

Statement

- MRS JUDY SIMMONDS



24th December 2015

Dear Sirs

1. I am Judy Simmonds. I have lived locally all my life and have been actively involved with the Conservative Party for over 50 years. In that time I have held various posts within the local Association, including chairman. I am currently part of Hertfordshire Area Conservatives management executive. I also sit on the Party's assessment panels for potential members of parliament and other Conservative positions.
2. I have known Cllr Leal- Bennett for more than 30 years when our children were friends at junior school. After that I only encountered him at occasional social events until he decided to become involved in local politics.
3. I have the highest regard for Cllr Leal-Bennett's commitment to his role as a NHDC councillor and political campaigner generally. It took a lot of work to win his seat and he has also played a large part in other Conservative campaigns, not least in helping two fellow candidates to become councillors in his ward and leading a team from Hitchin to help retain the Stevenage seat in the 2015 General Election.
4. Cllr Leal Bennett works hard for his electorate, the local community and the Party. His intellect, ability and business experience put him on a higher level than most local government councillors/candidates. He has a good grasp of what is required even though he is still in his first term as a councillor. He will always pursue answers on behalf of his electorate and will persist until he is satisfied that problems have the best possible outcome.
5. Living in Hitchin, I cannot help but be aware of the Town Hall difficulties. Not being involved I cannot comment on the details. However, I know that Cllr Leal-Bennett made great efforts to ensure he was acting properly. His own advice from impeccable sources contradicted officers' advice and he followed that advice. Indeed, if unelected officers' advice were always to hold sway, then there would be no democracy and those unelected officers become autocrats. That is clearly not the intent of the Localism Act.
6. Some of the comments made are reminiscent of a vendetta and it is very disappointing to see an able, effective and enthusiastic councillor being treated in this way. Pursuing Cllr Leal-Bennett in this way does nobody any credit. It appears that some people at the local authority are attempting to silence him and that is not acceptable. It would also be doing a great disservice to the local community, the very people NHDC and its officers are meant to serve.

JUDY SIMMONDS