

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

TONBRIDGE FORUM

Monday, 7th February, 2011

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

Councillors Balfour and Miss Sergison were also in attendance pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No. 15.21.

Members of the Forum:

Kent County Councillors Miss A Hohler and C Smith; Age Concern, Kent Police, The Bridge Trust, The Skinners Company, Society of Friends, St John Ambulance, Tonbridge Allotments and Gardens Association, Tonbridge Art Group, Tonbridge Citizens Advice Bureau, Tonbridge Civic Society, Tonbridge District Scout Council, Tonbridge Historical Society, Tonbridge Line Commuters, Tonbridge Music Club, Tonbridge Sports Association, Tonbridge Volunteer Centre, University of the Third Age and the Women's Institute.

Apologies for absence were received from Borough Councillors Aikman and Ms Branson, Tonbridge Lions Club, Tonbridge Philharmonic Society and the West Kent Community Health Team.

ACTION
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PART 1 - PUBLIC

TF
11/001

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING SENIORS' FORUM

A representative from the Tonbridge and Malling Seniors' (TAMS') Forum advised that their next meeting would be held at Age Concern Hall, Bradford Street, Tonbridge on Thursday 14 April 2011 from 1400-1600 hours, commencing with tea, coffee and biscuits.

Representatives from Age Concern, the New Pembury Hospital and Kent County Council would each give a ten minute talk, followed by ten minutes of questions and concluding with a further twenty minutes of panel questions.

An open session would follow when any matters concerning seniors in the Borough could be raised.

TF
11/002

MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 22 November 2010 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

TF
11/003

CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman thanked the West Kent College for their hospitality in hosting this meeting of the Tonbridge Forum and reminded Members that the meeting would be followed by a tour of the new facilities.

The Chairman welcomed County Councillor Miss Alice Hohler to her first meeting of the Tonbridge Forum and congratulated her on the recent Tonbridge by-election result.

Additionally, the Chairman welcomed Mr Phillip Jesson to the Tonbridge Forum who was attending his first meeting in his capacity as the new Chairman of Tonbridge District Scouts.

The Chairman referred to the sad passing of Mr Alf Saunders who had joined Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council in 1974 from the former Tonbridge Urban Council and worked his way up to the position of the Director of Finance before his retirement in 1990.

Members were asked to record their appreciation to Borough Councillors Aikman and Dobson for their contribution and hard work on behalf of Tonbridge as they were not standing for re-election in May 2011.

TF
11/004

UPDATE ON ANY ACTION IDENTIFIED IN THE LAST MINUTES.

There were no items identified.

TF
11/005

WEST KENT COLLEGE DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

The Chairman invited Mr Bill Fearon, Principal and Chief Executive, and Mr Chris Hare, Vice-Principal Corporate Development, of West Kent College to give a presentation on the ongoing £86 million re-development of the Brook Street campus.

The first phase had been completed during the summer of 2010 and included a Media and Arts Centre with a 500 seater theatre plus flexible training and performing space;

state of the art laboratories and classrooms; commercial hair and beauty salons; training kitchens and restaurant plus a brand new cafe and community space.

Phase two of the development was due to open in September 2011 with further first class training facilities including a learning and resource centre and an outdoor learning and performance space.

West Kent College was confident that the development would result in a flagship learning centre for the whole of the region and hoped it would directly assist in the regeneration of the communities of South and West Kent. The College was also keen to encourage a community sense of ownership, especially as public money had been used for the development.

The courses on offer, including both further education and higher education, short courses for adult learners and the wide range of full and part-time courses were outlined. West Kent College was also pleased to announce the opening of their recruitment agency aimed at helping students into employment, which had coincided with National Apprenticeship Week.

The Chairman thanked Mr Fearon and Mr Hare for their contribution to the meeting and questions were invited.

Members queried if the loss of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) would affect many students and asked whether there were other forms of financial support available. Mr Fearon reminded the Forum that currently the grant was paid to poorer 16 to 18 year olds to help them stay in further education and consisted of a weekly payment of £30 for those whose household income was under £30,000. The Government intended to scrap the system in September and replace it with a more focused method of payment. He advised the loss of EMA in September would have severe implications for many students at the College and alternative solutions were being explored. It was possible that some disadvantaged students would still receive some kind of support. West Kent College was actively engaging with Ministers and urging them to seek alternatives so that others would not be disadvantaged.

Mr Fearon thanked Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council for their support in the redevelopment application and for the excellent working relationship, which was greatly valued.

TF
11/006

TONBRIDGE STATION REFURBISHMENT

The Forum received a presentation from Julie Houghton, Senior Scheme Sponsor, of Network Rail on the Tonbridge station refurbishment project. The scheme was being funded as part of the £150 million National Stations Improvement Programme (NSIP). It was explained that the key aspiration was to improve passenger perception at stations, as measured by twice yearly National Passenger Surveys, and funds had to be spent on passenger and not train operator benefits. £1.35 million had been allocated to Tonbridge Station and the intention was to replace all the information screens with new flat screens, including making a provision for a future real time bus information screen; refurbishing all toilets; installing extra cycle parking; making changes to the waiting rooms and staffed information points to reduce congestion on the platforms. The front of the station would also be re-clad and have two entrances to reduce passenger congestion. Work was anticipated to start in the autumn 2011, sooner if possible, with an approximate 24 week programme. Network Rail recognised the difficulties associated with disruption to residents and travellers and hoped to keep this to a minimum. The Forum was warned that there would be times where the booking hall would have restricted access or areas hoarded off and times where works would be at night to take advantage of overnight possessions. A series of letters would be distributed to local residents once the contract had been awarded informing of the delivery programme and dates when noisy works were possible.

Members sought clarification on the planning approval granted and were informed that planning officers at the Borough Council had offered advice and assistance on the pre-application process. Ms Houghton also believed that works were possible under permitted development rights.

Tonbridge Line Commuters raised a query regarding the lack of detail for the redesign of the booking hall. In response, Ms Houghton advised that a more detailed design would be provided for the next phase of development.

A serious and in-depth discussion followed on a range of issues including the difficulties of access; improvements to cycle access and the provision of wider gates; the difficulties associated with making changes to train operator equipment and value for money justification; the disappointment that the front facade was not to be replaced; the lack of an attractive design and building and the overall

car parking problem at the station.

A serious concern was expressed at the night time working and the potential for disturbance to local residents due to noise and light pollution.

Ms Houghton reassured Members that Network Rail were committed to ensuring an effective dialogue with local residents and consultation would be ongoing. The Chairman asked that disabled groups be consulted on ensuring disabled access and DDA compliance wherever possible. He suggested that Network Rail liaise with the Tonbridge and Malling Access Group who were very active in the Borough in supporting disability rights.

However, in general Members welcomed the investment being made and were encouraged by any improvement to access and congestion, particularly in the stair wells. It was suggested that the six week school summer holiday period might be the best time to undertake the improvement works. The Chairman was extremely pleased to see this investment and encouraged ongoing consultation with appropriate stakeholders, residents and planning authorities.

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11/007

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL SERVICES UPDATE

The Chairman welcomed Mr Steve Charman to the Forum as the new Kent County Council Community Engagement Manager for Tonbridge and Malling and thanked Mr Loic Flory for his past contribution.

A brief verbal services update was provided and included reference to the Kent County Council proposed budget for 2011/12 announced on 6 January. The headline messages were that council tax would be frozen at 0% for the next year; £95 million of savings in 2011/12; continued investment in Kent, with a £72 million capital programme over three years and the creation of a leaner and more efficient organisation to transform how services were delivered. To deliver the £95 million of savings it was intended to make efficiency savings of £38 million from having fewer staff and improving procurement; making policy changes in order to save £36 million; the use of one off funds including reserves of £15 million and increasing income by £6 million. Further information on the full budget statement could be found at www.kent.gov.uk

Additionally, reference was made to the recent County Cabinet changes announced by the Leader, Paul Carter,

which came into effect on 28 January 2011. These changes reflected the Council's new structure which would be implemented from 4 April 2011. Further details of these changes could be found at www.kent.gov.uk

Attention was drawn to the Have Your Say leaflets which had been provided to encourage feedback and Members of the Forum were urged to complete these if they had areas of concern.

Mr Charman could be contacted at Kent County Council on steve.charman@kent.gov.uk

Questions were invited from the Forum none of which were forthcoming.

Kent County Councillor Miss Hohler indicated the availability of a small amount of Community Grant funding and asked that interested parties contact her at alice.hohler@kent.gov.uk before the end of February 2011.

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11/008

KENT POLICE UPDATE

The Chairman invited Kent Police to provide a brief summary of policing issues within Tonbridge.

Inspector Allen reported on recent Police Community Support Officer successes in making several arrests in Tonbridge; the work of the Neighbourhood Tasking Team who had recovered a small amount of drugs and worked on tackling anti-social behaviour with Russet Homes and the Borough Council and the apprehension of a purse snatcher.

Particular reference was made to the increase in large scale fuel thefts in the area, due to the rise in petrol prices, and Kent Police were targeting these crimes.

Kent Police were active in tackling issues related to the 'school run' in Tonbridge in an effort to ease traffic congestion and vehicle obstruction. Members welcomed this approach and were pleased to note that this was an ongoing initiative with one school per week being targeted.

Inspector Allen was pleased to report that, following a recent visit to pubs and nightclubs in Tonbridge on a Saturday evening, the majority of establishments were well run and responsible. There was a minority of crime reported and Members were assured that Tonbridge was a very safe place to live and visit.

Future initiatives for the summer included Op Motor which would target nuisance vehicles and drivers.

Inspector Allen indicated that the parking issues raised at the last meeting of the Tonbridge Forum were a work in progress and he would provide a verbal update to the local Borough Councillors outside the meeting.

Members raised a few issues of concern and asked if a speeding initiative could be considered for St Mary's Road as residents had complained of speeding vehicles. Inspector Allen noted this concern. Additionally, Members were advised that Kent Police issued on the spot fines for motorists taking an illegal right turn at the Humphrey Bean Public House and this would continue to be dealt with robustly.

Inspector Allen was asked about the proposed abolition of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBO) and whether this action would have an adverse effect on communities. In response, Inspector Allen expressed his support for ASBOs and felt these created better behaviour. However, whatever new initiative was put in place Kent Police would deal with and enforce appropriately.

The Chairman thanked Inspector Allen for his excellent and informative update.

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11/009

THE BOROUGH COUNCIL'S FINANCIAL POSITION

The Director of Finance outlined the implications for the Borough Council's financial position following the announcement of the final settlement grant figure. She was pleased to report the intention to freeze the borough council's element of council tax, subject to ratification at full Council on 17 February 2011; that there would be no cuts to services during 2011/12 and there would be no staff redundancies for the same period.

This good news was as a result of having a robust Medium Term Financial Strategy which, following a remodelling over a 10-year period, allowed the Borough Council time to consider how to manage any future financial problems. Additionally, the Borough Council's reserves had been managed extremely well and had been used to support the budget as expenditure was higher than income. It was emphasised that the Borough Council was a very lean and efficient organisation and operated a value for money philosophy. The Director of Finance stressed that efficiency savings would still be sought and reported that several

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partnership working arrangements with neighbouring authorities were in place. Reference was also made to the nil pay rise for all staff for the second year and the fact that Members' allowances were also frozen.

The Director of Finance highlighted the significant cut in government grant of 16.2% in 2011/12 which equated almost £1 million; a cut in 2012/13 of 13.6% which equated around £600,000 with further cuts expected for the following two years. This meant that there would be a gap of around £2 million between the Borough Council's expenditure and income which needed to be addressed. The Director of Finance indicated that there were some Government initiatives that offered hope in helping to fund this deficit and one of these was the New Homes Bonus. However, final details of the scheme were not yet known.

The Chairman thanked the Director of Finance for her contribution to the meeting and commended the Borough Council's Management Team, for the effective way they handled the authority's finances and key priorities. Members of the Forum were also reassured of the Borough Council's strong commitment to and continued support of local community and voluntary organisations.

The meeting ended at 2125 hours
followed by a tour of the new facilities