



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

Minutes of Meeting dated Thursday 27 January 2011

In the Chair: Councillor Peter Crawford

Present:

John Forster (RTWCS), Anne Stobo (Friends of Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery TWMLAG), Ian Naismith (Hanover & Rock Villa Association), G Bradley (Hanover & Rock Villa Association), J Higgs (Hanover & Rock Villa Association), Peter Perry (Calverley Park Crescent Freeholders' Association), Betsey Dix (Calverley Park Crescent Freeholders' Association), Alten Omer (Benhall Mill Road Land Association), Michael Larsen (Friends of the Grove), Jonathan Clark (Rusthall Village Association), David Wakefield (Royal British Legion), Christine Phillip (Tunbridge Wells Twinning & Friendship Association TWTF), Kate Sargeant (Clarence Road Users' Association), Jane Fenwick (Calverley Park Freeholders' Association), Mary Wardrop (Hawkenbury Village Association), George Lawson (Inner London Road Residents Association), Philip Whitbourn (Beulah Road Residents Association), Maggie Fraser (Tunbridge Wells Over 50's Forum), John Goodfellow (Banner Farm Residents' Association), Michael Doyle (Hawkenbury Village Association), Robert O'Callaghan (Residents First), Katharina Mahler-Bech (Telephone House Neighbours Association), Anne Forster (Friends of Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery FTWMLAG).

Royal Tunbridge Wells Ward Councillors: Councillor Ben Chapelard, Councillor Lesley Herriot, Councillor Catherine Mayhew, Councillor David Neve and Councillor Trevor Poile.

Others in attendance:

William Benson (Chief Executive Tunbridge Wells Borough Council), Nick Jones (M&N Communications), Julia Burton-Roberts (M&N Communications), Martin Woodhouse (John Laing), Victor Webb (UKIP representative) and Mary Harris (Kent & Sussex Courier)

Local residents were also in attendance as observers.

Apologies: Michael Holman, John Cunningham, Chris Thomas, Councillor Basu, Councillor Atwood (Leader of TWBC), Jenina Bas Pendry and Matt Goodwin

1. Membership Changes

Councillor Crawford (PC) presented the proposed new representative – Anne Stobo (Friends of Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery). The Forum agreed to her admittance to the membership of the Town Forum.

2. Minutes of the last meeting: 25 November 2010

Councillor Crawford (PC) explained to the Town Forum that due to time constraints it would be advisable to conduct the approval of the minutes from 25 November 2010 at the next Town Forum. This was agreed by the membership in attendance.

3. Reports from Councillors

No reports were received.

4. The Civic Complex

William Benson (WB) explained that the M & N Communications presentation session forms part of the overall consultation process being undertaken with regards to the future of the Civic Complex and town centre.

Nick Jones (NJ) of M & N Communications gave a presentation which clarified the role undertaken by his organisation in the consultation process. He further explained the consultation principles and confirmed that a final report of their findings and conclusions will be available upon completion of the consultation process. NJ concluded his presentation by emphasising that the meeting with the Town Forum fits in with the various workshops and stakeholder meetings, as well as other means of engagement with the public that had been carried out as part of the consultation.

In response to the non-receipt of consultation literature in some areas raised by members of the Forum, NJ invited those present to provide him with further information so that he could ensure that they would be sent out. NJ did remind the Forum that the process relating to the questionnaires being sent out was ongoing (14th February 2011 closing date) and that the full send out was not yet complete. He also noted that the questionnaire was available online for those with internet access.

In response to the focus of the report, NJ confirmed that the consultation report will represent a collation of information and views provided by the public and stakeholders on the future of the town centre and Town Hall in Tunbridge Wells. It was deemed more practical to link the two together.

Councillor Neve requested a list of the stakeholders involved in the consultation, to which NJ agreed. Councillor also queried as to why car parks were omitted as a consultation point. NJ confirmed that car parking had been omitted along with any other transport considerations as they are merely geared to facilitate the use of the civic site/town centre rather than an integral feature.

WB explained in reply to concerns as to why it was so important to look at revamping the town centre and Town Hall site. WB noted that changes to the whole site were not fully in the control of TWBC, with the future of the police station a clear concern. There is a need to manage available assets well and recognise the future needs of the town centre. WB explained that the retail operations in Tunbridge Wells continued to remain strong and there is a desire for other retailers to relocate to the area. As such, the consultation is a good opportunity to focus on the changes that could potentially be implemented. Martin Woodhouse (MW) explained that the 2006 Collier's Report studied the retail capacity in Tunbridge Wells, supported by other contributory evidence that retailers are keen to remain or relocate to Tunbridge Wells. In response, John Goodfellow (JG) commented that his

organisation was not supportive of further retail expansion in Tunbridge Wells beyond that detailed in the existing Local Plan.

NJ responded to questions raised over the origin of the topics in the questionnaire by explaining that the focus of the consultation was Borough wide and not solely limited to the areas immediately around the town centre. He confirmed that M & N communications had devised the questionnaire and that the consultation was designed to gain a wealth of information without being an exclusive and limiting document for residents. He concluded by reassuring the Town Forum that no weighting would be given to any one question and that the final report will be a balanced presentation of the data collected. WB concluded that the questionnaire was left solely in the hands of M & N Communications in order to take advantage of their expertise in the delivery of the final document.

Jane Fenwick (JF) commented that there was a hope that existing local small businesses would not be harmed by any potential changes and that this should be considered if the aim is to expand the town centre in the future. George Lawson (GL) supported this view and added that the cultural identity should not be sacrificed to retail expansion.

A number of members of the Town Forum raised the issue that people didn't just frequent the town centre for retail purposes.

WB explained that it was important to understand the current position in the process. Any changes to be undertaken need to go through the viability test with safety checks to ensure that changes are beneficial and necessary, as well as taking on stakeholder comments (Stage 1). Stage 2 would be the detail being addressed and the decision being made. WB confirmed that TWBC were still at the first stage and that there were no specific proposals, just the desire to review the issue in general terms. MW confirmed the process from John Laing's perspective.

The Town Forum queried the relative success of different approaches to regeneration. MW confirmed that he was aware of regeneration being successful in Hastings and that Tunbridge Wells should undertake a mixed development approach to make the most of the opportunity. He concluded that good and bad practice exists in regeneration around the UK, but that good work to consult, prepare and evaluate is essential for success.

Councillor Mayhew reassured the Town Forum that any changes would include the provision of cultural facilities. It was also noted that full answers in the consultation questionnaire would help to guide future discussions that come out of the final report.

MW addressed concerns over initial work being carried out by stating that it was common practice for his company to undertake preparation work prior to any decision being taken. He confirmed that this was all part of being a responsible partner and that John Laing had followed due process through clear liaison and transparency. WB confirmed this approach and explained that a great deal of background work has been undertaken to get the best possible information. He further noted that any decisions so far had gone through the appropriate political structures and that any future decisions would also follow the same process.

As to whether any regeneration could be culture led in Tunbridge Wells, three key issues were raised by the Forum:

- Liaison with the library through the Town Forum Working Group, whereby the library recognised the need for a more flexible set of premises to meet future needs, as well as being interested in remaining where there was the greatest footfall.
- The Pantiles and Museum were agreed as key town centre cultural attractions, with the possibility of locating the museum at two sites to maximise the use of its exhibits.
- The focus of Tunbridge Wells as a tourist attraction.

NJ noted that the town itself is strengthened by its cultural identity and the attractions beyond the town centre.

Councillor Crawford thanked M & N for their attendance and closed the meeting

Meeting Closed at 8.30pm

9. *Dates of next meetings of the Town Forum*

- 24 February 2011 at 6.30pm
- 31 March 2011 at 6.30pm
- 28 April 2011 at 6.30pm
- 26 May 2011 at 6.30pm
- 30 June 2011 at 6.30pm
- 28 July 2011 at 6.30pm
- August – no meeting
- 29 September 2011 at 6.30pm
- 27 October 2011 at 6.30pm
- 24 November 2011 at 6.30pm
- 15 December 2011 at 6.30pm

The group will undertake to as follows:-

- Examine the Terms of Reference/constitution of the Forum covering:
 - confirmation that the Forum is a non political grouping;
 - entitlement to formal membership of the Forum;
 - entitlement of the Forum to invite other bodies to attend even if they do not qualify for formal membership;
 - governance of annual general meetings and election procedures;
 - duration in the Chair;
 - voting rights;
 - demonstration of formal mandate from the represented organisation;
 - suggestions on how feedback between the representative and the represented organisation might take place - this could cover asking for views on town issues, explaining town issues and developments and giving information on how responses can be made to TWBC consultations".

Considering the nature and tone of some emails I would urge all Members of the Town Forum to look to the future and start to prepare for the forthcoming Civic complex consultation paper. It is extremely important that all views are put forward and that all members put forward those views.

The Town Forum wants to know when this consultation will be so the anguish clearly showing at meetings is actually stopped and that "residents" can put forward their concerns. The Town Forum wishes to know when this consultation will start and wishes for an answer. I also ask that we be informed why the Land Registry building is not being purchased by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.

Christopher Thomas
Chairman