



*The Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Development Framework
Core Strategy Submission Development Plan Document
Independent Examination*

**HEARING SESSION - Day 6, 4 December 2009
MATTER 10 (CP9) Royal Tunbridge Wells**

Dr Daniel Bech (as current Community Champion) and Dr Philip Whitbourn (as Planning Champion at the time of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum's submission on the Core Strategy) attended the Independent Examination's Hearing Session relating to Royal Tunbridge Wells, in Committee Room A at the Town Hall on the morning of Friday 4 December 2009.

The Inspector, Roy Foster MA MRTPI, had been provided, on the previous day, with a copy of the Town Forum's formal submission, of 10 January 2008, on the Core Strategy. This had been produced at the Preferred Option Report stage, by the Town Forum's Core Strategy Working Group [Daniel Bech (Telephone House Neighbours Association), Jenny Blackburn (at the time – Rusthall Village Association), June Bridgeman (Soroptimist Intl. Tunbridge Wells and District), Michael Larsen (Friends of the Grove), John Miller (Councillor of RTW – Culverden ward), Kate Sergeant (Clarence Road Users Association) and Philip Whitbourn (Beulah Residents Association)], and was subsequently endorsed by a full meeting of the Town Forum (- Members: <http://www.townforum.org.uk/members.html>).

The Inspector allowed a presentation by Dr Whitbourn, under Issue 5 of the day's agenda, and the presentation sought to reinforce key points in the Town Forum's document, coupled with an attempt to assist the Inspector on such other matters as had been raised at the Hearing. Additionally, the Inspector was provided with copies of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society's Monographs on "400 years of The Wells" and "The Residential Parks of Tunbridge Wells", by way of background to the particular character and special nature of the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells.

The following is a summary of the points made, which have been related as nearly as possible to the numbered sections of Core Policy 9 - "Development in Royal Tunbridge Wells".

Green Belt (1)

The concept of the Green Belt, and a general presumption against inappropriate development was strongly supported. However, it was acknowledged that it may be sensible to review the boundary around Royal Tunbridge Wells. The aim should be to have a truly rational boundary defined, and then to defend robustly the area within that boundary.

Housing provision (2)

Concern was expressed about windfall sites, and about the high incidence of "garden grabbing" in Royal Tunbridge Wells. Attention was drawn to the point that many parts of the town owe much of their charm to the sylvan character of mature gardens.

Affordable housing (3)

We favour a lower threshold and a higher percentage of affordable housing in the urban area, which might well be the same as that envisaged in rural areas.

Retail (6)

The figure of 23,403 sq m net of extra comparison floor-space by the year 2017 was considered absurd, and to have a degree of precision that looked downright silly in this context.

The Town Forum had pointed out in 2008 that the prediction of such figures is, at best, an inexact science, that can be affected over a period by factors such as the economic situation and the impact of internet buying. Yet the Council had stuck doggedly to its precise-looking figure, down to the last 3 sq m. On day 5 of the Hearing, the Inspector had raised, under Issue 2, the question of whether that quantum conveyed a spurious degree of accuracy and, only then, did the Council begin to concede that a round figure might be more appropriate in the circumstances. The intransigence of officials did nothing to help the Council's credibility on the subject.

That apart, the figure seemed worryingly large, and it was suggested the some townfolk might well feel alarmed at the prospect of the equivalent of another Royal Victoria Place being foisted on the Town Centre. However that may be, it was made clear that the Town Forum was not in favour of a large non-food expansion of the RVP, which it feared would be likely to upset further the balance between the northern and southern ends of the Town Centre, as well as adding to existing parking and traffic problems. It was pointed out that, at times, there is already gridlock in Victoria Road and other roads around the RVP.

The Inspector drew the Council's attention to paragraph 5.232 of the Core Strategy, which spoke of "certain deficiencies " in the transport infrastructure of Royal Tunbridge Wells, "which would inhibit its capacity to accept significant growth in the long term ". There seemed a lack of clarity on the part of the Council with regard to any possibility of resolving those deficiencies.

Serious concern was felt on the part of the Town Forum about the traffic implications of further large-scale development in Royal Tunbridge Wells, and the wording of section 5.232 of the Council's own document simply confirmed this unresolved problem. With regard to the reference, in section 6 of CP9, to the "planned expansion of Royal Victoria Place", it was pointed out that this had not actually taken place and the hope was that it would not. Indeed, the hope was the new LDF would unpick some of the unfortunate aspects of the old-style Local Plan, such as those provisions relating to the RVP. Any new shopping development would be better located in places such as the Cinema site, where it could help to bind together the two ends of the Town Centre, rather than exacerbating the present imbalance.

On the subject of convenience shopping, it was pointed out that Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre is badly provided with food shops, and especially so since the former Safeway store was closed down by Morrisons. The only town centre supermarket was the inadequate Tesco store in Grosvenor Road.

Neighbourhood Centres (7)

As well as neighbourhood centres, the Town Centre itself needed to be protected and enhanced, to provide the range of cultural and leisure facilities that were needed. (e.g. Trinity and Environs <http://www.townforum.org.uk/planning/trinityenvirons-rtwmasterplan-rtwtf260309.pdf>)

Attention was drawn to the loss of community facilities through the recent closure of the Town Hall to the public, and it was felt important that the central area of the town should not be reduced to little more than a shopping centre.

Conservation Areas

The Town Forum supported the requirement, in the preamble to CP9, to conserve the heritage assets of Royal Tunbridge Wells, but it favoured extension of the Conservation Area to include more of the Victorian and Edwardian heritage that contributes to the character of the town.

Knight's Park

The Inspector had expressed an interest in the Centre of Clinical Excellence, proposed at Knight's Park, to which reference is made in paragraph 5.230 of the Core Strategy.

It was explained that the Town Forum had received a presentation on the scheme, and had been rather impressed, both with the design and the Doctor-led aspect.

(<http://www.townforum.org.uk/press/circlepresentation060308.pdf>)

Mr Jim Kehoe (Head of Planning, TWBC) is to provide the Inspector with details of the project.

Cross-boundary perspective

Under Issue 3 of the Hearing Session Agenda, the proximity of the southern boundary of the town to Wealden District had been raised, mainly in connection with any possible growth options.

The view was expressed that, while growth into Wealden should not be regarded as a serious option, there was a strong case for cross-boundary co-operation on transport matters. Attention was particularly drawn to the huge number of vehicles that cross the border in and out of Sussex along the A26 and the A267, immediately to the south of Royal Tunbridge Wells. Also, mentioned was the possible role of Bunny Lane, which links those two roads in Sussex. It was suggested that there was indeed scope for more joint consideration on cross-boundary issues, but primarily on the subject of transportation.

Regional Hub

The preamble to CP9 speaks of a "sensitive regeneration of Royal Tunbridge Wells to provide and maintain a Regional Hub of strategic importance". It was suggested that the need was not so much for wholesale "regeneration" of an already lively and vibrant town, but for the urgent addressing of particular "grot-spots" such as the cinema site and the empty Morrison's Supermarket. On day 5, the Martin Robeson Planning Practice had spoken of the unresolved state of the Tonbridge / Tunbridge Wells Regional Hub, in connection with the Borough Council's Retail Study. The view was expressed that the situation was indeed unresolved, and that both towns rather seemed to be giving the impression of being the Regional Hub, independently of one another. While Tunbridge Wells was the regional shopping centre, Tonbridge was the main railway junction, although Tunbridge Wells was also the centre of an extensive bus network to Brighton, Eastbourne, Crawley and elsewhere. The whole question of the Regional Hub needed to be resolved properly, if the designation is really to mean anything.

The Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum had not been made aware, at the start of the Examination, that the Hearing was happening, and Dr Whitbourn thanked the Inspector for providing the opportunity for the Town Forum to make a contribution to the proceedings.

05.12.2009

Relevant documents/comments/submissions of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum

in connection with the LDF – Core Strategy are retrievable from these links:

Core Strategy - Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Area Action Plan

<http://www.townforum.org.uk/consultation/corestrategy-rtwtcaaplan-questionnaire-rtwtf080609.pdf>

RTW Town Forum Answers to Questionnaire — 8 June 2009

— including LINK to

'Royal Tunbridge Wells Masterplan'

<http://www.townforum.org.uk/planning/rtwmasterplan-rtwtf260309.pdf>

RTW Town Forum presentation to Cllrs & Reps of Residents Assoc. — 26 March 2009

Core Strategy - Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment

<http://www.townforum.org.uk/planning/ldfshlaasites230708.pdf>

RTW Town Forum submission (proposed sites in RTW) — 23 July 2008

LDF - Core Strategy

<http://www.townforum.org.uk/planning/corestrategystage3-rtwtfcomments220308.pdf>

RTW Town Forum submission - Stage 3: 'Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) Methodology' — 22 March 2008

LDF - Core Strategy

<http://www.townforum.org.uk/planning/corestrategy-rtwtfcomments100108.pdf>

RTW Town Forum submission - Stage 2: 'Preferred Options' — 10 January 2008

LDF - Core Strategy

<http://www.townforum.org.uk/consultation/ldf-corestrategy-comments190307.pdf>

RTW Town Forum submission - Stage 1: 'Issues and Options Report' — 19 March 2007