

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

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Town Centres Area Action Plan

One of the Council's responsibilities as planning authority is to produce long-term plans for the provision of houses, businesses, shops and restaurants and supporting infrastructure and policies against which planning applications can be judged. This used to be done under a ten year Local Plan but this has now been replaced by a "Local Development Framework" – a document that runs until 2026 – and this is something we have been working on for some time. We have already produced an overarching planning strategy – the Core Strategy - which was subject to extensive consultation and has been examined by an independent planning inspector who has found that the proposals are sound.

We are now consulting on more detailed proposals to allocate specific sites for particular uses. There are two documents that we are consulting on:

The *Town Centres Area Action Plan* (TCAAP) is a comprehensive plan for the borough's four town centres. By looking at the town centres as a whole, we can make sure that development needs and associated issues are looked at comprehensively rather than being developed on a piecemeal basis. The draft Plan proposes uses for particular sites within the towns.

The *Allocations document* allocated individual sites for specific uses (e.g. housing, employment, recreation) outside of the town centres.

You will be aware that the existence of these consultation documents does not in any way mean that planning permission has been granted for any particular site(s) or even that they will actually become an allocated site. Any future development proposals would be subject to the usual processes, consultation and controls.

We conducted early consultation on these plans between April and June last year (see here: <http://www2.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=3394>) and more detailed consultation between June and August 2010 (see here: <http://www2.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=2334>).

Whilst the Town Hall site is included within these documents, it is also important to stress that they do not constitute a plan to redevelop the site. The Town Hall is one of a large number of sites that has been submitted to the Council for consideration for future allocation. The purpose of this consultation is to seek initial views on these sites to help refine the Plan which will be subject to future consultation and examination in public by an independent planning inspector.

The Regeneration Company (see below) is looking at the site (amongst others) and we will be looking to consult on proposals for the Town Hall site in October/November.

Financial Pressures

As you will no doubt be aware from government statements and press reports, public sector bodies including local authorities are facing very significant reductions in central government funding. Whilst there is a lot of cynicism about local councils, we can assure you that Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has always sought to deliver excellent value for money services. Around 90 per cent of the Council Tax and Business Rates we collect go straight to other bodies such as the County Council, Police and Central Government and we deliver a very wide range of services for around 40p per day – less than a daily newspaper. Over the past three years alone, we have saved over £2.8 million (against the backdrop of a total net budget of around £15 million) and we are expecting further cuts in government grant of around 30 per cent when the results of the comprehensive Spending Review are announced on October 20.

We are trying to save money in ways which minimise the impact on front-line services. For example, we saved £800,000 per year when we introduced our new waste contract earlier this year which also resulted in a wider range of recyclates (including plastic) being collected from the doorstep – something that the public told us was important to them. Similarly, we have just completed a restructure of the Council's staffing structure which has resulted in savings of over a million pounds. We are keen to involve residents in this process and if you have any ideas or suggestions as to how we can save money, please tell us – we have set up a special link on the front page of our website or you can e-mail us (accounts@tunbridgewells.gov.uk) or write to us at the Town Hall marking your letter 'Accounts'. We will continue to keep you informed and let you know what the public spending review means through articles in the press and in our borough newsletter 'Local'.

The Tunbridge Wells Regeneration Company

We have also heard much rumour and speculation about the Tunbridge Wells Regeneration Company. In response to this, we have set up a page on our website which sets out details of what it does, and how and why it was set up as well as answers to frequently asked questions (see here: <http://www2.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=3945>)

We took a long time to set up the Regeneration Company and took expert advice. The proposals were examined by Cabinet and the Council's Audit Committee, Standards and Select committees and were also closely scrutinised by the independent Audit Commission.

The Regeneration Company was set up in an effort to promote the economic, social and environmental well being of the borough and to enhance the vitality of our key town centres as well as maximising the value the Council (and you the taxpayer) receives from its assets. The Council has a reasonably large portfolio of assets which include car parks, offices, shops and industrial units. Historically the Council has disposed of its assets in a piece-meal fashion. By setting up the Regeneration Company, the Council has the potential to save considerable amounts in procurement and consultancy costs and also to share in the proceeds of development profit.

The company is a joint venture share company with equal representation and ownership. The way this works is that John Laing are at liberty to bring forward proposals for any of the 38 sites that were included in the tender document. There is a two-stage approval

process: Stage 1 is an initial viability study which is undertaken completely at risk by John Laing; Stage 2 is a more detailed viability study which seeks to bring proposals to a planning application stage. No assets change hands until after Stage 2 and until after the Council has given its consent. No assets have changed hand to date.

The value of the assets are not pre-determined. At the point at which assets do change hands, assets are valued and this becomes a guaranteed minimum value. This is the value that the Council receives regardless of the redevelopment schemes making a profit. The Council also receives half any profits made on top of this guaranteed minimum value.

Plans for the Town Centre

The Regeneration Company is in the process of preparing a Stage 1 feasibility study for the Town Hall site but it has not yet been finalised. It was always the intention of the Company to consult widely on the proposals but this can only happen once the feasibility work has been completed. We hope that this will take place in October and November. Whilst we have not launched the consultation, a number of residents and groups have expressed concern about what these proposals might mean for facilities in the Town and we thought it might be helpful to emphasise that the Council's Cabinet is absolutely committed to retaining a theatre, museum and art gallery in the Town. Clearly the Library and Adult Education Centre are not our responsibility (being the responsibility of KCC) but we will do everything we can to preserve their presence in the Town.

It is probably also worth touching on some of the issues which are driving the feasibility study. Despite what has been suggested by some, Royal Tunbridge Wells actually has a relatively low level of empty shops compared with other town centres. The Town has a very large, strong and affluent catchment area but analysis has also shown that we lack modern, retail accommodation which has resulted in the Town falling down the retail rankings. There are currently around 50 major retailers who have listed a requirement for the town – one of the highest figures in the country. This has led some retailers to relocate to out-of-town locations and unless we can demonstrate that we are providing retail space in the town centre, developers will build the case that the only option for them is out of town space which could further affect the viability of the town.

Cinema Site and other 'Grot Spots'

The Council has made clear that it has made a competitive yet realistic bid for the Cinema Site. The Cinema Site has been a scar on the landscape of the Town for a decade and the Council has put together a scheme that is financially viable and which would contribute positively to the vitality and ambiance of the town. Regardless of whether or not we are successful, we are absolutely committed to ensuring that early progress is made in demolishing and redeveloping the site. We have also been working hard to make progress with other 'grot spots' in the Town.

Land Registry

You may well have read in the press that the Council is currently in the process of purchasing the Land Registry in Tunbridge Wells. A press release is available here: <http://www2.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=3766>

The proposal was put together as part of an initiative called 'Total Place'. This was an initiative launched in the 2009 pre-budget report to look at the totality of public sector spend within a given area and to look at ways in which it could be spent more

effectively. Kent was one of a small number of national pilots. Property loomed large as a theme within these pilots and the Land Registry was used as an example of what could be achieved in the final report. The proposition is pretty straightforward: currently there are dozens of different public sector organisations in the borough occupying dozens of different buildings all with their own receptions, meeting rooms, training rooms, ICT infrastructure and support/facilities management costs. Many of these properties are not fit for purpose and do not support flexible working. Our proposition is to co-locate many of these services which would make a saving to the public purse of around a million pounds per annum. In addition there would be considerable other benefits that would arise from bringing similar services together - for example by co-locating health services with adult social services.

The acquisition was supported by a business case and we have received an extremely positive response from public sector partners who see the building as an opportunity for them to reduce accommodation costs and to improve partnership and flexible working. Some people have questioned whether the business case remains viable when there is likely to be further changes in the public sector as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review but many of the changes being brought about by the Coalition Government are actually strengthening the proposal. For example, GP commissioning clusters which are being created as part of the reforms to the health sector have expressed a strong interest in space.

If a decision is ultimately taken to redevelop the Town Hall site the Land Registry building could provide us with alternative office accommodation but the business case also supported a scenario in which the Council does not ultimately occupy the building so it in no way pre-determines the consultation on the Town Hall site.

You may have read articles in *The Courier* which have suggested that the Council's acquisition of the Building could lead to AXA PPP reducing their presence in the Town. We are in regular discussions with AXA and are aware of their accommodation needs and are absolutely committed to keeping them in the Town and ensuring that they can meet both their existing and future accommodation requirements.

Transparency

Some people have expressed a concern that the Council is acting secretly and taking decisions behind closed doors. In fact, the Council is an extremely transparent organisation. We publish a Forward Plan which sets out all the decisions we are going to take which covers a full year. All of our meetings are in public and all the agendas are available at least a week before meetings. Minutes and records of decisions are taken and published. We do our best to consult with people in a variety of ways including surveys, road shows and 'Ward Walks' where we visit different areas to talk to residents in their own homes. At the same time, hopefully you will appreciate that there are times when some things need to be kept confidential – for example when dealing with sensitive employee relations issues, when conducting contractual negotiations or when planning enforcement activity. We can give you an absolute assurance that we will consult widely and fully on any plans to redevelop the Town Hall site. Before we do this, however, we need to understand whether any such plans are feasible.

Despite what is sometimes written, the Council is continually looking at ways in which it can make itself more accessible and transparent. Over the coming months we will be looking at ways in which we can publicise as wide a range of information as possible in the public domain including details of contracts, utilities and expenditure. If you have any ideas or suggestions on this – or indeed any questions or queries – you can submit them via the Council's 'Ask the Leader' website here: <http://viewfinder.localvocal.public-i.tv/theme.php?id=4>

Frequently Asked Questions

Whilst we have tried to address the main issues in the text above, we thought it might also be helpful to set out some of the issues/concerns that have been raised and to respond to them.

Issue/Concern	Response
Has a decision already been taken to redevelop the Town Hall?	No. Much of the concern that is being expressed is in relation to the Town Centres Area Action Plan which is merely consulting on allocations and in no way represents a decision or even the start of consultation on the future of the Town Hall. We will consult extensively on any proposals from October/November.
The Council is already moving staff into the Land Registry	This is quite simply untrue. Staff are meeting with colleagues at the Land Registry to discuss the normal negotiations associated with purchasing any property but no staff have moved into the building and there are absolutely no plans to do so.
Is it true that any redevelopment proposals will see the loss of the Library, Museum, Art Gallery and Assembly Hall Theatre?	No. Cabinet colleagues are absolutely committed to retaining a theatre, library, museum and art gallery in the Town and we will clarify this publicly as soon as possible. Clearly the Library and Adult Education Centre are not our responsibility (being the responsibility of KCC) but we will do everything we can to preserve their presence in the Town.
Do we need more shops in Tunbridge Wells and aren't there lots of empty shops anyway	Tunbridge Wells actually has a relatively low level of empty shops – 11 per cent (9 per cent excluding the cinema site) compared with national rates of 14 per cent. Detailed work on retail analysis shows that we have a very large, strong and affluent catchment area but that we also lack modern, retail accommodation. As a result, the Council is falling down the retail rankings (we have now fallen outside the top 50). This is likely to continue as a trend as other surrounding towns improve their offer. Analysis shows that there are currently around 50 retailer requirements listed for the town – one of the highest figures in the country. This includes demand for a large anchor store and we have had some initial discussions with a very big national retailer who has informed us that Tunbridge Wells is now their number one target town in the South East. This has led some retailers to relocate to out-of-town locations and unless we can demonstrate that we are providing retail space in the town centre, developers will build the case that the only option for them is out of town space which could further affect the viability of the town.
Is it true that the Council's acquisition of the Land Registry is leading to AXA leaving the Town?	We were aware of AXA's interest in the building and have been in discussions with them since our bid was accepted. It is true that AXA were seeking to acquire the building to meet short-term accommodation requirements (we did not know officially that they had put in an unsolicited offer) but the building would not have been sufficient to meet any growth requirements associated with the company's expansion and it is clear that there are other issues that they are considering including access to the labour market and business resilience.

	<p>We are absolutely committed to keeping AXA in the Town and are holding regular meetings with them to try to understand and meet their requirements. We have drawn a number of possible sites to their attention and have arranged meetings with our Development Control team to explain additional future possible sites.</p>
<p>Why couldn't we have refurbished the Town Hall at a cost of £3.5 million rather than spending £9m on the Land Registry?</p>	<p>We did examine the costs of refurbishing the Town Hall in the mid 1990s which at that time would have amounted to £3.5 million. At today's prices that would be around £6.5 million. Refurbishing the Town Hall would not significantly enhance its value as an asset and we would be left with a 1930s building with a very low efficiency rating, high maintenance costs that would be too large for our requirements post 2012 – all leading to high corporate costs which we have been trying to drive down in every budget. By contrast, the acquisition of the freehold of the Land Registry – a 5 ½ acre site – provides the Council with a strong asset on its balance sheet, would enable significant savings to be made across the public sector and it is significantly more flexible than the Town Hall.</p>
<p>The Gateway is not centrally located and does not have car parking.</p>	<p>The Gateway is extremely centrally located in the heart of the precinct and is extremely well used. Footfall is much higher than when services were delivered from the Town Hall and rather than having services split between organisations (and five Council receptions) over 25 organisations have been brought together under one roof which is close to rail and bus stops and car parks. Between five and six thousand people use the Gateway each month and it has received extremely positive responses from customers.</p>
<p>Any plan to vacate the Town Hall site would remove a 'civic presence' from the Town.</p>	<p>During the consultation we will be asking the public what they understand by a civic presence and looking at what can be done to accommodate this within the proposals.</p>

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