

Savings don't have to mean service cuts



by **John Steele**
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WE READ every week of our county and district councils' plans to reduce costs as they struggle to cope with the realities of the recession and falling income.

Each of us reacts differently depending on the services we rely upon and our personal experience; rarely do we think about the problem as a whole.

The truth is that our councils are expected to deliver more than we can afford. Year after year governments have placed responsibilities on councils

without necessarily bothering to work out whether they are affordable.

At the same time there has been a dramatic shift away from locally raised taxes to central grants. The effect has been to concentrate power in Whitehall and make it very difficult for councils to engage effectively with their communities about priorities and the real cost of local services.

This problem is not helped by the confusion within local government structures and a lack of transparency and accountability. Take roads for example. West Sussex County Council is responsible for roads, pavements, cycling, road signs and road safety, and on-street parking.

Horsham District Council deals with off-street parking,

cleaning, nameplates and town centre management. So we inevitably have duplication in staffing and costly mechanisms for co-operation; and there is nobody accountable as a whole for our streets.

West Sussex claims responsibility for business advice (whatever that means) and Horsham for economic development. West Sussex claims conservation and arts and heritage, whilst the real work is done by Horsham. I could go on.

Apart from costly duplication there are also services which in truth we could do without. Why for example should the council cut the grass verges outside our homes? Better, surely, that residents take more responsibility and the money saved is spent on communal areas such as parks.

The councils themselves could be pruned to save money. With cabinet-style local government does Horsham still need 44 district councillors? Would the quality of local decision making suffer if the number were halved and money saved spent on services?

Then there are our 27 parish and neighbourhood and councils. They perform a critical role within their communities with their fingers on the local pulse, delivering services and acting as a voice for their residents.

And, perhaps because this is the only level of government where there is a direct link between cost and local taxes, they are remarkably economic to run.

The district council could devolve more responsibilities to parishes which could then

decide their own priorities and how much they were prepared to pay for them.

It is possible to make savings without cutting services but only if we are prepared to face radical change. We should sort out once and for all which tier of local government is the best to deliver which services and eliminate all duplication; stop providing nice to have services which residents can provide for themselves; and devolve more responsibility to local communities. Are our local leaders up for radical change?

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town.

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.