

Firstly, congratulations to Jo Wiltcher and her team on their successful bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the new Cultural Hub project. They have received £4.3 m towards the project along with the funding from the Arts Council who have already agreed stage two funding of £886,250 subject to the project successfully securing the HLF grant.

In an e-mail to me Jo says:

“ Dear Linda

I’m delighted to announce that the Tunbridge Wells Cultural & Learning Hub project has been granted £4.3 million funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, supported by National Lottery Players. This is an exciting time for Tunbridge Wells and Kent and sets us clearly on the path to the delivery of this landmark project over the next three years. The project team will now begin the task of planning the next phase of the project including decant of the buildings and interim service delivery. The best place to receive up to date information is at our website: www.tunbridgewellsmuseum.org/cultural-hub

But for the moment this is a chance to celebrate the success of this award from HLF which wouldn’t have been possible without the continued support of you and our stakeholders and partners.

Please share this good news with the Cultural working party and the Town Forum and thank them for their support.

Jo ”

The working group met on **23 April 2018** and were fortunate to hear a less formal presentation by Hilary Smith, Economic Development Manager and Karen Pengelly, Tunbridge Wells Together which they had delivered at the Town Forum meeting but in more detail on 22 March 2018.

It was really useful for the working group to hear the initiative Hilary is undertaking in regards to marketing the Town and Borough both locally and nationally.

Hilary explained that she and Karen Pengelly are working together to identify additional resources that can be focused on the town.

Her remit for tourism is wider than the town and includes the whole Borough. Her role is as Economic Development Manager. She is responsible for developments at the, Tourist Information Office, tourism in general and leisure activities.

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 (Deputy Chair); David Wakefield (Finance); Jane Fenwick (Transport); Linda Lewis (Culture, Leisure & Tourism); Mark Booker (Strategic Planning); Michael Holman (Water in the Wells)

The developments she highlighted in tourism are the new website (marketing tool), new language guides, a mini guide to the area, town map and the new location for the Tourist Information Office which is now at the front of the Corn Exchange Building with a window on to the street thus making the TIC more visible.

Visitors still find the TIC. Over the summer July, August, September there were 10,000 remote contacts by e-mail. The guided tours by the Blue Badge Guides are very popular and are scheduled for a Thursday.

Colleagues also organise group guided walks around the town.

Now that the spring waters are running again, the dipper is being re-instated.

Dippers work Thursday –Saturday. It is a limited service as it has proved very difficult to recruit dippers. Hilary is looking for additional staff and will be meeting up with Michael Holman ‘Refresh’ as they are now also looking for volunteers.

Hilary asked if the Town Forum could put out a call for volunteers to help out. (Costumes provided). At the moment the staff is paid for their work.

Hilary suggested we visit the ‘Visit Tunbridge Wells’ website. It is work in progress. There are new things on the site, such as a blogs. People are encouraged to contribute their blogs with more inspirational content. They are always looking for more inspirational bloggers.

Shopping in TunbridgeWells section is one of their priorities which they are already working on it. They would like to include more photographs.

They have distributed 100,000 ‘In and Around Tunbridge Wells’ leaflets to railway stations, ports, airports, other spas and towns around the country.

They are working with SE Attractions, 7 Wonders of the Weald and Kent Welcome packs.

Visitor numbers are increasing but there is generally a need for more quality and cheaper accommodation in the town. Karen Pengelly stated that one of the most popular booking sites was for Harrogate where there are 100 hotels.

The group agreed there were not enough affordable hotels in the town.

Karen Pengelly is the Town Centre Manager. This role includes tourism development. She explains that places have to compete far more for their tourist market share than previously. For example – Garden Tours of Kent put their customers in hotels in Ashford. She is working towards adding value for the customer for tour operators. E.g. the U3A have food and wine appreciation groups and a tourism group. She now has a healthy group of Tour Operators to speak to following a visit to the ‘Excursions’

convention in January this year. The tour operators are now working on packages for summer 2019

Blue Badge Guides are now also offering talks in Woods on the Pantiles.

KP's background is in marketing. She has been working within the Town with business contacts and exploring some areas of town becoming a business improvement district which involves raising money from businesses to invest in a specific area. This is her main focus.

She is also working with U3A; restaurants; Pantiles shopkeepers

Outside the Town she is working with travel fairs; Visit Kent; Tourism SE

She sees Royal Tunbridge Wells' 'unique selling proposition' as being – two hour travel time from the continent, and from London.

Karen is also trying to encourage travel writers both from the UK and the continent to visit Tunbridge Wells.

Tunbridge Wells Together is just starting a feasibility study for RTW to become a business improvement district. Businesses' will have to vote for a fixed sum of 1.5% in addition to their business rates to enable this to happen. TWBC is very supportive of this scheme.

At the meeting we received an excellent presentation from Carolyn Gray and Isobel Dorman representing the Forum.

They wished to dispel the idea that the Forum was just for young adults, when in fact they are not only providing opportunities for young people but are also presenting a wider range of work for all ages. Carolyn and Isobel have grown up with the Forum which is now 25 years old.

Carolyn gave a short history of the emergence of the Forum.

In order to widen its appeal, they have set themselves up as a Community Interest Company (CIC). The age groups include 30/40 year olds (folk nights, charity events), and 50/60 year old (poetry festivals, HoD, history of the Fonthill site) She spoke about the wide audience the Forum attracts, not just young people, (young people under 16 cannot attend a show without a parent or adult accompanying them) and she books bands with this in mind.

Audience numbers are up by 12 % year on year, and besides paying its way, the Forum must be adding to sales at local eating and drinking places. They are restricted by space, which limits them to about 50/60 persons per event.

Isobel Dorman spoke about how she began there in 1993, behind the bar, from where she had proceeded to do the marketing.

The fact that we are not a university town is a limiting factor for audience development which she would like to address. The special contributions to culture the Forum offers are-

A source of inspiration; community cohesion; meeting place; training for young musicians (they are currently training an electronic engineer); venue for live events- drama, poetry, puppetry and a wide range of art forms; mixed bands.

A full transcript of Carolyn's presentation is available on request.

The working group for Culture Leisure and Tourism think it is a good idea to encourage other arts and culture groups based in RTW to have the opportunity to inform us about their work.

The group suggested that we might have a presentation from Trinity Youth Theatre about what their aims and objectives are and what they are currently doing.

Linda Lewis

6.5.18.