

Chairman's report –AGM 10th June 2022

Members, Friends and Colleagues

This is my first year as Chair of Braintree Constituency Conservative Association, and indeed my first year as an officer. I took over from John McKee last March together with a partly new officer team consisting of Justin Wrench as Deputy Chair Political, Mary Cunningham as Deputy Chair Membership and Finance, Tom Cunningham as Treasurer, Richard van Dulken as campaign support officer and Lyn Walters as 999 club officer. We took over in the run up to the County Council elections so it was a steep learning curve for some of us, but John McKee and Tom Cunningham kindly agreed to help run the campaign and we are very grateful for the support they offered us. This year, we decided to push the AGM back to June so that in future, new officers take over after any May elections.

2021 elections

Our main focus following the AGM last year was the County Council and Police and Fire Commissioner elections. Fortunately restrictions on campaigning were lifted in the spring allowing us to hand deliver our election material. Thanks to a positive Conservative message (and the successful vaccine rollout), as well as the efforts of all the volunteers who tramped the streets and made sure we got out our vote, we succeeded in getting all 5 of our candidates elected to the County Council and Roger Hirst elected as the Police and Crime Commissioner. Essex County Council continues to be led by the Conservatives who now have 52 of the 75 seats on the County. We are very grateful to those members who took part and made this success possible.

Association matters

In 2020 the Conservative Party drew up new rules for the Party, including new rules for Associations and Branches. The main effect of this as far as the Association is concerned is to require a larger Executive Council with representatives across the constituency. We decided to base our Executive on District Council wards with the number of representatives mirroring the number of Councillors for each ward. Under the rules, members in the ward should elect the representatives but we did not have sufficient applications for elections so those who had expressed an interest in joining the Executive were appointed. We currently have 22 ward representatives on the Executive with 12 vacancies.

Political

Our main focus for the forthcoming year is the District Council elections in May 2023. Over a third of the Conservative councillors in the constituency are retiring at the end of the current term so we had a large number of candidates to find, including those to stand in seats currently held by the Labour Party, the Halstead Residents Party and Independents. We are pleased to report that we have found 8 new candidates and the selection process for both existing councillors who would like to re-stand and new candidates has largely been completed, allowing them to start raising their profiles in the wards they will be contesting. We are however still looking for candidates for the 3 Fields ward (Finchingfield,

Bardfield, Wethersfield, Panfield, Shalford, Cornish Hall End), Halstead and Braintree/Bocking.

We have also carried out some 'peacetime' campaigning with surveys delivered in Braintree, Bocking, Rayne and Hedingham. The aim is to identify issues of importance to voters and to gather voting intentions. We are also making sure our data is up to date, including identifying those who actually voted at the County Council election and who are likely to go out and vote again, identifying those areas that had the strongest and weakest Conservative vote, and mapping walk routes.

At present, we anticipate this will be a difficult election. The Liberal Democrats will be focusing their efforts in Chelmsford and Colchester and the Labour Party seem a much diminished force in Braintree but we will face a strong challenge from the Green Party, the Halstead Residents and Independents. We very much hope that we will retain control of the District Council, but in these strange times, nothing should be taken for granted and we must not be complacent.

Membership and Finance

Our membership currently stands at 318, which is 49 less than last year. We have seen some new members join, and are very pleased to welcome them, but some have left due to dissatisfaction with the Party. It is true to say that given the size of James Cleverly's majority, our membership should be larger. One way of addressing this a local level is through canvassing but we should all try to encourage Conservative supporters to join the Party.

Ideally, we would like to have a surplus of around £7000 at the end of this year to fund the election expenses for 2023. Our main source of income is membership subscriptions, donations, dividends on the funds invested following the sale of our previous office, and fund raising. We held a dinner last December and were honoured to have the Secretary of State for Education, the Rt Hon Nadhim Zwahari as our guest speaker. We participated in the Conservatives Christmas draw which was surprisingly successful, with 75% of ticket sales going to the Association, and Lyn Walters has continued to run our 999 club with monthly draws. We have also tried to have smaller events this year including a quiz night, a race night and a bingo night but the first two had to be cancelled, maybe because the novelty of online events had worn off! We are holding a drinks reception next week and are planning a dinner in October. Our new Patron's Club has just been launched and we are hoping to set up a business club, both of which should raise valuable funds for the Association and the Party. If you have any suggestions of events you would like to see, do get in touch with Mary Cunningham via the office. We would also like to set up a small fund raising committee so again, please get in touch if you would like to help.

The other side of finance is of course expenditure. We are constantly looking at ways we can trim this and achieved a major saving at the end of this year by moving to smaller office. This will save us £1512 annually. We are also try to limit staff costs where we can (sorry Karen!) and rely on officers and councillors to carry our administrative tasks relating to campaigning. Our cash position is

healthy at the moment but we do need to improve our finances to pay for next year's election and the general election beyond.

Conservative Policy Forum

One other offering for members is our Policy Forum. This meets about 5 times a year. We discuss a topic given to us by the CPF team in London and write up a report. The CPF team then compile a report based on the submissions they receive from all the groups around the country and present this to the relevant minister and the No.10 policy unit. It is a great way for members to get their views on policy heard and I encourage anyone who is interesting in trying to influence policy to get involved..

Boundary Review

Finally, as I am sure you are aware, the Boundary Commission for England is currently carrying out a review of all the parliamentary constituencies in England with a view to redrawing the boundaries to make sure that each constituency has roughly the same number of electors. Their initial proposal saw this constituency split in half with all areas to the north of Braintree forming part of a new Haverhill and Halstead constituency and the Braintree Constituency comprising Braintree and areas surrounding Chelmsford. The Conservative Party position was to oppose this and officers from the Association attended the oral hearings to make this case. The Commission is currently reviewing the responses to all of the consultations and if their proposals change as a result of the consultation, they will hold a further consultation at the end of the year. The final recommendation will be published in June 2023 and will be made law shortly thereafter.

All that remains is to thank my fellow officers for all their hard work and dedication over the last 15 months, as well as the support and guidance given by our Executive Council. Last but not least I would like to thank our office manager, Karen whose knowledge and experience is invaluable.

Thank you too, to you the members, for all your support.