

# John Steele: not too late to talk, but council must have open mind



Last week's County Times was once again full of letters expressing the widespread frustration at Horsham District Council's failure to properly debate its preferred strategy and respond to the avalanche of objections generated during the consultation period.

The council's stage managed meeting in public, far

from lessening this frustration only increased it. People who are directly affected by any new development will almost always react against it. This is understandable and can never alone be allowed to stop all progress.

But the objections to the council's strategy go much farther and wider than that. This is not Nimbyism but a groundswell of anger at the lack of transparency and arrogant disregard of alternative views. The council would have us believe that its strategy is the result of a smooth, evidence based process since 2009. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The process has been dogged all along by false starts and U-turns. We are told endlessly that the plan

must comply with the Government's new planning policy (NPPF). The policy is not new. It was finalised in March 2012 following a draft in mid 2011.

It is reasonable therefore to assume that the council's deliberations up until late 2012 took the NPPF fully into account. So the major U-turn between late 2012 and April 2013, which switched almost all development to the north of Horsham, cannot be blamed on the NPPF. It was a political rather than evidence based decision.

The subsequent refusal by HDC to respond to reasoned criticism and alternative proposals supports this view. How many councillors have actually read the NPPF? They would have us believe

that economic development trumps everything else and this can only be achieved through creating a huge business park north of Horsham.

This is simply not the case. Economic development is very important but only one of three factors which the policy says are mutually dependent. The others are social – supporting strong and healthy communities – and environmental – contributing to protecting and enhancing our natural and built environment.

The NPPF's 'golden thread' is a presumption in favour of sustainable development. Sustainable development does not mean lumping everything together – commercial space, housing, a giant supermarket and

a crematorium – on a single huge site just because it is near Gatwick Airport. This approach fails to consider the needs of the district as a whole.

Even if a case could be made for commercial development here, there is no corresponding case for housing. The two have been conflated because it suits the council and Liberty, the developer. One NPPF requirement is to demonstrate how the plan will ensure the vitality of town centres. HDC has failed to explain how moving existing companies out of the town centre to the new business park, which is a key part of its strategy, can possibly help to achieve this.

Unless the council engages in a proper dialogue with

the public, and wins over at least some hearts and minds, the examination in public by a planning inspector is going to be a bruising experience, quite possibly ending in rejection of its strategy. It's not too late to talk, but the council has to show it has an open mind and will consider alternatives.

*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](http://www.horshamsociety.org) or telephone 01403 261640.*