

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING, INFRASTRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Decision Made: 3 April 2024

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

Issue for Decision

To seek approval of the proposed consultation response as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

Decision Made

That

1. The current consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040 be noted; and
2. The draft response to the consultation, as appended in Appendix 1 to the report, be agreed and submitted to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council ahead of the 15 April 2024 consultation response deadline.

Reasons for Decision

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'.

The consultation commenced on 23 February and runs until midnight on Monday 15 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

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.

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.

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

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

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.

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.

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

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 the report.

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.

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.

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.

This was presented to the Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Policy Advisory Committee on 28 March 2024 with the Committee supporting the recommendations.

Alternatives considered and why rejected

Option 2: That amendments to the draft response (at Appendix 1 of the report) to be agreed and submitted to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council ahead of the 15 April 2024 consultation deadline.

This option was not selected as no amendments were made.

Option 3: That a response to the current public consultation on the draft Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan – Vision 2040 not be submitted.

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 was not selected.

The option selected ensured that the Maidstone Borough Council complied with its duty to co-operate and had taken the opportunity to engage in the plan making process at an early stage. It also reiterated Maidstone’s position with regard to the Local Plan Review and the emerging Town Centre Strategy and sought to ensure that, wherever possible, TWBC maximised the development potential within the town centre to help meet their identified needs over the plan period.

Background Papers

None.

I have read and approved the above decision for the reasons
(including possible alternative options rejected) as set out above.



Signed: _____
Councillor Paul Cooper – Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure
and Economic Development

Full details of both the report for the decision taken above and any consideration
by the relevant Policy Advisory Committee can be found at the following area of
the [website](#)

Call-In: Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please
submit a call-in form signed by any three Members to the Proper Officer by: **5pm**
on 10 April 2024