

Latest twist in the 22-year town centre grot spot saga

Mary Harris

The ABC cinema site in Tunbridge Wells hit the headlines again after political party The Alliance championed the temporary use of the land for the community.

As we [reported last week](#), The Alliance approached the potential new owner about using the town's biggest grot spot until any construction starts.

The busy cinema shut down in 1999 and the site has seen a seemingly never-ending saga of plans, appeals, an inquiry, sales, a fire sale and purchases.

READ MORE: [Tunbridge Wells ABC cinema site could be used for pop-up markets and events](#)

It has also been a political stick with which parties have beaten each other, particularly as borough elections loom.

Many of the shops on either side of the entrance struggled on while the former multiplex crumbled and filled with pigeons and rats.

The decaying buildings were finally demolished in 2014 after legal pressure by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and the developer was forced to put up £17,000 hoardings, which still stand today.

Despite more than a handful of owners and grand schemes including flats, cinemas, restaurants and even a medical centre and private library, some with planning permission, no company has so much as laid a first brick for construction.

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Retirement Villages Group has an option to buy the site, if it can secure permission for its plans, which are yet to be submitted to the Town Hall. They are expected to be for 180 flats, a cafe, restaurant and health facilities.

Following a request by The Alliance, which has six councillors on Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Retirement Villages Group told Kent Live on February 3 it was "considering meanwhile uses with the current owners".

The public has been submitting ideas for the site via The Alliance's website and they include:

- A green space: with a wildflower area, benches, mobile coffee vans, water feature, flower beds
- A market place: for a regular weekly Saturday market with smaller scale ones mid-week
- Smooth space: for roller skating
- Drive-in open air cinema
- Hard-standing for pop-up events, markets and exhibitions
- Open space with container units for retail and catering, talks, puppet shows, charity promotion

The Alliance wants Tunbridge Wells Borough Council to have a policy for "meanwhile use" which it claims could avoid months or even the years of inaction and non-use of sites, as seen with the ABC cinema.

Alliance leader David Hayward told Kent Live this week: "If we had had a policy like this years ago we might have enjoyed over 20 years of really good community use of the ABC site."

The party wants this idea formalised in the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan.

He said fellow Alliance member Matthew Sankey had been "leading the charge" and researching meanwhile use with other authorities.

"He has discovered that other councils have 'meanwhile use' as part of their local plan and can insist on it at planning application stage. There is also then the possibility of it being part of any Section 106 (applicant payment) contribution," said Mr Hayward.

And he was encouraged by the response from Retirement Village Group, which he personally had contacted about meanwhile use.

"We are really excited with our continued positive contribution to the borough. It should have happened years ago in truth," said Mr Hayward.



The ABC Cinema opened as the Ritz Cinema in 1934 (Image: Phantom of the flicks (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/31016052@N05/>))

The Alliance is putting a motion at full council next Wednesday (February 23) which urges the council to create a "robust" meanwhile use planning policy for major developments in the Local Plan and the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Plan.

Retirement Village Group, which is owned by global asset manager AXA IM Real Assets, builds complexes for older people across the country, with South Chailey in East [Sussex](#) being the closest to Tunbridge Wells.

There has been a long line of owners, developers and plans, some with permission, since the cinema closed.

The Hastings to London railway line runs through a Network Rail tunnel under the north east edge of the site.

The 1.4 acre ABC site had gone back on the market in October 2020 with a £17 million price tag.

Elysian Residencies had been going to build and manage an £80 million scheme of retirement flats, a cinema and some retail on the site, after bursting on to the scene in Tunbridge Wells in 2019. But it has now moved its vision up to St John's Road.

Before that, development manager Altitude Real Estate arrived on the scene in 2019 with a £90 million redevelopment for the site.

It had represented holding company Prime Finance (Tunbridge Wells) in the purchase of the site three years earlier.

But Altitude was hit by more than a year of delays and work on shops, restaurants, 99 flats, offices or a GP surgery and a cinema was due to start in 2019 but was shelved.

Long history

The site had been owned by The Carlyle Group, in a joint venture with developer Bellhouse Joseph of London, which had reportedly paid around £10 million.

Before that Rydell Properties, of Cork, Ireland had bought the site in 2005 but in 2011 was forced to sell by the Irish banks.



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Rydell Properties had extended the site and bought Pizza Hut, Gamleys and the Gourmet Burger Kitchen and Clanricarde Hous

Prior to that it had been owned by Tunbridge Wells firm GLN (Copenhagen) Southern Ltd Developments which had bought the site in 2001 and had £20million plans for a nightclub, shops and apartments on the plot which straddles Mount Pleasant and Church Road.

It won at a planning inquiry after the borough council had refused the plans because they had not included a cinema.