

Horsham Society

with Nigel Friswell



If you want a job doing properly...

Ihear that the Horsham District Council are forming a wholly-owned company to build houses for the homeless (and there are more of those in Horsham District than most of us realise).

This is not only good news for the homeless. It is a recognition that, as the old saying goes, 'if you want a job done properly, do it yourself'.

Let us hope that eventually the idea will spread from the homeless to those who need 'affordable' homes. The problem there is that everybody's idea of 'affordable' is different.

When I struggled to buy my first home it cost three times my salary. The building societies would only lend two and a half times but salvation came because in those days you could get a three-times loan from the local authority if you were going to work in their area.

For those in difficulty buying, or not wishing to, councils were still building council houses. The council house builder par excellence was the London County Council. Between the wars there was nothing politically wrong in councils running businesses if it benefited the



community ('Municipalisation'). Many towns had corporation bus services and the utility services were mostly council owned and operated. London County Council mostly employed direct labour and had strict ethical rules.

This continued into the post World War II era which is why I was one of the lucky ones. Council housing continued and the

pre-war concept of Garden Cities spawned the New Towns. They provided much of the improved housing which was needed in post-war Britain. Many of the New Towns have now matured into very pleasant places to live.

It is difficult to put a finger onto where it all went wrong but gradually fashions changed. Successive governments disapproved of local councils running their own businesses, suggesting (often wrongly) that private companies could do it much more efficiently. Industries which had been nationalised were branded as inefficient and then privatised. Now we could all buy shares in enterprises which we had jointly owned anyway.

What the politicians did not recognise, or did not want to recognise, was that if publically-owned businesses made a surplus (we must not call it a 'profit'), it was ploughed back into the local community. The whole point of a private company is to make money for its shareholders. If it provided an efficient service to the community so much the better.

In February, the Government published its housing White Paper (comments to the Department for Communities and Local

Government by 2nd May) in which it says that the housing market is 'broken'. It says it wants to build more homes but it is still looking to private developers to do that job.

Here in Horsham we have developers delaying building work, apparently because they cannot sell the houses quickly enough to make their profits.

We need more houses but we also need more affordable ones. The developers plead poverty so perhaps what we really need is a local authority owned enterprise to get on and build the houses we need. Yes, there will be problems, not least in finding the skilled craftspeople to do the job (another story) and in how to keep a stock of affordable homes in the face of right-to-buy.

Perhaps the Government is its own worse enemy.

Nigel Friswell, Chairman, The Horsham Society

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 the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 261905.