

Response of the Town Forum to TWBCs Draft 2022/23 Budget

We are responding to your consultation on the budget for the year 2022/23. We note that your major concern is a short fall of £2m and that you propose to balance your budget by taking this sum from reserves.

In view of the short time between now and the start of the fiscal year, and in the absence of our finding any increase in revenue (though we do put forward two areas where more finance might be forthcoming below) we are forced to agree to this. However, we feel that you will be in the same position a year hence, and will again be proposing to raid the reserves in order to balance the budget for 2023/24, with reserves perilously close to exhaustion. These reserves were largely made when we transferred our housing stock over to Town and Country Housing, and represent capital accumulation over many years : once again we touch on this point below. It is too late now, but the Council does have a policy of using capital to finance revenue operations only under certain circumstances, and your action breaches the spirit of those rules, if not the rules themselves.

The Town Forum

We represent the central part of the Town, being made up by about 60 members who represent residents associations (Warwick Park), business groups (Camden Road traders), old people (Age Concern), charities (Royal British Legion), the total wider membership being in the order of 6,000. We are the nearest thing to a Town Council (such as Southborough) or a rural parish council. We have no statutory standing, though we could have if we so wished.

The general feeling we sense amongst our members is one of not being consulted about matters which effect the centre of the Town, especially housing and traffic.

Housing

Though they are not troubled by central government's decision to "dump" thousands of houses on our precious greenfields, they are concerned by the absence of any policy to provide low cost rented housing (rented is stressed since without exception the developers who are building the houses at the behest of central government are doing so for sale) for young key workers. They see a future where Tunbridge Wells will lack skilled workers, young people, teaching assistants, carers, policemen etc on which we depend to build a viable community.

What they want is bed-sit accommodation in units of about 20-25, grouped around a central gym, no provision for cars, but a cycle rack. The rental stream flowing from this would be in the region of £200k pa. The derelict cinema site might not provide a venue, being too costly, but the Council does already have a £120m portfolio of buildings, and starting with this something could be done.

They are not seeking charity : other councils are actively following such a strategy. In some instances in partnership with organisations such as the Grosvenor Estates, or even Town and Country Housing (you will remember that the reserves mentioned above arose from an earlier era, when we provided council housing), Another example is the west London council of Four Elms who are taking advantage of the derelict train sheds in their borough to provide rented housing for key workers.

Car Traffic

Another matter of grave concern is traffic levels in the centre of the Town. The level of traffic in the town centre continues to be of concern to all, since it limits the increase in walking and cycling which is at the centre of TWBC position for the future. Street parking is central to this problem, and we recommend a review of the residents parking scheme: finances, operation and enforcement and a reduction in "free" parking spots. This would encourage more use of the Town's multi-story car parking facilities, provide incentives for residents to use these facilities for their second and third cars and increase revenues further from this source. We also would ask you to speed up the introduction of electric charge points, since most town centre residents do not have the ability to charge their electric cars, and this is a disincentive to their acquiring one. Here again, this is a further stream of additional revenue.

We urge you to put up the cost of residents parking to at least something in the region of what a garage costs, say £700pa. This increase should go some way towards meeting your target of increased revenue.

Councillors and Committees

There is a view amongst our members that the number of councillors is too great at 48: you will soon be in a position to reduce this to 39. But we urge you not to lose sight of why they are there: they should provide the interface between those governed and the governors. For various reasons, this interface is broken. Partly this is because your consultation process is placing the finished article before the public, and not the alternatives you considered to get to that finished article. Also, the time you give the public to consider the matter is too short: this Budget consultation has a time frame of about two weeks: this allows us time only to consult our Management committee, and not the membership.

Councillors

The questionnaire which went out to the public has proved useful to us in writing this response. We wonder if its use by the Leader to find out the views of the councillors might help in sensing where they stand in advance of a vote in Council? We think that on two matters, Safety and the Environment, our members would be reluctant to see any cuts: indeed, they would support modest increases in cost.

Also, on contracts, there is a widespread view among the members that some of the more recent ones have been very badly drawn up, leading to TWBC having to bear the cost of price increases which rightly should have been borne by the contractor. We instance the increase in cost at the Amelia Scott as an example.

Is the process of matching committees to key tasks being done? We note that whilst there are seven heads of services and two directors, no mention is made in the names of the committees of either of the two matters of most concern to our members.

We would like to see evidence that the process of matching the committee structure to the officer structure is being examined in the light of our changed circumstances, forced reduction in expenditure and increased demands for services.

Officers

We believe that there is a system for assigning responsibilities from the chief executive down through the ranks of director, chief officers etc. We believe that there is an appraisal system which annually assess performance against agreed targets, and that remuneration is based on that assessment. We think that this process is key to being able to say to our members that the number of officers employed is not excessive, and that the pay scale is in line with neighbouring councils.

Conclusion

Whilst we are unable to find for you the missing millions which you seek to match your budget shortfall, we hope that we have provided you with some ideas for improving performance, breaking down the barrier which exist between our members and the Town Council and finally the actions you should take if you are to avoid having to consider using reserves in order to balance the budget for 2023/2024.

14 January 2022