

Statement

- MR DAVID MORGAN

1. My name is David Morgan of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
2. I have been shown the complaints which have been made against Cllr Leal-Bennett and I understand your panel has been convened to hear evidence in relation to it on 24, 25th & 26th February 2016.
3. I believe the Disciplinary Hearing is to be held in public and confirm that I have no objection to this statement being read out and indeed would hope that it would be.
4. By way of background, I would advise you that I am now a retired solicitor and in the past I have been Chairman of East and North Herts Health Authority and of the Standards & Ethics Committee of Stevenage Borough Council. I have been a director of Willmott Dixon Ltd and of National Mutual Life and remain a trustee of Knebworth House Education and Preservation Trust, where I was Chairman for 15 years. I therefore have experience of the public, private and charitable sectors of the economy.
5. Please note that I will not comment on the complaints in detail as I understand there may yet be litigation between North Herts District Council and the registered charity, Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. Rather I wish to comment upon David Leal-Bennett's efforts on behalf of the community.
6. As a solicitor with a local firm, HRJ Foreman Laws, I was approached in, I believe, June 2011 as the group of individuals who had led the campaign to "Save the Town Hall" as a public meeting place had reached the stage where heads of terms of an agreement with NHDC needed to be translated into binding legal documentation. I understood the job would take about 3 months (as deadlines had to be achieved) and the directors of HRJ Foreman Laws agreed to support the charity by charging simply to cover the insurance risk and not for the firm's time. (As it happens, the second of the Development Agreements was not signed with NHDC until September 2013, shortly after which HRJ Foreman Laws involvement as legal advisors to Hitchin Town Hall Ltd largely ceased).
7. Until then, my only knowledge of the Town Hall project was gleaned from what I had read in the local press and from the occasional conversation with members of Hitchin Initiative. Until 2011, I do not recall having met David Leal-Bennett.
8. I was briefed as to the details of the proposals by Morag Norgan, Rosemary Read, Brent Smith, Stephen Pike and David Leal-Bennett who each brought

their professional skills on an entirely voluntary basis to the project. They in turn reported on a regular basis to a meeting of the various Hitchin Community groups who wanted to keep the Town Hall open and refurbished for public use.

9. Over the many months that followed, the 'team' worked tirelessly to conclude the agreements with NHDC, the Social Investment Bank and Hitchin Property Trust (Mr John Ray). It was a privilege to work with the team. Close relationships were forged and it was easy to see why through teamwork and dedication, other projects had been brought to a successful conclusion in Hitchin.
10. No one worked harder than David Leal-Bennett. I think it would be true to say that if he had not been a party to the project, the Social Investment Bank would not have remained on board. His banking background ensured that any presentation to the Bank was couched in the appropriate language and format and his explanation of the business plan to the bank was absolutely key to Hitchin Town Hall Ltd securing the grants and loans. The Social Investment Bank had confidence in the scheme. At the same time, David Leal-Bennett presented the business case to finance officers of NHDC who as a 'partner' had to understand in detail the commerciality, the finances and the timings. The eventual fulfillment of the business plan, which included a substantial community fund raising programme, would mean that the community groups of North Herts would be able to enjoy the Town Hall, Lucas Room and associated facilities at 'charitable' rates and without recourse to taxpayers.
11. The Board of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd became frustrated with the actual and perceived hurdles raised by officers of NHDC but, led by David Leal-Bennett, always with a necessary eye to the Bank, they were overcome. The Board fought to persuade the Council that the acquisition of No 15 Brand Street (in addition to No 14) would substantially improve the appearance of the building, its foyer and also provide much needed additional space. Once again David Leal-Bennett presented the case to the Social Investment Bank incorporating a revised business case and adjusted timings. Weekend and evening work on the project by the volunteer professionals was the norm.
12. It is a matter of record that David Leal-Bennett became a NHDC councillor in May 2012. The former close relationships forged in Hitchin were not going to be broken and, as in so many community partnerships, individuals may have a 'foot in both camps'. This is not an uncommon position and provided it is

transparent and there is no personal gain, which when working totally voluntarily for a charity appears difficult to imagine, it can work to the benefit of both sides.


I recall that many years ago, Stevenage Borough Council had to work through the issues involved between the Council and Stevenage Leisure Ltd.

13. I have found that dealing with Mr Leal-Bennett is not always easy. He is talented, does not tolerate fools easily and comes from a corporate banking background. He is used to drilling down into the initial response he may get to a question.

I have worked for 40 years for directors, managers and clients whose approach was at least as robust as that of David Leal-Bennett and on occasion, more so. One has to accept criticism for poor performance! I would categorise his manner as demanding but not bullying.

14. With hindsight, I think it was inevitable that on occasion there would be a clash of cultures in his dealings with both fellow Councillors and with officers. He is determined to ensure accountability of all concerned. To my mind, NHDC should be thankful to David Leal-Bennet for his efforts. It is essential to have Councillors who have the time, determination and intellectual ability to hold officers to account.

15. It is to be hoped that the Town Hall and NHDC Museum will soon be open to the public and, in my opinion, it is completely wrong for NHDC to brief against the dedicated directors and members of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and community groups in relation to their efforts which have taken 10 years to bring to fruition.


David Morgan

31st December 2015