

At last, a possible vision for the future of our town

FUTURE generations may look back on Horsham District Council's publication last week of a report on the future prosperity of Horsham as a significant landmark in the history of our town.

The town centre as we know it today, with its pedestrianised Carfax, Swan Walk and Albion Way, was the product of 20-plus years of careful planning and council entrepreneurship.

Some aspects have their critics, and the final phase including the Forum was scarcely its crowning glory, but there can be no doubt that the town benefited enormously from having a guiding vision and energy.

Since then we have drifted. Towns that do not



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continue to adapt decline, and The Horsham Society has for a number of years lamented the lack of any clear plan for the future.

There have been one-off laudable initiatives like the East Street improvement but no coherent plan.

Only the council is in a position to lead change positively, to take a long term view, and where necessary help to assemble schemes, so the promise over the summer to turn this report into

a comprehensive town framework to guide development over perhaps the next 20 years is a huge step forward.

The report is very aspirational but there are some exciting ideas and a number of welcome guiding principles.

It has not shied away from the difficult issues such as the problems of Albion Way, the poor and uninviting entrance routes to the town, the fragmented vehicle and pedestrian routes, and the threats to the future viability of our local economy from Crawley and towns further afield.

The suggestion that Albion Way might be downgraded as a vehicle route, with traffic calmed enough to create an

attractive boulevard, re-establishing old links between the town centre, the park and residential areas, is particularly imaginative.

The clear message that we should adopt a town-first policy which avoids the creation of competing shopping centres on the outskirts is welcome.

So, too, is the vision that the town should become a hub for culture and the creative arts, though the report is rather weak on how this might be achieved.

Another proposal which we have long advocated is the use of planning briefs which are designed to guide the development of larger sites, something which the council has in recent years refused to consider.

A potentially controversial idea is to consider depedestrianising West Street by allowing some limited traffic outside the hours of 10am and 4pm.

This could address its rather bleak and intimidating appearance at night and help promote the evening economy.

But whatever people think of the individual ideas in the report what is important is that we should draw from it a vision for the future, a template against which individual developments can be tested and longer term change planned.

Town plans that are poorly designed and implemented can become a straightjacket which obstructs change but all the

evidence is that with the right leadership Horsham can, and will continue, to avoid that trap.

This could be a historic turning point. We hope the council will stage an exhibition to allow as many people as possible to see and comment on the ideas. Meanwhile you can view it on the council website.

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 our website www.horshamsociety.org or telephone 01403 263870.