

# POSITION STATEMENT ON PLANNING

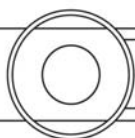
A "love-hate" relationship with our town -



"Love" of Heritage . . . . .  
. . . . . and "Hate" of "Grot Spots"



**AS AT JUNE 2007**



# Position Statement on Planning as at June 2007

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## INTRODUCTION

The Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum was established by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in order to allow some form of collective voice for the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells, which is the only part of the Borough that does not have a Town or Parish Council of its own.

The Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum agreed terms of reference for a Planning Committee in October 2006 and, nine months later, devoted the whole of one of its regular monthly meetings to the subject. This took the form of an interactive Presentation by the Chairman and the Secretary of the Committee on 28 June 2007, and this Position Statement endeavours to reflect the feelings expressed by Town Forum members who were present at the event.

### Aims of the 28 June 2007 Presentation

The aims of the Presentation were three fold.

First, it sought to report back to the wider membership of the Town Forum on the work of that Committee, and / or its Officers had undertaken on the Town Forum's behalf during those nine months.

A summary of that work is attached as **Appendix A**.

Secondly, the Presentation sought to inform and update members of the Town Forum on changes to the planning system in this country. In particular, it was explained how Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) are replacing old-style Local Plans, and the steps Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is taking to put the new Framework in place. These include the preparation of a "Master Plan" for Royal Tunbridge Wells.

The text of the Presentation is attached as **Appendix B**, and contains the explanation of the changes to the planning system.

Then, thirdly and very importantly, the Presentation sought to obtain a steer from the wider membership on a number of issues facing the town, by inviting responses to some key questions.

### The "love-hate" relationship with the town

By coincide, the leading article in the local newspaper, "The Kent and Sussex Courier", in the week of the meeting was about the "Master Plan". Under the heading: "*Will the plan tick all right boxes?*", the leading article observed that

*"Those of us who live and work in Tunbridge Wells have a love-hate relationship with the town. Yes, we love The Pantiles with its al fresco dining, the historic colonnade and independent shops. We know we are lucky with our stunning parks – the green lungs of the town – and we're pretty proud of our heritage.*

*But, it can safely be assumed that congestion, car parking, dilapidated buildings, grot spots and lack of homes that are affordable are at the top of many hate lists. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is seeking to remedy some of the town's inherent problems with its grand master plan".*

The article concludes with the words: "*So it sounds as though Town Hall chiefs may be tackling some of those items on the hate lists of many of us. The concern among some is will it protect – and enhance as promised – those many items on our love list?*"

Something of this same "love-hate" relationship was reflected in the Presentation too, with three of the top "loves" being Heritage, Open Spaces and the Pantiles.

## HERITAGE



### A Local List of Heritage Assets

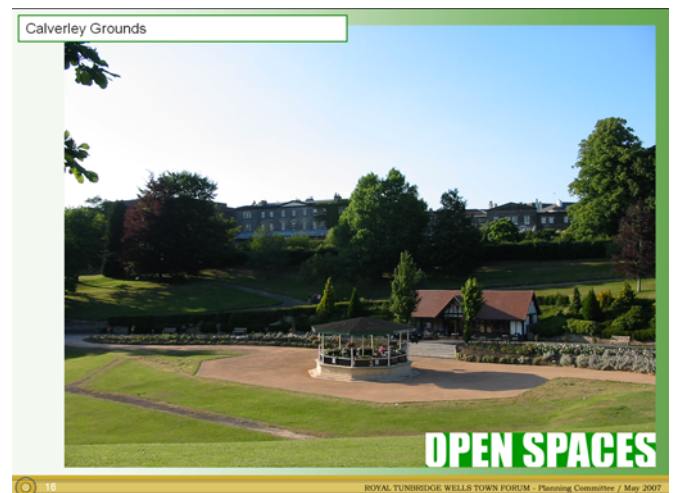
There is no doubt that residents, generally, do love our town, and clearly appreciate the town's heritage. Thus the Town Forum has joined with the Civic Society in the considerable task of drawing up a Local List of Heritage Assets. The aim is to complete this Local List project by October 2007.

The Council's programme for the Local Development Framework envisages work on a Master Plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells starting in earnest at about that time, and we hope that the Local List will be of help in informing that process. Fieldwork on the project is ongoing, but members were invited to draw attention to any buildings, especially within the Conservation Area, which they thought should feature on the list.

The Homeopathic Hospital, by C.H. Strange, in Church Road was an example of a building to which attention was drawn at the meeting.

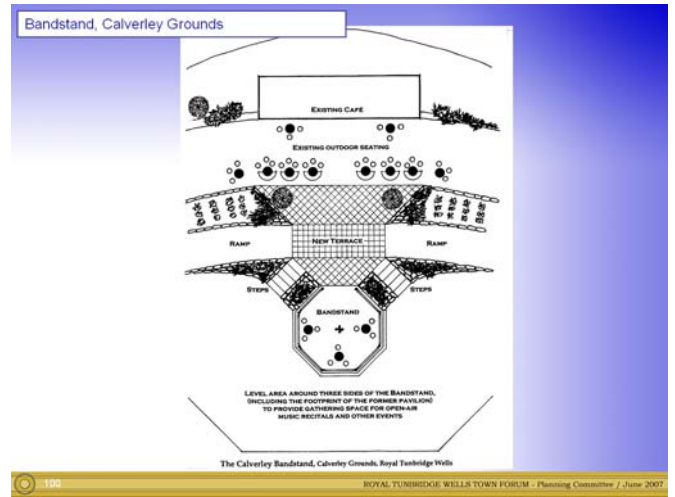
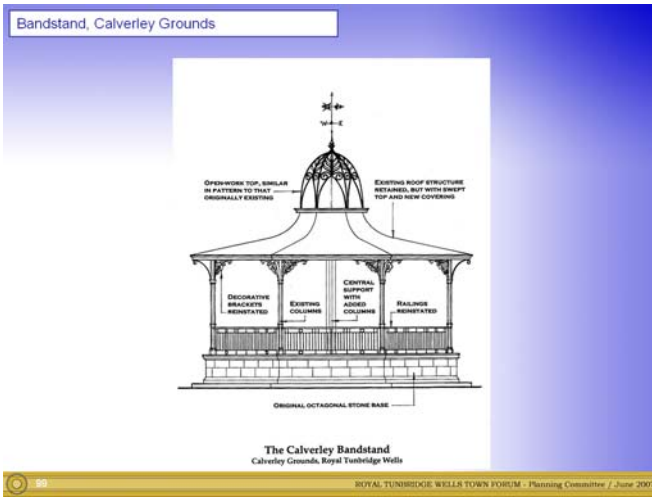
### Buildings at the heart of the Community

Also, members were invited to make mention of any buildings, especially in their particular areas, that were seen as being at the heart of their Community. Examples of these included Churches, such as King Charles Church, St James's Church, St John's Church, Hawkenbury and Mount Ephraim URCs, the Baptist Chapel and the Culverden Evangelical Church. Other features included The Pantiles, Calverley Park Crescent and the former Habitat building in Mount Pleasant. Post offices and food stores were cited as important, too, together with Community buildings such as Toc Hall and Claremont School.

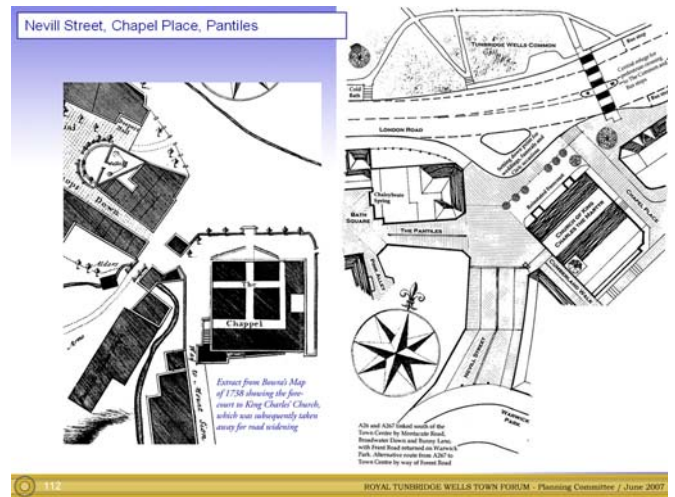
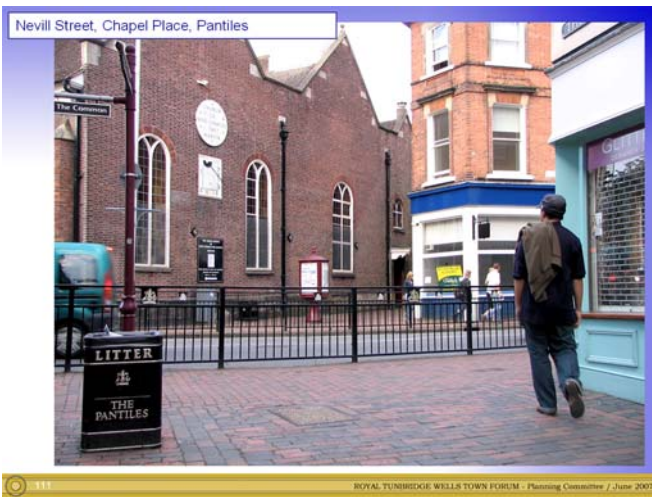


### Open Spaces

Work on an input from the Town Forum to the Council's emerging Open Spaces Policy is in hand.



With regards to the Bandstand in Calverley Grounds, 74% of members expressing a view on the 28 June were in favour of the refurbishment and better use of the Calverley Bandstand, as a feature of the town centre with only one member against.



## The Pantiles

Comment from one member on 28 June read: *“The Pantiles is a disaster at both ends. Unless there would be a huge adverse impact on traffic flows, I think linking the Pantiles with the High Street is extremely important and probably a key reason why the Pantiles does not flourish as it should – it is TW’s No 1 advertised historic attraction!!”*

With regard to the other end of The Pantiles, the view was expressed that Union House was *“unattractive and incongruent with The Pantiles”*. Thus, a sympathetic redevelopment, perhaps as a hotel, would be welcome. Failing that, some sort of refurbishment might be second best.

## “GROT SPOTS”



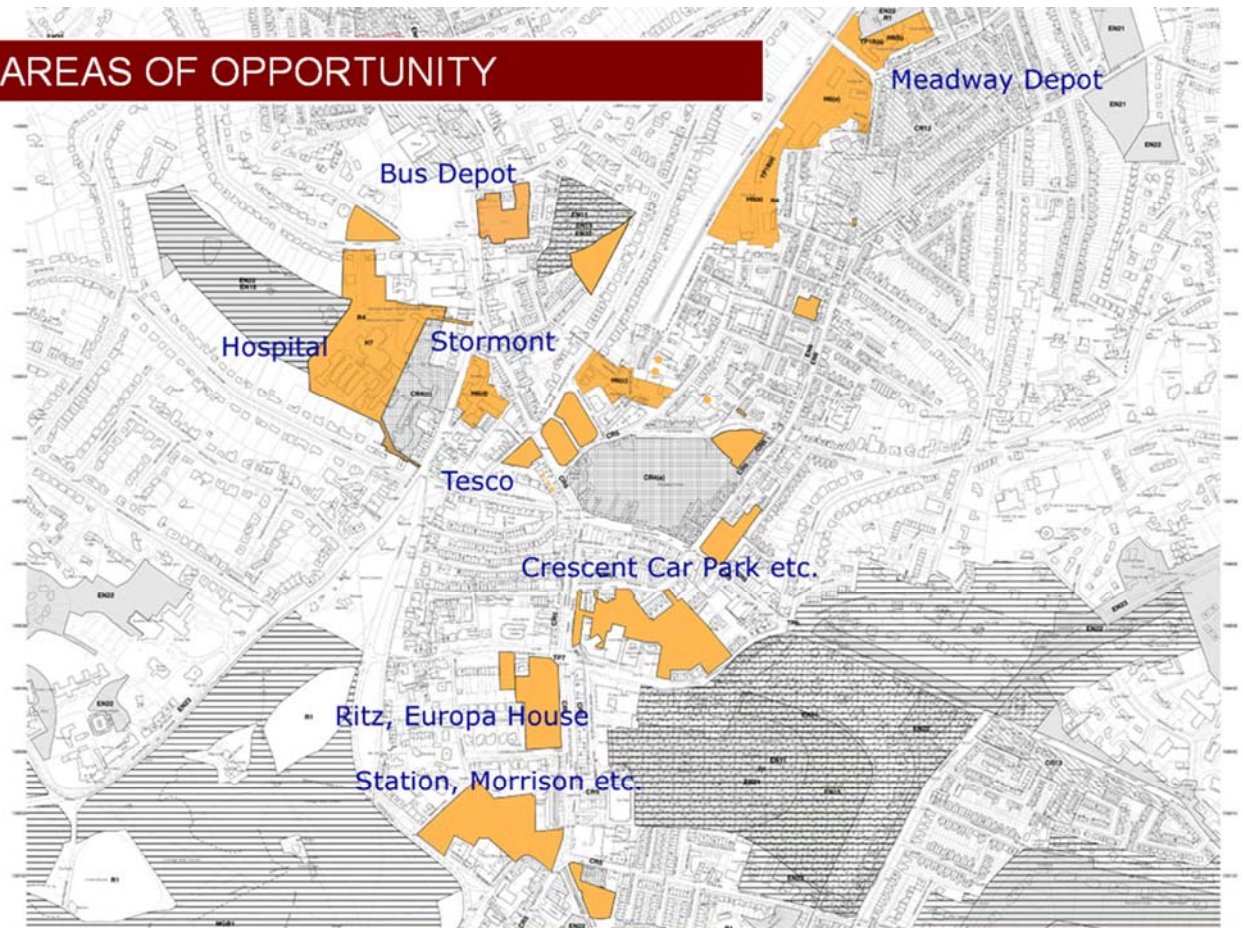
### Top Eyesores

So much for the ‘love’ side of the ‘love-hate’ relationship. If the term ‘grot spot’ was not actually coined in the Town Forum, it has certainly become associated with the Town Forum in the public mind. Serious concern about eyesores that let the place down badly has been a major feature of the deliberations with the Town Forum since its inception. A list of the “top 10” eyesores was published by the Town Forum in November 2005 and this is attached as **Appendix C** to the Paper. Only one of these ten, No 30 Warwick Park, appears to have received any physical attention so far. Further ‘grot spots’ that troubled members included: the former Morrisons supermarket; the old Turley’s Cycle shop in Rusthall; the St John Street car park; the huts behind Monson Road Adult Education Centre; the former Habitat Store; the private road behind Cosmos; and the service road behind the Post Office and Coronation Parade (Grosvenor Road).

### Areas of opportunity

Some of the present ‘grot spots’ on members’ “hate” lists, such as the former cinema site are seen by the Town Forum as ‘Areas of opportunity’, where sympathetic and enlightened development for suitable uses would be most welcome.

## AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY



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ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM - Planning Committee / June 2007

A preliminary map of such areas was displayed as part of the Presentation and this can be updated in the light of further suggestions made. It is hoped that the “Areas of opportunities” map, can join with the Local Heritage Asset List in guiding the new Master Plan towards both the conservation of the good, and the enhancement of the bad in the historic town of Royal Tunbridge Wells.



### Incongruous lamp posts

An overwhelming 86% of members favoured replacing the Motorway style lamp posts in Mount Pleasant Road and Crescent Road with traditional street furniture, appropriate to the main streets of a major historic town.



This picture shows the design of lamp post that once graced Mount Pleasant Road.

If Tonbridge can secure a more sympathetic design in its Upper High Street, Why, some members asked is Royal Tunbridge Wells failing?

### Civic Pride

One member expressed the view that the Council *“should take the action, as matter of priority to use all legal powers available to turn the town round from neglect to the sort of presentation one would expect of a major historic town – to be shown positively promoting civic pride”*. The perceived lack of Civic Pride of some business people was another comment, together with the arrogance of some officials in the past and sadly, the apathy of some residents.

Enthusiasm was expressed for The Tour de France coming through the town, albeit with a backdrop of the Royal Tunbridge Wells’ worst “grot spot” of all, namely the former Cinema site.

## HOUSING



### Urban Capacity Study

In the year 2001, the Borough Council produced an "Urban Capacity Study" which was an attempt to assess the whole of the built up area of the Borough in terms of "Typical Character Areas" and "Potential for intensification". Despite the obvious potential interest of such a document to the house-holders concerned, no public consultation on the study was carried out at the time. Of those members who expressed a view on the matter in the Presentation Questionnaire, only six were clear about the study, as compared with seventeen that were not. There does seem to be a strong case for the study being revisited as part of the Local Development Framework process with, this time, the benefit of the sound personal knowledge that residents could bring to bear upon such a study. It is important that any study of this kind must be right, if housing targets are to be met, while treating existing residential areas in an appropriate way.

### Garden grabbing

Some concern was expressed about that part of the Planning White Paper regarding housing on "previously developed land". The fear was that, with so much of the Borough as Green Belt or an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, there could be ever more pressure on urban gardens that were legally "brown" but physically green. The Planning White Paper gave rise, too, to some anxiety about so-called "minor" developments that could affect neighbourhoods.

### Affordable Housing

One particular problem with "garden grabbing" is that it typically leads to developments below the fifteen new dwellings threshold, and therefore, does nothing to help the problem of providing much needed affordable housing for key workers. It was noted that the Council in Maidstone had brought forward changes in their Affordable Housing Policy in advance of the rest of the Core Strategy in their evolving Local Development Framework. As housing in Tunbridge Wells is even more expensive than in Maidstone, there could be a case for doing the same here. However, it was acknowledgeable that there can be possible economic and social problems that need to be addressed in deciding upon the best way forward.

### Recycling provision

Attention was drawn to the need for adequate provision to be made for recycling in new housing developments, especially were large new block of apartments were concerned.

## RETAILING



### Ely Court

65 % of members favoured the retention of Ely Court in the new “Master Plan”, with only one member of a contrary opinion. The open walkway was seen as an important counterpoint to the enclosed RVP, and its human scale was valued. Also, it was seen as important to protect the environment of the Prince of Wales Public House.

### Royal Victoria Place

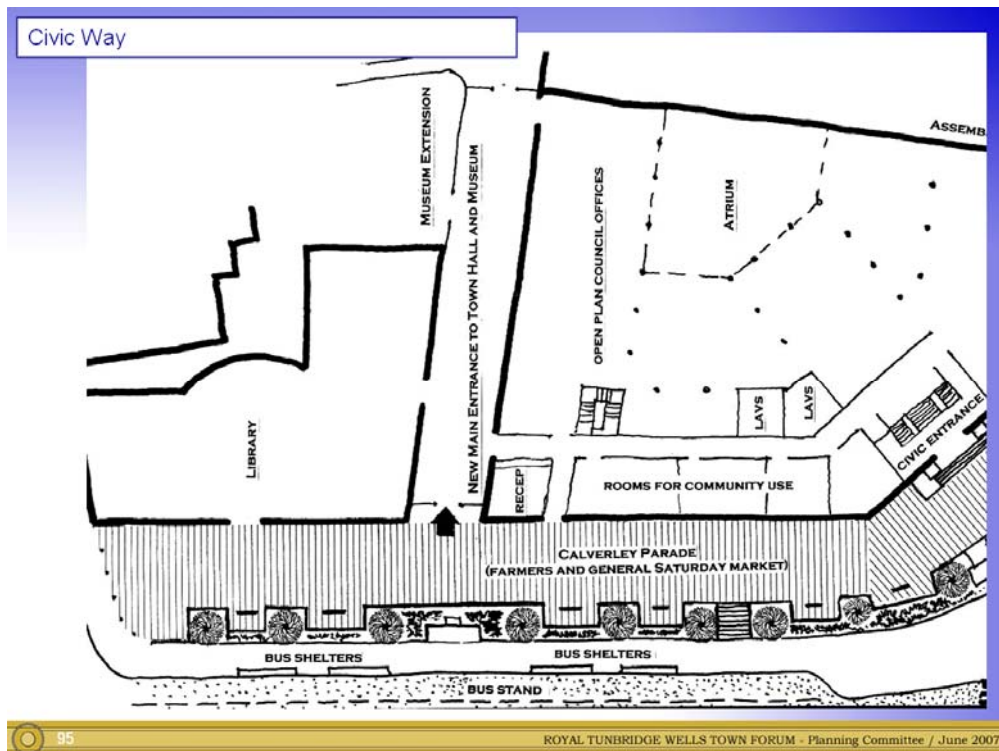
The comment was made that “RVP is already big enough, especially in the context of e-shopping in the future”. 65% of members favoured the location of any new shopping further south along the central spine of the town, rather than extending the RVP. No members dissented from that approach, although concern was expressed that retail development should not be the plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells, given the problems of roads, parking and transport infrastructure.

### Camden Road and Grosvenor Road

An overwhelming 86 % of members favoured Camden Road and Grosvenor Road remaining in shopping use, as part of the retail mix on offer in Royal Tunbridge Wells. Some members felt very strongly on this issue and no members dissented from that view. The shops with their lower rents, were seen as a different offering from other parts of the town, especially the RVP and the Calverley Road precinct. Also, they were seen as part of the charm of the town and as offering mixed retail and residential usage in some cases. The reinstatement of a secondary shopping notation should be a feature of the new Development Framework, together with the review of the present so-called primary shopping notation in places such as Vale Road and Castle Street.

## Farmers' Market

The Farmer's Market in "Civic Way" (formerly Calverley Parade) is a valued facility. However, it is suggested that the new Master Plan should consider whether the area in front of the Town Hall could function and work as a Civic Space.



## TRAFFIC AND PARKING



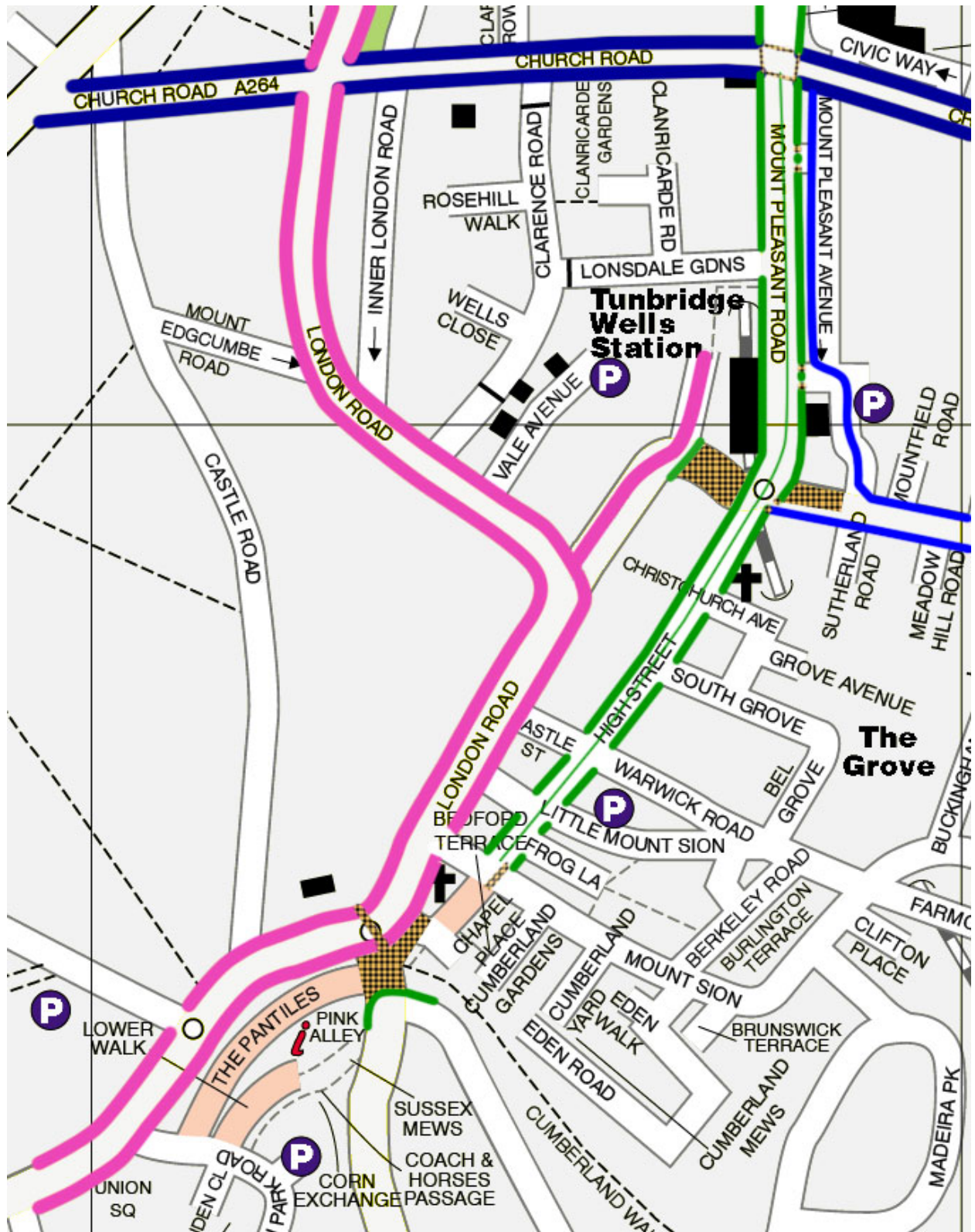
### “Getting around Tunbridge Wells”

Transportation issues should clearly be a major consideration of a Master Plan for Royal Tunbridge Wells. In that connection, attention is particularly drawn to the Discussion Paper of residents’ views produced by the Town Forum in April 2007, under the title “Getting around Tunbridge Wells”.

Some thoughts that emerged in that paper are summarized on **Appendix D**.

### A more pedestrian-friendly “spine”

One of the priorities for action identified in the Discussion Paper was a shift in balance to favour pedestrians over vehicles down the spine of the town.



A map was displayed at the 28 June Presentation, showing a more pedestrian-friendly spine linking the upper part of the town with The Pantiles, by way of the High Street and Mount Pleasant.

Then members were invited to say whether or not they would be in favour of carefully planned experimental road closures in places such as Nevill Street and Vale Road, to ascertain how traffic might readjust, or take a different route altogether. Such an experimental closure took place before the Calverley Road precinct was formed, and traffic was found to readjust in that case with relative ease. In the case of the Central Spine, a majority of members was in favour of carefully planned experimental closures, although eight people were not sure. Only two were against.



### Parking

Members were also asked whether they would favour exploring the idea of providing more than one level of car parking at Union House and / or Sainsburys / Homebase. Again, a majority was in favour with, again, some members unsure, but none against. Other points on parking included a wish to get parked cars off the Common; exploration of a “Pay on Exit” system at municipal car parks, and progress on Park and Ride. Decking the Sainsburys Car Park, in particular could provide a useful Park and Ride facility for the Southern part of the town, especially as it is now on the 281 Town Centre Bus Link.

### Pedestrian Barrier Railings

Pedestrian barrier railings are a visual blot on the street scene and open to question on practical and safety grounds in some cases. Those at Grove Hill Road, for example, are widely disregarded. One member made the point that with no railings at the Vale Road and Cinema junctions, those at the Monson Road and Tesco junctions seemed highly questionable. It is suggested that such railings should be reviewed, and removed unless there are sound reasons to retain them. Also, some such as those in Victoria and Garden Road, are of very poor design.

### Public Transport

There was a comment about the need to improve alternative transport nodes, in order to open real alternatives to car use. Much more on that topic is contained in the Discussion Paper “Getting around Tunbridge Wells”.

## THE “MASTER PLAN”

Finally, comments included some enthusiasm for a new “Master Plan”, but subject to there being proper consultation between the Council and residents, together with “clear signs of delivery”.