



RESPONSE TO THE TWBC DRAFT STRATEGIC PLAN

We note on Page 4 of the Draft Strategic Plan that the Town Forum is named as a key stakeholder and we are of course very willing to comment on the Plan, and in fact do so below, but we must make the following points very forcibly:

0. Despite being a key stakeholder the Town Forum was not notified of the publication of the draft. The draft was discovered by accident by a Forum member on 5 February and comment is required by 12 February.

0. We note that the Leader of TWBC has not yet included his foreword, for reasons which we do not know. In principle we consider it inappropriate to comment on the Plan in the absence of the Leader's strategic context but are forced by timing to do so nevertheless.

We consider that TWBC has failed in its duty to adequately consult and we respond only because of the importance of the document.

Note that our comments are necessarily brief in view of lack of time but they are as follows:

General comments

0. We consider that substantial sections of the document both at the start and at the end should be consigned to appendices; our view is that an outline plan should be capable of very concise presentation and 42 pages does not fit that requirement.

0. The members of Town Forum have often commented that the way in which the multiplicity of plans actually dovetail and their profusion makes a mockery of the desire to empower local communities as well as being fundamentally impenetrable even to the well-informed layman.

We do acknowledge the willingness of TWBC to consult but lament their apparent unwillingness to take note of responses to those consultations.

Turning to the detailed priority areas of the document:

Priority 1 – promoting a diverse and thriving local community

This section is long on aspiration and very short on detail with a major focus on development of the shopping areas of the town. Whilst we acknowledge the value of the town's shopping areas we consider that this is only a part of the future of the town; we should be looking to attract businesses of the future and to developing a university/training college to equip people locally with the skills to service these businesses.

We note that it should be an absolute and enforced requirement that the necessary infrastructure is put in place in advance of, or in tandem with, all necessary housing developments.

Priority 2 – care for our environment

We consider that there has been clear progress on this front but are concerned that it's interlinking with the other priority areas identified in the Plan, and particularly priority 1, are not fully and properly thought through. We consider that there are a number of key factors to consider in addressing the environmental issues of the town, and they include a strong transport infrastructure affording residents a genuine choice of public rather than private transport, sensible policies on local school catchments areas so that children can walk to school, and school buses.

We also consider it an absolute priority that planning conditions should be designed to ensure development of renewable energy sources focusing on solar, ground heat and wind; furthermore we consider it a reasonable aspiration that the town could and should aim for energy self sufficiency within the foreseeable future.

We are disappointed that, more than eighteen months after initiating the Grot Spots campaign to rid Tunbridge Wells of some of its more inelegant sores, little or nothing has been done to invoke the legislation which would enable the Council to enforce the restoration of buildings to acceptable condition.

Priority 3 – suitable local housing

We are again concerned that there are a lot of words but little in the way of action. We consider that TWBC should take a more forceful lead on this issue, for instance perhaps rent free periods could be offered with TWBC support, perhaps some of the cash proceeds from prior sales of council housing stock could be redeployed into new TWBC owned housing stock. We note that investment in property is generally considered to be a sensible element of any balanced investment strategy.

Priority 4 – stronger and safer communities

We consider that the draft strategic plan pays little more than lip service to the idea of community. We believe that TWBC should actively encourage community development by considering holistically the impact of new housing developments and particularly the failure to adequately invest in town infrastructure in the shape of lack of post offices, the outdated public transport system and the inadequate and unfair schools policies.

Summary

In summary our view is that this document is overlong and crucially lacking in joined up thinking and real and concrete plans for the future of our town. Many of the targets and plans are in fact to draw up plans and there is not enough recognition of the serious and coordinated approach which is required across all the different areas into which TWBC has considerable input or even control.

The most promising aspect of the plan is TWBC's apparent enthusiasm to hear from local stakeholders, including the TF, but this is not matched by clarity of presentation, and because of poor timing and inefficient delivery we are concerned that it is not matched by intent either.

Matt Goodwin.
Chairman.
12th. February 2007.