the working group has had an input to TWBC's initial guide, an outline schedule of opportunities and potential sites would be submitted for the Forum's consideration; Calverley Grounds – where proposals for a 'dry' water feature as part of the children's play space were welcomed; Dairy Crest, St John's Road – where the developer, Ashill Land, had entered into a purchase agreement with McCarthy and Stone. Mr Holman added that he hoped the planning authority would insist that the agreed water feature (under the agreement with Ashill) would be implemented; Chalybeate Spring – although there was a water flow, Mr Holman advised that there was a dearth of dippers.

Finance and Other Issues – David Wakefield, Chairman of this working group, advised that there were no specific issues to report on.

Culture – Bob Atwood, Chairman of this working group, reported on his working group's consideration of TWBC's plans for the cultural and learning hub. He advised that approximately 95% of the funding for this exciting scheme had been secured, adding that there were now 12 members who had been appointed to an implementation board.

Mr Atwood voiced two issues of slight concern: first, TWBC's plans to transfer some existing functions to the new hub, principally its Gateway service; and secondly how groups such as the Town Forum could become engaged in the scheme as details began to be developed. He added that he would pursue TWBC's Head of Communities and Wellbeing on both of these issues.

RESOLVED – That the progress reports be accepted.

9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

(a) Tunbridge Wells in Bloom – Katharina Mahler-Bech drew attention to a leaflet which had been tabled, which set out the details of the Tunbridge Wells in Bloom initiative. She urged Town Forum members to publicise the event wherever possible.

(b) 'Selfies, Ego and Identity' – David Wakefield drew attention to another leaflet which had been tabled, which provided details of a presentation being made at the Museum and Art Gallery on 'Selfies, Ego and Identity' by Jasmine Farram, who had won great acclaim for her project.

(c) Chalybeate Spring – Brian Lippard asked what plans there were to deal with the Chalybeate Spring, should the water flow dry up during the summer season. Michael Holman advised that this was a question he had raised on a number of occasions in the past. He added that he had proposed that an alternative source be provided, to guarantee a constant supply. Mr Lippard wished to register his disappointment that this issue seemed to still be unresolved.

(d) The Grove – Tim Tempest voiced his frustration with the Borough Council over the continuing failure to have lighting repaired in the Grove. Mike McGeary undertook to pursue this matter.

(e) Taxis/Hackney Carriages/Private Hire Vehicles – Tim Harper felt that there were too many taxis operating within the town, adding that he wondered if TWBC were maintaining proper licensing control. Lorna Blackmore advised that the Town Forum had examined the licensing and operational situation in 2014, a report on which was available. Mike McGeary undertook to find out from TWBC's Licensing Service what the current position was.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 19 May 2016 at 6.30pm

The meeting concluded at 8.40pm.