



SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS & DISTRICT

CONSULTATION DRAFT - TWBC COMMUNITY PLAN 2006

Formal submission of comments

1. This submission offers comments by Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District. Our proposals draw on our past research and recommendations submitted in previous reports to the Council. We welcome that Government guidance is that Councils should particularly endeavour to build in women's views and proposals.
2. We have focussed on the action plans, rather than the already heavily-discussed themes and issues of the Plan itself, because these will determine what is actually done and how available resources are allocated. It is therefore regrettable that the standard form inviting public comments is so constructed as to make it very difficult indeed to comment on the action plans. It poses a false dichotomy in providing only for a "yes" or "no" answer to the question "do you feel the right issues have been identified?" when in many cases we agree with what has been identified as issues in general terms, but consider specific actions should be added. This is a serious flaw in the consultation process, likely to distort any figures of alleged "agreement" and shortchange the Council of useful feedback about achievable worthwhile actions. We hope it will be avoided in future consultations
3. The Club have done their best with the difficult layout of the form. But for the avoidance of doubt, in particular about some general concerns we have, we are accompanying the standard form with this free-standing memorandum for the Council's consideration. It follows the sequence of the Community Plan document, putting each recommended change in its context.
4. We first offer some general comments on the draft Plan and associated Action Plans as a whole.

GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT PLAN

- We agree with the thrust and general priorities of the Plan itself. But it lacks a tangible and inspiring goal for the sort of overall changes we want to be proud of in 10 years time. (By 2016 we shall have....). We can't afford to wait another 5 years to start thinking and planning for this. An aspirational " banner project" that conveys to the world what Tunbridge Wells stands for, and which provides a step change in the long-term betterment of the borough is needed to add heart to the Plan. There are many forms this could take. The Council needs to institute a public debate on this. Meanwhile land in the town centre should be earmarked in planning terms for a major exciting new facility. Obvious possible sites include the K and S Hospital, and Union Square. No doubt others are possible. The important thing is for the Council to kick-start the process now
- Many of the action points are vague, and the timing too laid back. We have suggested realistic ways of moving the action agenda along more briskly and positively, so that everyone can soon begin to see things happening. It wastes resources not to do so
- The most crucial strategic question is how to strengthen the core of Royal Tunbridge Wells with its long drift away of retail, civic and other facilities, and its traffic and developers pressure destroying its special attractive character. Tunbridge Wells is about more than middle-class housing, wine bars and trendy restaurants, and deserves better than cloned national chains of shops
- The disastrous decision to abandon all transport planning capability (not the policy adopted by other boroughs) needs to be reversed

- There is insufficient attention to joint analysis and working with East Sussex County Council and Wealden District, not only to tackle problems, but also to prevent them from getting worse (housing, transport, services etc). In many cases they are far more important partners for this than KCC
- In too many cases the partnerships are simply of providers, lacking representatives of those at the receiving end to provide focus, monitoring and quality control. They should include women's organisations, racial minority, faith, residents, and disabled access groups, Age Concern, YMCA, the Civic Society
- The Community Plan should affirm the Council will fight to ensure Tunbridge Wells Borough continues to manage its own affairs, and indeed eg on transport, seek to retrieve responsibility and resources from the County, rather than be swallowed up in a remote authority
- Specifically focussed measures should foster existing voluntary institutions on whose work so much depends, and encourage new ones. It is informative and of great value that they see priorities through different eyes from statutory providers. As part of regular contact with grass roots views and wishes, the action plan should have an item to sustain and encourage the Town Forum as a valuable institution helping local people to engage directly with Councillors and signal issues important to the flagship of the borough, RTW itself.

COMMENTS ON ACTION PLANS

1. SAFEGUARDING THE ENVIRONMENT

Priority 1: protecting and enhancing natural environment and landscape

1.1 **Add** (noting they also serve other policy priorities eg economic health, social inclusion, health and well-being):

- Prepare action brief by end 2006 to develop weekly market along Calverley Road pedestrian precinct to make good extinction of Camden Road market and provide fresh provisions and other goods in middle of RTW.
- Develop action plan by end 2006 for regular produce and antiques markets on the Pantiles
- Protect the Commons from further creeping incursions of parked vehicles.

Priority 2: Conserving and improving built environment

Add new items:

- Prepare a landscape assessment of Victorian and Edwardian areas of RTW as the basis for a proactive policy to conserve this important part of the local heritage.
- Reach agreement with owners of Union Square to improve its appearance in the short-term so as to make it a more fitting end-point of the Pantiles and marshal public support. Identify and use powers to challenge other visual blemishes eg inappropriate signs
- Explore options for removing Union Square building in partnership with private sector, and replacing with Pump Room complex more fitting for such an important and historic site (relevant also to tourism, provision of community and leisure facilities, display setting for museum costume and cultural exhibitions to draw people from top of town)
- Launch public debate about what facilities borough dwellers would like to see there to enhance the present quality of life and prosperity of RTW, foster its status and image and as a worthy legacy to their children.
- Explore options for public/private/local citizen partnership to fund and create this and work towards its creation.
- Prepare with KCC a systematic programme for early removal and replacement of intrusive and unsuitable street furniture and surfaces in RTW, and enforcement action on accreted advertisements along roads eg way-marking by developers (with road safety implications)

Priority 3: Reducing local contribution to climate change

Amend 3.2 to take account of position now reached and set goal of increasing number of plastic bottle and other recycling sites available.

Add

- Design and erect by spring 2007 “flag ship” signs at all recycling sites to give far clearer message about Borough’s green policy and targets, the role waste prevention plays, and changing programme of messages about other things people can do to contribute
- Develop action plan with KCC by spring 2007 for “Green Business Partnerships” in Borough and to encourage crushing and recycling of all plastic bottles from business and entertainment premises.
- Agree and enforce litter code for all street cafes and other litter generators

Add to 3.3

- Prepare by end 2006 Borough policy statement supporting underground rainwater storage tanks to capture run off in all future developments, and to reduce run off and visual degradation caused by paving over front gardens and hard landscaping of new developments
- Prepare guidance for the public and developers on these matters
- Apply this to planning applications and requests for new “pavement crossings” from 2007 onwards (note Mayor for London policy and action on latter because of environmental effects)
- Prepare by end 2006 Borough policy statement on the use of solar panels and other forms of renewable energy and apply this to requirements in future planning permissions (note one London Borough has already done this)
- Take high publicity profile on these initiatives and on Tunbridge Wells as Green and Clean beacon borough and improve the environmental pages of website to match standards of other boroughs.
- Prepare by October 2006 a Borough noise pollution policy statement and action plan, to include partnerships with local retailers in advertising and offering advice on low decibel equipment, and advice on its own website
- prepare and adopt by mid-October 2006 at latest a Borough policy statement restricting the hours and dates when fireworks may be let off, work in partnership with all retailers and the police to publicise this, and post on the website clear advice about how to secure enforcement action.

2. MAINTAINING A THRIVING ECONOMY

This block of ideas has many reviews, committees and aspirations, but not much specific action. **Add** the following specific items for action:

- Announce that there is no question of the Town Hall — the civic heart and anchor of the town — being moved away from its present site
- Seek public views and prepare plans to build up Civic Centre community role, making better use of the whole “footprint” including Crescent Road and Monson Road buildings, Monson and Civic Way, front gardens, foyer of Assembly Hall and public toilets there.
- Draw up plans for atrium joining the Town Hall and Library, to provide new accessible main entrance, and walk-in Borough Information Centre covering all aspects of public information, and information exchange by voluntary organisations
- Secure provision of town centre local travel information office possibly at staffed desk in the entrance of the Assembly Hall, in partnership with SETrains, Arriva, coach operators, private hire firms (see Transport)
- Remodel Town Hall frontage gardens to make them accessible to public with seats under the trees
- Foster existing and develop other new public facilities in the town centre, such as improved and better signed public toilet facilities, IT centres, health care services, children’s play facilities, meeting places, market
- Secure early provision of new post office facilities in Vale Road area and Pantiles

- Develop plans for major new conference centre and associated facilities within RTW, accessible to Town Centre eg at K and S site.
- Provide in local landuse plans for new town centre cinema
- Maintain domestic character of Camden Road and Ely Place and defend from characterless cloned outlets of multiples.
- Improve access to the Longfields Road estate
- Improve visitors and residents movement into and around the town through Spa Shuttle and better travel information (see Transport).

3. ENABLING PEOPLE TO TAKE PART IN LEISURE ACTIVITIES

Add:

- In partnership with KCC and ESCC, and other sponsors, eg TV companies, Arts Council, Lottery, Madame Tussauds, draw up major second phase programme to enhance and expand museum, art gallery, library and archives as regional centre of excellence, tourist attraction, research facility
- Promote through information and encouragement use by older people and disabled people of new free travel concessions, and with Age Concern, SE Trains, coach operators and event promoters publicise low cost travel outings and packages for families.

4. COMMUNITY SAFETY

Add:

- Develop half way houses and support schemes including where necessary literacy assistance for domestic abuse victims leaving the Women's Refuge
- Establish Community Rail Partnerships with SETrains at all Borough stations to maintain and improve safety and appearance, and to act as eyes and ears for the public on what needs to be done.

5. TRANSPORT

This section is particularly weak on any effective action to improve traffic and parking problems.

Add:

- Reinstate Borough transport planning capability to monitor and make informed inputs and strong representations to KCC and ESCC transport decisions of all kinds that affect Borough interests. This is essential for the Borough's well-being and future
- Revisit Borough Local Transport Plan and identify all its weaknesses that KCC needs to address noting that KCC in its recent County Local Transport Plan has assumed on basis of the TW plan assertions that it does not need any resources
- Actively associate ESCC in problem analysis and solving since much of the traffic causing problems is ESCC generated
- Publicise and support in all possible ways takeup of experimental free bus travel to schools to reduce school car journeys
- Encourage early formation of Community Rail Partnerships (see above) for all stations in the Borough
- Together with KCC and ESCC and Civic Society establish scoping study for bypass routes for RTW
- Together with KCC and Network Rail establish scoping study to improve road access to the Industrial Estate
- Develop, publish and implement taxi and hire car policy for RTW, including policy on planning conditions about taxi access, parking enforcement related to taxis, taxi access to bus lanes and provision of new major taxi stand in prominent position at Five Ways
- Turn Park and Ride into a reality rather than the constantly receding mirage of years of "further studies"

- Require bus operators to use vehicles that show destinations on the side and back as well as the front, with better details of routes, and require buses that link to the top and bottom of the town to be clearly marked as “Spa Shuttle” or the like
- As noted above provide central travel information office in RTW shopping centre both to answer questions people have about travel options, and actively to promote greater use of all forms of public transport through provision of maps, timings, contact points, easy booking arrangements, special offers etc. and to give realtime information on known delays.

6. HOUSING

Include in 5.4 solar heating options to reduce fuel bills of less well off householders.

7. HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

No comments other than points already made.

8. SOCIAL INCLUSION

See action points above on low cost local produce access, post offices, transport, reduced fuel bills.

9. LEARNING FOR ALL

Replace “business needs” everywhere that it appears in this section *with* “employment needs”.

Add:

- Survey and establish extent of literacy problems in the borough as basis for targeted action.

23 June 2006