

John Steele: the council must be guided by its own policies



A feature of our planning system is the requirement on local councils to set out their policies in some detail in a hierarchy of planning documents. They are the result of a great deal of detailed work and public consultation and state clearly what sort of development will be permitted and where.

Only six months ago Horsham District Council adopted the Horsham

Town Plan which sets out an imaginative vision for future development designed to ensure it remains a competitive, thriving town which meets the needs of residents, businesses and visitors.

The plan is intended to steer potential developers towards the overall aims, aspirations and priorities for the town.

Will it be successful? This depends upon whether the council has the strength of will to make it work.

It is a long term plan much of which will require persuasion, encouragement and taking opportunities to complete parts of the jigsaw as they arise over the next ten years or so.

Because it is the sum of its

parts it is essential that the integrity of the whole is not lost through failure to keep to the plan, particularly in the critical early stages.

The council has immense leverage and responsibility. Not only is it the planning authority with the power to insist that properly adopted plans are followed through, it is a significant landowner with the powers needed to assemble land for development.

The town plan will not be delivered successfully unless it engages actively in the process rather than waiting for developers to make the running.

The first test of the council's resolve will probably be an application for retail development on the

site currently occupied by Lifestyle Ford, the bowling club and the private parking alongside Albion Way.

The town plan recognises the need for some new stores larger than are to be readily found elsewhere in the town, and the possibility of creating an anchor store for the west end of the town.

But it makes it perfectly clear that any development must provide improved links and public access to the town centre.

Unless this is achieved any retail scheme would amount to out of town development. Albion Way already creates a significant barrier to west-east pedestrian movement and nothing should be agreed that does not cure this problem, still less

aggravate it.

The proposals published so far for this site fall far short of complying with the town plan and the developer seems reluctant to consider any changes.

It also owns the Bishops Weald site on the town centre side of Albion Way but rejects the idea of incorporating that into a wider scheme.

The council must make it clear that they need to go back to the drawing board.

The town plan suggests the site could be mixed use, including residential units. The council's core strategy previously identified the Lifestyle Ford site for 120 new homes.

It is not clear how this shortfall would be made good if the development does not

include housing.

At the end of the day, if they are faced with an application that does not demonstrably meet the requirements of the town plan, councillors must have the courage to turn it down. That is what they are elected to do.

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.