

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW on Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Plans to take out a big loan to rejuvenate the shopping centre. Recorded 2nd April 2026

MARTIN WEBBER:

Hello and welcome to the West Kent Talking podcast. It's April 2026 and our topic this time is the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council plan to borrow a very large sum, up to £ 68 million to develop the Royal Victoria Place Shopping Centre.

The council says it wants to revitalise the town centre complex, but the plan is highly controversial. It involves demolishing a Victorian Friendly Society's hall, which currently houses a thriving snooker centre. The Tunbridge Wells Civic Society is trying to save the snooker hall by getting it listed by the government. And 5,000 people have now signed a petition asking for the snooker club to be allowed to continue where it is.

Well, I'm pleased to say I'm joined now by Justine Rutland, who's deputy leader of Tunbridge Wells borough Council, and in charge currently of the town's economic development. Hello, Justine. Good morning.

Q: Let's start, if you don't mind, by talking a little bit about you. How long have you been in the council?

A: 6.5 years.

Q: And what do you think motivated you to come onto the council? It's a very demanding role, very time consuming, involving lots of tricky issues. Why do you enjoy being a councillor?

A: Well, I wanted to make my home town a better place and by extension the borough, for my children mostly. And other residents.

Q: And how long have you known Tunbridge Wells? Well, I was born at Pembury and grew up locally, went to Sir John's Primary, then Bennett. I went away for university, lived in London, then came back to raise my own family here. So I've been back here since about 2004.

Q: So let's focus on the Royal Victoria Place Shopping Centre. It was built in 1992. The council always owned the land, but it was run by various private operators up to 2023. Why did the council decide to buy back the lease and so take full control of the RVP?

A: So we learnt that the previous owners were putting it on the market, and we felt we were best placed to buy it and to regenerate it because it's such an important economic asset for the town and the borough. We knew it had potential, and we are the people most invested in seeing it become a success.

Q: So how do you think you've been doing so far?

A: I would say it's been extremely positive so far. So in terms of footfall, we are now back to pre-COVID levels, 2019 levels. We're up 350,000 people a year on rolling, the capacity is quite high now. Let me just check. It is now at 94% as opposed to 81%. So we filled up an awful lot of the units. We brought in new brands. We've obviously got Primark in. We have some really great independent brands and they're continuing to come. We're seeing a lot of interest in the development and the new units that that will generate.

Q: I think a lot of residents and other councillors were generally supportive, probably overwhelmingly supportive of the council coming in to stabilise the shopping centre, to maintain the things that need to be maintained, like the car parks and so on, maybe lower some of the rents that were driving people away. General support for that. But what you're proposing now, taking out a big loan, is something very different. People are going to be surprised about that, aren't they?

A: Well, previous owners have also wanted to regenerate that particular area because unfortunately it doesn't perform as well as other parts of the scheme for various reasons. It's underutilised and obviously it's a prime centre site and could be housing a lot more economic activity than it is. And the fact is that the RVP project doesn't stop at bringing in more uses and more businesses. You know, we need to keep going because retailers, you know, they're very fussy. They're very particular. They, they, will want to see that their shops are successful and if they're not, they will go.

So kind of an onward investment in the shopping centre is really crucial to make sure that it keeps delivering, and that we not only attract new tenants, but we keep our existing tenants, and we make the town a better place to live. So it was always the idea that the shopping centre should become more of a mix of experiences.

So not just shopping. People don't just go out to shop anymore. We all know people do shop online, although the proportion of people shopping online, or rather the amount of shopping online, is slightly falling, and people definitely still want to go and buy things outside of their homes, but they also want leisure. They want to meet up with people.

And you'll see that already in RVP. You'll see that we have. For example, a beautiful play village for children called Kidsbury, that we have more cafes, we have community uses. The latest one is a pop-up space for people who are feeling lonely and want company. There's also a community space upstairs and that's used by everybody from the puppetry festival to the winter lanterns, to charities, to the mayor's toy appeal. And also obviously really busy programme of events, which many of them are free. We've got lots of Easter things going on.

So, the idea is to bring people into the centre, not just to, you know, buy some shampoo and a pair of trousers, whatever, but to have experiences and to have more of a day out, and then hopefully with a cinema, a day out slash afternoon out, an evening out, and to start to rebuild that nighttime economy that will then support, you know, all the hospitality venues that we have.

Q: But it is a high price, isn't it? Any investment, has to be calibrated really with with what it can achieve. And if you're going to borrow about £70 million, that's going to cost about £5 million year in interest and paying the loan back to pay it back over 30 years. You're obviously hoping that more revenue comes in, the car park fees go up, but £5 million a year, is that really feasible?

A: Well, we have plenty of data and economic studies to show that the scheme is viable - the recommended scheme is viable. With economic activity growing, the idea is that yes, it would pay for itself eventually.

(6:39)

Q: But how much revenue do you get in terms of rents from the shopping centre at the moment?

A: I can't share that, I'm afraid. It's all commercial.

Q: When the private operators were there, they said it was about £1 million a year. So, this is what some people can't, can't really fathom, but the scale of what you're hoping to bring in with this new investment can possibly be achieved. If you were only getting rents of £1 million a year at the moment, then how can you suddenly up that to 5 million a year with this new investment? It doesn't seem like it's practical. People are worried about it, aren't they? You can see that they're worried.

A: Well, of course, we will be looking continually at the data, and we will get updated economic impact assessments. And if we decide nearer the time that we need to make the big decisions, that it doesn't work anymore, then we won't proceed, but we are doing the groundwork to prepare for a scheme. We're confident, we've got operator interest, and we're confident that the wider benefits will make it a viable scheme.

Q: What about the precedent, because we know that the Conservative group was dominant in Tunbridge Wells for many years. They decided to have another big investment scheme to boost the town, setting up new council offices, a brand new West End quality theatre. It was all going to cost £100 million and a lot of money, about 10 million was spent getting nowhere, and residents and Conservatives teamed up the opposition and it all got called off. Aren't you worried of a repeat this time? Because this sort of project, you're proposing, is pretty close to the scale of what was being proposed before and which was rejected.

A: Well, I will reject your £2 million inflation up to £70 million. We do not yet have final prices. This is a very different scheme to Calvary Square. I think everyone has looked on at that scheme and is determined not to make the same mistakes. So 1st of all, when people were asked what they wanted many years ago, very few people said a theatre, I think it may have been 2%, whereas a cinema is the most requested leisure amenity that our engagement over 2 years has found, and that holds true over most age groups. It's definitely

the amenity that young people want. We've done a separate survey. What was a restaurant that they wanted? It was Nando's. What was a shop? It was Primark. What was the leisure amenity? It was a cinema. So this is a scheme that will deliver what people are asking for.

Q: But a lot of people would say, I don't go to the cinema anymore. I stay at home and I watch Netflix and I watch films in the comfort of my own home. Isn't a cinema something of the past rather than the future?

A: Well, it really isn't, actually, if you look at cinema as an industry, it has some ups and downs, obviously, writer strikes, and so on, but there's a lot of thriving cinema chains out there.

Q: And the Trinity Theatre, I've spoken to them and people, volunteers there are concerned, very concerned, that if you're encouraging people to go to a new cinema, then fewer people will go to the Trinity Cinema.

A: We understand their concerns, and Trinity have been engaged through this process. The idea about a boutique cinema is that it sits between a multiplex offer, like the Odeon and Trinity, which is not a cinema, but it does show films. I mean, I would argue that Trinity is a much greater amenity than a cinema. It does so much more. The idea is not to compete with either of those, but to offer something new.

Q: So you think Trinity revenue won't go down if you set up another 3 screen cinema nearby? A: Well, I couldn't possibly speculate on that.

Q: The one thing they're (Trinity) concerned about is that the cinema offerings are relatively profitable for them, and they do fund lots of community outreach and events because the borough council no longer funds Trinity at all. And would you be able to, if revenue for the Trinity falls, would you step in and help Trinity fund those community projects in the future?A: Well, I couldn't say because by the time this project is built, there will be a new council. And I couldn't possibly project what that council would do. But I do think, Tunbridge Wells, a studies show, they're unprovided for, with cinema screens per head of population. I really think in a town like Tunbridge Wells that's growing, there's room for Trinity and a boutique cinema and a multiplex, absolutely no reason why they cannot all happily coexist.

Q: So at the moment, the top of town, if you like, is much more retail during the day, and it's the Pantiles area, the High Street, which thrives in the evening. Isn't that always going to be the case? There's just more character, isn't there at the Pantiles?

A: There's a lot of character at the Pantiles, and everyone loves the Pantiles, of course, but, you know, inaction is not a strategy. I don't think we can just stand by and not invest in the top of the town. Everywhere is important. It's been neglected for many years. And it's important that there's new attractions built and that the shopping centre moves with the times.

Q: Let's look at the heritage angle. The council says it wants to preserve just the front facade of the Friendly Societies' building. The Tunbridge Wells Civic Society has said it was surprised that you want to demolish the building. It's come out and it's put a proposal to have the whole building listed. Aren't the Civic Society, right, this is a part of Tunbridge Wells heritage, isn't it?

A: It is a part of Tunbridge Wells heritage, and that's why the scheme seeks to enhance the frontage and repair it and restore it, and also, enliven it by opening up the windows and improving the Camden Road Street.

Q: But the inside of it will be knocked down, won't it? All that Victorian coving and architrave and everything will go. It'll be rubble.

A: The current scheme, yes, does involve the demolition of the interior of the Friendly Society building. It's not listed. It's obviously significant at planning and the process will, the processes, I should say now, will prevail.

Q: So, I mean, the planning is a legal process, but it's also up to individual councillors to decide what they think is valuable of the heritage of Tunbridge Wells. The Friendly Societies Hall was part of the history of the town. From voluntary donations, all the different Friendly Societies got together to build

this hall. Some old buildings just are unusable, but this is still in use, isn't it? So why, why demolish it? The civic society says it's in use. You can keep it, and you could just build a cinema around it.

A: It's not as easy as that. It's quite a constrained site. I don't really want to get too much into it. All I can say is we have looked at every option. We'll keep looking at every option and we'll keep talking to the civic society as we have done from the outset.

Q: So they said they were surprised when you said a few months ago you wanted to demolish the building. Is that the case from your point of view or do you think it was clear a while ago that the building was going to go?

A: Well, the designs have been evolving. I can't speak on behalf of the Civic Society.

Q: What about the look of the cinema on that corner? I mean, obviously we don't actually know it's going to look, we've seen artist impressions, but some people have said, well, it looks as if it's come down from space. It's a very modern design in an area of Camden Road and Calverley Road that is still quite traditional Victorian type building. Was it a deliberate effort to put something new and modern looking on that corner?

A: Well, I would suggest that anyone who's interested in the architecture really looks closely at that building because it's got some really beautiful brick decoration, brick slips, taking inspiration from Tunbridge ware and so on. There's been an awful lot of thought given to the look of the building. I think it is rather lovely. I think artist impressions, especially, you know, on a phone, don't really give the full picture of, of how much nicer it will look. I think it's important that we look at what is there already, which is buildings which are very dilapidated and unuseable.

Q: But that corner, which did have White Stuff on it a few years ago, which has obviously not been leased out, and therefore it looks pretty grotty now. But that's perfectly useable rental accommodation - if there is indeed demand for shops - and I think there were flats above it. You could just refurbish it (that corner) at a fraction of the cost presumably and get it into use?

A: Potentially, it could be refurbished, but it won't deliver the benefits that a cinema and additional leisure and F and B (food and beverage outlets) would provide.

Q: And what about the snooker hall? Because the snooker hall is thriving. It's got 100s of members, a petition has been signed by 5,000 people saying, please leave it as it is. What do you say to them?

A: I'd say we have had a meeting with the snooker club, but I'm not really not able to get into it more than that.

Q: Okay, so you've been talking to them. Your suggestion seems to be to find somewhere else for them in the town, but would somewhere else give the same space at the same rent?

A: Well, that's something we'd need to look into. I mean, I think the ideal would be if the snooker club could be in somewhere better than they are. There's no reason why we couldn't help them into somewhere that was, you know, very accessible with potentially more space, potentially cheaper bills.

Q: Okay. And the actual building, looking at the historical element and where, so you say, have you been in there to see how it's being used? No.

Q: Are you planning to go in and have a look? I can't say very much about that. I think really, I mean, the kind of key point is that our design team did meet with the owner of the snooker club at the last engagement.

Q: Okay, so the, basically, the discussions with the snooker people will go on and, I mean, it is a leisure activity in Tunbridge Wells, which is what you want. Do you think some compromise can be reached?

A: Well, I think we'd love to have snooker continue in Tunbridge Wells. There's absolutely no reason why it cannot continue.

Q: So, Justine, this cinema operator obviously thinks it can make a profit, make a business out of a 3 screen cinema. Why do they think they can do it? Has it worked in other places?

A: Yes, I mean, lots of town centres have cinemas and we think it's really important to have a cinema in the town centre. Partly because we have so many, you know, families. We've got a lot of young people. We also

have a lot of people who don't have cars. So, in parts of the town centre, not even half of people own cars, which really limits them from getting out to the multiplexes or further afield. So, one of the ideas is to ensure that young people can be independent, they can go to the cinema independently. They can also turn up at the cinema in the way that I might have done when I was young and I went to the cinema round the corner and thought, oh, what's on? And be able to go and do things spontaneously, which you can't always do at other venues.

Q: And people are still slightly vague as to what the cinema is going to be like. How is it going to be priced compared to the out of town cinema? Is it going to be more expensive?

A: Yep, so this has been interrogated. And actually, if you look at it, the prices are fairly similar. I don't think anybody will feel outpriced.

Q: And you'll be able to get drink and food at your seat. Is that the idea?

A: That's the concept of a boutique cinema, so it will be offering something different.

Q: And is there anywhere else where you can point to where this concept, where the operator is already operating and is making a success of this?

A: I think that would give away the operators that we're speaking to.

Q: And you are not permitted to do that?

A: Not at the moment.

Q: You've obviously still got to make the case to lots of councillors. Quite a few have come out and said that they are very sceptical that the scheme is a good thing. What are you saying to them now to reassure them?

A: Well, what I would say to them is, that actually isn't my experience, quite frankly, most councillors - you'll have to ask them yourself, of course - but I feel they are broadly supportive. We all have things that needs to be, you know, firmed up, because we're not, you know, daft, but we will be looking at everything very critically so that we get good value for taxpayers, and of course, we ourselves are taxpayers and we are residents too. So it's really important that this scheme is successful. But I think there's every reason to be optimistic. At the moment, it serves quite a sort of town demographic, but there's a whole sector of people who really should be, or we would like them to come and shop in Tunbridge Wells, and if we improve the shopping makes, they will come, and that is already happening. And of course, if it's better here, then there's less reason for people to go to, say, Bluewater or London or Brighton.

Q: You have also got the transport issue, haven't you? From where we are in Southborough, it's quite often quicker to get to Bluewater than it is to the middle of Tunbridge Wells because the A26 is completely stationary. Have you managed to sort that out?

A: I'd love to sort out the transport problems around Tunbridge Wells, it's not exactly in my remit right now, but of course it's a consideration. Of course, we want to make it easy and quick for people to come into Tunbridge Wells and to get about the borough more generally.

Q: What if some councillors said, well, look, we understand the logic of regeneration. We need to do something, but why not do, you know, say a halfway house whereby that food area, the palm court area that is, you know, completely empty, why not put a cinema in there? Why not put a few more retail units in there, halve the amount you have to borrow? So you are regenerating, you're not having empty space, but essentially you can leave the Victorian units, retail units, and just do them up. Would that be a lot cheaper, more measured option, particularly in this economic climate, with the war going on in the Middle East.

A: It's not, I'm afraid, optimal for a cinema operator, the ceilings are not high enough down there, and we also know there's a demand for leisure space and things like, it's called, competitive socialising, so that's things like mini golf and darts and so on. So we are reserving that area for that sort of activity. I would also like to say I would reassure councillors by letting them know, although they do know already, that the latest engagement did find that 72.6 people in the engagement supported.

Q: You mean percentage? A: percentage. Yes, they either support or support strongly.

Q: But that was out of what, 200 people who filled it in? Yes, because we've been talking to people for 2 years, so it's quite normal for the respondent levels to go down.

Q: But some people would say that 200 people isn't many, particularly when you've got this petition where the snooker club have persuaded 5,000 people to sign to say, don't do the scheme as it stands.

A: I'm afraid I didn't have the numbers of people who responded to the latest engagement, but we can provide those to you.

Q: So you're confident that 1000s of people in Tunbridge Wells do you do you want the council to build this cinema? And the financial risk is that held by the council? I mean, if the building is left and the operator can't make money and leaves, who puts the bill? I mean, is there any insurance, any compensation for council taxpayers?

A: I can't answer that at the present time. Okay. I'm afraid I don't know that.

Q: We've just finished the final consultation. That didn't actually last that long. It was only a week and a bit, wasn't it?

A: Yes, it was really an engagement, not a consultation. So it was a chance for the public to see the latest designs.

Q: Okay, so what's the timetable going forward?

A: Well, we're hoping to bring forward a planning application this summer. And we're hoping to make the first decisions in October.

Q: So you'll get all the detailed plans. There'll be a planning decision from the Tunbridge Wells borough Council Planning Committee, and that'll be on planning grounds only.

A: Correct.

Q: That will take into account the heritage issues, I presume.

A: Yes.

Q: But then the council, at the end of all that, even when that that's all been done, it's been approved by planning, the council will then have to get together and say, this is good value for council tax players.

A: That's right.

Q: So that will happen when?

A: October at the earliest.