



The Community Newsletter of TotSoc - the Totnes and District Society

Chairman's Chat

Judy Westacott

In July, the Town Council was informed that it had been shortlisted as one of three finalists for the Academy of Urbanism's[†] "Great Town 20102" award. As a result the town was visited by a team of assessors on 1st August. The other two finalists are Bury St Edmunds and Londonderry!

The team identified six key elements – governance, local character and distinctiveness, user friendliness, commercial success and viability, environment, social sustainability and functionality. All these were judged having regard to the Academy's principles. The team spent the whole day in the town, visiting the historic main street, the Lamb, Heath's Garden, Leechwell Garden and the Castle. They were also shown the main sites earmarked for development in accordance with the approved local plan.

Local people joined us and gave short presentations and a group of four councillors put together the required paper and digital evidence that they requested. The result will be announced in London in November and will – win or not – provide the town with a great deal of publicity, all of which should attract new visitors to Totnes. The answer to one of the questions we were asked follows:

Totnes is a small, but vibrant, market town of about 8500 people situated alongside the River Dart adjacent to the South Devon Area of Natural Beauty. It is an historic town with over 500 listed buildings, many of which front the main shopping area. In spite of this it is a proactive town that readily embraces change.

[†] See <http://www.academyofurbanism.org.uk/>

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It is well aware of the challenge of meeting the diverse needs, and quality of life, of existing residents without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same. Its environment is one of its key assets - as well as being important to those who live and work here - it is vital to the local economy as the town - with its many specialist shops - and its location, attracts many visitors who help to keep the shops and businesses financially viable. It is a sustainable, active community - one with a low crime rating - where the many and varied groups and organisations are involved in decision-making.

The town has a strong local character, and is well run, as a result of the communities' effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership, Totnes is

forward-looking, proactive and not afraid of participating in new, innovative, cutting edge initiatives. As a result it is both a Transition Town and a Fair Trade Town. It set up, manages and operates its own community bus and a Ring and Ride bus service for the frail elderly and disabled. A high percentage of the food eaten and sold in local shops is grown within 30 miles of the town.

These are major contributions to minimising the local carbon footprint. We even have a straw bale house! All planning applications are closely monitored to ensure that the design of new

houses blend in with the existing street scene or enhance it. With four major sites, comprising some 400 houses, in the pipeline, the strong community involvement will help to ensure that the character and essence of what Totnes was, and is, will be maintained.

It is truly a town for all seasons, a small town with big ambitions that has developed sustainably since those early days, is a National Treasure and is therefore fully deserving of the title of the "Great Town of 2012".

Transition Streets – a new look to the Civic Hall

Clare Jeffery



The new silver-grey panels across Totnes district rooftops are the visible signs of the government-funded Transition Streets scheme, which started in March 2010 and installed the Civic Hall's 14kWp solar-PV system and 135 domestic systems in the spring this year.

Less visible are the changes that have been going on under the roofs. To be eligible for a Transition Streets solar-PV grant, groups of neighbours have been coming together to work through Transition Together, a programme of energy use reduction – covering electricity, heat, water, fuel – to reduce their carbon footprint.

'These quiet changes, below the radar, are actually as important as making our own energy using solar-PV,' said project co-manager Adrian Porter. 'The maths shows that it's not possible to meet our current energy

demand with renewable energy alone, so the only option in our view is to use less energy and conserve what we do have. The great thing about Transition Together is that cutting down becomes a lot more interesting in the company of friends and neighbours than struggling to do it alone'. Early Transition Streets research showed that each of the 468 households taking part are on average stopping 1.2 tonnes of carbon dioxide being released and saving an £601 a year on their household bills a year.

Transition Streets was devised in 2009 by Transition Town Totnes and awarded a grant of £625,000 by the Department of Energy and Climate Change in December 2009, creating new jobs and trade in Totnes district. It is one of 22 Lower Carbon Community Challenge pilot schemes around the country, testing methods of reducing carbon emissions locally

and generating renewable energy at a domestic level.

The fundraisers chose solar-PV over other renewable energy systems because it is the least disruptive for householders to fit. The system requires no planning permission for non-listed buildings as it is considered by local authorities wishing to encourage renewable energy installations as having 'Permitted development rights', even in a conservation area such as central Totnes.

Similarly, a solar-PV system doesn't need costly internal changes to the property as it is wired into the existing fuse-box rather than requiring a hot water tank and new plumbing as a solar heating system does. The scheme supports householders to meet basic energy efficiency standards in their homes to stop heat loss. They are offered help to improve the energy efficiency of their homes through a home energy check; training by the Energy

Saving Trust on draught-proofing and pipe lagging for example; and are supported to access grants through the Cosy Devon scheme for wall and loft insulation.

Last but not least, Transition Streets offers householders a basic grant of £2,500, or low-income grant of £3,500, to reduce the cost of a PV system, which starts at £5,577 for the smallest 1.1kWp system. In addition, a partnership with South Hams District Council (SHDC) has ensured the scheme is not the preserve of the well off. Approximately 40 per cent of households involved have lower disposable incomes and so are eligible to apply for a SHDC low interest loan to pay for the solar-PV systems alongside the grant. And once their system is commissioned, householders can expect to receive a combined annual Feed-in-Tariff income and energy bill saving of approximately £450 per year.

Greenlife

Jamie Sermon

(Jamie is one of the directors of Greenlife who have kindly made a donation to the cost of this edition of Contact)

Some Totnesians will remember that Greenlife began life in a tiny shop on Fore Street (currently Stoned, the jewellers). The shop was opened by husband and wife team, Mike and Jamie Sermon in July 1990. As the name suggests, the aim was to encourage more 'green' shopping: recycled paper, fair trade items, organic clothing, and so forth. By September the country had plunged into recession and a disastrous fire had brought down the arch and left the street covered in rubble. Mike remembers "The road was virtually closed for weeks and there were days when almost no one walked by the shop". If it was to survive, the couple had to do some serious rethinking. One thing was sure, even in hard times people still need to eat. Food was the answer!

Over the next year, Greenlife gradually

transformed from an eco-shop to a health food store. With a fair amount of competition in the town, a welcoming atmosphere was paramount.. "Mike excelled at making customers feel special, and used to dole out endless free lollies to kids!" reflects Jamie. Every nook and cranny was packed and customers really enjoyed browsing and passing the time of day with the owners. The shop grew in popularity and eventually extra staff were needed.

Within four years the shop was running out of space so Mike and Jamie decided to take a bold step and expanded into what seemed a gigantic store at the bottom of town. Mike says "It felt like a huge gamble but it worked. Customers loved the extra space and we even had room for pushchairs." Greenlife spent many happy years there, gradually increasing

its product range and employing more staff, some highly qualified. But inevitably over time, even at these large premises it became more and more uncomfortable and difficult, with the shop aisles becoming increasingly impassable and staff struggling to work in one very cramped back office. The need for bigger premises became more and more urgent. They had to move again! The search was on for new premises.

Not wishing to abandon their established spot at the bottom of town or step on the toes of their industry colleagues (an astonishing feat that they have all survived in such a small town and a testament to the wonderfully supportive and health-aware population of Totnes), the owners were at first reluctant to investigate the old Boots shop which had become vacant in the Market Square. But with nothing else available, they finally checked it out and to their amazement found that it had not only a large shop space but also a rabbit warren of offices, alcoves, corridors, storerooms, a staff room and even three loos! After years of searching, Mike says they felt they had finally found premises that would give Greenlife the home it deserved.

It's now a year and a half since that mammoth move, and in spite of initial challenges, Mike and Jamie both feel more and more confident that it was the right step. Staff have worked hard to recreate something of the old shop atmosphere in what was at first a very clinical environment. Greenlife has also celebrated two birthdays this year, the first on the anniversary of the latest move. This proved such a success that it was followed by a much bigger event on a glorious July day on Greenlife's 21st birthday. There were festive market stalls, musical entertainment and discounts galore in the shop, with staff giving out over 1000 goodie bags to the good folk of Totnes.

Customers have been heard to say, especially now that the shop has installed the wonderful window mural (expressly created by Steiner School students), that it is fitting that Greenlife should be in the Market Square, so much the heart of Totnes. Jamie says, "We are certainly very happy to be here. Having been third time lucky, I really hope we will never have to move again!



TOTSOC 2011 AGM

Sue Bennett

The Totnes and District Society Annual General Meeting will be held at the UNITED FREE CHURCH HALL on THURSDAY 6th October 2011. The AGM will start at 7 pm and will be followed by a talk at 7.30pm by Ian Franklin.

Tickets: £1.50 for Members
£3.00 Non-Members

All of the current committee members (see page 8) are prepared to stand again, but the committee does have vacancies, so if you wish to nominate yourself or someone else, please contact Paul Bennett (tel. 10803 865 848 or email paulandsuebennette@btinternet.com).

After the formal meeting (at 7.30pm approx) **Ian Franklin** will be speaking on **“Regenerating Totnes – some lessons from Taunton”**. Ian who is chair of the Totnes Preservation Trust has been the Director of the Project Taunton partnership since 2005. The project which extends to 50 hectares of Taunton town centre is one of the largest regeneration programmes of its kind in the South West and Ian's team is responsible for its delivery.

With the Local Development Plan for Totnes now in place envisaging a 17% increase in the population over the next 15 years coupled with the provision of 4.4 hectares of new employment land the topic of Ian's talk is a most pertinent one. To encourage more members to attend the AGM we have brought the date forward to October to avoid the dark cold/wet nights of November and I do hope you will all make the effort to come out and attend what promises to be an informative and interesting evening.

Draft National Planning Policy Framework

The end of our countryside – what future for the South Hams?

Paul Bennett

The “Draft National Planning Policy Framework” (NPPF) was published on 25 July and is open for consultation until 17 October. It states:

“At the heart of the planning system is a presumption in favour of sustainable development, which should be seen as a golden thread running through both plan making and decision taking. Local planning authorities should plan positively for new development, and approve all individual proposals wherever possible.”

It is this presumption that has created a gulf of opinion between those who see it as a means of encouraging regeneration and growth in the economy set against those who

can see only the creation of a developer's charter and the end of the countryside as we know it. Predictably the forces ranged against each other are the construction industry, house builders etc on one side with the National Trust and the CPRE on the other.

The presumption in favour of development is tempered by development proposals having to accord with statutory plans (e.g. the Development Plan adopted by South Hams District Council last February) and the requirement that such development should be sustainable. The “default position” for determining any planning application is to be “yes” provided it complies with sustainable criteria. In the event we may have much to

thank South Hams Council for in being so ahead of most other local authorities in producing its Development Plan Document for the whole district. This up to date local plan may well provide a welcome bulwark of defence against the predations of developers seeking to take advantage of what is seen, and is intended as such by the government, to be a major shift of climate in favour of the development industry.

The NPPF is heralded as a simplification of existing planning law sweeping away more than 1,000 pages of national planning policy and replacing "*this thicket of documents*" with a little over 50 pages. Whilst perhaps an admirable intention, is it sensible and will it work? Whatever its faults and complexities the present system stemming principally from the Planning Act of 1947 has spared us from the random and spasmodic developments so prevalent in many parts of continental Europe, to say nothing of North America. Overall it has worked well and we should be grateful to the local authority planners who have worked hard to protect their communities over many decades. It is unlikely that in practise the new framework will lead to any better decision making with it being drafted in such general terms as to lead inevitably to challenge by those unhappy with the outcome of a decision.

For the planning system delivering sustainable development means:

- planning for prosperity (an economic role)
- planning for people (a social role)
- planning for places (an environmental role)

The document goes on to say that these "*components should be pursued in an integrated way, looking for solutions which deliver multiple goals.*" It claims that these components need not necessarily be contradictory "*so long as development is planned and undertaken responsibly.*" Pity the poor planner seeking to interpret this without any guidance as to how "*responsibly*" should be defined. This vagueness is a recipe for poor planning and

uncertainty. Bearing in mind the whole tenor of the document, which is to place economic growth at the heart of the reforms what local planning authority is going to run the risk of refusing an application from a wealthy developer with unlimited resources to run an appeal? Unless a local authority is very certain of its grounds for refusal, it will inevitably incline to giving consent simply because of the uncertainty inherent within the proposed new planning framework coupled with the authority's own administrative problems of depleted resources both in terms of finance and staffing.

The document states that the presumption in favour of development will have implications for communities engaging in neighbourhood planning, again emphasizing that neighbourhoods should plan positively to support local development to the extent of promoting more development than envisaged by the Local Plan. How this sits with the Localism Bill is not clear but it may place local communities in a difficult situation where they might be opposed to plans brought forward by a developer beyond those allowed for by the Local Plan.

Whilst existing Green Belts will be protected as will Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) with encouragement being given to enhance these, the document states "*It should not be necessary to designate new Green Belts ...*" One can only hope that South Hams with an extensive area within its boundary designated as an AONB will be afforded protection by the provisions in the NPPF relating to the Natural Environment. What is less encouraging are the doubts hanging over undesignated green open spaces so valuable to local communities but now almost certainly under threat of development from the economic growth imperative enshrined in the document.

Contradictions abound. The Localism Bill stresses the importance of local communities and offers them new powers to shape the planning of their neighbourhoods whilst this document permits neighbourhoods only to

Continued on the next page

increase the amount of development allowed for in a Local Plan but not seek any reduction. There is commitment to cut down pollution and congestion through the greater use of public transport yet because of the reduction in the public transport grant, bus services have been reduced so drastically that some people in rural areas without cars have become isolated and those with cars inevitably use them because of inadequate public transport alternatives.

It is interesting that an earlier draft of the document referred to the presumption in favour of sustainable development as being "**central** to the approach taken to both plan-making and decision-taking" whereas the present document states that the presumption "*should be seen as a **golden thread** running through both plan making and decision taking*"; a use of softer words but the

reality remains the same. Local planning authorities such as South Hams will be facing an uphill struggle to stem a likely tide of market housing development. The ability to compel the provision of affordable housing is weakened thereby undermining the objective that "*Everyone should have the opportunity to live in high quality well designed homes, which they can afford, in a community where they want to live.*"

Planning policy should not be used as a vehicle to engender growth; it must be cast in wider objective terms holding the ring between competing views and interests; above all it should protect and enhance our built and natural environment. Whether having an up-to-date Local Plan will save the South Hams from the worst depredations of the new planning framework, time alone will tell.

Pub Quiz at the Bay Horse

Sue Bennett

Around 40 people including some members of your committee, their spouses, partners and friends participated in a "benefit" night at the Bay Horse one Monday in August to attempt to swell the almost empty TOTSOC coffers to help pay for this edition of Contact. It turned out to be a very successful evening with **£140** being raised for TOTSOC. Happily the overall winners were a team comprising committee members Dave Mitchell and Louis Victory and their wives Janet and Mary who took home some liquid prizes. The booby prize (past copies of Contact magazine!) went to a young German couple who, gamely wrestling with language/spelling/cultural differences, still managed a very respectable score.

We have arranged another quiz evening at the Bay Horse on Monday 12th March 2012. A long time ahead I know but these evenings are very popular. So if you feel you do know your Arts from your EBooks and wish to join us and make up a team (4 people needed per team) or wish to join a team please email Paul and Sue Bennett on "paulandsuebennett@btinternet.com" or telephone 01803 865848 and leave a message on our answerphone if there is no reply.

Sue Bennett

P.S. The Leechwell Garden Association are holding a quiz evening at the Bay Horse Inn on MONDAY 10th October 2011.

A Plea from the Secretary

It is important for us to build up members' email addresses, it saves a great deal of money on postage, so please email me **now** at

paulandsuebennett@btinternet.com

The TotSoc Committee

The current TotSoc Committee Members are:

Judy Westacott	chair	cllr.westacott@southhams.gov.uk
Paul Bennett	secretary and planning officer	paulandsuebennett@btinternet.com
Lionel Harper	membership secretary	harp@prandl.plus.com
Sue Bennett	minute secretary	paulandsuebennett@btinternet.com
Tony Mead	treasurer	anthonyjmead@tiscali.co.uk
Jim Carfrae		jim@carfrae.com
John Keleher		john.keleher@virgin.net
Dave Mitchell		dave@zenoshrdlu.com
Louis Victory	vice-chair	louis.victory@btinternet.com

Joining TotSoc

Please complete the form below and send it to:

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10 Castle Street,
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