

John Steele: why it's time to stand up for good quality design



There have been two recent cases where our local councillors have rejected planning applications on grounds of poor design and their decision has been upheld on appeal.

The sites in question were both important Horsham landmarks. The first, Linden House, is the old grey Sun Alliance building on Chart Way which adjoins Albion Way.

The proposal was for a large block of flats which would have loomed over Albion Way,

The second was a site on the corner of North Parade and Hurst Road on which the developer wanted to place a large block of retirement apartments.

The National Planning Policy Framework and Horsham District Council's local policies all stress the importance of maintaining high quality design. In both these cases councillors considered the plans as submitted failed to meet this test.

So, what makes these two cases so important? In both the council's officers had recommended they be approved. Councillors are too often told that design is a matter of opinion and that if they turn down an application on design grounds alone the council will lose on appeal,

which can be costly.

These cases prove unequivocally that this is not the case. Design is a matter of informed opinion and in the past it seems the council has sometimes lacked the confidence or experience to articulate properly the reasons why an application is poorly designed.

Hopefully these recent examples will increase the resolve of officers and councillors alike to ensure Horsham gets the quality of new buildings it deserves.

There is a current application from McCarthy and Stone for a large new block of retirement apartments on the corner of North Street and Norfolk Road which needs particular scrutiny.

In our view the current design is not acceptable,

looking too much like an office block, and too large.

Furthermore, with the council's offices, and possibly other buildings in North Street, becoming vacant soon what is needed is a comprehensive development plan. Following changes made by the Government it is now much easier for developers to turn redundant offices into apartments and it looks as though this could make a considerable impact on the town centre.

Whilst in some cases this might provide a sensible solution to the problem of empty offices, flats are not suitable for young families with children.

What is needed is for the council to focus on providing small well designed homes with gardens reasonably close

to the town centre.

Our Victorian terraces, with their grid-like design, provide good examples of well designed high density development. A few years ago a terrace of six small houses was very successfully added in Rushams Road. More such schemes could both look good and meet the needs of families who can't afford the four and five bedroomed houses so favoured by the developers.

In an area where there is no shortage of willing buyers for large new homes, simply relying on market-led housing developments will never deliver the smaller houses of high quality design that are needed unless the council makes it happen through proactive planning and design guides.

Another approach which

we have been pressing the council to adopt is the use of an independent design panel to advise on important schemes. Other neighbouring councils do this and HDC could share those resources at little cost. Despite many promises over the years HDC simply does not care enough about the quality of our town's architecture to take this simple step.

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 horshamsociety.org or telephone 01403 261640.