

TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL
DRAFT LEISURE STRATEGY - FIVE YEAR PLAN 2006 – 2011

Comments by Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society

We have read and discussed the Plan with interest. It is somewhat of ‘a curate’s egg’ – good in parts – but it does have a number of omissions which we find difficult to understand and these are listed in the numbered comments below.

We also thought that in writing the report, the authors seemed to be so determined to make every Action Point fit precisely every Objective and vice-versa, that it was a positively Procrustean Bed, in which Objectives and Action Points were being constantly squeezed or stretched to fit each other. This does not seem to be necessary, or realistic, for what is a working strategy document.. Objectives and Action Points need to match each other, but not necessarily precisely.

Our detailed comments follow:

1. As this is stated to be a *Draft* Five Year Plan for the years 2006-2011 and was not issued until September 2006, would it not be more realistic to make it the Plan for the years 2007 – 2012, which would include the Olympic year 2012, for which there is at least one stated Action Point (1.i).
2. Despite it being for the stated years, the Plan is remarkably non-specific as to individual years, with few years or dates actually mentioned. It is also not very time-specific, being fairly loosely defined as Short-term (1-2 years), Medium-term (2-3 years) and Long-term (3+ years).
The Action Plan has some 82 Action Points (and a total of 88 time indications, since some Actions are listed as Short and Medium, Medium and Long, and Short, Medium and Long). As a Five Year Plan, it is strongly biased towards the Short-term, with 49 Short-term, 23 Medium-term and 16 Long-term Actions (i.e. over 80% of the Action Points to be achieved within three years of a Five Year Plan).
3. The Plan seeks to fulfil four stated Objectives or Priorities.
The first – Improving health and well-being of the Community by increasing opportunities for participation – has 19 Action points;
the second – Facilitating provision of appropriate quality facilities, services and activities – has 29 Action points;
the third – Seeking to provide relevant, safe and good quality facilities for children and young people – has 20 Action points;
the fourth – Facilitating appropriate provision to meet the needs of older people – has 14 Action points.
4. We would question whether the Objectives are in the right order. Our concern lies not with the second, third and fourth Objectives which are unexceptionable, but with the first. While accepting that Britain in general has a growing health problem with up to 30% being clinically obese, we think that the solution to this lies essentially with the individual who needs to make decisions about the amount and

type of food and drink eaten and exercise taken, rather than the provision of more sports facilities and programmes, the provision of which at considerable public cost *will not necessarily* guarantee their use.

5. There seems to be a huge emphasis on sport and sports facilities. Some 20 of the 82 Action points are to do with sport/physical organisation and activities. By comparison, the Museum and Art Gallery get 12, the Assembly Hall 7 and Parks 6, a total of 25. The remainder of the Action Points (some 37) are broadly non-specific in terms of subject.
6. There is no mention of the Library Service in the Report except as an aside with reference to the Heritage Lottery Funding Application Action Point. Presumably this is because it is provided by KCC. However we regard the Library Service, whoever funds or manages it, as an integral partner of the Museum and Art Gallery in Tunbridge Wells, as different arms attached to the same body politic, and are surprised that no reference was made to any mutual policies, discussions, or activities between them over this five-year period. There should be some form of cross-referencing in the document.
7. Similarly there is no mention of Tourism. Presumably because it is regarded as separate from Leisure. However we believe that tourist services and facilities can be just as beneficial to and appreciated by residents, as out-of-visitors. Even if the two are kept separate in the eyes of TWBC management, their interaction as such at all levels of involvement should surely require that Tourism gets some mention in a Leisure Strategy document. There should be at least some form of cross-referencing in the document.
8. Similarly there is no mention of the 2009 Centenary of the granting by King Edward VII of the 'Royal 'title to Tunbridge Wells. The experience of the 2006 400th Anniversary suggests that celebrating notable anniversaries is popular with residents and tourists, is good for the morale of the Town and is a publicity 'handle' for the Borough which gives us wider and favourable coverage in all media. If this is to be celebrated, preparations for this need to start not later than 2007, and cannot be excluded from a Draft Strategy document.
9. Similarly there is no mention of Cricket Week, which has been an integral leisure activity in TW since 1901, spread over 6-7 days and attended in 2006 by up to 30,000 people (both residents and visitors), or of opportunities which could be developed with the Nevill Ground, which is both a Council property *and relatively underutilised*. However the Strategy document does list as one of its 82 Action Points the proposed setting up of a new youth-initiative – the Kwik-Cricket Festival (venue unspecified) within the next two years (3.xii)
10. While in the Draft Strategy the Mela is an Action Point (2.xvii, not 1.xvii as listed), which (we understand) in 2006 produced an audience of 1,000 in the Pantiles with a funding of £25,000 from TWBC, there is no mention of Heritage Open Days, which took place at broadly the same time, and which in 2006 produced an audience of 5,000 spread over 30 sites in the Borough, at a cost to TWBC of just £1,000.

11. There is no reference to the future of, or future strategy for the Trinity Arts Centre, even though it is a major consideration in TWBC budgeting and cultural leisure provision.
12. There is no reference to key 'leisure sites' in the Borough, such as High Rocks, Happy Valley and Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons, which are in need of, and deserve, resuscitation as venues for both residents and tourists.
13. There is no reference to the services of the Museum Volunteers (organised by the Local History Group of RTWCS), who *for the past 2½ years* have been cataloguing the previously uncatalogued TWBC archives *at no charge to TWBC*. In case the connection between the Museum Volunteers and Leisure is not understood (or even known), their work will provide the opportunity for TWBC Archives to be opened for inspection by all those local historians, family historians and genealogists, whose interest is the *fastest growing leisure activity* in this country.
At the same time it should also be noted that the Strategy document lists as two of its 82 Action Points (4.vii & 4.ix) as collecting the reminiscences of older people. The lead and only partner for this is listed as TWBC.
Either, if the statement is strategic, then TWBC has not had time to think who its partner should be and will appoint another partner to do the *actual work* in due course, but doesn't know yet whom that should be.
Or, if the statement reflects that TWBC does not think it needs a partner in this, then why have they been taking advantage of the goodwill and support of the LHG of RTWCS with the Museum Volunteers, when their own staff were apparently more than qualified (and presumably available at no extra cost) to carry out the cataloguing of the TWBC Archives.
14. In case the counter-argument is made that the reason why certain items were omitted from the Strategy document was because they were deemed to be Tactics and not Strategy, then one must ask why so many tactical details, such as mapping and marketing a Healthy Walking route, or having a minimum of three members of the Museum User Panel aged 11-18, or setting up procedures for oral history, are nonetheless included in a strategic document, while others are not.
15. It cannot go without notice that RTWCS is nowhere mentioned in all 80 pages of the document. RTWCS was founded in 1959 and has been for many years the official amenity society for Tunbridge Wells registered with the Civic Trust. The word 'amenity' covers a wide spectrum and in our view includes 'leisure', 'tourism' and 'history'. Other organisations, such as residents' associations and the Town Forum, formed just over a year ago, are listed in the Draft document as partners, but for reasons which we do not understand, RTWCS are not, although RTWCS are clearly partners in Heritage Open Days, the Annual Conservation and Shopfront Awards and other joint activities with TWBC. The conundrum puzzles us, as it should you.

Finally, we have two last points:

16. Appendix 5 which is the advice of your paid consultants, Strategic Leisure Ltd., seems to have been largely ignored and no explanation has been given for this.

They advised that :

- a. it may be better to focus on providing fewer, better quality services (5.1)
- b. given that the Council can no longer provide all things to all people, it needs to develop its enabling and facilitating role (5.7)
- c. the future agenda of leisure provision needs to be action-oriented (5.8)
- d. the critical decision for the Council was whether it wished to be a direct provider or simply an enabler (5.12)

The provision of 82 Action Points, coupled with the fuzzy and somewhat ambiguous Strategic statements made in the body of the text, does suggest that your consultants' advice is not being followed.

17. RTWCS has never been asked directly by TWBC to comment on this Strategy. We only learnt of its existence through an email dated 20th September and sent by TWBC to the Town Forum, requesting comments by 16th October, 2006 (i.e. 26 days' notice) on an 80-page draft which could be down loaded from the TWBC website. We accessed the website and decided that it was too long to download and requested a hard-copy which came in early October, giving us effectively a fortnight to comment. We do not think that this is sufficient time for adequate consultation and discussion. We assume that this was not your intent, but merely the way your administration of it turned out.

We would also add that we think that even draft documents should be page-numbered in addition to the decimal notation.

We look forward to your response and to seeing the final draft of this Strategy Plan.

RTW Civic Society

16.10.2006