


Statement

- MR JOHN SIMMONDS


24th December 2015

Dear Sir

1. I am John Simmonds, a retired chartered accountant, formerly senior partner of a local firm.
2. I have been locally resident for 45 years and have known David-Leal Bennett (DLB) for over 30 years when we both had children at the same school. We have since met in various capacities and he is a friend, albeit not a close one.
3. I have been active in the Hitchin community for many years, including as company secretary of Hitchin Initiative Ltd (HI) since its inception and as chairman of Hitchin Markets Ltd since its formation 7 years ago. I have some knowledge of company and charity governance, having been a trustee of various charities, a charity auditor, president of a professional body, an NHS trust deputy chairman and governor of a school and chair of governors of an FE college and been involved in various disciplinary processes in various capacities.
4. I sit on the steering group of HI, as has DLB recently.
5. I am broadly aware of the developments of the so called partnership between NHDC and HTHL, since HI was arguably the instigator of saving Hitchin Town Hall for the town, when NHDC proposed converting it to the district museum. That disturbed HI, since Hitchin is a large community minded town and, in the absence of the Town Hall, would have no community space public or private of any size. HI provided initial seedcorn funds of more than £20k to research opportunities to retain the Town Hall.
6. Over those years of dealing in both a personal and representative capacity with DLB I have formed the highest opinion of his intellect, personal abilities and integrity, not to mention his capacity for hard work on behalf of the community. Accordingly, I find the attacks on him unlikely, distasteful and, of course, hugely inappropriate.
7. The report uses some inappropriately pejorative terms about him, principally alleging bullying and harassment. I readily agree that his approach is questioning and robust, but I fear that officers who may not reach his intellectual levels do not have the professionalism to deal with his rigorous approach and have resorted to abuse and bureaucratic spoilers. He has operated at very senior levels in banking and conducted himself professionally. No doubt his job there, as here, was to scrutinise and test with rigour and it is disappointing that a local authority culture appears unable to cope with this.
8. I consider he acts in the best interests of Hitchin, the district and his electorate, is highly principled, but does become exasperated with some of his fellow councillors and their unquestioning acquiescence to the dominance of officers, who manifestly have not observed the spirit (and probably the legal obligations) of the agreement to develop the Town Hall and appear to have managed the project poorly at cost to the public purse. Along with Churchgate, there has been a litany of incompetence which merits questioning by members. Anything less will bring NHDC into further disrepute.
9. I say this as a Conservative activist and with a good number of friends and acquaintances who are Conservative members of the authority and some of whose supine behaviour I regret.

JOHN SIMMONDS