

Paper for the TMBC Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tonbridge – the Main Event

Adapting to changing concepts of what events are and responding to changing social and business demands while driving beneficial change.

When considering events, it is important to put them into context and see the process in terms of its contribution to wider economic and social objectives.

Recent concern about the future of high streets in the UK has focused on changing shopping habits and the impact of out of town retail and the internet. The *Portas Review* underlined the need for high streets to change and adapt to these and other challenges. Subsequent follow up work and recommendations have reinforced this message and a major thread running through all recommendations has been the need for high streets to become event spaces offering diverse visitor experiences in addition to more traditional day-to-day shopping.

Setting up Town Teams was a major feature of the *Portas Review* and so we have sought to rise to the challenge on a number of fronts and develop an integrated and holistic approach to our activities (See 2018/20 Business Plan).

Amongst other objectives, our ambition is to orchestrate a regular events programme for the town with large, landmark events at regular intervals (such as the Food and Drink Festival, and Dragon Boats and the recent English Civil War re-enactment event) alongside smaller events such as the recent Art Fair.

A main aim is to spread economic benefits, contribute towards placemaking, include diverse stakeholders and raise the profile of the town both locally and further afield.

Specific Objectives include:

- To maintain and increase town centre footfall
- To provide a focus around which raise the town's profile
- Build the visitor economy
- Promote Tonbridge as a place to shop, socialise, live and do business.
- Encourage participation and coordinate activities across sectors

We have always aimed to be non-prescriptive or proprietorial and to be as inclusive as possible. Ours is a “can do” ethos with an emphasis on activity.

However, we face a number of barriers which include:

- Lack of business cooperation and involvement
- Lack of revenue funding
- Lack of coordination and communication between civil society organisations
- The need to improve procedures
- The need to involve more volunteers

A key element in overcoming these barriers and achieving our aims is to build on the relationships we have already built with the Borough Council and to also work with other

organisations (such as Visit Kent, the Medway Valley Line Community Rail Partnership and civil society organisations within the town such as the Lions). Working with schools, businesses and other institutions is also an important element of building what we might term a “can do” network. Towards this end, we have started to build strong links with Tonbridge School, the ArtSpring Gallery and businesses such as Fuggles and Basil. We have also formed a network for creative and cultural practitioner called **The Tonbridge Scene** which is planning to develop a range of events and other activities over the coming months and years.

However, it is not the role of the Town Team, as a voluntary organisation, to do everything itself. Instead, we should aim to work with others to plan, facilitate and enable, offering advice and guidance where we can and signposting as required.

Our key partner in all of this is and will remain the Local Authority. We have always maintained the objective of being financially and administratively independent but we also need to be mindful of the need to involve a wider pool of volunteers and to generate more income.

We are aware that the Borough Council also needs to generate income and strike a delicate balance between maximising a return from its assets while enabling and encouraging civil society participation. We believe that it is possible to do both if the task is approached in an open and inclusive way that builds mutual confidence and trust.

It is our view that, as important as it is, income generation needs to be proactive and not simply based around the hire of facilities or following established patterns. We need to start thinking about what makes the town centre special and why people and businesses might want to come here for the day, an afternoon, an evening or longer.

Therefore, the town as a whole also needs to strike a balance in the events it develops and promotes and this, in its turn, puts into focus the need to work together more closely to maximise opportunities while also encouraging innovation and enterprise.

We are aware that with an increased focus on events, there is the possibility of increased pressure on officers. Therefore, we would like to explore ways to work together and streamline procedures. A part of this will mean building on the trust that has already been built but there are other procedural changes that could be explored in order to encourage the expansion of activities without incurring additional cost to the Borough Council.

Towards this we propose a joint working group to:

- Plan and facilitate public outreach activities
- Identify spaces to promote and market
- Coordinate a yearly calendar while also maintaining flexibility to respond to the unexpected
- Identify and develop income generating opportunities (for both the Borough Council and Town Team)
- Identify improvements in communication and procedures

Adapting to change and driving beneficial change

Building the visitor economy and encouraging inward investment is an important feature in driving the town forward over the coming years. We should also investigate the potential of possible funding sources to fund infrastructure such as public wifi and environmental

media to help events promotion. In addition, events need to be planned to attract the whole range of age groups different demographics and each will require a careful evaluation of the most appropriate communication channels.

As mentioned, planning and developing an events based approach should not be viewed in isolation from other developments. Indeed, we are likely to see a convergence of traditional retail and events based activities with pop-up shops and demand for more flexible retail and work spaces challenging our traditional sense of place. We need, therefore, to be prepared to respond to more flexible and adaptive business and cultural demands which are not easily accommodated within established parameters.

New ways to utilise commercial premises and public spaces will be both exciting and challenging. New ventures such as online businesses seeking pop-up shops, new types of street markets and mobile trading as well as shop spaces used for community activities, are all likely to push and challenge current civic and commercial norms. In such a scenario, people expect new mixes of occupational and social experience much of which will be increasingly reliant upon digital media channels. The 'digital' has been seen as a challenge to the terrestrial high street but it might also be a part of its salvation. Multi-use emporia, click and collect, flexible leases and wi-fi enables public spaces and office/coffee shops are likely to become more common and all of these break down our current definition of events, spaces, and what we mean by the workplace.

But some will find it difficult to adapt. The lack of digital skills will create a barrier to participation so building ongoing support/training capacity will be essential. Driven increasingly by developments in robotics and artificial intelligence, how we work and how we play will become more and more fuzzy edged so the provision of appropriate work spaces to cater for 'digital nomads' and the more flexible working practices they demand are likely to be essential consideration in assuring the future prosperity of towns like Tonbridge. In addition, a move towards 'artisan' production/retail may also be a feature of the future high street economy.

As a result, high streets need to become more adaptive yet managed and organised spaces; they also need to be enabling and welcoming otherwise shoppers and business will look elsewhere to those that are. Therefore, placemaking and place branding need to be central strategic objectives encompassing a wide range of strategies with events across a range of 'spaces' being central elements of this process.

For instance:

Markets were identified in the *Portas Review* as important elements to town centre regeneration. They provide flexible yet focused retail opportunities, relatively cheap and quick routes to market for entrepreneurs, local variety and choice, buzz and stimulation (the feeling that things are happening) thus enhancing the appeal of the town centre.

Music and public art also attracts footfall and add to the sense that things are happening. From small scale busking type activities to music festivals and concerts, such events have the capacity to help build a powerful sense of place as do impromptu dance and theatre events, murals, projections and performance art pieces and temporary art installations.

Specialist festivals and events can also contribute to building footfall and the all important placemaking that encourages a positive identity for a town centre. They also need to cater for diverse tastes and interests from model railway exhibitions to vegan food

festival. It is especially important to have highly visual promotion for events, not only to inform the public but to build the sense of activity.

Carnivals, participatory activities of all kind helps to build community and identification with the locality. Community gardens, litter picks, small scale and informal sporting events, fun runs and nature walks are all public expressions of place that encourage participation. and need to be facilitated, especially as organisers may not be familiar with procedures and regulations.

'Traditional' events, both small scale activities such as church fêtes and larger events such as Tonbridge Carnival, the Christmas Festival and organised sporting events (involving local sports clubs) all add to the rich mix so although we look to innovation we also need to value and encourage the more traditional expressions of community.

How we use and adapt current spaces and venues will be of central importance and Tonbridge is fortunate in its current range of facilities. Care will need to be taking to nurture these but neither can we afford to be over precious. Establishing a register of usable spaces both public and private, indoor and outdoor has been an ambition we have held for some time. We also need to be open to new uses (a launderette as an event space was an interesting early idea, for example).

If we can coordinate our efforts and remain open to new possibilities, we have every chance of being able to continue to build on the strong foundations we already have.

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