

A TOWN PLAN FOR ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS

As the apocryphal Irishman said "If I was trying to get to where you said you were going, I certainly would not be starting from here"

Why does Royal Tunbridge Wells need a Town Plan?

Over the last many years, it has become apparent that Royal Tunbridge Wells, with its unique and eclectic mix of architecture, retail and leisure facilities, was getting old and worn; that its infrastructure was less than fully fit for purpose; and that, unless something was done, it would slowly deteriorate and could easily slip into neglect and decline.

Amongst the more practical and compelling reasons for a Plan are the following:

- "Grot spots" such as the old cinema site
- A significant maintenance backlog on civic buildings
- The need to consider major "opportunity" sites, such as the Kent & Sussex Hospital, the St John's bus depot and others
- Traffic and transport problems
- The delivery of appropriate and up to date retail, commercial and leisure facilities

Consideration of the above has led to a strongly held view that significant developments in this rather special town should be seen as separate pieces of a more complex jigsaw. I believe that an aspirational Town Plan that could cover a period of the next twenty years or more should be developed so as to provide a template which could be used to guide future changes such that they could take place in an orderly and logical way.

Additionally, there is currently ongoing work to prepare Town Centre Area Action Plans (TCAAP) for all the towns within the Borough. The TCAAP is a formal planning document and it is essential that the TCAAP for Royal Tunbridge Wells is co-ordinated with and becomes part of this overall long term Town Planning process.

Whilst no one body, such as Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, is likely to have either the authority or the resources to enforce a Town Plan, nevertheless its existence would clarify and inform all those who may have an interest in the future of the town .

The Plan itself should be evidence-based and informed by the wishes of the residents and traders from within the town and the greater Borough, and will need refreshing and reviewing from time to time, as fashions, aspirations and circumstances change.

How should a Town Plan be delivered?

There are many possible approaches to the delivery of a Town Plan. At this point in time Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has procured and is a co-investor in the Tunbridge Wells Regeneration Company (TWRC) to promote and potentially develop a number of specified council-owned sites. However, it is a fact that the council, as the Local Planning Authority, retains responsibility for the town planning process itself and therefore as this paper goes on to argue, it is necessary to make sure that this process is sufficiently advanced before any important town centre projects are considered in any detail and any further.

It is important that any Town Plan should reflect as far as is possible the considered aspirations of a convincing proportion of residents, traders, and other relevant consultees. Care must be taken to cover a full range of demographics (for example the aspirations of the "young" are likely to differ from those of the more mature), and a balance between reactionary conservatism on the one hand and militant modernisation on the other, needs to be sought. In due course clear options need to be presented with appropriate illustrations and/or models available to help in the consultation process. The M&N report, coupled with other surveys and research, has given us a snapshot of what people want from their town but these views were expressed in the absence of any firm proposals for improvement.

In order to ensure that this process is widely understood and to ensure that aspirations for the town are clearly articulated, I am proposing to establish a Town Plan Advisory Panel. The detail and structure of this Panel will be the subject of a separate paper but, in essence, I would like it to comprise a number of people who are either representative of the wider community and keenly interested in the future of Royal Tunbridge Wells, or who have some area of expertise that would enable them to contribute. The Panel will essentially be "independent" from Tunbridge Wells Borough Council but will accept input from any and all relevant sources.

The Panel must be set up as soon as possible to help inform and shape our emerging planning policy documentation and to make sure that evidence, opinions, challenges and ideas are understood and responded to appropriately so as to reflect the aspirations of all affected stakeholders.

How should development projects be delivered?

Development opportunities exist now where Tunbridge Wells Borough Council owns the relevant asset(s) or, often opportunistically, where these assets are owned by others.

The TWRC has been set up as a vehicle for promoting social and economic wellbeing through delivering projects arising from council owned assets. However, it is clear that sites must not be developed in an ad hoc manner. It is essential that they are developed within the framework and against the template of an agreed Town Plan.

Developments not involving council owned assets will be delivered through the commercial property market or by direct intervention from TWBC.

What about the "Civic Centre" specifically?

The Civic Centre comprises buildings owned by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Kent County Council (KCC) and others. It could potentially be expanded to include the whole block bounded by Mount Pleasant, Crescent Road, Calverley Road and Monson Road. It houses, amongst other things, a multi-storey car park, an assembly hall/theatre, council offices and civic rooms, museum and library, and an education centre. It is a highly sensitive site, and in my view cannot be delivered politically for redevelopment at this stage.

The main reason for this is that the site has been "pushed" into the public domain too hard and too soon. This may have been for commercial reasons or as part of some individual "vision", but whatever the reason it has caused premature public concern and polarised

public views, with a significantly powerful lobby emerging against any sort of destruction of these seminal 1930s buildings.

Furthermore, it is now apparent that although this site is one of the sites specified in the TWRC contract documents, it may not be possible to move it to "Stage 2" (i.e. the point where detailed viability studies and drawings are produced at shared cost between TWBC and Laing) until a long term Town Plan (as discussed in this statement) has been produced and consulted upon. Additionally I believe that there are other criteria which will need to be met before further movement on the Civic Centre.

- The Town Plan has been properly aligned with an agreed TCAAP (as detailed above).
- The derelict cinema site opposite the Civic Complex has moved to a satisfactory resolution.
- Full alternative arrangements have been made to accommodate any public facilities which will be lost from any proposed development of the civic site (in particular ensuring that the town is not left for any significant length of time without an appropriately sized theatre).
- A sensible solution has been found to the perceived need to preserve some or all of the architecture and style of the current listed buildings.

The ongoing relationship with TWRC?

This company, which is a 50-50 joint venture between TWBC and John Laing, was procured by the Council as a delivery vehicle for the development of 38 sites currently owned by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. Despite the fact that 38 sites are listed within the agreement, attention has been focused on the Civic Complex - and considerable work has been done to drive that project forward.

It has now become clear that the time is not right for this huge and complex project to be brought forward as one to move on in the near future and therefore secure a Stage 2 approval under the project approved process for TWRC (detailed viability and design) and subsequently transfer of ownership to TWRC and build out. Politically this is not achievable, and if the partnership is to succeed we need to demonstrate that the Regeneration Company can produce results perhaps in relation to other sites, that can be clearly shown to be in the public interest and to receive their support.

Past steps and next steps?

Since the end of January this year I have made every effort through the media and internally to calm things down so that the polarised positions concerning Regeneration in general and the Civic Centre in particular, are given time and space for reconsideration, and may even accept the need for compromise. Additionally, the portfolio holder for Property and Major Projects has been using the time to review and clarify the council's position, including its relationship with TWRC. Furthermore the Great Hall car park project has been debated in

public and put on indefinite hold, and the M&N consultation report has now been debated at full council leading to a resolution noting its conclusions.

Next steps will include a paper expanding on my ideas for the proposed Advisory Panel. My papers will then be refined through suggestions from cabinet members and senior officers pending wider political approval. Subject to that, officers will be instructed to produce formal paperwork for approval by Cabinet and eventually full council as appropriate.

In the meantime, the portfolio holder will continue considering the Council's position with regard to TWRC, and our intentions concerning the cinema site, as well as proposals concerning other sites within the Borough both within and outside Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre.

We will need, given the council's role as a member of TWRC and as a co-Investor with John Laing, to informally discuss with representatives of the TWRC the future role of the Advisory Panel and how it will relate to the Regeneration Company, which should give both partners confidence and a more secure platform for moving forwards into the future.

It will then be up to officers to execute the actions as agreed by the politicians. This will ensure there can be no further misunderstanding of political intentions