

Dialogue with local authority chiefs



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THE HORSHAM Society last week met Tom Crowley, Horsham District Council's chief executive, and council leader Robert Nye.

One hundred members heard from Mr Crowley about the challenges which face Horsham today and some of the opportunities which the future might offer. In his presentation, Mr Nye pointed out that Horsham District Council is Conservative and would act as such.

What he failed to mention was that most of the councillors

for the town are not Conservatives. This poses a difficulty for The Horsham Society as it is, by constitution, non party-political.

After the council representatives had finished, the meeting was opened for questions from members. A question about the town 'Special Charge' led to others about the need for a town council so that residents had the advantages of a parish council, including the ability to make more locally democratic decisions about some of what goes on in the town.

Mr Nye emphasised the estimated costs of such a move which, he felt, would give no great advantage over the present arrangements. There was a call for a referendum.

It was suggested by one society member that the proposed pedestrianisation of

East Street would be largely ineffective considering all the various uses which will be allowed by the scheme. Mr Crowley felt that it would work and could, if necessary, be amended based on experience.

There was some discussion about Horsham Town Hall. The society had campaigned for community use but the society committee acknowledged that decisions had now been made which made further lobbying a waste of time.

Mr Crowley announced that Bill's Produce will not be using the marriage room or the cells downstairs and that these areas could be refurbished. Upstairs would be available for occasional community use although there would be limitations because providing disabled access would not be practical for the cost involved.

Mr Nye pointed out the

pressures the council was under to reduce expenditure. The Arts Centre, for example, would have to raise its prices. This led to concerns from the audience that some of the societies promised a share in the use of the centre would no longer be able to afford to do so.

Mr Nye admitted that personally he was not a great supporter of the arts and thought that the user should pay. We were left with the question: should these activities be subsidised by the council tax payers or should each pay for itself?

There were questions about so-called affordable housing and about the provision of infrastructure and facilities. The meeting wondered if letting market forces decide was going to give the answers that Horsham town really needs, while developers were pleading

poverty.

The Horsham Society has decided that the town's built-up area is in danger of getting too large and HDC should really consider a new town to allow long-term development, well past the present planning period.

Other topics covered by the question time included councillors' expenses (the audience, many of whom were volunteers, were not convinced) and 'A' boards outside shops, on which all agreed that there should be greater control.

The meeting was a great success. We did not agree all the time but it did illustrate where more discussion was needed to ensure that Horsham remains a great place to live.

If you would like to join The Horsham Society, visit www.horshamsociety.org or telephone 261905.