

Statement

- COUNCILLOR CLAIRE STRONG

I am Claire Strong and I have been a North Herts District Councillor for over 20 years. I was first elected as the Councillor for the single ward of Offa in 1995 and when this was combined with other wards I became a member for Hitchwood, Offa and Hoo. From 1996 to 2010 I was the deputy leader of the Conservative Group when F John Smith was the Leader of the Council. I have been a committee chairman for Performance Committees, Southern Rural and Chairman of the Council. I have also served in Cabinet and was Chairman of North Hertfordshire Homes.

I have been involved with the Conservative Party for many years and I have stood as their candidate in the Euro elections in 2004 and 2009.

1. I first met David Leal-Bennett through the Conservative Party when he became the candidate for the Highbury ward although he did not win the seat until his third attempt. I supported David in his campaigns as Highbury was a target ward for the Conservatives and he conducted himself as I would expect a candidate of the Tory Party to behave. During the campaigns he was polite, helpful and supportive of the Conservative Party's aims and values.

2. I was aware that he was a member of the Hitchin Town hall community group and that this group was at odds with the Council over the plans for the Town Hall. There had been discussions on the future of the Town Hall for many years and what its usage should be either run by NHDC or "sold" to other parties.

3. NHDC officer John Robinson proposed a plan for reducing the costs of the museum service by closing the Letchworth and Hitchin museums and converting Hitchin Town Hall into as a new district museum. His plan involved building a mezzanine floor in the main hall and totally changing the usage and appearance of the building. This plan was fully supported by the then portfolio holder Cllr Tricia Cowley.

4. The community in Hitchin opposed the plan and a number of prominent people from Hitchin came forward to "save" the Town Hall by proposing an alternative plan which was reluctantly accepted by NHDC officers and the portfolio holder. One member of the community even had the Town Hall building listed which further frustrated the officers but this just demonstrates the feelings that the community has to the building and wishing it to remain a public hall.

5. It was apparent that John Robinson was unhappy when the community set up the Hitchin Town Hall organisation and he had to work with them rather than just get on with the project he had proposed without interference. I frequently heard negative comments from the community about John Robinson. However I have had to remind them that he is acting as an officer of the Council to get the project done. Personalities are not a consideration and in business you have to work with people whether you like them or not. It always helps if you do get on but inevitably if you don't there could be a clash but you have to rise above that.

6. When David Leal-Bennett was successfully elected he did not participate in Council meetings when Hitchin Town Hall was an agenda item and he always removed himself from the chamber. At that time I was a member of the trust for the Workings Men Hall and Gymnasium so I was also unable to sit in Council meetings when the town hall was discussed and therefore I sat outside meeting with Councillor Leal-Bennett.

7. When I was no longer a trustee I was immediately was allowed back in meetings where the Town Hall was discussed. However when Cllr Leal-Bennett resigned as a director of HTH Ltd around the end of 2013 and he wished to now participate in meetings on the Town Hall the officers took issue with this and advised him that he still had a declarable interest and that he needed to leave the

meetings. I did question the monitoring officer what this interest was and Anthony Roache replied the interest was that he had a "close association" still with HTH Ltd .

8. I found this very strange that I was allowed back into the Council Chamber and allowed to participate in Council debates yet Cllr Leal-Bennett was being prevented to carry out his elected duties. I have questioned the Monitoring Officer if I needed to declare that I was a "past" trustee and I was reassured I did not need to do so.

9. In 2015 I was the subject of a complaint and an investigation was carried out over whether I had compromised the code of conduct which it was found I had not. In the response to the complainants, the Acting Monitoring Officer Jeanette Thompson, she said and I quote

"I would add that a District's Councillors role is to represent their ward and they are specifically encouraged (under the Council's constitution) to act as advocates on behalf of their constituents (some of which they undoubtedly will have association with).

10. NHDC appears to have different interpretation of the Constitution for different Councillors and it would appear in my opinion that officers are bullying Cllr Leal-Bennett to force him out of meetings rather than allowing him to take up his constitutional right of being an elected member. Further the offices are there to give advice – my understanding is that advice is not an instruction. If a Councillor wishes not to take that advice they are free to do so but would have to face any consequences afterwards if there were any.

11. I am aware that statements have been taken from officers and Councillors. Some of the officers are referring to meetings when David Leal-Bennett is there as a Director of Hitchin Town Hall limited and appear to believe that he is bound by the Council's code of Conduct in those meetings. It is quite clear in the Council's Constitution that the code of conduct only applies when a member is representing the Council or the Council's business or has been elected , appointed or nominated by NHDC to an outside body.

12. Officers are now spending public money to get legal advice to justify the actions that they have taken against him. This use of public money is a disgrace and many council tax payers who have read this in the local press have approached me of their concerns and asked who is in control at NHDC ? Their conclusion is that it is the officers not the Councillors who have been elected.

13. It has also come into the public domain that the Monitoring officer involved the police over whether Cllr Leal-Bennett had a pecuniary interest as a trustee in HTH which in their opinion he should declare. We have other Councillors for example one who was a Director of North Herts Homes, who stayed in the chamber and voted a clear violation of the code of conduct but the Monitoring Officer took no action against this Councillor. There are others who never declare that they are the Council's representative or elected representatives on the Letchworth Heritage Foundation (LHF) and when the Council is discussing the assets of LHF these Councillors stay in the meetings and vote. It does appear that the Monitoring Officer applies the code differently and inconsistently to different members of the council whereas the code should apply to all Councillors.

14. Cllr Leal-Bennett has challenged the Monitoring Officer's view that he has a pecuniary interest as a director of HTH Ltd and sort the advice of Eric Pickles MP, who was the local government minister at the time, and the local MP Peter Lillley. As I recall their view was that he did not but officer's have continued to pursue and tried to bully Cllr Leal-Bennett that he does. The officers have sort legal advice paid for from Council Taxes to challenge the views of Members of Parliament.

15. I believe the officers have influenced the business of Full Council by advising the Chairman of the Council to suspend a meeting because Cllr Leal-Bennett would not withdraw from the meeting claiming that he still had a close association with HTH. The Chairman could have allowed the business to continue but took the officer advice against Cllr Leal-Bennett. Instead the item had to be deferred to a later date.

16. It is well known in the Conservative group that Cllr Cowley and Cllr Leal-Bennett did not get on over Hitchin Town Hall because he is prone to asking difficult questions particularly around the financials and when he is not satisfied with the answer he will continue with his lines of enquiry. Cllr Cowley seems to forget that Councillors are elected to scrutinise officers and that full financial information needs to be fully understood to be able to make a decision. Asking difficult questions to get the full financial information should be encouraged and officers have been known to make mistakes in the figures.

17. For me it is a great sadness that there is to be a public hearing against Cllr Leal-Bennett and an alleged breach of the code of conduct. When the public read about this in the press and see how much time and public money has been spent it will damage the Council and its reputation.



Cllr Claire Strong

December 31st 2015