

Planning for a Brave New World?



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SOME 65 years ago, as well as winning the Second World War, the government was thinking about how all the homes damaged in the blitz would be replaced.

Clearly hundreds of thousands of new homes would be needed. In those days, solutions to such national problems were not left to 'market forces'; central and local governments saw it as their problem. The result was the post-war building boom.

Some politicians, architects and social reformers saw the

future as lying with blocks of flats, although most of these individuals would not want to live in flats themselves. Surveys (by Mass-Observation) of families made homeless by the war painted a rather different picture.

After being boarders in other people's houses everyone wanted a home of their own; an aspiration which could well be met by living in a flat.

However, the most wanted 'dream home' was a small modern suburban house with all mod-cons.

Without question they wanted privacy, a little garden and a building which responded to some domestic pride.

Churchill planned half a million prefabricated houses although, in the end, less than 200,000 were built. As far as I know, none were constructed in Horsham but there are still a

few places where these little homes, intended to last for five years, are still standing, most of them tenderly looked after and loved by their residents.

Horsham, like most places, had conventional brick-built council houses. Although many are flats, most of these are two-storey units that look (and feel) like semi-detached houses.

Those that were not sold off in the Thatcher years are now owned by housing associations.

The surprising thing is how little has changed in people's attitudes. Although flat-dwelling suits some, it seems that many people would still prefer to live in a house with a garden.

Developers recognise this, so that is what they have mostly been building for sale. But when it comes to the quota of 'affordable' homes which they are required to build (if

enforced by the council planners), developers choose to build flats.

This immediately sets the social housing apart from the owner-occupied. Not the route which sociologists recommend.

Affordable housing is not helped, either, by the government edict for energy-saving ('green') construction which is considerably more costly than a standard house. This makes developers doubly reluctant as we are seeing in the West of Horsham developments.

Many of us feel that Horsham District Council has lost its way. By relaxing its quota of affordable homes it is satisfying neither the local need nor the government requirements.

By allowing designs which differ from owner-occupier homes it is likely to store up

problems for the future, recalling the stigma which used to be attached to council estates.

The basic problem seems to be that councils have lost the ability to plan.

Yes, we have overall 'strategic' plans, but what about the detail?

Or do we leave that to market forces? Somehow I doubt if that will give us the best solution.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 261905.