

HORSHAM SOCIETY

New threats to our town

Although long expected, the District Council's draft District Planning Framework Preferred Strategy has revealed its short sighted political expediency and lack of proper process. Inside we look in more detail at the alternatives that seem to have been ignored with little or no explanation but the headline is simple. Most of the new housing, 2,500 homes, will be dumped north of the A264 to create an isolated community with almost no physical, social or economic link with the town.

This is despite the clear statement in the Council's 2007 Core Strategy that it wished "to contain the built up area within the A264 northern bypass, in order to avoid issues of lack of integration or detachment". Now the Council says not only that it has no choice but such a development would be positively beneficial.

This volte-face might perhaps be more understandable if it were part of a complete rethink on the Core Strategy but in fact almost nothing else has changed. The settlement hierarchy approach is rigorously maintained. This protects smaller communities, mainly in the south of the district, and thus drives new development to Horsham and, less so, Southwater and Billingshurst.

The Council's audacity is compounded by the indicative map of the proposed north Horsham development. It stretches along the A264 for almost the entire width of the town with a single road access down Rusper Way. There is no other way in simply because the A264 was designed to be the outer boundary of the town and development has filled the space between. It beggars belief that the developer and the Council can claim a community joined by such a tenuous and inappropriate link will be part of the town.

The possibility of building a much needed new town close to the A23 corridor is once again kicked into the long grass.

While it is tempting to characterise this as simply a north/south divide, with the majority southern councillors protecting their votes, at least one Horsham town conservative councillor spoke strongly in favour of the proposal and the Liberal Democrats leader, while saying some changes were needed, welcomed the plan.

Bad though this is, it might turn out to be a side show compared with the Gatwick debate. The Government has appointed Sir Howard Davies to chair a Commission tasked with identifying and recommending options to maintain the UK's status as an international hub for aviation. This is of course code for suggesting where and when there should be airport expansion. Unsurprisingly

the companies owning Heathrow, Stansted and Gatwick are all lobbying to demonstrate why they are best placed to provide extra capacity.

West Sussex County Council has a legal agreement with Gatwick that there will be no second runway before 2019 but it is common knowledge that the company has been planning for another runway as soon as possible thereafter. In what seems an incomprehensible own goal, a few days before Gatwick was to present its proposal for a second runway to the Davies Commission, WSCC pushed an emergency motion through a full council meeting expressing support in principle for a second runway. There was no prior consultation and virtually no analysis of the merits of the case. In essence it was simply asserted that a second runway at Gatwick was necessary to maintain and increase economic growth and that the county would suffer if future airport expansion was to go elsewhere. The reason for haste was that it would be helpful for Gatwick to be able to tell the Davies Commission that it had WSCC support and by being helpful now it would give the council a seat at the table in working out the details later. To us this seems simply naïve.

Once again, despite a predominant north/south divide in the debate, Horsham's position was compromised by speeches in support of the motion from the town's three Liberal Democrat councillors and silence from the town's Tories. It was left to Labour members from Crawley and a few brave Tories to make but fail to win the case that the motion was premature and unnecessary, and the council should wait to see Gatwick's proposals before expressing a view.

The most depressing aspect of all this is that if Gatwick is successful in winning an early second runway it will be operational well within the time frame of Horsham District's plan yet the latter takes no account of the likely impact. As more than one councillor has pointed out, taken together we could see London sprawl as far as Broadbridge Heath with no gap in between. Is this really what HDC wants?

We never thought we would be looking back on the South East Plan with affection but it is becoming increasingly clear that local politicians are incapable of looking beyond their own back yards.

The Horsham Society
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