



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 30 March 2023, held online starting at 6pm

ATTENDANCE

1

Member Organisations:

Beulah Road Residents' Association – Stuart Anderson | Boyne Park Residents' Association – Sue Bishop and Dorothea Holman | Calverley Park Residents' Association – Jane Fenwick | Civic Society of Royal Tunbridge Wells – Brian Lippard and John de Lucy | Friends of The Commons – Joy Podbury | Friends of The Grove and The Avenues Residents' Association – Tim Tempest | Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery – John de Lucy | Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery – David Bushell | Grantley Court Residents Association – Lorna Blackmore | Molyneux Park Gardens Residents' Association – Don Sloan | Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District – Caroline Auckland | Trinity Theatre – Nick Mowat | The Forum – Carolyn Gray | Tunbridge Wells Bicycle User Group – Adrian Berendt | Tunbridge Wells Older People's Forum – Ruth Chambers | Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association – Michael Holman and David Wakefield | Culture Hub – Mike Trudel | Inner London Road Residents Association – Pat Wilson and Carol Wilson | Royal Wells Park Residents' Group – Paul Bright | Poona Road Residents Association – Alastair Tod | Culverden Residents' Association – Michael Lees | RTW in Bloom – Katharina Mahler-Bech

Councillor Members:

Culverden Ward – Cllr Justine Rutland and Cllr Martin Brice | St James' Ward – Cllr Ben Chapelard | St. John's ward – Cllr Marguerita Morton and Cllr Peter Lidstone | Sherwood Ward – Cllr Hugo Pound | Park Ward – Cllr Victoria White and Cllr Nick Pope

Others in Attendance:

Borough Council Officers – Carlos Hone (Head of Planning) | Secretary – Emer Moran.

MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

2 No membership changes were discussed.

MINUTES OF THE AGM MEETING DATED 24 NOVEMBER 2022

3 **RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the AGM held on 24 November 2022 be approved

MINUTES OF ORDINARY MEETING DATED 24 NOVEMBER 2022

4 **RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the meeting held on 24 November 2022 be approved

MINUTES OF ORDINARY MEETING DATED 19 JANUARY 2023

5 **RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2023 be approved

UPDATES FROM MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

6

Daniel Colborne, newly appointed Ranger for Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons gave a brief introduction to his role and work:

- A focus on where the Common sat within the town centre and 3 key components: safety; ecology/biodiversity; and community engagement.
- Sought to capitalise and optimise views and sense of open space within the Common.
- A consultant had been commissioned who had produced a plan going forward with a raft of different surveys expected to start in October 2023, in order to produce a 5 year ecological plan.

Michael Holman, President of Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association (TWTFA), gave an update on recent activities:

- In early May students from the Hermann Ehlers school in Wiesbaden were expected in Tunbridge Wells as part of a weeklong trip to Kent, where they were to visit the Amelia Scott and the Pantiles along with a tour of the town. It was felt that Brexit had made arranging such trips 'impossible', but that short trips such as this kept doors open with Wiesbaden.
- TWTFA were acting as an intermediary between community groups that shared common interests in Tunbridge Wells and Wiesbaden, recently building an exciting link between The Oaks Specialist College and similar organisations in Wiesbaden which provided specialist education for young adults with learning difficulties. In June, 4 students and 2 teachers from The Oaks were going to Wiesbaden for 5 days to share their experiences.
- In October, Wiesbaden's Red Heralds marching band were to visit Tunbridge Wells, in conjunction with the local Sea Cadets, along with two dance groups for a programme of music and dance which was still being prepared.
- The Wiesbaden Wine Festival, which took place over 10 days in August each year, had asked the TWTFA to identify a local vineyard to be named Twin Town Vintner of honour in August 2024. Discussions were ongoing with local vineyards to gauge levels of interest.

Nick Mowat, Executive Director and acting Chief Executive of Trinity Theatre and Arts Centre, gave an update:

- Financially, 2022 had been tough. With post-pandemic audiences not returning to pre-pandemic levels and disappointing Christmas Box Office numbers. Furthermore, there were unexpected VAT implications from the ongoing Clocktower project which had caused a significant financial hit on their accounts.
- Fundraising efforts to raise £25,000 by the end of January and a further £75,000 by the end of February to end the financial year in a better position had been successful, hitting both targets. This meant that the Theatre would end the financial year not owing any money and starting the next financial year on a firmer footing, with invaluable help from visitors, Members, volunteers and staff. No further redundancies would be made following a small staff restructuring earlier last year.
- The summer schedule (April-September) would be released in the coming days, including in June several extraordinary performances from a French company before they go to Edinburgh, and in July an

Australian company bringing a show called 'Splash Test Dummies'.

- Further fundraising events would be held throughout the year, including on Sunday 4th June when several West End performers would provide an evening of music from West End musicals at a black tie event.

Ruth Chambers of Tunbridge Wells Older People's Forum gave a brief update:

- The Older People's Forum covered the whole Borough and had been around since 2011 with approximately 270 members.
- There had been a vacancy for a Treasurer/Membership Secretary which had been open for the last year. If no one could fill the position the group was in jeopardy, so any volunteers would be welcome.
- A report had just been completed on "Where are we now: The New Normal' after Lockdown and to update the initial 2020 report on how the pandemic had affected older people in particular. There were 167 respondents, with a selection of closed questions and open comment sections. This was a 50 page document with analysis of responses as well as summaries. The main identified concerns were: the use of technology to access basic services with no alternatives; getting around, socialising and using public services; the decreasing public transport reliability and frequency, and; availability of medical services and ease of access in health and social care. Conclusions and suggestions for improvement were made in the report. These suggestions also overlapped with other vulnerable groups.

FUTURE MEETINGS AND COUNCIL SUPPORT

- 7 Town Forum Chairman Don Sloan gave a brief introduction to the topic and the leaflet 'Town Forum in Action' sent to Members within the agenda papers which showed the work of the Town Forum, as well as potential discussion points for the item, relating to the future of the Town Forum and ongoing pressures on the Forum and Council in general.

Discussion from Members included:

- Brian Lippard gave a prepared statement regarding his thoughts on the Forum's situation and that if TWBC could not provide the resources of the Council Chamber without charge, when the Town Forum had no financial resources, there would be no choice but to disband the Forum.
- It was noted by the Chair that the Town Forum did rely upon the Council's support not just for venue but for GDPR and administrative needs.
- Leader of the Council, Cllr Ben Chapelard, disagreed with Mr Lippard's comments and described the disbanding of the Town Forum as 'disastrous', but that the current position meant that Local Government was being starved of funds with a likely outcome of more Unitary Councils nationwide. The leasing of some of the Town Hall to Town Square was to partly remedy this financial situation with cost savings. The Borough Partnership and TWBC were keen to look at alternative solutions for the Town Forum, including holding the meetings at alternative venues and spreading administrative duties among members.
- Town Forum Deputy Chairman Adrian Berendt noted that as a member of the Cross-Party Working Group who looked at alternative working solutions for the Town Hall, he strongly supported the outsourcing of the Town Hall and Town Square would bring vitality to

the building which hadn't existed for many years. He noted that town centre residents did not have a Town Council to represent them, but did produce approx.. £2 million in Special Expenses and he did not feel it unreasonable to find funding from out of this amount. Otherwise there was the option to form a Town Council, which had its pros and cons.

- Mention was made that if there had been knowledge that Town Square weren't going to make allowances to community groups such as the Town Forum, then this would have made a difference in the decision.
- Ruth Chambers disagreed with Cllr Chapelard's proposal that the Town Forum move around, as it was a closed meeting with little benefit to holding it in different locations with no access to microphones etc, and these locations would need paying for.
- Cllr Hugo Pound mentioned that in the first instance they should allow William Benson, CEO of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council to negotiate with Town Square for provision for the Town Forum, and that local councillors would keep the pressure up. He mentioned that there were several locations within the town centre with suitable accessibility and the Town Forum could explore alternative locations. He also noted that online MS Teams meetings gave more options for attendance than in-person meetings, and could be alternated with less formal in-person gatherings to promote cooperation and engagement with each other. He also stated that if Government was moving towards single-tiered, unitary councils, then the argument was strengthened to establish a formal Town Council to provide democratic representation to Town Centre residents.
- Chairman Don Sloan stressed the importance of in-person meetings to getting Town Forum business done.
- Stuart Anderson asked that the Forum did not discount Town Square yet, and that negotiations may go well to secure use of the Council Chamber. The Forum also did not know the cost of the Chamber to hire, so it did not benefit to get too far ahead. However, he also stated that the Forum could use the Showfields Community Centre, which did not have recording equipment but did have enough space and agreed that moving around may help understanding of the area they were representing.
- Cllr Justine Rutland echoes Cllr Pound and Cllr Chapelard's comments that the Town Forum was important to the Council and hadn't been singled out in any way in negotiations as Commons Conservators were facing similar issues and were seeking a community rate to use facilities in the Town Hall.

TOWN CENTRE AREA PLAN AND LOCAL PLAN

8

Councillor Hugo Pound, Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning, gave a short introduction prior to Carlos Hone, Head of Planning at TWBC, giving a presentation on the Town Centre Area Plan:

- The Town Centre Plan was to be a Land Use Planning document, similar to the Borough-wide Local Plan in that it was to be used for decision making. It had been put together by a Town Centre Working Group with members from Councillors, the Town Forum, KCC, TWBC officers and youth representatives etc. Consultants had been used from LDA Design to oversee the initial works and Town Centre Study.
- Engagement so far for the Town Centre Study had included a walking tour with consultants and the Town Centre Working Group; 3 separate workshops, a public pop-up event and an online consultation.

- The online Talking Point consultation was advertised via social media, press releases, local newsletters, schools and Parish/Town Councils, as well as in neighbouring Authorities.
- The wards situated closest to the Town Centre were most represented in the results of the online consultation. Most respondents were aged over 45. Very few were under 26, so further thought was needed on how to engage more younger people, especially those aged 16-35.
- Based on the responses, the most common reason for visiting the Town Centre was to go shopping, followed by use of leisure facilities and to visit parks and green spaces.
- Other centres that respondents preferred to visit were Maidstone, followed by Tonbridge, London, Sevenoaks and other local town centres.
- Most of the respondents/residents preferred to walk to the town centre and to drive. The most popular car park used by respondents was Royal Victoria Place, followed by Crescent Road, on-street parking and then Meadow Road Car Park. Improving the connectivity of the Town Centre by more sustainable modes of transport (cycling, bus, rail) through the Plan would be of benefit.
- Respondents identified a need in the Town Centre for: evening economy (such as a cinema); more leisure facilities and community events; a greater variety of shops, including independent shops and more affordable retailers for young and older people; improvements to the accessibility of the High Street/Pantiles; investment in the overall enhancement/attractiveness of Royal Tunbridge Wells.
- An interactive map was included in the online consultation, with 55 contributors and 178 pins placed, identifying: a lack of appropriate crossing points in various locations around the town; traffic (speeding cars, air pollution, illegal parking etc) with residents and businesses both concerned with the enhancements of the top part of the town, particularly around Camden Road and Grosvenor Road; and, need for more innovative planning and development around the town to maintain harmony with the heritage and historic buildings of the town centre. Other trends were for a farmers market, more shops and cycling infrastructure.
- There was also direct consultation with local businesses. It was hoped that future rounds of consultation would increase the numbers of businesses who responded. Out of the 26 businesses who responded, 12 answered that their staff drove to work and 8 answered that their staff usually worked. None by train. Most frequently used car parks for commuters were Crescent Road and Royal Victoria Place, but most employees preferred on-street parking.
- Businesses identified the following priorities: a reduction in parking fees or the introduction of a 'park and ride' scheme; the promotion of events to increase footfall; creation of better links between the top and lower parts of town; and, traffic congestion, proposing better cycling infrastructure and free short-term parking to increase visitor numbers to the town centre.
- The Town Centre Study was intended to set out a vision for RTW Town Centre and how it was to evolve up to the year 2040. It was the outcome of several technical studies and engagement reports and included: a number of principles to deliver the outcomes of the vision; a masterplan framework; proposals for a number of key projects; and intervention and quick wins.
- The masterplan framework intended to split the town centre into 4 separate quarters: Grosvenor Road and Camden Road to the north would provide a unique and vibrant destination; to the west the train

station and surrounding area was to give a sense of arrival to the town for visitors and improve connections to green spaces; Mount Pleasant Road and Crescent Road to the east were to provide a dynamic, thriving quarter focused on civic life and culture; and to the south the High Street and Pantiles showcased the heritage and heart of the town.

- Documents produced so far within the Town Centre Study included the Town Centre Transport and Carbon Baseline Report (City Science); the Town Centre Retail Study and Health Check (Knight Frank); a Town Centre Stakeholder and Community Engagement report (LDA Design), using the consultation and workshop events; and a Town Centre Study Baseline Evidence Report (LDA Design) which provided a comprehensive summary of all the study documents as well as referencing planning policy and a SWOT analysis of the built environment, economics, carbon emissions and decarbonisation and transportation infrastructure.
- The Plan was currently at the stage of calling for suitable sites, land and buildings available for development within the next 5 years, with a comprehensive car parking strategy assessment due to be completed and potentially further evidence studies needed. A formal statutory public consultation was due to start in late 2023 for a minimum of 6 weeks. Following the consultation the Plan would be drafted and tested prior to submission.

Cllr Hugo Pound then provided further discussion prior to the broader discussion:

- In relation to the 7 principles set out within the Town Centre Study, there had been discussion with several members of the Town Forum to make sure residents were shaping the vision of their town centre. It was not so much a planning document as a vision of what the town centre should be and the planning elements would follow after this. This was then relayed to Carlos.
- Not enough was known to give definitive answers or solutions, but from all the consultations and workshops etc which had so far gone on, the 7 principles had been identified to build the vision.
- The next stage would involve everyone who attended the first workshops to go over the initial report and ask whether it covered their views.
- The Chairman stressed that he would like the Town Forum to contribute to the Plan before it was 'fixed'. Cllr Pound stated that the Town Forum had been well represented in the initial workshops so would be able to give feedback, and the Town Forum would also be able to contribute to the public consultation both as a group and as individual members. .
- Carlos Hone confirmed the workshop participants would be given further opportunity to contribute prior to the document being finalised and he was happy to come back to the Town Forum and other community groups as part of the consultation exercise.

Questions and discussion included the following:

- The Plan had initially been expected to be adopted in late 2025, but there were delays as this timeframe had been created with the provision that the Borough-wide local plan would have been adopted by now, which it had not.
- It was noted by Carolyn Gray that the Town Forum skewed heavily in the older age range and that it was really important that younger

people were engaged with and their views found out before the Plan went any further, rather than the Forum's. This view was echoed by Sue Bishop. Cllr Pound responded by highlighting a suggestion made by Brian Lippard in a previous discussion in which activities and facilities within the town centre were tested against their usefulness to younger people, young families and other demographic groups to ensure they were meeting their needs.

- Jane Fenwick noted that there was a difference between Calverley Grounds and Calverley Park which wasn't correct in the masterplan framework and that access routes marked in the framework to Calverley Grounds went through private land off Crescent Road and down a path that was not a public right of way and that this needed amending. Cllr Pound disagreed with this, stating that the Council did know the difference between the Grounds and Park and that the framework shown was only a graphic and did not represent an accurate picture, but that he took her point.
- Brian Lippard questioned why the next stage of the process was a call for sites, which he felt was 'bottom-up' rather than solidifying a vision first, which would be more 'top-down', noting that the call for sites at this stage would limit the vision on what was available now. Carlos Hone confirmed that the Study document, which he had hoped to bring to the meeting but was still being completed, had the vision within it but that a call for sites was important to determine what land was available and which developers/land-owners were keen to see their land develop. It was an important part of the process and usual to do it not just once but potentially many times, as with other local and area plans.
- Stuart Anderson echoed Cllr Pound's original point that this was primarily a Planning document but that there was a lot of information that could be gained from LDA Design and their material to create the Vision, and that it could be looked at as two separate things – the statutory obligation that Carlos would be dealing with, and the 'softer' Vision side which the Councillors and Forum needed to focus on, therefore to get less hung up on the fixed statutory routes and more on how to add substance to the 7 principles identified by the Consultants.
- Carol Wilson questioned what would happen in the Plan to the busy roads within the town centre which had become more congested due to pedestrianisation of some of the Town Centre. The response was that the principles set out within the Plan showed that streets were to be redefined as spaces for active travel and public transport, but that detail would come at a later date to what, if any, changes would be made to the road network.
- Dorothea Holman asked that the public transport network within the town centre be improved. It was noted in response that the funding of the private bus network was outside the scope of the Town Centre Plan but that within the Local Plan there were ambitious housing plans which would look to provide financial support towards improving bus services. It was also noted by Cllr Lidstone that much of public transport was controlled at county council level.
- The importance of getting younger people to live in the centre of town by providing affordable housing to ensure the sustainability of the town was highlighted. Carlos agreed that town centre living was a key factor and that the emerging Local Plan identified a need to deliver between 150-200 homes within the area but that affordability was an issue. Cllr Pound added the fact that Tunbridge Wells was the only borough in Kent in which the population aged 25-49 was decreasing

because of affordability issues. New housing needed to be affordable and rentable to ensure vibrancy within the town centre.

- Issues at road junctions such as Grantley Court were raised and questioned whether these would form part of the Plan. Issues were asked to be passed to the Planning Department but that there would need to be a formal process for public consultation. It was agreed that there were particular 'node' points which needed focus and attention to make safe and workable for all road users and pedestrians.

Carlos Hone, Head of Planning, then gave an update on the Borough's Local Plan:

- Recent revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in which the Government undertook a consultation between 22nd December and 2nd March. TWBC submitted a response during this time. It was intended that amendments to the NPPF would be adopted into national policy by the Spring, becoming part of the process for decision-making by TWBC.
- In terms of the revisions, the standard method of calculating local housing need remained unchanged, although this was subject to review based on census projections to be published next year. Local Authorities were being allowed to avoid unduly dense development to meet housing need as well as to avoid reviewing Green Belt boundaries.
- Meanwhile, the test of 'soundness' for Local Plan testing and adoption was to be softened, needing only to be effective and deliverable. But this did not affect Plans already in advanced stages, such as Tunbridge Wells'.
- Local Authorities with an up-to-date Local Plan were not to be required to continually show a deliverable five-year housing land supply and historic oversupply could also be used in five-year housing land supply calculations.
- Measures were also being put in place to tackle and penalise developers for slowly building out of permissions.
- Other revisions to the NPPF were regarding: wind energy; energy efficiency; biodiversity net gain; building beautiful; and more homes for social rent.
- The TWBC Local Plan had been in production since 2016 and was now at advanced stages. The Council had received the Inspectors post-hearings letter, setting out the initial findings of the Planning Inspector and was invited to consider the issues raised and the suggested ways forward.
- In regards to the Inspector's findings on the Green Belt, with TWBC having looked at maximising densities in urban areas and the possibility of neighbouring areas accommodating additional housing growth, the release of some Green Belt was in principle seen as reasonable and appropriate strategy and allowed by the NPPF as part of Plan-making. But the Inspector felt there was further work to be completed to consider omission sites and whether they stayed discounted. This work was being completed by Consultants on behalf of the Council.
- In relation to the development of 2800 homes proposed for Tudeley Village, the Inspector raised a number of issues. The release of Green Belt had been considered an appropriate strategy by TWBC as identified in the NPPF and the Council had provided significant evidence to support this, but the Inspector raised issues about whether the site and strategy for TV were justified or effective. The Inspector felt that exceptional circumstances had not been

demonstrated in order to release Green Belt land at this stage. TWBC had been working with consultants to resolve issues and review evidence such as accessibility of the site by sustainable modes of transport.

- The Inspector felt that the expansion of Paddock Wood/East Capel represented a 'logical choice' for growth, but TWBC needed to ensure that the development came forward in a comprehensive manner, so looking at policy and how it was written. Some locations of new housing, community and employment facilities were deemed to be in areas of higher risk of flooding and were not justifiable. These proposals were therefore being reviewed with the Council's consultants in order to set out parameters for the scale, type and mix of uses permitted, while being mindful of the flood risk. Then, as part of the Tudeley Village review, the education infrastructure requirements of Paddock Wood would be reviewed.
- The Inspector had fewer concerns about proposals for Royal Tunbridge Wells. They recommended revisions to Cinema Site police to allow more flexibility, as well as not supporting the safeguarding of Colebrook House for future unidentified development. Further consultation was also required on Hawkenbury access plans.
- Overall the Inspector recognised that a significant amount of work had gone into the preparation of the Plan. It was positively prepared in seeking to meet housing needs despite large areas of Green Belt and AONB, especially in relation to the Council's relationships with neighbouring Authorities. The majority of changes identified and required were straightforward.
- The aim was to present the recommendations to Council Members in June 2023 and then consult on any proposed changes over the summer. Focused Hearings on the changes in strategy were to be held in November. If the Hearings were completed satisfactorily, then a public consultation would go ahead prior to adoption of the Plan.

Questions and discussion included:

- Cllr Pound spoke of his role to protect the Officers to allow them to get on with the work that the Inspectorate had asked of them. It was important to recognise that while there were resourcing challenges across the Council that Carlos and his team had done a fantastic job in getting the Local Plan to the advanced stage of development it was currently at, which was a credit to them.

UPDATE FROM THE BOROUGH COUNCIL

9

Councillor Justine Rutland, Cabinet Member for or Tunbridge Wells Town and Local Areas, had updates which given time restrictions she agreed to email out to Town Forum members. She did give a verbal update on Public Realm 2, the traffic restrictions in front of the War Memorial:

- The scheme was to become enforced and go live on 1st April, and she and Cllr Lidstone were keen to hear feedback on the scheme from Town Forum members.
- Cllr Rutland thanked Adrian Berendt and Jane Fenwick and other Town Forum members for conducting traffic counts and giving recommendations for improving the scheme, which would be taken to the Joint Transportation Board on April 17th.
- Cllr Rutland particularly wanted feedback on disadvantages to residents of York and Dudley Road, as well as from businesses on Monson Road.

REPORTS FROM THE TOWN FORUM WORKING GROUPS

- 10 The Chairman asked David Wakefield to speak regarding the Finance Working Group:
- David announced he would be stepping down from the role, and that whoever took on the Working Group needn't be an accountant as there was no accountancy involved, but have drive and energy to take over.
 - The Chairman thanked David for his fantastic contribution to the Forum over many years, giving ideas/feedback, having meetings with Councillors and responding to Consultations.

URGENT BUSINESS OR TOPICS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

- 11 No urgent business or topics for future meetings were discussed.

FUTURE MEETINGS

- 12 The next meeting was scheduled for Thursday 25th May 2023 at Townhall.