

John Steele: will our council rise to the planning challenge?



Council leader Ray Dawe has taken personal charge of the preparation of the District Plan.

We wish him well because he is not starting from a position of strength.

His first challenge is to arrive at a target for new housing that he can convince both local people and a planning inspector is reasonable.

He touched on the key problem in a recent article, 'everyone understands the need for houses for our children... but often has a reason for not wanting them in their own town and village'.



The UK needs more houses

If he were just talking about building houses for our children, there wouldn't be a problem and resistance would be minimal.

By any rational assessment the UK needs more houses and they are needed where there is

work and where people want to live, which includes the South-East.

The young and those with lower paid jobs are already being squeezed out of our local housing market.

More houses aren't a

complete solution but no more houses will make things worse.

This is not to suggest that we should just keep building in a race to meet an inexorable demand, as housebuilders would have us do.

Horsham District Council has tried to assess its housing target through a series of complex studies.

But it is not an exact science and none are completely convincing.

The task for Mr Dawe is to pluck a figure out of the welter of data that he can explain in simple terms and defend in a public hearing.

Then he must decide where the houses will be built and who they are being built for.

The approach adopted by the council in 2007 to locate almost all new housing in two strategic sites has been shown to be flawed.

It puts too much power in the hands of a few developers

to decide what will be built and when.

Yet the council has kept its head in the sand and continued to pursue a policy of identifying huge new sites in Southwater, Billingshurst and north of Horsham.

This would produce the worst of all worlds: developers would still have the upper hand and the character of our towns would be threatened.

In the case of Horsham, the proposals would create a new orphan community on our doorstep with no ties to the town.

Instead of this ill-judged, lazy approach the council should have spent the last few years working with local communities to agree how best to achieve organic growth.

It should also have worked much harder and faster to develop a new market town.

The council has said that a new town would need the

support of neighbouring councils.

This will clearly not be forthcoming and in our view is not necessary.

If there were a genuine will to build a new town the council would just get on with it.

What we need is strong leadership. It's not too late to rescue the situation with a complete rethink, but time is running out.

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 261640.