

# Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society

## Comments on

### TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMUNITY PLAN CONSULTATION DRAFT, May-June 2006

**Introduction.** We see little point in commenting on the Community Plan document *per se*, since it seems to us to be concerned with very general statements of intent and goodwill, with which no one could or should disagree.

What is **much more important however** to us, is the *specific* What, How and When – i.e. the individual nine Action Plans themselves; and it is on these that we have focussed our Comments, which are confined to four of the nine Action Plans.

Please note that we do not propose to answer the specific questionnaire, which seems to us to be designed to discourage/ deter/ suppress response/comment and pat the drafters of the Community Plan on the back. To respond to it, would therefore seem to be counter-productive to what should be its aims.

## COMMENT ON THE ACTION PLANS

### SECTION 1. SAFEGUARDING OUR ENVIRONMENT

#### **Priority 1: Protecting and enhancing the natural environment and landscape**

1.1.1 This topic – supporting Farmers’ Markets – does not fit very comfortably in this section (Priority 1) which is to do with protecting and enhancing the natural environment and landscape. It is however difficult to see where else to put it, unless one creates a new ‘Priority’, or places it in a totally different section such as No. 2 ‘Maintaining a thriving economy’ (Is this a cross-cutting issue between Sections and Priorities?).

1.1.2 What exactly does ‘a sustainability appraisal’ mean in plain English?

1.1.3 What exactly does ‘a Local Biodiversity Action Plan’ mean *or entail* in plain English?

1.1.6 An *additional* although relatively minor Action Plan Point, but *relevant to this theme*, should be:

Encourage better and greater use of the network of *footpaths*, in both town and country, by better signage and by active promotion of the network.

#### **Priority 2: Conserving and improving the built environment**

1.2.1 Surely RTWCS and the Town Forum deserve recognition as Partner organisations *by specific name*, rather than being lumped together as ‘Local Amenity Groups’.

1.2.2 ‘A clean neighbourhood initiative’ is **much, much more** than just fly-tipping, graffiti and abandoned vehicles. It is the elimination of ‘grot spots’ (houses, buildings in disrepair; lampposts, signs and street furniture never repainted, or at least not for 10 years); reduction of sign clutter; unacceptable levels of air or noise pollution; general deterioration of areas, or sites within areas, such as the Woodbury Park cemetery, *for all of which there should be a specific Action Plan Point*. It requires a pro-active rather than reactive approach – the provision of immediately- reactive ‘hot-lines’ and ideally a ‘one-number’ hot-line, together with a dedicated email

address, as is implicit in the recent Government national advertising campaign 'connect to your council'. We would therefore suggest the addition of the following Action Plan Points under 2.2.2:

- Set up ***and publicise*** a dedicated HotLine and email address
- Use legal powers to tackle 'grot-spots' (eg Section 215, T &CP Act, 1988)
- Examine opportunities for compulsory purchase
- Inspect all street furniture for defects/deterioration (and correct) twice a year
- Ensure all road signs are cleaned (and renovated if necessary) twice a year
- ***Actively*** encourage the Police to take action against air/ noise pollution (This is a cross-cutting issue with Section 1. Priority 3)

1.2.3 *Correction*: 30 properties are being 'opened' in 2006 in TW for Heritage Open Days.

We would propose other Action Plan Points under Section 1, Priority 2:

1.2.7 Draw up a Register/ Schedule of ***unlisted*** buildings/monuments/ locations in the Borough which deserve preservation/conservation, so that they are *automatically* taken into consideration in relation to any Planning Application; and they are *automatically* considered for preservation/conservation, if circumstances dictate.

1.2.8 Take responsibility for the *general* condition of derelict (or becoming derelict) areas, including responsibility for compulsory purchase if necessary, and Section 215 orders; but also encourage the involvement of local groups, particularly amenity societies and residents' associations, in the restoration and conservation of derelict areas, particularly cemeteries (eg. Woodbury Park)

### **Priority 3 Reducing the local contribution to climate change etc.**

We would add the following Action Plan Points to this Priority:

- 1.3.6 Legislate that all new developments must have water-meters
- 1.3.7 Legislate that all water supplied to construction sites is metered
- 1.3.8 Introduce a special scheme for heavy users of glass (particularly bottles) ie pubs and restaurants
- 1.3.9 ***Actively*** encourage Police to take action against air/noise pollution (This is a cross-cutting issue with Section 1.2.2)

## **SECTION 2: MAINTAINING A THRIVING AND DIVERSE LOCAL ECONOMY**

### **Priority 1 Encouraging the continued development of a wide range of enterprises in the Borough**

2.1.1 We are somewhat surprised that both the Town Forum and the Civic Society are not considered as Partners in this, since we believe that we have a great deal to offer, by way of our other inputs in the Plan.

Under 2.1, we don't think that 2.1.4 is sufficiently precise (ie it is too woolly) and we would *add to it, or present as a separate Action Plan Point*:

- Develop ***and promote*** an Incentives Package to encourage new business (eg rate-free 'holidays', settling-in allowances, personal advisers, schools and housing advisers etc.)

We also think that a number of issues which could be put under 2.1, are missing from this whole Section, and we think that ideally (since a number of them are cross-

cutting issues) they would probably be better suited, listed under a new and separate Priority heading, **Enhancing the Environment within which business can thrive.** This Priority, which is a cross-cutting one with other Sections and Priorities, contains both shorter and long-term issues, which extend *way beyond* the Year 2011. But if they are not taken on board now, they will remain officially 'invisible' and therefore not taken into account in any planning in the period up to 2011. These issues are to do essentially with Traffic and Parking. Neither issue could possibly be solved by 2011 and therefore there is a strong temptation to leave them out of a short-term five-year Community Plan. But they must be taken on board, even if they are not to be solved until 2030, since if they are not recognised and accepted as existing now, how can they ultimately be solved?

So we would propose as Action Points, under this or another Priority Action heading:

- 2.1.7 Seek to *alleviate* car-parking problems of TW through 2.1.9 below, residents' parking and park-and-ride schemes.
- 2.1.8 Lobby and prepare **long-term** plans for an A26 By-Pass plan of Tunbridge Wells (2006-2030) – This is the only long-term solution to the problem caused by allowing long-distance traffic for Eastbourne, Lewes, Brighton and the South Coast to drive through the centre of Southborough and TW on the existing A26. It was first proposed by the then Civic Association in 1943.
- 2.1.9 Lobby and prepare long-term plans for a car-park under the Common (*vide* Hyde Park in London in the early 1960's) (2006-2030)

## **Priority 2 Enhance the attractiveness of towns and other centres in the borough as...etc.**

Under 2.2.4, we think that the Plan is missing a number of real opportunities. As we understand it, Tourism brought in about 4 million visitors and £125 million in 2000 and it is now estimated that this has increased to £180 million. This divides broadly into 98% day visitors and 2% overnight visitors: but revenue divides 70% day visitors and 30% overnight visitors. These figures suggest that there would be a much better return in encouraging overnight visitors, and so we would propose a number of *inter-related* additional Action Points which would replace the existing 2.10:

- 2.2.10 A positive drive to increase the number of *overnight* visitors
- 2.2.11 Encourage the provision of more 3\* hotels in TW, as centrally as possible (The 4\* and 5\* star is already adequately provided for)
- 2.2.12 Market TW as a *small conference* venue (i.e. up to 200 people) (The average Conference is two days/*three nights*).
- 2.2.13 Give hotels incentives to provide conference facilities
- 2.2.14 Encourage the establishment of language schools (50-100 pupils each) in TW – the venue and location are atmospherically right – and the average attendee stays 28 days – more than ten times more than the average overnighter – and spends in 28 days 10 times more than the average overnighter.

We would add as Action Plan Points (as RTWCS, we speak only of TW):

- 2.2 Eliminate 'grot-spots' (a cross-cutting issue, see Section 1.2.2)

- 2.3 Seek to restore Happy Valley, High Rocks and The Common to their former glory as *significant* attractions for visitors to TW.
- 2.4 Seek to develop ***and promote*** at least 8 Heritage Trails in TW
- 2.5 Seek to celebrate appropriately in 2009, the centenary of the Royal style being granted to the Town by King Edward VII.

### **Priority 3 Support the sustainable economic development of the more rural areas**

No comment

### **SECTION 3 ENABLING PEOPLE TO TAKE PART IN AND ENJOY LEISURE ACTIVITIES**

No comment

### **SECTION 4 INCREASING COMMUNITY SAFETY AND REDUCING THE FEAR OF CRIME**

No comment

### **SECTION 5 TRANSPORT – GETTING AROUND THE BOROUGH**

#### **Priority 1 Reduce traffic congestion and pollution etc.**

This is a cross-cutting issue which ties in with Priorities 2.1 and 2.2 (see above). We would repeat the same Action Plan Points:

- 5.1.12 Seek to *alleviate* car-parking problems of TW through 5.1.14 below, residents' parking and park-and-ride schemes.
- 5.1.13 Lobby and prepare ***long-term*** plans for an A26 By-Pass plan of Tunbridge Wells (2006-2030) – This is the only ***long-term*** solution to the problem caused by allowing long-distance traffic for Eastbourne, Lewes, Brighton and the South Coast to drive through the centre of Southborough and TW on the existing A26. It was first proposed by the then Civic Association in 1943.
- 5.1.14 Lobby and prepare long-term plans for a car-park under the Common (*vide* Hyde Park in London in the early 1960's) (2006-2030)

We would also propose as additional Action Plan Points:

- 5.1.15 Positively encourage 'walking bus' schemes for schools to reduce parents' use of cars at rush-hour.
- 5.1.16 Monitor and control the 'Bus-gate' at Fiveways to prevent abuse.

#### **Priority 2 Pursue improvements to key transport routes etc.**

This is a cross-cutting issue which ties in with Priorities 2.1, 2.2 and 5.1. We are very surprised that no reference is made in the draft Action Plan to the issue of an A26 by-pass of TW. The A26 problem is in our view worse than the A21 problem, since it is a 10 hour-a-day problem where the A21 is *at most* a 4 hour-a-day problem. So we would repeat the Action Plan Point from 2.1.8 and 5.1.13

- 5.2.1 Lobby and prepare ***long-term*** plans for an A26 By-Pass of Tunbridge Wells (2006-2030) – This is the only ***long-term*** solution to the problem caused by allowing *long-distance* traffic for Eastbourne, Lewes, Brighton and the South Coast to drive through the centre of Southborough and TW on the existing A26. It was first proposed by the then Civic Association in 1943

**Priority 3 Improve travel safety etc.**

No comment

**SECTION 6. MEETING THE NEED FOR HOUSING**

A glaring omission in our view is any reference to a fundamental issue underlying both existing and future development. The infrastructure of TW – in terms of utilities: water, gas, electricity, sewers, drains - is broadly 100+ years old and although repaired frequently, *has never been renewed* (which, it must be admitted, is true for virtually every town in the UK.) On a wider scale, infrastructure also includes facilities for education, health provision and transport (both road and, not to be forgotten, rail).

Before planning further housing development, and despite pressure from central government, we believe it would be prudent for TWBC to carry out a fundamental assessment of the existing infrastructure to establish whether it is capable of taking further development, *and if so, how much*. Proceeding without such an assessment could be compared with the lack of foresight exercised by some countries on the issue of global warming, when by ignoring the issue, it may become too late to correct one's mistakes.

So we would suggest an additional Priority – **Assessing the current infrastructure to establish how far it is capable of meeting both current and future demands on it.**

**SECTION 7. PROMOTING HEALTH AND IMPROVING WELL-BEING**

No comment.

**SECTION 8. ENCOURAGING SOCIAL INCLUSION BY SUPPORTING INDEPENDENCE**

No comment.

**SECTION 9. LEARNING FOR ALL**

No comment.