



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

30 August 2010

Councillor Roy Bullock MBE
Leader
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Councillor Glenn Hall
Chairman
Tunbridge Wells Regeneration Company Limited

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Dan Roy and Glenn'.

Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Action Plan and the Town Hall complex

The consultation on the draft Town Centre Action Plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells invites comments on the overall draft Action Plan, and on the potential uses of various sites – one of which is the Town Hall complex.

I would be grateful if you and your fellow councillors and Regeneration Company board members would take into account the following comments on this landmark site and its current and future contribution to the town. I should make it clear that I am writing with my own views as the MP for Tunbridge Wells, and as a local resident, rather than on behalf of the Government.

The future of the town centre

I welcome the overall aim of the Town Centre Action Plan to ensure that Tunbridge Wells is as attractive and as prosperous in the future as it has been up to now. It is right to recognise that maintaining this prosperity requires improvements to the quality of facilities available. I believe the plan should recognise that this applies as much to civic facilities as to purely commercial facilities.

Specifically, at a time when more and more retail business is being done at out-of-town centres and online it is important to ensure that the centre of Tunbridge Wells continues to be a destination that people choose to come to – something that requires both independent stores and anchor retailers.

The future prosperity of the town also requires an adequate supply of high quality modern office accommodation – both for valued current employers, such as AXA-PPP and the town's professional services firms, and for potential future employers. As other towns develop up-to-date office facilities there is a risk that firms will be attracted away from Tunbridge Wells if we cannot offer modern premises.



However, it seems to me that a key task of the Council and the Regeneration Company is to combine this requirement for improvement in the commercial attractiveness of Tunbridge Wells with a clear determination to enhance the existing civic and community assets of Tunbridge Wells which are just as important in making Tunbridge Wells an attractive place to live, work and visit.

The Town Hall complex

Prominent among these assets is the Town Hall complex - comprising the Town Hall itself as well as the Assembly Hall Theatre, the library, the museum and gallery, the police station and the adult education centre.

The Borough Council's Core Strategy commits the Council, among other things, to:

"conserve and enhance the town's built and natural assets, including conservation areas, listed buildings and landscape and biodiversity for future generations";

and to

"promote and improve access to the town's cultural, tourism and amenity attractions".

These crucial objectives, it seems to me, apply with particular force to the Town Hall complex: the Town Hall complex occupies the most prominent and commanding position in the town; it consists of a set of buildings which are of central importance to the amenity of the community and to the cultural life of the town; and forms of a group of listed buildings that are a significant part of the town's built assets.

The uses of the Town Hall complex

I think the Council's core strategy is right to talk of *conservation, enhancement and improvement*. I believe that it is essential that any future proposal covering the site should at the very least conserve, and preferably improve each of the services to the community currently provided by the Town Hall complex. None should be lost to the town.

Civic buildings

Tunbridge Wells is a unique town. We are famous throughout the country, as much for our strong sense of place and civic identity as for our historic buildings and natural assets. The position of the various civic buildings at the most prominent place in the town – the main crossroads – reflects, and indeed embodies, that strong civic pride. Other – less distinctive – towns may have town centres which do without prominent civic buildings, but I do not believe that is good enough for Tunbridge Wells.



That is not to say that every function of a modern Borough council need be carried out from a town centre site – some office functions may be more efficiently carried out elsewhere. But a strong and recognisable civic focal point in the centre of town, especially for public occasions, is something that I, and I think others, strongly feel should continue.

Assembly Hall Theatre

The Assembly Hall gives thousands of people each week – residents and visitors – the chance to enjoy a wide range of live performances from orchestral music to theatre performances, from top-name comedy gigs to children's shows. This is a great attraction for the town. But the Assembly Hall is more than that – as the home ground for the performances of many local amateur groups, it is a focal point for a wide section of the community. I am sure that changes are possible, and desirable. Modern theatre design can increase the flexibility of the auditorium, and an increase in capacity could even improve the theatre's financial prospects by making it a suitable venue for touring West End shows. But I think it should be made clear that the Council and Regeneration Company's intentions are that a theatre at least as good as the Assembly Hall will continue to be part of the centre of Tunbridge Wells.

Police Station

The location of police stations is, of course, a matter for the Kent Constabulary and the Kent Police Authority, to whom I am copying this letter. But it seems to me appropriate that a town the size and importance of Tunbridge Wells should have a prominent police station, accessible to the public, in the centre of town. I would be strongly opposed to any proposal for the town centre that did not provide for the continuation of this essential presence.

Public library, museum and gallery

The lending and reference library, the Tunbridge Wells museum and the art gallery are all important assets that a town of the size and historical interest of Tunbridge Wells should maintain. While patterns of library use are changing, maintaining a well-equipped, accessible central library will be for the foreseeable future something that will be essential for a town – even as the range of services that it provides evolves. The museum contains many unique and valuable exhibits and collections that deserve a greater prominence than they currently have. The museum, gallery and the reference library are, I think everyone would accept, inadequately housed being tucked away from public prominence and more difficult to access by people with disabilities. Attempts have been made to improve this situation, and I hope that any redevelopment could find an answer to these problems.



Adult education centre

I know from visits that I have made to the adult education centre how valued the courses and activities it provides are. In an age when education no longer ends when people leave school or college, I think the whole community should be reassured that there is a commitment to provide a suitable venue for adult education within Tunbridge Wells for future generations.

Architectural considerations

The architecture of the Town Hall complex divides opinions. I am sure I am not alone in thinking that it is an inadequate replacement for the Decimus Burton terrace and parade that was demolished to create the current complex. Yet the buildings are grade two listed - reflecting an overall architectural merit; they convey a strong civic presence; and, as a group, have a cohesion that makes them greater than the sum of their parts. Many of the interiors have an Art Deco quality that is distinctive and attractive.

On the other hand, the buildings are over seventy years old and anyone who knows the office space within the Town Hall - in particular its long corridors of cell-like rooms - would recognise that it is not a very functional workplace in the 21st century, where more open areas are required. Similarly, much though I regret the lack of use of the courthouse in the police station, I can see no practical prospect of it re-opening in the foreseeable future. All this is in addition to problems I noted above with the accommodation for the reference library, museum and gallery.

These considerations would, I think, lead most people to accept that changes could be made to the present Town Hall complex, but that the aim of the Council and the Regeneration Company should be to use modern methods to conserve the best of what the buildings currently present, while making the whole site more useful - and viable - for the next 70 years of its life. In so doing, the prominence and historical significance of the site should require that changes - which could be extensive and radical - are made to the highest standards and the most creative design. Clearly, as with any listed building, English Heritage will play a decisive role in assessing the quality of any changes.

Conclusion

I am aware that no proposal has been made to redevelop the Town Hall complex either by the Council or by the Tunbridge Wells Regeneration Company. Were ever a proposal to be made, it would clearly need to win the consent of the Council as a planning authority - which would, of course, have to follow proper procedure, including public scrutiny of any plans.



And yet, I do not believe it is too soon to make observations on the future of the complex. Indeed, it is essential that clarity is established to prevent local anxiety over the future of important and cherished functions. There is all the more reason for such clarity if, in reality, no danger to these functions is being contemplated.

Specifically, I think it would be welcome if the Council and Tunbridge Wells Regeneration Company were to make clear that any future proposals for the town centre would secure five commitments:

- (i) a theatre at least as good as the Assembly Hall
- (ii) a better accessible central library, museum and art gallery
- (iii) a police station open to the public a prominent venue for civic occasions
- (iv) a prominent venue for civic occasions
- (v) an imaginative and high quality use of the existing architectural heritage

I would be grateful if the Council and the Regeneration Company would take these views into account in drawing up the final Town Centre Action Plan and any proposals for regeneration.

Yours sincerely

Greg Clark MP

Copies to:

His Worship the Mayor of Tunbridge Wells

Chief Superintendent Tony Thomas

Chief Inspector Martin Wilson

Mrs Ann Barnes JP, Chairman, Kent Police Authority