



COUNCIL ANSWERS QUESTIONS OVER EYESORES

The Kent and Sussex Courier put questions to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council this week about the use of Section 215 and its approach to eyesores.

Question: What responsibility does the council have in relation to the appearance of buildings and sites in TW? Can you respond in terms of council owned land, commercially owned land and private homes?

Answer: Where land is privately owned, responsibility of the condition of the land lies with the owner.

Q: When has Section 215 been used before by TWBC?

A: Three notices have been served in the last year but in that time 24 investigations into complaints have been carried out, meaning a letter has been sent and the owners have acted.

Q: If it has not been used very much, why is that?

A: It is used in a wide range of situations, eg in urban areas it is being used where gardens have become overgrown. It is also used in rural areas, eg when abandoned vehicles have been left in fields.

Q: I believe Section 215 has been used in relation to the Greyhound Pub - can you give extensive details of this?

A: We wrote to the brewery requesting they remove the graffiti off the walls, shutters and hoardings. They did not carry out the work. A Section 215 Notice was then served and they did not comply in the stated period of time. We are now looking at serving a summons to court.

Q: What other powers does TWBC have in terms of eyesores and forcing action?

A: The council is keen to see long-term empty homes brought back into use, as these properties can help meet the housing needs of the population. The private sector housing team has undertaken a study to identify long-term empty homes. In addition, it has initiated an empty homes hotline, as advertised in the September edition of the Borough News magazine and would encourage residents to report empty homes in their local area. The team will be investigating ownership and working proactively to provide useful information to encourage properties to be brought back into use. Currently the council has powers to consider a Compulsory purchase Order as part of its delivery toolkit. From April 2006 the council will have additional powers under the Housing Act 2004 to serve interim and final empty dwelling management orders. The orders will enable a local

housing authority, with the consent of the relevant owner, to take steps for the purpose of securing that the property becomes and continues to be occupied.

Q: Daniel Bech believed the grottness of buildings and sites meant the town had lost Its "spa town sparkle". Does TWBC think this Is so?

A: "Royal Tunbridge Wells has certainly not lost its sparkle. We are in the process of implementing a wide ranging clean neighbourhoods initiative that will tackle properties that have a negative impact on the appearance of the street scene, increase our ability to deal with graffiti, fly posting and litter and improve the appearance of the borough council's street furniture.

We have three new street scene enforcement officers, a new graffiti hit squad and all of our services will be working together to make the best use of the powers that are available to the Council, including Section 215 and fixed penalty notices. With this new approach we aim to cut the time it takes to respond to reports of eyesores." [Answer by chief executive Sheila Wheeler.]

Q: Mr Bech Is confident the council will take on board his and the civic society's and town forum's concerns and act. Can you respond?

A: No response ..

- The council has recently completed a programme in the town centre to repaint litter bins, CCTV camera posts and bollards.