

The Public Realm

Report on Visit to Ashford and Canterbury

Friday 27th January 2012

On Friday 27th January I attended The Public Realm Group which left Tunbridge Wells to visit Ashford and Canterbury. The group consisted of Councillors Mrs Barbara Cobbold, Dr Linda Hall and Nicholas Rogers. Portfolio-holder for Sustainability; Councillor Barrington-King, Civic Society representatives; John Forster and Alistair Tod; Officers Jonathan MacDonald(Director of Regeneration and Sustainability), Gary Stevenson(Head of Environment and Street scene), Alan Legg(Urban Design Team Leader), Lene Beynon(Borough Engineering Officer), Edwin Burgess(Street Scene and Team Leader) Mike Mc Geary(Overview and Scrutiny Officer) and myself.

Aims and Objectives

To see how the benefits of The Public Realm Issue had been realised in Ashford and Canterbury and how they could be applied to Tunbridge Wells with regard to Local distinctiveness, Design and ongoing Maintenance, Co-ordination between the various Agencies, De-cluttering and the use of the space and its competing needs.

Public Realm and why it is important

The Public Realm or spaces between buildings is considered as extremely important and good management of it is seen as enhancing our public areas. The benefits being; Increased pedestrian footfall with the resulting economic rewards, increased rents and property values, increased street activity-pavement cafes, street markets etc. Reduction in accidents and crime, decreased noise and air pollution, increased Civic Pride.

Ashford

We were met by Bob White KCC representative who introduced us to The Ashford Ring Road Scheme and we looked at The Elwick Road and Elwick Square shared space project.

Pedestrians have the right of way here and there are traffic signs slowing traffic to 20pmh installed in advance of the area. There are no guard rails and no crossings. The conclusions from this would seem to be improved safety, less speeding and less barriers to the Town Centre. This project, however cost £16 million pounds and there will be a considerable ongoing maintenance bill. While the concrete collar around the town had been removed there were still lots of building work to be carried out and my overall impression of the scene was that it was rather barren.

Canterbury

We looked here at Long Market and a new housing area called The Tannery, the aim being to de-clutter and use the space to its full potential. Interestingly the street lights were wired to the buildings and protruded from the walls. There was only 1 access for delivery vans and servicing agents and this was underground. Once again the claim was greater use and access to the commercial areas. I however found both developments hemmed in and almost claustrophobic.

Outcomes

Councillor Linda Hall proposed that a group meet on the 11th February 2012 to use the material sent out by English Heritage, which suggested simple ways of improving our street scene. Using The Street Clutter Audit form from this organisation, they proposed to audit the Town Centre and pass on their suggestions to the appropriate bodies.