

Building a Better Borough

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Plan 2022-24

Introduction

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) has one single and only objective:

doing the best for our residents, our businesses and our Borough.

The *Building a Better Borough: Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Plan 2022-24* sets out the priorities for Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) for 2022-24.

The Council's previous Five-Year Plan covered the period 2017 to 2022. Halfway through that plan, in 2019, TWBC started reviewing the plan. The Covid Pandemic, however, forced TWBC to prioritise managing the pandemic rather than draw up a new plan.

The Council has also experienced a change in political control in the past two years. This new Plan covers the period 2022-4 and sets out our key ambitions for this time.

At the same time, work is underway to research, produce and consult on a longer-term Corporate Plan which is expected to be adopted before the end of 2024. This new plan will consider the changes to the way we live and work following Covid.

This Council, like most of local government, is operating in challenging conditions. We are nonetheless committed to working for the benefit of all our residents and businesses.

This document sets out our 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

Priorities: Focus on Five

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

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

The Focus on Five are the five areas where TWBC can add the most value to improving the quality of life for our residents and business.

- Safeguarding finances

Local government has seen amongst the highest reductions in funding of any government department over the past decade and Covid has had an impact on both our reserves and our income. Inflation is running well above Council Tax increases so, if the Council is to remain a force for good in our borough, safeguarding the Council's finances will be vital. We will always act with the best interest of the borough and residents. We aim to protect the services which residents tell us they value.

- Vibrant and safer towns and villages

Traditional high streets can compete with the internet, but we must also adapt to the reality of the digital age. We want town centres we can all be proud of, where we transform the way we live and where walking and cycling are part of a more sustainable lifestyle.

- Carbon reduction

Climate change is real. It poses an existential threat to us, and the clock is ticking. We have our role to play with national government. We must all act locally if we are to win the fight globally.

- Genuinely affordable housing and social rental housing

Many of our residents enjoy living in some of the most desirable postcodes in the country. However, quality housing remains unaffordable for too many, denying them the lifestyle they deserve. This Council can play a transformative role in the lives of many of our residents.

- Digital access, transparency and local democracy

Residents must feel heard and empowered about the biggest decisions in our Borough. We must never lose sight that this Council works for residents and businesses. We strive for the best for the Borough.

Responsibility for the strategic delivering the *Focus on Five* priorities lies with eight Cabinet members who each have individual areas of responsibility. The operational responsibility for delivering this plan rests with Council staff.

The Cabinet are 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.

Context

The Council has historically set out its priorities in a series of overlapping five-year plans. The most recent plan ended in 2022. Work on refreshing that plan started in 2019 but this stopped whilst the Council responded to the Covid Pandemic.

Covid and the subsequent war in Ukraine and associated 'cost of living crisis' (linked to high inflation and utility costs) means that this plan for 2022-24 is being put together in the most challenging of circumstances.

For TWBC, these events and the Government's response to them have resulted in greater demands on our council services. At the same time this Council has had less money with which to deliver its services.

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.

Focus on Five priority actions

Over the period 2022-24 the Council aims to take the following priority actions and deliver the following projects.

The list below is a bullet point summary of the projects. Further information about projects is available on the Council's website.

This document is intended to be a live document and it will be updated as priorities and projects are completed.

Safeguarding Finances

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Carried out the 2022 In Year Budget Review
- Reduced the projected 2022-23 deficit

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Re-purpose the Town Hall for co-working
- Deliver disposals of surplus assets
- Review fees and charges for council services
- Develop a car parking strategy
- Develop a digital transformation plan
- Produce a savings plan
- Produce a People Strategy

Vibrant and safer towns and villages

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Hosted a Cost-of-living summit and created a cost-of-living digital hub
- Launched Community Support Fund
- Approved UK Shared Prosperity Fund investment plans
- Approved Rural England Prosperity Fund investment plans
- Submitted 3 priority active travel schemes to Kent Highways under Active Travel Fund Tranche 4
- Created a 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
- Hold a 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
- Begin distributing funding for projects via the Rural England Prosperity Fund
- Develop a business pack to support the new business portal

Carbon reduction

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Hosted some Big Green Week events
- Refurbished the Town Hall windows and roof
- Enhanced information and features available on the TWBC Climate Change website
- Expanded the Tunbridge Wells Car Club

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Develop a Pesticide & Herbicide policy
- Renew our Biodiversity action plan
- Review resources to deliver 2030 net zero commitments
- Collaborate and consult on a borough emissions strategy.
- Expand TWBC's Climate Change web site
- Deliver SALIX carbon reduction schemes at Weald Sports Centre & North Farm Depot.

Genuinely affordable housing and social rental housing

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Submitted Local Plan
- Developed New Housing Allocations Policy
- Developed New Neighbourhood Development Plans
- Met with social housing providers
- Set up the Beam Project to address homelessness

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Use existing Council land and assets to deliver affordable housing
- Make modifications to and adopt the Local Plan
- Develop an empty property strategy and policy
- Progress the RTW Town Centre Development Plan

Digital access, transparency and local democracy

ACTIONS COMPLETED

- Held "Cabinet on Tour" public meetings
- Increased the number of public consultations
- Undertook a significant number of public consultations
- Gone 'back to the shop floor' to understand how residents interact with our services
- Set up TWBC Instagram account
- Met all key partner organisation's and stakeholders

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Carry out a residents' borough-wide survey
- Provide user friendlier access to the Council's data and information
- Develop a digital transformation plan
- Review and develop a TWBC communications plan