

## REGENERATION

# Jukes' new broom for town centre debate

By Jenna Pudelek

jenna.pudelek@archant.co.uk

TUNBRIDGE Wells council's new deputy leader has promised a "fresh approach" to the controversial regeneration company and revealed a fondness for cutting-edge design.

Since his term as mayor ended last month, the Tory councillor for Speldhurst and Bidbrough, David Jukes, has taken on the high-profile role of portfolio holder for property and major projects.

Many saw the recent outcome of the consultation on the future of the civic complex as a rejection of any redevelopment plans for the Grade II-listed buildings, and it will be down to Cllr Jukes to whet the town's appetite for change.

He said the cabinet members were determined to bring their fellow councillors and residents along with them in a new collaborative and inclusive era of council activity.

Cllr Jukes, who became a councillor after a successful career in the construction industry, spoke about his decision to resign from the Tunbridge Wells Regeneration Company, saying: "I was being left out [of decision-making] but still expected to take responsibility."



**GROT SPOT:** The old cinema site is key to any future developments in the town

Asked if he now felt happier about how the joint venture partnership between the council and developer John Laing was running, he said: "The regeneration company has been on pause since Bob Atwood took over as leader. Apart from giving the go-ahead for Cranbrook to go into phase two and the subsequent demolition of the council offices there has been very little action on any other item.

"I'm hoping to start with a fresh approach in the next couple of months."

He would not give anything away,

so it is unclear whether this will be an NHS reforms-style 'pause', which will lead to fundamental change.

Meanwhile, the former ABC cinema site, which has stood derelict for 11 years, is top priority for the Cllr Atwood-led administration.

"Something must be done with this site even if it means public intervention," Cllr Jukes said of the infamous 'grot spot'. The council has already admitted it is considering a compulsory purchase order on the site amidst growing frustration at a lack of progress

with its sale to private developers.

"We are relying on the information that we can obtain from those handling the sale [Savills] on behalf of the owner so I do not know what the timeline is for any sale," Cllr Jukes said.

"But before anything happens in Tunbridge Wells the cinema site would have to have an acceptable proposal, which not only meets the needs of the 21st century but also fits in architecturally. That does not mean it has to be old-fashioned. It could be extremely modern, but we have to make sure it fits with its surroundings."

He spoke about iconic buildings, which were at first given a frosty reception by some, from architectural masterpieces such as the Sydney Opera House to the new Turner Contemporary Gallery in Margate.

"I think you have to have a bit of vision," he said.

In this paper last week, leading architect and Tunbridge Wells resident, Ptolemy Dean, raised concerns that the council had failed to understand what made the town special and different. He feared redevelopment proposals with a focus on retail would turn the spa town into "urban wildernesses" like Ashford and Maidstone (see letters page on p17 for reaction).

Cllr Jukes said he was "more than

happy" to meet with Mr Dean and other local architects to get their views on where and how to develop.

"It has got to be revitalised," he said. "Tunbridge Wells has a reputation for being a bit sleepy, but that does not mean to say we have to copy Ashford, Maidstone or Bluewater."

"Let us create our own identity for the 21st century. This was a new town in the 18th century with the cafe society in the Pantiles, but we have not got that in the higher part of town. Calverley Precinct could be in any town in the UK."

"If we are going to do any major redevelopment we have to come up with a unique identity. I think that would be a mixed development of some sort, which includes commercial, offices, residential, educational and retail."

"We need to create our own model for the town not copy anyone else's."

He added: "We have to crystallise our thoughts on the sites available for development, this needs to go to the full council, but also to the outside bodies and organisations such as the Town Forum and Civic Society."

"We need to bring the public along with us. We are not going to please all people all the time, but we're representatives of the taxpayers – they put me here to look after their interests."

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