

Horsham Society

with David Griffiths



Full and open disclosure of viability

Horsham District Council granted outline planning approval for the North of Horsham development on 27th May 2017. However significant data regarding the viability assessment for this project, upon which this approval was granted was withheld from public scrutiny by HDC, thus preventing a full understanding of the costs and profitability.

Dixon Searle Partnership (DSP) who were engaged by HDC as the consultants for the North of Horsham project and who had full access to the viability assessment highlighted that the calculations were based on 'out of date' data from September 2015 for market pricing for housing, construction costs etc.

They advised the report should be updated using current information. This advice was seemingly ignored by HDC, which duly redacted it. Furthermore only a minority of district councillors were made aware of the shortcomings as the report, which would give a full understanding of the viability assessment for the North of Horsham development, could only be accessed by them by appointment and if



Flashback to June 2014 and hundreds of protesters gather in North Horsham to protest against thousands of new homes.

they signed a non-disclosure agreement!

Due to concerns regarding the obscuring of sensitive information in the viability assessment measures were taken to make the full DSP report available to the public. This required an approach to the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) with a request to rule on the matter. On 14th December 2017 they advised that HDC had wrongly withheld important information and instructed that it be made

publicly available within 35 days of their decision.

Reading the document with redactions removed confirms the many concerns that had been raised, ie viability assessments had been based on outdated two year old figures. It further reveals that DSP had suggested that house selling prices be increased by at least 12 per cent and a lesser increase of four per cent for construction costs.

Liberty has potentially been 'gifted' a further £75,000,000 by HDC ignoring the DSP recommendations. This is a considerable sum of money and one which HDC should have taken into consideration when considering the planning application for the North of Horsham Development. Not least the percentage for affordable housing, which stands at a pathetic 18 per cent could have been increased.

What to do now? One assumes that the Section 106 Agreement has not yet been finalised as details have not been published in accordance with planning application DC/17/1677. Therefore some urgent negotiating on the part of HDC is needed to resolve an extremely unhealthy situation.

What can we learn from this fracas?

HDC must become more democratic and transparent in any future negotiations, ensuring the public and their own councillors are fully appraised of matters.

Additionally the council should not pay lip service to policies, making certain proposals are secured, such as 35 per cent percentage provision for affordable housing, form a central part of any negotiations.

In order to enforce policy terms and conditions Brighton and Hove Council (unitary authority) approved in January 2018 that planning applications would not in future be considered if they did not comply with their policies (on viability grounds) without full and open disclosure of all the viability figures and associated calculations. Would HDC make such a commitment?

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 259038.