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By Mary Harris

'Seven deadly sins' ruining town

Town Forum calls on council to clean up

They've been tagged the "seven deadly sins" and they threaten to destroy forever the image of Tunbridge Wells.

The stark warning came from the **Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum** this week which has compiled a rogues' gallery of unsightly spots in the town under seven headings.

The 'sins' range from a proliferation of satellite dishes, estate agents' boards and A-boards to overflowing bins, twisted railings and patchy pavements.

Outspoken forum member Daniel Bech, who is driving the campaign to clean up the streets, has renamed Mount Pleasant as "*Mount Shabby*" and said parts of the town looked like "*down town Hong Kong*".

He said the town's tourism, house prices and prestige were at risk and called on Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent County Council to take action.

The town's Conservation Area - which is made up of 11 'character areas' of special architectural or historic interest which are desirable to preserve or enhance - was recently exposed by English Heritage as being "at risk" from neglect, decay and inappropriate development.

Mr Bech presented his findings and 120 pictures to the forum last month and was invited by the borough council leader Cllr Roy Bullock to prepare two reports, one containing borough council-related issues and one for highways issues for Kent County Council.

This week Mr Bech showed the Courier a photographic slideshow taken within a one mile radius of the Town Hall during July. He said it took just 15 minutes to take 60 such photos.

He said: "*These things are killing the Conservation Area. It's seriously putting our image at risk. We have been on this since the town forum was established in 2005, starting with the grot spots. The announcement of English Heritage was sad confirmation.*"

Asked why the forum, whose website has up to 20,000 hits a week, was so concerned with the street scene, he said: "*Well then don't tell me the town relies on tourism.*"

In the year you want to celebrate the 100 years of having the Royal prefix you are declared a Conservation Area at risk!

It must have some effect on the town's prestige. It will have an economic impact on house prices. At the end everyone will suffer because you will lose money. Don't tell me prices will stay much higher than Hastings.

It will also affect employment, no-one wants to come any more. And spending, you would not see this as a place people would want to spend their money.

If we don't do something now we will reach the point of no return. The town's prestige is under threat. Where's our civic pride?"

The town's scruffiness could be partly blamed on the "buy to let ghettos", he said. *"Landlords who bought these flats and they don't have the dosh to maintain them or they don't want to maintain them."*

He also thought a lack of communication between the borough and county councils and contractors was another root of the problem, particularly with road reinstatement and street clutter.

He also believed the council should get tough on those *"committing the deadly sins"* by using legislation which would restrict what Mr Bech believes has become a planning free for all since the Government last October relaxed restrictions on building alterations.

He said: *"The problem stems from October last year when the Government said it was going to simplify the planning process and minor alterations don't need a planning application therefore you can attach an annexe to your house whereas previously you didn't have to. It opened up the floodgates."*

He called for the council to use Article 4 directions under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 on the town's Conservation Area which would remove "some or all" permitted development rights

"This would mean a householder would need to file a planning application to do certain alterations. A high number of local authorities use Article 4. It could be adopted very quickly. This would give the council more control of things like street scene changes which includes car parks on gardens and unsympathetic changes to facades i.e. plastic windows and doors and satellite dishes."

Mr Bech also believed proper management and liaison between authorities and contractors on jobs was needed.

"On the simplest basis, when you take bricks out for a job, reinstate the bricks. When you replace a lamp post, finish the job and take the old one away. The contractor is at the base of the whole thing and they need to get the right instructions. Lack of communication seems to be the root of the problem."

The forum also wants to see a street manual for the town centre's Conservation Areas for use by authorities and contractors; the Streetscape Manual 1996 created by a senior planner at the council never made it past draft form.

Council leader Cllr Roy Bullock said he took on board many of the forum's complaints and said the council was also "keen" to improve the street scene.

He said he was currently arranging the meetings between the town forum, councillors and officers from the county and borough council.

But, he said, some of the "clutter" for example road signs, was necessary for safety of pedestrians, cyclists and motorist and therefore, insurance purposes, but he agreed a "balance needed to be struck".

Talking of 'sins' such as satellite dishes, plastic window and door frames and conversion of front gardens to car standings, he said the council could not take retrospective action unless in the case of listed buildings.

"So what we are trying to do is identify within the Conservation Areas what is acceptable from a design point of view and a functional point of view and then we can control it in the future. There is legislation we can use to control it in future."

He said the council was examining the use of Article 4.

He hoped the forthcoming meetings would help formulate a "definitive protocol" for Conservation Areas, which would include an order to contractors to reinstate areas to their original standard.

Overflowing residential bins should "not happen" and householders should report this to the street scene team. Cllr Bullock also agreed a street manual was a good idea and the council might look at but he added it was a "matter of prioritising resources".

A Kent County Council's Highway Services spokeswoman said: *"Kent Highway Services has been actively working within the Tunbridge Wells district and a whole range of work has been carried out this financial year from drainage improvements through to major resurfacing. We have also carried out a number of smaller improvements in addition to routine maintenance. We would be pleased to hear from the Town Forum regarding any specific concerns so they can be addressed and responded to."*





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- Empty no use properties – residential and commercial
- Street scene changes (front gardens - removal of hedges, walls)
- Unsympathetic changes impairing facades
- Satellite dishes
- Street clutter
- Real Estate agents / Letting agents signs
- Bins in prominent/unsuitable places