



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

26 January 2012, 6.30pm
Council Chamber, Town Hall, Tunbridge Wells

MINUTES

In attendance: John Goodfellow (Banner Farm Residents' Association), Altan Omer (Benhall Mill Road Land Association), Chris Morris (Beulah Road Residents' Association), Dorothea Holman (Boyne Park Residents Association), Betsy Dix (Calverley Park Crescent Freeholders Association), Peter Perry (Calverley Park Crescent Freeholders Association), Michele Hull (Camden Park Residents' Association), John Forster (Civic Society), Sally Balcon (Friends of the Commons), Jonathon Brooks (Friends of the Grove), Anne Forster (Friends of the TW Museum, Library and Art Gallery), Miss Angela Phillips (Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery), Ms Lorna Blackmore (Grantley Court Residents Association), Mr Michael Doyle (Hawkenbury Village Association), George Lawson (Inner London Road Residents' Association), Victor Webb (Molyneux Park Road Residents' Association), Stephen Marshall (Association of Pantiles Traders), Stephen Bowser (Residents First), Mary Wardrop (Sherborne Close Management Cttee), June Bridgeman (Soroptomist International), Marguerita Morton (St John's Road Residents' Association), Katharina Mahler-Bech (Telephone House Neighbours' Association), Kate Sargeant (Transition Tunbridge Wells), Maggie Fraser (Tunbridge Wells Over Fifties Forum), David Morris (Tunbridge Wells Over Fifties Forum), Michael Holman (Tunbridge Wells Twinning Association), Helen Featherstone (Upper Stone Street Residents' Association), Christopher Thomas (Woodbury Close Residents' Association), Councillor Ronen Basu, Councillor James Scholes, Councillor Peter Bulman, Councillor Mrs Mayhew, Councillor David Neve, Councillor Tracey Moore.

Councillor Peter Crawford

Councillor Neve noted the very sad passing of Councillor Peter Crawford, who had been a dedicated public servant, and was not only a gentleman, but a gentle man also. The funeral was to be held on 7 February 2012 at the Crematorium, and instead of flowers the family had asked for donations to be made to BLESMA (British Limbless Ex-Servicemen's Association).

The Chairman added that Councillor Crawford had also raised funds for the Royal British Legion, and been a very committed member of the Town Forum. He would be greatly missed and was a friend to everyone.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from J P Lambert (Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert Parks), D Barnett (Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert Parks), Councillor Cobbold, Councillor Chapelard, John Cunningham (Warwick Park Residents Association), Linda Chamberlain (Citizens Advice Bureau), Councillor Trevor Poile.

2. Declarations of substitute members

Mr David Morris for Mrs Maggie Fraser , Mr Steve Bowser for Mr Robert O'Callaghan and Mrs Anne Forster for Ms Ann Stobo.

3. Membership changes

None.

4. Minutes of the meeting dated 24 November 2011

The minutes were agreed as a correct record.

It was noted that Michael Doyle, June Bridgeman, Jean Michau, David Bushel and Marguerita Morton had been present at the last meeting.

5. Matters arising

A) Leisure and Tourism

Councillor Mrs Mayhew updated the Forum on issues around leisure and tourism, starting with the Ice Rink. She said there had been no final wash up of the event yet, but it was known to have made a loss. She felt however that this was a loss worth making. Over 26 thousand people had enjoyed the Ice Rink, and it had been very popular with families. Lessons did need to be learnt regarding installation of the generators. Cabinet would soon be making a decision whether to continue with the idea, and if it was to be a success it could include a Christmas market with a Germanic theme, which would like in with the twinned town of Wiesbaden. A trip had recently been organised between the Twinning and Friendship Organisations of Tunbridge Wells and Wiesbaden to visit Wiesbaden at Christmas this year, to which Councillor Mayhew had been invited. She had been very impressed with the Christmas decorations.

Questions and comments were received from Town Forum members. It was noted that the event was very good and well received, and there had been no particular problems with sound issues. If the environmental health conditions were replicated for next year, this should help residents who lived close by. There was more litter found in the local area, and bins were overfull during the Christmas period. It was noted the ground had been damaged, and asked who paid for repair of the park? Councillor Mayhew thought that any restitution of the grounds was on the part of the contractors.

Councillor Scholes believed there was every chance the event would run again. It took Winchester three years to begin to make profit, and so the Council was not expecting immediate results. He felt it would be nice for charities to have stalls present at the next event, and noted that in Wiesbaden it was a way of life with a magical atmosphere. He felt Tunbridge Wells was geographically ideal to attract tourists to the event.

It was noted that whilst the Ice Rink was a great success, there was no strategy to encourage tourism into the area, and it was asked why this was. Councillor Mayhew said that there were several events being organised this year to promote the Jubilee and the Olympics, and £170,000 would be spent on different events and supporting communities to hold events. She noted that KCC provided a good briefing to communities on how they can organise their own street parties for the Jubilee, which she would arrange to be circulated. On Tuesday 17 July the Olympic torch would be coming to Tunbridge Wells and a weekend of celebrations would take place on 27 July in Dunorlan Park. Sporting passports were available throughout the town and a Freedom of the Borough parade was being arranged for 17-20 July with the Royal Wales Regiment.

It was asked if the Mela would now be held at Dunorlan, and Councillor Mayhew confirmed this. She said that consultation was needed on what type of event people wanted to see in town on that weekend.

It was noted that Wiesbaden had a festival almost every month. A strategy was needed to earn money from tourism events, including a five year leisure strategy for young people. Councillor Mayhew said that the town needed to provide something for people to come to aside from the traditional offering of the Pantiles, which was not free. She felt that the Borough needed to start

with what it had already, and make it better. The Museum was a great collection, but needed to be more prominent, and the Council website also needed updating. Start with what we've got. She didn't necessarily feel a strategy was needed for this work.

There was concern that there had been several years where nothing had progressed with regard to leisure and tourism, and there was a feeling that more work was needed to know what it was that people wanted.

It was asked where the Tourist Information Centre would be located after November. Councillor Mayhew said there were no options for this yet. She said that tourists did not come to Tunbridge Wells for a tourist information centre, and felt the website could be used to bring more tourists to the area. Putting on festivals and events was what would bring people to the town, but the Borough had limited resources and these needed to be used in the right places.

Councillor Scholes said a Tourism and Leisure Strategy was available up to 2011, but the same disciplines and objectives would apply, they just needed to be refreshed. Tourism represented 7-8% of the economy, and he believed Tunbridge Wells was in an ideal geographic location.

Councillor Mrs Moore said that the Council had a small budget and very few staff in Economic Development. A Strategy was important to residents, but this was not represented in the budget that was available. This year was unique in terms of the events available, but in subsequent years it was likely the budget would be squeezed further. There was a great deal of opportunity for business people to contribute to a Council strategy, and if there was a vision available, the business community could be part of this. She agreed that the future of tourism was through the web and phone apps.

There was concern regarding the future of the Tourist Information Centre, and it was felt that this as well as a website should be the way forward for promoting tourism.

B) Strategic Compass and Policy Framework

Holly Goring, Interim Policy, Performance and Partnerships Manager, gave a presentation on the Strategic Compass and policy framework of the Council. The Strategic Compass was the business plan for the council and was designed last June. It was currently in the process of being refreshed. There were four key sections, with the Community section stating what the Council aimed to deliver. The Customers section was how customers would be treated; the People section referred to the support given to internal staff, and the Value section was how the Council would provide good value for money. Additionally there were a suite of policies sitting under the Compass that built upon the high level aims. Key projects such as the Cinema site, the Day at the Wells, and a management plan for Calverley Ground were expressed in the Compass.

The Vision for Kent set out the long term vision of the County, and it was a requirement for Councils to have this strategy. The Vision contained 3 clear objectives: improving the economy, tackling disadvantage, and putting citizens in control.

Questions and comments were made by Forum members, and it was asked if the application for the disabled toilet and lift for the library had been withdrawn. Ms Goring could not comment on this, but would circulate an update after the meeting.

A member asked in what way was the Borough Council representing Tunbridge Wells to Kent County Council. Ms Goring replied that each District had a Locality Board where TWBC Cabinet Members met with County Councillors to look at issues that affected the Borough. It was recognised that Tunbridge Wells was a predominantly healthy area, and KCC perhaps focussed on more deprived areas, but Tunbridge Wells also had significant pockets of deprivation. Officers and Councillors were lobbying to ensure Tunbridge Wells was not forgotten.

It was suggested that Tunbridge Wells had more in common with East Sussex than it did with Thanet or North Kent. Ms Goring replied that Local Economic Partnerships crossed traditional boundaries and TWBC was jointly working in numerous partnerships to deliver better services.

A Forum member found the document incoherent, and Ms Goring highlighted it was truncated for the presentation and in draft format. Full details for both the Strategic Compass and Vision for Kent were available on the Council's website.

6. Budget Working Group Report

The Chairman presented a report from the Budget Working Group regarding a consultation response to the budget, which was available as part of the agenda papers.

Councillor Neve said that Cabinet were recommending a 3.3 % rise in Council Tax, but also saying that the user should pay for the service. He felt they were doing both currently.

It was noted that Council Tax had been kept low for a long time in the Borough. The majority of the money went to KCC. This policy had caused tensions as TWBC wanted the support of KCC, but was not contributing financially. If taxes remained low any increases would have a dramatic impact, and Council Tax was most effective when spent locally.

Councillor Mrs Moore said that a paper had recently been presented to the Economy & Governance Overview & Scrutiny Select Committee, and it was obvious that some tough choices needed to be made with staffing implications. TWBC was already a very efficient council, and had been making efficiencies for a decade. It was now time to take a hard look at what the Council was able to deliver. The situation of spending reserves was appalling, and hard decisions needed to be made to prevent this.

The Chairman felt that raising Council Tax by 3.3% was a sensible option.

Councillor Scholes reminded Forum members that even with a 3.3% increase this equated to £4.79 per year for band D properties. If it was increased TWBC would still have the 8th lowest Council Tax in England if others Councils didn't alter theirs. There were many issues in the near future that would impact on the budget, including further reductions in the grant settlement. There was very little waste in the Council left to take out however, which left staffing figures, but the wage bill of Council had actually gone down in recent years. The public needed to be consulted on what services they wanted from TWBC. Very few services needed to be provided by statute, and services like swimming pools or parks could be cut if members of the public did not want to pay for these services. The reserves were needed to set a balanced budget for this year; however Councillor Scholes felt the amount might reduce over time.

The Chairman stated that the Forum did not want the reserves to be used.

Other members said that the reserves had been plundered over many years, but that money should have been reinvested for longer term benefit. Plugging gaps using reserves was not acceptable.

Councillor Scholes suggested cutting services to the Trinity and Assembly Hall, which would save around £400,000. He asked Forum members for ideas on how else to save that money.

A Forum member suggested that the Council could earn money through tourism and leisure initiatives.

Another member suggested a zero- based budgeting exercise, as he felt there was still opportunity to save money in the Council and make efficiencies.

Councillor Scholes noted that the only area that had begun a task of zero-based budgeting was in Tourism, and this project had been abandoned.

The Chairman asked why TWBC did not share their CE with neighbouring Councils. Councillor Scholes said he was open-minded on this and there were various solutions. He did have evidence that the sum of money TWBC paid was going down however. One of the reasons the Council was judged as excellent was because of its partnership working, and he believed the Council gave a better service because of this.

It was noted that William Benson was a Director under the previous CE Sheila Wheeler, and now doing the CE's role and a directorship. He had therefore taken on a wider area of responsibility and reduced costs at the Council.

Councillor Scholes added that TWBC was one of the leanest Councils in the area in terms of staffing. Whether the Council could go further and remove more directorships was a question that remained to be answered.

It was suggested that the Mayor's service was a "nice-to-have" service when there was spare money, but when there was less money, the service could be run in a much less expensive way.

The Chairman did not feel there were savings to be made in reducing Councillors parking costs, and the Mayor's service could reduce costs by entertaining less outside of the Borough. Councillor Scholes felt these were minor savings when hundreds of thousands needed to be found.

It was suggested that asset disposal could be considered as a way to make money. Councillor Scholes noted this and said that assets could only be sold once and so they needed to gain the very best value from any assets that might be sold.

The Chairman summarised that the Forum would like to know details of the salaries for the top Executives, that Council Tax should be raised, staff should be reduced, the reserves should not be used to balance the budget and services that could make the Council money should not be cut. He thanked Councillors Scholes for the update.

7. Fountain Working Group Report

Mr Holman gave an update on the work of the Fountain Working group, which was contained as part of the agenda papers.

The group's work was fully endorsed by the RTWTF and it was suggested that art and culture developer contributions could be used to initiate this. The proposals for the Grassy Knoll were noted, and it was suggested that water feature could have been included for this.

Tunbridge Wells had five little known streams that could include water walks, and this idea could engage the public into helping.

It was suggested that Section 106 monies could be used to help with the ideas, and Councillor Scholes said that any money from previous S106 agreements would already be allocated. There were a number of substantial developments coming forward however.

It was suggested that Calverley Grounds could be redeveloped with a fountain that doubled as an ice rink; and Five Ways could include a round of fountains.

Councillor Mrs Moore supported the idea and said that the Town Forum was ideally placed to progress it. She noted that Tunbridge Wells was a spa town and it needed to retain a unique character. Water features were important and S106 monies could be found to implement this.

8. AOB

The Vice-Chairman stated that a new Friends Group for Calverley Grounds was being set up, with a future meeting to be advised. The purpose of the group was for consultation and to help devise a management plan for the grounds.

Separately it was noted that the Love Where we Live Awards had been launched, and nominations for a group or person could be filled out on the website or through forms available throughout town.

Date of the next meeting: 23 February 2012