

**TOWN CENTRE STEERING GROUP**

Suite A The Courtyard – offices of Marlborough Law Ltd.

Minutes of the meeting of 12<sup>th</sup> September 2024

**Present:** James Cole (JC, Chair), Charlie Barr (CB), Alistair Fyfe (AF), Adrian Gilmour (AG), Julie Lloyd (JL), Ed Mills (EM), Hugh Pihlens (HP), Karen Salmon (KS), Helen Simpson (HS), Jehona Hansell (JH)

**On Teams:** Simon Lee-Smith (SLS)

**In attendance:** Jon Winstanley (JW, West Berkshire Council), Robert Coles (RC, Canal & River Trust), Stella Coulthurst (SC)

		ACTION POINT
1.	<p><b>Meeting opened</b> at 5.45pm and JC welcomed everyone.</p> <p>No <b>apologies</b> were received.</p>	
2.	<p><b>Actions from July meeting:</b></p> <p>Make an invitation to the Canal &amp; River Trust (CRT) to attend a TCSG meeting. Accordingly, we were joined by Robert Coles, Area Operations Manager, East Kennet &amp; Avon for CRT.</p> <p>Make an invitation to WBC Highways to advise on highways in relation to the Town Square proposal. Accordingly, we were joined Jon Winstanley, Service Director (Environment), West Berkshire Council.</p> <p>Other matters are included in the September discussion agenda.</p>	
3.	<p><b>Terms of Reference (ToR)</b></p> <p>JC invited JL to address the group and she referred to her July paper concerning the chair of TCSG and the conflict she saw in JC’s role as substitute for HS on TCSG and as Deputy Mayor on HTC. Drawing attention to an email of 10<sup>th</sup> September from JH to members of TCSG, JL noted its direction that “[a]fter the change of administration in the Council, [the TCSG] is now chaired and administered by Hungerford Town Council” (HTC). She concluded that there was no point in a discussion of the sort intended by her paper as it was now up to HTC.</p> <p>JC clarified in the discussion that TCSG was now “chaired and administered” by HTC but was not in the control nor a committee or subcommittee of HTC. It was not a change requested by HTC and both Newbury and Thatcham had the same change – these groups remained WBC committees – with unchanged remits to do what is best for, in our case, Hungerford.</p> <p>There was a discussion with regards to the chair having a casting vote (as they would in any WBC committee) at the end of which a proposal was made to adopt a casting vote in line with WBC.</p> <p><b>Proposed:</b> AG  <b>Seconded:</b> HP  <b>Resolution:</b> Passed by a majority, it was resolved that the chair should have a casting vote in the event of a tied vote by TCSG members.</p> <p>It was noted that all TCSG would report back to their various organisations, who may make their views known publicly, but no ratification was required by or from HTC.</p>	

	All members were requested to complete the ToR alternates (which draft document has been recirculated).	All members
4.	<p><b>Approval of the previous minutes</b></p> <p><b>Proposed:</b> HS  <b>Seconded:</b> CB  <b>Resolution:</b> Minutes of meeting held on Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> July 2024 were approved as a true record with 1 abstention.</p>	
5.	<p><b>Canal improvement</b></p> <p>RC joined the meeting at 6.10pm. He began by making a presentation (copy attached), providing an overview of the work of CRT – whose mission is to “make life better by water” – and addressing some Hungerford-specific issues. He demonstrated the considerable impact of the organisation, including benefits to other organisations, notwithstanding reduced, and reducing, Government grant funding.</p> <p>Hungerford’s special setting, surrounded by National Landscape (AONB), SSSIs &amp;c, was noted. Its notable waterway issues are bank and towpath repairs and damaged bridges (particularly expensive to repair), although a natural presentation and some imperfections were later noted as part of its charm. The weather challenges of 2024 (noted as being even worse than the infamous 2014) added to the damage.</p> <p>The shared TCSG / CRT ambition of making the waterway part of the town was hindered principally by a lack of money. It was noted that SusTrans was a good partner for CRT and this might provide a route for some s106 funds for the towpath.</p> <p>RC said, in response to a question, that very little work could be expected in and around Hungerford; mainly running repairs. Certainly, we could not expect any large-scale towpath repairs. In reference to the decades-long planned marina, RC noted that it did not have permission from Natural England. CRT had a statutory obligation to comment on any development proposed within 50 metres of a canal or other waterway.</p> <p>RC confirmed that there were no restrictions on CRT selling assets (in Hungerford, they own the wharf) if they were minded to and had done.</p> <p>CRT’s presentation had noted the contribution (of c.£60/night) that narrowboat moorings contribute to the local economy. The meeting observed that some moorings gave the appearance of being abused by over-stays (although some long stays are permitted).</p> <p>RC would connect TCSG with the CRT signage team with a view to additional signage (e.g. the town centre, the hotel boat and walks onto the marsh). Any questions TCSG has should be sent to RC, who will answer any operational queries and otherwise pass on to the wider organisation. He will also supply an organisation chart for us.</p>	RC  RC/SC
6.	<p><b>Proposed town square</b></p> <p>JW’s responsibilities cover transport/highways, waste management and delivery of an environment agenda.</p> <p>He confirmed that the area being considered for a town square was a public highway and ownership of the surface (if not necessarily ownership of the land underneath) as well as absolute control would rest with WBC unless and until the highway was stopped up, in respect of which there were no plans. It remained a highway, and was maintained as such, irrespective of any usage by vehicles/traffic. In the vernacular,</p>	

	<p>“once a highway, always a highway”. The “stopping up” process was handled by the Magistrates courts and would need to address any underground utilities, access for emergency vehicles and similar issues. As well as paying WBC’s fees, a third party would need to take on responsibility for its maintenance, and public rights over a previously public highway addressed. Addressing the hypothetical point stopping up, JW commented that in the event of a stopping up, the land may but would not necessarily revert according to historic rights.</p> <p>There was no “in principle” objection to a town square by WBC. Safety would be a key consideration, and its design would need to be “in keeping” and substantial enough for its purpose.</p> <p>The meeting considered the rights of Town &amp; Manor (T&amp;M). JL stated that T&amp;M owned the land in front of the Town Hall below Highways but conceded that, while the area is adopted highway, over-arching control and rights rested with WBC. The market charter does yield rights and T&amp;M charge stallholders for their pitches at the Wednesday market. JL raised the possibility of T&amp;M expanding its markets to more days and also charging for using café facilities (and the kebab van). WBC would have the ability to block a significant expansion of rights/usage if this impeded the highway. Licensing for new usage, such as a pavement café, would run through WBC / Public Protection Partnership (like the kebab van) in much the same way as it does now. It was noted that an easing of licensing restrictions, introduced during COVID, was overdue review. JW undertook to provide an update on current thinking.</p> <p>The meeting discussed next steps, first of which was drawings of the proposed town square. JH indicated that basic technical design drawings, sufficient for an initial stage, could be available for c.£3,000. JW made clear that there was no funding for this in his budget. HTC would review but its small reserve was mostly earmarked for other projects and financial pressures indicated that significant funds in the next financial year were unlikely. T&amp;M noted that there would be no funding from the charity as this was outside its remit. The committee agreed to explore local contributions.</p> <p>JH confirmed that, with public support (by way of a public consultation, whose cost can be modest), there were routes to gain project funding. JW agreed to send over the proposals for Newbury town centre by way of precedent.</p>	<p>JW</p> <p>JW</p>
7.	<p><b>Parking</b></p> <p>HS summarised HTC’s objection, made in formal submissions, to the proposed changes to the structure of charges (but not the increase in price) and noted HTC’s questions about the cost/benefit, commenting that there was wide concern across Hungerford. AG reinforced this from the retailer perspective. JW responded that this was a consultation to which officers would aggregate the response in informing a final political decision.</p>	
8.	<p><b>AOB</b></p> <p><b>Taking over redundant buildings</b> {held over from July}: The pressure to find more housing may result in changes to legislative provisions to take over redundant buildings. The Dodds building in the high street was noted. We needed to establish the facts.</p>	<p>JH</p>
9.	<p>Meeting ended 8.00pm</p> <p>Next Meeting on October 24<sup>th</sup> 6.15pm in Suite A The Courtyard.</p>	