



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

Wake up call on local government change

Top of the agenda at this week's Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum meeting was the shake-up in local government planned by John Prescott's Department. Under this the Borough of Tunbridge Wells would disappear within the next 3 years and its affairs come under a unitary authority of at least half a million people with its headquarters elsewhere - probably at Maidstone. The Government had said there would be a White Paper announcing their decisions this summer. Explaining what was known about the proposals, Chief Executive Sheila Wheeler said that on the one hand abolishing a local tier of elected government would make it easier for the public to see where the threads of responsibility for functions like transport, planning and education came together. On the other, there would no longer be accountable Councillors and officers on the spot, familiar with and sympathetic to the needs of the local area. It would be for people to weigh the pros and cons. A driving factor seemed to be the desire to cut the overall running costs of having local government.

Town Forum members expressed concern that there had been no public consultation about such important proposals. While the local Council had not been a shining beacon of good practice in the past, it was making efforts to put its house in order. Moving the goal posts meant a period of turmoil for the foreseeable future. Most people were completely unaware of what the Government were contemplating and therefore unable to weigh up what its implications might be for them. The concept that bigger was necessarily better had not always been borne out in past reorganisations. There would be loss of local autonomy. They also pointed out that Tunbridge Wells served as a centre not only for south west Kent but also a similarly wide area across the East Sussex border, and it could make sense for it to be a unitary authority administering its true catchment area. However that option was not on the table since the Government had announced it would stick with existing county boundaries. Tunbridge Wells might therefore be even worse off under the new arrangements than at present.

"This is a wakeup call for us all" said Town Forum Chairman Matt Goodwin "We need to find out what is going on from the various Government websites and publications before it is too late. The Town Forum clearly feels people need proper time to study this and make their views known before any decisions are taken before such major changes are wished upon us all. That's what local democracy is supposed to be about."

A second major topic on the Town Forum agenda was **the shortage of affordable facilities for young people** who for lack of better things to do get involved in antisocial behaviour. Speaking about the problem, Stephen Lucas of Showfields said: "When we were kids here, you could still kick a ball around in the street and there were plenty of other places you could get to and play. Nowadays traffic and the pressure of redevelopment have ruled that out. Experience at Sherwood and High Brooms has shown a direct correlation between levels of antisocial behaviour and a shortage of things for bored kids to do."

He identified three key problems:

- refusal of permission by those who had earmarked land for future development to allow it to be used for ball games meanwhile
- massive red tape blocking the efforts of volunteers to set up any form of organised facilities for children
- past total disinterest by the Council in helping volunteers to overcome the difficulties

"We need proper youth centres for both boys and girls where it does not cost an arm and a leg to get any sort of sports training" he said.

Councillor James Scholes promised to hold an urgent meeting to look into all these issues.

Notes for editors: The Town Forum was established in July 2005 to consider and advise on issues affecting the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells. Its members are mainly drawn from residents associations and ward councillors across the town.

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