

Chairman's Report 2009/2010

My year as Chairman has passed very quickly. During that time I have attended approaching 300 engagements and most of which my wife Hazel has been with me in a very supportive role as Chairman's escort.

A memorable occasion was my invitation to the annual lunch of the London Mayors' Association. The current President of the Association is the Lord Mayor of Westminster, Councillor Duncan Sandys. As Cllr Sandys is Winston Churchill's great grandson, this lunch was held at Chartwell in Sevenoaks District. This was followed by an even more memorable occasion, which was the Annual Civic Service of the London Mayors in Westminster Abbey.

I have attended many other church services including the reopening of the Drive Methodist Church, two services at the superb late Saxon "Church in the Woods" at West Kingsdown and the farewell service to Michael Nazir Ali, the Bishop of Rochester. I was grateful for the support during the year of Canon Paul Francis, the vicar of Riverhead and Dunton Green as Chairman's Chaplain, and was also grateful for the extent to which the local vicar of St Luke's, Rev Mark Griffin, supports the District Council. There were a number of Christmas carol services. Of these, two of the most memorable were the singing of carols around the wards of Sevenoaks Hospital on Christmas Eve, and the Mencap carol service. That service is a joyful and very happy occasion with everyone joining in with famous carols such as Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer!

On a sadder note I represented the Council at memorial services for two past Chairmen, Joyce Thompsett and John Harris OBE MC. More recently another past Chairman has sadly died, Dr Wilfrid Harding CBE, but I was unable to attend the function to commemorate his life.

During the year I have been in attendance at three royal visits to the District. The Duke of York visited BPI Films in Moore Road at Bat & Ball, the Duchess of Gloucester opened farm buildings for children at Dorton House School for the blind, and the Duke of Kent visited Hever Castle to open a new wood chip burning boiler.

The year as Chairman was an opportunity to admire and fully appreciate the excellent music and drama provided in the District. In the last year I have attended performances by

Sevenoaks Symphony Orchestra
Kentish Opera
Sevenoaks Philharmonic Choir
Sevenoaks 3 Arts Festival
Sevenoaks Summer Festival
Lydian Orchestra

Hillview Community Choir
Kent Youth Jazz Orchestra
Sevenoaks Players
Swanley Light Opera Group
Young Musician of the Year Competition
Youth Theatre at the Stag

It has been encouraging to see many of these bodies performing back in the Stag Theatre.

As Chairman, one obviously supports the many events organised, either wholly or partly, by the District Council. This has included 21 visits to the Summer 2009 In the Zone holiday programme and 5 visits to the Easter programme. Recently I was required to make a speech at a Start4life event in Swanley to promote Breast Feeding. On that occasion I was glad to be able to delegate the technical part of the speech to my wife! We attended meetings in Edenbridge and Swanley (the Vice Chairman attended the Sevenoaks event) arranged to establish a Fifty Plus forum for the District. This forum, once it starts operating, should become an important local voice. We have also attended local initiatives such as Health Walks, Heart of Kent events promoting tourism, staff induction days, Safety in Action, and TryAngle awards to young people. A fun evening was enjoyed by SDC staff and Members at the annual cricket match in May and they were well fed by Gary Williamson's BBQ.

A major event organised by the District Council, together with the Wildernesse School Council, was the Celebrating Young People Conference in February 2010. Young people from eight different schools and several youth organisations came along to take part in workshops, showcase their talents on stage and join in with the first youth conference to be organised by young people for young people

It has been interesting to meet staff from the Kenward Trust on several occasions to see and discuss their important work in lessening the impact of addiction to drink and drugs. Recently, I presented certificates to a number of young people from Sevenoaks who had made a significant contribution towards the work in this area. I will be particularly interested to see how successful their work will be in implementing the new Alcohol Treatment Requirements imposed by magistrates' courts.

The Chairman's role brings about many contacts with military and veterans' bodies. These have included a parade of the Princess of Wales' Royal Regiment on its return from Afghanistan and the presentation by the Lord Lieutenant of Kent of awards to cadet and reserve forces. As with most Chairmen there was a number of events associated with Remembrance Sunday, the main events taking place on the Vine in Sevenoaks in the morning and in Swanley in the afternoon. I was personally appalled that the Swanley event was switched from its traditional venue - St Mary's Parish Church - because the Church would not allow this year's Royal British Legion Chaplain to conduct the service because she is a woman. Instead Rev Linda Green conducted a drumhead service in the Alexandra Suite. More recently there has been a parade of the Sevenoaks Branch of the Royal Naval Association celebrating their 50th anniversary.

Despite the fact that it is not in Kent, I have done my best to foster links with Tandridge District Council. They are, after all, a neighbouring authority with which we have numerous links. A particularly interesting event was their Civic

Day when we visited the Highways Agency's Regional Control Centre at Godstone. This centre monitors and controls traffic on the southern half of the M25, together with motorways M2, M20, M23, M3 and M27, and is collocated with Surrey Police.

It was a pleasure to attend the Lord Lieutenant's presentation of voluntary service awards held at Bradbourne School. For young people, it was a privilege for me to have the opportunity to present awards from the District Council to the young volunteer of the year. I was aware that we owe a debt to the many people who contribute voluntary service in the District. However, my year as Chairman has shown me how enormous that debt is. During the year I have attended functions or meetings at

Swanley Volunteer Centre	Royal British Legion
Scouts and Guides	Age Concern
Edenbridge Voluntary Transport Service	CAB Sevenoaks
NW Kent Carers Support Service	CAB Edenbridge
Otford Heritage Centre	West Kent Extra
Spadework Nursery	Cadet Forces
Hospice in the Weald	Mencap
Alzheimers and Dementia Support	Bridges Edenbridge
West Kent Mediation	

These are the people who need to be thanked and the Civic Dinner is a way of doing so.

I should, perhaps, have checked more carefully during the year that I was visiting every parish in the District but, on studying the map, I can not identify any parish that I have not visited. Sometimes this has involved the attendance at a particular event and in other cases I have visited the Parish Council. I am grateful to Members for their support on these occasions. One aspect of these visits with which I was particularly impressed was the extent to which fellow councillors are contributing to their local communities as volunteers.

I have visited many schools and Dorton and West Kent Colleges to attend prize givings, art exhibitions, concerts or just to see pupils being taught. Three educational establishments, West Kent College and Tonbridge Grammar School are opening new teaching and learning buildings and Sevenoaks School recently provided a Gala Concert to mark the opening of their new performing Arts Centre. Locally in Riverhead, I acted as a judge in Riverhead Infants School's bid for the Longest Walking Bus competition. Here the headteacher permitted only one member of staff to remain to look after the school buildings while the staff and all 270 pupils took part in the walking bus.

I was privileged to be invited to join the guests at the London Golf Club at Ash when the club hosted the very prestigious British Open last May. Not being a "golfing person", I had not been aware that the District contained this important sporting venue and employer of labour. I have visited a number of

Sencio events and was privileged to open their new disabled facilities at the Edenbridge leisure centre. Two of these events were for the disabled; at one I was soundly beaten at disabled basketball and at the other soundly beaten at disabled table tennis. I received invitations from both the Sevenoaks Hockey Club and the Sevenoaks Rugby Club. I had not appreciated how large these clubs are. Both clubs field about 18 different teams including many junior teams.

New Chain

At the start of the Civic Year, the original civic chain needed repairing again. When these repairs were completed, the silversmith reported that, in his opinion, the chain was worn and badly designed, and would only last another year or two. Consequently, it was decided that it would be more economic to replace the chain rather than continue to pay for repairs. A new chain was procured which cost Council only £280, thanks to donations from 10 past Chairmen and from the current Chairman and Vice-Chairman. The medallion bearing the District Council's emblem has been transferred to the new chain. To save costs in the future, the name of the retiring Chairmen will not be engraved onto the chain.

Chairman's Charity

Members will recall I chose to support two charities - Hospice in the Weald and Alzheimer's and Dementia Support. The total raised for these two charities has been about £1000.

The Role of the Chairman

According to the Council's Constitution "*The Chairman of the Council will carry out the ceremonial duties of the Council attending such civic and ceremonial functions as the Council and/or s/he determines appropriate.*"

This leaves the question of which civic engagements are actually "appropriate". I have taken the view that I should attend, if possible, every event in the District to which I was invited. This leaves the problem of which civic engagements outside the District should be attended.

I have accepted all invitations for Kent wide events such as those from the Lord Lieutenant, the High Sheriff, Kent County Council, and other agencies covering the County as a whole. The events that I have attended have been reported in the weekly Members' bulletin. Members are not however, aware of the invitations that have not been accepted. Obviously some events are not attended because they clash with other engagements. However, a fair number of invitations have not been accepted because they did not appear to justify the cost to the Council of attending. Before deciding to accept an invitation I have considered whether attendance would benefit Sevenoaks. In many cases the decision made, in consultation with the Chairman's PA, is that the benefit would not justify the cost. For example, the annual lunch on the Kent and East Sussex Railway, organised by Tenterden Town Council, is

apparently a very pleasant occasion but the relevance to Sevenoaks is hard to see.

A category of events that I have generally not attended are ticket paying events whose object is purely fund raising for charity. A typical invitation that was refused was a charity dinner in an Indian restaurant organised by a borough council. Again this might have been a pleasant occasion, but the cost of attending would have been far greater than the amount that went to the charity, and it is, therefore, difficult to justify. In any case such events are not truly civic occasions.

Another area in which I have attempted to minimise costs is in using an official car as little as possible. Instead I have travelled about 2000 miles using my own car. Very often Sevenoaks has been the only district or borough council at an event that has used a private car rather than an official chauffeur driven car. An extreme example of this was an engagement when the 18 other mayors or chairman of boroughs or districts attended in official cars and for which I accepted a free lift from the Deputy Town Mayor of Sevenoaks. I have been concerned that my regular use of a private car might not present a very good image of Sevenoaks, but have taken the view that it was preferable to save Council funds.

The year has been hard work but Hazel and I have enjoyed it and I thank Members for giving me the opportunity to represent the Council.

John Lankester
Chairman 2009/2010