



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

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Thursday 11 May 2017

Attended: Caroline Auckland, Sally Balcon, Lindsay Barker (sub), David Barnett, Adrian Berendt (Chair), Lorna Blackmore, Mark Booker, Stephen Bowser, John Cunningham, Jane Fenwick, Chris Gedge, Linda Lewis, Katharina Mahler-Bech, Cllr Peter Lidstone, Stuart MacDonald (sub), Helen Mitcham (sub), Altan Omer, Cllr Catherine Rankin, Martin Sanderson (sub), Cllr James Scholes, Cllr Don Sloan, Tim Tempest, David Wakefield (sub), Mary Wardrop, Denise Watts, Pat Wilson and Dr Philip Whitbourn (sub)

TWBC officers present: Jane Clarke (Head of Policy and Governance), Kelvin Hinton (Planning Policy Manager), Gary Stevenson (Head of Environment and Street Scene) and Mike McGeary (Democratic Services Officer)

Also present: Cllr Alan McDermott (Deputy Leader and Portfolio-holder for Planning and Transportation) and Cllr Jane March (Portfolio-holder for Tourism, Leisure and Economic Development)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were reported from: Stuart Anderson, Cllr Ronen Basu, Cllr Peter Bulman, David Bushell, Cllr Mrs Barbara Cobbold, Irene Fairbairn, Alex Green, Cllr Lawrence Heasman, Jennifer Hemming, Dorothea Holman, Michael Holman, Cllr David Jukes, Bill Kern, Brian Lippard, Marguerita Morton, Angela Phillips, Charles Pope, Nick Pope, David Scott, Angus Stewart, Anne Stobo, Alastair Tod, Cllr Lynne Weatherly and Cllr Chris Woodward

2. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

Mike McGeary advised that there had been no membership changes since the last meeting.

3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman reported on the following matters:

- (a) Engagement in consultation items – The Chairman drew attention to a number of key issues which were impacting on the town. He cited the following examples: (i) Review of the Local Plan: Issues and Options; (ii) the proposed cultural hub; (iii) the civic complex draft planning framework; and (iv) proposals for a new theatre and civic offices. He urged Town Forum representatives to ensure their members were made fully aware of these matters and encouraged them to become engaged in the continuing debates.
- (b) The future of the CCTV operation – The Chairman asked Cllr Alan McDermott, Deputy Leader of the Council, to provide an update on this issue, following a 'call-in' of the Cabinet decision regarding its future operation. Cllr McDermott said that the Cabinet, earlier that day, had taken account of the conclusions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and had decided to call for more extensive consultation to

take place. He added that, once this had occurred, the matter would be reconsidered by the Cabinet, via the Communities Cabinet Advisory Board.

Cllr Catherine Rankin sought reassurance that the Town Forum would be consulted as part of this extended process; Cllr McDermott confirmed that this would be the case.

The Chairman welcomed this news and thanked Cllr McDermott for the update.

4. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting dated 23 March 2017 were submitted for approval.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 March 2017 be approved.

5. ACTIONS FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

- (a) Community speed watch campaign – The Chairman advised that the planned presentation had had to be cancelled but would take place at the 20 July meeting.
- (b) Health and deprivation issues in the town – The Chairman advised that arrangements were being made for a speaker on this topic to address the Forum at the 20 July meeting.
- (c) Vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells 2017 – 2033 – The Chairman said that the Forum's document had been formally submitted to the Borough Council (Chief Executive and Leader of the Council) and was also being sent to relevant KCC officers.
- (d) TWBC's updated Five Year Plan – It was noted that there was still the opportunity to respond to this draft document, up until 5 June.
- (e) Education issues affecting the town – It was noted that a guest speaker would be invited to address the Forum and answer questions, either at the July or the September meeting.

6. COMMUNITY SPEEDWATCH

The Chairman said that this presentation had been deferred until the 20 July meeting.

7. LOCAL PLAN: ISSUES AND OPTIONS

Kelvin Hinton, TWBC's Planning Policy Manager, explained the significance of the 'Issues and Options' consultation document and the important part it played in the review of the Local Plan – a document which would guide future development in the Borough up to 2033.

Mr Hinton advised that his service had been focusing on the production of a number of evidence bases over the past few months, which would underpin the review of the Local Plan, covering housing, economic and other land uses. He added that there was now a second 'call for sites' process under way, inviting land owners to come forward with sites which might be suitable for future development.

Mr Hinton said that the Issues and Options document set out five options for how the authority could accommodate the level of growth identified by the evidence studies in accordance with government national planning policy and guidance, adding that the public's views on this aspect were being encouraged as part of the formal consultation

now taking place. He added that a number of exhibitions had been arranged, in support of that consultation process.

Mr Hinton also drew attention to the timescale of the Local Plan review, which it was intended should lead to the authority submitting its draft revised Plan in the summer of 2018, ahead of a formal 'examination in public'.

The Chairman invited Mark Booker, Chairman of the Strategic Planning Working Group, to summarise the key components of his working group's draft response to the Issues and Options consultation document.

Mr Booker began by complimenting Mr Hinton and his team for the quality of their work and the openness in which they had developed the authority's proposals. He also acknowledged how accessible the Borough Council had made all relevant material on its website.

Mr Booker said that, while the Town Forum had previously supported the principle of encouraging the growth of Tunbridge Wells as a destination town, some of the consequences of national planning policy had produced certain unwelcome outcomes, such as permitted development rights and the extent of the loss of local planning control. He said that the initial call for sites process had resulted in 15 sites being proposed by land owners which were in the Green Belt. He sought reassurance that the Borough Council would rule out these specific sites unless it was an absolute last resort.

On the five options for accommodating the growth imposed on the Borough, Mr Booker said that options 1, 2 and 3 would result in a very significant population expansion for the town, without any accompanying increase in amenities. He stressed that this was a process which was already taking place, adding that these options for the future could not be supported by the Town Forum (although option 3 might be of some benefit to some of the smaller local communities in the rural part of the Borough).

On balance, Mr Booker said that option 5 (a new settlement) was considered to be the 'least bad' proposal, on the basis that it should be accompanied by the required infrastructure to support it – although even this aspect was reliant upon the utility companies providing a huge scale investment, he stressed.

Mr Booker advised that, as soon as the Working Party's draft response to the consultation document was ready, he would circulate it to Forum members and seek their endorsement. He stressed that he hoped that individual residents' association and 'friends of' groups would feel able to respond in their own right, adding that perhaps the draft response the Working Party would be circulating would help each group understand the complex issues on which residents' views were being invited. He added that he felt sure that the parish and town council areas of the Borough would be very active in their responses to the Issues and Options document, thus it was vital that the town area took this opportunity to express its own preferences.

The Chairman thanked Mr Booker for the quality of the consultation response that had been drafted. He emphasised how Tunbridge Wells town had, over the past few years, taken almost all of the Borough's housing – and population – growth. He added that studies showed that the Borough's assessed need was for 50% of its housing growth to be in the 'affordable' category but that there was no indication that this would be delivered; in other words, he said, the Borough's evidence-based housing need was simply not being met.

The issue was opened up for general debate. Denise Watts said that she was in favour of option 5 (a new settlement), but stressed that she wished to see the housing

occupied by UK citizens, with sale prices set at an affordable level. Mr Hinton said that, with 'market sales', it was very difficult to control who purchased the properties. Mrs Watts acknowledged the argument, but asked if the local authority should seek to apply greater control. Mr Hinton said that the only lawful and practical way in which this might be achieved was through its affordable homes policy, i.e. according to what percentage level was set for the provision of affordable housing.

Cllr Peter Lidstone pursued the point; he asked whether the lack of affordable housing was occurring at a national level. Mr Hinton said that central government policy was key, adding that the latest housing white paper published was encouraging local authorities towards the provision of more affordable housing.

Helen Mitcham felt there was much demand for greater numbers of rental property within the Borough, an argument which Mr Hinton accepted.

Cllr Rankin emphasised the need for individuals and groups to engage fully in this stage of the review of the Local Plan. She added that this was much more important than awaiting the subsequent planning applications which would emerge, which was long after the site allocations had already been agreed.

Jane Fenwick asked whether the 'employment spaces' element of the Local Plan 'followed the people' or whether it was more closely linked to where the necessary infrastructure existed. Mr Hinton advised that each element of employment space, be it factories, warehouses etc, had its own requirements. He stressed the importance of selecting the right area for each and of ensuring that it was built, as the consequence of failure to deliver economic use was that developers would otherwise be able to provide more housing. He emphasised how important it was, therefore, to have a robust evidence base in place, to ensure the economic use was placed in the correct area.

John Cunningham reiterated his concerns over the strain being placed upon existing infrastructure, citing the huge difficulties that new housing was already placing upon 'inadequate' sewers and drainage. He added that, in that respect, at least option 5 should guarantee the necessary new infrastructure.

Mr Hinton said that the importance and significance of infrastructure provision had already been recognised, adding that all of the utility companies had been made fully aware of the Local Plan review process and issues, and were being encouraged to fully engage in this process.

Dr Philip Whitbourn asked to what extent the review was focusing on shopping, conservation and on the town being a destination point. He asked whether the division between 'primary shopping' and 'secondary shopping' areas – as existed in the current plan – was being repeated in the new document. Mr Hinton confirmed that all parts and functions of the town centre would be covered within the review of the Local Plan.

Stephen Bowser asked whether the Council was aware of various options available – including funding through the Public Works Loans Board – should it choose to enter into a partnership arrangement with, say, a housing association, to be able to build affordable homes. Mr Hinton advised that there were a number of alternative delivery options available to achieve this outcome; he added that one such proposal involved the establishment of community land trusts, who were already in 'early stage' discussions with the Borough Council.

David Wakefield welcomed this development, adding that he hoped that this would lead to more homes being available for key workers. He felt that most of the new

housing schemes in the Borough were failing in that aim and that, as a consequence, developers generally were not meeting the housing needs of the Borough.

Denise Watts made the point that 'affordable housing' was, often by definition, only 'affordable' once and that by the time of any subsequent sale, it was no longer considered an economical purchase. Mr Wakefield said that his concerns related more to rented accommodation. Cllr Jane March added that the conditions attached to affordable housing were very important and stressed the significance of applicants having a local connection.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked all of the contributors to this debate and urged that individuals and resident associations/ 'friends of ..' groups consider Mr Booker's proposed response to the Issues and Options document – once circulated – and made their own representations.

Action point: Forum members to read the proposed response to the Issues and Options document and encourage their residents associations/ 'friends of ..' groups to respond to TWBC, by the deadline of 12 June.

8. CIVIC COMPLEX: DRAFT PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Kelvin Hinton, TWBC's Planning Policy Manager, introduced the 'Civic Complex: Draft Planning Framework' consultation document, which the Borough Council was consulting on until 1 June. He explained that its purpose was to define the strategic approach to change in the area shown in the document, purely within planning terms. He added that it had been prepared because of the sensitivity of the area and the importance of buildings and sites within its boundary and to help shape and guide any future changes.

Mr Hinton said that future planning applications within the site would be judged against the principles set out in the finally agreed document. He added that, beyond the current consultation stage, the Cabinet would be asked in August to adopt the framework as 'material consideration' in the planning process, with the possibility of it being taken forward as a supplementary planning document in due course, after a further public consultation process.

The Chairman sought clarification over the document's status, asking whether it would sit alongside the Local Plan. Mr Hinton advised that it would form a part of the Local Plan, due to the role it would play in the site allocations process; he added that it would provide a high level framework for how the buildings within its boundary were treated and afforded the right level of respect.

Katharina Mahler-Bech asked how the status of the framework might impact on the future of the Crescent Road car park. Mr Hinton advised that the car park was part of this 'area of change' and the framework required at least the existing level of car park provision within the site.

Jane Fenwick expressed surprise at the positioning within the planning framework of the boundary inside Calverley Grounds. She considered that the boundary, as drawn, made an assumption that other parts of the public park on its western fringes would be available for future development.

Mr Hinton stressed that the boundary line of the framework document within Calverley Grounds was not intended to indicate the extent of any possible development. He added that it had been necessary to indicate some form of boundary for the framework and that, if there were objections to its current positioning, then this point should be made within the current consultation process. Mr Hinton added that he would look to

see what other options existed to define the boundary of the framework within the Grounds, in an effort to address the objections raised.

Dr Philip Whitbourn felt that the planning framework document in its current format was failing to address one of its key components, namely the opportunity to make the best possible use of the existing civic complex. He also reiterated his strong opposition to the proposals for a replacement theatre and new offices.

Mark Booker felt that insufficient mention had been made in the planning framework about the remainder of this very important area of change.

Sally Balcon voiced her concern that the proposals for a theatre and offices within Calverley Grounds were an unwelcome intrusion into the much-valued green spaces within the town centre.

There was some discussion about the cost to the Council of the work undertaken to date as part of the feasibility of providing a new theatre and offices, but it was accepted that these elements were not part of the planning framework document.

David Wakefield considered it odd that, in the case of a new theatre and offices, the Council was both the applicant and the decision-making planning authority. Mr Hinton acknowledged the point, adding that planning legislation did provide guidance for such a situation.

In conclusion, the Chairman thanked Mr Hinton for his presentation and urged Forum members to respond to the consultation document by 1 June.

Action point: Town Forum members were asked to view the consultation document on the TWBC website and respond direct to the Borough Council.

9. TWBC'S FIVE YEAR PLAN

The Chairman made reference to another formal TWBC consultation document, namely its draft Five Year Plan, which had undergone a review and was the subject of formal public consultation. He added that he was preparing a recommended response from the Town Forum, which he would circulate for comment, in time for its submission by the deadline of 5 June.

The Chairman selected a few comments from his draft response: he said that he would like to see (i) a clearer description set out of the limit of TWBC's responsibilities in the provision of local services; and (ii) more detail about the link between £x collected through council tax and business rates and the £y the Borough Council has to run its services. The Chairman also wished to see more clarity over the Borough Council's strategic direction and how its annual list of projects was linked to that vision.

There were other aspects of the Council's strategy on which the Chairman felt the Five Year Plan could be improved, such as the linkage between economic growth and managing its consequences, in terms of transport, air quality etc.

John Cunningham said that, as a general point, some Town Forum members faced a disincentive when invited to respond to consultation documents, because no hard copies were made available. The Chairman acknowledged the point but added that, in this particular case, the document was short and easily read on-line.

Jane Clarke, TWBC's Head of Policy and Governance, added that reference copies of the document were available at both the Gateway and the Library; she added that, if Mr Cunningham so wished, she would provide a hard copy.

Action point: The Chairman said that he would circulate a draft response to the Five Year Plan and circulate this to Forum members, with the request for feedback in time for submission to TWBC by 5 June.

10. PUBLIC REALM SCHEME, PHASE 2

Gary Stevenson, TWBC's Head of Environment and Street Scene, reported on progress towards the next phase of the public realm scheme in Mount Pleasant Road, between the Monson Road and Church Road/Crescent Road junctions.

Mr Stevenson began by saying that funding for this next phase was to be provided principally through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund (via the Local Enterprise Partnership), supported by £300k from the Borough Council. He emphasised that there was a strong link between the architects appointed to lead on the proposed cultural hub and the consultants working on the next phase of the public realm scheme. This, he added, was being strengthened via the significant involvement of TWBC's Alan Legg (Urban Designer) on both schemes.

Mr Stevenson recapped the original scheme drawings previously presented to the Town Forum and tabled an architect's sketch of what might be achieved specifically in the vicinity of the cultural hub entrance under this phase of the public realm scheme. He drew attention to a proposal that the grass bank on the Mount Pleasant Road side of the cultural hub might be replaced by means of a 'sweep' of steps, thereby enhancing the access to the hub, while respecting the integrity and sensitivity of the war memorial.

Mr Stevenson said that much thought had been given to the traffic implications of this phase of the scheme. He added that, while the ideal scenario might be to make the whole area pedestrianised, this approach was not achievable with the need for bus movements and access to a wide range of businesses and residential properties. Thus, he said, while there would be no formal vehicle movement restrictions in place there would be both a 20mph speed limit and a very noticeable narrowing of the available carriageway, with discussions continuing as to how best to divert traffic away from use of this road.

Mr Stevenson invited Town Forum members to comment on this proposal, adding that he would feed back views to the design consultants.

The response of Forum members was mixed, with the following concerns raised:

Vehicular traffic

Sally Balcon asked if Monson Road would still carry vehicular traffic; Mr Stevenson said that there would be no changes to the current two-way traffic arrangements for this road.

Jane Fenwick advised that her Working Group had examined this next phase and felt that it represented a good opportunity to make Monson Road a fully pedestrianised area, which would encourage the 'café culture' which the Council had said it was keen to promote. She added that there would still be the need for loading access for the shops in Monson Road, which could be achieved during restricted hours. She added that part of the Working Group's thinking would be the removal of the 'chaotic' bus stop arrangements close to the junction between Monson Road and Mount Pleasant Road.

Lorna Blackmore said that the current flow of traffic around Monson Road and Mount Pleasant Road – and the access from York Road – had created a more dangerous

situation for pedestrians, adding that she hoped that this could be remedied in this next phase.

Linda Lewis asked if there could be a re-think on the traffic issue. She made reference to the 'town centre plaza' aspiration which the Council had previously stated it wished to achieve.

The Chairman said that he would like to see the complete removal of traffic in this section of Mount Pleasant Road.

In response, Mr Stevenson confirmed that the junction arrangements under this phase were being very carefully examined and were a vital part of the design considerations, including crossing points linking pedestrians to the hub. He added that one of the concerns about making this area traffic-free was the overload it would cause to other road junctions, thus it was felt that removing all vehicles was not a viable option.

War memorial

Jane Fenwick felt that, with the replacement of the grass bank and wall with steps, the war memorial would no longer command the focal point the Council sought. She added that, until the future use of the Town Hall had been determined, it was premature to make such a significant change to Mount Pleasant Road.

Katharina Mahler-Bech felt that the war memorial, along with the loss of the trees and the grass bank, should be considered within the right context, in other words as part of the planning framework.

Dr Philip Whitbourn emphasised that the war memorial and its surrounding was a listed structure. He added that he also found the tabled sketch confusing, as the war memorial was currently within a rectangular wall structure, but the sketch showed it as part of a semi-circular frame. He suggested that there needed to be a more careful study undertaken.

Mr Stevenson acknowledged that the sketch was an initial draft for use to enable early discussions to take place and that no changes to the war memorial's structure were proposed. He said that the Leader of the Council would not wish to see the memorial relocated, although that situation could be reconsidered if a compelling argument were made, as part of the planning framework considerations.

Bus stops

Denise Watts acknowledged the sense of moving the bus stops away from the war memorial; she stressed that, from her group's discussions, there was still a strong demand for bus stops to exist and for buses to run in Mount Pleasant Road.

Caroline Auckland drew attention to the sketch's suggestion that the bus stops could be consolidated closer to the junction with Church Road/Crescent Road. She felt that, with buses parked there, with engines running, it would act as a significant disincentive towards achieving the café culture the Council was seeking.

Mr Stevenson acknowledged that there was a need to retain bus stops in this section as a key element of sustainable travel. He added that there would not be any changes to the stops outside the Metro Bank and that discussions were continuing with the bus companies as to the best locations within the phase two area.

Link between the proposed hub and the public realm scheme

Linda Lewis welcomed the fact that there was a clear linkage between the architects for the hub and the consultants for the next phase of the public realm project.

In conclusion, Mr Stevenson said that he would convey all of these views to the hub architects, as part of the continuing discussions with the consultants on this phase of the public realm.

There were no other action points arising from this report.

11. PARKING ON TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMON

David Wakefield sought the Town Forum's approval to send a letter to Targetfollow, voicing strong opposition to their possible plans to develop their use of the car parking site, in Major York's Road. He added that there were fears that their application for permitted development rights might lead to intensive use of this part of the Common.

John Cunningham and Cllr James Scholes provided some historical context and advised that both the Civic Society and the Commons Conservators were maintaining a close watch on how the situation was developing. It was noted that Targetfollow were hoping to gain from the fact that they would shortly be able to demonstrate the required 10 year period of informal use of this part of the Common for car parking to their advantage.

Action point: It was agreed that David Wakefield would draft a strongly-worded letter of opposition to Targetfollow, for the Chairman's signature.

12. PROPOSED CULTURAL HUB

Linda Lewis advised that, within her summary report of the Culture, Leisure and Tourism Working Group, a series of questions had been set out relating to the cultural hub (pages 15 and 16 of the agenda papers).

She added that Kevin Hetherington and Jo Wiltcher would be attending the next meeting of the Working Group and responding to the issues raised. Mrs Lewis said that the main areas of concern were: the security of the building around the various entrances and exit points; the possible loss of the grass bank at the front; and the long term funding position, citing an example of what happened to the Towner Gallery in Eastbourne following the formation of a trust to run the centre and the subsequent removal of 50% of their local authority grant aid.

Mrs Lewis also relayed a message from Michael Holman, Chairman of the Water in the Wells Working Group, urging members to visit platform 2 at the railway station, where the replacement murals were now proudly displayed.

13. REPORT OF THE TRANSPORT WORKING GROUP

Jane Fenwick, Chairman of this Working Group, summarised her report, which had been circulated with the agenda, and drew attention to the key issues.

Mrs Fenwick advised that there was currently a consultation process taking place on the South Eastern Rail Franchise, the link to which was set out in her report. She added that a draft response to the questions raised had been attached to her report (pages 19-23 of the agenda); she invited Forum members to comment on the draft by the following Wednesday, to be able to submit a formal response within the specified time limit.

14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 20 July 2017 at 6.30pm

The meeting concluded at 8.51pm.