



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

Thursday 25 July 2013

Attended: Cllr Bob Backhouse, Sally Balcon, Lorna Blackmore, Stephen Bowser, David Bushell (sub), Cllr Ben Chapelard, Michael Doyle, Jane Fenwick, Alex Green, Michaela van Halewyn, Tim Harper, Jim Kedge, Kyrios Kyriacou, George Lawson (sub), Katharina Mahler-Bech, John Mattei, Marguerita Morton, Cllr David Neve, Altan Omer, Peter Perry, Christine Phillip (sub), Anne Stobo, Alastair Tod, David Wakefield (Chairman), Mary Wardrop, Victor Webb and Philip Whitbourn (sub)

TWBC officers present: William Benson (Chief Executive), Mike McGeary (Democratic Services Officer) and Catriona Franck (work experience student)

Also present: Léonie Harrington, Cllr Paul Barrington-King (TWBC Cabinet Portfolio-holder for Sustainability), Cllr Jane March (TWBC Cabinet Portfolio-holder for Tourism, Leisure and Economic Development), Cllr Alan McDermott (TWBC Cabinet Portfolio-holder for Planning and Transportation), County Cllr Matthew Balfour, Chad Nwanosike (Senior Transport Planner, KCC) and Hilary Smith (Economic Development Manager, TWBC)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were reported from: June Bridgeman, John Cunningham, Maggie Fraser, Dorothea Holman, Michael Holman, Sue Kaner, Bill Kern, Angela Phillips, Margaret Watts, Chris Wigley and Cllrs Peter Bulman, David Jukes, Mrs Catherine Mayhew, Trevor Poile, Len Price, David Scott, Mrs Lynne Weatherly and Frank Williams.

2. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

There were no changes to report.

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2013 be agreed.

4. ACTIONS FROM PREVIOUS MINUTES

23 May 2013

4 Evidence of formal appointment to the Town Forum

MMcG Representatives to submit evidence of their formal appointment to the Town Forum.

The Democratic Services Officer advised that 14 out of the 47 representative organisations had now submitted evidence of their formal appointment to the Town Forum. He also set out the relevant section of the Town Forum's Constitution, where reference was made to the need to submit evidence in the format of "...a copy of the AGM minutes, or similar...". The Chairman reiterated once more the importance of submitting this information, in the interests of good governance.

5. UPDATE FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The Chairman advised that Cllr David Jukes had been unable to attend the meeting because his wife was unwell and he had sent his apologies for absence. The Chief Executive added that the Leader of the Council had said that he was happy to attend the next meeting, in order to provide a verbal update on key issues affecting the town.

On behalf of the Town Forum, the Chairman sent his best wishes to the Leader's wife for a speedy recovery.

6. UPDATE REPORT FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

William Benson was welcomed to the meeting and provided a corporate and financial overview of the Borough Council, ahead of the 2013/14 priority-formulating and budget-setting processes, which would begin in the Autumn.

Mr Benson first provided a national context, where he stressed how local government was being asked to make the biggest cuts to public expenditure, compared with central government departments. He also demonstrated how social care costs were increasingly squeezing out discretionary areas of spend.

Against that backdrop, Mr Benson explained what action had already been taken by TWBC to address the huge cut in government support, through a mix of: staff reductions; discretionary services being reduced or stopped; some fees/charges being increased; the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership initiative, (where district councils were pooling their resources in order to provide a more resilient service); and the outsourcing of some services.

As for the future, Mr Benson drew attention to the Borough Council's vision for the town, details of which had already been shared with the Town Forum by the Leader of the Council. Mr Benson warned that, while there was some evidence of economic growth in the Borough and some cause for optimism, it was difficult to rely on future government support for district councils, as shown by the loss of the 'new homes bonus', the distribution rules for which were changing.

The Chairman next opened up the subject for questions, as follows:

- (a) Jane Fenwick asked the Chief Executive how important he felt it was for there to be less traffic congestion, in order to deliver economic growth. Mr Benson, acknowledged that it was vital, and reminded Forum members how TWBC and KCC had jointly secured funding commitments to both the A21 dualling scheme and to improving the North Farm business park traffic problems but he cautioned that there were insufficient funds available to tackle all of the congestion issues in the town.
- (b) Victor Webb focused on the fact that over 50 members of staff had been made redundant in recent years. He asked what the cost of this action had been to the authority and how much had been paid to contract some of these services externally. Mr Benson replied that details of staffing numbers and costs (including redundancy costs) were included in budget reports and quarterly budget updates; he added that the Council tried to take advantage of opportunities presented by staff leaving and that the outsourcing of services always went through an open and transparent process. On this point, Cllr Backhouse welcomed the savings that had been achieved through the partnership working initiative with other authorities, which had also brought about greater resilience to services.

- (c) The Chairman, who also acted as Chairman of the Finance and Other Issues Working Group, reminded members that the Forum had been able to respond to TWBC's budget-setting process last year and intended to do so again this year. He asked the Chief Executive to view the Forum as a group of interested local people who were willing to assist the Borough Council in its formulating of priorities and budget-setting functions.

RESOLVED – That the Chief Executive be thanked for his presentation.

7. HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORTATION IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS

Jane Fenwick, who was the acting chairman of the Traffic Strategy Working Group, led this discussion and presented the following guests, who had agreed to take part in the discussion: County Cllr Matthew Balfour (Deputy to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment), Borough Cllr Alan McDermott (Cabinet Portfolio-holder for Planning and Transportation), Chad Nwanosike (Senior Transport Planner, KCC) and Hilary Smith (Economic Development Manager, TWBC).

Mrs Fenwick summarised the issue to date. She reminded the Forum that her working group had prepared a response to the Borough Council's draft Transport Strategy which had been circulated to all Forum members for comment and approval, before submission to TWBC in March. She added that a meeting had been held with senior KCC and TWBC elected members and officers on 1 July, when the Forum's key concerns had been discussed. Mrs Fenwick advised that a member of her working group, Peter Perry, had also attended the Joint Transportation Board (JTB) meeting on 15 July, when an interim report had been considered, summarising the key issues raised through the public consultation stage of the draft Transport Strategy.

The principal issue of concern amongst the Traffic Strategy Working Group members had been congestion in the town. Mrs Fenwick strongly believed that, with the greater number of homes planned for the town in the coming few years, the congestion issue would only become worse, unless there was a commitment – in the Traffic Strategy and in actual action – to address this fundamental element.

To provide some focus for the discussion, Mrs Fenwick invited the special guests to answer the following matters, starting with how decisions are made about traffic, with the following issues in mind:

- (a) Decision-making – how to make it work better for Tunbridge Wells;
- (b) Congestion – its impact and solutions, including relief roads;
- (c) Visitors, pedestrians and the cycling experience; and
- (d) Parking and public transport.

- Mr Nwanosike explained that the basis of partnership working between TWBC and KCC was set out in the 'Service protocol for development planning'. He added that the congestion relief scheme for the North Farm business park and the draft Transport Strategy were two key areas being worked on by the two authorities.
- Mrs Smith, who was TWBC's main contact on transport issues, advised that, following on from the JTB meeting held on 15 July, she would be undertaking some re-drafting work on the draft Strategy, in which she was willing to work with the Forum's Traffic Strategy Working Group. Mrs Smith added that, as and when traffic issues were raised with the Borough Council, these were discussed with KCC as the highways authority in the first instance. She advised that there were other, specific, aspects on which partnership working took

place between the two authorities; one of these was the Quality Bus Partnership and work was currently underway in the preparation of a Borough bus map, including visitor information (funded by S106 developer contributions). The Forum was advised that KCC and TWBC were also working together to prepare a cycling strategy for the Borough.

Finally, Mrs Smith advised that regular cross-boundary discussion on transport issues took place amongst the West Kent partnership authorities (i.e. TWBC, Tonbridge & Malling BC and Sevenoaks DC) and, when it was necessary, with East Sussex.

General discussion then took place as follows:

- Mrs Fenwick sought clarification on **how traffic/highway projects were initiated** and worked up. Mr Nwanosike explained that some schemes might develop in order to mitigate the effects of development which had obtained planning consent, thus 'section 106' (S106) developer contributions might fund such work. Other schemes might be safety-critical, an aspect which might trigger the need for a relevant scheme. The Chief Executive added that, from a TWBC perspective, other schemes might be initiated locally, such as the proposals for Fiveways, which was a 'public realm' initiative by the Borough Council. County Cllr Balfour provided further explanation on how schemes came into being, including proposals which might start with individuals making contact with their local councillor.
- Tim Harper asked who took the lead responsibility for resolving a traffic issue, such as the Pembury Road/Blackhurst Lane/Halls Hole Road scheme. Mr Nwanosike advised that KCC would be the lead authority, adding that, in this case, a number of improvement measures had been implemented, following endorsement from the Tunbridge Wells JTB.
- Kyrios Kyriacou asked if there should be some form of feedback process for schemes in the future. Cllr McDermott advised that this was through the existing JTB meeting structure.
- Mrs Fenwick still felt that the opportunity should exist for the public to set out what they wished to see for the town, in terms of traffic and highway improvements.
- Victor Webb picked up on the comment that some schemes had been initiated in order to 'mitigate the effects of development'. He felt that there had been some poor decisions made about S106 developer contributions in the recent past, to which County Cllr Balfour responded by saying that it was for TWBC to negotiate relevant amounts.
- Borough Cllr David Neve believed that the effectiveness of the JTB had been adversely affected by the lack of continuity in KCC officers attending, an aspect which County Cllr Balfour acknowledged.
- Borough Cllr Barrington-King voiced his optimism over the partnership working between TWBC and KCC on highways issues. He also praised the Town Forum for the positive work they were pursuing in their wish to see water features provided, where early engagement was, he believed, the key to success.

- Michael Doyle made reference to the North Farm scheme to address congestion issues. He enquired how negotiations were continuing with those land owners who were reluctant to help with the site assembly. County Cllr Balfour advised that he was confident that those outstanding discussions with land owners would be concluded shortly. He added that this was an important aspect, as KCC's commitment to the scheme was dependent upon full site assembly; he also advised that a significant part of the funding for the scheme was coming from central government 'pinch-point' money.
- Both Mrs Fenwick and Philip Whitbourn felt it important to emphasise Tunbridge Wells' **border position** in the context of the Traffic Strategy, adding that it might be helpful to have an East Sussex County Council representative taking part in this discussion. Mr Nwanosike advised that discussions with East Sussex did indeed already take place for schemes that impacted on both counties. Mrs Smith reiterated TWBC's willingness to liaise and discuss with all neighbouring authorities.
- Sally Balcon raised the important issue of **air quality**, which was acknowledged as being another undesirable consequence of congestion. Mrs Smith advised that the Borough Council already had an 'air quality management area' along the A26, where air quality was closely monitored and that air quality was an issue acknowledged in the draft Transport Strategy. Cllr McDermott added that he was also aware that Arriva were planning to implement improved exhaust emission controls on their latest vehicles. On this element, Cllr Jane March advised that Greg Clark MP had stressed the importance of addressing air quality concerns when he was pressing the Department of Transport for approval to the A21 dualling scheme. In addressing the issue of air quality, County Cllr Balfour said that, while district councils were responsible for its measuring and monitoring, they were not responsible for implementing schemes to rectify, thereby exposing a weakness in tackling the issue.
- Lorna Blackmore referred to the recent A26 congestion, where an HGV had broken down, creating many hours of queuing and disruption in the town. She felt that the poor road layout had been partly to blame. Mrs Fenwick used that example as an argument for the long term planning of **relief roads**. Both Peter Perry and Mrs Fenwick believed TWBC and KCC should be more aspirational when it came to relief road provision, so that plans could be agreed now, ready for implementation should funds ever become available.
- Stephen Bowser referred to the publication 'Growth without Gridlock', adding that he would like to see much-improved **public transport** as a central platform in addressing congestion. He enquired why we did not make more use of the Local Sustainable Transport Fund, provided by central government. Mrs Smith advised that the Local Sustainable Transport Fund had been a Department for Transport initiative which had now ended. Tunbridge Wells had put forward some suggested projects to the County Council for a bid under this scheme but, against competing demands across Kent, the Tunbridge Wells projects had not been selected for inclusion on this occasion. County Cllr Balfour confirmed that East Kent had, in the past, tended to do well under such a bidding process, explaining that it was largely based on deprivation statistics. Mr Bowser felt, therefore, that TWBC should be emphasising the importance of its public transport need through the Transport Strategy process.

- Mr Kyriacos enquired who was responsible for **strategic forecasting** across the Borough. Mr Nwanosike advised that this was a joint partnership approach via the Local Plan process, including the Site Allocations Development Plan Document route (which had recently been undertaken and on which the Forum had received a briefing in March). He added that forecasting was supported by the VISUM modelling work that would provide evidence on the soundness of the Transport Strategy and Local Plan.

Mrs Fenwick asked Forum members to finish off by focusing on issues at a local street level and on parking:

- Cllr Ben Chapelard enquired what the outcome had been from a review of the success of **20mph zones**. County Cllr Balfour advised that, although the results of the review were not yet known, generally 20mph zones were felt not to be effective, adding that the police would not approve a scheme unless they felt it was appropriate. Cllr Balfour advised that there would be full consultation on the outcome of the review in October. Cllr Backhouse believed that 20mph zones were still in demand, enforceable by the police or not; he felt that they could be implemented as a direct result of the Localism Act.
- Mrs Fenwick enquired if there were an adverse impact on Tunbridge Wells as a **visitor destination** because of the congestion problem. Cllr March felt this strengthened the case for the town centre pedestrianisation proposal and, if it attracted visitors, for extending the scheme.
- Marguerita Morton said that, within the Leisure, Culture and Tourism Working Group, there had been the feeling that some hotel chains did not view the town as viable for their trade, due to the congestion issues. Cllr Balfour believed that was not a valid reason; good access (to motorways or railway stations) was far more important, he felt.
- Mr Webb felt there was a conflict in demanding the provision of relief roads at the same time as closing other roads to make way for a pedestrianised town centre.
- Cllr Neve referred to page 27 of the draft Transport Strategy, specifically: "There are a number of interventions that have been considered, which are not included in the Strategy, for example bus rapid transit, congestion charging and additional relief roads. It is considered that these cannot be delivered within the timescale of the Strategy." He felt that this showed a lack of vision, adding that he felt there was a lack of commitment towards park and ride because of it would reduce the authority's keenness on car park revenue generation.

In summarising the debate, Mrs Fenwick thanked all the contributors to the debate. She urged KCC to listen to the issues which had been raised and TWBC to help realise the ambitions of the members of the Town Forum.

Cllr McDermott committed TWBC to continue to work with Town Forum members on highways and transportation issues, as this debate developed.

There were no specific action points arising from this item.

8. WORKING GROUPS

Update reports were made from the working groups as follows:

Water in the Wells Working Group – The Chairman, Michael Holman, had provided a written update report, which had been circulated with the agenda. He advised that a community interest company (Water in the Wells CIC) had been incorporated. Their

stated activities included contributing to the design, construction, installation, maintenance and operation of water features in and around Royal Tunbridge Wells, in order to promote the regeneration of its spa-town heritage. The CIC was currently seeking assistance with publicity and fund-raising activities.

Amongst other issues to note, the Town Forum learnt that the Water in the Wells Working Group continued to engage with influential individuals and local firms that have development plans. The Working Group also welcomed the planned de-cluttering of Fiveways and was very keen to see this scheme incorporate a water feature, as announced by the Leader of the Council.

RESOLVED – That the progress report be accepted.

Leisure, Culture and Tourism Working Group – In the absence of the Chairman of this working group, Mary Wardrop provided a short summary of its most recent meeting. Cllr Woodward, recently appointed by TWBC as its ‘Youth Champion’, had attended the working group meeting where he had spelt out more details about plans for a permanent youth hub and a re-invigorated youth forum.

The working group had also discussed the outcome from the recent survey among young people of what their favourite activities were and what they would like to see in the town.

Mrs Wardrop added that the next meeting would be taking place on 5 September when the focus would be on: (a) the needs, preferences and priorities for supporting the actions of youngsters, open space provision and older people’s access to facilities; and (b) the results of a survey on souvenirs for tourists in the town.

RESOLVED – That the progress report be accepted.

Traffic Strategy Working Group – The acting Chairman, Jane Fenwick, advised that there were no further issues to report, adding that the working group’s focus had been on the matters already covered in minute 7 above.

Planning and Development Strategy – Michael Doyle, Chairman of this working group, reported on TWBC’s timetable for dealing with responses submitted on the Site Allocations Development Plan document. He advised that nothing was likely to come back to his working group or the Town Forum until early in 2014.

Finance and Other Issues – David Wakefield, Chairman of this working group, advised that he had no issues to report to the wider membership, although there would be much work to consider once TWBC’s budget-setting and priority-formulating processes began.

There were no specific action points arising from the above reports.

9. FUTURE CONSULTATION ISSUES

Mike McGeary had circulated a list of future consultation issues which the Borough Council would be leading on, drawn from TWBC’s ‘Notice of Intent to Make Key Decisions’.

There were no action points arising from this report.

10. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

None

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Town Forum administrator advised that meetings for the remainder of the year had been arranged as follows:

Thursdays 26 September and 28 November (to include the AGM), all starting at 6.30pm.

The meeting concluded at 8.30pm.