

Council is facing a perfect storm of discontent

LAST week's County Times pictured the new Conservative leader of Horsham District Council, Ray Dawe, facing a perfect storm of discontent. Whether it's Broadbridge Heath Leisure Centre, parking charges, the use of consultants, the Town Hall or new housing, at every turn the council is facing public opposition.

Whatever the rights and wrongs the council has been on the back foot because it has appeared to be rail-roading through its changes without proper explanation and consultation. It's been a PR disaster.

Ray Dawe will hopefully use the honeymoon period given to new leaders to articulate his vision for the future of our district. But he faces huge challenges. The council has to balance its budget in the face of lower government grants and after many years of careful management that isn't going to be achieved without some pain. And it isn't going to get any easier in the years ahead.



by **John Steele**
of the **Horsham Society**

In our hearts we all know this is true, yet when a particular change impacts on us we are only too ready to join the clamour of discontent. We all have to grow up.

The council must stop thinking residents are too stupid to understand, and explain more. Residents need to be more realistic. For example, there is no point in railing against parking charges unless you have a better suggestion for balancing the budget. Everybody's sacred cow is somebody else's sacrificial lamb.

We have some immediate suggestions for Ray Dawe.

Lack of resources today must not stop planning for the future. The Horsham Town

Plan is an essential step in that process. And he should immediately champion an annual arts festival which could grow gradually year by year, eventually significantly helping our local economy.

The council needs to flex its muscles more and act as an agent for change. A good place to start would be to get a grip on our shopping area by managing it as a holistic business bringing together traders, landlords and the voluntary sector to breathe new life into empty units.

The council must accept that there are many services that could be run better and more cheaply using volunteers. It is not just a question of cost; volunteering helps build and sustain communities.

When looking for savings the council should realise that not all areas are starting from the same point. Those that have been innovative and built services using volunteers must be rewarded and

encouraged rather than face arbitrary cuts. Horsham Museum and the Capitol have both attracted strong bodies of volunteers which provide services which otherwise would be unaffordable. They are exemplars, and the rest of the council should follow their lead.

Finally, we the public must engage more, and at the right time. It is amazing that local councillors and residents should express surprise at the recent proposal for expanding the town north of the A264. It has been crystal clear for the last four years that this was coming and the Horsham Society has warned about the consequences many times.

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.