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Alliance of Folkestone Residents Associations

## Folkestone Place Plan (draft)

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Report Authors

We Made That

Commissioning Authority

Folkestone and Hythe District Council

Response drafted by

AFRA (Alliance of Folkestone Residents Associations)

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## Introduction

The construction of a Place Plan is intended to support regeneration for this generation and the next generation. From this framework, a series of development projects and programmes will change the face of Folkestone future.

Overall, The latest iteration of the draft Place Plan resembles something of a cold collation – an old fashioned phrase for a mixed buffet – it consists of a familiar set of issues which are well presented, with no real surprises. The opportunity to submit responses on this final instalment closes on 20<sup>th</sup> August.

There are three substantive and inter-related elements to this work:

1. The Draft Place Plan
2. The Urban Appraisal report
3. The report on the recent consultation

Each element is reviewed in turn, firstly examining the draft *Place Plan*.

## The draft Place Plan

This work is of huge significance to every one of the 100,000 residents in the Folkestone and Hythe District, most of whom will have reasons to visit the centre of the District at Folkestone Town Centre.

The content of this report is a rehearsal of existing data, intelligence and materials, referencing decades of similar previous studies and reports in some detail. This is actually a useful exercise.

It would normally be the role of a senior Council officer to produce a report and recommendations.

For those seeking to predict the potential outcomes of this outsourcing, it is worth bearing in mind the competencies and capacity of the District Council, which were apparently insufficient to action this professionally executed editing work, which has enjoyed only minimal public scrutiny.

Moreover, it's not unreasonable to say that the District Council is identified as having failed painfully in successive administrations to address the message of 22 earlier studies to any meaningful extent.

Sadly, it is clear that the economic, social and infrastructure issues have worsened considerably in the last 20-40 year, for a variety of reasons. Holding your breath for meaningful community engagement or coherent and concerted action is therefore not recommended, on health grounds.

The result of the WMT exercise is captured in all three elements, as already mentioned:

The draft Place Plan sets out an effective summary of issues, with a relatively small number of errors and omissions, as might be expected from a consultancy with considerable experience in this work, given an extensive and fairly unstructured brief that showed little reference to the earlier studies.

The outcome of the work highlights six major themes, listed as 'Missions' which permeate the Plan.

- Mission 1: Celebrate what's great
- Mission 2: Town centre for the future
- Mission 3: A place for all voices
- Mission 4: Moving sustainably
- Mission 5: Access to opportunity
- Mission 6: Deliver sustainable quality

These are not new ideas, but a reiteration of key elements needed for regeneration work.

Again, a careful reading induces the possible conclusion that the report represents something of an own goal in charting six well-established issues which have not been addressed by our civic leaders.

However, the draft Plan now provides a significant and in many ways positive challenge to the Council. If it has been possible for a series of – in many cases – imaginative propositions to be formulated by a team with limited knowledge of the locality and community within a very short space of time, then it begs questions as to the style and qualities of civic leadership for a town with poor infrastructure, poor relationships and a poor perception of the town by its community.

*".....feedback from community engagement reveals that levels of social capital are low and the relationships between different communities and between residents and the council has been strained..."*

*The ability of the Council* to address these points is, as suggested above, entirely unclear, but the report and draft Plan is not without a practical set of answers.

The key tool is a matrix which cross-references a series of 'Missions' with the identification of the aforementioned six Action Areas:

- Station;
- Sandgate Road;
- Town Centre core;
- Creative Quarter;
- Coastal and Heritage;
- Harbour and Sunny Sands.

The cynical might be tempted to dub this report '*Mission Implausible*' - given the historic lack of credibility in terms of methodology, internal logic and historic agency for taking action. That would be to do the report and the plan a disservice. With further work and real leadership, there is much here to be receptive to.

There is no escaping the final message, which although it almost literally forms the small print at the very end of the Plan, carries a very clear and very fair echo of the concerns expressed consistently during the consultation – more work is needed. These concerns remain entirely valid, but it would seem at this stage to be unfair to address them to the team brought in to cover for the Council's lack of capacity, expertise or imagination.

Readers will be left in no doubt of the need for a change of approach in civic leadership: more engagement is specifically required for this Plan to have either meaning or any prospect of success.

To be helpful, the totality of around 100 potential projects within an overarching regeneration programme is initiated by the consultation management team with a useful starting point of seven first step actions.

In the end, debating whether these are in fact the correct programmes in detail or not will be fairly fruitless.

Firstly it needs to be recognised that this work was in essence the best possible product which could be culled from discussions with a fairly selective audience in order to support the substance of the report.

Secondly, the reality is that *this is an illustration, not a plan*. It indicates some of the ideas which could be worked up into practical projects or programmes – and the extent to which this will happen is entirely unclear at this point.

Folkestone is a town which could have a good future: it is up to the community to ask more of the Council and for the Council to show greater energy, capacity and commitment to implementation and community participation.

As many local people have already said: **“This is OUR town. It must be OUR plan.”**

Conclusion in one sentence:

**“The Council needs to radically rebalance its approach in order to address issues with and for our community”**

Additional notes and observations on the model and structure.

The Plan overall could perhaps have done more to address issues of inequality and the need for greater social justice, but perhaps it is right that this issue is one for a political and policy framework.

In the model as far as it goes, there is only limited likelihood of substantial social change, due to the stringent economic situation which is recognised within the reporting and the draft Plan.

The most unsatisfactory outcome in terms of community cohesion would be merely for some limited fringe benefits to emerge from further investment, trickling down for those living on the margins of the community, whilst the well-established might be well-assured there are continuing and exciting new opportunities for them.

The definition of what a Place Plan is all about is set out clearly in the **Wikipedia** definition of Placemaking, setting out as the very first principle which should guide such work the following statement:

***“The Community Knows Best***

*An important aspect of placemaking is taking into account inputs of the people who will be using the public space most. That is, to say, the community for which the public space is intended. This is important because members of the community are likely to have useful insights into how the space does - or should - function, as well as a historical perspective of the area, and an understanding of what does and does not matter to other members of the community.”*

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Placemaking>

A snapshot of some potential caveats and concerns on reading through the Plan in reference to the *six missions* which underpin the descriptions and indicative suggestions for the six *action areas*, have been noted with very brief comments as follows:

- M1 Celebration
  - This Plan has to be seen for what it is: very much a partial celebration of community character and the town's core assets – something of a post-lockdown party, perhaps.
- M2 Town centre for the future
  - “Look no further” there is the central over-promise and under-deliver history which has failed the majority of the community over decades: needs further work and thought.
  - Future imperfect: notably only a very generalised vision emerges for the next generation and the marginalised: the young, the poor, those from minority groups.
- M3 All voices
  - Again, the exercise to date has disappointed on a massive scale (see further below)
  - There is as yet no practical mechanism for ongoing consultation or engagement
  - 17 young people represents a very limited effort in engaging the next generation
  - Few community groups were engaged, mostly representing ‘establishment’ voices
- M4 Sustainability
  - The minimal reference to climate change needs little comment: no planet...nothing!
- M5 Opportunity
  - For developers, this is a continuing feast; for the community, more substance is needed in projects such as new uses for urban space, significant new partnership working and a radical departure in pump-priming smaller scale projects, rather than the serial indicators of a propensity for large-scale development grandeur.
- M6 Sustainable quality
  - Development and contracting history will limit confidence in planning oversight – a team which has a key role: the report and Plan understandably have little to say about the current team of officers and the degree to which their competencies, expertise and experience and the overall structure of the Council align with the vision of the Plan.

While it may seem wrong to some to give such a short synopsis of this major work, the reason is relatively simple, as set out in the main conclusions reached in response to a first reading of the draft Place Plan and its accompanying reference materials.

The next section of this response, explores in slightly more detail the way in which the *Urban Appraisal* serves to identify something of a herd of ‘elephants in the room’.

# Folkestone Urban appraisal

## Summary

This is possibly the most useful document, collating multiple references to FHDC characteristics, which might have been assumed to be in place already, in order to underpin the policy-making process and the work of senior officers. Apparently this is not the case.

This piece of work effectively and efficiently iterates some of the disturbing and shocking issues for our community and the future of our Town. To show disinterest in any section of our community is to disregard personal and professional responsibility; it is also a near certain recipe for failure, in the current social and economic context.

## Context: identifying the challenge for our community

Overall this particular paper reads as something of an indictment of the administration of the District Council (of whichever political persuasion) and its partners over the last three decades.

No less than **22 previous studies** are cited – which all have currency and relevance, but which all share the verdict that there are only the most limited indications of actions fulfilled or taken to a strategic level.

Among some of the most significant challenges listed in the Appraisal are a series of deficiencies in housing, education & skills and community participation.

Regrettably, there is no clear indication of the pathway to solutions or work to ameliorate these major issues set out within the Plan.

Indeed, the **Key findings** set out something of a litany of missed opportunities which follow a pattern, which indicates narrowness of vision and avoidance of responsibility through a technical abnegation. While the District Council is not responsible for health or education services, for example, there is a clear problem with these services failing to be provided in tandem with developments in and around the Town. The result is usually a deficiency of choice or opportunity for those with limited personal resources. The proposals and *opportunities* set out in the closing summative section show the need for such partnerships, as well as the value of professional expertise, partnership roles and good local knowledge.

## Climate change and sustainability

Disappointingly, as mentioned in the review of the main section of the Place Plan, the *Urban Appraisal* has very little to say on the wider implications of climate change, the implications for development, sustainability, quality of life, waste management, etc.

This has to be noteworthy, given the proximity of the Town to the sea and the overall District topography.

Some residual errors – such as the incorrect designation of the starting point for the Leas Coastal Park – will be picked up by experts, purists and community activists. However, there is some point to assessing the natural amenities – and useful food for thought in the current scarcity of green spaces, public amenities – despite some sites in the Town literally gathering weeds and being barred to public access.

## Business support and employment

For a commercially focused study, there is insufficient detail on the need for investment and regeneration to be facilitated by local administrations by working to support community, business support and infrastructure initiatives. The latter represents a key employment sector.

Employment in significant numbers through business support, finance and professional enterprises are shown to provide almost 6000 jobs, with little evidence of how this can be nurtured, preserved and developed. In another reality check, it emerges that there are now around 5000 claimants – amounting to one sixth of the working population – a figure which has increased 100% in just a year.

### *Investment*

In some signs of the imbalance of stakeholder voice, perhaps, pre-eminence in the report is given to the creative sector with an unsubstantiated attribution of 900 jobs created.

There seems to be a recurring pattern of near-eulogistic references to Creative Folkestone, which is also cited as ‘investing’ in refurbishing delapidated buildings – described as *creating opportunity*, but also clearly creating capital gain – which is not to say that there is an absence of social responsibility in play. The explicit policies which would support the former are regrettably just not sufficiently visible.

The answer of course is that the investment by the Creative Foundation as a major landlord is extremely important but should also be seen within a more balanced local economy, with social enterprise, cooperatives and community initiatives forming part of overall activity.

### *Housing and development planning*

Modest housing development (other than the major Seafront and Harbour programmes) includes relatively little supply of local affordable housing and almost no social housing at all

A fascinating *development timeline* highlights the history of land-ownership and the evidence of patronage by wealthy individuals in the town’s history of development: has this changed?

Little community development leadership has impacted upon the town since the post-war period of national renewal and regeneration.

The decline of the Town is equally very clearly set out in the three decades leading up to the millennium, at which point there is a reversion to the historic dependency upon a benevolent patron and investor.

Planning applications again clearly show the dominance and significance of Roger De Haan and it is not the purpose of this paper to debate the unquestionable contribution of the De Haan family to Folkestone. However the dominance and dependency of the Town and District and the question of whether this has inadvertently let civic leaders ‘off the hook’ are matters for legitimate debate.

### *Data, strategy and causal factors: transport infrastructure as a sign of decline*

Of particular interest are the key sections of data and analysis of how the Town is currently faring, both in terms of the infrastructure and in terms of the wider population.

Exploring a sample section of this report provides some clues to what has gone wrong and what needs to be done to open up a new set of prospects and opportunities.

The **Transport and Movement** section notably highlights a series of issues – which serve to illustrate the overall verdict - in this response - of inaction as a causal factor in the risk of continuing decline for the Town Centre.

A lack of imagination and a lack of concerted action with partners on these can be perceived in other segments of the Urban Appraisal which in turn feeds into the substantive Draft Plan.

Among several notable issues and statements within the Appraisal from this particular section are:

- *Historic ring-road design as a legacy from the port era*
- *Middleburgh square “an impenetrable boundary” to town centre*
- *Pedestrian network, with some significant accessibility issues*
- *Cycling not well provided for overall in a “hostile environment”*
- *Lack of integration, notably to help make the significant rail links more attractive*
- *Bus services good, central....; bus station set for redevelopment!*
- *Significant car usage shown as essential for retail centres, with limited parking*
- *Usage possibly affected by pedestrian issues, lack of integration etc.*
- *Limited charging points for electric vehicles*
- *High Street footfall down 16% over four years*

### *Community cohesion*

The Appraisal includes some devastatingly sharp notes on socio-economic factors, and yet provides few answers to these concerns within the draft Plan, as noted earlier.

The following are key quotations from the Appraisal:

- “The research show that Folkestone is increasingly divided and unequal”
- “Folkestone is a divided town. There are pockets of severe deprivation around the centre and north-east of the town. Four areas are in the top 10% most deprived in the country and struggle particularly with low incomes and high unemployment and crime.”
- “For example, the life expectancy between least and most deprived is 6.9 years lower for men and 3.7 years lower for women”
- “...there is a clear opportunity for the town centre to fulfil a stronger community, social and civic function.”
- “Overall the combination of limited connections, steep gradients, and routes that require the use of steps affect pedestrian access to the harbour and seafront.”
- “Folkestone lacks a competitive leisure offer.”

### *Land occupancy and living in this Place*

Key issues identified in the **Land Usage** section also highlight this sense of reactive, rather than proactive policy-making. Again, a genuine Place Plan has people at the heart of the proposals, which is not as strongly evident as it should be here.

- Dominance of retail
- Lack of leisure & community uses and cultural destinations
- Key anchor stores are closing or have closed (such as Debenhams)
- Lack of quality guest accommodation & hotels
- No healthcare facilities found in the Town Centre (but the Debenhams site will be used for vaccinations)

The matter of the **night-time economy** has been dealt with in what really does seem to be a highly inappropriate way, failing the test of impartiality with brokerage work by the Night Time Industries Association, very clearly a lobby group which raised its profile in seeking an end to lockdown. AFRA members have pressed for years for the issue of licencing policy to be addressed properly and with a proper balance between the enterprise and residential interests. Some truly horrifying testimony emerged in live session during the consultation workshops, which demonstrated the serious failings of licencing policy arising from statutory neglect of a licencing review, in a trail of alcoholic abuse with follows a straight line from Sandgate Road to Tontine Street

## *Character and perception*

Two other brief points, to round off this section of the review of the draft Place Plan will focus on a symptom of missed opportunity and misdirection of the discussion – again, the responsibility of the commissioning.

Firstly: the *Perceived Character* mapping serves to highlight the extent and strength – clearly underused – of the historic character area. Inevitably, the heritage community were not sufficiently involved in this piece of work and some avoidable offence was caused, not least by the exclusion of the Town's patron saint, St. Eanswythe, from the original mapping of the Town Centre action zone.

Secondly, there are so many missed opportunities to realise potential in a creative way which admits to the paucity of financial resources or investment for some of the core issues facing our community.

This means that there is no indication of how we might address such issues because there is very little meaningful reference to the deployment of the key asset of human energy in the community.

The evidence that there is a lack of green space, space for children and families could surely lead to greater opportunities for community gardens; the lack of much needed skills training begs the question of why these cannot be asked of those with time and experience to offer; the somewhat ageing Neighbourhood Watch is not mentioned as a partial means of addressing the behaviours which are becoming a daily dispiriting experience for retailers, residents and visitors.

And so on.

And so it goes: the Appraisal highlights need, but only very faintly alludes to remedy, before it skips back to status quo recommendations which are assumed to be the property of the decision makers and the developers, rather than the community.

## Place Plan Engagement report

Finally, we refer to earlier and widely shared concerns over what has broadly been seen as a necessarily limited exercise – which is not necessarily a criticism of the professional capability of the consultancy.

There is little doubt that the genesis of this work lies in the inadequacies of the District Council – lacking strategic capacity to review existing data; failing to find mechanisms to reach out to the community; engaging in a commercial substitute for a commitment to real regeneration.

Ironically, this report on consultation again points the way forward to a better possibility: whether the District Council members and officers will grasp that possibility is entirely a different matter.

AFRA has already issued a statement, which is attached as an appendix to this report.

This section of the response simply adds some points of interest from the latest iteration of the consultation work in this new update:

### *A cast of thousands....?*

The cover shot of Bonmarché provides what might be seen as an ironic visual metaphor for the consultation. This shop is named in French, meaning something found cheaply and has now been closed, having failed.

More seriously, the final report provides yet more evidence of consultation exclusion, which cannot be fully attributed to or blamed upon the CoVid19 pandemic. This work clearly failed to take account of the well-known digital divide affecting those in poorer households and a significant proportion of older members of the community

To celebrate the use of social media securing 2000 page views in 6 months would be ill-advised when a single post on the Veolia contract issues recently secured 7000 views in 48 hours.

The listings of those involved in this exercise reads unfortunately as something of an exclusive club: those in limited Council contact listings and those who in more ways than one are well-connected.

There is no reasonable excuse for the parsimony of the publicity. There were few print or broadcast media mentions if any – and therefore significant sections of the community were not engaged.

### *Where next with community engagement?*

Adding insult to the injury of poor overall engagement and the over-egging of views from a somewhat selective elite, the final failure is the lack of commitment to the one key outcome which would have made a real difference.

Thus should have been a determination to create a standing community consultative body – such as has been in place in many other localities for many years.

#### Impact in numbers: one-to-ones & workshops

**46** one-to-one conversations

**15** virtual workshops to discuss priorities and ambitions, including young people

**96** invited to workshop events

**121** workshop participants; residents, community groups, businesses and stakeholders,

including **17** school students

- 46 privileged conversations
- 15 discussions, over just three months
- 96 invitations
- 121 participants from 100k/54k Town
- 14k 60+ – 25% of population digital divide
- Next generation: 17 of 19000 U30 pop.
- From just two schools....
- No analysis by gender, ethnicity or other

Detailed one-to-one conversations have been held with representatives from the following organisations and groups:

- Black Wood Bayne & Seijo Associates
- Creative Quarter Strategic Regeneration Group
- East Cliff Creatives
- FIRRG
- The Leas Resident's Association (TLRA)
- The Workshop
- Business Advisory Board
- Stagecoach
- Creative Folkestone
- Cycling UK
- EKC Group
- Ellandi
- F51 skatepark
- Council stakeholders
- Folkestone College
- Folkestone Town Council
- HEART (HEritage & ARTs Tourism) Forum
- Folkestone & District Local History Society
- High Street Fund applicants
- Kent County Council
- MPL Group
- Otterpool Park LLP
- Pillory Barn
- Radnor Estate representative
- SAGA
- Folkestone Harbour Arm
- Folkestone Fringe
- Stand House
- The Assembly Line
- Seafrost Development Company/The Roger
- De Haan Charitable Trust
- Touch Base Care
- Turner Academy
- Turner Schools
- Urban Room

In the wider listing of those “engaged with”, not all were able to attend

“At the beginning of the process, We Made That worked with the council to identify a list of groups and individuals to engage with: strategic & delivery partners, key stakeholders, community & interest groups, business groups and residents’ groups.”

Therein lies the possible problem: **this is an administration which has not routinely practised the art of listening.**

“The establishment” were predominant in 1:1 stakeholder conversations – this particular listing shows those invited for these privileged opportunities.

DeHaan associated groupings appear 7 times out of 34 entities listed  
Overall, there is an eclectic selection of educators (3), lobby and civic voice groupings (9) and a strong set of commercial interests and major landowners

Where is the indication of listening to the marginalised or their representatives?  
The inclusion of KCC and FTC is on the borderline of misrepresentation, given the limited opportunity for elected representatives on these bodies to have an input.

*Survey analysis: 62% female; 91% straight; 85% white British; 81% non-disabled;*

The meagre and skewed demographic feeds into some truly startling statistical claims for the main plan:

“40% of 77 people agreed” (which would equate to almost 31 people)

One could be forgiven that this is somewhat reminiscent of the gimmicks used by an anti-ageing cream commercial.

## Conclusion:

Many will find copious material here to exercise their personal perspectives in undertaking an intricate dissection of the content and the accuracy or cogency of the content.

This, with all due respect, is largely irrelevant when you drill down into the core issue:

1. This is a report into a history of civic failures, which were already well-documented
2. The recommendations do not present a coherent or credible new plan for local regeneration
3. The exercise has been dressed up with a consultation which failed to engage.

The draft Place Plan is of course the responsibility of the District Council, not the consultancy.

The District Council can no longer shirk the responsibility of remediation of the work to date followed by implementation. Civic leadership has been left exposed by these observations, findings and notes of advice from regeneration experts. It cannot easily be dismissed, nor is it simply a case of contract completion for FHDC.

The willingness to sign off on this Plan must be assessed as unacceptable without further assurances, primarily because the issues identified are not adequately addressed through unequivocal commitment to Council actions.

These should involve firstly taking ownership for their response to the Plan’s ‘Missions’ and secondly making an explicit commitment to genuine community engagement and community service.

**Final verdict: The Place Plan has some of the right answers – but leaves too many unanswered questions.**

Once again, we offer the reminder: *“If this is our Town, this must be our Plan.”* Ownership is more than property...