

John Steele: The perils of the consultation process



Nowadays there is an expectation that the public will be consulted before major changes are implemented both nationally and locally but in how many cases do the powers that be really want to know what we think?

How real are their consultations, and are they designed in a way that the public can provide a meaningful response? Sometimes it seems that

consultations are only undertaken in order to tick a box.

Formal consultations, such as those conducted by Horsham District Council on its District Planning Framework, are often conducted over a short time period and try to corral responses by seeking answers to specific questions, often through an internet portal. This format has become popular because responses are cheap to process and analyse.

Old-style open consultations need professional analysis to sift the arguments, identify the themes and present the results. It is expensive and takes time, neither of which impress policy makers or

politicians in a hurry.

Then there is the question of whether those consulted are provided with the necessary evidence and have the knowledge or skill to make a meaningful response. Alternative options may be unclear, or not offered at all, and rarely, if ever, is no change an option. All too often the process is an end in itself and the views expressed make little or difference to the outcome. We have seen this in the council's consultation over its Preferred Strategy for 2,500 homes in North Horsham where the process may have met the legal test but few would consider a genuine consultation.

Then there are informal consultation processes where

the council consults with local organisations, and sometimes the wider public, before bringing forward changes. An example of this has been the consultations over the West Street refurbishment. The outcome can scarcely be described as a success. It is either the product of an individual with exquisitely poor taste or, more likely, a camel produced by a committee.

More recently, there has been an exhibition to seek views on options for refurbishing Bishopric. It seems the process was again seriously flawed with a high risk that the mistakes of West Street will be repeated. For example, it did not provide the public with clear alternatives,

and more importantly did not offer 'do nothing' or 'replace the Shelley Fountain and leave the rest alone' options.

Although consultation can be helpful, it does not of itself ensure good design, particularly in the case of the public realm where changes have to last a generation or more.

What is needed are professional landscape designers, working within a brief from the council, who can work up a number of fully costed schemes which are then put to the public. The temptation to meddle with individual designs must be resisted because otherwise their overall integrity is destroyed and you end up with a mess.

Unfortunately West Street now seems a lost cause. Although the inappropriate bamboo has gone the council seems set against the only thing that could help now and that is the reinstatement of the trees.

But it's not too late to save Bishopric from a similar fate.

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.