

Pre-Examination Thoughts

by Richard W. Symonds

I genuinely want Horsham District Council to produce a sound and legally compliant Local Plan. However, I remain unconvinced that retaining Policy HA2—West of Ifield—can be justified while fundamental questions remain unresolved about infrastructure, environmental harm, deliverability and legal soundness.

As the Local Plan examination hearings resume this week, those questions must be addressed on the evidence. The associated planning application, DC/25/1312, does not establish that the allocation is sound. A planning application cannot substitute for demonstrating through the Local Plan that the scale and location of development are justified, necessary infrastructure will be provided at the right time, and the policy can be lawfully implemented.

If transport, schools, healthcare, drainage, utilities and other essential infrastructure cannot be funded and delivered alongside development, HA2 risks placing unacceptable pressure on existing communities and services. If impacts on landscape, biodiversity, water, heritage and Ifield's character cannot be avoided or effectively mitigated, the resulting harm cannot be dismissed as an incidental consequence of growth. Without credible evidence that these requirements can be met, the allocation may be undeliverable.

This goes directly to legal soundness. A sound plan must be positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy, based on proportionate and credible evidence, with policies capable of implementation. Retaining HA2 without resolving the infrastructure and environmental evidence would risk treating aspiration as deliverability and relying on future negotiations, uncertain funding or later planning conditions to address matters that should be established at the plan-making stage.

There is also a political risk. Labour and Reform councillors in Crawley may seek to gain support at the expense of the Liberal Democrats, who lead Horsham District Council and the cross-party administration at West Sussex County Council. If the Inspector finds HA2 unsound, opponents may try to blame Liberal Democrat leaders. However, political considerations should not obscure the central questions: whether the allocation is evidence-based, whether infrastructure can be secured, funded and delivered when needed, whether environmental harm can be avoided or mitigated, and whether the policy provides an effective framework for implementation.

Planning involves political choices, but they must remain within planning law and national policy. Every party should be willing to reconsider its position if the evidence

requires it. If the Council cannot demonstrate that Policy HA2 is justified, environmentally acceptable, deliverable and legally sound, the responsible course is to amend or remove it rather than retain a flawed allocation for political convenience. A sound Local Plan matters more than saving political face.