

John Steele: keeping taxes low is only one side of the coin



In last week's County Times we heard from Ray Dawe, leader of Horsham District Council, about how successful his administration has been in cutting costs and freezing our council tax, already one of the lowest in the country, for four consecutive years.

This is of course only one side of the story. The Government has bribed councils by offering extra grant to those that do not

increase their council tax. So we are paying more anyhow, only it is less transparent.

Helena Croft, deputy leader of the council, in commenting on this year's reappearance of a Christmas tree in Carfax, thanked businesses and the neighbourhood councils for their support.

This, too, is simplistic. First, the neighbourhood councils get their funding through a grant from HDC. They are told how much they can have and are unable to decide for themselves, which is different from what parish councils can do.

Second, the Christmas lights' budget contribution from the disingenuously termed 'Special Charge' levied on the town's council tax

payers has been significantly reduced.

Eric Pickles, commenting recently on the conclusions of a report on Tower Hamlets, referred to 'a deeply concerning picture of obfuscation, denial, secrecy and the breakdown of democratic scrutiny and accountability'. Now, where else might that description fit?

However, the real problem is that our council seems to regard keeping council tax as low as possible as its primary aim. The responsibility of local government is to provide services.

Yes, as efficiently and effectively as possible, but cheap does not mean effective. This administration seems to think a town like Horsham

can be run on a shoestring like their local parish councils.

This is not so. It is much more complex and needs more oversight and support if it is to remain vibrant, clean, safe and successful. The council's slash and burn approach to staffing numbers has seen the departure of many individuals, often with a long and deep understanding of the town, whose loss is becoming ever more obvious as the council grinds to a halt.

For example, despite promises of action to improve the disgraceful state of Blackhorse Way, the main vehicular and bus access to the town centre, nothing has been done. The council has stood by as the Groundsman's Cottage by the cricket ground

has been allowed to fall into disrepair despite the crying need for accommodation in the town. Repeated assurances that a solution was imminent have been nothing but false promises.

Instead of sorting out this sort of important but perhaps unexciting issue the council instead puts its efforts into vanity projects such as the colossally expensive and hugely disappointing West Street; again with our money, though this time mainly from the county council.

West Street may previously have looked a little barren, though this was caused in large part by the council's failure to maintain the splendid potted trees, but now it simply looks tacky and ugly, especially

when one gets hit in the face as a result of the ridiculous decision to put bamboo in the planters. Doesn't it look a mess? Keeping taxes low is only one side of the coin. Delivering effective services, nurturing the public realm and avoiding waste are even more important.

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.