

West Kent Homelessness and Housing Strategy 2016-21

Consultation: 16/06/17 - 28/07/17

Response by the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum

Introduction and conclusions

Formed in 2005, the Town Forum is the voice of 50,000 residents in the unparished area of Royal Tunbridge Wells. It takes an interest in the provision of housing for all sectors of the local population.

We welcome the consultation report as an extremely well researched and clearly expressed exposition of the serious and growing problems of homelessness and affordability across the three Boroughs. We similarly welcome its proposed vision to increase the availability of good quality affordable homes for purchase and rent while reducing homelessness and contributing to building the West Kent economy. We also support the four ambitions identified in Section 5 of the report.

However, the situation concerning homelessness and affordability which it so carefully describes unfortunately appears to us to flow directly from the cumulative effects of nearly 40 years of central government policies under successive administrations. The deficit of affordable housing in our town gives cause for serious concern and is liable in the medium term to lead to growing social unrest unless central government allows or adopts radically different policies towards social housing.

It is admirable to seek to build resilience and to encourage the communities most affected by present policies to support each other. We support many aspects of the Sherwood Partnership as an example of what can be successfully achieved. However, we do not share the perhaps despairing hope expressed in the report that such initiatives will have more than a marginal impact in finding overall solutions to local affordable housing problems.. To tackle the identified affordable housing need of 341 units per annum for Tunbridge Wells Borough will require quite other solutions. We are deeply concerned that the present situation will only worsen and are sympathetic to the difficulties facing TWBC and its two neighbouring authorities in seeking to avoid this happening. We would therefore strongly encourage the three authorities to militate for political changes which might present them with more effective tools to tackle their problems, which are also our problems because the homeless and inadequately housed are all part of one local community.

In February 2017 we published a vision statement for the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells intended to inform the then forthcoming consultation on Issues and Options under the 2013-33 Local Plan development. In it we expressed serious concerns over the present housing mix and the issue of affordability. Inter alia we stated the following:

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

Town Forum Management Group

Adrian Berendt (Chair); Alex Green (Deputy Chair); Alastair Tod (Leisure & Tourism – acting); David Wakefield (Finance); Jane Fenwick (Transport); Linda Lewis (Culture); Mark Booker (Planning); Michael Holman (Water in the Wells)

“While the clear need is for Affordable Housing (not least for key public sector employees) the SHMA expects the private market to cater for most future housing need. However the cost of open-market housing makes it likely that there will be an overall deficit in meeting the affordable housing need. Sharp increases in house prices in London may make Tunbridge Wells still more attractive to buyers from outside the Borough, many of whom would continue to travel daily to jobs elsewhere. Seeking to achieve a better balance between identified need and overall supply should underpin the Borough Council’s policy, within the constraints imposed at a national level. Currently, land values in the Borough push house prices well beyond the purchase ability of many residents. The SHMA finds gross affordable housing need is more than 50% of housing need in the Borough. The present definition of ‘affordable’ housing means that the element required at present (35% on developments of more than 10 dwellings) is out of reach for many. In practice on many developments where high land prices have been paid, a lower figure for affordable housing is negotiated on grounds of what the developer can afford. There are elements of a vicious circle here, and we see ensuring an adequate supply of housing at genuinely affordable prices as a key issue, and strict application of planning policies as a way to reduce land prices.”

We believe that the otherwise hopeless seeming situation might be attenuated by a more vigorous exploration by the three Authorities of the possibility of establishing an arm’s length development company to build and rent out affordable housing units in the area, as is being contemplated in Medway. This might first make use of any suitable surplus land already in public ownership, but might also look at judicious use of compulsory purchase powers.

Other specific comment

Affordability

The present concept of “affordability” is little short of farcical in Royal Tunbridge Wells. Household incomes of some £58,000pa and a deposit of some £67,000 will not be available to the overwhelming majority of the 341 households per annum stated to be in need of affordable housing in RTW. So, home *purchase* of any kind, even under government schemes, will not be an option for them.

If no two bedroom properties are available for commercial rent within the Local Housing Allowance cap of £765 per month, then a significant majority of the same demographic will never be able to *rent privately* in the area either.

Even the concept of an “affordable” rent in national terms has no meaning in Royal Tunbridge Wells where a rent of 80% of a typical market rent cannot seriously be considered to be “affordable” within the normal meaning of that word.

So far as social housing is concerned it is no solution to suggest that replacement homes might be provided outside the area: The Town Forum has previously pointed out that the crisis of traffic congestion and on street parking in our town is being exacerbated by the numbers of essential but low wage employees already being forced to come in from far away because no actually affordable housing is available to them.

Additional measures to tackle homelessness and the housing shortage

If the ending of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy is locally the principal cause of homelessness, as is stated in the report, the three authorities should vigorously campaign for changes to the law to increase the length of such tenancies at least to the three years common in continental countries. With two thirds of homeless households stated to include children, for whom homelessness (and

even the recurring threat of it) is a particularly frightening experience, such changes in the law could have a significant positive impact.

We welcome the “No use empty” scheme to bring back into occupation or convert for occupation space which is lying empty within existing properties. While we are aware that the nearly 1000 vacant residential properties at any one time in Tunbridge Wells Borough do not, for a variety of reasons, constitute an available additional housing pool and still less an affordable housing pool, there may be some further measures available to local authorities to render it unprofitable for properties to be left unoccupied for long periods of time.

The largest identified need of those on the housing register in Tunbridge Wells Borough (430 out of 994) is for one bedroom accommodation. A significant number of large properties currently in multiple occupation providing this kind of accommodation have recently been coming onto the market described in such terms as *“would make a superb family home”*. The authorities should explore how the planning system may be used to prevent changes of use in such circumstances. If the present planning system is incapable of doing so, the authorities might usefully militate for change at a national level, as conversions to single occupation will be appreciably worsening an already unacceptable situation.

To provide new 1 or 2 bedroom accommodation, it might help if TWBC and Town and Country Housing Association were to work with companies such as Grainger and Watkin Jones on build to rent schemes. These are specialist builders of properties designed for young people, singles and couples that use space efficiently and provide facilities that young couples want and can afford. Such companies have been very successful nationwide and are able to borrow cheaply. Substantial areas for new build across the Boroughs should therefore be designated for 1/ 2 bedroom flats and not houses, which use up around 75% more space.

Assistance with down-sizing

There is a wide range of elderly people who need advice, and sometimes transitional financial help, to down-size into more suitable accommodation (independent or sheltered/extra care) thus releasing typically 3 bedroom homes for family occupation. This applies both to public and market housing and we believe consideration could usefully be given to creation of a publicly funded service to enable the elderly to move. This is a huge and difficult decision and needs more knowhow and energy than many have at the time they move, when there may be no other family members nearby to help.