



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

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Thursday 28 November 2013

Attended: Cllr Bob Backhouse, Sally Balcon, David Barnett, Lorna Blackmore, Stephen Bowser, Cllr Ben Chapelard, John Cunningham, Cllr Caroline Derrick, Michael Doyle, Helen Featherstone, Jane Fenwick, John Forster, Alex Green, Tim Harper, Michael Holman, Sue Kaner, George Lawson (sub), Katharina Mahler-Bech, Cllr Mrs Catherine Mayhew, David Morris, Marguerita Morton, Cllr David Neve, Altan Omer, Angela Phillips, Cllr Nicholas Rogers, Cllr James Scholes, Kate Sergeant (sub), Anne Stobo, Peter Taylor, David Wakefield (Chairman), Mary Wardrop and Philip Whitbourn (sub)

TWBC officers present: Rosemarie Bennett (Parking Manager), Adam Chalmers (Democratic and Community Engagement Manager), Lee Colyer (Head of Finance and Government) and Mike McGeary (Democratic Services Officer)

Also present: Léonie Harrington, Glen Horn, Cllr David Jukes (Leader of the Council), Cllr Jane March (TWBC Cabinet Portfolio-holder for Tourism, Leisure and Economic Development) and Cllr Alan McDermott (Portfolio-holder for Planning and Transportation)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were reported from: June Bridgeman, Michaela van Halewyn, Dorothea Holman, Bill Kern, Margaret Watts and Cllrs Peter Bulman, Trevor Poile, David Scott, Lynne Weatherly and Frank Williams.

2. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

The Democratic Services Officer reported that the Chairman had approved an application to join the Town Forum from the Friends of the Royal Oak and Community; their representative, Peter Taylor, was welcomed to his first meeting.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2013 be agreed.

4. ACTIONS FROM PREVIOUS MINUTES

26 September 2013

4 Evidence of formal appointment to the Town Forum

MMcG Representatives to submit evidence of their formal appointment to the Town Forum.

The Democratic Services Officer advised that 19 out of the 35 active representative organisations had now submitted evidence of their formal appointment to the Town Forum. The Chairman reiterated once more the importance of submitting this information, in the interests of good governance.

5. UPDATE FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Cllr David Jukes provided an update on a number of key issues which were of general interest to the Town Forum, as follows:

- (a) **Traffic re-alignment on North Farm** – Cllr Jukes advised that Asda had now agreed to be part of this road improvement scheme. He added, however, that legally-binding agreement from various solicitors acting for three other landowners, all of whom had signed up to the proposal, was still awaited.
- (b) **Cultural hub** – Cllr Jukes reported on the launch earlier that day of the plans for a cultural hub, based on the Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Adult Education Centre buildings. These, he added, included art gallery space of 15,000 sq. ft. and the development of the area at the rear of the site. He stressed that the viability of the scheme was very much dependent on a successful bid for Heritage Lottery Fund money.
- (c) **John Street car park** – Cllr Jukes advised that the Council had accepted the concerns expressed by interested parties arising from the recent public exhibition event and that the Borough Council's proposals for this site would be amended accordingly. He added that a planning application had now been submitted.
- (d) **Fiveways pedestrianisation** – Cllr Jukes advised that the de-cluttering of the area around the Millennium Clock had been completed and sample paving materials laid out, as part of the creation of a shared space piazza. The next phase, he added, would be the detailed design of the scheme, upon which full public consultation would take place. Cllr Jukes asked that Town Forum members take a full part in the consultation stage, for which leaflets were tabled (as well as an on-line option).
- (e) **Cinema site** – The final issue on which the Leader reported was the cinema site where, Cllr Jukes advised, his patience with the owners and their plans for securing a supermarket had come to an end. He advised that the next stage was likely to be Council backing for an alternative solution, as TWBC decided what the best course of action was for this site.

The Chairman invited questions and comments from the Forum members.

Michael Holman sought clarity over the best way to respond to the consultation taking place over the Millennium Clock and wider public space. Leaflets were circulated, with an option for on-line comments being made via www.consult.tunbridgewells.gov.uk

Cllr Backhouse asked for further details of the proposed surface materials. He was advised that this formed a key part of the consultation process.

The Chairman thanked the Leader of the Council for his attendance and helpful update on a wide range of issues of interest to Forum members.

There were no specific action points arising from the report.

6. TWBC DRAFT BUDGET

Lee Colyer, TWBC's Head of Finance and Governance, provided Forum members with a presentation on TWBC's draft budget for 2014/15, which was being formally considered by the Cabinet on 5 December.

Mr Colyer advised that, once the Cabinet had discussed this and agreed the Council's position, there would be a period of formal public consultation, before the issue was considered once more by the Cabinet and then full Council in February.

Mr Colyer drew attention to the very significant loss of government grant being suffered by all local authorities and the resultant pressure on maintaining public services. The loss of central government grant funding, he advised, amounted to over 40% across a four year period. By 2018/19, Mr Colyer added, the current trend of government cuts would see this Council receive no Revenue Support Grant funding to support its public services.

The authority was looking at ways in which it could raise income as well as make further costs savings, members were advised. The current position, Mr Colyer added, was a potential deficit of £462k for 2014/15; the public consultation stage, he advised, would enable the public to comment on how best it felt the authority should address this large deficit.

Mr Colyer drew attention to a report which the Council had commissioned from consultants who had a proven track record in their understanding of local government, namely iESE. Their report, he added, formed part of the Cabinet agenda and would provide councillors with some areas of possible review, as the Council looked at ways of addressing the budget deficit.

The Chairman opened up the subject for discussion and the following points were made:

- The Chairman began the debate by supporting the proposal that council tax be increased by 1.9%, the maximum permitted before the need for a referendum to be held. Helen Featherstone enquired how much such an increase would cost council tax payers. Mr Colyer advised that, for a band D property, the annual increase would be in the region of £2.90;
- The Chairman asked what the consequences would be of using the authority's reserves to support its revenue expenditure. Mr Colyer advised that the Council's reserves already helped to deliver its capital programme, adding that it was the authority's policy to maintain a balanced budget, i.e. only to spend what was achievable through grant and other income;
- The Chairman asked if the Council were providing some services which were not considered essential. Linked to this, Marguerita Morton asked to what extent TWBC was combining its services with neighbouring councils. Mr Colyer advised that the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership (MKIP) had been put in place exactly for that reason, i.e. to provide partnership working across three Kent authorities, of which Tunbridge Wells was one. This initiative had been successful, he added, in bringing down costs to all three authorities, as well as making services more resilient, through the ability of covering staffing absences across the three councils;
- David Morris suggested that the Council might look to charge owners of larger, expensive cars who parked overnight on the road, as a new income generation initiative. John Forster felt that most people had no choice other than to park in the road, as much of the town's housing stock had not been built with the modern car in mind;
- Cllr David Neve asked whether, under the MKIP partnership arrangements, there was a need to employ the number of heads of service the authority had.

Mr Colyer advised that the MKIP initiative had reduced the number of managers but added that this was the type of suggestion which could be looked at, as part of the cost-saving work by the Cabinet;

- John Cunningham felt that having the second lowest council tax rate in the county was not necessarily something to be proud of. He suggested that many people would accept that the council tax charge should rise in line with the cost of living, thus being linked to the 'consumer price index' (currently 2.7%) or the 'retail price index' (3.2%) was not unreasonable. George Lawson felt that a 1.9% increase was more reasonable, as local government faced such a difficult financial future;
- Cllr David Neve reiterated his view that council tax payers were suffering from the historical decisions to keep year-on-year tax rises low, artificially in his opinion. However, he felt it would be wasted money if the Council decided to hold a referendum in order to raise the council tax by more than 1.9%;
- David Morris expressed support not only for greater partnership working with other councils but also for the suggestion that the number of councillors on TWBC should be reduced. Mr Colyer outlined the procedure for this, namely that, through a full Council decision, the Boundary Commission could be invited to undertake a review. Realistically, he added, revenue savings of approximately £200k per annum could be achieved;
- Philip Whitbourn voiced his support for a reduction in the number of TWBC councillors, a proposal which Cllr Ben Chapelard felt should be pursued. Cllr Catherine Mayhew added that reducing three-member wards by one councillor – as had been suggested – was not how Boundary Commission reviews operated. Their approach, she added, was to achieve electoral equality, so that each ward member was representing approximately the same number of the electorate, thus reviews often resulted in ward boundary changes in order to achieve that key aim;
- Cllr Bob Backhouse added that most town-based councillors became very much involved in ward issues which, in other parts of the Borough, were parish or town council matters, so their workload was heavier than might first be thought.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked the Forum members for their thoughts and suggestions on the Council's budget pressures and, once more, invited volunteers to join him on the Finance and Other Issues Working Group, which would be meeting to consider a formal response to TWBC's consultation processes.

There were no other action points agreed under this item.

7. PARKING IN THE TOWN CENTRE

Jane Fenwick, Acting Chairman of the Traffic Strategy Working Group, welcomed the opportunity for the Town Forum to discuss parking issues in the town, ahead of TWBC preparing its draft Parking Strategy in the new year.

Mrs Fenwick reiterated the Town Forum's preferred long term position, i.e. the provision of relief road around the town. In the meantime, she added, the focus should be on tackling congestion. She advised that her working group had recently conducted a survey of Town Forum members, one of the key outcomes from which had been member concerns about the extent of residential streets that were full of

commuter/worker parking. Other main issues, Mrs Fenwick added, were the under-use of the town centre car parks and the impact of delivery vehicles and parked cars on some of the main thoroughfares.

Rosemarie Bennett, TWBC's Parking Manager, provided some context for the Parking Strategy which would be available in its draft form in the spring. She advised that it was required to support the Transport Strategy, which had come before the Town Forum earlier in the year also in its draft form and which was expected to be presented as a final document in April.

Mrs Bennett summarised the approach being taken to the draft Parking Strategy, which would set out a number of key objectives and actions and she welcomed an early input from the Town Forum on what they felt the priorities should be. She stressed that a comprehensive approach was being followed within the draft strategy, rather than the piecemeal actions which had been undertaken before, often in response to having to deal with particular issues.

The Chairman opened up the debate for wider discussion, when the following points were made:

- Cllr Alan McDermott, TWBC's Portfolio-holder for Planning and Transportation, reminded the Forum that the draft Parking Strategy was being prepared against a backdrop of approximately 1,200 free car park on-street spaces in the town centre;
- Philip Whitbourn enquired if the 'pay on exit' principle, as debated at the full Council meeting in April, were to feature in the draft document. Cllr McDermott advised that there was a reasonable chance that there could be a trial of this method of charging in the RVP car park next year. Mrs Bennett added that the exact system was known as 'post payment'. She advised that this was based on credit card payment but that TWBC was looking to work with the providers to see if cash payment and/or a top-up card option could be offered;
- On the 'post payment' issue, Stephen Bowser asked how it could operate without barriers in place, to prevent mis-use. Mrs Bennett advised that a motorist, having registered their credit card with the system, would be charged a 'full day' rate if payment were not made on exit;
- John Forster enquired whether a system could be considered which operated on the lines of vehicle recognition or congestion charging. Mrs Bennett advised that the car parking legislation under which TWBC operated prevented it from using 'automatic number plate recognition' technology;
- Cllr Bob Backhouse believed that most residents preferred not to be bound by a time limitation when they parked. He added that the Council was therefore trying to respond to that situation by examining a flexible alternative;
- Mary Wardrop added that she knew that many visitors to the town preferred some form of 'pay on exit', especially if they were from overseas, where such a system was more common. This therefore had implications for the town's efforts to make it more of a destination attraction, she felt;
- Mrs Fenwick returned to the theme of encouraging greater use of the car parks, thereby reducing the congestion caused by on-street parking in residential streets. She felt that the authority might wish to take a lead in discussing with

some of the larger employers in town whether preferential charging rates could be offered, in order to incentivise far greater car park use;

- Cllr Mrs Mayhew felt that the proposal to charge for evening and overnight parking in the town centre car parks ran the risk of greater use of residential streets, using what had occurred in Yew Tree Road car park – where charging had been introduced – as evidence of her view. Mrs Bennett advised that, as part of TWBC's review of car parking, all resident parking schemes would be examined, to see what impact the charging structure was having, in order to see if changes were needed. For example, Mrs Bennett advised, changing the period when the residents' scheme was operable to end at 8pm instead of 6pm might mitigate any adverse impact;
- Stephen Bowser returned to the '30 minutes free' aspect and asked whether a 'post payment' system could provide this;
- John Cunningham voiced concern about the use of roads such as Warwick Park, where all-day parking occurred. He suggested that either a 2-hour limit might be appropriate or restrictions applied for an hour in the morning and similar in the afternoon, as was applied elsewhere in the town;
- Jane Fenwick asked whether 'red-line' restrictions could apply in some key roads, which would prevent any parking from occurring, including blue-badge holders, in the interests of maintaining traffic flow. She added that possibly there was a need to advise blue-badge holders of the free spaces allocated in each car park, close to the lifts, in order to encourage greater use. Cllr McDermott advised that 'red lines' were only permissible in London and in the West Midlands, adding that blue-badge holders had a legal entitlement to park for up to three hours wherever they wished, provided they were not causing an obstruction;
- Jane Fenwick enquired how specific parking problems should be communicated to TWBC's Parking team. Mrs Bennett advised that this could be done either by e-mail or, if the situation were more urgent, then by phone and she would arrange for a civil enforcement officer to attend and view. Mrs Bennett added that a photo of the incident was always helpful, to be sent to her team, which would provide advance notice of the issue, before attendance.

Contact details for the Parking team are:

01892 526121 – such calls will be directed to the parking operations team.

The Chairman thanked Mrs Bennett and her team for their constant work in the town centre and for her presentation.

There were no specific action points arising from this item.

8. WORKING GROUPS

Update reports were made from the working groups as follows:

Water in the Wells Working Group – The Chairman, Michael Holman, had provided a written update report, which had been circulated with the agenda. He drew attention to the following specific details:

- (i) He welcomed TWBC's intention to prepare a five-year plan for the town's development and particularly looked forward to information on the inclusion of water features within that vision;
- (ii) Prof. Holman advised that graphic design students at K College had been given a brief to devise a logo for the Water in the Wells CIC, based on the vision of "refreshing health and wealth in Tunbridge Wells – a spa town";
- (iii) In respect of proposals for the development of Knights Park, the working group members were concerned that there appeared to be little in the design to demonstrate the scheme's link with Tunbridge Wells and its spa town heritage.
- (iv) Prof. Holman added that he had written to Greg Clark MP to inform him of the aspirations of Water in the Wells and had received a letter expressing Mr Clark's wholehearted support for its work.

Cllr Bob Backhouse advised that, following discussion with the developers of Knights Park, he was aware that they were willing to incorporate a water feature and added that he was happy to facilitate progress towards this, if that were helpful.

Cllr Backhouse added that he was also aware that TN2 in Sherwood were also keen to have a water feature, as part of the 'Lakewood' development. Again, he offered to facilitate discussion and effort towards achieving that objective.

In summing up, Prof. Holman again sought the assistance of any Forum member who could bring experience and knowledge of fund-raising and publicity to assist the CIC in its work.

RESOLVED – That the progress report be accepted.

Leisure, Culture and Tourism Working Group – In the absence of June Bridgeman, Chairman of this working group, David Wakefield reported on the publication of their 'Tunbridge Wells Souvenirs' report, following its earlier circulation in draft form to all Town Forum members. The final report had now been produced and distributed, to which the Forum's endorsement was now sought.

Prof. Holman welcomed the report and its 'next steps'. He added that it was important for the Town Forum to identify the key elements and ensure that these were followed through.

Mary Wardrop, a member of the working group, conveyed Mrs Bridgeman's invitation to all Town Forum members to join the group in seeing that these actions were taken forward.

RESOLVED – That the 'Tunbridge Wells Souvenirs' report be endorsed, the working group members be thanked for their hard work and commitment to the initiative and any member wishing to be involved in the next stages be invited to contact the Chairman, June Bridgeman.

Traffic Strategy Working Group – The Acting Chairman, Jane Fenwick, had submitted an update report with the agenda, which covered the main areas of activity since the last Town Forum meeting.

Mrs Fenwick drew attention to the Carrs Corner situation, where the new roundabout was causing so much difficulty for pedestrians. Cllr Catherine Mayhew advised that KCC Highways had accepted that they had made an error in the design and, following a site meeting involving TWBC members and officers, they were looking at the best

remedy. Mrs Mayhew added that this was an issue which required not just an immediate solution but a long-lasting one too.

Cllr James Scholes advised that KCC would be reporting back in the near future to TWBC members and officers leading on this. Cllr Alan McDermott added that KCC would be completing the planting phase of the work that weekend.

RESOLVED – That the progress report be accepted.

Planning and Development Strategy – Michael Doyle, Chairman of this working group, advised that the key issue was concern about the outcome of the Site Allocations consultation process, due in the spring. He added that a close watch was being maintained over a number of planning applications being submitted for housing in advance of the agreed Site Allocation document being in place. Rural fringe developments, he added, were of particular interest.

In support of that general view, Cllr Alan McDermott advised that a planning inspector's decision was awaited on a site in Hawkhurst, the outcome of which had the potential for a significant impact on housing developments.

The Chairman of the Town Forum thanked Mr Doyle for maintaining a close watch on this issue.

Finance and Other Issues – David Wakefield, Chairman of this working group, advised that the group had recently responded to TWBC's consultation on council tax support.

The next task, he added, was to consider TWBC's consultation on the draft budget for 2014/15, the period for which would begin on 6 December. Cllr James Scholes, Portfolio-holder for Finance and Governance, offered to meet with the working group, to assist them in this role. Cllr Scholes added that TWBC had been very successful to date in its programme of disposing of non-performing assets, which had not only realised considerable sums of revenue but had also reduced the authority's maintenance requirement. Prof. Holman welcomed Cllr Scholes' report and stressed the Town Forum's support for income generating initiatives.

The verbal update report was accepted.

9. 2014 YEAR OF ANNIVERSARIES

Michael Holman had circulated a report with the agenda which explained how the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Twinning Charter between Tunbridge Wells and Wiesbaden formed part of a number of 2014 anniversaries which TWBC would be celebrating (75th anniversary of the opening of the Assembly Hall) or commemorating (the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War).

Prof. Holman's report summarised the events currently being planned by the Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association relating to the Charter and sought the Town Forum's endorsement, as part of the year of celebrations.

The Chairman added that details would emerge soon on the town's plans for commemorating the outbreak of the First World War.

RESOLVED – That the programme of events celebrating the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Twinning Charter between Tunbridge Wells and Wiesbaden be endorsed.

10. FUTURE EVENTS

The Chairman drew attention to the Calverley Grounds ice rink attraction and to the current art exhibition taking place in the Tunbridge Wells Art Gallery, 'A Grand Tour', featuring works by Gainsborough, Reynolds and Lawrence, which was running until 12 January.

11. FUTURE CONSULTATION ISSUES

Mike McGeary had circulated a list of future consultation issues which the Borough Council would be leading on, drawn from TWBC's 'Notice of Intent to Make Key Decisions'. The Town Forum working groups were urged to take part in the formal consultation processes which related to key issues such as: TWBC's draft budget for 2014/15; the Strategic Plan etc.

There were no action points arising from this report.

12. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

(a) Léonie Harrington, KCC's Community Engagement Officer, advised that KCC's 2014/15 budget consultation would be ending on 13 December; she urged Town Forum members to express their views and preferences on-line by visiting kent.gov.uk/budget;

(b) Miss Harrington also advised that, following consultation, KCC had determined that Tunbridge Wells should be the first district to have street lights in specific streets converted to 'part-night' operation. She added that residents could use a 'find my nearest' link from the following address, in order to see if lights were being switched off from midnight until 5.30am in their area: kent.gov.uk/streetlights

(c) Cllr Bob Backhouse advised that hopes were high that a meeting between Greg Clark MP and Network Rail would lead to the two railway bridges at the foot of Mount Pleasant finally being redecorated soon;

(d) Philip Whitbourn asked for support for his wish that a wreath be laid on behalf of the Town Forum at subsequent Remembrance Sunday services. This view was warmly endorsed, to begin in 2014.

Action: That the Chairman lay a wreath on behalf of the Town Forum at the 2014 and all subsequent Remembrance Sunday services.

13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 16 January 2014 at 6.30pm

Subsequent meetings:

20 March

8 May

10 July

25 September

27 November (including the AGM)

The meeting concluded at 8.30pm.