

Summary response to the draft Town Centre Area Plan

The Town Forum welcomes the development of a Town Centre Plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells. Three working groups - Transport, Strategic Planning and Finance/Management - have prepared detailed responses to specific aspects of the plan, with key points summarised below.

The document has many good aspects at this early stage and many of our comments are intended to inform the next steps, although we also recognise some omissions in the plan to date. In particular, we consider that **the Vision should be a handbook to guide future developments**. We also acknowledge that some of the points we make will need to be delivered outside this specific plan.

1. While the Town Centre Plan was originally developed by TWBC as a Land Use plan, it needs to be also a Vision for the future. A key success factor for this Vision is the extent to which it can be seen as unique to Tunbridge Wells. While we agree with many of the aspirations and the principles shown, we consider that the current Vision is insufficiently unique to Royal Tunbridge Wells. It doesn't clearly identify enough the key issues facing the town or the ways in which those might be addressed. We suggest refining the detailed SWOT analysis into a smaller number of key items and emphasising these by headlining them at the start of the document.
2. Even as a Land Use plan, it has a number of key failings which need addressing:
 - a. It omits a number of key sites, due to the constraints of the boundary chosen. While we understand why the boundary was selected - and we do not propose changing it at this stage - we recommend either 1) amending in a future iteration or 2) placing greater emphasis on the sites just outside the boundary which have important relationships to the area inside. We refer in particular to the St. John's area and the West Station, but there may be others. They may also need to be the subject of Supplementary Planning Documents. Regarding the West Station area as an example. From a Tourism perspective, the Spa Valley railway is currently a key strength of the town and, from an economic and transport perspective, the re-opening of the railway to Lewes, Brighton and Croydon should be recognised as a major opportunity.
 - b. Within the chosen boundary, Master Plans and possibly Supplementary Planning Documents are needed for all the "Areas of Change". As one example, we need to be more specific about how the area to the south and east of Mount Pleasant / Crescent Road might be developed in order to link directly to the Police Station / Calverley Terrace / Town Hall carpark and onwards to Monson Road / Calverley Road. While losing control of the cinema site might be seen as unfortunate, not getting what the town needs on the AXA site might be viewed as carelessness (sic), The next likely site - Hendy, below Mount Ephraim - will likely be coming along shortly and we cannot afford another slip-up.
 - c. Insufficient consideration is given to the uniqueness of Tunbridge Wells in terms of location (halfway between London and the South Coast), the attractiveness to (potential)

Formed in 2005, the Town Forum is the voice of the 50,000 residents of Royal Tunbridge Wells on issues of common interest

Town Forum Management Group

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residents created by its schools and demographics (lack of 20-30 year olds, relatively little population growth).

- d. The plan does not recognise the major impact that the topology of Tunbridge Wells has on land use and on economic and personal activities. The long - 1.5 miles - and, in some places, steep hill from St Johns to the West Station impacts people movement, transport, parking, congestion and activities along its stretch. Different from a town built around a relatively flat centre, it impacts greatly on decisions about land use and most other aspects for the future of our town.
 - e. With these in mind, we see the urgent need for a Supplementary Planning Document, along the lines of the draft¹ Urban Design Framework from 2016, to include outline drawings of what we expect and want from the various key sites. Where appropriate, these should include those areas just outside the TCAP boundary.
3. The above comments also point to weaknesses in the Vision itself. Using the concept of “quarters” doesn’t help to build a vision for a town that is relatively long and thin. The earlier concept in the Urban Design Framework based on a ‘string of pearls’ is a closer representation, although the ‘pearls’ need joining up. We propose a central trunk from the West Station (see early comment), maybe splitting into two at Monson Road - one leading to Camden Road and the other to St John’s Road - with branches hanging off the main trunk.
 4. Recognising the Spa Heritage of Tunbridge Wells is welcomed and clearly of utmost importance, not least in developing the concept of “Water in the Wells”, but care must be taken to avoid Tunbridge Wells being merely a “Spa Town” - it is much more than that. Greater thought needs to be given a range of activities to attract tourists.
 5. There are many references to the challenges facing the town in terms of transport. We now need an overall transport plan for the whole of Royal Tunbridge Wells to suggest solutions to these challenges.
 6. We recommend developing, in parallel, an implementation plan. As well as identifying quick wins - ideas which can be implemented with or without the plan being completed - this may also test our aspirations and identify barriers and / or further strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats

Town Forum Management Group

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¹ The Urban Design Framework was approved as a Supplementary Planning Document by cabinet in April 2016, but never registered as such by TWBC