

**Planning, Infrastructure and
Economic Development Policy
Advisory Committee**

28 March 2024

**Consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town
Centre Plan – Vision 2040 (regulation 18 – stage 1)**

Timetable	
Meeting	Date
Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Policy Advisory Committee	28 March 2024
Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development	2 April 2024

Will this be a Key Decision?	No
Urgency	Not Applicable
Final Decision-Maker	Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development
Lead Head of Service	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)
Lead Officer and Report Author	Helen Smith (Principal Planning Officer)
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

A public consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040 is underway. This report sets out the scope of the consultation and provides a summary overview of the content of the draft plan. Maidstone Borough Council's proposed consultation response is set out in Appendix 1 of this report.

This report and associated appendix is to be considered by Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Policy Advisory Committee (PIED PAC) before being passed to the PIED Cabinet Member for agreement and submission to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council ahead of the 15th April 2024 consultation response deadline.

Purpose of Report

Recommendation to Cabinet Member.

This report asks the Committee to consider the following recommendation to the PIED Cabinet Member:

1. That the current consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040 is noted; and
2. That the draft response to the consultation (as appended to this report) is recommended to the Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development for agreement and submission to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council ahead of the 15th April 2024 consultation response deadline.

Consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040 (regulation 18 – stage 1)

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place <p>Accepting the recommendations will enable the Council to ensure that plans in a neighbouring authority do not materially harm its ability to achieve each of the corporate priorities.</p>	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected <p>The report recommendations support the achievements of the four cross-cutting objectives by ensuring that plans from a neighbouring authority do not materially harm the council's ability to achieve these objectives.</p>	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)
Risk Management	Covered in the 'risk' section of this report.	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)
Financial	There are no financial implications to note. Any cost of participating in the consultation will be accommodated within existing	Section 151 Officer & Finance Team

	budgets.	
Staffing	We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing.	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)
Legal	Accepting the recommendations will help fulfil the Council's duties under Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations (2012) as amended and the National planning Policy Framework (NPPF).	Russell Fitzpatrick (MKLS - Planning)
Information Governance	The recommendations do not impact personal information (as defined in UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018) the Council processes.	Information Governance Officer.
Equalities	The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment.	Equalities & Communities Officer
Public Health	We recognise that the recommendations will not negatively impact on population health or that of individuals.	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	There are no implications to Crime and Disorder.	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)
Procurement	The recommendation has no identified impact on procurement.	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)
Biodiversity and Climate Change	The implications of this report on biodiversity and climate change have been considered and there are no implications on biodiversity and climate change.	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2.1 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) are in the early stages of preparing a new Plan titled 'Draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040'.

2.2 The consultation commenced on 23rd February and runs until midnight on Monday 15th April 2024. During this time, TWBC are seeking views on the content of the draft plan, posing a series of 15 questions dispersed throughout the main consultation document. All materials including the draft plan and supporting documents are available to view on the TWBC website: <https://tunbridgewells.gov.uk/planning/planning-policy/rtw-town-centre-plan/consultation-on-the-draft-royal-tunbridge-wells-town-centre-plan-vision-2040>

Planning status of the draft plan

2.3 TWBC are preparing their Town Centre plan as a Development Plan Document. Within the planning legislation framework, this Town Centre Plan will have the same status and carry the same 'weight' as the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan – both being DPDs.

2.4 This consultation represents the first stage in the process of producing a DPD – the 'Regulation 18' stage (Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations (2012) as amended). It must therefore, as a minimum, undergo two public consultations: one at Regulation 18 and one at Regulation 19 (pre-submission); before being submitted to the Secretary of State for independent examination. Subject to being found 'sound' and legally compliant, the DPD can then be adopted. Under the current planning framework, the authority must also fulfil the 'duty to cooperate' on matters of a strategic, cross-boundary nature.

2.5 A key benefit of producing the town centre plan as a DPD is that it carries greater weight in the decision making process than, for example, a Supplementary Planning Document or Area Action Plan. However, the production process and regulatory framework mean that this approach takes more time to get something in place.

Draft plan – content overview

2.6 First and foremost, the draft plan contains a proposed Vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre by 2040, focused on: creating an attractive town centre; harnessing opportunities for change; and enabling sustainable transport choices. It also sets out a series of seven principles and ambitions as follows:

- A distinct place
- Town centre living
- Connected landscapes
- Active streets and nodes
- A low carbon future
- A sustainable and resilient economy
- A creative destination

2.7 The plan goes on to describe the town centre as it is today, sets out the planning policy basis for the plan; and includes a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of the centre focused around

four key themes: Built environment; Economics and viability; Decarbonisation; and Transportation and movement.

2.8 The plan then includes a draft Town Centre Masterplan Framework, which sees the centre divided into four 'quarters' (North, East, South, West). The framework highlights primary streets, parks and greenspaces, green link connections, existing nodes/gateways, opportunities for redevelopment, and other opportunities for improvements.

2.9 Next, the plan looks in more detail at 22 key sites and project opportunities – summarising the potential project/site in bullet point form. Some are considered to be significant sites for change such as the development of the former Cinema site and the possible re-purposing of Royal Victoria Place, whilst others are interventions at a smaller scale such as improved connections between the different parts of the town and improvements to the streetscape. There is also a further 'call for sites' whereby TWBC is inviting submissions of potential sites for development/redevelopment during the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan period (up to 2040).

Proposed response to the draft plan consultation

2.10 The proposed response to TWBC's current regulation 18 consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040 is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

2.11 In summary, Maidstone Borough Council is supportive of the production of a long-term town centre plan and broadly agrees with the draft Vision and seven principles identified in the plan. Officers consider the draft vision for Tunbridge Wells Town Centre to be appropriately balanced in terms of ambition and achievability. Some of the points noted in the SWOT analysis appeared contradictory to one another, so clarity is sought in that regard.

2.12 In terms of the sites listed within the draft plan, officers have not identified any site-specific comments to make at this stage. However, it is suggested that the preparation of the plan and the sites identified therein represent an opportunity to further explore the potential for additional development capacity (both residential and employment uses) – given the significant reductions in homes and employment floorspace now proposed within the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan as a result of the Inspector's findings (see separate report presented to this PAC). Allocating additional development within this Town Centre Development Plan Document may go some way towards meeting the full identified needs as set out in the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan.

2.13 A final point is in relation to the timetabling and next steps of production of the DPD. The expected submission date is June 2025 - in line with the NPPF transition cut-off date ahead of the 'new style' plans. It is assumed that this DPD is predicated on having the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan adopted in accordance with the current LDS timetable. However, if for any reason, this is not achieved, Maidstone Borough Council are keen to understand if there are implications of progressing this Town Centre DPD without the Local Plan and relative policy STR/RTW2 – Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre in place.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 **Option 1:** That this Policy Advisory Committee recommends the draft response (at Appendix 1 of this report) be agreed by the Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development, and submitted to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council ahead of the 15th April 2024 consultation deadline.
- 3.2 This option ensures that the Maidstone Borough Council complies with its duty to co-operate and has taken the opportunity to engage in the plan making process at an early stage. It also reiterates Maidstone's position with regard to the Local Plan Review and the emerging Town Centre Strategy and seeks to ensure that wherever possible, TWBC maximise the development potential within the town centre to help meet their identified needs over the plan period. This option is recommended.
- 3.3 **Option 2:** That this Policy Advisory Committee recommends amendments to the draft response (at Appendix 1 of this report) to be agreed by the Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development, and submitted to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council ahead of the 15th April 2024 consultation deadline.
- 3.4 If Members are minded to make amendments to the proposed response at Appendix 1 then this option would be suitable, as per recommended option 1.
- 3.5 **Option 3:** That this Policy Advisory Committee recommends not submitting a response to the current public consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040.
- 3.6 This option would mean Maidstone Borough Council not complying with its duty to co-operate and missing an opportunity to input into and help shape the content of the TWBC Town Centre DPD as it progresses. There are only limited occasions to have comments formally noted and considered throughout the plan making process. This option is therefore not recommended.
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4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 Option 1 is preferred, whereby this Policy Advisory Committee recommends the draft response (at Appendix 1 of this report) be agreed by the Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development, and submitted to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council ahead of the 15th April 2024 consultation deadline.
- 4.2 This ensures that the Maidstone Borough Council complies with its duty to co-operate and has taken the opportunity to engage in the plan making process at an early stage. It also reiterates Maidstone's position with regard to the Local Plan Review and the emerging Town Centre Strategy and seeks to ensure that wherever possible, TWBC maximise the development potential within the town centre to help meet their identified needs over the plan period.

- 4.3 If Members are minded to make amendments to the proposed response at Appendix 1 then Option 2 would also be suitable.
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5. RISK

- 5.1 The risks associated with this proposal, including the risks if the Council does not act as recommended, have been considered in line with the Council's Risk Management Framework. We are satisfied that the risks associated are within the Council's risk appetite and will be managed as per the Policy.
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6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 This is the first formal public consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040. It is a regulation 18 (stage 1) consultation in accordance with the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 as amended. As such, there is no previous committee feedback.
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7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 7.1 If Members opt to recommend the draft response to the Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development (with or without amendments), it is expected that the Cabinet Member will agree the consultation response and ensure it is submitted to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council ahead of the consultation deadline of midnight, 15th April 2024.
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8. REPORT APPENDICES

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- **Appendix 1:** Draft response to the public consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040.
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9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.