



SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS & DISTRICT

TUNBRIDGE WELLS DRAFT STRATEGIC PLAN

Comments by Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District

1. As women with senior management experience working for human rights and to serve the community, we welcome the intention in the proposed Plan to tackle a number of important issues needing positive action. Likewise we welcome the desire to sharpen up the effective delivery of action. Some past local plans have been long on aspirations and short on delivery. Setting priorities for staff effort is a rational and responsible way of managing limited resources to get outcomes.
2. We noted some of the new ideas that appear in the document, but for the purposes of this submission have concentrated on the key statements on page 36 defining what the Council's high and low priority areas for the next 3 years are to be for the delivery of its services. It would have been helpful if the Plan had contained numbered paragraphs to which we could refer.
3. The beneficiaries are listed as "those who visit, live, work and learn in our borough". We consider the Council's first duty is to its residents not its visitors. The target order of this list should read "those who live, work, learn and visit".
4. Unfortunately, the strategy offers no information about who currently uses the facilities and provision available, and who does not, as a basis for forming sound judgements on the impact of shifting the priorities or securing cost-effectiveness within the wider scheme of things. This is a serious omission. We are surprised that obtaining basic information about this, the reasons why, and who pays is identified as a non-priority issue.
5. We are even more surprised that page 36 puts Council internal management and the Overview and Scrutiny function right at the top of the priority list for resources. The associated proposal to move resources to this from other service areas, higher fees, grant cuts to outside bodies is likely to infuriate many of the public including those critical of the Council's administration costs. The impression given is that the Council has become obsessed with its internal systems and ratings and lost its sense of perspective about its functions.
6. This is reflected in the mixture of items in the priorities/issues lists. Systems of effective delivery that any well-run Council should anyway be using without extra resources because they hold down running costs(eg partnership working, and efficiency savings) are lumped in with key policy delivery areas (economic regeneration, transport improvements and housing services) that urgently need injection of extra resources in this particular Borough at this particular time, even at the expense of other desirable activities. No explanation is

given why these 3 have been selected out of the 7 community plan priorities and 4 corporate priorities on page 8

7. A better balanced set of key priorities for service delivery with an explanation of why these have been chosen, would be more likely to get public support. For example, though it is difficult to piece together all the reasoning, the Plan's preceding discourse indicates this list might be:-

1. economic regeneration,
2. transport improvements,
3. housing services,
4. improved provision for the most vulnerable including the young and elderly,
5. capacity building for community involvement, and
6. a well-managed and well-motivated organisation using partnerships with others to help deliver these priorities.

8. The last point is a key aspect of strategic plan delivery. But it is a means, not an end, and properly has an action plan to itself, not bits and pieces scattered through the strategic plan.

9. On the issue of staffing and its relationship to the community it serves, we also find surprising that a council that declares itself an equal opportunities employer, and lists as a top priority "enhancing its governance structure", has just recruited its new management in such a manner that out of the top 14 staff appointments made in recent months under the Chief Executive only 2 are women, one of whom is also the only ethnic minority member. This raises questions of possible bias in the Council's recruitment and selection procedures.

10. Finally, on overall presentation, we have already commented on the difficulty of referring to unnumbered paragraphs. It is a great pity that throughout the document, it has been decided to lump together all the residents of Tunbridge Wells under the inappropriate heading of "customers" of the Council who operate in a separate bureaucratic world defined by terms such as BME, TIC, HO, LSP, RSLs, "bring sites", dynamic, embedding, sustainable, Customer Relationship Management, stakeholders, prioritisation, transportation. Virtually every reader has commented adversely on the tired jargon and incomprehensible initials, or asked what has happened to Plain English.

11. We hope that editorial review will also improve the punctuation and bad grammar (such as the muddled syntax of challenges on page 9), and ditch the completely meaningless diagram marked Table 1. We have not found a single reader who could make head or tail of the purported relationship.

10 February 2007