

Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan Vision 2040

Detailed comments and recommendations

The Town Forum management team supports the development of a Town Centre Plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells. This process started in January 2022 as a cross party working group, inclusive of representatives of the Town Forum, RTW together, and various officers from TWBC and KCC. During the last two years progress has been made, although the Town Forum would have liked earlier and greater involvement for many more of its members in the process. We look forward to this being achieved in the next stages.

There are good points in the document. We have tried to provide references to page numbers and the various heading and subheadings used in the draft report. Our comments are designed to encourage further discussion across the various members of the Town Forum: residents' associations and affiliated charities and organisations. We recognise there is no single view but there is a need to raise issues and make comments to stimulate further discussion.

In putting the final Town Centre Plan report together, it's worth remembering the many voluntary organisations, festivals and events that are a major bedrock of Tunbridge Wells. Recognising the need for these to be sustainable in the long term requires resources and often meeting places or the allocation of public space and support of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and local businesses.

The Draft Report

While the main document is relatively easy to read, as a highly colourful document with many photographs it is costly to print. On the other hand, it does not use interactive links suitable for computer use. We suggest two versions of this and future documents to reach wider audiences: a printer friendly version and an interactive version.

Initial questions:

1. Does it describe Royal Tunbridge Wells?

Does the Vision, the Ambitions and the Current Status (*pages 6-11*) describe RTW or could this be equally applied to most other towns of similar size?

The report mentions specific aspects/characteristics of our town, such as The Amelia Scott, The Pantiles, Calverley Grounds, heritage and 'listed buildings'.

We identify five main drivers:

Our Location and the impact and value that this has on RTW. We are close to London with the advantages and disadvantages of that. We share this location with sister towns of Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Crowborough thus attracting people, primarily from the City, West End and areas bordering that part of the Thames south and north banks, plus easy access from all of southeast London. Transport links are obviously key.

Each of our sister towns provide a different but similar 'offering'. RTW house prices and income and general cost of living are higher as a result.

In the Southeast we have access to many historical buildings, the 'garden' of Kent and on to the coast and Europe. These are important to the future development of our town RTW.

Our Education Our location makes RTW an attractive place to live for those who work, want access to quality schools (private and state schools) for their children or wish to retire – often near to their grandchildren. In RTW and nearby, we have many high-quality schools. However we lack significant young adult education such as universities or places of further education for those who work in London. This impacts our demographics.

Are we happy with this and/or what should we do for the future well being of RTW?

Our demographics are dominated by similar growth patterns as the rest of England with a fast growing population of over 60s. However we have one of the lowest overall growth rates in England. We also have a gap in our age profile of young adults and families, many people wait until their children are of school age before coming to RTW – probably when those adults are in their mid to late 30s. Many of our children seem to leave RTW to go to university or their first jobs, perhaps only to return once they have families. We must answer why this is the case and its possible consequences for the future of our town. In the last census, the centre of RTW had very low percentages of people over 65 compared with the rest of TW. The cinema site should help balance this, as should similar planned residential locations just outside the defined boundaries of Town Centre Plan, such as The Arriva site, The Dairy and the new residential development by West Station.

Our topography (*the arrangement of the natural and artificial physical features of an area*) is defined by the hilly Wealden edges which give rise to the long steep incline from The Pantiles to Five-ways and up to St John's. It also defines our key vehicle routes through our town, south-north and west-east with main routes through the centre of RTW. However we are fortunate to have an 'inner' bypass of our main town centre 'linear' street with the London Road (perhaps built before the town) and an outer bypass with the A21 to the northeast of RTW.

How should we cater for this and manage its consequences for the future of RTW?

Our Heritage is included within the draft plan, mentioning Community Pop-Up, culture, events, local economy (shops), heritage generally.

The suggestion is that TWBC now wants to be a 'spa' town after years of neglect of water features and Pantiles spring! We have seen efforts of Water in the Wells and others to revitalise the Chalybeate Spring. However, this desire begs the question, what does TWBC regard as 'spa' - all the Georgian buildings, narrow pavements and street patterns, etc.? How should it better preserve the 150+ listed buildings in the town centre. There has not been much encouragement to Decimus Burton Society's plans for an archive / museum / study centre in the Decimus Burton buildings on Crescent Road, and a rather concerning interpretation of rules for Grade 2 and 2* buildings in the recent application for over development of 5 Calverley Park.

We need not just words but commitment throughout the Council, particularly by the planning department's rules in protecting our listed buildings and other heritage - both hold and to be developed.

Our heritage should be considered in relation to the four previous sections above i.e.: location, education, topography and demographics, as are the development and future of our parks, the common and green areas of our town. However, many of our heritage buildings (other than performance space) create little direct interaction with visitors.

Can we make more of these or is RTW simply a nice place to eat, listen to local music in bars and the open-air events in Calverley and Dunorlan parks?

While there is a continuing and long-term downward trend in RTW as an attractive shopping destination - a trend accelerated by COVID - we will need a retail and leisure footprint as an attraction, particularly our many independent shops and other businesses.

We have a fantastic range of volunteer and commercial 'festivals' such as Local & Live, TW Fringe, The ice rink and fun fair, The Lantern Parade, Literary, Poetry, Puppetry, Food festivals, plus Jazz, Hugmany (the New Year celebration in the Pantiles) and the many other events in The Pantiles have proven very successful but often reliant on many volunteers.

How can we make these more sustainable and increase their range, perhaps across the entire year? There is much to celebrate in RTW. How do we make it sustainable for the long-term?

We also have a long history of voluntary organisations such as religious establishments, many youth organisations, the U3A, Bridge, Fitness and other organisations including support for other more vulnerable residents. These form a bedrock of RTW.

Many people visit RTW on the way to visit other heritage buildings in the surrounding countryside.

Can there be an attempt to understand and compare different activities and needs of those who live in the centre or nearby with those of people from further afield.

While there is little we can do to change the basic elements of the above 4 characteristics, they do directly determine many aspects of life in RTW in the past but also for the future.

Could we create an 'apprenticeship university' or have strong links to city institutions such as the City University to support our residents who often work in senior positions in the City?

Can we become a supporting centre for the West-End?

Now that homeworking has become popular following COVID, how will this impact what RTW offers?

How should our relationship to our sister towns be used to the advantage of residents in RTW?

Surely these 4 characteristics are highly significant in planning for the future of RTW in 2040?

How should we include these in the 'key Principle and Ambitions' for RTW (page 9)?

We should also consider if the 7 topics 'Principles and Ambitions' truly reflect the needs of RTW or simply those of most towns of our size. Clearly, we are not unique in these. They are important questions but without a discussion of the 4 main characteristic drivers of RTW of Location, Education, Demographics and Topography, are we missing some major considerations about both our past and future?

New technology is not mentioned. Clearly the last 20 years has seen previously hardly envisioned changes: Internet Shopping; Greater home working through technology; more home college studying; identification of the Climate Emergency; changes in demographics; and the initial introduction of electric cars and bikes. However the report does not consider future change – such as automated vehicles, different forms of technology, the substantial growth in people over 60 and their increased physical and mental health and general wellbeing and increased leisure time. The future is uncertain; however we must also prepare for changes that are likely or possible, either accommodating those changes or being prepared to adapt if they occur. Future changes must be a key point of discussion in any plan for the future.

We are concerned there is a mismatch of ambition and aspirations by Tunbridge Wells people, councillors and TWBC and KCC's willingness to fund them or at least to find ways to encourage others to fund them either commercially or through Community Interest Companies or charities.

2. **The SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)** *pages 12-17*

Does the SWOT analysis provide insights specific to RTW?

Does the Built Environment (*our existing buildings, roads, parks, paths etc*) including the heritage and cultural offerings of RTW, really achieve their potential and are their 'weaknesses' listed eq,

Our cultural offering: The problems of the Assembly Hall are not mentioned (emergency exits, stage size, curtains, backstage facilities, environmental controls, music pit and facilities), the limited nature of the Trinity, Many of the cultural / performance activities are ad hoc and dependent on continued amateur commitment. There is a lack of a true cultural performance hub.

While there is a separate Cultural / Creative project being funded through the Arts Council and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, there needs to be specific mention about its impact in the Local Plan for RTW. This is important, not just to those who directly organise or perform in these activities but in respect of buildings, other businesses and users of these events and activities.

The physical separation of the northern area, High Street and the Pantiles has resulted in a different 'built environment'. It also results in difficulty for many visitors in interacting with more than one. It does not mention the tourist/out-of-town visitor trade;

Few of our heritage sites provide for active public involvement for all age groups in the centre - other than the Amelia Scott. Our heritage does little to engage visitors in activities.

Greater note should be made of the 'Trinity Gardens and Environs' needs to be fully supported and conserved. The Church, operating as a small multi-varied producing theatre is vulnerable to the lack of action to broaden performing arts in our town. The area around it (Church Road, York Road, Mt.Pleasant, Inner London Road) is the only Green Open Space in this part of the town centre, and has many of the listed buildings in this part of town centre.

Our town centre housing is not analysed for its suitability or the actual age and income profile of those who live in the town centre. The report seems to assume the town centre lacks low income and younger age groups. Further analysis on the actual and likely future demographic profile is required before coming to conclusions about land use or activities needed.

Two areas (technically outside the boundaries of the town centre used in the report) heavily influence commercial, public and tourist activities of RTW. These are 1. The Spa Valley railway (including West Station and the retail park), and 2. St John's commercial area with its two new developments of different types of elderly persons residences.

These two areas provide for a very different character to the 4 identified 'quarters'. St Johns has local, individual, entrepreneurial businesses/retail and dense population areas with traffic and parking issues; Sainsbury area complex of supermarkets, petrol station, bus interchange and one of main tourist attractions, plus a possible railway link to Brighton and coast.

Economics and Viability: Many of the points in the report appear to be a repeat of those in the 'Built Environment'. Does our 'cultural and creative economy' really succeed in a fully sustainable way that will attract more visitors? Is it regularly drawing large numbers of visitors – if not how can it receive a significant boost? What will happen when those (often unpaid) individuals decide to retire or stop their promotion of these events? How will RVP attract substantial investment to be the catalyst for the whole town centre? In what way can we use the 'Spa' heritage to be a major draw of visitors?

We have many independent traders in RTW.

How can we best support them to grow and be more vibrant for the future.

How does the economics differ between the 4 quarters discussed in the report in terms of types of businesses or activities?

The report does not mention The Spa Valley railway – a key tourist draw (especially at Christmas) – important to the town centre even if it falls outside the technical boundaries of central RTW used in the report. Nor does it mention that many tourists use RTW as a centre from which to visit other heritage sites/buildings in the neighbouring countryside.

As identified above, we do have many successful festivals and events.

The key question is how do we make these more sustainable for the future?

Decarbonisation: Does RTW perform better than other similar towns (are these statistics for the Council or for the town)? Many of the points raised seem to mainly relate to national policy. We must ask, what are we able to do that is specific to RTW or can be influenced by the Council?

Transportation and Movement: People from outside Tunbridge Wells who drive in frequently list “congestion” into and within the town as a top concern. While this concern is common to most towns and cities across the UK, it is exacerbated in RTW by the topography of the town with its relatively long and thin town centre. A thorough transport plan for the town needs to be added to the Town Centre Plan. Combined with most road traffic coming into and out of town along two roads - the A26 and the A264 - the topography results in:

- People being unable to easily interact along the entire length (and some places steep) commercial area spanning almost 1.5 miles
- Multiple car parks effectively serving single sections of the commercial ‘centre’, rather than the whole town, leading to motor vehicle journeys between areas.
- Narrow feeder roads, restricted by our heritage buildings and green areas
- Particular congestion on the A26 northbound and along Pembury Road (outside the Town Centre Plan area). We note earlier research from KCC which shows that most traffic coming into RTW does not pass through the town, which means that a ring road would do little to reduce congestion. We also note the benefit of the A26 London Road which operates as an effective by-pass of the main commercial streets.
- A taxi system which is concentrated around the station (not considered in the report).

How can we deal with our topography to benefit visitors and residents?

The Arriva 281 service provides a valuable bus link but is poorly advertised, nor does it really provide a solution for visitors to move between areas (e.g. in The Pantiles or along the High Street to other parts ‘up the hill’) that will attract visitors. Many people walk into town but are then reluctant to visit other parts, especially if they have young children, shopping or luggage.

What can be done to allow visitors to park or ‘arrive’ once and visit different parts of our long commercial hill and have easy access to our taxi system?

Changes in transport and the use of cars, their weight, size and ownership will have a large impact on the 5 major RTW Multi-Storey Car Parks (MSCPs). The Crescent Road, RVP, Meadow Rd, The Great Hall/Mount Pleasant, and Torrington car parks each occupy vast amounts of prime land and influence vehicle and pedestrian movement and activity. If demolished or changed they will have a huge impact on the street scene/streetscape of the RTW town centre.

We also note that there is no comments about HGVs in the town centre, narrow pavements such Crescent Road, Grove Hill Road, Church Road. There are no width or weight limits or mention how to plan for alternative routes to avoid congestion in the centre of RTW.

There needs to be greater consideration of people movement and access to different parts of the town. For instance, no mention is made of increasing pathways from Calveley Grounds to Crescent Road, its adjoining car parks, Assembly Hall, and council buildings, Monson Road and RVP to help open up these areas. This needs expert investigation and planning of the potential improvement of people movement in our town.

While the SWOT analysis has many points, it needs further input and in-depth analysis.

3. **Framework Quarters** *(pages 18-23)*

Each of the 4 ‘quarters’ are shown in map form, The central parts of this area are defined as ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ in different colours on the main map (pg 19). However, they would be better defined as lower and upper Mount Pleasant as shown on the individual maps in the following pages. These two ‘quarters’ are essentially an ‘upper’ and a ‘lower’ parts of the centre of RTW which lie between the ‘north’ and ‘south’ ‘quarters’.

This is the underlying problem in our town. We do not have a central point or area, with 4 quarters radiating out. We have a long linear town with a steep hill, where people find it difficult to engage in more than one ‘quarter’ at any time. Cars generally travel to that one area, often adding to congestion as they travel to a specific car park. This makes it difficult to plan for movement, interaction and a balance of different activities.

One cannot ignore it. We must find some way to deal with the issues that the steep hill creates. The key question is, how to enable people to easily move up and down the hill with children, baggage and/or difficulty in walking or when the weather is unpleasant. Without a solution(s) one has to treat each area almost entirely separate from each other.

St Johns and the West Station areas are clearly part of RTW’s linear structure. They will influence the RTW of the future. They are as important as Camden Road and are surely worthy of mention in the plan and therefore should be included with the town centre definition.

Identifying the assets/features in each ‘quarter’ is useful and really asks how to make better use of these features, largely treating each area separately.

4. **Key Sites and Opportunities** *pages 24-27*

This is a useful listing. While some of the sites are already in development, each deserves attention and consideration. However the issues around the Assembly Hall, the police station and the last remaining underutilised Decimus Burton building, are not mentioned. Also not mentioned is the possibility of a permanent open-air stage/arena to the western side of Calverley Grounds – attached to the existing Great Hall car park or its replacement. This could provide a better use of the park rather than temporary arenas being created each time an event is held. We should encourage debate on how best to open up the entrance area for this park and encourage its use.

Our Engagement so Far and Next Steps *pages 29-31*

We are pleased to see we are only at the first stage in consultation. However we are aware that the first stage has taken over two years of 'evidence gathering'. Hopefully our comments above will help open up discussion across all of the public as well as the members of the working party.

We would like to have seen the initial stage open to greater discussion and done, in a shorter time-frame. Hopefully we can encourage all residents, particularly those who are members of the various residents' associations to be involved in this and future stages of our RTW Town Centre Plan.

Undoubtedly, the consideration of our location, education facilities (children as well as adults), demographics, topography, heritage, and culture are all important in developing a plan for the future of RTW. These need to be explored in greater depth and an understanding developed to ensure we plan and enable our town to take full advantage of what each has to offer. They are fundamental to our future and that of our town in maintaining and its unique characteristics, while being complementary to our sister towns and neighbouring areas.

Town Forum members and various TF Committees have conducted many long-term campaigns such as additional benches, toilets and ways of improving security and reducing anti-social behaviour in parks and elsewhere, pedestrian safety for instance at Carrs Corner. We would like many of our previous reports noted and action taken to review recommendations and implement many proposals within the 'built environment' of RTW.

Finally – Lets celebrate the good things in Tunbridge Wells. Fully identify them. Work out how to support them for the future enjoyment of all residents.

This requires good planning, physical and financial resources but also encouraging positive engagement within our town, Royal Tunbridge Wells.

David Scott, Finance Working Group, 31st March 2024