

John Steele: silence, failings and secrecy at Horsham council



The council has done almost nothing to explain and sell its proposals to the public. No exhibitions, no public meetings; simply reports in this newspaper.

The Horsham Society was prepared to step in and host a debate in the Drill Hall but when we asked councillor Ray Dawe, leader of the council, if he would attend and speak he refused.

That's not a reasonable leadership response given a council proposal that would so dramatically and permanently change for the worse the character and setting of Horsham town.

Claire Vickers, councillor for Southwater and the cabinet member primarily responsible for the decision to choose North Horsham,

has also been keeping her head down.

She has used a live Facebook event as well as question and answer pieces in the County Times to respond to points raised: this is hardly a satisfactory way to have a dialogue. Furthermore her answers cannot be relied upon.

When asked in this newspaper if a new parkway station would lead to the downgrading of Littlehaven Station she denied it would.

Yet in 2011 HDC was told that Network Rail would not allow trains to stop at both Littlehaven and a new station.

How do we know this? Only because we got the correspondence through a Freedom of Information

request.

What's more Network Rail said HDC couldn't have new stations at both Kilnwood Vale and North Horsham, so HDC approved a plan including the Kilnwood Vale station in October 2011.

It seems it has been caught trying to use the same station to justify another strategic site in a different plan. How's that for honesty and openness?

The consultation ends tomorrow. Let's hope the council sees sense, throws out its draft and starts again.

But that is not all. HDC has been in discussion for months with the developer behind the application to build a new Waitrose and three further stores on the west side of Albion Way.

Despite the development being contrary to the Town Plan, and with far too little parking, we fear it will be recommended for approval.

Nothing wrong with that you may think, but HDC is not only the planning authority it also has a financial interest in it being approved.

It stands to make a significant financial gain as it owns a 'ransom strip' across the entrance to the site.

Good you might say, but we think HDC should come clean about its financial stake.

Despite admitting there is a legal agreement it refuses to disclose it.

This is publicly owned land, public money and the public is entitled to know.

Secrecy breeds suspicion and that is not good for

democracy.

What has gone so desperately wrong with a council that not so long ago prided itself on openness, accessibility and healthy debate?

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.

Underneath Horsham District Council offices is a nuclear bunker. A remnant of the late cold war period, it is a fitting metaphor for an administration that drops bombshells and then goes to ground.

As the debate rages over its plan to dump 2,500 homes north of the A264, where are the councillors who voted in favour of the strategy?