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## ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS TOWN FORUM

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Roy Bullock M.B.E.  
Council Leader  
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council  
Town Hall  
Royal Tunbridge Wells  
Kent  
TN11RS

14<sup>th</sup> December 2007

Dear Roy,

**Report on the role and performance of the Town Forum in 2006/07 and key residents' challenges to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC)**

The Tunbridge Wells Town Forum has just completed its second full year; this letter is intended both as an overview of the principal areas of its activity and achievement in that period and also to highlight those areas in which the Town Forum considers that Tunbridge Wells Borough Council continues to fall far short of residents' rightful expectations.

***Background***

The Town Forum was set up in 2005 to address one of the fundamental weaknesses in local democracy in Tunbridge Wells which was highlighted so clearly by the Audit Commission in 2004 – that is, the failure by TWBC to consult with town residents on substantive local issues, a failing not helped by the anomalous lack of parish or town council representation for the 46,000 residents of Tunbridge Wells.

The Town Forum is a partnership between Borough Councillors and local residents; its membership is drawn from whichever of the town's residents and community associations choose to attend, and also from the Civic Society, Soroptomist International and, of course, Borough Councillors. Whilst the Town Forum cannot and does not make claim to be a wholly representative town body, it does nevertheless pull together a wide cross section of the views of the community and intends to extend this in its third year through connections to other forums and the town's Housing Associations.

The Town Forum would like to thank TWBC for its continuing support and also those Councillors who have regularly attended its meetings. We note, however, that there are a number of Councillors who have either rarely or never attended Town Forum meetings and we are concerned that this indicates, at the very least, an unwillingness to engage with local residents which will hamper their effectiveness in their elected roles. This is a matter which we consider should be addressed by TWBC.

***Principal areas of Town Forum activity***

The Town Forum has inevitably been sidetracked to a degree in its first two years by the need to invest considerable energy and time in educating itself on the machinery and financing of local government. Nonetheless the Town Forum has been able to make significant contributions across a wide range of areas the most significant of which are summarised below:

- **“Getting around Tunbridge Wells: Residents’ views”** – a report distilling the essence of Tunbridge Wells town transport issues and offering a series of priorities for action but also some quick fix solutions in many areas. The report was presented to the Joint Transportation Board in April 2007 and was warmly received. The Town Forum continues to press in this area and is formalising meetings with Kent County Council and its officers to discuss the solutions which we have offered and how they can be implemented. We attach that report for your attention.  
[www.townforum.org.uk/transport/transportreport-jtb160407.pdf](http://www.townforum.org.uk/transport/transportreport-jtb160407.pdf)
- **Planning position statement in June 2007** - setting out a clear and coherent statement of the Town Forum’s views on significant town planning issues covering parking, grot spots, garden grabbing but also offering insight and opportunities in the future development of the town in particular in light of the proposed town Master Plan. The Town Forum again continues to press in this area in meetings with TWBC officers and Councillors but so far with little constructive feedback. We attach that report for your attention.  
[www.townforum.org.uk/planning/tf\\_positionstatement\\_planning\\_june2007.pdf](http://www.townforum.org.uk/planning/tf_positionstatement_planning_june2007.pdf)
- **Grot spots** – a sustained campaign lead by the Town Forum, by the Planning Committee in particular, which has taken the issue of grot spots and their potential solutions into the press and public arenas. The Town Forum continues to press in this area with some success.  
[www.townforum.org.uk/focusgroup/topgrotspotsjune2007.pdf](http://www.townforum.org.uk/focusgroup/topgrotspotsjune2007.pdf)
- **The Local Development Framework** – as a partner in the LDF, the Town Forum has had a strong voice in its second iteration and indeed has signed off on the final version. There are many issues in both the way that the framework is developed and how it will be implemented and the Town Forum will continue to seek significant improvements in these areas.
- **Consultation documents** – the Town Forum has responded to many if not most of the plethora of consultation documents which have emerged from local and national government over the last two years. Whilst we have very significant concerns over the efficacy of the consultation system we have continued to engage in order to ensure that residents’ views can be at least heard and not easily dismissed or ignored. Nonetheless, the most unsatisfactory issues in this area are the continuing non response from the consulters and the failure to demonstrate how and where these responses are taken into account, if at all. This is a significant area of contribution by the Town Forum and of failure by both local and national government.

### ***Key residents’ challenges to TWBC***

The work of the Town Forum and the insights into local government which it has offered to its members have been heartening in some respects but in equal measure both frustrating and worrying. There are a number of absolutely key areas in which TWBC needs to take action and indeed initiative if Tunbridge Wells really is to be a “Town for Tomorrow” rather than a forgotten relic. The Town Forum has identified five key challenges which it believes that TWBC must address in order that the town can play a confident and prominent role in local and national life in the twenty first century. The following are the five key challenges which TWBC must address, all of which are very much interrelated:

- **Lack of leadership by TWBC** – the issues of the twenty first century and the deterioration of the town require that the Council should take the lead role in developing and proposing initiatives to drive the town forward. It should be a significant part of TWBC’s role to encourage residents of the town to embrace change and look to the future but it is the view of the Town Forum that TWBC is primarily reactive, even defensive. It may be that the current democratic structures are inappropriate for a vibrant town and that perhaps an elected mayor may be the only feasible option.

- **Designing the future of our town** – TWBC is presiding over a town in disintegration; the state of Mount Pleasant from the old cinema site down to the former Morrison’s store is shaming for locals and visitors alike. The proposed Master Plan may offer the opportunity to address some of these issues but it must lead to action and should be supported by demonstrably valuable initiatives driven by TWBC. In this regard the Town Forum is acutely aware of the continuing failure by TWBC to use proceeds from the sale of the Council’s housing stock some fifteen years ago in any planned and meaningful way. The proceeds remaining unspent are believed to stand at around £33m and currently the income on this is used only to support TWBC revenues.
- **Planning, the infrastructure and the environment** – the Town Forum considers that TWBC must take a stronger line with developers over both infrastructural and environmental measures; currently TWBC’s ambitions fall far short of those of the leading local authorities in these fields. The Town Forum is of the view that planning and planning permissions in the town must be more assertive and forward thinking and in particular that TWBC should require considerably higher and challenging energy efficiency targets for new build and redevelopments regardless of size.
- **Building communities** – the Town Forum is of the view that TWBC does not do enough to foster community spirit in the town and even that its actions in other areas tend to undermine community spirit. Communities are built around green space, schools, churches and pubs – failure to require the former in the large developments springing up in the town and bussing children across the town away from their communities adds to congestion and environmental damage absolutely unnecessarily and does nothing to enhance the cohesiveness of our local communities. There is a conspicuous lack of “joined up thinking”.
- **Transport infrastructure** – this is an area of enormous concern to which the Town Forum has repeatedly returned. There are many issues with road and rail links in the town and, although the Town Forum accepts that TWBC has little direct control over either of these areas, it nonetheless appears to us that TWBC has, or should have, considerable influencing and lobbying powers which it does not deploy adequately and equally. It appears to us that TWBC has substantially abdicated its responsibilities to its residents by its failure to engage appropriately in the development of the Kent transport plan.

## **Conclusion**

As we remarked earlier in this letter, the Town Forum has invested considerable energy and time in educating itself on the machinery and financing of local government which we believe equips the Town Forum to make an even stronger contribution on behalf of town residents over the next few years. However, this contribution from local residents, which of course is absolutely necessary, must be matched by active participation by TWBC and its Councillors.

And this is the primary message from the first two years of the Town Forum – we believe in the partnership of residents and Councillors but the onus is on TWBC to lead. We have set down the five key challenges that we as a Town Forum consider are faced by TWBC but all boil down to leadership. The Town Forum will report on TWBC’s success or otherwise in delivering on this absolutely key issue at the time of our next annual review.

Christopher Thomas  
Incoming Chair

Matt Goodwin  
Outgoing Chair

Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum  
14.12.2007