



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

Draft Minutes of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum meeting held on Thursday 30th June 2011 in the Town Hall

Representatives Present

Katharina Mahler-Bech, Michelle Hull, David Bushell, Lesley Herriot, John Forster, Anne Forster, Ian Naismith, Sarah Balcon, Kate Bishop, Betsey Dix, Chris Morris, Michael Holman, John Goodfellow, George Lawson, David Webster, Kate Sergeant, Maggie Fraser, David Morris, Mary Wardrop, Helen Featherstone, John Mattei, Michael Doyle, Dorothea Holman, Jenina Bas Pendry, David Wakefield

Cllrs Peter Crawford, James Scholes, Peter Bulman, Catherine Mayhew, Ronen Basu, Ben Chapelard, Tracy Moore, Nicholas Rogers and Caroline Derrick

Also in attendance

Philip Whitbourn, Alastair Tod, Marguerita Morton and Cllr Victor Webb

Before the start of the meeting, Robert Hardy announced the sad news that Lee O'Brien (TWBC's Local Democracy Officer) who had supported past meetings of the Town Forum but had been ill in hospital since late February, had died early the previous day, aged 39. TWBC will be sending a representative to the funeral in Lee's home town of Swansea.

In the Chair (for Item 1) – Cllr Peter Crawford

Item 1 – Election of Town Forum Officers

Following their nomination for the vacant positions of Chair and Deputy Chair of the Town Forum, David Wakefield and Jane Fenwick were confirmed as the successful candidates and welcomed by Peter Crawford, who will continue as the second Deputy Chair.

David Wakefield chaired the remainder of the meeting and began by thanking Peter Crawford for having 'held the fort' so well over the preceding months. This sentiment was endorsed by all present.

Item 2 - Apologies

Lorna Blackmore, June Bridgeman, John Cunningham, John Neel, Altan Omer, Peter Parry, Anne Stobo, Roger Walsh, Matt Goodwin, Jane Fenwick

Cllrs – David Neve, Trevor Poile, Len Price,

Item 3 – Membership Changes

Robert Hardy confirmed that there had been no applications from organisations wishing to join the Town Forum and that, as agreed at the previous meeting, this agenda item will be divided between membership applications for decision and notification from current member organisations of changes to their named representatives (for information only).

For clarity and the avoidance of confusion, the list showing the most up to date set of named representatives will be circulated on a regular basis (as it was with this agenda) and any remaining problems with circulation list or contact details are being dealt with as swiftly as possible.

Items 4 and 5 – Minutes of the previous meeting and Matters Arising

The draft minutes of the May meeting were agreed as an accurate record. The only matter arising was that David Wakefield had arranged for the first meeting of the officers of the Town Forum in their role as the Management Committee to be held on Thursday 14th July to discuss and prioritise the 'Forward Plan' attached to the minutes. Robert Hardy had also been invited to attend the meeting. It was hoped that the timing of such meetings would be set for the year to fall halfway between meetings of the Town Forum.

Item 6 – Response to the TWBC Core Strategy Review

Mary Wardrop introduced the reports circulated with the agenda on behalf of the Working Party as follows –

“ You will remember at our last meeting on 26 May (and we have just approved those minutes) that we had a presentation from John Spurling of TWBC and a short discussion on the TWBC Core Strategy Review. Members of the Town Forum at that meeting decided to appoint a working party to formulate a response, in view of the tight deadline.

Those who volunteered for the working party – a group with a wide spread of ages and experience – were June Bridgeman, John Barber, John Cunningham, Helen Featherstone, Alison Finlay, Katharina Mahler-Bech, Chris Thomas and Mary Wardrop. You can see from the list of members that these represent different parts of the unparished area of the town.

We took as our brief the function of the Town Forum to identify shared concerns of the unparished residents of Royal Tunbridge Wells of all ages and walks of life about how the proposals affect their interests. We did not see it as our task to view the issues through the eyes of other areas in the Borough which have their own channels for making their representations.

The group met twice; the first time to discuss all the papers relevant to the Core Strategy and to prepare a draft response. Email contact was also made with those who could not be at the meeting in person and then the second meeting took these and other views into account in order to finalise the draft responses attached to the agenda – Note by the Working Party; Draft Response of the Town Forum and Draft Consultation Reply Form.

Before proposing the recommendations of the working party to the Town Forum, further discussion and additional comments would be welcome. “

The proposed responses were welcomed by members of the Town Forum and the Chair drew attention to the need to ensure that the Town Forum heard back from TWBC with their response (see his later comments under item 7).

Cllr Tracy Moore, who is the chair of the TWBC Local Development Framework Member Working Group, updated the Town Forum on the consequences of the recent court judgement which ruled that the Government's attempt simply to abolish the Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) was unlawful. This meant that for Tunbridge Wells and all other local planning authorities they could not plan for lower housing growth than contained in current RSS targets. This did not mean that views of the Town Forum should not be expressed – especially in relation to the location/allocation of housing targets and the basis for setting those targets. There were also many other important planning issues that the CSR was looking to update which still needed to be done, even with the judgement in relation to housing targets.

Mary Wardrop pointed out that there are concerns amongst TWBC officers that the proposal to include 'windfall sites' within the target could lead to the plan being viewed as 'unsound' by the planning inspectorate. The view of the Town Forum was that including 'windfall sites' reflected both past reality and common sense.

Other contributions to the discussion were about –

- the need to maintain an emphasis on the delivery of affordable housing and a range of housing types
- the significance of urban green space as well as the value of Green Belt and Special Landscape status
- the distribution of proposed housing should be based on identified need
- the balance between the proposed urban and rural targets needs to be adjusted

Finally a question was asked about how comments the Council had received to the consultation would be considered, given the short time period. The answer was not known

The following recommendations were then put to the meeting -

- 1. To endorse the response submitted as representing the Town Forum's views.**
- 2. To request the Town Forum Secretary to inform the Planning Department on Friday of any supplementary points they wish to add.**
- 3. To invite the Chair to write to the Council expressing concern about the hopelessly short consultation period allowed for a well-considered collective response on an important major issue affecting all residents. An assurance should be sought that in any future major consultation exercise of this sort, the established calendar of Town Forum meetings will be taken into account to allow for initial discussion by the Town Forum, preparation of a draft response and a second discussion by the Town Forum to approve this.**

4. To inform all Councillors of the Town Forum's views on housing allocations by sending them a copy of the memorandum re-captioned as a full Town Forum document.

5. To post a copy of the agreed memorandum on the Town Forum website.

All recommendations were endorsed by the Town Forum.

From the Chair, David Wakefield then asked Cllr Catherine Mayhew if she would take responsibility for reporting back to the Town Forum on both the TWBC response to the Town Forum's views and on the progress of the CSR process. She agreed to do so.

Item 7 – Reports from Councillors

Before inviting councillors to give their updates, David Wakefield suggested that in future he would like to ask individual councillor members to feed back to Town Forum on particular areas of TWBC activity or projects, as well as the more open invitation to give an update on matters of importance in their respective Wards.

Cllr Tracy Moore reported that KCC had begun a programme of removing street trees and tarmacing over the hole rather than replacing the tree. She is hoping to persuade TWBC to pick up this issue and would welcome information about this happening elsewhere in the town.

Cllr Catherine Mayhew drew attention to the TWBC bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for funds to improve Grosvenor and Hilbert Road parks. One of the things that will help persuade the HLF to support the bid will be the time given voluntarily by local people via the Friends Groups. The more people sign up to these the better the chances of getting the funding! Please contact her if you want to know more.

Item 8 – Reports from Champions and the Vision Committee

David Wakefield, from the Chair, said that he'd like the Town Forum's permission for the Management Committee to look again at these roles. Members agreed to the suggestion.

Michael Holman asked if the timescale for the lifts and other improvements at the Museum & Library was known. It was confirmed that these are all scheduled for the current financial year.

Katharina Mahler-Bech reminded members of the forthcoming Mela being held on July 17th

John Goodfellow understood from Cllr Brian Ransley that the TWBC urban parking strategy was due to be published in July and he also offered to continue as 'transport champion'.

Item 9 – Civic Complex Consultation Report

Attached to the agenda was an extract from the M&N report. The extract was of the section of the report which summarised the comments of local people and organisations under a series of headings and those headings were used at the meeting as the basis for comments and observations.

9a Cultural uses

The following comments were made –

- The library, museum and art gallery could all do more to promote themselves – locally and to visitors (in the case of the museum and gallery)
- It was wrong to compare the library with the museum and gallery as they were ‘like apples and pears’
- The town centre already has a cinema at the Trinity Theatre
- The town centre library has the highest ‘footfall’ of any library in Kent.

9b Civic Uses

The following comments were made –

- It is a disgrace that the meeting rooms at the Town Hall are closed to other bodies
- There needs to be a decent meeting space for larger gatherings in the town
- The Camden Centre is supposed to be this, but why is that not free of charge?
- Could the ‘special expenses’ for the town be used to increase the subsidy at the Camden Centre to reduce further (or remove) charges for local non-commercial groups?
- A lot of the replies in this section of the report simply reflect the rather odd nature of the questions
- Civic functions should be in the centre of the town.

9c Public Services

The following comments were made –

- The ambiguity in the questions is reflected in the ambiguity of the answers/conclusions
- There were different opinions on whether the Gateway was more or less ‘accessible’ than the Town Hall – accessible meaning not simply its location but whether Gateway was a less intimidating venue to take your problems to. Even those who felt the Gateway works, recognised the need for improvement.

9d Leisure

There was widespread support for the need for more and better facilities for young people.

9e Retail

The following comments were made –

- Given the difficulties being experienced by many well-known retailers there was a view firmly against any retail-based redevelopment of the site – plus a fear that this sort of development could become another derelict site
- The report itself shows a much greater level of support for increasing independent retailers rather than chains/department stores
- It was said that other reports show a lack of local demand for ‘big retail’
- There was evidence that some retailers were flourishing in the town – including local branches of large chains – in one case the town has the most successful store in the UK for that chain.

9f Other Topics – transport

It was felt that these issues were being ‘faced up to’ now by TWBC – see item 8 in these minutes.

9g Other Topics – general

Final comments –

There really should some clear options for the future put forward to inform this debate, the consultation had nothing of substance in front of it. This consultation was intended to ‘test the public appetite’ but should have had more detail for people to consider.

There were concerns that although refurbishment and improvement had been ruled out, but this ought to be reconsidered based on worked done and costed previously.

The TWRC ought to be asked to go to Phase 2 in the development process in order to produce a range of options and plans that can be considered and consulted upon.

There is too much focus on just one site – the TWBC commitment to a master plan for the town centre is central to taking a more strategic approach. It is hoped that this will be an open and transparent process governed by a professional methodology.

There is the possibility (now confirmed) that the debate on this report will be held at the TWBC Council meeting on July 20th.

David Wakefield concluded the discussion with the suggestion that Cllr David Jukes be invited to the September meeting of the Town Forum to give an update on the Civic Site, the master plan and other town centre matters within his portfolio. This was agreed.

Item 10 – Any Other Business

Cinema Site

A question was asked as to the current status of the 'cinema site' after recent stories about the commercial purchase having fallen through.

Those councillors present were not the ones directly involved in this, but they had heard the same information about the sale. It was confirmed that the Council had begun the early stages of exploring a compulsory purchase order.

At the invitation of the chair, Philip Whitbourn (in attendance as an observer) was asked to speak on this item. He talked about the powers available to councils to take enforcement action against the owners of 'eyesore' properties and further powers which would enable the Council compulsorily demolish premises if other actions were not complied with. These powers were known to have been successfully used in Hastings.

What else could be done to put pressure on the agents (Savills) to bring into temporary use those empty shops not behind the hoardings? This has been done in other towns. Cllr Catherine Mayhew said she was aware of something called a 'meanwhile tenancy' which could be used and she offered to take these comments into the Council and report back.

It was felt by all that this site and all the options and questions mentioned above, should also be part of what the Town Forum asks Cllr David Jukes to update them on at the September meeting.

The Town Forum agreed to urge TWBC take steps to issue Section 215 notices to the owners of the cinema site, whether collectively for the whole site or separately between the adjacent shops and the old cinema itself.

Kent & Surrey Hospital site

A question was asked about the status and progress of the planning application for this site and it was confirmed that it was still in the 'pre-application' stage. The proposed joint meeting of both TWBC planning committees due to be held in July had been postponed.

This site is currently designated solely as employment land but the application would mean only 12% of the site would be retail-based or office employment, the rest would be residential.

Concerns were raised again about both the traffic impact and the lack of schools/school places for those likely to move to any new homes.

It was agreed that David Wakefield would write to Jim Kehoe, the Head of Planning at TWBC, to express the concerns of the Town Forum.

The meeting closed at 8:09pm