



## ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

**Minutes of the meeting on Thursday, 17 June 2021, held online starting at 6pm**

### **Attendance**

#### **Member Organisations:**

Banner Farm Residents' Association and Tunbridge Wells Older People's Forum – Veronika Segall-Jones | Boyne Park Residents' Association – Dorothea Holman | Calverley Park Residents' Association – Jane Fenwick | Civic Society of Royal Tunbridge Wells – Brian Lippard | COCA – Sue Pound | Culverden Residents' Association – Mark Booker | Friends of Grosvenor and Hilbert Parks – David Barnett | Friends of The Commons – Sally Balcon | Friends of The Grove and The Avenues Residents' Association – Tim Tempest | Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery – John de Lucy | Friends of Tunbridge Wells Museum, Library and Art Gallery – Anne Stobo | Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery – David Bushell | Grantley Court Residents' Association – Lorna Blackmore | Hawkenbury Village Association – Delphine Houlton | Inner London Road Residents' Association – Carol Wilson | Molyneux Park Gardens Residents' Association – Don Sloan | Poona Road Residents' Association – Alastair Tod | Ramslye Residents – Noreen O'Meara | Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom and Telephone House Neighbours Association – Katharina Mahler-Bech | Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District – Caroline Auckland | St. John's Road Residents' Association – Marguerita Morton | The Forum – Carolyn Gray | Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group – Angus Stewart | Tunbridge Wells Bicycle User Group – Adrian Berendt | Tunbridge Wells Friends of the Earth – Marieke de Jonge | Tunbridge Wells Puppetry Festival – Ailsa Molyneux | Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association – Michael Holman | Warwick Park Residents' Association – Neil Williams

#### **Councillor Members:**

Broadwater ward – Cllr Christopher Hall and Cllr Chris Woodward | Culverden ward – Cllr James Rands, Cllr Justine Rutland and Cllr David Scott | Pantiles and St. Mark's ward – Cllr Wendy Fitzsimmons | Park ward – Cllr Nick Pope | Sherwood ward – Cllr Hugo Pound | St. James' ward – Cllr Ben Chapelard and Cllr Rob Wormington | St. John's ward – Cllr Mark Ellis, Cllr Peter Lidstone and Cllr Marguerita Morton

#### **Others in Attendance:**

Borough Councillors – Cllr Matthew Bailey (Portfolio Holder for the Environment), Cllr Tom Dawlings (Leader of the Council) | Borough Council Officers – Nick Baldwin (Parking Engineer), Stephen Baughen (Head of Planning Services), David Candlin (Head of Economic Development and Property), Jane Fineman (Head of Finance, Procurement and Parking), John Strachan (Parking Manager) | Commons' Conservators – Steve Budden (Warden) Gemma Stapeley (Executive Clerk) | Guests – Lindsay Barker, Barbara Cobbold and Mairéad Ni Fhinn | Secretary – Mark O'Callaghan

### **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

- 1 The following apologies were received:
  - Tim Ball (Calverley Park Crescent Association)
  - Marianne MacDonald (co-optee)

### **DECLARATIONS OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

- 2 The following substitutes were representing their respective member organisations:

- Veronica Segal-Jones (Banner Farm Residents' Association and Tunbridge Wells Older People's Forum)
- David Bushell (Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery)
- Noreen O'Meara (Ramslye Residents)
- Angus Stewart (Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group)
- Ailsa Molyneux (Tunbridge Wells Puppetry Festival)

## **MEMBERSHIP CHANGES**

### **3 a) Changes to Membership**

The following changes in membership were noted:

- Stuart Macdonald was now the substitute representative for Calverley Park Crescent Association, previously vacant. Tim Ball remained the primary representative.
- Ailsa Molyneux was now the substitute representative for Tunbridge Wells Puppetry Festival, previously Linda Lewis. Matthew Brown remained the primary representative.

### **b) New Membership Applications**

New membership applications had been accepted from:

- None

## **MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 18 MARCH 2021**

4 No amendments were proposed. The minutes were noted.

## **UPDATES FROM MEMBER ORGANISATIONS**

5 No updates were reported.

## **REPORTS FROM THE TOWN FORUM WORKING GROUPS**

6 The Chairman called for more volunteers to help with the Working Groups which were the engines of the Forum, any offers to the Chairman in the first instance.

### **Strategic Planning**

Mark Booker presented:

- Regulation 19 consultation on the Draft Local Plan closed on 14 June 2021. That was the last stage before public examination before an Inspector, probably in November 2021.
- If the Plan was found by the Inspector to be 'sound' it would likely come into effect in June 2022.
- The Forum welcomed the detailed presentation from Stephen Baughen, Head of Planning Services at the special briefing to the Forum on 12 April 2021 which informed the Forum's response to the consultation.
- The Forum had submitted 65 comments against various policies within the Draft Local Plan. Broadly, the Forum supported the Local Plan.
- Areas of concern were around transport and the environment where proposals did not go far enough.
- Provisions for more affordable housing were supported but building density and incursions into Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty were highlighted as concerns.

- The Forum strongly supported the idea of a Town Centre Area Plan and would be actively participating in the working group on this.
- The Forum did not expect to be called to the public examination but participation was at the discretion of the Inspector.

## Transport

Jane Fenwick presented (further to the report on the agenda) –

Alleyways:

- Concern over the loss of a footpath had led to a survey of other alleyways and twittens throughout the town by members of the Forum.
- The town had been divided into 8 areas and each was surveyed by a team of volunteers noting the location, condition and subsequently the legal status of each pathway.
- There were a number of maintained but otherwise unmarked paths either in their entirety or branching from other paths.
- 70 entries were added to KCC's official database of public rights of way and are being added to TWBC's maps.
- A number of questions remained unanswered, including who owned the land, who maintained them, why were these paths not registered when they were laid? A further progress report would be presented at a future meeting.
- None of the routes through the Pantiles were protected.
- Concerns about specific paths should be fed back to the Transport Working Group.
- Council officers welcomed the report. Paths would be entered into the council's GIS (Graphical Information System) maps which would overlay various sources of information and help with issues such as identifying land ownership and risk of loss. It would also bring the paths to the attention of officers across the council when conducting desktop research.
- The Commons were protected under the County of Kent Act, separate to public rights of way.

Car Parks:

- Was consulted on a new name for the former Union House Car Park which needed to have a strong geographical link. The Pantiles Car Park was chosen.
- Internal areas were largely complete with external areas awaiting resurfacing. Estimated to open in August 2021.
- There may be opportunities for business and event advertising and directional signage on internal walls.
- Linden Park Car Park (near the former auction house) would remain open.
- At The Pantile Car Park, parking for the 1887 development was separate and cordoned off. There would be 112 public spaces including the existing disabled bays.
- 27 apartments in the 1887 development were sold without parking but there was the opportunity to buy 30 season tickets for The Pantiles Car Park and a further 38 season tickets for Linden Park Car Park.
- The Parking Strategy had been scheduled for review on the heels of the Local Plan and was intended to dovetail with the Transport Strategy and the Town Centre Area Plan. Covid had affected parking demand, particularly Torrington Car Park due to reduced commuter numbers and Royal Victoria Place due to reduced shopper numbers. A period of settling would need to be allowed before significant changes were considered.

- Work on the Town Centre Area Plan was expected to start in earnest in early 2022.

#### Bus parking:

- The Council confirmed there were no immediate plans to change the former coach park on Linden Park Road (behind Sainsbury's) back to coach parking, but this remained under review as part of the overall review of council assets. The coach park was not ideal for coaches due to tight turning circles and the risk of grounding so was converted to car parking at the request of local businesses and currently had the highest occupancy rates in the town.
- The lack of coach parking had led to the bus stand on London Road being used all day, causing congestion and ruining a tourist beauty spot.
- The bus stand on London Road had been in situ and in regular use for at least 50 years. An alternative site had so far not been found. The Council would not seek to remove the bus stand without an alternative as it served school buses which were preferable to many separate cars and would otherwise have to park on street.
- The bus stand had been expanded when the Linden Park Road Coach park was closed. Previously, tourist buses used the stand and only stopped briefly. Now the school buses were parked all day denying access to the tourist buses.
- The coach park needed to be reinstated or a suitable alternative found.

#### Active Travel:

- The Department for Transport had announced a further £280m for active travel schemes. Bold action would be needed quickly as deadlines and criteria were very strict but this was a good opportunity to bid for extra funding.
- Funding from the Local Growth Fund earmarked for reducing congestion on the A26 was at risk after several years trying to find an appropriate scheme. Negotiations were ongoing with KCC to try to make a bid to the South East Local Enterprise Partnership for the retention of the fund which would centre around the A26 between Southborough Common and Mabelton.

#### Electric Vehicle Charging:

- Visitors and residents were being surveyed to assess demand for EV charging.
- The necessary infrastructure in car parks was easier to achieve and these were within the control of TWBC so the initial focus was on car parks. KCC were responsible for the roads.
- On-street EV charging had been provided in Dover and Deal so KCC must be at least amenable to the idea.

### **Culture, Leisure and Tourism**

Carolyn Gray presented (further to the report on the agenda) –

#### General updates:

- Trinity Theatre had been successful in getting Heritage Lottery Funding
- Local Magazine was good source of event and activity information for the town.

#### Benches (Caroline Auckland presented):

- The Bench Survey had been presented and welcomed by the Council. A number of follow-up enquiries were being addressed.

- Tim Tempest from the Men's Shed and Neil Williams from Warwick Park were ready to start work, just awaiting confirmation from the Council.
- Broken benches on Inner London Road would be repaired by the Commons Conservators.
- A broken bench opposite the Church of King Charles the Martyr would be repaired by TWBC.
- A community group had approached the Soroptimists seeking assistance in getting a new bench details of which had been passed to the Council. It was encouraging to see other groups raising the topic of new benches.

Community Interest Company (Adrian Berendt presented):

- The Town Forum was not a legal entity and as such was unable to attract funding. Plans were underway to create a new body for Tunbridge Wells, separate to the Forum, which would operate as a Community Interest Company.
- The Company would be a vehicle for funding to support the town through events and any other activities agreed by the trustees. Offers of assistance of either time or money would be most welcome.

## **Water in the Wells**

Michael Holman presented –

General updates:

- The contract for a drinking water fountain at The Amelia was been awarded to Tim Ward of Circling the Square, a firm with a reputation for impressive water features. The design was supported by the Working Group.
- A bottle filling station had been installed at Dunorlan Park near the Pembury Road entrance.
- The Victorian fountain at Dunorlan Park was urgently in need of attention. The Council was aware and drawing up plan which must include long-term provisions to stop the feature becoming dangerous and an eyesore.
- An drinking water fountain had been installed at the new square outside the Southborough Civic Centre.

Pantiles:

- The water feature outside the 1887 development was expected to open in August and likely to combined with the unveiling of the Wiesbaden plaque near the junction with Eridge Road.
- The plaque had been presented in 2015 to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the twinning.
- A local businessman had highlighted proposals to take over and overhaul the chalybeate spring, currently managed by the Council. Plans were ambitious and exciting but potentially worrying. The Council had welcomed the proposals in principle. The spring was a fundamental part of the Pantiles and a major attraction to tourists.
- The land around the spring was owned by Targetfollow who currently granted a lease on an annually reoccurring basis to the Council. It was unclear who owned the water coming from the spring. There were likely to be complicated legal questions and details were scant at present.
- Any commercialisation of the spring would be subject to normal planning permission and environmental controls.
- The spring should be a public asset and initiatives such as the Community Interest Company may provide an appropriate vehicle in future.

- The businessman was seeking a 5-year lease with a short-end clause of 3-years. This would provide time for alternative proposals if the businessman's plan failed. Progress would be watched closely.

## **NEW LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

7 The Chairman congratulated Town Forum members Nourish Community Foodbank who's work had been recognised in the Honours List.

Councillor Dawlings presented:

- Resident of the borough since 2007, now a smallholder after an long career at the Bank of England.
- First elected in 2014, served on Planning Committee before joining the Cabinet. Always taken a collaborative cross-party approach, particularly in determining what to do with the Council's property assets.
- The pandemic had placed huge strains on Council finances, a large deficit was projected from insufficient support for increased costs and reduced income.
- The Council only received 10% of Council Tax, around £8.7million, and 3.8% of Business Rates, £2million. The majority of the Council's income came from charges for local services, approximately £21 million.
- Government support, as was received last year, was unlikely to be repeated and the Council expected to have to draw £2million from reserves to balance the budget. This was clearly unsustainable.
- The Council had performed well during the pandemic, not least by successfully distributing £52million of government grants to local businesses.
- In the three-week since taking office, the Leader had worked on setting out his priorities for the future. The Portfolio Holder for Communities would have special responsibility for rural areas and the new Portfolio Holder for Economic Development would have special responsibility for the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells.
- Environmental concerns would feature in all business of the Council: litter would be tackled, areas of outstanding natural beauty protected, waste efficiently collected, recycling made easy, parks managed to maximised environmental benefits and buildings made environmentally sound. A carbon audit had been undertaken in response to the declared climate emergency and the council's own carbon emissions were being reduced.
- The Local Plan had just completed the Pre-submission stage and proposals for a Town Centre Area Plan would be expedited.
- Economic growth was vital for wellbeing and the council's finances.
- The council did not own the former cinema site but was pressing for action. A meeting with the owners was being arranged.
- Post-pandemic the nature of work was likely to change, some businesses had already announced plans to vacate large offices. It was hoped that London-based businesses would seek to take the opportunity to relocate to less expensive and more flexible office space in towns like Tunbridge Wells. This could include re-using the Town Hall.
- In the immediate future the focus would be on developing plans for the Town Hall, events to support reopening the towns and tackling transport problems. Existing strategies would need to be reviewed to take account of changing conditions.

- In the longer term there would be less reliance on large contracts with services broken down into smaller local contracts or brought in-house. There had been a tendency in the past to out-source to large national contractors who set their own standards, in future contracts needed to be responsive and quality driven.
- These were the Leader's priorities and engagement with residents and the Town Forum would be important in developing Council policy.
- The Town Forum welcomed the new appreciation for the town centre and approach to cross-party working and contracts.
- The plastic barriers on the High Street had been difficult, partly due to having to use KCC contractors Amey. They would be replaced with quality parklets and planters in the very near future.
- Previous plans to transfer Highways responsibility (roads, drainage, lighting and pavements) from KCC to TWBC had failed. Whilst renewing those efforts was not on the immediate plan it was important that decisions were taken at the appropriate level.
- Solar panels were already in place on the roofs of some leisure centres. 91 panels would be installed on the roof of the Amelia Scott as part of the development. The roof of the Town Hall was about to be renewed and funding was being sought for further solar panels.
- The reopening of the Amelia Scott would bring opportunities to collaborate with other heritage organisations, some with an international audience, which would bring visitors to the town.
- Communication and engagement with residents would be a much stronger focus in future. Communication was improving with Local magazine and email contacts but engagement was needing a big overhaul. New systems were being put in place to facilitate residents having the opportunity to be involved in idea formulation and not just comment on complete plans.
- The Mayor had selected as their theme for the year, 'the rising generation'. The intention was to hear the voices of young people and engage them in policy making. This would include efforts to establish a Youth Forum. Help was sought from the Town Forum and any expressions of interest may be sent to [mayor@tunbridgewells.gov.uk](mailto:mayor@tunbridgewells.gov.uk)

## COMMONS CONSERVATORS

- 8 Steve Budden (Warden) and Gemma Stapeley (Clerk) presented:
- Increased usage of the Commons over the pandemic had brought both rewards and challenges.
  - A new website and facebook channel had gone live.
  - A new promotional video had been created which could be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/546502880>
  - Waste removal on the Commons had been split into two contracts, one to empty litter bins and transfer the waste to a centralised point and a second to empty the bulk bins. The new arrangement was working well.
  - Regular litter picking was also taking place.
  - The Commons precept only covered existing maintenance and opening new areas had significant resource implications. The Conservators were reliant on the generosity of the friends group and the freehold tenants to fund new works.
  - Work had recently been completed on rejuvenating the Marl pits on Rusthall Common. Water was very important for biodiversity. The area had already been colonised by frogs and newts with more species expected before long.

- Bull's Hollow (a former quarry owned by Mr Bull) had also received work funded by a grant from Sussex Land Organisation received through the friends group. Water was drained into new 'scrapes' which would create a wetland.
- Holly was useful for shielding road noise and providing food and shelter for wildlife but had become problematically overgrown, particularly around Wellington Rocks. Clearance work, largely funded by the freehold tenants, had opened up new areas.
- Efforts were underway to create an all-abilities path between St. Paul's Christ and The Beacon Hotel.
- New machines had reduced the cost of maintaining the land
- Much work had gone into restoring benches on the Common, the unique 'hawthorne bench' design would eventually become the standard. The solid seat was more resistant to vandalism. The programme for this year would see 30 benches restored, including all 11 in Rusthall.
- Another traveller incursion on Rusthall Cricket pitch had caused significant damage to the ground and left much rubbish. Kent Police and the Borough Council acted quickly to have them removed within 72 hours. The Cricket Club and local volunteers worked hard to clear up the mess. Work was underway to strengthen the defences against further incursions.
- As well as clearing, new planting was taking place. A new hedge was planted around the Pantiles car park to screen the cars and prevent encroachment by the car park.
- The Commons was again involved in the Britain in Bloom competition. Fortunately judging was taking place a month earlier than normal this year meaning the orchids would be flowering.
- Maintenance work would focus on replicating the effect of grazing animals which would remove excess material from the ground. Overly fertile ground only encouraged gross-feeders such as brambles and nettles whereas lower-fertility soil was necessary for wildflowers and a more natural environment.
- Hawthorne benches cost approximately £650 including installation but also had an ongoing maintenance liability.
- The commemorative bench policy had just been revised. Now, people wishing to install a bench would own the bench for 10 years and need to renovate it twice during that time, the total cost would be approximately £1000. Alternatively, someone could take over an unadopted bench, renovate it once at the start and twice more during the ten years for £600.

## **ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS OR TOPICS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS**

9                      No items were raised.

## **FUTURE MEETINGS**

10                     16 September 2021  
                          11 November 2021 (AGM)