



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

Draft minutes

Meeting of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum held on Thursday 31 March 2011

In the Chair – Cllr Peter Crawford

Present –

Katharina Mahler-Bech, Jenina Bas Pendry, John Forster, June Bridgeman, Angela Philips, David Bushell, Peter Perry, Betsy Dix, Altan Omer, Michael Holman, Chris Thomas, Linda Chamberlain, Dorothea Holman, Jeanne Michau, Philip Whitbourn, George Lawson, Michael Doyle, John Goodfellow, Mary Wardrop, David Wakefield, Anne Stobo, David Morris,

Councillors Ben Chapelard, David Neve, Lesley Herriot, Bill Hills, Ronen Basu, Frank Williams, David Jukes, Bob Atwood and James Scholes

Apologies –

Jane Fenwick, Kate Sergeant, Maggie Fraser, Chris Morris, Zoe Jangaard, Michael Larsen, Cllrs Catherine Mayhew, Tracey Moore, Peter Bulman and Trevor Poile.

Also in attendance

Cllr Stanley Ward

The Chairman proposed that because of the Easter holidays and the Royal Wedding Bank Holiday weekend, the meeting scheduled for Thursday April 28th be cancelled. This was agreed.

He also proposed that the order of the published agenda be altered to move item – Cllr Bob Atwood introducing himself and answering questions to be the first item. This too was agreed.

Item 5 – Cllr Atwood, Leader of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Cllr Atwood gave a short personal introduction, focused on regeneration and the Regeneration Company. He had wanted to fully understand the background to the company, the reason for seeking a private sector partner to ‘sweat the council’s assets’. He did understand that this was a model now being pursued by other council and saw that it was a way to bring in expertise and experience which the

council didn't have even though Laings is there to make a profit and the council is there to secure public benefit.

He feels that the very detailed shareholder agreement which is the governing document for TWRC should be published – with clear explanations as to why some sections had to be redacted before publication.

His much-publicised hitting of the 'pause button' was to give him time to consider options and to be able to go back to first principles – the most important of which is the need for an overall masterplan for the town, not merely a focus on individual sites within it. There will be no final decisions and no transfer of any TWBC asset until the 'pause button' was lifted. A masterplan would have to look at transport, parking, infrastructure and other related topics not just sites and will have to bear in mind the limits of council ownership and ability to act in relation to issues (such as transport) and land/buildings owned by others – for example Morrisons continuing to be willing to pay rent without occupying the building.

For Cllr Atwood the style, nature and culture of Tunbridge Wells is paramount. However current council assets cost money to run and maintain and this has to be looked at but there will be no radical changes without a clear mandate from the people.

Cllr Atwood (joined by Cllr Jukes and Cllr Scholes) then offered to answer a number of questions.

Question 1 – Will the master-planning exercise be transparent and follow RIBA-style standards? The exercise will welcome input from all concerned and Cllr Atwood wants it to be widely understood and owned by a broad range of residents, businesses, commuters etc.

Question 2 – The proposed 'unpicking' of the TWRC arrangement was welcomed as the questioner felt this had skewed to planning process. The specific question was in relationship to the Council's Chief Executive being a Director of TWRC and the potential for a conflict of interest. Was Cllr Atwood comfortable with this arrangement? He replied that no, he isn't - although since the decision-making power lies with the shareholders – John Laing and TWBC - the role of Directors is in some way nominal as they act under the direction of the shareholder.

Question 3 – Given the role that the local press has played as a source of information for local people, what more is the council going to do to counteract this? Cllr Atwood acceptance that the council 'must do better' but the press are the press and the key things for the council are to reduce the amount of debate and decision-making placed on the 'exempt' section of council agenda and sharpen-up its own act in the information it puts out directly to local residents.

Question 4 – As a follow-up to the earlier question regarding the Chief Executive as a Director of TWRC, are there plans to revert to the previous situation of 3 councillors as Directors and the officer-Director being the TWBC Director of Regeneration & Sustainability? The answer was yes, but that there is a need for continuity through the transition to this situation which the Chief Executive is providing.

Question 5 – Cllr Jukes was asked to share his thoughts as a former TWRC Director and soon to be portfolio holder. He answered that he had resigned as a Director because of feeling 'cut-out of the loop'

in relation to information and decisions (and gave some examples). He is already looking at the relationship between the council and Laings although he is broadly happy with it. He is looking at all sites which are potentially part of the arrangement and looking at re-prioritising them based on TWBC judgement, as he felt was now the case re Cranbrook. He reminded the Town Forum that this is only year 2 of a 10 year agreement so everyone should keep that timescale in mind in terms of both benefits and implementation.

Question 6 – Who exactly is the shareholder for TWBC? The questioner felt that it was from clear as to who was ‘pulling the strings’. Cllr Jukes answered that TWBC as a corporate body held the shares, not any individual person.

Question 6 – As a follow-on question Cllrs were asked if this meant that all shareholder matters were put to full Council and the answer was that a decision to transfer an asset can be made only by full Council; other matters are dealt with by the Cabinet and are subject to the Scrutiny process.

Question 7 – Does Cllr Jukes feel that the focus on Cranbrook could run the risk of detracting from the need for the town master-plan? He didn’t. He said that the two could run in parallel because Cranbrook was relatively simple and the key discussions with local people had now taken place. It will need time to consider all the inter-relationships of the sites in the town and that ought not to be rushed.

Question 8 – When will the council be pulling together the responses to the TCAAP, the conclusions from the parking strategy (and its link to the proposals for the Great Hall Car Park)? A written answer to this question will be provided from Cllr Ransley.

Question 9 – In the consultation process for the Civic Complex the questioner suggested that a diagramme showing the project cycle or process map for all sites (from naming the site to planning application) be prepared and communicated widely. Will this be done? The answer was ‘yes’.

Cllrs Atwood and Jukes were thanked for both their attendance and their frankness and both left the meeting at this point.

Item 2 - Membership Changes

Robert Hardy pointed out that Chris Woodward had voluntarily stepped down as a representative to the Town Forum.

Item 3 – Minutes of the November 2010 and January 2011 meetings

The attendance list for the November needed to be amended to show that the representatives from the Civic Society at that meeting were Andrew Bridge and John Cunningham. With this alteration they were agreed as a correct record.

The minutes of the January meeting were agreed as correct, but the proposed addition to those minutes set out at the end of the notes of the February was not supported. Following a formal motion supported 20:2, the February notes were amended to end at the reference to the time of the end of the meeting.

Item 3a – Notes of the February meeting

The body of the notes were agreed (subject to the deletion mentioned above) but alterations were proposed to the amended constitution appended to the notes.

Firstly, John Goodfellow, seconded by David Neve, proposed an amendment to the final paragraph of section 2 of the constitution to read

"Town Forum meetings are open to all residents, irrespective of membership of any organisation.

Every town resident has the right to speak and address the Forum on a matter pertinent to the town, after applying to do so, and subject to the Chair's direction".

Following some discussion on the difference between and respective merits of a membership body and an entirely open forum, Philip Whitbourn, seconded by Michael Doyle, proposed that in the same paragraph the current wording "members of the organisations represented on the Town Forum" be replaced with the wording "residents of the unparished area of the Borough of Tunbridge Wells".

This amendment was supported. The previous amendment was withdrawn.

Secondly it was proposed and agreed that the notice period required for an AGM or EGM needed to be extended to three weeks to allow for the two week period for nomination of officers for election.

The constitution thus amended was agreed.

Item 7 – Reports from Councillors

Cllr Stan Ward, newly appointed TWBC Director on the Regeneration Company Board was invited to introduce himself to the Town Forum.

Given the Extraordinary Council Meeting the previous evening to debate the petition on the Great Hall Car Park, he wanted to read out the following extract from the statement made by Mrs Anne Horton Group Managing Director of Hoopers –

"I warmly welcome the Regeneration Project with the proposals to enhance facilities and amenities and improve the heart of the town. Tunbridge Wells is ahead of the majority of councils in the joint venture with a commercial developer or 'Local Asset-Backed Vehicle' and as a commercial businesswoman I see this as a very positive step and visionary"

Like Cllr Atwood he had a number of concerns about what had been happening and had a commitment to re-examine a number of things ranging from finance to communications. He too felt the main priority was the need for a coherent masterplan.

Comments were made as follows - that people love the town as it is but also see plenty of opportunity for change and improvement, such as the cinema site; that the focus of TWRC has not been on the right things; that the Town Forum's own work on master-planning must not be overlooked and needed to be re-circulated

Cllr Ward was thanked for attending and would be welcome on future occasions to attend and speak to the Town Forum.

Cllr Mayhew was not able to be present at the meeting but had asked that the following statement be read out under the 'Reports from Councillors' item.

"I feel this is an important time for the Town Forum to chart its future course and to a large extent the decision about the Constitution will set out the groundwork for that path.

It is not just about who can speak at the meetings - but what the very purpose of those meetings is.

Do you become a forum whose main purpose is to provide a venue for individuals to express their personal views in the public domain?

I would suggest that those people already have The Courier, Council meetings, their elected local Councillors for that purpose.

Or do you embrace the powers and responsibilities which the government's Localism proposals offer you?

In order to do that you have to accept a greater degree of democratic accountability, so that it is clear that people are not just speaking for themselves but for their community. You need ambition and goals AND to see it through - not just talk about it. The Library and Museum working groups for example are excellent examples of how it can be done. Daniel's work with Grot Spots and Bloom was another good example - but I would suggest this sense of direction and purpose should permeate everything the Forum does.

A positive vision about how you want your town to be and how that can be achieved..

Localism gives the opportunity for budgets and powers to be devolved - and I would greatly regret seeing budgets and powers being devolved to Parish and Town Councils but not to a body which represents the residents of RTW. It has been my aim ever since the town Forum was created to give you greater control, but in order to achieve this you may need to accept some increased formalities and perceive yourselves as not just a place for people to talk but a place of action.

As I have said, it is a matter of considering which way forward the Town Forum wishes to take, but in my view to go down the route of a talking shop would be to take the wrong fork in the path "

Item 8 – Reports from Champions/Vision Committee

Katharina Mahler-Bech asked for volunteers to come forward to take part in user-testing of the Borough Council's website.

She also reminded the Town Forum that RTW in Bloom needs support and sponsors

www.royaltunbridgewellsinbloom.org.uk

Item 6 – TWBC Strategic Plan: proposed projects and Item 9 Suggested topics for the agenda 2011 were, in effect taken together

Robert Hardy introduced the item by explaining that February report to TWBC Cabinet confirmed that the long-term goals of Vision 2026 were still guiding the council priorities. The second paper set out key additional projects and initiatives to be taken forward in 2011/12 and Member organisations were invited to comment on these by the end of May. The Town Forum welcomed the opportunity to comment. Initial observations included a concern that perhaps the vision and projects were not as ambitious as they should be in relations to visitors and tourism; that there needed to be some short-term action in relation to the cinema site and that opportunity gave something concrete for representatives to 'galvanise' their organisations into responding to.

Following on from these comments, suggestions were sought on topics for future meetings – and that further suggestions would be welcome subsequent to the meeting.

Immediate suggestions included –

- Information on the use by TWBC of Special Expenses for the town
- An invitation to the Commons Conservators
- A broad debate about parks and open spaces across the town – what was the strategy, where are the plans?
- Is it too late to discuss the proposals for the development of the former K&S Hospital site?
- Should the Town Forum create a project team to promote itself and to improve communications with residents? Can this be linked to the new Localism agenda?
- Would Greg Clark attend a future Town Forum?
- What does the 'new Localism agenda' actually involve?
- There needs to be a session on the changes to the NHS and that should include the changes to the way that patients and the community are represented

Robert Hardy undertook to collate all email suggestions, add them to this list and to circulate the full list of suggestions in advance of the May meeting.

Item 10 – Any Other Business

As of 12:01am tomorrow (April 1st) Rusthall Parish Council come into being and is therefore no longer part of the 'unparished area of the borough of Tunbridge Wells'.

The meeting closed at 8:38pm

DRAFT