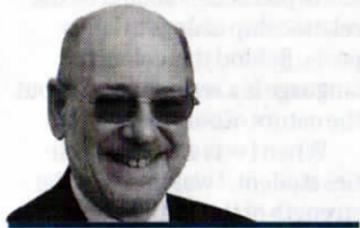


John Steele: short term thinking will not solve long term issue



For years local politicians railed at governments for imposing regional housing targets.

Leave it to us, they said, and we will sort things out for ourselves.

But as events are proving some local councils, including Horsham, seem not to be up to the job.

Courted by developers and in fear of local reaction, councillors simply can't agree how many houses should be built or where; and when they

do finally decide it is likely they will make a hash of the task.

Nationally, there is no doubt that many more new homes are needed. People may argue why this situation has arisen but the inescapable fact is that the population is rising and people are living longer.

Many choose to live and work in the South East and unless we build more homes only the most prosperous, and increasingly the more elderly, will be able to afford to live here.

Building the right type of new homes will not in itself solve the problem but it could help to stop matters getting worse.

Unfortunately, councils seem to be falling over

themselves to make a case for not building in their back yard. Some, like Mid Sussex, have gone for a fairly low housing target, underpinned by a series of local community plans.

It remains to be seen whether their draft plan is approved, but at least they have a plan.

Horsham District Council, on the other hand, still doesn't have a plan. Instead of engaging with parish councils and local communities, it adopted an arrogant top down approach which unsurprisingly is unlikely to have grass roots support.

Consequently, there has been a series of embarrassing delays and policy paralysis.

The council is dominated

by members from the small towns and rural areas, with the majority of the cabinet from the south of the district.

If rumours are to be believed the one thing most seem to agree on is that the bulk of any new homes should be dumped on the north of the district, particularly north of the A264.

Out of sight, out of mind, they probably think.

There is ample precedent for this approach. Prior to the redrawing of local authority boundaries in 1974 it was possible to deduce them without a map by looking at the placement of sewage works.

They were almost always sited as far from voters as possible, on the border with a neighbouring authority.

Some 4,500 new homes north of Horsham would destroy its sense of community, and increase the likelihood of coalescence with Crawley, creating a huge urban sprawl.

Worst of all it would be shortsighted. It would only buy enough time to see the present council leadership into retirement.

What is needed is a new town, which could grow over a generation to provide most of the housing we need in an eco-friendly new community.

Properly designed it would have less impact on our countryside than an equivalent number of bolt-on housing schemes.

Last week two local councillors, Christian Mitchell and Peter Burgess,

broke ranks and declared themselves against any more housing close to the town, and in favour of a new town.

Let's hope others will follow, and quickly.

Short term thinking will not solve Horsham's long term housing problem.

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.