

Chairman's Report

2013-4

I must begin by expressing my sincere thanks to all Members for their kindness and support throughout my year of office, particularly those who have welcomed me to their wards. My thanks also to the officers of the 'engine room' of Democratic Services, who have provided me with much help, despite the changes that have affected their routine, and always with grace and charm. Thanks also to the other Council officers with whom I have had cause to work this year, all of whom have been most helpful and always good humoured, notwithstanding the pressures upon them.

I would also like to express my warm thanks to my Vice-Chairman, Cllr Mrs Davison, for her support and advice during the year, and wish her and Cllr Davison as fruitful and rewarding year as Chairman and Escort as I have enjoyed.

The year of a Chairman is one of great contrasts. There is the pomp and ceremony of Civic Services at venues as diverse as Canterbury Cathedral and the smallest parish church in Rochester diocese. As my predecessor found, the annual Battle of Britain Memorial Day event at Capel-le-Ferne was highly memorable, as being both very moving and very humbling.

Much of the year is taken up with events that celebrate the cultural aspects of the District. I attended many concerts, plays and musical productions of song and dance, a number at the Knole Academy. A particularly noteworthy production at the academy was prompted by the forthcoming centenary of the outbreak of World War I. This outstanding performance was so profound, and deeply moving, that I think that many in the audience were brought to tears. This was by a cast of Year 8 & 9 students. Extraordinarily powerful. All of these events were immensely enjoyable, whether by young people or by adults, and showcase the talent in the District. It is good to be able to show appreciation by attending these events.

I took part in some carol events, most notably the SDC staff event at St Luke's (which gets better every year!) and that at Mencap, markedly different!

There has been the usual round of AGMs, where the presence of the Chairman validates the work done by the organisation, generally through the work of an army of volunteers, unsung heroes all. It is a great opportunity to thank those volunteers without whom many of the most unfortunate in our society would lead much poorer lives. It is a worry that funding cuts may drive some of these voluntary organisations out of existence.

I have had the pleasure of attending events associated with the older members of our community, and with the young, who always show a sense of appreciation that they have been recognised.

I have particularly enjoyed being able to participate in a number of activities, such as a Sky ride cycle ride, the Sport Relief run and a day out working with our refuse collectors.

I cannot leave out what was probably the most amazing event of the year, the open top bus victory tour of the District by our very own Olympic Gold medallist, Lizzy Yarnold. My

congratulations to her on her fine achievement, both at the Winter Olympics and in becoming World Champion. I was absolutely astonished by the huge number of people who came out onto the streets of the District to wave and cheer during the tour. The massive sense of pride and identification with 'our girl' was palpable! Lizzy is an absolutely charming person who seems unmoved by her huge success, and is keen to use herself in inspiring others to achieve great things. Long may she do this!

I anticipate that I shall have attended approaching 140 events in my term of office, and have found interest in all of them, a sense of pride in what our community in the District is achieving but also concern that ongoing budget cuts may compromise the future of this. However, I feel that the Chairman should have been invited to many more, such is the range of activities and events in the District that are worthy of recognition by way of a formal visit.

My deepest concern is that Sevenoaks District Council is in danger of becoming an 'invisible authority'. There is widespread public ignorance of the shire county three tier system, and there is the common misconception that a 'mayor' is more important than a 'chairman', something that has also been noted by the other District Council Chairmen that I have met over the year. As a consequence, I believe that the Chairman of Sevenoaks District Council is not invited to events that the post holder should be as the First Citizen of the District. If this misconception is not remedied, I fear that the District Council will be regarded as simply the body that collects the Council Tax (and keeps it all) and does nothing other than collect refuse, and possibly deal with some planning matters. Town/parish and county councils will continue to have a standing with the public, without the opprobrium of being tax collectors. I believe that the role of the Chairman of Sevenoaks District Council needs to be promoted much more actively, to enable the post holder to be an effective and visible ambassador for the Council to a much wider audience.

As an exemplar, I have been invited to a single event at one Infants' School only (by the school), and another to make an award by the award maker. I have received several invitations to events promoted by only one secondary school. Are these the only schools in the District?

Finally, my deepest thanks to my Escort, Sylvia, a very private person, who has undertaken a very public role with enormous grace and charm, a role which she would not have chosen for herself! I am most grateful for her support.

Alan W. L. Pett

**Chairman
2014**

April