



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

Draft Minutes of Meeting, Thursday 27 March 2006

Present

Daniel Bech (Telephone House Neighbours' Association), June Bridgeman (Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells & District), John Cunningham (Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society), Michael Doyle (Hawkenbury Village Association), Karen Fisher (Grove Hill Residents' Association), John Goodfellow (Banner Farm Residents' Association), Bruce Goodwin (Grove Hill Residents' Association), Matt Goodwin (Chairman Town Forum / Tunbridge Wells Village Residents' Association), Michael Hicks (Inner London Road Association), John Higgs (Rock Villa & Hanover Residents' Association), Michael Larsen (The Grove Residents' Association), George Lawson (Friends of the Common), Ian Naismith (Rock Villa & Hanover Residents' Association), Altan Omer (Benhall Mill Road Land Association), Keith Perry (Benhall Mill Road Land Association), Lorna Prentice (Calverley Park Residents' Association), Patrick Shovelton (Inner London Road Residents' Association), Fred Sirman (Warwick Park Area Residents' Association), Patricia Smith (The Goodwins No 1/The Goodwins No 2 Residents' Company Ltd), Robert Soden (Telephone House Neighbours' Association), Chris Thomas (The Goodwins No 1/No 2 Residents' Company), Grace Thomsett-Hill (Clarence Road Users' Association), Gill Twells (Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society), Mary Wardrop (Hawkenbury Village Association), David Webster (Clarence Road Users' Association), Cllr Crawford, Cllr Wakefield.

In Attendance

Cllr Roy Bullock, Ellie Broughton (TWBC), Daryl Jones (TWBC), Gary Stevenson (TWBC), Ptolemy Dean (Member of the public),

Apologies

1. Apologies were received from Jenny Alexander, Graham Bradley, Betsey Dix (see para 2), Jane Fenwick, Michael Holman, Cllrs Ekins-Dawkes, Mrs Mayhew and Scholes.

Membership changes

2. Betsey Dix, representing Calverley Park Crescent Freeholders Association, hopes to attend future meetings.
3. David Lock of Chancellor House is no longer able to come but hopes someone else will attend in his place.
4. In addition the Chairman welcomed Lorna Prentice from Caverley Park Residents' Association, Grace Thomsett-Hill from Clarence Road Residents' Association and Ptolemy Dean, local resident.

Minutes of meeting 23 February 2006

5. The minutes of the meeting were approved as a correct record.

Matters arising from minutes of last meeting

6. The three action points had been actioned.

Highways matters

7. June Bridgeman informed the Town Forum that the Soroptimists had recently undertaken a taxi survey in the town, the results of which would shortly be available on www.townforum.org.uk and which has had some press coverage. The report had raised a number of issues, including the interface with the County Council.
8. The Chairman welcomed the evidence-based approach adopted by the Soroptimists and which he hoped the Town Forum might benefit from.
9. Patrick Shovelton spoke in favour of Kent Highways taking a strategic approach to taxi and other highways issues and not focussing on the detail of a taxi rank. He believed parking is under serious consideration.

10. Daniel Bech then gave a slide presentation of Highways 'grot spots' on behalf of the 'Brighten up RTW' focus group (viewable on <http://www.townforum.org.uk/subcommittees.html> - click the projector sign). The images included dirty, illegible, contradictory and superfluous signs, damaged railings and street furniture, concrete patching of paved and cobbled areas, fly-posting, illegal parking on pavements, restrictions marked on pavements, and listed signposts fallen into disrepair. Town Forum members expressed warm appreciation for the work involved in undertaking the presentation.
11. John Goodfellow spoke of proposals to introduce a 'no right turn' by the Town Hall and improve corners: he said these proposals had come to nothing and that he believes there is no overall coherent plan for improvements. He argued that the Town Forum should aim to get something coherent done.
12. Grace Thomsett-Hill said everyone should watch the presentation. She went on to speak of good practice in other Boroughs and suggested that lessons could be learnt from how other local authorities achieve progress.
13. Patrick Shovelton said that Highways have been through a difficult time with the transfer of responsibilities and personnel from the Borough Council (TWBC) to (KCC) County Council and agreed it was still extremely difficult to get results. He said that there should be an aim to have proper dialogue with Kent Highways but reminded members that responsibility for Parking remains local, i.e. the responsibility of TWBC.
14. John Cunningham suggested that the presentation be shown at the Joint Transportation Board meeting of 10 April (6 pm).
15. David Webster reminded members that street lighting in private roads will no longer be undertaken.
16. Ptolemy Dean spoke of the symbolic representation street furniture can have for a town and the authority responsible for it. Picking up Grace's point he said that in London real headway is being made, for example Kensington and Chelsea are piloting a scheme to reduce clutter and the Cities of Westminster and of London are also demonstrating good practice. He agreed that the Joint Transportation Board should be encouraged to learn from these authorities and others like them.
17. Mr Higgs argued that highways and transport strategies should be 'pedestrian led'. He believed that the Kensington and Chelsea scheme to reduce clutter had made the area safer, and gave other examples: Camden, Nottingham (slowed traffic, introduced tree lined boulevard) and Hull (a 20 mph restriction for over a quarter of the Borough's roads).
18. Mary Wardrop asked how Kent Highways had responded to the invitation to attend the Town Forum. Ellie Broughton explained that, within the Highways authority, responsibility was split between maintenance and strategy: officers from both 'sides' had offered to deal with specific Town Forum requests separately, perhaps meeting with one or more Town Forum representative during office hours to progress. There had not been a response from the relevant portfolio holder or any other Councillor: the request had been made through the Kent officers, asking them to ensure an invitation was issued.
19. Fred Sirman spoke about the difficulty in getting street lights repaired: Health and Safety requirements dictate that highways staff cannot climb a ladder against a post – a scaffolding tower must be used.
20. Christopher Thomas expressed concern at a perceived lack of goodwill and co-operation: he too was anxious to see a proper strategy – particularly given the likely redevelopment of the Kent and Sussex Hospital, Royal Victoria Place and the Cinema sites, and the recent redevelopment of Telephone House. 'Where is all the extra traffic going to go?', he asked. He was also concerned at a general lack of care and attention to the condition of roads, describing St Johns Road as 'one big pothole'. He would like to see how expenditure breaks down (figures, not pie charts). He also said parking information should be less ambiguous: there are areas, he said, where a driver might be ticketed simply because signage has been misunderstood.
21. Michael Doyle said that planning regulations generally prescribe traffic flow and contractor parking for a site during construction but rules are often contravened without enforcement: parking provision is not made and mud on the roads is a frequent hazard.
22. Cllr Bullock, responding to Chris's comments, offered to make Kent Highways budget figures available. On the issue of pavement markings, Kent Highways were introducing them as a safety and security measure for residents using bank cash point machines. He also advised that Kent Highways had, the previous week, announced a new target: to reduce street clutter by 30%.

ACTION POINT:

- Kent Highways budget figures to be provided (Cllr Bullock)

23. June Bridgeman emphasised that there was a clear agenda for progressing with Kent Highways and suggested that they be prioritized for discussion and then the offer to meet with Highways officers in working hours be taken up.
24. Michael Hicks said that compliance with planning consent should be enforced when contravened.
25. Patrick Shovelton agreed a meeting with Kent Highways was necessary and said that he was willing to go to the Highways offices during working hours if necessary. The attitude that Highways officers have is too often unhelpful. In comparison, he said, officers from Islington have the attitude 'how can we help you?'.
26. Matt Goodwin, connecting this issue to the wider issues thrown up by the next item of **Review of Progress and Future Direction: Setting and Influencing Goals for the Future**, said that people were clearly angry: that they had a sense of disenfranchisement. In spite of the commonality of aims – between the Town Forum and the authorities – there remained a 'systemic opacity' with no-one taking responsibility for resolving matters. Matt was particularly concerned at the impression that the recent lamppost issue was only finally being resolved because two high profile people – Ptolemy Dean and the Leader of the Council - had got personally involved. This shouldn't be necessary.
27. Matt said that he personally felt very strongly. That many people had given up a lot of time and without financial reward, and he expected more engagement from the leadership. In his recent meeting with Sheila Wheeler, TWBC Chief Executive, Matt formed the impression that the Town Forum may have been perceived in some quarters as representing only 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells'? This view might be fair if the Town Forum had confined itself to discussing individual lampposts, but it has not and in fact the lamppost has proved to be symbolic of the wider problems that exist.
28. Moving forward, he was concerned that the Town Forum was not high profile enough to engage the attention of KCC. Matt had drafted some proposals about the future of the Town Forum for consideration.
29. Cllr Bullock took issue with the comments made about the lamppost. He reminded members that it had been agreed the Civic Society would take the lead on the issue, not the Town Forum. Within the Council he and officers had progressed the matter and there had been no need to involve the leadership. (Appx 1).
30. He then went on to talk about Central Government work underway, reviewing the hierarchy of Council responsibilities and local government's relationship with local communities.
31. Referring back to the presentation of 'Highways grots' he advised the Town Forum to seek a formal mechanism for its sub-committee reports to be fed into the local authorities' committee processes. He agreed with John Cunningham's suggestion that a link be made to the Joint Transportation Board. If the Board did consider the presentation this would have the advantage of requiring officers to respond in person and would lead to recommendations and action, subject to formal progress reports on a regular basis.
32. The Chairman invited comments: Grace Thomsett-Hill said she found the advice about how to progress an issue patronising and that people did not trust the Council. She liked the Soroptimists' approach of surveying local needs and thought that this was something the Town Forum could usefully do: going out onto the streets and speaking to residents. Christopher Thomas suggested the Town Forum seek a 'service level agreement' with the Council, setting out what was expected from each. He said Sheila Wheeler should take a personal interest in the Town Forum.
33. John Goodfellow expected County Councillors for the town (Cllrs John Davies, James Scholes and Roy Bullock) to be taking issues forward to KCC, and that the Town Forum should be seen as a support mechanism for them. He spoke of KCC's Local Boards initiative whereby County Councillors met regularly in locations around the Borough. He suggested that the Town Forum invite the Local Board to meet, believing that this might assist Sheila Wheeler in progressing productive partnerships. Finally he asked if there were other Forums in Kent from whom the Town Forum might learn.
34. David Webster said it was important to establish what resources the Council would make available to the Town Forum in future.
35. Matt Goodwin commented that there were only a handful of Councillors attending the Town Forum, and was concerned that the Town Forum could be seen merely to be 'a figleaf' for the Council. Councillors, he said, needed to have a higher profile and in that connection Cllr Melvyn Howell, TWBC Leader had indicated that he would be prepared to attend the next meeting. Sheila Wheeler had also asked to attend the next meeting, 24 April, to make a presentation on local government review. Matt proposed that the Town Forum should review its objectives and requirements and ask the Leadership how they will meet them.
36. Daniel Bech reinforced Matt's concerns about the low numbers of Councillors attending: three at that evening's meeting.

37. Cllr Wakefield asked for some understanding of Councillors' position. He said the Town Forum was only recently started and still needed to convey to Councillors its role and its importance - not all Councillors knew about it. He said that the progress achieved to date represented a long step forward on the situation before: before were separate individuals, now, there is an organised body. Progress had been achieved he said. Referring to the local government review he stated his personal belief that the Town Forum could be an important part of local government reorganisation: an essential link to a replacement Unitary authority. For now, however, he agreed the Town Forum should concentrate on seeking progress on Highways issues and that the presentation should go forward to the Joint Transportation Board. If necessary the Town Forum would have to 'get nasty': he didn't know how, perhaps via the ombudsman and letters to Chairmen, but it should act to achieve progress.
38. Mr Higgs reminded members of the local democratic process, with forthcoming elections in May. He suggested the Town Forum should write to Councillors and to the Member of Parliament, Greg Clark, to let them know of its existence.
39. June Bridgeman described how the process of decision making involved three sets of people: Councillors, with the responsibility for decision making; officers who advise on options and solutions; and 'all of us'. She advocated the three parties working together. The Town Forum does need to have resources in order to do its bit; and members do need to focus dialogue down into recommendations and reports. She supported Cllr Bullock's suggestion of seeking a formal mechanism for submitting reports into the Councils, so that Cabinet members would be obliged to give consideration to proposals. The Town Forum was providing a 'bubbling up of ideas', she said, which was unique and valuable to the Councils.
40. Mary Wardrop agreed with June's view that 'all of us' have a role to play: it was incumbent on members to let their Resident Association members know what the Town Forum is about, to 'spread the word'. In Hawkenbury Village Association each edition of the newsletter carries an article about the Town Forum and its work. She said members should put their trust in those who can help further the aims and commended the support given by the officers: there had been already some response on the Recreation paper for example, and Gary Stevenson had given up a lot of his time to meetings and progressing issues.
41. Matt Goodwin concurred: 'we are only representatives'.
42. John Cunningham too agreed that it was relatively early days for the Town Forum: this was the ninth meeting, he thought. He said there was a need to ensure that the Town Forum was properly configured: that it was not yet what it should be. He said that the Manor of Rusthall, for example, had a definite interest in the town and, he believed, might be willing to send a representative. He also understood that under local government reorganisation the Borough Council might not exist – Greg Clark had indicated that this might be by as early as mid-2007. He recommended that members read the Government's White Paper for discussion at the next meeting.
43. Cllr Bullock agreed the Town Forum should respond to the White Paper. He said that the formal TWBC and KCC position was for improved two tier working, not moves to a unitary authority. Cllr Howell had recently met with David Milliband, the Local Government Minister, who had given an assurance that unitary status would **not** be imposed on local authorities. Cllr Bullock said he was leading an informal group at County considering the issue of local government reorganisation.
44. The Chairman reiterated that Sheila Wheeler would be attending the next meeting to discuss Local Government reform. One of her big concerns about the Town Forum seemed to be that some constituencies were not represented on it: the young, the poor. Councillor Bullock reminded members that the Town Forum was only one of a network of Forums linked to the Borough Community Plan Partnership: many other constituencies, including the young and the poor, are represented in this wider network (for example in these cases by the Youth Forum and by the Community Development Forum).
45. In responding to the Chairman's request for ideas for moving forward Daniel Bech asked what might have to be done to form a Town Council – Folkestone had recently done this. Cllr Bullock said that a Town Council might itself be considerably less representative than the Town Forum, needing only a small number of elected representatives. John Goodfellow referred to Southborough Town Council and how they achieve success.
46. June Bridgeman said that the Town lacked a comprehensive transport strategy although there was a Borough Transport Strategy adopted in 2003.
47. Matt Goodwin's paper had set out proposals for 'thought leadership' and building infrastructure. Commander Lawson said that the Town Forum had been called together to address a communications gap. Its members were there to represent people's concerns. He felt there was a danger of being drawn into the local government bureaucracy if the Town Forum confined itself to a strategy and infrastructure. Matt Goodwin said he did believe infrastructure was important. He also thought that the Town Forum needed to provide **leadership**. But he didn't feel it was inappropriate to look at detail as that is what people are concerned about.

48. It was agreed that a Task Force be formed to progress discussions about the future role and membership of the Town Forum: how to increase its influence and recognition; how to better achieve responses and action from the statutory authorities and others; and its spread of representation and capability.

49. It was also agreed that the Highways presentation be submitted to the Joint Transportation Board.

ACTION POINTS:

- Task Force to be appointed and to meet to formulate recommendations about the future role and membership of the Town Forum (Matt Goodwin)
- The presentation of Highways 'grot spots' be submitted for consideration by the Joint Transportation Board (Cllr Bullock)

Waste Collection

50. Christopher Thomas and Keith Perry reminded members of the background leading to this being put on the agenda: that the contract for refuse collection will shortly be up for renewal; and that there are some issues of resident concern. These include recycling, plastics recycling specifically, particular nuisances arising from waste collection, and the suitability (or otherwise) of some blocks of flats for fortnightly collection.

51. Gary Stevenson, TWBC Head of Environmental Services (soon to incorporate 'streetscene'), confirmed that the contract was due for renewal in March 2008 but with tendering during 2007 and preparation of the specification later this year. He also advised that a national Waste Strategy was currently being consulted upon, and that KCC would be consulting on a Kent Waste Strategy would be due to be consulted upon in the summer. He said he would be happy to come back to the Town Forum later in the year to ensure that the Town Forum could have input into the specification.

ACTION POINT:

- Borough Council to consult Town Forum before finalising Waste & Recycling Contract

Licensing Sub-Committee

52. Owing to lack of time at the meeting Christopher Thomas said his report could be circulated separately. He said the visit to the CCTV Control Centre had now taken place and had been very interesting.

Feedback from meetings

53. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) Chief Executive, Sheila Wheeler – covered earlier on the agenda.

54. John Lister, TWBC, re suggestion to have market area by Millennium Clock – nothing to report. Robert Soden commented that nuisance could be avoided by removing the seats nearby.

Short announcements

55. Free off-peak travel for residents aged 60 and over and those with disabilities is available, for 2006/7, by contacting TWBC's income section (01892 526121 ext 2613, income@tunbridgewells.gov.uk, or in writing at the Town Hall).

56. Daryl Jones, TWBC Economic Development Manager, reported that he would shortly be convening the Business Forum and would welcome a Town Forum representative. It was agreed Matt Goodwin would respond to the invitation.

ACTION POINT:

Town Forum to take up invitation to attend Business Forum (Matt Goodwin to respond)

Items for future meetings

- Crime and disorder issues (Linda Mortley, TWBC)
- Promoting membership of the Town Forum, developing good practice amongst Residents' Associations
- Commons Conservators
- Waste & Recycling (Gary Stevenson, TWBC)

Dates of Future meetings

- Monday 24 April
- Thursday 25 May
- Thursday 22 June
- Thursday 20 July

Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum

Future direction

Purpose of Town Forum

The Town Forum was set up by TWBC in response to very adverse Audit Commission (AC) report in 2004; the AC called for evidence of partnership working between TWBC and residents and the Town Forum is one of the means that has been established to achieve and demonstrate that partnership.

The Town Forum has had some significant achievements including:

- pulled together a disparate group of people and demonstrated a strong commonality of aims and interests.
- responded to a series of high profile consultative documents.
- highlighted a number of areas of public concern and obtained considerable local media coverage.
- proved that local people are willing and keen to be engaged, even in their own time and at their own expense.

However, profile of the Town Forum is too low and it is easy to ignore; this is partly because it's so new but also because we have not sufficiently set an agenda to which TWBC must respond.

It is time to reappraise the direction of the Town Forum.

The future

The Town Forum needs to concentrate on TW issues; primarily these should be **thought leadership** in the following areas, some strategic, some not:

- infrastructural matters – compulsory measures on energy and water measures for residents and developers, road and rail integration etc.
- positioning the Town for the future – attracting value added businesses to set up or relocate to the Town including educational measures.
- public policy matters – for example alcohol control etc.
- develop initiatives to ensure that views of disenfranchised and the under represented are taken into account.
- smaller issues but which impact directly on quality of life, including street lighting, pavement conditions, community projects etc.

What we also need to do

1. consider the composition of the Town Forum.
2. review the roles of local councillors on the Town Forum – they will typically have the knowledge that we need to inform Town Forum debates and we need their more active and helpful involvement.

What the Town Forum needs from TWBC

- more active partnership – attendance by leadership demonstrating interest and giving feedback on where and how the Town Forum could contribute more.
- a formal structure under which TWBC and all other partner agencies commit to involvement with the Town Forum rather than relying on persuasion to secure.
- a formal reporting mechanism under which Town Forum views, proposals and recommendations are submitted directly to the most appropriate persons **and** under which appropriate response and feedback is made to the Town Forum.
- following TWBC restructure and loss of the principal Town Forum supporter we need an active commitment from TWBC on resources and general support.

And finally, we need to see more complete transparency in local governance. The recent lamppost issue, whilst not in itself interesting, has highlighted a number of deep flaws. They are:

1. determining responsible parties in TWBC and/or KCC – it is simply unacceptable that the system is so opaque.
2. that it required two high profile local residents and a lot of media coverage to achieve movement on something so basic and necessary. Would this have been achievable by a normal member of the public?
3. that it has required the attention of the Leader of the Council.