

Atwood finally outlines plans for civic complex

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Tunbridge Wells council leader Bob Atwood has, for the first time, set out a clear position on the future of the civic complex. Proposals to redevelop the Grade II-listed buildings, which include the Town Hall, proved hugely controversial and have been on pause.

Now, Cllr Atwood's approach is to create an "aspirational", overarching town plan that is set to shape Tunbridge Wells for the next 30 to 40 years. In his words, to find a balance between "reactionary conservatism" and "militant modernism". Despite being just one of 38 sites around the borough earmarked for development by the equally contentious Tunbridge Wells Regeneration Company, the civic complex has been the most divisive by far. He said: "We have made a clear political statement that we are not about to rush in and demolish and change, in anyway, the civic centre until things have been properly thought through."

The civic centre development will not move forward until the Town Plan has been created, the derelict cinema grot spot is resolved, another space has been found for the 'public facilities', such as the theatre and Town Hall, and a way to preserve some or all of the architecture and style of the current buildings has been found. For some, this latest episode in the town's redevelopment saga is seen as yet another delay to progress.

One member of the town's active community on social network website Twitter wrote: "It's not a plan, it's an outline of a plan to develop a plan that might be implemented before we all die." But Cllr Atwood urged people to be patient, he said: "What we are planning to do could influence people living here for the next 100 years or so. I do not see there is a great rush. I want to do this carefully in a considered way." His plans have been broadly welcomed, in particular the proposal for a Town Plan Advisory Panel, which would be independent from the council. It would include people from special interest groups such as the Civic Society and Town Forum, as well as local experts such as surveyors and architects, he said. He has already begun making the phone calls to interested parties and hopes it will begin to take shape by the end of the month.

John Forster, chair of the Civic Society, said: "We would welcome involvement in the panel. The society has many people with extensive knowledge of the history of the town and what has happened in the past. "We are committed to the improvement, not just its conservation." He suggested that as it was such a long-term plan, it would be good to decide phases of what might be done in five, 10 and 15 years time.

Katharina Mahler-Bech of the Town Forum, also expressed interest in the panel. Mr Forster and Mrs Mahler-Bech welcomed Cllr Atwood's move away from piecemeal development. And his plans to treat the town's major sites, such as the cinema and the Kent & Sussex Hospital, as "separate pieces of a more complex jigsaw".

Leading architect and resident Ptolemy Dean, who specialises in historic buildings and designing new buildings in sensitive locations, has raised concerns that the council's redevelopment plans have shown that it fails to understand what makes the town special. He said: "It looks as if there might now be a moment of reflection about how and what might be done in Tunbridge Wells. While the emphasis might be placed upon what changes could be made, I would hope that as a first stage this plan might

be based upon a sound understanding and appreciation of what makes Tunbridge Wells such a successful place for people to live and enjoy now, when so many of the neighbouring towns are so clearly unsuccessful by comparison.” Mr Dean added: “The new town plan needs to be based upon building on existing truths rather than plotting future fantasies which ride roughshod over existing sensitivities.”

Tracy Moore, a prominent member of the previous administration’s cabinet as former economic development portfolio holder, gave a more cautious welcome to the plans.

She said: “I’m pleased Cllr Atwood has acknowledged the need for Royal Tunbridge Wells to invest, or risk decline. However, I’m concerned about the intention to form yet another group to discuss the future of the town. “This opportunity already exists through the public consultation process for the Town Centre Area Action Plan (TCAAP), expected in early 2012. The opportunity for member involvement already exists through the monthly Member Working Party for the LDF (Local Development Framework), of which I was recently made chairman. I’m afraid of more ‘talking shops” and further delay to action, change or improvement. Plus ca change...”

As Cllr Atwood said of the panel, the whole process will be a “living organism” with no definitive timeframe. However, he said the TCAAPs for all the towns within the borough have to be ready for consultation by the end of the year and the separate, long-term Town Plan for Tunbridge Wells must be aligned with that. In terms of what the plan will look like, he said it would be a block plan setting out areas and sites for potential uses. “It will be specific about how traffic flows can be improved, how street furniture might be changed such as lampposts so down to that detail. When it comes to specific individual sites it would be necessary to go into detailed design and we might come up with suggestions,” he said. “Some of the work David Jukes did on the cinema site for example, which is purely aspirational in order to give an idea. It is all part of what we are doing.” He said he was “very supportive” of Cllr Jukes plans for the cinema site. He said: “It would be nice to see a theatre and maybe some civic rooms, a council chamber and meeting rooms. All this is aspirational and supported by the entire cabinet, but work is yet to be done on how practical and how feasible it is.”

As for how the regeneration company fits into these plans, Cllr Atwood said the sites in its portfolio for Tunbridge Wells will be on hold until the Town Plan is created. But the company can potentially move forward with other sites in Southborough, Paddock Wood and Cranbrook. He said: “The plan is that they should be pressing ahead with the other sites. Still in discussions with them at the moment, but the plan is that we should go ahead but stay on hold in Tunbridge Wells.”