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OUR TOWN HAS LOST ITS SPARKLE

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Derelict and graffiti-daubed buildings, broken road signs, jungle-like gardens and barbed wire - all can be seen during a brief tour of Tunbridge Wells.

As the town gears up to celebrate its 400th anniversary next year, "eyesores" across the town are no cause for festivities, said resident Daniel Bech and member of Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society.

He believed the town had "lost its sparkle" and many across the town had grown used to the tatty surroundings or "looked away in shame".

"The key is first to accept and then the cure can follow. It is like an illness. The town is one of the best looking in the whole country but it is like it has lost the spa town flair," he said.

Mr Bech who is also on the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum, has collated dozens of images on his "spot-the-grot trail". His findings range from the dilapidated and graffiti-daubed ABC cinema which he described as the "most hated building in Tunbridge Wells" to a house in upmarket Warwick Park, so overgrown with foliage the property is barely visible.

One entrance to Calverley Park resembled the death camp Dachau with strings of barbed wire across its gate and a site behind the Old West Station looked as though a helicopter had dumped tonnes of rubbish from the sky, he said.

Regarding the tatty rail station, he said "something is badly wrong - this is the main entrance point to Tunbridge Wells and we have to live with this".

He wrote a hard-hitting article in the civic society's autumn newsletter titled Time For Action and asked: "Our planners have powers to require property owners to look after their buildings. Why don't they use them?"

His wrath is not only directed at commercial landowners but private property and home owners. He thought a website showing the worst cases but also celebrating well-maintained properties would generate huge local interest and spur action.

Mr Bech and civic society vice-chairman John Cunningham have been inspired by the success of Hastings Borough Council which has adopted a zero tolerance to eyesores and uses heavily Section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

This legislation could also be used by TWBC to force landowners to smarten up or face conviction and fines.

The campaigners hoped initial general letters would be sent to all householders in Tunbridge

Wells with the council's newsletter Borough News. It would explain the council's aim to smarten up unsightly land and properties and its powers of enforcement. They wanted subsequent "much stronger" letters fired off to owners of identified sites, threatening legal enforcement.

Mr Bech spoke about the issues at the Town Forum on October 26, where a sub-committee was formed to work with the borough council on tackling the issue. It will report back to the main forum on November 29, with its first list of sites on which it believed action should be taken.

Although they said the council had been "complacent" and "backwards in coming forwards" on tackling the eyesores, they remained confident of results.

For information on Section 215 visit www.odpm.gov.uk

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