

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

TONBRIDGE FORUM

Monday, 14th September, 2009

Present: Cllr M S Worrall (Chairman), Cllr N J Heslop (Vice-Chairman), Cllr A W Allison, Cllr Mrs J A Anderson, Cllr O C Baldock, Cllr P F Bolt, Cllr Ms V Branson and Cllr M J Dobson.

Councillors Balfour, Coffin, Court, MacDonald and Rogers were also present pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 15.21.

Members of the Forum:

Kent County Councillors Smith and Mrs Dagger, Age Concern Tonbridge, Society of Friends, St John Ambulance, Tonbridge Allotments and Gardens Association, Tonbridge Art Group, Tonbridge Area Churches Together, Tonbridge Citizens Advice Bureau, Tonbridge Civic Society, Tonbridge Historical Society, Tonbridge Lions Club, Tonbridge Philharmonic Society, Tonbridge Theatre and Arts Club and West Kent College.

Apologies for absence were received from Borough Councillors Ms Atkinson, Ms Spence and Thornewell, and from the Bridge Trust, Tonbridge District Scout Council and Tonbridge Music Club.

ACTION
BY

PART 1 - PUBLIC

TF
09/014

MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 1 June 2009 were received and agreed as a correct record of the proceedings.

TF
09/015

UPDATE ON ANY ACTION IDENTIFIED IN THE LAST MINUTES

The Cabinet Member for Innovation and Improvement reported that the official opening of the Tonbridge Gateway would be performed by the Mayor and Chairman of Kent County Council on Thursday 17 September. He indicated that the facility was already open for use and encouraged members of the Forum to visit to see the facilities available.

TF
09/016

CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman reported on a new initiative celebrating Jane Austen's family connections with Tonbridge and invited Councillor Vivian Branson to update the Forum on the launch of an exhibition and audio guided walk highlighting the buildings with Austen associations and the family memorials in St Peter and St Paul's Church. Members were advised that the initiative had been funded by the Jane Austen Society in collaboration with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, Kent Libraries and Archives, the Parish Church and Explore Kent. The Chairman paid tribute to Councillor Branson's work in promoting the new facility.

Referring to the economic difficulties faced by all, both individually and collectively, the Chairman advised the Forum that a number of posts had been deleted from the Council's full-time establishment in response to the economic circumstances and shortfall in Government grant. He assured members of the Forum that staff were as committed as ever to providing services to the same high standard and sought understanding and support for the fact that fewer people would be doing more with fewer resources.

TF
09/017

WEST KENT COLLEGE UPDATE

The Forum received a presentation from Bill Fearon, Principal, and Chris Hare, Vice-Principal Business Development, on the background to the work of West Kent College and current and future developments. Mr Hare advised that the College had a £22 million turnover, 800 employees and 12,000 learners. He indicated that the emphasis of the work was changing with a larger proportion of business with employers and a reduction in adult learners. He referred to the College's work in supporting communities, such as providing a redundancy resource at the Tonbridge Gateway, support for the unemployed and a "New Skills New Lives" initiative with ex-offenders.

Mr Fearon updated the Forum on the application for a potential merger with South Kent College based on a five town model of learning centres with the "flagship" new campus in Tonbridge. Details were given of the overall benefits of the merger and specifically to West Kent stakeholders. Mr Fearon posed the question of how the Forum could engage with the new College in Tonbridge and beyond, indicating that the new campus would open in part in spring/summer 2010 with completion by the September

2011 intake.

Mr Fearon answered a range of questions from members of the Forum including the policy for employing teaching staff, location of courses in construction skills, experience thus far with the vocational diploma programme and the relationship of the College with local schools. Mr Fearon confirmed that a variety of teaching staff from assessors in business to lecturers were employed with a significant proportion on part-time and temporary contracts. He described the good relationship with local schools and the opportunities for staff exchanges. He indicated that initial enrolment for the vocational diploma had been low although it would take time to assess the value of the qualification. He also confirmed that the College had an Ofsted Grade 1 for Special Needs and the aim was to make the new campus accessible to an excellent level.

The Cabinet Member for Planning and Transportation enquired about the availability of courses for planners, environmental health officers and building inspectors where there were shortages of skills in local authorities. Messrs Fearon and Hare welcomed the opportunity to discuss such provision with the Council but stressed the need for funding to match demand and for a critical mass to be achieved before a course could be arranged. The Forum was advised that there would be less public funding available for colleges, the Government having discontinued the subsidy of Adult Education. There was therefore an expectation that employers would provide greater investment. The Chairman observed that if the merger with South Kent College was successful there would be a larger pool of local authority partners and potentially more funding available for courses to meet the skills shortage. He then thanked the West Kent College representatives for their contribution to the meeting and wished the College well for the future.

TF
09/018

A CONTINUOUS MEDWAY VALLEY FOOTPATH

Presentations were given by Graham Rusling, Kent County Council Public Rights of Way Delivery Service Manager and Andrea Griffiths, Assistant Partnership Officer, Medway Valley Countryside Partnership on the aspiration to provide a continuous Medway Valley footpath from Tonbridge to Rochester. Mr Rusling outlined the role of the Public Rights of Way Service and emphasised the value of public rights of way to the rural economy in terms of amenity and as part of the highway network. He indicated that access to riverbanks was important to heritage and the 28 mile long

Medway Valley Walk, although not continuous, was free of stiles. Mr Rusling stated that improvement to the riverside path was a key policy in the Countryside Access Improvement Plan for Kent and he explained the problems of erosion in securing riverside access. Improvements were taking place on a piecemeal basis, depending on a number of partners for funding and delivery. He anticipated that provision of a continuous riverside route from Tonbridge to Rochester could take decades to achieve. Further information was available at www.kent.gov.uk/explorekent.

Ms Griffiths provided an introduction to the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership with its aims of improving the area for bio-diversity and access. She gave examples of work undertaken in Tonbridge and at Haysden Country Park and outlined the features of the River Warden Scheme, the role of volunteers and the "River Rubbish Roundup" in October. Details were given of the various access improvement projects which had taken place or were ongoing along the route of the Medway Valley Walk. Particular reference was made to the River Communities Project promoting the river heritage between Tonbridge and Maidstone with an events programme, circular walk packs and interpretation along the route. The Partnership was developing its website in relation to interpretation and linkage with partners. Ms Griffiths also mentioned the Medway Gap Landscape and Access Study along the Allington to Aylesford stretch of the River which had led to the Valley of Visions where the feasibility of providing a multi-user path was being investigated. Community groups were invited to become involved in the River Warden Scheme.

Members of the Forum raised various questions and drew attention to the dumping of supermarket trolleys in the river and the fact that the Tonbridge Gateway appeared not to have copies of the Medway Valley Walk. It was also suggested that problems of infestation by Himalayan Balsam be addressed along with the Giant Hogweed Control programme.

The Chairman thanked Ms Griffiths and Mr Rusling for their attendance and congratulated them on the work being undertaken. He indicated that the Borough Council had been one of the partners in the Medway Valley Countryside Partnership for many years.

TF
09/019

PREVENT STRATEGY

The Chairman introduced Ian Whyte from the Kent Community Safety Partnership Training Unit who gave a DVD presentation on "Operation Fairway". This had previously been seen by the Local Strategic Partnership which had considered it important to bring the presentation to community groups. Mr Whyte advised that the Prevent Strategy dealt with the threat of terrorism and operated at two levels, encouraging people to be observant and report anything of significance and, secondly, addressing the concerns of people becoming alienated and attracted to violent extremism. An information sheet was circulated giving details of Operation Fairway and the anti-terrorist hotline on 0800 789321. It was noted that whilst the UK level of threat was currently "substantial" rather than "severe", the assistance of the public on the ground was essential.

The Chairman thanked Mr Whyte for his contribution to the meeting and suggested that Tonbridge Forum members might wish to show the DVD to their own groups. It was intended to invite parish councils and the Youth Forum to view the presentation and to cascade it to schools if they so wished. Any comments on improving effectiveness of the film were invited since it was still being fine-tuned.

TF
09/020

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL SERVICES UPDATE

The Kent County Council Liaison Manager, Loic Flory, circulated an update on County Council Services. Particular attention was drawn to a scam warning from Kent Trading Standards and the launch of the Kent Carers Strategy. Further details could be obtained from the contacts set out in the notes. The Chairman advised that Mrs Valerie Dagger had been designated as the lead County Councillor for Tonbridge and Malling following the change in emphasis of Tonbridge Forum and the Parish Partnership Panel to provide vehicles for local liaison with both the Borough and County Councils.

The Chairman then thanked representatives for their attendance and reminded them that the next meeting of the Forum was on Monday, 23 November 2009.

The meeting ended at 2134 hours