

Calverley Square Compulsory Purchase Order 2018

Councillor Nicholas Pope MBA, Beng

Why the CPO is not in the public interest - summary

Introduction

My name is Nicholas Pope, I became a councillor on Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in May last year, representing the Tunbridge Wells Alliance party, and am the former chairman of the Friends of Calverley Grounds, the community group registered as a charitable incorporated organisation with an interest in the public park, Calverley Grounds, that is directly affected by the Calverley Square development on the western edge of the park. I am also a resident of Mountfield Road, a residential road that has one of the four public entrances into the public park at the end of the road. My wife owns a one bedroom flat in Grove Hill House and is a statutory objector.

I have been a resident of Royal Tunbridge Wells since September 2010 and have been involved in a number of community projects including one to build a community funded playground on the retired bowling green in the eastern part of Calverley Grounds. The playground gained enormous support from the community with the project team successfully raising more than the £225,000 required to build the playground.

I am a founding member of Tunbridge Wells Alliance which was initially founded as a residents action group in October 2016 formed after two separate petitions raised enough signatures to be debated in the Town Hall by councillors on 26th July 2017. Tunbridge Wells Alliance was registered as a political party at the end of February last year just in time for the 2018 local elections in May. Tunbridge Wells Alliance is often described as a one issue party with the sole purpose of opposing the Calverley Square development.

Do the public want a new theatre?

In a residents survey undertaken on behalf of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in 2015, one question asked:

“Would you be willing to pay a bit more in Council Tax (for example £10 a year or 19p a week) if this would allow us to deliver a significant project such as a new theatre worthy of the Borough?”.

55% responded “No”, 32% responded “Yes”, 13% responded “Don't know”.

Online petitions have been created opposing and supporting the “Calverley Square” development:

The “Save Our Park” petition which opposes the development has received 5,434 signatures.

The “Stunning new theatre and Civic Complex for Tunbridge Wells” petition created to support the Civic Complex project has received 201 signatures since it was created.

Two borough councillors held surveys in 2017 to find out whether the residents of their wards supported the Civic Centre Development.

In Southborough North ward residents voted 342 to 86 or 79.9% against the project.

In Sherwood ward residents voted 452 to 113 or 80.0% against the project.

Tunbridge Wells Alliance registered as a new political party at the end of February 2018 just 10 weeks before the borough council elections on 3 May. It is often badged as being a one issue party. It fielded candidates in 7 out of the 16 wards in the borough and successfully took an average of 25% of the votes in the 7 wards winning one council seat. My council seat.

The 31 January 2018 edition of Country Life magazine had an Athena article with the title "Justified Outrage at Tunbridge Wells" which clearly took a position that strongly opposed the development, including the words "The motives of the Council's leaders are difficult to comprehend".

Members of the public have filled the town hall to capacity with some being turned away on two occasions. Residents have also stood in the park to protest on three occasions, twice covered in the local newspapers and once appearing in the Mail on Sunday.

The site selection process for the Calverley Square development

The site selection process was limited to a small number of sites failing to consider obvious options for such a large development - the **old cinema site** which has been derelict since the cinema closed on 1st December 2000, the 1960s **Crescent Road multi-storey car park**, and the use a **temporary theatre**, something used during many other theatre refurbishments and redevelopments.

The cinema site is not owned by the Borough Council, but is the town centre site that many residents have been calling to have developed as it has been a derelict grot spot in the centre of town for over 18 years.

The Borough Council has done little about the cinema site in the 18 years it has sat derelict. In October 2011, the councillor with the Portfolio for Property & Major Projects, Councillor David Jukes, said the following in his Portfolio Holder Monthly Update:

Cinema Site

As this is the third or fourth developer to take over the project in the last eleven years, the Council is still minded to continue with the process of a compulsory purchase with a view to one day having this site for community use.

It is almost certain it would cost less to CPO the cinema site than the combined cost to CPO properties around the Calverley Square site and build a replacement underground car park at total cost of £19 million. The cinema site was bought for £12 million in 2011 by Bellhouse/Joseph and changed hands again for an undisclosed amount in April 2016.

The Crescent Road Car Park is owned by the Council. It takes up a large area in the centre of town close to the civic buildings, the Town Hall, Assembly Hall Theatre and Police Station and is ripe for a redevelopment into a more human friendly environment with offices, entertainment, residential and retail uses with an underground car park below.

One reason given for not redeveloping the existing Assembly Hall Theatre was to ensure there was "continuity of theatre operation" to avoid losing an audience during the redevelopment. An option that offers continuity of theatre operation that has not appeared in any documents is to use a temporary theatre. The use of temporary theatres is common practice. Examples are:

In Chichester, in 2013 the Theatre In The Park temporary theatre which could seat 1,400.

In London, in 2014, the National Theatre built a temporary theatre called The Shed which could seat 220.

In Colchester, a temporary theatre with 800 seats will be used.

Damage to the Grade II Listed park, Calverley Grounds

Historic England, in the Grade II Listing entry, describes the view from Calverley Grounds and Calverley Park as follows: "From the higher slopes and the plateau there are extensive views westwards and southwards, through tree cover, over Tunbridge Wells and to the more distant countryside."

The construction of the Calverley Square development will block this view through tree cover, replacing it with a wall of glass and concrete.

The Statement of Case, section 2.50, talks about "reflections from vehicle windscreens which spoil views from within the grounds". The only place where these reflections might be seen is from the vehicles parked in the Great Hall car park, but these vehicles are barely visible from most places within the park as the car park is part concealed by trees, particularly in the summer.

The Great Hall car park was built in the 1980s and designed to blend in with the Great Hall by using matching bricks and arches in the design to mimic the Great Hall. It was built as a low structure to minimise the impact on the park, with the lower levels of parking built below ground level. The new theatre and office building would significantly impact on the character of the park, replacing the green western edge with an abrupt, hard boundary of glass and concrete several storeys high.

Failure to consult

A significant number of consultations with various stakeholder groups are listed in the Statement of Reasons. However, the most important decision of this project was never put out for consultation or discussed with stakeholders. The decision that was not consulted on was the site selection which took place prior to October 2015.

The list of consultations in the Statement of Reasons, section 2.53, shows only one consultation before October 2015, a meeting with Historic England.

I attended a presentation about the site selection. Few questions were answered and no explanation of how the 13 initial options were shortlisted to five and then to the final selection was given. Many felt it was a fait accompli.