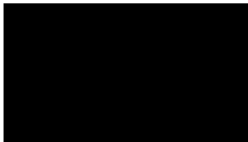


# Statement

- COUNCILLOR JOHN HARRIS

Statement re Cllr David Leal-Bennett-Disciplinary hearing.



30<sup>th</sup> December 2015

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Cllr John Harris representing Baldock East and I am the Chairman of Baldock Area Committee. I have over 25 years Corporate Banking experience.

I would like to state at the outset that in my opinion, this disciplinary hearing is the result of a personal campaign/attack by a small number of Officers and the Leader of the council, on a man who is prepared to speak up on behalf of the residents of North Herts District Council.

This personal campaign against Cllr Leal-Bennett highlights the double standards that are in evidence both within the Conservative Group and NHDC. My comments and opinion are based on my experiences as follows:

1-At the Group meeting where disciplinary action was considered against Cllr Leal-Bennett, the following occurred:

- a) A cabinet member was overheard calling DLB and another Member, "the opposition" before the hearing commenced. (A clear lack of respect for fellow members).
- b) In a desperate attempt to enforce a suspension (as the Group opinion appeared to be going against a 6 month suspension), a complainant said that they would accept a 3 month ban. However, the group decided against any suspension. Subsequently the campaign against David has appeared to move to a new level.
- c) A member supporting DLB was shouted down, by supporters of the suspension (a common occurrence within the Group showing a complete lack of respect for fellow members, and allowed by the Leader).

2-In May 2015 a Senior Officer at NHDC requested an Elected Member of the Council to delete an email to conceal information from public records. This is a clear breach of the Officer /Member protocol/code of conduct. "Using position to seek influence?"

This however was deemed to be acceptable behaviour, by the Chief Executive Officer and Monitoring Officer, in response to an Official complaint by the Elected Member. The Leader of Council was made aware of complaint at the outset, but chose not to make any comment or assist the Elected Member.

3-A number of examples of potential disclosable interests, where advice sought from the Monitoring Officer and on the face of it was not taken into account by the member. In at least one instance, this has resulted in a belated apology by a Senior Member of the Council in respect of a key vote affecting the Local Pan. No further action was taken. This is an apparent failure to follow the rules of the Council in relation to the Declaration of Interests.

## Statement re Cllr David Leal-Bennett-Disciplinary hearing.

4- An Elected Member of the Conservative Group has been appointed by the Leader to be Chair of an NHDC external organisation, where a conflict of interest exists. No action was taken by Officers questioning the appointment.

5-A Cabinet member of the Conservative Group emailing all group members calling them "weak willed" in respect of a Group decision, insulting all Elected Members, however no action taken and the person in question subsequently appointed to a key position within the Council. Using position to seek influence?

6-A senior Elected Member of the Conservative Group has publicly criticised an Officer of NHDC on a number of occasions, and to date no action has been taken by Senior Officers of NHDC or the Group Leader.

7-Importantly it should be noted that the ruling Conservative Group, lacks in my opinion Democratic Leadership. The style of Leadership is more dictatorial, with a "MY WAY OR THE HIGH WAY" policy. The examples below from my observations and experience highlight this style of leadership:

- a) The Leader has sent incorrect/misleading emails to Group Members in an attempt to discredit one member who has questioned issues raised at group meetings.
- b) Inadequate information/time is given to Elected Members upon which to make an informed judgement.
- c) Debate is not encouraged, however in its place the Leader comments on every point made by elected members, thereby influencing decisions.
- d) The Leader is unwilling to meet with an individual elected member and an independent observer (despite numerous requests) to discuss concerns about her behaviour towards a certain elected member.
- e) Crucially, on the one and only occasion that a Group vote went against the Leader's view, the majority decision was overruled by the leader and was never taken to Full Council.
- f) This style of leadership, restricts freedom of speech, proper debate within the group and detrimentally impacts on decisions made by the ruling group.

As an elected representative of the people of North Herts, for the reasons given above, I have found it impossible to represent my constituents, and for that reason, I have decided not to stand for re-election, in May 2016.

Personally, I have found Cllr Leal-Bennett, to be a likeable, passionate man who represents the residents of his ward, better than most other councillors I have experienced in the past 4 years. Cllr Leal-Bennett does not seek any personal gain from his role as Councillor, on the contrary, he has given up any opportunity of progression within the council, by sticking up for the people of Hitchin.

Statement re Cllr David Leal-Bennett-Disciplinary hearing.

He is well respected by residents of his ward, and should be complimented on the way he is willing to question the "establishment", on matters that are important to Hitchin and the residents of North Herts.

He has never enjoyed the respect of the Leader of the Council who I feel takes matters personally and is unable to work with people who ask questions. This is surprising given Cllr Leal-Bennett's knowledge, experience and successful professional background which could be a considerable asset to NHDC.

In conclusion, given the circumstances that I have highlighted above, I believe that the personal attack on Cllr Leal-Bennett, is an attempt to remove him from the system, because of his willingness to challenge the Officers and Leader, on behalf of the residents of North Herts.

He is up for election in May 2016 and to hold a disciplinary hearing just before an election is, in my opinion, an attempt to influence his constituents and is undemocratic.

The extent of this investigation and hearing is totally disproportionate and a total misuse of NHDC taxpayers money.

Cllr John Harris ACIB  
Councillor Baldock East  
Chairman Baldock Area Committee  
Former Corporate Banking Manager