

Local representatives should determine local taxes

IT'S BUDGET time again at Horsham District Council and we wait to see what wheezes the council has come up with this year to transfer costs from the general fund to Horsham town council tax payers.

When the council introduced the special town tax a few years ago the argument was that taxpayers in the district as a whole were contributing to services in Horsham which in the parishes were being met through their parish charge. In other words it wasn't fair.

There are two problems with this argument. The first is that many of the town's facilities are enjoyed by



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residents from other parts of the district as well as visitors. In other words they attract people to the town and help to contribute to its economic prosperity, and they are part of what attracts people to live in the district.

As we have pointed out before the whole district depends upon the success of the town to provide the tax base which underpins the

many services that those living in the parishes expect but would be unaffordable if they alone were paying for them.

The second problem is that in the case of parish taxes it is the local parish councillors who determine what services should be provided and what their community is prepared to pay. In the town's case these decisions are made by a cabinet composed entirely of councillors who don't live in the town.

They decide what we get charged for and what we pay. The fact that nowadays there are discussions with the neighbourhood councils does not make this any less

undemocratic, particularly when it is the same administration which has refused to allow the town to vote on whether to set up its own town council.

Not only is the whole process undemocratic, it is skewed in favour of the parished areas. In recent years the town tax has included a sum to pay towards the cost of Horsham Town Hall. Next year, when presumably the council will be earning an income from leasing the town hall as a restaurant, one would expect to see a credit in the town tax account to represent the town's share of the income.

But no, it seems the general

fund keeps all the receipts, thus directly benefiting the unparished areas. A classic case of heads the council wins, tails the town loses. Where is the fairness in that?

The council has promised a review, but not of course before the town tax is increased from April. If it is serious about fairness the whole process needs to be fundamentally changed.

If it can be shown that there is a case for a town tax then it should be the neighbourhood councils, or the local district councillors, who should have the responsibility for determining what we are prepared to pay.

Better still, we could have

an annual town meeting, just like the parishes, at which we could all have a say. The long term success of our town depends on fair local taxes. The sums involved may not be great, but the principle at stake is priceless.

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.