

Building a Better Borough

Introduction

In May 2022 a new political administration took responsibility for running Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. The Borough Partnership is a cross-party administration made up of the Liberal Democrat, Tunbridge Wells Alliance, and Labour groups, and one of the independent councillors.

The Borough Partnership administration has one single and only objective: *doing the best for our residents and our Borough*. Whilst our administration, like most of local government, is operating in challenging circumstances, we are committed to working for the benefit of all our residents.

This document sets out our administration's plans for 2022 – 2024:

- Our *Focus on Five* priorities
- The context in which we operate
- Our operating principles
- Our key projects and our future work programme

Cllr Ben Chapelard
Leader of the Council

Context

Tunbridge Wells, the Council, local government and the country have had to deal with a decade of austerity, the consequences of Brexit, a once-in-a century pandemic, a war in mainland Europe and a cost-of-living crisis.

For Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, these external events and the Government's response to them have resulted in greater demands on council services. At the same time the Council has had reduced financial resources with which to deliver its services.

Priorities: Focus on Five

The Borough Partnership has set itself five priorities called the *Focus on Five*. These are:

- Safeguarding finances
- Vibrant and safer town and villages
- Carbon reduction
- Genuinely affordable housing and social rental housing
- Digital access, transparency and local democracy

Responsibility for delivering the *Focus on Five* priorities lies with the eight Borough Partnership Cabinet members who each have individual areas of responsibility.

The Cabinet is supported by four champions who also have specific projects to deliver.

This document contains details of our key priorities, projects and initiatives in relation to our *Focus on Five* priorities.

Operating Principles

In delivering the *Focus on Five* priorities, the Council will abide by several key operating principles. These are:

- **Being outward-looking** – we will be community- and partnership-focused, leveraging social capital where possible.
- **Valuing staff** – we recognise the vital importance of staff in delivering our services and will ensure that we remain an employer of choice to attract, retain and develop our employees.
- **A learning council** – we will gather feedback from residents and service users, seek best practice from elsewhere and learn from our mistakes.
- **Digital first** – ensuring that the widest range of residents and users can access our services digitally (whilst recognising that this will not be possible for everyone).

We will be seeking to reduce the budget deficit in a responsible manner by adopting the following principles:

- **User pays** – a recognition that users of services should pay for the cost of those services rather than all council taxpayers.
- **Enabling** – exploring areas where others might be better placed to lead on facilities or service delivery.
- **Carbon reduction** – taking opportunities and decisions that contribute to our climate emergency goals.
- **Preventing future costs** – taking opportunities to reduce future costs through preventative spending.
- **Delivering (good) growth** – Delivering sustainable growth through the implementation of the Local Plan, raising income to deliver services and ensuring that the Borough is open for business.
- **Being opportunistic** – seeking opportunities for external funding, collaboration or the delivery of our priorities by external partners.

Priority actions

Safeguarding Finances

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- 2022 In Year Budget Review
- Reduced the previous administration's 2022-23 deficit

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Town Hall being repurposed for co-working
- Delivery of surplus asset disposals
- Review of fees and charges
- Car parking strategy
- Digital transformation
- Savings plan
- Production of a People Strategy and associated policies to support us in recruiting and retaining high calibre staff

Vibrant and safer town and villages

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Cost-of-living summit and creation of cost-of-living digital hub
- Community Support Fund launched
- Approved UK Shared Prosperity Fund investment plans
- Approved Rural England Prosperity Fund investment plans
- Submitted three priority active travel schemes to Kent Highways under Active Travel Fund Tranche 4
- Creation of business portal on the TWBC website
- Held launch event for the Kent and Medway Business Fund
- Held tourism networking events in partnership with Visit Kent

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Bring an independent farmers' market to Royal Tunbridge Wells
- Parish chair convention
- Install CCTV in Great Hall, Crescent Road and Torrington car parks
- Publish a new Economic Development Strategy
- Install additional EV chargers in TWBC car parks
- Develop tourism across the Borough
- Begin distributing funding for projects via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Rural England Prosperity Fund
- Develop a business pack to support the new business portal

Carbon reduction

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Big Green Week
- Town Hall windows and roof improvements
- Enhanced information and features available on the TWBC Climate Change website
- Expansion of Tunbridge Wells Car Club

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Develop a Pesticide & Herbicide policy to promote biodiversity and wider behaviour change.
- Renew our Biodiversity action plan to protect, enhance and publicise our local environment.
- Review resources to deliver 2030 net zero commitments, seek funding and increase staff capacity.
- Collaborate and consult with residents, partners and businesses as part of a Borough emissions Strategy.
- Expand TWBC's Climate Change web site to promote sustainability and encourage networks.
- Reduce our own emissions by delivering the Weald Sports Centre and Depot SALIX schemes.

Genuinely affordable housing and social rental housing

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Local Plan submitted
- New Housing Allocations Policy
- New Neighbourhood Development Plans
- Meetings with social housing providers
- Beam Project to address homelessness

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Utilise existing Council land and assets to deliver affordable housing
- Modifications to, and adoption of, Local Plan
- Empty Property strategy and policy
- Progress the RTW Town Centre Development Plan

Digital access, transparency and local democracy

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Cabinet on Tour
- Increased the number of public consultations
- Undertaken a significant number of public consultations
- Gone 'back to the floor' in council services, such as Recycling and Waste, to understand how residents interact with our services
- TWBC Instagram account set up
- Met all key partner organisations and stakeholders

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Borough-wide Survey
- User friendlier access to the Council's data and information
- Digital transformation plan
- Review of TWBC communications