

A View from the District (April 2012)

By the time you read this the election will be over. Whatever the outcome, I would like to thank the enthusiastic team which helped me with leaflets and in many other ways. It is humbling to experience such positive reaction to what I have been trying to do over the past four years.

The major news this month is our successful bid to borrow over £200M in order to fulfill a Government demand that all councils share the housing debts built up by many of them over past years (we were debt-free). The good news is that in recompense we shall now be able to retain all of the rents received instead of having to give half to central government. This will enable us to pay off the loan interest and still have a surplus to spend on new housing. Our officers are to be congratulated on the way they have handled this difficult issue.

The Corporate Governance meeting on 12 March focused mainly on the extensive reports from our auditors, and I was delighted that the chairman enthusiastically supported my suggestion that such reports might be printed in black and white (some pages have solid colour background) and on standard quality office paper (what we had was at least 120gramme). Government changes (eg the winding-up of the Audit Commission) will introduce potential risks and conflicts of interest which will need careful assessment.

Our Direct Labour Organisation (DLO), the maintenance and care team for sheltered housing, has now been transferred to a private company called Meares. Meares gave us a presentation on their proposed approach and the SCDC staff who attended, and who will become Meares employees, appeared to be satisfied with the arrangement.

Since as I write we are in an election limbo, I thought I would share a few reflections on voting. You might think that finding a reasonable way to run a fair election might be straightforward; in practice it is impossible. An economist named Kenneth Arrow demonstrated this in about 1950 (a web search yields all the complicated details). There is no way to guarantee that an election with three or more candidates should be fair – the fairness criteria are complex but more-or-less boil down to: ‘if every voter prefers X to Y, then X should get more votes than Y’.

A number of different methods have been proposed to improve fairness. A transferable vote system tries to weed out the less popular candidates; proportional representation tries to rank parties according to their overall popularity, but is very hard on independents! Another system encourages you to vote *against* candidates so that the winner is the one with the fewest (negative) votes. Yet another gives each voter as many votes as there are candidates, and you can do anything from giving each candidate a single vote to putting all your votes on your favourite. And there are more ...

Or, of course, you can abstain: in Britain (in contrast to places like Australia) voting is not compulsory. And turn-out in Britain tends to be pretty low – many people feel for many reasons that there is no point in voting. Is that a problem? Politicians seem to think it is and agonise over how they can increase turn-out. Personally, I would be more relaxed. The key thing about our voting system to my mind is that it enables us, if a significant body wishes it, to get rid of our rulers without bloodshed. It's a pretty blunt instrument; we may have to wait several years and it may not be clear what the alternative will be like; but it can be done. I just hope that, if I am still your representative as you read this, you will never feel that ousting me is the greatest benefit of our electoral system.

Douglas de Lacey