

Response to Draft Vision 2040.

Foreword.

The working group of the Town Centre Area Plan has published 'Draft Vision 2040' to convey the status of its work on a vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre with related statements of principles, ambitions, and opportunities and with the purpose of inviting and receiving views and observations. This response should be read with the Executive Summary also by the Town Forum.

Referring to the Summary, p.5

Vision 2040 should have a purpose beyond the Consultation.

It isn't clear if the draft Town Centre Area Plan document is intended for an eventual completion as an independent summary or solely as a document which will remain in various draft stages until it finds its completion through integration into the Local Plan.

With all the effort and resource which will have been contributed to preparing the draft Vision 2040 our recommendation is that its finalised version should become a useful explanatory handbook, for Council and Executive to use in their task of finding and engaging with owners, investors and developers, showing them the changes which TWBC intends, and where they can be involved.

Referring to The Vision, p.7, and answering Q 1- 4.

There is a need for a stated objective of more and various workplaces to be added to the Vision of a future town centre.

A vision of a future vibrant atmosphere for the town centre, an expectation of new and repurposed buildings and urban spaces within it and moving about it without a heavy dependence on private cars, misses the provision of more workplaces. Many now find themselves without the obligation to commute every weekday. Their presence in the town is a big resource which should be accommodated conveniently and economically in the town centre. These thinkers, makers, advisers, and doers can be settled there, making the town thrive. Assuming this to be a sensible strategy, how and where to do this should be a major theme to embrace in the next work stages.

Why isn't a real union of Town Centre and Common something to envisage over the next sixteen years?

One or more well-positioned prospects which become key paths from the town to the Common would contribute significantly to the town's identity and atmosphere.

Referring to Principles and Ambitions, p.9, and answering Q 5.

The making of strong and clear connections to the Common and increasing workplaces are missing here too.

Principles and Ambitions should be the part which guides the content of policy and planned initiatives and the encouragement of development. As given here these look like fine enough thoughts with which nobody could disagree. They must become evident in the plans too.

Referring to Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Today, p. 11.

Address the interested outsider here.

The text should also be considered with an outsider in mind, someone who might be given the document to bring them, their organisation, or their investment into the town centre. This type of person should be addressed more particularly in paragraph 3. Furthermore, whilst the text is good at pointing out that the need for change and adaptation has been recognised, this is the place to put across that TWBC knows how to embrace it with strategies and approaches.

Referring to A Plan for the Future of Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre, p.12, and answering Q 6.

The TCAP area relates to the same area previously covered in the existing and very useful draft Urban Design Framework Supplementary Planning Document. This document should be used again in the next stage of the TCAP work, excising where necessary sites which have since taken their own way or been cancelled.

Referring to the SWOT analysis. pp 14-17

Much plainer conclusions should be drawn from the SWOT analysis with clear and prioritised objectives.

For example :

i.) the Common is marooned from the town centre area by western zones which offer no views through to it and no attractive routes to it either, ii.) the low incidence of affordable residences in the town centre contributes to a lack of vitality there, a lower employment pool, more people forced to the suburban zones with all related personal costs, and traffic congestion with air pollution, iii.) the town has a long linear spine and the steepness of it in part, the dominant presence of vehicles on it, as well as the relative absence from it of significant urban and civic spaces, all leave the overall town centre without cohesion and necessary spatial interest. iv.) we are a Spa town but currently without many of the facilities relating to that description. Some facilities already exist but need to be highlighted. Other spa facilities could be developed, even possibly in the redundant police station. Spas

promote health and leisure and bring significantly more visitors to a town to have fun and enjoy themselves at festivals of various kinds, aware of water and its health-bringing properties. Under the Vision, residents and visitors could be breathing clean air as they stroll on uncluttered streets and relax in accessible green spaces near to and in water.

ii.) Use appropriate graphics to represent and broadly locate intended development objectives including routes and building zones and using the designation of Areas of Change in the later Area Plans. Objectives and solutions should arise out of the above analysis and find their way very clearly into the Area Plans which follow later in the document.

iii.) the analysis should not shy away from a blunt recognition that the town's axis, a long drawn out, and in part steep linear route which runs centrally and singularly through the town plan, presents known problems. The important conclusion to draw from this is that two approaches should be brought into play. The one, over a period, reduces traffic dominance on that axis and maybe even displaces it in parts to allow missing civic spaces to be formed. The other focuses straightaway on the urban spaces each side of that axis, fitting them out with new routes, green spaces, and new infill projects to strengthen the substance of the town. The latter should be set up as clear objectives in the Area Plans.

Referring to 'Draft Town Centre Masterplan Framework', pp.18-23, and answering Q 7-11.

Town Centre Masterplan – Framework Quarters. p.19

i.) The TCAP boundary should not be altered.

A lot of work and procedural formalities already rely on the current boundary of the TCAP. It is the same boundary within the draft Local Plan. Where areas outside and on the periphery of this boundary have important or dependent relationships with areas within the TCAP, these can be the subject of Supplementary Planning Documents with all necessary cross referencing. Any alteration to the TCAP boundary should only be considered after the document has served its first purpose as a contributor to a finalised Local Plan.

ii.) The designation of quarters is only a descriptive convenience.

The town centre is made up of overlapping neighbourhoods. The term 'quarter' is a useful and convenient organisational device for locating areas of interest and orientating the reader to the subject matter. It isn't a neighbourhood branding proposal.

iii.) Nodal Points or existing gateways are drawn boldly in each plan. Their purpose is unclear.

iv.) Find, improve, and better establish north-southward pedestrian routes on the east side of the town's Grosvenor Road/ Mount Pleasant / High Street Axis.

Alternative movement networks away from the main axis will allow more and newer uses to develop there within calmer and greener pedestrian environments, removed from vehicular ways.

v.) Include the aid of a few street names in the general plan and all the plans of the individual areas.

North Quarter-Grosvenor Road and Camden Road. p.20

i.) Evaluate change at RVP using a masterplan and Supplementary Planning Document.

Royal Victoria Place is represented in this plan as a large light grey area which is an opportunity for re-use/redevelopment. Points of access and the mall positions as well as the retail blocks, the parking zones and the major servicing/delivery area should all be shown in the plan.

RVP should be the subject of a masterplan and Supplementary Planning Document which takes in its periphery, including the urban block of Meadow Road car park. RVP has too much lettable retail area and much of it is deep plan space. It needs re-ordering. This should include the consideration of useful through-routes to divide the space more appropriately and making peripheral positions more active and attractive through considered positioning of any new access and egress points. New uses should be evaluated including residential, workplaces, leisure, cinema and health facilities.

The acquisition of this asset by TWBC will be fortunate if such work can be promptly and intelligently performed. This will inspire confidence in the current community of tenants and the public. The process of an SPD/masterplan should be used by the Council to communicate the good sense in the work.

ii.) Designate the urban block bounded by the A26, Grosvenor Road and Rock Villa Road as an Area of Change and pursue an SPD and masterplan.

Despite the obviousness of the need to redevelop the site known as 'Hendy' and its previous designation as an area of change, it is omitted in the plan. This area is a jewel in the town, containing many intact buildings, ways, and road from the early – mid 19C. It presents the opportunity for a significant residential area with mixed use, including the integration of the historic assets. The area should be designated as a Supplementary Planning Document with masterplan and the requirement that a high density of dwellings as well as the inclusion of higher buildings be explored. It should be directed very carefully to achieve a good architectural result and a vibrant neighbourhood.

East Quarter – Mount Pleasant Road and Crescent Road. p.21

i.) The approved project at the former ABC cinema site is in construction.

Show its layout in the plan as if existing and not as a development opportunity.

ii.) Recognise that the area to the immediate north and east of the Civic Complex is a muddle of buildings without spatial coherence.

Designate the same as an Area of Change and resolve with a masterplan and Supplementary Planning Document.

iii.) Recognise that the area currently occupied by Axa Office buildings at Crescent Road should not be processed as a singular project.

This site together with the adjoined TWBC car park site to the south, should only be considered together. As one planned site they form the potential for a needed urban enclosure on the northwest corner of Calverley Grounds , and for an appropriate frontage to the street space of Mount Pleasant Avenue. As one planned site feasible vehicular movement in Mount Pleasant Avenue can be realised. More development, including dwellings, may be realised with a combined site and thereby the asset and social value for TWBC will increase.

A suitable scale for the proposals should be found taking account of the precedent of the scale of the existing AXA blocks.

A resolution for the site should be found through masterplanning and a Supplementary Planning Document, and with the involvement of an interested community representing Calverley Grounds and Hotel du Vin.

A visual illustration of the kind of process which should be applied to this area in drawing up the TCAP is given below. It is given not as any definitive solution but only to show the desired process. It is of the utmost importance that the approach evidenced by this drawing and the analysis on which it is based should be adopted for every physical area to be covered by the TCAP. Only in this way will prospective developers, planning officers and the general public be able to form an appreciation of how it is intended that the town should develop over the plan period. This should inform the Vision 2040 even if individual sites and public realm spaces are not presently capable of being classified as “deliverable” within the meaning of the Local Plan legislative framework.



Note that such a masterplan and SPD will straddle the 'quarters'.

West Quarter – Train Station and surrounds. p.22

i.) The approved project at the former ABC cinema site is in construction.

For clarity and completeness show its layout in the plan as if existing.

ii.) Note that the TWBC car park site at Mount Pleasant Avenue belongs logically with the consideration of the AXA site at Crescent Road, all as set out above.

iii.) Urban block of Hoopers, the Great Hall and the Great Hall Car Park should be designated an Area of Change.

This designation can prompt a collaborative evaluation of a key site within the context of a masterplan and SPD. Department stores are facing significant change and closures across the whole country. The failed Calverley Square project leaves a previously consented built form which can be taken as a precedent. The Great Hall needs commercial activation. The car park location could accommodate new dwellings. Calverley Grounds is a sensitive location. A piecemeal approach to the redevelopment of this block is undesirable.

iv.) Designate the area known as Vale Avenue and Belvedere Estate as an Area of Change.

This designation can prompt a collaborative evaluation of a key site within the context of a masterplan and SPD. The existing plan pattern there lacks urban density and character. Thereby it offers the potential for woven in additions, selective demolition, retentions and maybe even higher buildings to create a more dynamic neighbourhood which can also provide much needed attractive east-west routes to the Common.

Whilst partial demolition of the Torrington multi-storey car park might open development opportunity, this needs to be evaluated against parking need more generally and whether any losses may need to be compensated in the near vicinity, such as at the sunken corner site between the railway station and Grove Park.

South Quarter – High Street and the Pantiles. p.23

No observations at this stage.

Referring to Key Sites and Opportunities, including site listings. pp.25-27 and answering Q12-13.

This section describes a process of finding key project opportunities and a 'call for sites'. Now, refer to the key plans and Area Plans earlier in the document and note that the objectives taken from the analysis, statement of principles and described Vision are just not met there. The plans must have another layer which shows intentions in order to drive change. All objectives might not be presently deliverable through available sites and willing owners. Many have to be achieved through careful promotion and the planning team must

find the way to incorporate this. Areas of Change have been repeatedly advocated in this response and to this should be added the need for graphic devices within the plans to give proper attention to the town's objectives and where the town will engage to achieve them.

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