

# TENTERDEN TOWN COUNCIL – EXTERNAL COMMITTEE

## CINEMA FOCUS GROUP

### MINUTES OF A MEETING ON 30<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2021

**Present:** Alan Bates, Colin Campbell, Angela Chivers, Tom Evans (Chair), Cllr. Sue Ferguson, Claire Gilbert (Deputy Town Clerk), Paul Hale, Chris Head, Elaine Mahoney, Keli Nolan-Lyons (Town Centre & Tourism Co-ordinator), Carol Parkin, Bob Somerscales and Gill Topley.

- 1. Videoconference Protocol.** Tom Evans reminded the Focus Group on the protocol for the meeting.
- 2. Apologies.** Cllr. Mike Carter, Andrew Laughland, Barbara Lawrence, Nic Phillips and Fran Sharp. Tom Evans reported that Fran Sharp would no longer be attending the Focus Group and Claire Gilbert reported that Wilfred Watters had also left.
- 3. Welcome to New Members.** Tom Evans welcomed Keli Nolan-Lyons who is the Town Council's Town Centre & Tourism Co-ordinator.
- 4. Briefing and Presentation from Tenterden Cinema Ltd (TCL).**

Tom updated the Group on where we had got to in May 2020 with a presentation that covered:

- Pebbles Building Feasibility Study Design and Cost Analysis;
- Operator Interest;
- TTC Relations and Finance Options;
- Community Interest Company Opportunities – opportunity for CIC with guarantee;
- TCL Conclusions and Recommendations.

It was agreed that a copy of Tom's presentation would be circulated to all members of the focus group.

### **5. Site Options Review.**

- 5.1 The Pebbles. Alan Bates reported that a lot of money was being spent on the glazed link and to partially submerge the auditorium, so had thought of removing the glazed link entirely and moving the auditorium to as close as possible to the Pebbles and not submerge it. It was felt that the 150 seats for catering was too high and the impact of this high number attracts added costs in kitchen capacity etc. Alan thought that the planners might accept a higher roof line on the auditorium if it was the same level as the White Lion's kitchen. Claire Gilbert reported that Heritage England when they visited the Pebbles indicated that they were in agreement with removing the current extension to make the historic building more appealing, so it could be difficult to obtain approval for the auditorium to be up close to the building.

Keli Nolan-Lyons suggested investigating Central Garage as a possibility for the cinema itself with a link to the Pebbles or White Lion for catering. Tom responded that cinema providers rely on income coming from catering

which amounts to around 50%, therefore the idea of the Pebbles or White Lion providing catering might not be viable. Tom reported that whichever project we go for, we need to keep capital expenditure down. Paul Hale reported that we are going to have to work closely with the potential operators who will produce their own business plan which will then of course feed into Tenterden Cinema Ltd's business plan.

It was agreed that we need to keep open mind about The Pebbles for now.

- 5.2 Possible Alternatives. Tom reported that two different options are the greenfield (or brownfield) sites and other areas that can be developed. Gill Topley asked whether something could be done in combination with the Leisure Centre. Tom reported that he had discussed this with Cllr. Justin Nelson who is Chair of the Tenterden Leisure Centre Trust (TLCT); the Leisure Centre is about to be reroofed and ABC are looking at another possible provider instead of SERCO. Justin indicated that he would be happy to liaise with the trustees on the new leisure centre plans and the idea of incorporating a cinema. Keli reported that she felt it was a good time to have discussions with TLCT and ABC on this as it would work out very well with an extension on the Leisure Centre.

Tom reported that he had been introduced by Andrew Laughland to Gary Bourne from Stanhope Plc, who operates from Elwick Place. Gary was behind the build in conjunction and is happy to make any connections to the senior officers at ABC, developers, operators or high net worth people in the Borough with an interest in cinema. Chris reported that with a boutique style cinema which is what the focus group are aiming for, you go there for the atmosphere and Chris did not feel this would fit in with the Leisure Centre. Keli commented that the cinema experience will be for toddlers up to teens as well, so it is open to a wide range of age groups and not just the evening audiences. Keli felt that with more families coming into the community, we need to ensure we capture them as well so there needs to be a broad range. Bob Somerscales enquired whether the Leisure Centre car park land would be used for the cinema or will it be within the existing footprint; Tom reported that this was unclear at present, but if it is within the existing shell it would cost less.

Paul Hale reported that the way to the High Street is changing with the new developments at Church View and Three Fields; the Leisure Centre used to get lost, but it is becoming a place of greater footfall. Paul felt the whole area could come up in due course and there might be more of a sense of an entertainment venue being on the site. Gill asked whether the cinema could be included in the Recreation Ground re-ordering plans; Cllr. Sue Ferguson reported that this is a non-starter, and the planning application is soon to be submitted for the reordering.

Sue asked whether St Mildred's Church could be thought of. Tom reported that he had contacted Lindsay Hammond to brief him on where the Group were at and shared the briefing information. Lindsay would strongly welcome dialogue to see if there is something we can do together, but not using the church itself. The church is currently debating the future of the Glebe Hall site and what they should do with St Mildred's Church Hall. The suggestion was subject to the focus group's view and it was agreed that we should enter a dialogue with the Estate Project Manager. Sue suggested entering discussions with the Tenterden Club as well given that St Mildred's Church hall is quite small.

Elaine Mahoney asked whether other venues could be explored as there are more empty premises on the high street. Sue reported that there are no empty shops big enough in the Town to house a cinema. Highbury Hall was suggested as an alternative and Alan reported that it is owned by a charitable trust and is a possibility, so this will be kept on the table. Any plans for Highbury Hall could still incorporate a community hall space, although this would cost a lot more.

## **6. Future Strategy and Next Actions.**

6.1 Operator Relations. Tom reported that we must have operator support to keep this project going. Gary Bourne did say to Tom that there might be other larger operators interested in Tenterden and others in Ashford might be interested in a 'Tenterden outpost'. Paul reported that Tenterden will become more of an entertainment centre than shopping experience. Given the changes on the high street, it may be an idea to go back to those who were interested initially. Paul commented that the currently interested operators look like they are going to survive the pandemic which is a really positive sign, but we should look to others as well in the future.

6.2 Development Actions: Site, Design and CIC. Tom reported that we need to start talking actively to the operators to get their feedback now and Keli and Paul agreed to liaise. Paul reported that there is a potential in a new build to incorporate an arts centre with a gallery or performance space as well.

Keli reported that she had attended a meeting with ABC which covered the Government's 'welcome back fund' and the idea had been suggested that with the empty shops on the high street, try and put artists in there on a temporary basis; the funding can last up to a year. Colin commented that he was not keen on using this for a temporary cinema, but it was a good use for vacant shops with the artists.

Colin reported that we need to prioritise what we are doing to find a site and options on the accommodation. We need to keep the ball rolling on all options and focus on the main two options; Colin did not feel the Leisure Centre is a possibility and should be at the bottom of the list. The Pebbles is the second from the bottom of the list given the rent and listed building issues. Highbury Hall and the Glebe Hall are the two front runners and should be pursued.

Carol Parkin asked that we very strongly pursue St Mildred's Church Hall and Tenterden Club as well. Tom sees the process of speaking to Church first with Highbury Hall second.

Tom reported that a Community Interest Company (CIC) by limited guarantee would be the best option and it seems a good time to set this up. Angela Chivers agreed and suggested keeping both the CIC and TCL going for now. Tom asked for the focus group's support on the following options, and all were agreed:

- form a CIC limited by guarantee (Tenterden Neighbourhood Cinema CIC);
- talking to St. Mildred's Church;
- moving forward with talking with operators including Keli, Andrew and Paul Hale.

It was also agreed to keep The Pebbles scheme on the table, but not act on it at present as this would involve expense which is not sensible at present.

- 6.3 Constituency Building and Public Relations. Tom thanked Carol and Sue for getting conversations started about the project in the Town on Instagram, Facebook, etc. The website has gone into abeyance for now. Keli suggested that Sue and Carol keep posting on the Instagram page with interesting information, even if not local. It will help to build momentum which would then lead onto support for the project as a whole. Sue and Carol have been working a lot of harder on this and there are 642 followers now on Instagram; Facebook has 1,600 followers. Carol reported that it had been hard to push this forward given we do not have a confirmed venue yet but will look into ideas of posting more regularly.
7. **Any Other Business**. Keli reported that the Sinden Theatre are looking at running a children's cinema, but only running DVDs. There is quite a positive link with the Sinden which we are keen to keep going.
8. **Date of Next Meeting**. Monday, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2021 at 6pm.