



# ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

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Thursday 23 March 2017

**Attended:** Stuart Anderson, Caroline Auckland (sub), Sally Balcon, David Barnett, Adrian Berendt (Chair), Lorna Blackmore, Mark Booker, Stephen Bowser, Cllr Peter Bulman, David Bushell, Cllr Ben Chapelard, Robert Chris (sub), Cllr Mrs Barbara Cobbold, John Cunningham, Andy England, Chris Gedge, Alex Green, Tim Harper, Cllr Lawrence Heasman, Dorothea Holman, Michael Holman, Linda Lewis, Katharina Mahler-Bech, Cllr Peter Lidstone, Cllr Tracy Moore, Marguerita Morton, Altan Omer, Charles Pope, Nick Pope, Jaco Rowlands (sub), Kate Sergeant (sub), David Scott, Cllr Don Sloan, Anne Stobo, Tim Tempest, Alastair Tod, David Wakefield (sub), Mary Wardrop, Denise Watts, Simon Weatherseed (sub), Pat Wilson and Cllr Chris Woodward

**TWBC officers present:** William Benson (Chief Executive), Adam Chalmers (Head of Communities and Engagement), Paul Taylor (Director of Change and Communities), Jo Wiltcher (Museum Manager) and Mike McGeary (Democratic Services Officer)

**Also present:** Cllr David Jukes (Leader of the Council), Cllr Alan McDermott (Deputy Leader and Portfolio-holder for Planning and Transportation) and Cllr Joy Podbury

### 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were reported from: Bill Acker, Cllr Ronen Basu, Irene Fairbairn, Jane Fenwick, Sue Kaner, Bill Kern, Kyrios Kyriacou, Brian Lippard, Cllr Catherine Rankin, Angus Stewart and Cllr Lynne Weatherly

### 2. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

Mike McGeary advised that the Town Forum's Management Group had approved an application for membership from the Tunbridge Wells Anti-Aircraft Noise Group (TWAANG), with Irene Fairbairn appointed as their representative and Angus Stewart as their substitute member. In addition, Mr McGeary said the Beaulah Road Residents' Association had appointed Stuart Anderson as their representative in place of Chris Morris, with Dr Philip Whitbourn re-appointed as their substitute.

For that evening's meeting, Jaco Rowlands had been appointed to represent the Calverley Park Crescent Association, Simon Weatherseed the Calverley Park Residents' Association and Robert Chris was acting as the substitute for the Grove Hill House Residents' Association.

### 3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman reported on the following matters:

- (a) Friends of Calverley Grounds – where Mr Berendt congratulated the enormous fund-raising efforts of the group towards their plans for a children's play area.
- (b) Amalgamation of two working groups – Mr Berendt said that it had been decided to amalgamate the Leisure and Tourism Working Group with the Culture Working Group under the chairmanship of Linda Lewis. He added that this was on the basis

that 'culture' was very much the 'driver' for the work of the Leisure and Tourism group, thus it made sense to focus the contribution of the Town Forum within a single group.

- (c) St John's 20mph zone – Mr Berendt welcomed the implementation of the 20mph zone in the St John's area as a significant step in the road safety campaign within the wider town area.
- (d) Community speed watch campaign – Mr Berendt drew attention to the success of this road safety initiative, adding that there were a number of examples of where the efforts of local communities, under specialist guidance, had tackled regular incidents of speeding. David Scott expanded on how the community speed watch process worked, stressing that, while the basis of the approach was very much on educating speeding drivers, there was a graduated process of inducing improved behaviour. He added that the campaign related to residential streets only and invited interested individuals and groups to speak to him, if they would like to run a scheme of their own under this initiative.

The Chairman added that one of the advantages of the speed watch process was that it linked to similar schemes across the UK, thus there was an accumulative impact which might apply to offenders. He suggested that the Town Forum might like to hear more about this campaign direct from the Police at the next meeting, where the equipment used could be demonstrated. The meeting endorsed that suggestion.

**Action point:** The Community speed watch organiser to be invited to address the next meeting.

- (e) Meetings of Management Group and TWBC senior managers – Mr Berendt advised that a number of meetings had been held between the Forum's Management Group and TWBC's Chief Executive and a number of senior managers, to discuss issues of particular concern and interest. He said that these had been welcome and positive discussions and he thanked the Chief Executive for the level of engagement shown. One topic, Mr Berendt advised, had been health and deprivation in parts of the town. He suggested that it might be of interest and value to invite a guest speaker on this topic to address the Forum, a proposal which the membership endorsed.

**Action point:** A guest speaker be invited to the next meeting, to initiate discussion on some of the health and deprivation issues prevalent in parts of the town.

#### 4. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting dated 19 January 2017 were submitted for approval.

Marguerita Morton drew attention to the following correction which she asked to be made to minute 8, page 7, the next to last paragraph where, instead of "...with particular reference to reversing the trend for smaller units", she asked that the following be inserted: "...to safeguard the quality of new builds". This was accepted by the meeting.

**RESOLVED** – That, subject to the above correction, the minutes of the meeting held on 19 January 2017 be approved.

## 5. ACTIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

### 5.12(b) Junction improvements – transparency of process

This had been raised at the 9 January 2017 Joint Transportation Board meeting, the minutes of which were still to be published, at which point details of the specific issue would be circulated.

### 7 Vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells 2017-2033

A copy of the final version of the document had been circulated with the agenda. The Chairman sought the Town Forum's formal endorsement to the document, to enable it to be submitted to both TWBC and KCC. The Forum fully endorsed the Vision document.

TWBC's Leader, Cllr David Jukes, said that he shared the Chairman's view that the Vision document focused not just on TWBC but on Kent County Council services as well. He suggested that the Forum might wish to invite new county councillors to its future meetings, after the KCC elections taking place on 4 May.

**Action point:** The Chairman to submit the 'Vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells 2017-2033' to both TWBC and KCC.

### 8 The Town Forum's formal responses to TWBC's draft budget and draft corporate priorities

It was noted that the Town Forum's responses to these two consultation issues had been considered both by the Cabinet and the Full Council, as part of the decision-making on these matters, in February.

### 12 Post Office – A formal 'community asset'?

It was noted that details of how to seek to have a building included on the register of community assets had been sent direct to Tim Harper.

## 6. UPDATE REPORT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Cllr David Jukes, TWBC Leader, provided an update on some issues of general interest as follows:

**(a) TWBC Corporate priorities** – Cllr Jukes thanked the Town Forum for its helpful response to TWBC's consultation process on its draft corporate priorities for 2017/18.

**(b) Civic complex** – Cllr Jukes said that he had asked the Full Council to consider and to take the decision on whether the authority should move from RIBA Stage 2 (concept design) to Stage 3 (developed design) for new offices and replacement theatre. He added that the decision to proceed had been approved by 34 votes to 9. Cllr Jukes added that the comments made at various stakeholder sessions about the 'massing' of the proposed new offices had been taken into account and the scheme architects had made some design changes to reflect those concerns. He acknowledged that, even with those amendments, the overall effect of the buildings would still be significant.

In terms of timescale, Cllr Jukes advised that it was expected that a planning application for the two buildings would be made during the late Autumn, at the same time that the Full Council would be asked to decide whether to move to Stage 4 (technical design). Cllr Jukes added that the significant aspect of that decision would be that the Council would need to decide whether to commit to the funding of the scheme.

At this point, Cllr Jukes responded to a number of questions about the scheme which had been submitted by Linda Lewis, on behalf of the Culture Working Group:

*Does a 1200 seat venue optimise the commercial potential and minimise the need for indefinite continuing substantial financial support from council tax payers?*

Cllr Jukes advised that, yes, this was the case; he added that discussions held with some key theatre operators had provided much reassurance on this point. Cllr Jukes reported that one director in particular had said that it could become the most successful regional theatre. He added that this could lead to it becoming free of TWBC financial support after only a few years, operating under the control either of a trust or a management company.

*Is the day-to-day operation of the theatre contingent upon vehicular access via the service roads behind the Great Hall and Hoopers?*

Cllr Jukes advised that yes, this was also the case but he added that the design and the practicalities were still being considered.

*If the Hoopers service road is to be used for service vehicles to access the theatre, what arrangements have been considered to eliminate noise pollution that would cause a significant nuisance to residents in Grove Hill House, whose bedrooms all overlook this service road?*

Cllr Jukes said that he was aware of the concerns of residents in Grove Hill House and reiterated that there were design details still to be determined. He added that he had invited the residents of these apartments to come and discuss their concerns direct with him, an offer which he said was still in place.

Chris Gedge raised the following issues:

- (i) He advised that the principal concern of the residents of Grove Hill House was the anticipated noise levels late at night, as touring companies were loading their vehicles at the completion of performances. He asked what sound-proofing measures were planned for the service area.
- (ii) Mr Gedge also asked whether it might be prudent to resolve the vehicular access issues to this area with Hoopers, as an urgent next step.

Cllr Jukes said that the noise levels in the evening would be controlled by environmental powers; on the second aspect raised, he said that, while he was confident that agreement would be reached, an alternative solution might have to be found to achieve the required access.

David Scott referred to the description that the new theatre would be 'commercially viable'. He asked whether that would still allow school and community groups to hire the theatre. Cllr Jukes confirmed that this point had been discussed with potential theatre operators, who had welcomed such use, he added.

**(c) Cultural and Learning Hub** – Cllr Jukes advised that this project was progressing well. He added that, having studied the latest set of drawings from the architect, he felt the Borough Council was well-placed to achieve the release of the next stage of Heritage Lottery Fund monies.

**(d) Cinema site** – Cllr Jukes advised that councillors had received a briefing from the owners of the cinema site as to their proposals, adding that a planning application was expected to be made within a month or two.

Michael Holman asked the following:

- (i) Had the **public realm** stage 1 works now been formally signed-off?
- (ii) Was the Borough Council ready to progress stage 2 of the works?

Cllr Jukes said that the stage 1 works had not been formally signed-off, adding that he expected some planters to be installed, to protect the paving from damage by heavy vehicles. As for stage 2 of the project, Cllr Jukes said that some plans had been drawn up and were still being developed, which he was happy to show to any interested parties or individuals.

John Cunningham also wished to ask what more the Borough Council could do to address the continuing drainage problems which the residents of **Warwick Park** had been experiencing for some time. He stressed that, while some progress had been made by the Borough Council through leading the discussions with Southern Water, residents remained very concerned about the longer term impact of future housing developments, which would feed into the drainage system.

Cllr Jukes was pleased to hear that his efforts to engage Southern Water were leading to some genuine progress and he acknowledged the point about the longer term situation; he added that, if needed, he would once more become involved in direct discussions with Southern Water, to help bring about infrastructure improvements.

Linda Lewis said that she was grateful to Cllr Jukes for his detailed responses to the questions which her **working group** had raised. She added that it was known that some touring production companies would have a large number of articulated vehicles – over 10 vehicles, for instance, were possible – and she sought an assurance that the facilities at a new theatre would be able to cope with such circumstances.

Cllr Jukes said that the scenario described by Mrs Lewis had formed part of the discussions with potential operators but added that the practicalities and logistics were principally down to the touring companies.

There were no action points arising from this report.

## 7. CULTURAL AND LEARNING HUB

Jo Wiltcher, TWBC's Museum Manager, and Paul Taylor, TWBC's Director of Change and Communities, provided an update on progress with the proposed Cultural and Learning Hub.

Ms Wiltcher provided a summary of what had been achieved in collaboration with the consultants appointed to advise on the interpretation design element of the scheme. This, she said, had been approached from the perspective of how visitors would experience the Hub, with separate 'thinking', 'making' and 'doing' areas.

Ms Wiltcher listed how the consultants envisaged seven distinct galleries being established within the Hub, namely: the story of Tunbridge Wells, the Tunbridge Wells

room, 'change the world', nostalgia, portrait gallery; folk art/Victorian photography; and costume. Other interpretation areas within the Hub included a 'welcome display' and a 20-minute introduction by film; Ms Wiltcher completed her summary with listing the 'Library-led' spaces.

Mr Taylor explained how the architects had approached the phasing of the building works: stage 1 would be to remove the huts at the rear of the site; stage 2 would be create a new 'circulation core' and link the Museum/Library building with the Adult Education Centre, reducing the four differing ground floor levels from four to two, to greatly improve the accessibility; stage 3 would involve the removal of the curved rear section of the Museum and Library, which was a later (1960s addition); stage 4 would be to rebuild the rear section and create greater display and exhibition space and construct a full-height glazed section fronting Monson Road, joining the Museum and the Adult Education Centre; stage 5 would involve the creation of a fully-usable courtyard area, for use as exterior café space and artwork displays.

Mr Taylor advised that the project team was nearing the completion of RIBA stage 2 (concept design), adding that, on 12 May, Ms Wiltcher would be making a presentation on progress to the Heritage Lottery Fund, as part of the funding bid process.

Members of the Town Forum made the following observations and raised a number of specific questions:

Dorothea Holman said that the scheme was an exciting one and asked whether there would be sufficient space for visiting exhibitions. Ms Wiltcher advised that yes, an exhibition space for temporary displays – including visiting ones – would be provided.

David Scott, whose U3A organisation covered over 1,000 members and at least 90 different groups locally, said that there was always a demand for meeting space. He offered to circulate details of the facilities that would be available for hire to the U3A members, if that were helpful, a suggestion which Ms Wiltcher said she was pleased to follow up.

Linda Lewis said that her Working Group had a number of questions that she would like to put, which had been set out in her supplementary report already circulated to Forum members. These included:

- (i) With an estimated shortfall in funding for the full scheme of £800k, she asked how this gap might be bridged and whether there was a case for undertaking some fund-raising. Ms Wiltcher confirmed the figure of £800k, adding that this was an aspect to which the Heritage Lottery Fund would require an answer. She advised that one possible option was to establish a development trust, to lead on bridging that funding gap.
- (ii) Mrs Lewis asked if there would be full circulation between the three functions of the building (library-museum-adult education) throughout. Ms Wiltcher said that this element of the design had been fed back to the scheme architects and a response was awaited.
- (iii) Mrs Lewis asked if the rear courtyard, area was to be an open space. Ms Wiltcher said that one of the original options was to have a glass atrium, providing a covered area and this was being costed at the moment. She added, however, that this might be cost-prohibitive at this point.
- (iv) Finally, Mrs Lewis said that the Working Group remained concerned that the scheme included the existing Gateway functions, their worries being that it was very difficult to see how these were integral with the cultural functions of the

hub. She added that the Working Group's strong belief was that the Gateway functions should be placed in the new civic centre.

Mr Taylor said that the Council understood that argument. He advised that one of the key issues for the hub was to see much more integration of services. He added that the future of a Gateway service would be very different from the current one, with a high – but not exclusive – focus on digital provision. Mr Taylor advised that evidence from elsewhere showed that there were many similarities in the 'customer profile' of the users of Gateway, Library and Museum services; he added that the design of the hub would take account of customers who, because of their specific needs, required a discreet area in which to discuss their concerns.

Denise Watts asked whether the courtyard area would be available for use by the public. Ms Wiltcher said that this would be encouraged, either through its use as part of the café or by means of the display of public art.

Michael Holman felt that the scheme was a very exciting prospect and he welcomed the update report on its progress. He asked whether there would be the opportunity for the inclusion of public art within the building which had the express message that 'this is Tunbridge Wells'? Ms Wiltcher said that it was hoped that funding from the Arts Council would help the authority to commission some public art work, with thoughts being given at this point as to whether this would be for internal display only.

Caroline Auckland asked what progress had been made with finding a suitable name for the hub. Ms Wiltcher advised that the recent public consultation resulted in no single theme or name emerging. She added that this aspect was now being progressed through the commissioning of a branding agency, with tenders for the contract currently being sought.

Andy England, on behalf of the local Access Group, asked whether all areas of the hub would be fully accessible for visitors. Ms Wiltcher confirmed that this would very much be the case.

Mr England also asked whether the 'low-relief sculpture' above the entrance to the Library and Museum would be preserved. Ms Wiltcher said that such a feature was a very important part of the listed building and would not only be preserved but enhanced under the scheme proposals.

Chris Gedge felt that the hub and the civic centre developments were progressing very much as distinct schemes; he felt that they should be viewed as a single project. Ms Wiltcher explained the approach being followed: she said that both the hub project and the new theatre were key findings that flowed from the research which was undertaken leading to production of the Council's Cultural Strategy, published in 2012. Mr Taylor added that the authority's Five Year Plan made reference to a 'collection' of cultural projects, with a recognition that, while these were being progressed as separate schemes, on different timescales, they were connected by a common theme or aim.

Picking up on an earlier point, Dr Holman asked if the Council had considered whether the courtyard atrium roof could be provided by means of public subscription. Ms Wiltcher said that the current scheme shortfall of £800k had to be funded somehow, adding that the viability of providing an atrium roof would be reassessed once the design details had been firmed up.

Anne Stobo congratulated Ms Wiltcher and her team on the progress being made with this scheme and the Council for following this very positive strategy at a time when galleries were closing elsewhere through lack of funding. She urged as many people as possible to support the project and encouraged membership of the Friends of the Museum, Art Gallery and Library as a practical way of showing their endorsement.

This update report was linked to the following item.

## **8. REPORT OF THE CULTURE WORKING GROUP**

Linda Lewis, Chairman of the Culture Working Group, referred to her report, which had been circulated separately from the agenda. The focus of the paper was on the new civic complex and theatre, many aspects of which had been covered in the preceding two items.

Mrs Lewis said that she accepted that many of the issues set out in the report were difficult to answer definitively at this point but she asked that they remain as matters of concern, for future consideration and response. Amongst the issues set out which had not been considered earlier, Mrs Lewis said that the Working Group members were concerned about the extent of the loss of mature trees to accommodate the new offices; she added that it would be helpful to see a 'footprint' plan of the site, with the new buildings overlaid.

In terms of the financing and consequences of the development, the Working Group had noted that the project was not reliant upon the sale of the current civic complex for its funding but on borrowing. Mrs Lewis asked therefore who the future occupants of the Town Hall and the Assembly Hall might be. She added that the issue of car parking also remained a concern and felt that this element of the scheme should be re-visited. Mrs Lewis added that the Working Group also remained concerned about the impact of the scheme on neighbouring residents.

Adam Chalmers, TWBC's Head of Communities and Engagement, acknowledged that these were all important issues. He said that all of the points raised would be considered and discussed as the Council moved through Stage 3 of the scheme, including direct discussions with the residents of Grove Hill House. Mr Chalmers added that he would set out the timescale for responding to all of the points raised shortly.

Robert Chris, a resident of Grove Hill House, said that it was very clear that securing access to the rear of Hoopers was a crucial element of the theatre's viability. He felt that, until such time as that agreement was in place, the entire project should be placed on hold.

Mr Chalmers said that every effort was being made to secure an agreement with Hoopers and that, in the meantime, it was important to continue with all other elements of the project.

Cllr Peter Bulman said that he had been one of the members who had voted against moving to Stage 3 when this matter had been debated at the Full Council meeting. He felt that the new theatre was not a viable scheme, citing the much-used example of the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury which, he said, was operating on the basis of an £800k subsidy from the City Council. Cllr Bulman added that, if a new theatre did not achieve the level of activity and business predicted, the shortfall would have to be met by the Borough Council.

With the proposals for new offices, Cllr Bulman said he was very concerned at the prospect of an empty Town Hall and Assembly Hall Theatre site for years to come.

In response, Mr Chalmers said that caution had to be adopted in comparing subsidy costs between the Marlowe Theatre and the current plans. He said that the subsidy for the existing theatre was approximately £250k but that this figure did not include internal recharges or depreciation. Mr Chalmers added that, if a like-for-like comparison were made between the Marlowe Theatre and the current proposals, their £800k subsidy would fall to a figure of £127k.

On the point made by Cllr Bulman regarding the Town Hall, Mr Chalmers fully acknowledged the argument, adding that the issue of its future occupation and use was a top priority to be resolved.

In summing up, the Chairman welcomed the discussion, adding that there clearly were many aspects still to be thought through. He asked what the next stage of public consultation entailed. Mr Chalmers said that there would be six weeks of public consultation on a 'development framework' (also referred to as a 'masterplan'), scheduled for late April, which would focus on the 'development management' of both the existing civic site and the proposed area in Calverley Grounds. He added that the latest scheme drawings would also be publicly available shortly, on which public opinion would be sought.

There were no specific action points arising from this Working Group update.

## **9. REPLACEMENT MURALS AT THE RAILWAY STATION**

Michael Holman, in his capacity as Chair of 'Refresh Tunbridge Wells', was delighted to report that replacement murals had now been completed and would be installed at the railway station very shortly. He said that Refresh Tunbridge Wells had played a leading role in (a) persuading Southeastern Railways to fund the replacement, then (b) selecting an artist to undertake the work, following a competitive process.

Mr Holman said the £10k funding provided by the railway company had been topped up by a £1k contribution by Royal Tunbridge Wells Together and £500 from Refresh Tunbridge Wells. He said that both artists behind "The Tunbridge Wells Helix Timeline" were local: Chris Burke (the principal artist) and Elaine Gill. The result, Mr Holman said, was bright, colourful, informative and quirky, and he urged Forum members to view it on platform 2 at the earliest opportunity. He added that the original mural artist, Brian Barnes, would be adding an extra panel at a later date.

The Chairman said that the Town Forum – and the town more generally – were indebted to Michael for all his hard work and commitment to this project and he thanked him warmly for such a welcome outcome.

## **10. REPORT OF THE WATER IN THE WELLS WORKING GROUP**

Michael Holman summarised his update report, which set out the progress made on a number of water-themed schemes across the town. He added that, with the review of the Council's Five Year Plan, he hoped that it would reinforce the previous importance attached to the town's water heritage.

Mr Holman added his congratulations to the Friends of Calverley Adventure Grounds for their tremendous fund-raising work for a water-themed children's playground.

Amongst the other updates provided in his written report, Mr Holman said that the water flow at the Chalybeate Spring – described as a 'sorry trickle' – continued to be a

worry. He said that there remained some concern over the long-term management of the Spring, adding that although there were plans to repaint the building and refurbish the well, there was no indication of when this work might be carried out. He also reported that the new management at the Beacon Hotel had drained the top lake as part of their garden refurbishment plans.

Finally, Mr Holman asked that, if anyone felt able to give their time and expertise in support of either the Water in the Wells Working Group or the Refresh Tunbridge Wells CC, they were welcome to contact him.

There were no action points arising from this update report.

## **11. TWBC'S UPDATED FIVE YEAR PLAN**

William Benson, TWBC's Chief Executive, said that the Council was in the process of updating its Five Year Plan, to reflect the many changes – both locally and in terms of government policy – since the Plan had first been approved in 2014, as well as to reflect the key outcomes from a peer review of the authority undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA).

Mr Benson said that one of the findings of the LGA peer review was that they felt that the Council should look for a better balance when referring to its achievements: less about its major projects and more on its everyday services. He added that the review had also challenged what the Borough Council was doing to address the social and health inequalities within the Borough. Both of these issues, Mr Benson advised, were being addressed in the redrafted Plan.

Mr Benson said that, once the draft document had been approved by the Cabinet on 13 April, it would undergo a period of formal public consultation for six weeks.

The Chairman invited individuals to view the draft document, once agreed for consultation, and respond. He added that the Town Forum would be preparing a collective view in due course, a draft of which would be circulated in due course.

Mark Booker regretted the proposed loss of the corporate priority which focused on a 'green Borough', as he said that it had provided a useful 'hook' for linking issues set out in the Forum's agreed Green Network document. He hoped that it might be incorporated in some other easily-identifiable form elsewhere in the document.

Mr Holman added that the continuity of the theme was important. Even if a 'green Borough' were no longer a principal corporate priority, he said that he would welcome the insertion in the document of appropriate wording – in the right places – which demonstrated the authority's commitment towards 'green' issues.

Mr Benson acknowledged the point and suggested that this could be part of the Forum's response. He added, however, that within the 'well Borough' section of the redrafted document issues such as public health and recycling etc were given some prominence. He stressed that the corporate priorities were what drove the authority's main projects and initiatives, adding that 'green issues' were inherent in all of the Council's day-to-day activities. In view of the comments made, Mr Benson accepted that the matter could be looked at as part of the consultation process.

Cllr Moore said that it was helpful to add that the draft Five Year Plan had been considered by all three of the Council's Cabinet Advisory Boards (CABs) that same week. She added that the Planning and Transportation CAB on Monday had determined that the draft document should be amended for some re-phrasing (and re-

focusing in some areas), before it was consulted upon. Cllr Moore emphasised that the Town Forum very much had an active role to play at the consultation stage.

**Action point:** That the Town Forum take the opportunity – collectively as well as individually – to comment on the Council’s updated Five Year Plan, as soon as the consultation process begins, (planned from 21 April until 1 June).

## 12. REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKING GROUP

Mark Booker presented the update report of his Working Group, which had been circulated prior to the meeting. He summarised the key issues as follows:

- (a) Judicial review of the Site Allocations DPD – Mr Booker advised that TWBC had been successful in its defence of this challenge, brought by Cooper Estates in relation to land it owned off Sandown Park, in the Green Belt. He added that much officer time had been spent on preparing for this challenge.
- (b) Call for sites – Mr Booker said that there was to be a second round of the ‘call for sites’ as part of the efforts to meet the Borough’s revised housing need.
- (c) Landscape Character Assessment – Attention was drawn to this draft supplementary planning document, which would undergo formal public consultation, once approved by the Cabinet on 13 April. Mr Booker added that his working group would prepare a response to the findings set out in relation to the three ‘character areas’ which abut and form part of the Town Forum un-parished area.
- (d) Issues and options – Mr Booker congratulated TWBC’s Planning Policy team on producing a clear, concise and well-written document, which set out a number of options for how the Borough was best-able to meet its revised housing target. He added that this document would be considered by the Cabinet on 13 April, after which a period of formal public consultation would be taking place, during which time his working group would be preparing a response for circulation, before submission to TWBC. Mr Booker encouraged residents’ associations to look out for the consultation document – expected to be during the period 2 May to 12 June – and make their own representations.
- (e) Other issues – Mr Booker said that, amongst other matters which the Working Group had examined, further discussions were hoped with the developers of the RVP Ely Court. He advised that, in respect of the cinema site, it was expected that the developers would brief the Town Forum’s Management Group shortly, as well as the Strategic Planning Working Group members, on their proposals, in advance of what it was hoped would be a public exhibition.

Mr Booker ended by reporting that Wealden District Council had given planning permission for 200 homes to be built adjacent to the boundary with Tunbridge Wells Borough, along Benhall Mill Road. He said that this had been very difficult to resist, adding that, because of the impact that this would have on the town and on public services, he wondered whether Wealden’s ‘duty to co-operate’ under planning legislation had been complied with. For the same reason, Mr Booker also suggested that it would not be unreasonable for Tunbridge Wells to claim these houses as counting towards their own housing target.

On the Benhall Mill Road issue, Mr Benson acknowledged the point, but said that all local councils faced the same difficulties. He said that he regularly spoke with his counterpart at Wealden on planning and many other issues, adding that TWBC’s planning officers also maintained close contact with their equivalents across the

border. In other words, he said, there had already been much discussion and consultation on this issue.

Altan Omer provided further information on the scale of the proposed housing on land within Wealden District, adjacent to Benhall Mill Road. He said that, altogether, there were four separate areas of land allocated for housing. He added that the concerns of local residents related to key issues such as school places and vehicle movements, both of which would have a significant impact. On the issue of schools, Mr Omer wondered whether KCC could enforce a "Tunbridge Wells Borough only" policy in respect of places at the new Hawkenbury primary school, once it was built.

Mr Omer was also concerned about the use of the land from a potential contamination aspect, due to its former use as a refuse depot. He added that Southern Water had previously voiced doubts over the suitability of the site due to the ground conditions.

Mr Benson advised that a number of these issues were for Wealden to consider as part of the planning approval process. On the aspect of KCC's education policy, Mr Benson said that TWBC was in discussion with the County Council, to ensure that the Borough's needs in terms of future places were met. He suggested that it might be of value to invite an officer from KCC to address the Town Forum and respond to these concerns.

The Chairman felt it would be beneficial to invite a KCC representative to address the Town Forum on education issues, a proposal which was endorsed. The Chairman added that many of the issues raised under this item had already been recognised as part of the preparation of the Forum's 'Vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells' document, thus some of the groundwork towards addressing these matters had been started.

**Action point:** That a KCC representative be invited to an early meeting, to answer member questions on education issues affecting the town.

### 13. REPORT OF THE TRANSPORT STRATEGY WORKING GROUP

Adrian Berendt, a member of the Transport Strategy Working Group, presented the update report prepared by its Chairman, Jane Fenwick, which had been circulated with the agenda.

He began by saying that he had met that day with Kent Highways officers and with TWBC's Economic Development Manager, Hilary Smith, to discuss the Transport Strategy. He added that he was pleased that the Transport Strategy and the Local Plan would be developed in harmony, with the full involvement of the County Council.

Cllr Bulman said that, in his role as Chairman of the Joint Transportation Board (JTB) for the year, he had established a working group, with the purpose of maintaining an on-going dialogue between TWBC and KCC. He added that this was essential, in order to ensure that a conversation on matters of interest and concern, e.g. congestion, cycling strategy etc could take place. Cllr Bulman said that the working group also provided an opportunity for the Town Forum to add their own views.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Bulman for establishing the working group, especially within the context that the Town Forum did not have a voice on the JTB.

### 14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

(a) **Calverley Grounds Adventure Playground** – Further to the earlier references to the successful fund-raising towards this scheme, Nick Pope wished to record his thanks to the Town Forum for their support.

- (b) **Yard sale** – Nick Pope said that he was co-ordinating a town-wide community event known as a ‘yard sale’ on 10 June. He said that interested groups could contact him on either Twitter or Facebook accounts to register their involvement and he would provide the necessary publicity, with map locations included.
- (c) **Unitary councils** – Stephen Bowser asked what the latest position was within Kent with unitary/merged councils.

William Benson provided some historical context surrounding the issue, leading to the current Government’s policy of encouraging devolution i.e. the transfer of power and funding from national to local government. He added that, while KCC had decided not to submit a bid for devolution – largely because a pre-condition was to have an elected Mayor – the four district councils in East Kent began a process for merger into a single authority. He added that, the previous day, Shepway District Council had voted against the proposal, thus the matter was currently on hold.

Mr Benson said that the remainder of the districts in Kent were focusing on the devolution of powers from KCC. He said that, as part of the devolution process within West Kent, TWBC was already undertaking some public health services previously provided by the county, with discussions continuing regarding some highways functions. Mr Benson added that, within West Kent, there had been no appetite for seeking unitary council status.

## 15. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Thursday 11 May 2017 at 6.30pm

The meeting concluded at 8.30pm.