



A TIME FOR A CHANGE

At its AGM meeting held in the Town Hall on 27th November, Town Forum members endorsed the Management Team's plans to refocus the organisation and to consider the likely impact of central government's anticipated plans for 'devolution'. Since 2005, the non party-political RTW Town Forum has monitored and responded to TWBC and KCC strategies and activities acting in place of a formal Town Council for the town centre. It has been attempting to fulfill the requirements of the Audit Commission which in 2004 found that the Royal Tunbridge Wells unparished area was in 'democratic deficit' compared with its surrounding communities which have Town or Parish Councils.

Now that the UK Government has published its plans to make major reforms to local Government, a voice for people in the currently unparished area of Royal Tunbridge Wells is needed more than ever. To meet the challenge, the Town Forum has refocused its efforts on exploring:

1. Options for forming a Town Council for the unparished area, including
 - o Examining how the £2.6 million 'Special Expenses' - the precept that all town residents pay - which support the needs of the 'unparished area' are actually spent; and
 - o Ensuring that town assets are protected in the forthcoming local government changes.
2. Forming a CIC – Community Interest Company – to give the Town Forum a formal, legal and financial basis;

At the meeting, Council leader, Ben Chapelard, explained that the £2.6m 'Special Expenses' are spent on parks and recreational grounds, the Camden Centre, street lighting and cemetery maintenance. Adrian Berendt, chair of the RTW Town Forum has since declared that because of the lack of transparency about Special Expenses over time, finding out more is a top priority for him. He said, "As we move towards a Unitary Authority structure with perhaps a headquarters as far away as Kings Hill or Maidstone, that transparency will worsen." Furthermore, he expressed concern that without a Town Council, we will lose control over all our income and those assets which should rightfully belong to the town.

Government publishes its plans in a White Paper

On 16 December the UK government published its [English Devolution White Paper](#). The proposals for change have been headline news and subject to discussion and comment in the broadcast and online media. The introduction to the White Paper states, "*Devolution across England is fundamental to achieving the change the public expect and deserve: growth, more joined-up delivery of public services, and politics being done with communities,*



not to them. This White Paper initiates the biggest transfer of power out of Westminster to England's regions this century."



The Government's intention is to reduce the two tiers of borough and county authorities to single tier Unitary Authorities, as has increasingly been the pattern elsewhere: Cornwall, Dorset and North Yorkshire are recent examples of where two-tier counties have become Unitary Authorities. Cumbria and Northamptonshire are places where the previous county has been split into two Unitaries.

While the best solution for Kent has yet to be decided, Ben and other council leaders across Kent, have been discussing possible alternatives. While expressing a positive interest in devolution, they all thought that a Kent-wide unitary authority would not work in a county of its size and disparity. If as expected County and Borough Councils are abolished, a grouping of Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge and Malling, Sevenoaks and possibly Maidstone, could make an effective Unitary Authority, probably under a Combined Mayoralty for Kent and Medway.

The RTW Town Forum has also taken steps to understand the impact of these White Paper proposals on Tunbridge Wells in particular. The biggest impact for Royal Tunbridge Wells will be that responsibility for planning and other local services will almost certainly move away from the town.

It will take some time to decide and achieve these changes. This is just the beginning. We will communicate regularly with you on progress. Please forward this Newsletter to your residents and members to keep them in the picture.

Volunteers keen to contribute to the discussions are welcome, particularly those with local government, communication, finance and similar backgrounds. Please email

rtwtownforum@gmail.com or contact us via [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#)



Appendix: current local council structure

Royal Tunbridge Wells Borough comprises 14 Parish Councils and 2 Town Councils -Southborough and Paddock Wood. The central unparished area is known as Royal Tunbridge Wells and it is currently administered by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. This is the area which is covered by the RTW Town Forum and its 27 residents associations and 30 other local membership organisations since its formation in 2005.

District Councils can be called District Councils or Borough Councils - there is no difference in reality . For instance, Sevenoaks has a District Council, but Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge and Malling both have Borough Councils. Their functions include housing, leisure, environmental health, waste collection, planning applications and local tax collection. Sevenoaks also has a Town Council and Tonbridge is currently considering forming one.

Unitary Authorities administer all services. Many have resulted from combining authorities. For example, in Kent, the Medway Unitary Authority administered by Medway Council was formed in 1998 by combining Rochester on Medway with Gillingham. The new White Paper suggests that most new Unitary Authorities will be created with populations of 500,000 or more. Each of London's 33 Boroughs is a Unitary Authority, however, the Greater London Authority (GLA) provides London-wide government, including special responsibility for police, fire, strategic planning and transport.

Finally, some councils are still called **Metropolitan Districts** but are effectively Unitary Authorities. This name is a relic from past organisational arrangements, and confusingly they can be called a Metropolitan Borough or City Council.