



Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum Strategic Planning Working Group

Update report for the meeting on 18th January 2018

1. Six monthly round table with TWBC Planning Policy team

The meeting postponed from November between members of the working group and Kelvin Hinton and his team took place on 4th December, although there were at that date no further published developments in the new Local Plan process. However, Kelvin was able to update us on the considerable body of work still in progress.

Issues of housing had taken up much of the time, including analysing the sites which came in following the 2017 second Call for Sites, which resulted in some 400 proposed sites in total, of which some 200 have been retained for further consideration. New central government methodology on housing numbers has resulted in an increase in the Borough housing target from 12,000 to 13,000 (7% over 20 years). Officers feel that the Borough has come out of the process rather better than nearby authorities, so there is no intention to protest. A Borough-wide social needs housing survey has been carried out to assess need and, in spite of the lengthy questionnaire which many members will have received, there has been an encouragingly large response. The working group raised the issue of homelessness and also the 50% need for actually affordable housing and whether TWBC had the power to require this in private developments. Unfortunately central government policy still makes adequate provision most unlikely, in spite of the recent housing review. TWBC would be subject to appeals likely to be successful if it sought to impose a higher proportion of social housing in private development schemes than it does at present.

The rest of the period was devoted to preparation of an **analysis of responses to the consultation on the Issues and Options document** (see section 2 below). Other work has also been undertaken producing a draft gypsy and traveller site assessment, strategic flood risk assessment and a specific study of office space availability and the extent to which this is fit for purpose. Retail development is not likely to be a major consideration provided the existing planned developments see the light of day. It was intended to produce an overall strategy document for the new Local Plan in February but this timetable is likely to slip owing to the complexity of the task of seeking to accommodate the housing “need”. It seems this may not go out to formal consultation but will be available to the Town Forum for comment when it goes out to the various Cabinet Advisory Boards.

The working group raised the issue of **Green Belt and AONB protection** and whether any changes might be expected arising from the published review of Green Belt land in the Borough. The Planning Policy team would not really be drawn on this further than commenting that if all the Green Belt and AONB sites were systematically excluded rather than being further individually considered, there might only be some 20 viable sites in and around RTW.

A Garden Village was still very much on the agenda, looking at a variety of sites to decide firstly on whether a Garden Village or villages should figure in the strategy and then on a possible short list of site areas. The Issues and Options consultation Survey resulted in a majority of respondents supporting a garden village, at least conceptually. Kelvin Hinton commented that the schemes coming forward nationally had almost all concerned land in public ownership.

The rumoured *purchase of RVP by British Land Securities* was raised at the meeting with Mr Hinton. There was no indication of what effect this might have on current plans for redevelopment of the Ely Court area. Local press comment on the continuing closure of shops, not all in the Ely Court area, raises concerns about the whole future of RVP and the working group will be seeking reassurances about its long term future. We hope that the change in ownership may, however, put an end to the controversial plans for an over-scale new entrance on Fiveways.

The future of the *police station* was raised in connection with redevelopment of the Town Hall site. The working group felt that logically it should be included in any plans, but the issue of its separate ownership had first to be resolved and it was confirmed that TWBC had been unsuccessful in previous enquiries to purchase it even though it was now largely surplus to police requirements.

The future of the *public space in front of the new Cultural Hub* was discussed. This will be subject to a specific presentation at the Town Forum meeting on 18th January.

Finally *Kelvin Hinton* mentioned that he would be retiring in the early spring. Mr Booker expressed his thanks to him for having done so much to keep the Town Forum well briefed and brought into the consultation process on a number of matters at an early stage. This open approach, typified by the introduction of the regular round-table discussions on planning policy issues had been greatly valued and his good humoured, courteous and clear response to our many inquiries would be missed. We hope to be able to build on this excellent working relationship with his successor and wish Kelvin a happy and fruitful retirement.

2. Analysis of responses to the Issues and Options consultation

This has just been published on the TWBC “New Local Plan” section of the planning website and runs to some 278 pages. Information from the consultation meetings and consultation written responses has been divided into two sections including a 46 page summary of key responses and the council’s own responses on these, plus a large appendix analysing different groups’ responses (e.g. societies, parish councils, statutory consultees etc.) The Town Forum is acknowledged to have been formally consulted and to have been subject to a formal presentation as part of the consultation process. However, it is not specifically listed under any of the categories, unlike for example parish councils or the National Trust, so that it is not immediately obvious in which of the different categories of respondent its comments figure. What is clear though in reading the 46 page *summary* of key responses, particularly some of the more technical responses, is that the comments made by the Town Forum in its submission have found their way into the analysis and should therefore be taken into account in formulating the next stage of the Local Plan. The document will now be analysed in more depth and relevant issues taken up with Planning Policy.

Mark Booker Leader Strategic Planning Working Group 16.1.18