

SDC Chairman's report 2016/17

A year ago when I was privileged to be elected Chairman by my peers, I took on the role with some diffidence - despite experience as Town Mayor. I was still not sure what to expect in a role covering a much wider geography. What I have experienced as Chairman has been a growing and amazing appreciation of what goes to make up our unique District.

The initial press release highlighted my recognition of and interest in supporting local talent. What my wife and I have experienced has exceeded any reasonable expectations. Very early in the year we were invited to a community choir festival in Edenbridge - the standard of singing amongst the several choirs taking part was fantastic, especially since community choirs do not audition. These included D'Vine Singers based in Sevenoaks, established to measure the benefits of singing for people suffering mental illness. There can be little doubt about the wellbeing effect of singing for the members, and we have always enjoyed their concerts. The nationally recognised metrics used showed a significant measurable improvement in well being and mental health.

We are fortunate that we are surrounded by performing arts. We have attended two thought provoking plays by Stag Youth Theatre. We have been amazed by the talent exhibited by Kentish Opera and Sevenoaks Players - I even managed to squeeze in a participation in Sevenoaks Players performance of Mikado at Stag Plaza and am proud to say that I remembered all the right words in the right order. It would have been even better if I had managed them all in the same performance! In also name checking Sevenoaks Symphony Orchestra I have to declare an interest as my wife is a member, their concerts reach a very high standard in what is a relatively small town. That performers come from quite a wide geography is testament to the quality of the facilities and core talent in the District. And anyone who has not experienced the extraordinarily high standard achieved by choirs such as Cantate, Temenos and Sevenoaks Philharmonic have missed a treat. That said, we have also many attended musical events outside the District, one of the many highlights being the London Mozart Players performing in New Romney (a town of 8,000?) which included the premiere of a work commissioned from the renowned Paul Mealar, made even more special as the composer was present and proved to be a delightful conversationalist.

However all this talent doesn't just happen. It starts at school age. We were fortunate to be invited twice to St Michael's School for concerts given at the end of a day of workshops to which St Michael's invited 6 or so local primary schools. For children of primary age, the standard reached, firstly for the jazz concert and a few weeks later for their Big Sing, was astonishing. We also attended a number of performances at Knole Academy where the benefits of music and performance on the confidence and wellbeing of participants became increasingly self evident. So perhaps it comes as no surprise that the Tonbridge Grammar School Senior Carol Concert had singing that was almost sublime, nor that the Sevenoaks Young Musician of the Year competition attracted talent of such high quality. And I have

merely scratched the surface; all these activities add tremendously to the quality of life and wellbeing in our District.

It was good to see our local schools being so inclusive and community minded. The New Beacon hosted a seminar on mental health in schools. Knole Academy hosted a dance show involving many groups and schools at The Stag in Sevenoaks. And it is this theme of community that created such a powerful impression during the year. I had the privilege of collecting an award on behalf of Sevenoaks District Council for its work with people living with Dementia. The Forget me Not café in Westerham received an award at the same ceremony. Whilst SDC had provided practical support, the establishment of this café (and another in Edenbridge) was driven by the local community. Another community initiative was the Howard Venue in Hextable, which through the drive of one individual supported by a dedicated team of helpers revived an unused modern dance studio complex and reopened it as a much needed performing arts complex.

A highlight late in the year was being present for the High Sheriff's Award to SupaJam in Swanley, an extraordinary place where music is used to help young people in desperate need. The common theme with all these is an undying extraordinary commitment by ordinary(?) people to help their fellow beings and their community. This is also reflected in my two chosen charities for the year, Guide Dogs for the Blind and West Kent Mind. Again, I have only scratched the surface of the very many organisations and people dedicated to helping others in so many ways; we owe them an enormous debt.

So far I have focused on the culture and the people who help to make our District such a wonderful and special place to live. But I could not finish without commenting on our environment and the vibrant economy found within it. 93% of the District is Green Belt, and of that 93%, 60% is Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and a lot of it is also of Special Scientific Interest. I doubt that there are any Districts or Boroughs that have such a wealth of heritage assets as we have, much perhaps down to the fact that we are within a days carriage ride of London. I wonder whether we take them too much for granted, and do not realise how valuable they are. Sevenoaks Town Council recently commissioned an economic evaluation of Stag Theatre from a firm of reputable and experienced consultants. Using recognised metrics, they assessed the value of Stag to the local economy as £7m - some comes from direct employment, some from visitor spend, more from direct spend into the economy and so on. This is just one visitor attraction, but we have so many more. During my year I have tried to highlight some of these. We held a civic tea and tour of Hever Castle, a tour of the Kent Wildlife Trust reserve off Bradbourne Vale Road and a gala charity dinner at Penshurst Place. The response was almost stunned amazement at the beauty and quality of these places. We also arranged a civic visit to Castle Farm to view the lavender fields, on which occasion I sampled a lavender massage in one of the fields - a unique experience. What became obvious was that our traditional heritage attractions have had to become far more business like and professional to survive. But interestingly many of our businesses are also becoming tourist attractions - Castle

Farm is very much a business, but the lavender fields are spectacular in July and the farm shop itself is interesting to visit. Just down the road in Shoreham is Mount Vineyard, producing award winning wine - people visit it for tastings and for tours round the vineyard. Our townscapes and the unique retail offering in those high streets can also attract visitors - think of Eynsford with its ford, castle and buildings, Westerham with its charming square, Sevenoaks with its independent shops - all business centres which attract people perhaps bored with shopping malls and their uniqueness.

Given the beauty and wonder of our Green Belt, maybe it is appropriate to finish by highlighting the pleasure of visiting two other farms on Open Farm Sunday last year. One produces wheat that goes into Warburtons bread, the other produced organic milk that goes into Yeo Organic Yoghurt - a timely reminder along with Castle Farm and Mount Vineyard (amongst others) that our Green Belt is economically productive that helps to underpin our local economy and local employment. Something easy to forget when so many people live in the District but commute to London.

It has been a humbling year learning a lot, hopefully supporting some extraordinary "ordinary" people doing so much for their communities, and waving the flag for what is a unique, special and beautiful District throughout the region.

Cllr Simon Raikes May 2017