

Local Government Leadership
 Local Government House
 Smith Square
 London SW1P 3HZ
 Telephone 020 7187 7388
 Fax 020 7187 7383
 Email info@localleadership.gov.uk
www.local.gov.uk



Great places need ambitious leadership to inspire local communities and create a better future for the people and localities they represent.

Local Government Leadership works with local leaders, shifting thinking on leadership, enabling councils to work effectively with others and transforming communities for the better. Now more than ever, we need to raise the aspiration of politics locally. Through our 21st Century Councillor campaign we are committed to helping local politicians reinvigorate local democracy and ensure councillors are on the front line of building vibrant local societies. The challenge facing local government is to empower communities and individuals with a sense of civic pride for their place. We believe councillors should take the lead in devolving power to people and communities and we work with the main political parties to respond to this challenge in their own way, developing and sharing their thinking on this agenda within party traditions and values.

Local Government Group

The Local Government Group is made up of six organisations which support, promote and improve local government.



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Community Politics in the 21st century

The challenges and opportunities for community politicians

Foreword

The work of DCLG in an empowering and enabling environment

Andrew Stunell MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Foreword | 2 |
| Chapter 1 – Community Politics in a changing society | 4 |
| Chapter 2 – Advancing Community Politics: the role of local government | 11 |
| Chapter 3 – Community Politics in practice | 30 |
| Chapter 4 – The way forward for Community Politics | 48 |
| Chapter 5 – 30 years of Community Politics | 51 |

Localism is this year's buzz word, wrapped up in the shiny new catch phrase the 'Big Society'. But it is not so new for those Liberal Democrats who remember the dramatic launch of Community Politics back in the '70s. It has come round again, and it's based on recognition that communities aren't all the same, understanding that they have different needs and allowing them to take their own decisions. Localism has long been one of the core beliefs of Liberal Democrats, but with the centralised state that has grown at pace over the last half-century, too often local communities have found themselves being dictated to from the centre. Power was in the grasp of the national politicians, and not in the hands of the people.

The difference now is that there is a majority Coalition Government committed to reversing that. Liberal Democrats have an unparalleled opportunity to deliver on the changes we have planned for decades. We can now reverse creeping state centralisation, and put power back in the hands of local communities. We can turn government upside down – 'power from bottom up, not top down' – just like we've talked about for years.

And at Communities and Local Government we're wasting no time in getting things started. The Localism and Decentralisation Bill will pave the way for the long-overdue push of powers out of Whitehall to councils and neighbourhoods across the country, and give local communities real control over housing and planning decisions. It will help set the foundations for the Big Society by radically transforming the relationships between central government, local government, communities and individuals.

The bill will also be crucial in two other aspects. It will free councils up to select their own governance structure, even allowing them to return to the old committee system if they choose. But most crucially, it will give councils a

general power of competence. This is central government giving councils the freedom to get on with the job of local government. The freedom to innovate. To experiment. To deliver.

Already there are Lib Dem councils up and down the country chomping at the bit to get going. Sutton Council has had the honour of being chosen as one of the four vanguard councils to pilot Big Society programmes, and are coming up with an array of pioneering and inventive ideas. I keep hearing from others that are eager to follow suit.

Liberal Democrat councils have consistently shown that they can come up with a variety of new ideas to tackle countless every day problems despite the restrictions previously imposed from the centre. The Big Society is all about giving our councils the freedom to do even more, and to develop and implement genuine local solutions to suit their local circumstances. Sure, we'll still collect and share best practice, but the days of councils having to blindly follow central government diktat are over.

It won't all be plain sailing. The nation's finances have been left in dire straits by a Labour government that was spending money like water. Difficult decisions will have to be made, but that only makes a localist agenda even more crucial. Councils won't be able to provide effective solutions to the problems that they face whilst wearing a centrally-imposed straight jacket. 'Business as usual' just isn't an option any more. Councils will have to innovate and come up with new ideas and new solutions, ready or not.

I look forward to readers of this challenging publication 'getting the bug', and getting stuck in, at their local community and local council level, to a once in a life-time transformation of 'subjects' into 'citizens'.

We've got an immense opportunity ahead of us to really do local government differently in this country. We need to seize it with both hands.

Community Politics in a changing society

Councillor Richard Kemp
Leader, LGA Liberal Democrats

Young Liberal amendment to party strategy passed
at Liberal Party Conference, Eastbourne, 1970

“A dual approach to politics, acting both inside and outside the institutions of the political establishment, to help organise people in their communities, to take and use power to build a Liberal power-base in the major cities of this country, to identify with the under-privileged in this country and the world, to capture people’s imagination as a credible political movement, with local roots and local successes.”

If Big Society is the question then Community Politics is the answer

The phrase of the moment in certain circles is Big Society. Big Society has been seen by some as the Tory version of Community Politics – a phrase which should flow from the lips of every Lib Dem.

1

Lib Dems have always believed that collective decisions should be made at the level closest to those at the receiving end of the decisions.

This is because we believe that people have a right to autonomy over their own lives, that they have a responsibility for themselves and those around them and also that decisions taken at the lowest level, especially with regard to services, are usually the most efficient ones. Societal change and the current fiscal situation have recently led to a wider political recognition of the value of the last two of these principles, responsibility and efficiency, giving rise to an unprecedented opportunity for the Lib Dems to put their long-held ideals into practice.

We should not underestimate the significant move that even uttering the phrase ‘Big Society’ represents in the Tory Party with the last Tory PM but one telling us all, “There is no such thing as society”. Nor should we underestimate the fact that many in the Tory Party instinctively side with the Thatcherite view rather than the Cameron one.

Achieving genuine devolution of power will require the removal of many institutional barriers such as Whitehall targets but it will also need movement at the ground level to meet the challenge and take responsibility for changes in the community. Without this movement to inform and involve all members of a community, the mere removal of barriers to community action risks only empowering a few active people, often at the expense of everyone else. It is this version of ‘Community Politics’ that Lib Dems have made their own over the years and from which they have reaped the rewards politically, as representatives of the whole community.

We must not forgo the opportunity presented by the Big Society agenda to introduce Community Politics as a system of

governance and embed it as a way of ‘doing government’ after many years in which we could only campaign through it and for it.

This Government has already done much to sweep away barriers posed by regulations, bureaucracies and quangos. Now it is up to us to deliver changes.

We know that there are not as many people as active in local decision making as we would like, but we also know that people would like to be informed more than they are. The challenge for Liberal Democrats in power and opposition is to create the structures within our councils where communities can flourish, where we provide services that people want (not what we think they want) and where people are involved to the extent and in the way that they want. After 40 years many aspects of Community Politics can now leave the drawing board and become a reality.

The politics of the community in a modern age

In 1970 the Young Liberal Conference and then the Liberal Assembly adopted what it called the dual approach to politics. It implied, work to get elected to councils and Parliament but also practice Community Politics. Show that Liberalism means something by working with people, ‘all year round – not just at election time’. Show that a liberal society would look, feel and taste different.

Right from the start it was appreciated that good Community Politics would lead to good election results. The barn storming act of a predecessor of mine in Liverpool’s Church ward, Sir Trevor Jones (Jones the Vote) showed that attention to detail in people’s communities led to their respect and in many cases their vote.



Focus newsletters, street letters, ‘bring it with you’ have become part of our language and our way of life. The ‘Good Morning’ – the bane of my life – was also dreamed up in this era. It became clear that this type of work led to electoral success with by-election wins in places like Sutton and Cheam, and Rochdale where the late Big Cyril had been an instinctive community politician from the day he was born. This early phase culminated in the Liberals taking control of Liverpool City Council in 1973 at a time when the national opinion polls were only giving us four per cent of the vote.

Other Liberals such as David Penhaligon took up the charge, “If you want to explain something”, he said, “Put it on a piece of paper and stick it through the letter box!” In the dark days of the newly formed Alliance when we had slumped behind the Greens in the European elections it was the community politicians – the army of leafleters – that saved the Party.

The electoral success engendered by politics in the community however, obscured much of what the original Community Politics thinkers like Tony (now Lord) Greaves were proposing. Community Politics is not just a marketing project for a political party, its candidates and its policies – it is a belief that this is a new way of administering communities and districts. It was supposed to give real power and authority to people to run their own lives. It is therefore vital that,

once elected, councillors are guarded against the onset of ‘town hallitis’ and are not seduced by the idea that they or more likely their officers are the only ones who can really take responsibility for decisions. Time spent in the town hall is time not spent in the community. The meeting with an important person should never become more important than the meeting with the important people – the residents – who put them into power.

Just as Liberals started the process of decentralisation, the Government and society as a whole started the process of centralisation. In 1975 the then Labour Government announced that “The party’s over for local government”, and started a process whereby powers were successively stripped away. This process was followed even more enthusiastically by the Tories. This arch-centralisation culminated in 2006 when councils only spent 25 per cent on the provision of public services in their areas. Around 75 per cent of the cash was spent by London reporting quangos with only one politician in the whole of England, the Secretary of State, being held accountable by the public. Our 25 per cent was bounded by more than 1,100 centrally imposed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which meant that there was only real local discretion over about five per cent of spending.

Reluctantly the Government started to let go. It reduced the number of KPIs. It made the council first amongst equals around the

**“It’s the Government’s fault” will not wash.
Local government will take on real responsibility
for our actions – we cannot blame someone else.**

local strategic partnership table; it gave all other public bodies the duty to cooperate with the council. In reality the changes made little difference. Ministers were unable to drive the culture change needed for localism through their own organisations.

An inspection industry flourished which soaked up money, enthusiasm and most importantly kept councils and other partners away from good decision making, based on local need and opportunities. Decisions were taken to ‘get through the inspection’ rather than to deliver what councillors and local partners knew was required.

The good news is that the new Government is stripping away many of the inspections, bureaucracies, quangos and targets that have prevented good practitioners in all parties from making those effective decisions. It’s good because we really can spend money more effectively, more speedily and more locally on actual not perceived need though local delivery mechanisms.

However this does of course mean that the buck will now stop with the council. If delivery does not improve; if more residents are not satisfied with the services; or if greater efficiency is not introduced into our services, “It’s the Government’s fault” will not wash. Local government will take on real responsibility for our actions – we cannot blame someone else.

A changing society

Times have changed massively since 1970. Back then there were only three TV channels, and no internet or e-mails. Up to 75 per cent of people read the local paper. Public meetings were seen as forms of entertainment. Rattling a local MP or councillor was almost as good as bear baiting! Community was where you lived or worked or often both together.

However change was in the air even then. Clearance programmes which broke up family and community ties were at their height. Low cost transport took young people away from old people. Respect for authority was on the decline. Nowadays families are often no longer Mum, Dad, and two kids but a wide variety of family types with more people living separated from their loved ones. Public meetings can seem unnecessary when we can e-mail people or contact them via Twitter or Facebook. People get their information from a wide range of sources not just the local news media.

This change in people’s social relationships appears to be accompanied by a change in people’s relationship with the state. The idea of people being citizens engendered by two world wars and a long history were giving way to the concept of people as consumers not only of private services but also of public services. “Mustn’t grumble” gave way as a national catch phrase to, “I’ve a right to”.



One of the most intense discussions that we had when we first took control of Liverpool was the correct term for describing our residents. Some, like me, argued for the term citizen. We chose the 'lofty' term because we wanted to see people in that role of giving as well as getting; of contributing as well as receiving; of taking leadership for their areas instead of just mutely accepting whatever whoever gave them. However it is clear that the term 'consumer' is becoming an increasingly accurate description of what the relationship between the council and its residents is becoming. This highlights the one-dimensional, passive relationship of an increasing number of residents.

Even for those who do interact in a positive way with the 'authorities' much of their contact is as a consumer. Consciously they use our schools, our benefit services, our social services; unthinkingly they use our bins and walk on the streets that we light, repair and maintain. Unknowingly they don't get food poisoning in cafés because of our environmental health services and would be evacuated by our emergency services if there were a gas explosion.

It is true that there are some things councils can learn from the relationship between a consumer and modern corporation such as a

supermarket. Every time we, as local authorities interact with our citizens we can pick up valuable information that it is so easy to ignore. On a simple basis you can map the times that people access services to change opening and closing times to fit popular demand or need. On a more complex basis you can map enquires for certain types of activity using a Geographic Information System and try and predict future problems and nip them in the bud whilst the problems are still solvable. In this we ape the supermarkets and their loyalty cards and points systems. With our consumer's permission we extract information from a transaction and use it to improve services and improve our offer.

There are however two major differences between us and a supermarket. Firstly, everyone knows that what you get is what you the purchaser can afford. The Champagne might look tempting but if the purse only allows for a bottle of brown ale that's what you go for and you don't blame the supermarket for not being able to afford the Champagne. Secondly, there is the question of choice. You don't have to go to just one supermarket; there are a range of options. There might not be all that much difference between them but you are able to choose.

Users of council services by and large do not get a choice. We all use the rubbish collection service. We all depend on the man and the lorry turning up to remove it. Often the poorer you are you the more your contact with the council and other authorities. A continued delivery of poor service might be a nuisance to the wealthy who often have the option of private alternatives, but it will make a profound difference to your quality of life if you are poor.

It is true that you do not have to use our parks or libraries but there are very few similar alternatives. It is an open ended approach to the provision of public services that is now beginning to cause the most friction between the state (at all levels) and residents. When does my need become my entitlement and then become my right? Even when a service is provided, what is our role as resident, citizen or consumer in delivering that service?

Again let us use the supermarket analogy. We know that if we use a supermarket we have to go round and assemble our 'basket' ourselves thus saving labour cost. If we shop online it will cost more because they do the collecting and delivering for you.

And so it could be with council led services as well. Yes of course it is the responsibility of the council to keep your street clean but it's also your responsibility not to throw rubbish in the street in the first place.

Of course the council and other players should be helping to look after the very young or the old and infirm but it is also your job to look after your ageing parents and occupy the time of your children.

There is further complexity: how do we differentiate between a parent who does not care about their child and a parent who cannot cope with a child? How do we decide whether a person is now unable to help their aged mum as distinct to unwilling? Crucially how does that judgment affect what happens to the child or the granny who are often only the recipients of other people's decisions? How do we get those who can, to take that responsibility, so we can better provide for those in need, who cannot?

This is an age old challenge for public sector support, but in our current climate with at least 25 per cent cuts in funding underway hard decisions will need to be made about services that we all value.



Advancing Community Politics: the role of local government

Councillor Richard Kemp
Leader, LGA Liberal Democrats

2

Devolution within the council and its partners

Societal changes have led to an increasingly apparent need to revitalise communities and people's sense of responsibility to those around them. This coupled with the gradual realisation in Whitehall that moving budgets down to more local levels could save money whilst providing services that people actually want, has aroused an unprecedented appetite for localism in central government.

This opportunity to devolve decision-making processes to their proper levels cannot be missed. Sometimes this will mean devolving powers to the council and sometimes it will mean devolving powers from the council to communities. If Lib Dems believe that you cannot sit in Whitehall and know about every community then we should logically assume that the same applies to the town hall. We must be careful that intellectual or physical laziness does not prevent us from taking the big step required and actually give our own councillors' power away. Just as central government is removing some of

the barriers to local government, such as the overbearing number of targets, quangos and bureaucracies, likewise councils must create the structures necessary to allow communities to start taking responsibility for services in their area.

It is not as easy as removing barriers however: "Let's empower citizens" is a lazy response. Even those of us who believe passionately in devolution and empowerment struggle with this because the reality is that very few people currently have a burning desire to be empowered.

I think it's a law of diminishing returns, my guesstimation based on personal experience of community activism would be:

| | |
|-------------|---|
| 100% | citizens who live in an area |
| 70% | citizens who want to know what goes on in their street/school/neighbourhood |
| 30% | who will donate money/ turn up to a fund raising event in their street/school/neighbourhood |
| 20% | people who will give an opinion about what is happening in their street/school/neighbourhood |
| 5% | people who will do something about their street/school/neighbourhood |
| 0.5% | people who will move beyond their immediate community and involve themselves in wider area/themed strategies |

It would take immense effort to radically alter the number involved at each of these stages. Lives are too complex, work patterns are too varied, people tend to relate only to the present, themselves and their families. There appears to be a view among some in the Government that there is an army of people who can't wait to set up schools, get involved in local decision-making and host leisure activities if only town hall bureaucracy could be removed. People who have worked for

years in their community will tell you this is not the case. That does not mean to say that we should not seek to empower more but it recognises the reality that we face: the number of natural volunteers is limited.

If we as Lib Dems are to make Community Politics a reality then there will need to be an effort at all levels. In Westminster and Whitehall they must, as they have started to do, remove the institutional barriers, the targets and bureaucracies that force councils

to look up rather than down. Town halls must in turn continue this devolution to communities and also provide support and facilitation to community action.

Councils must be genuine in their desire to devolve power. If you don't want to do it don't pretend to do it. It is going to be very hard work, over a sustained period of time to change the culture of your council and its partners to give up direct control of staff, resources and services.

It will mean training and supporting people for new roles, involving local people how and where they want to be involved. There will need to be very clear objectives from day one as to where you would like your devolved structure to be in (say) five years and set a series of achievable objectives for every year in the intervening periods, remembering that saving money should not be the key objective – recognising that this is a better way of providing services which saves money is the key objective.

Perhaps the most important role is that of the ward councillor as community politician, working hard to engage the community in its new responsibility and ensuring that all sections are represented. It is essential that ward councillors remember that local people are not necessarily as representative as they claim to be, that wards are a building block for governance but that people don't live in wards - they live in neighbourhoods and communities.

The rest of this chapter looks at the strands of local budgeting, driven by both the responsibility and the efficiency agendas,

and what is being done and can be done by Whitehall, the town hall and the ward councillor. Whatever level budgets are assigned to, one of the most significant benefits of local budgeting is that it both allows and requires the council to co-ordinate partnership working at each of the appropriate levels. The role of councils and councillors in facilitating this is examined in the section that follows. The third section looks at accountability. If budgets and delivery partners are working at different levels of the local government structure then the nature of council scrutiny will also have to adapt, with scrutiny starting at ward level and aggregating up to district and top tier level. There follows a brief summary of the role of new methods of communication to improve residents' scrutiny of service delivery in their area. The chapter finishes with an account of the obstacles that face ward councillors in engaging the whole community.

Decision-making at the right level

The LGA have made an offer to the present government showing how the budget deficit can be tackled whilst saving money and protecting frontline services. They were able to demonstrate £100 billion of savings in the lifetime of the Parliament by a massive reduction in quangos, levels of government and delivery mechanisms. The abolition of many of these bodies will enable us to deliver our services in a more joined up way. Three examples show the need for this:

- In the Baby Peter case 14 organisations were responsible for looking after Peter and his family. All got their outputs but none took overall responsibility. No-one wanted the outcome of Peter dying but that is what happened.

- If you leave prison as a 20-year-old there are at least 13 people from nine different organisations responsible for trying to keep you from returning. All the people and organisations get their output boxes ticked but which of the organisations had the target of the 80 per cent failure rate that exists.
- In Leicestershire over 40 organisations deal with various aspects of drug prevention and drug dependence assistance. All those organisations have their mission statements and get their outputs. But whose outcome is it that so many drug users simply cannot make the system work for them and don't know where to go?

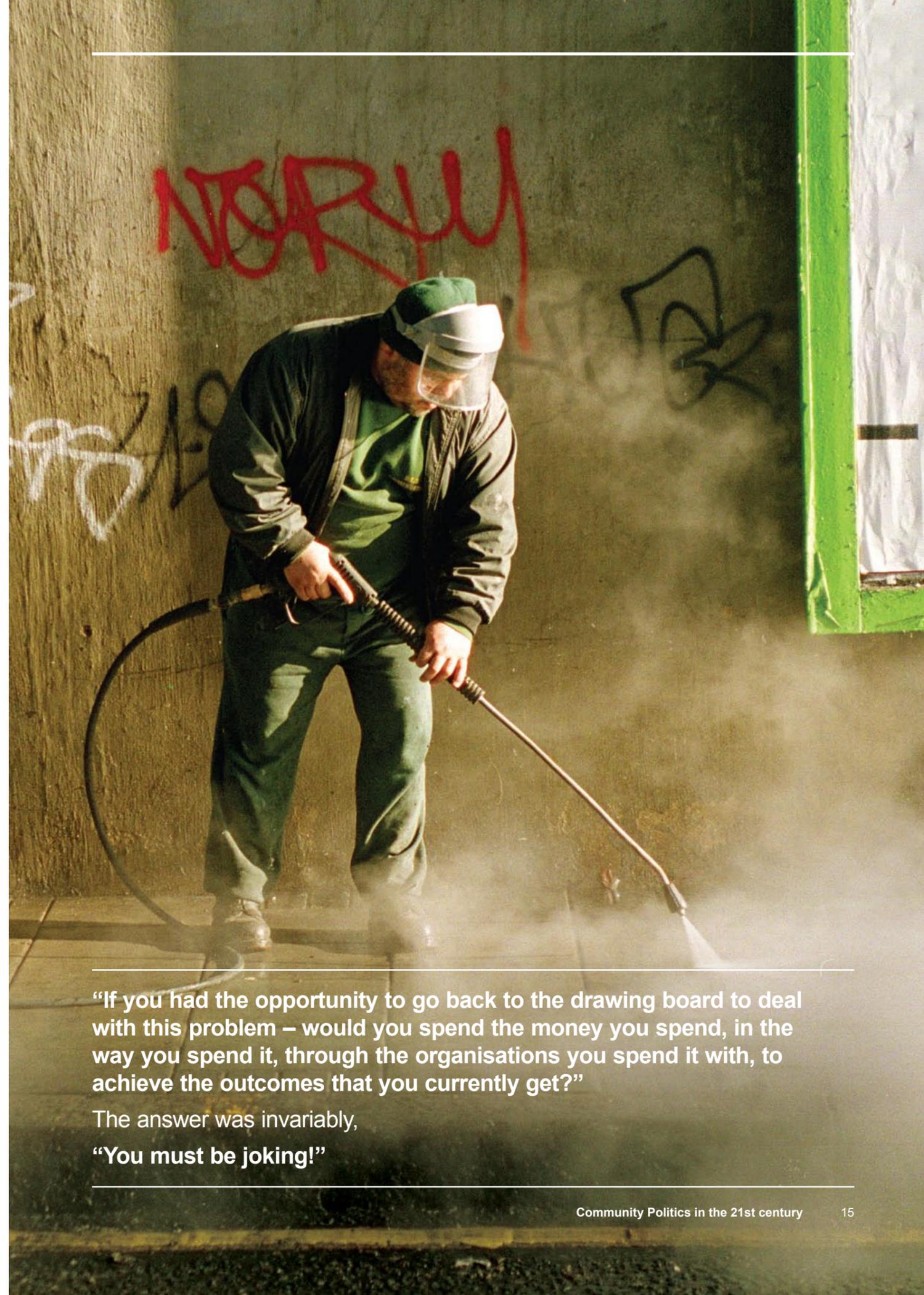
These examples derive from 13 official Total Place pilots and more than 70 unofficial ones which looked at how services were provided in a locality. They revealed a significant opportunity to reduce waste by cutting down on the layers of government, bureaucracies and quangos delivering services in a haphazard way. The question was continually asked – “If you had the opportunity to go back to the drawing board to deal with this problem – would you spend the money you spend, in the way you spend it, through the organisations you spend it with, to achieve the outcomes that you currently get?” The answer was invariably, “You must be joking!”

The local budgeting approach has now been encapsulated in an offer made to central government on behalf of local government called ‘local budgets’. Instead of pepper potting bits of money from central government to local deliverers, add it all up – give (say) ten per cent less to the area via the council and let the council and its partners sort out the best delivery mechanisms and use of the cash against local priorities.

Significantly the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles MP, has initially accepted that offer although he said he did not like the term, preferring to call it ‘community budgeting’. Without attempting to read Eric's mind it is clear that, consistent with the responsibility principle that drives both Big Society and Community Politics, local government will be expected to pass these new freedoms onto communities.

Let us look at one department where the Government is already keeping its word – health. Undemocratic PCTs are being closed down. Their public health roles are being transferred to councils so here is a straight transfer of power and resource. **We will control the money.** Commissioning of services will be done by consortia of GPs. At time of writing there was no clear understanding of how these might work and there will be a variable geometry based on geography. There is an assumption that councils will be involved with the consortia and in some cases might run them on the instructions of the GPs. In any case there will be a requirement for the consortia to work more closely with other parts of the public sector than GPs have hitherto done. **We will advise on the money.** Strategically we will have responsibility for ensuring the continuum between health and social care at all levels. In this case **we will influence the money.** This gives three different roles in health provision, strengthening our overall role of community leader.

If those are the structural changes, we need to link them to the principles of devolution to work out what community budgeting means for a council's approach to all services for which it is responsible. In moving control down from the council level, Liverpool effectively now works at five levels:



“If you had the opportunity to go back to the drawing board to deal with this problem – would you spend the money you spend, in the way you spend it, through the organisations you spend it with, to achieve the outcomes that you currently get?”

The answer was invariably,
“You must be joking!”

Devolution: five levels of Liverpool

| Level | Who in the council | Which budget | What overview/ drawing together |
|--|--|---|--|
| Conurbation 1,650,000 people | Leader and Cabinet working with other councils in city region activities | City region macroeconomic generation, planning, transport and economic development activities | City regional bodies; strategic health activity |
| City 450,000 people | Leader and Cabinet challenged by the scrutiny system | All services directly controlled by the council | Health; Police; Housing associations (capital and revenue); Universities; Colleges; Fire Authority; Highways Agency; Environment Agency; Transport Authority |
| District 90,000 people | 18 councillors for the 6 wards plus key parts of city wide delivery agencies | All services directly controlled by the council; community development functions | Health; Police; Housing associations (capital and revenue); Universities; Colleges; Employment and business creation |
| Ward 15,000 people | 3 councillors; local staff; local residents; local community organisations | All services directly controlled by the council; participatory budgeting for small projects and really local services/ programmes | Local residents commenting/advising on service delivery of all public sector bodies |
| Neighbourhood 200-5,000 people | 3 councillors; local residents; local community organisations | Delivery of small projects and programmes | Local residents delivering small scale projects using small public sector grants |

As you can see, control over budgets and services go from macroeconomic co-operation with other councils in the region down to the delivery of neighbourhood projects with the help of small public sector grants. The aim is to push responsibilities as far down the table as possible providing the necessary support at each stage. Whilst it is true that this is based on a city model, if instead we used county; district; ward; town council; neighbourhood we could cover a lot of the country.

If Whitehall and the town hall have removed barriers and offered support as outlined here, there is still the crucial step to be made to engage residents in this process, to deal with the reality of the diminishing returns mentioned earlier. This structure aims to maximise the role of residents where they actually want to be involved most. Either in discussions about their road/street/area – places they know and understand or in practical delivery of services in those places – where they actually want to do things. It gives people the opportunity to be involved at any level they wish. Even at city level there are ways in which community, amenity and faith groups link into the work of the local strategic partnership.

It also gives all councillors a role in using their wider knowledge to influence the spending of all public sector players within an area. And to join together those spending programmes, safeguarding the role of the democratic institutions which have been given the mandate by the local community. This is vital when we consider how to use state resources in terms of manpower or cash. It can be easy for organisations to believe that they represent an area because they call themselves the area's Residents Association but often they are comprised of only a small number of hard working, well meaning people out of thousands who might live there.

Community residents and amenity groups are important parts of our civic structure but we should never forget that their 'mandate' is even more limited than ours and that it is ward councillors who have a duty to ensure that the whole community is empowered when barriers are removed and government support offered.

It may appear that the number of meetings is demanding too much of participating residents with their own lives to lead. But much of this activity does not involve a lot of meetings in the formal sense. The nearer the community you get the less the need for such meetings. Chats in a pub or café; e-conferencing; conversations in the street can be as valuable, if not more so than formal meetings at the lowest two tiers of this activity. "People will be attending too many meetings to do any work". No. People only go to meetings that are relevant to them and where they get value out of them which makes their job easier. The PCSO could not go to a meeting with the Leader of the council and we would not want the Chief Constable to attend a ward meeting.

Joint working at the right level

Local budgeting is not only about linking budgets to ever smaller geographical areas, it also brings with it both the necessity and opportunity for partnership working, joining together all the organisations involved in delivering services under one coherent strategy. If by merging a number of funding streams into a single pot for an area, Whitehall removes the barriers to doing this at a council level, the council will then have a duty to look at those barriers currently



preventing partner working at district and ward level.

“What do we want – co-location – when do we want it now!” is probably not a chant that we will hear on the streets of our cities as people seek to find new solutions to old problems but it is a vitally important area if we are to ensure an effective joining together of local services. Too often even very local staff work upward into silos within the council with reports going up and instructions going down. Where possible at a lower level, staff simply get on with the job and do so with the people who they work with from other departments and organisations within their patch. This is a pragmatic approach. Usually you find at the senior level of an organisation the people that go to the LSP are happy to sign up to joint working, innovative ideas and pooled budgets.

The problem seems therefore to be in the middle, away from public view and scrutiny. Two departments, often from the same council, may not work corporately about elements of front line delivery. The housing department will fight to evict a family for rent arrears – the social services department will try and keep them in the house. In such cases no-one looks at the problem of the family in the round. One department will keep clean and tidy the road way, another will keep clean and tidy the public space whilst a third will keep tidy the immediate environs of estates. Again may be no-one in this situation is looking at the problem as a whole and sees the solution to the environment in the round.

Local government has been successfully chipping away at such instances within their own domain but there is some way to go to put an end to the frequent turf wars and lack of mutual consideration between public sector organisations that should be working together.

The structure in the appendix table shows the various levels at which Liverpool’s delivery partners are being brought together. At each stage the relevant staff, not only from the different council departments but from their partners also, can meet to decide a co-ordinated strategy for delivering their services across the relevant area. Co-location implies a physical conjoining and certainly that can be very helpful. What is even more important however is ensuring that staff that work a patch know all the other staff that work a patch. Creating active networks of officers and empowering them to make local, practical decisions can often be better than any strategy.

At each level staff have the means and the opportunity to listen to local councillors and local people and vary service delivery and therefore budgets accordingly. Decisions about allocating resources in a ward for instance can be made jointly by PCSOs, GPs, housing associations and social workers and all other relevant council staff, not only rationalising service delivery in a ward but also giving residents and councillors one point of access to the decision-making through which all changes are made in their area.

Case study

Productive partnerships with Registered Social Landlords

Housing associations already have a great deal of experience working as a major agent for the council in drawing together all public sector services within an area. Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) could and should be major partners with the council in neighbourhood based initiatives.

A good RSL has a number of qualities which it can offer the council and the community:

- It has good, regular and trustworthy contacts with the people it looks after.
- Its tenants are usually the clients of other parts of the public sector who need to talk to them. By definition 70 per cent of tenants of Social Landlords are unemployed or unwell or are in interaction with a range of agencies.
- RSLs are accustomed to regularly contacting their tenants and know how to contact them appropriately
- RSLs are used to managing big long-term projects.
- Housing providers always look after things other than housing in order to make the best of the whole of the environment their tenant’s live in.
- RSLs are socially minded and used to working in multi agency environments.
- RSLs are themselves social enterprises and therefore part of the third sector.

RSLs therefore are a unique partner for all other parts of the public sector whilst having the legal form and adaptability of the private sector. They are in it for the long-term. When they build a house it will need to last 200 years before being replaced at our current levels of housing investment. In particular some RSLs are now beginning to take responsibility on a total place basis for:

- entire needs of neighbourhoods
- worklessness activity
- social care/housing/health care interface
- crime and anti social behaviour actions
- youth service.

For the last nine years the National Housing Federation has promoted ‘In Business for Neighbourhoods’ and now are working with a number of leading RSLs to promote turn-key solutions in a number of areas to other public sector partners.

Accountability at the right level

Local government Lib Dems have for a long time opposed the increasing amount of targets and inspections that Whitehall have imposed on local government, arguing instead that accountability should be moved downwards to local people. If resources and decision-making are being moved down to local levels in the way outlined, there is an even greater need for scrutiny of those decisions to be moved to those levels both from Whitehall and, in turn, from the council.

The Government have already indicated a readiness to release councils from the constraints of an overbearing inspection and KPI regime, announcing the end of the Audit Commission. We must ensure that it is replaced by an auditing system that enables local residents to scrutinise the council.

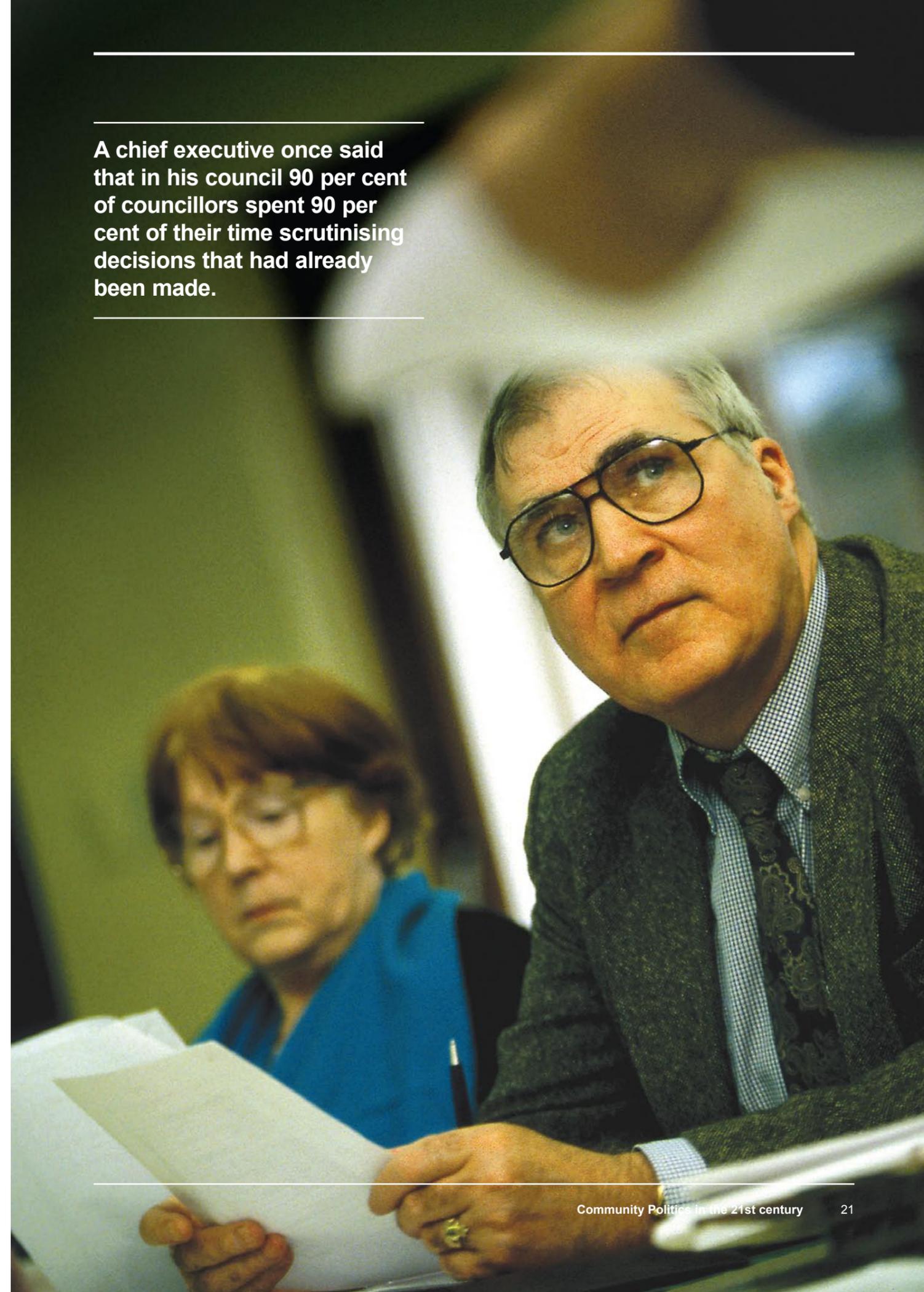
There are some within the Government who believe that a market model can replace this Whitehall scrutiny. Old bogies like choice when raised are usually found to be unrealistic. There is no choice about getting your bins emptied unless we moved to a totally free market system which would be very much more expensive than the controlled system that we have. People do not want to choose between three hospitals within a radius of 30 miles they expect their local hospital to be good for them.

In this context then the fundamental idea of the market, that people can use a different

provider which forces quality and value for money into the service is inadequate. Scrutiny needs to step up to fill the gap. It needs to ensure that the state does meet the needs of people – it needs to become the people’s champion within the system. In most cases it manifestly fails to do this and a major review of the way scrutiny is undertaken is necessary. “Bring back the committee system” I hear councillors cry but given that the committee system went over 10 years ago the number of us who remember it diminishes each year. Councils work hard to make scrutiny work. Councillors work very hard to engage in the scrutiny process. There is no doubt that there are some very good examples of where scrutiny has been very effective. However, for the most part I hear more complaints than plaudits. A chief executive once said that in his council 90 per cent of councillors spent 90 per cent of their time scrutinising decisions that had already been made. With most of the decision making power within a council resting with the executive, the majority of non-executive councillors can wonder at the point of turning up to a scrutiny committee. There is a need to think beyond the council when we are holding people to account, or trying to drive improvement. Understanding where responsibility lies is complex and councillors can struggle to know who best to scrutinise when trying to tackle childhood obesity for example. This is a real opportunity. Just as we have the ability,

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mandate and drive to bring partners together at ward level we can do the same as scrutineers at the town hall.

If scrutiny is to act as a replacement for a non-existent market then the engagement of users within the system is of paramount importance. In most councils this will need a complete rethink of what scrutiny is, who does it and where it is done. As mentioned earlier most people want to be involved in the lowest rungs of accountability and transparency. They want to know quite a lot about their neighbourhood – a reasonable amount about their ward and a bit about their district. Not only do they want to know about things at those levels in those proportions they want to involve themselves at those levels in those proportions. Prime scrutiny for service delivery therefore must clearly move to the districts and the wards where everyone can understand what is going on; where problems can be discussed in plain language and complex reports looking at KPIs for a series of services across the whole council area would be an immense turn off.

Scrutiny should and can be a two way process. At the district level it is easier for mutual challenge to take place between the council and its partners. We cannot and must not assume that it is only us who hold the partners to account. If we are to deliver better services for people we must accept that our partners may well feel that we are not delivering effectively. This can be effectively heard at district level. Ward councillors must have clear information from all partners about what is happening to service provision within their ward. That will enable them to intervene speedily, locally, effectively and cheaply. This type of scrutiny will not change policy but it will take council

wide policies and programmes and adapt them within parameters set by the council to ensure that they meet real and not perceived needs, local and not town hall priorities.

Districts would look at services that affect wider areas but would use the ward by ward knowledge gained by the involvement of councillors in discussions. They would pick up things like localised educational performance issues where school intakes rarely fall into the boundaries of a ward. At council level scrutiny would aggregate the bottom up discussions and would then move to look at bigger changes in the programmes and strategies of the council. A major role that scrutiny is not used for enough is pre-decision making scrutiny. Too often scrutiny only reacts to standard reports and 'called in' items. That means that the vast experience of 80 per cent of councillors is not used effectively to look ahead and see what changes in policies or strategies might be needed. It means that policy development and going out and looking at best practice is something only done by the cabinet. A scrutiny programme should include a large amount of forward thinking work to challenge the incumbents of the cabinet and senior management team, with contemporary ideas and practical good practice.

It is also necessary to take the scrutiny role beyond ward level and down to the residents that are both the voters and taxpayers of the council. Bringing budgets and decisions down to more local levels will make it much easier for residents to look closely at how their money is being spent in their community. The Government has requested a great deal more transparency from councils over their spending. We should work to ensure that local government auditing extends this



transparency to the outcomes that councils are delivering for their money and, consistent with the principles of Community Politics, does it in a way that is relevant and accessible for residents.

Engaging communications

Whilst access to information is necessary for residents to hold service providers to account, it is not always enough. Councils could achieve perfect transparency but, unless people are actually reading and accessing the information, there is no accountability. Innovative ways of getting this information across is needed to both inform and involve council residents about what is going on in their area. The good news is that co-operation between partners and advances in technology are providing new opportunities for communicating with residents.

At one time everyone read the same local paper, had a restricted number of national media outlets and would take time to read them. Those days are well past. The number that read national or local newspapers is declining. Even less read the sign on the lamp-post which informs them of a planning decision or the badly designed poster put up in the newsagent. As discussed elsewhere people no longer turn up in their droves to public meetings unless something is being taken away from them, such as the closure of the local school or hospital.

Too often official communications are badly formatted and too infrequent to have any impact. Advertisers know this and so do Focus producers. If you want to get a message across people have to be comfortable with the format and you need to repeat a message 10 times in seven different ways for half the people to notice it! The public sector spend a fortune on marketing, advertising, glossy reports and consultation documents most of which goes right over the head of the people they are seeking to communicate with. So let's have some ground rules for the public sector.

The public sector should work together to find out what people want. Different organisations going round with different questionnaires to find out different things are a big turn off. A good example of how to do things properly has recently been seen in Liverpool where a secondee from the Fire Service organised a survey of private tenants and RSL tenants paid for by the PCT with the help of the housing associations who looked after their tenants. The questions asked related to health, fire safety, housing and public health issues. The cost of doing four surveys would have been immense and people would not have welcomed the fourth door knocker!

The public sector should hold joint meetings in the community. People do not want to turn up to a police forum and find out that the problem is really a traffic problem controlled

by the council. One regular listening exercise in which people can attend to talk through their issues with all the public sector service deliverers leads to quick and effective action from people who have heard the same things.

We should merge all literature streams. Infrequent leaflets simply are not read. A regular ward newsletter (no not a Focus – we do that!) from the whole of the public sector to which they all contribute money, articles and effort and which comes to be recognised as THE source of local information by local people will lead to much higher readership rates.

Anything that goes out should be written by professional writers and not policy wonks or legal eagles. If people cannot understand it they won't read it.

We also need to review how we gather information from residents.

Every day 22,000 people contact Liverpool City Council. They may be residents, businesses or visitors. Most are not complaining (fortunately!) but what they say, when they say it and how they say it provides a massive amount of information which, if we joined up properly, can enable us to change the way we do business.

This could be called the supermarket approach. The supermarket club card which automatically records what we do; tailors services accordingly and then tells us what that tailored product or service is so that we

can buy it. Public services should work in the same way. If we log all contacts we can do some basic things:

- By recording when and how people contact us we can arrange to have our phones and counters staffed at times that suit the public not us.
- If we aggregate what people are saying we get real time feedback from residents which will enable us to rapidly change service specification.
- If we map some things geographically, such as environmental health or littering complaints, we can see trends emerge and deal with problems whilst they are small and before they become costly.
- If we delegate to our officers the power to make changes in accordance with what we are told we get more value for money.
- If we then link up our GIS systems to those of others we can begin to plot new partnership approaches to problems. For example if we map problems with burglaries to complaints about poor street lighting we might find that the way to prevent burglaries is not a policing way but a council way.

Many councils are already doing these things but there is still a need to extend these practices to all areas. Most people want to come to meetings or see their councillors when basic things are not done properly and when they have reported a problem and nothing has happened. Why have a public meeting or a protest when things are working!?

The role of the ward councillor

I have reiterated throughout this chapter that, whilst central and local government should do all it can to remove institutional barriers and provide support, you won't have community activism without community activists. The very reason for the Government's Big Society agenda will remain its biggest obstacle without some ground-level initiative. We can provide all the necessary structures for controlling local budgets, meeting service deliverers and scrutinising their decisions but unless people feel a responsibility to do these things, Community Politics won't get off the ground.

A large proportion of people do understand their citizenship role but there is a growing number who feel no responsibility for their own actions within their family; or within society. It is this anomie is that is beginning to affect us all.

The fact that this number is growing is not just chance. We have created a greedy society and encouraged people to play their part in it. Consumption of goods and services regardless of their effect on others has been lauded in parts of the media. Celebrities whose only ability is effortless consumption have been placed as the career figure head for many people. What you do about all these complex issues is beyond the scope of this or any other single publication but unless we accept that there are complex reasons for changes in our society we will not accept that the answers to the problems will be complex also.

However, at the same time, we should acknowledge the amount that is already being done in our communities. Earlier we guesstimated that five per cent were prepared to actually do something for their neighbourhood, school or community. If even this small percentage were correct it would



mean a mighty army of 3,500,000 people who spend a great deal of their time volunteering and actually doing things. On top of this will come people who only work within their church or their trades union but whose effect is felt outside their own institution.

On top of that we have an even greater group of people who don't think of themselves as volunteers but who willingly and gladly give time to care for those in their own family who have greater need than others. Millions of these people 'volunteer' happily and we should never underestimate their value to our society as a whole.

There are some specific barriers to volunteering that the state will need to help mitigate:

- Social security rules which limit how much voluntary productive work people can do within their community although there is not paid, productive work for them.
- Changing shift systems with people working on shifts around the clock making continuity difficult.
- The complexity of the way we do our business with an over professionalisation of large parts of the public sector who interact with the public.
- The physical separation of families caused either by poor planning decisions or the mobility needed for employment.
- The rigid rules we have for the interaction between state and public.

However there is much left to do and in Church Ward Liverpool, we believe that it is the ward councillor with the democratic mandate of the whole community behind them, who should take this initiative.

What can be done to involve more people? Much! Many public and voluntary sector agencies carry on delivering 'consultation' in ways that would be recognisable 50 years ago. How many people did we get to attend a meeting in a cold church hall in February? How many leaflets have we put through someone's door? Of course there are times when it is important to have a public meeting – when there are big issues at stake – where lots of explaining needs to be done – and a lot of listening is required. Consultation about how you radically change a neighbourhood is not and should not be confused with market research such as, "Do you like chocolate or plain biscuits?" Of course we should, still deliver leaflets so that people can consider in the comfort of their own home the sorts of things that we want them to consider. But these things alone are not enough.

The community politician will have to work alongside non-party political leaders who want to effect change within their community either at a policy level (changing policies which affect that community); at decision level (such as a planning decision); or at delivery level (trying to play a part in how services are delivered to meet local need). Using their mandate to pull together the community and a range of providers to take power down to the local level and use it in an informed and responsible way.

There are some complexities to overcome in fulfilling this role. Every community has factions who like each other or not – who will work with each other or not. Often the factions within a community can be much more difficult to reconcile than the differences between party politicians. Some of the most vicious arguments can be heard round the table of an allotment society committee or



amenity group. In some cases these can take extreme form with parts of communities organising against other parts. This was seen recently in Liverpool where small numbers of residents fought proposals for remodelling areas of the city which had been supported by the vast majority of their neighbours.

To add to the complexity communities are not homogenous entities. The style of Community Politics differs according to the make up of the community. Having moved from a working class and deprived ward to a relatively wealthy one has convinced me that how you are needed to behave, how you are expected to behave and how you do behave vary massively.

The third complexity is us. Inside all of this there is a need to work out what each of us can do to play to our strengths. Some councillors can indeed fulfill the heroic leadership role of pulling a community behind him or her. Most of us have lesser talents. Our job is mentoring, supporting and acting for the communities in which we serve.

All this is extremely complex. Good community politicians do some or all of these things all the time in differing intensities dependent on the nature of problems being confronted. A combination of all the above, conducted in such a way as to ensure that it is you that people turn to when they make their choice at the ballot box, that is **politics in the community**.

Effectively practicing politics in the community and fulfilling the role of community politician is a demanding task. The simple fact is that we cannot do it all. As councillors we have neither the time nor the skills to undertake all the work within the community that we have identified: nor should we. To function effectively councillors need to look at their skills and those of their colleagues (sometimes from a different party), establish for themselves what roles they should play in their community and what roles their community actually needs them to play and then plan to ensure that any gaps are filled.

The roles can be seen to line up best under three headings:

Politician

We need to have a clear sense of place and priorities and coherent vision for the future based on knowledge and political conviction

Leader

We need to be capable of creating change within the system and galvanising people behind our ideas

Partnership builder

We need to successfully encourage a range of people and organisations to work as one behind that vision

Our job is mentoring, supporting and acting for the communities in which we serve. All this is extremely complex. Good community politicians do some or all of these things all the time in differing intensities dependent on the nature of problems being confronted.

To fulfill these roles we need to consider the skill base that councillors need. Interestingly those skills are needed by every councillor whether we are the leader, a successful scrutineer or a good 'cabinet member for your ward'.

The community politician skillset:

- communicator (two-way)
- mentor
- strategist
- thinker
- tenacious agitator

Community activist is a role that Lib Dems have made their own and is a route through which many Lib Dems have entered politics. It is therefore no surprise that any Lib Dem councillors and councils have made significant progress in advancing the principles of Community Politics in their area. The next section will endeavour to show, by way of example, how these challenges can be met and the role described opposite fulfilled.



Community Politics in practice

Councillor Erica Kemp

Liverpool City Council and Liberal Democrat Special Adviser,
Local Government Leadership

3

Leading within my ward

Technology has changed things, circumstances have changed things. My experience of how to get things done has helped me to change things. When I was first elected to Liverpool City Council in 1993 I spent a lot of time dictating letters on a dictaphone to the City Engineer. I was dealing with piles of rubbish that had accumulated in the entries behind houses, litter on the streets and empty houses that were causing problems to neighbours.

As the issues grew I quickly learned to move from writing a letter reporting a problem to thinking about taking a lead in solving a problem. I moved from super complainant to strategist as my experience told me that it was the system that was wrong.

Today the role of the front line or ward councillor is moving more and more towards leading as many people as possible, starting with residents, to see the problem, acknowledge the problem and then to be a part of the solution.

I'm a politician

I never forget that I am a Liberal Democrat. What I do, what I say and how I behave reflects what I believe and I believe in all the aspects of Community Politics.

For the residents

Politics in Liverpool has always been very 'lively'. We argue with passion in the council chamber and we campaign furiously during an election campaign. But I always think that for most of the time other councillors even from other parties should be my key allies. I have a very healthy respect for anyone who stands for the council and anyone who is elected as a councillor whatever party they stand for. I believe that we are all striving to achieve the same goal which is to improve the quality of life for the residents who have elected us. It's a journey where we are all heading in the same direction. Where I disagree with my political opponents is the route we take to get there.

I strongly believe in enabling residents to take that journey for themselves. My role as a ward councillor is to ensure that the council and its partners enable residents and makes

decisions, where possible, with them and not for them. That is what Liberal Democracy in action means to me. It just so happens that now the political climate is promoting this nationally, but I've been doing this for as long as I've been a councillor.

Politics though has to be more than just helping people arrive at the journey's destination. As politicians we must have a clear political vision and conviction. People who vote for us are entitled to know what we stand for across a range of issues. We have a responsibility to communicate that clearly to residents, officers within the council and our partners. We may choose to communicate this differently depending on who we are talking to but the clarity of the message has to be the same.

My city is composed of 30 wards like mine and anything up to 280 neighbourhoods. For the city to thrive each of its neighbourhoods and wards needs to thrive as well. What we are all aware of is that each ward is different and each neighbourhood within each ward is different. The challenge is to be able to accommodate this strategically. A model for engaging residents in one area of Liverpool will be very different to a model in another area. Through close discussion with my constituents I am now properly 'armed' to go down to the town hall and argue about how the city as a whole should be run and where the city as a whole should be going.

Being a political animal

Some time ago I was talking to a group of people who were thinking of becoming councillors. A number of them said they wanted to take the politics out of the role and just represent what people wanted. I have two problems with this approach. The first is that

when you sit in the town hall to make a decision on an issue you are making a political decision as a politician. You cannot pretend it is anything other than politics. Secondly, whatever decision you make you will upset somebody so you can't pretend that you will be representing everyone on everything. Therefore, it is important, prior to an election that you are very clear and communicate well your political vision, priorities and convictions.

Officers need politicians to be political. Without strong political direction officers will move in to fill the gap. They have no choice. If the direction is poorly or inadequately communicated officers then have to 'guess' and this can have disastrous results.

Our partners also need to understand our politics. If the council is determined to devolve decisions and influence down to the lowest level then partners need to understand this so they can help determine those decisions.

Party political councillors have an important role of working within their national as well as local parties. We are pleased that the Government is giving us more powers and authority to decide things for ourselves within our own areas but there will always be national legislation and taxation which will have a major impact on our areas and our communities. We must always link local knowledge with national application through our parties and our national representative bodies such as the Local Government Association.

I'm a leader

Good ward councillors are good leaders. Good leaders are able to bring people along with them, they are 'doers' who often lead by example, they are able to listen and

communicate well with a range of people, and when these skills are combined they are able to create change within a system where it is needed.

Some of these skills and qualities are instinctive. Many of us became councillors because we saw something happening within the system that we didn't like. For me it was when I saw the orchid houses destroyed for no good reason in my local park. I started off as a 'doer', a campaigner on an issue of importance to me.

Divesting myself of power within the community that has elected me is not a problem. I am more than happy to acknowledge that the local residents association can get a group of over 100 people at a meeting which is about 95 more than I can encourage to attend as a councillor! It is possible to lead from behind. I am not afraid of handing over 'power' to residents on a variety of issues. I feel secure enough in my abilities to lead from behind to do this.

I know that many councillors are concerned about tenants and residents associations and see them as a threat. It must be acknowledged that some associations do see themselves as an 'alternative' to the councillors. It is also true that some associations are fronts for another political party who use them as a base from which the system can be challenged. But I find that this is rarely the case.

My role is to work within the system to ensure that those who work within the community are heard. The role of the residents association is to feed me information so that I can raise their concerns within the system; their role is to do things my role is to help find them the resources to do more things. Their role is to organise fundraising events; my role is to turn up and judge the teddy bear competition!

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I'm a partnership builder

Every Saturday one of the Church Ward councillors goes to the local library and does an Advice Centre. I clearly remember one week where I dealt first of all with a gentleman who was dying of cancer and wanted some advice on a property that in a few months time would belong to his daughter. As he left I struggled to hold back the tears as I reassured him that I would deal with the matter and he would not have to worry about it. The second person who came in was a lady who was reporting a faulty light outside her house, she had phoned the call centre many times, taken the details, watched the light being 'fixed' but the light was still faulty. The third person was someone who wanted me to assist them to get the correct medication for their son who was in prison.

When I followed up my casework I had to deal with a number of people. Only one of them worked directly for the council. For every pound spent in my ward my partners spend between three and four pounds. If we are to ensure that our residents get the best value from all of the money spent in our area then someone has to take a lead. A ward councillor has the mandate, the authority, and by the nature of all the work we do is the best person to make this happen.

It has been my experience that working with partners can have mixed success. Suggest a meeting with the local police inspector to look at ways in which we can work together and they will bite your hand off. Try and get all the GPs in the ward together to look at local health issues and the silence is deafening. However, if I need to find out more about the issues in the ward that I don't know about then I must talk to the GPs and I see that the responsibility to make this happen lies with me.

However, councillors are good opportunists so recently when our local vicar got in touch with us to ask us how we could assist the church get more involved in community work we suggested that the local church should host a meeting with partners such as GPs, head teachers, and anyone else who spends money in our ward. I am optimistic that this will be successful.

And, importantly I know the totality of my ward...

Some years ago I was speaking to a newly appointed senior officer in Liverpool City Council. He told me he was discovering that when a service wasn't working well the council just put in another layer of people to remedy the fault. I think we have done this not just in councils but in almost all areas of public service delivery. We have built up layers of officers, volunteers, charitable organisations, residents groups and anything else we can think of to address problems and issues in our cities, neighbourhoods and wards.

Shortly after I was elected to the council in 1993 I attended a presentation where we looked at where the council had spent money in an area. We saw an overlay of a map of Liverpool with red areas where the greatest spend had taken place. Then we saw another overlay that showed the areas of greatest need. Guess what? The two were almost identical. Now you could argue that if the money had not been spent then the need would have been even greater, but I immediately felt that there was a lesson to be learned and that money was not always the answer. It's not always money that resolves issues and our best resources are the leaders, drivers, and participants in an area.

For every pound spent in my ward my partners spend between three and four pounds. If we are to ensure that our residents get the best value from all of the money spent in our area then someone has to take a lead. A ward councillor has the mandate, the authority, and by the nature of all the work we do is the best person to make this happen.

Local budgeting has been 'the idea of the day'. I am a convert, it makes sense to me. It promotes the ideals and values I believe in. I can 'lead', I can be a 'politician' I can be a 'partnership builder'. Too often however the Total Place concept – if pursued at all – was pursued by the council leader and 'top brass' and not the council as a whole. If Total Place or its successor, local budgeting is to mean anything it must mean something in every community and every service.

In Liverpool we have conducted a Total Place for Neighbourhoods pilot of our own in Princes Park Ward. Princes Park is one of the more deprived wards in the city and has a long history of community engagement. There are many different people and cultures which are well established. Over the years we have poured money into it through a variety of schemes, projects and programmes BUT it is still one of the most deprived parts of our city. Common sense tells us that the programmes have not worked.



We did an audit of what we still spend there to service the needs of about 13,000 people. Having conducted this audit the council, has looked for some quick wins. It has brought all the organisations together to look at the 'grot spots' and make sure that all agencies use their knowledge and resources to keep the place clean. All buildings are now being reviewed to see how money could be saved by combining building use and finding capital to ensure that all remaining buildings are good and fit for purpose.

It is looking at a subsequent stage of activity by appointing leading members of staff from the council or its partners to begin the process of bringing together in one operational unit all the staff who work the patch so that they know each other, share information and share budgets. There is a massive waste of resources in Princes Park with too many buildings, organisations, and uncoordinated staff. We expect this pilot – which is shortly to be replicated in the Kirkdale ward to lead to better, more joined up services with better outputs and outcomes for less cost!

I have skills

Local government employs staff from more than 280 different professions inside our 1.6 million full time staff. The skills that it tends to use least are the skills of its 25,000 principal councillors and 100,000 town, parish and community councillors.

We have and need a tremendous range of professions and skills. None of us have everything that is required but most of us have a lot of them. What are those skills?

Strategist

This sounds more technical than it needs to be! It involves us thinking big and long-term. Always keeping to the original journey of good services and how we think the council should take us there – involving people, listening, creating opportunities, ensuring all get heard. Remember the strategy and learn how to apply it locally. Make sure your strategy is informed by residents and to residents. Think through the issues and work out how to apply them at ward level or how to solve them at ward level.

Communicator

We have to be able to communicate effectively with a range of audiences and in this current age of faster and more varied forms of communication this is becoming quite a challenge. Communicate as much as you can in as many different ways as possible. Grasp the nettle of online interaction while at the same time knocking on doors. It's not always 'out with the old and in with the new'.

The skills that local government tends to use least are the skills of its 25,000 principal councillors and 100,000 town, parish and community councillors.



Mentor

We have to be a mentor to residents to enable them to be movers and shakers in their areas for themselves on the issues that are important to them.

We have to be a mentor to officers to enable them to understand how to work effectively with residents. Even if it doesn't affect the result of an enquiry, it will ensure that the response acknowledges the problem from the resident's point of view.

We have to be a mentor to our partners. They have to understand our electoral mandate. Whatever their 'board' might have decided are their priorities we have to tell them what ours are.

We have to be a mentor to new councillors or those wanting to be councillors. Empowerment might mean we do ourselves out of a job.

Thinker

We need to set time aside from the next agenda and the next problem to work out how to join things up – to see the wood for the trees.

Tenacious agitator

With casework – sometimes the smallest issues are symptomatic of a greater/wider problem.

With partners – we are their best resource – why are they not using us more?

With ourselves – taking the next advice centre or door knocking in February needs resolve and self starters.

With national politicians who think they know best – often they don't – we do!

Make sure you adopt a terrier like approach to solving issues, don't let go, push and push until you get a response that is appropriate. Ask yourself all the time: if I was getting this response as a resident would I be satisfied?

But, I need help...

Officers who run our councils regularly go to conferences to keep them up to date; they get professional magazines for the same reason. They are on continuous professional development courses which track them through their career. And what do the councillors who lead these councils get. Very little!

Partly we bring it on ourselves. Going to a conference is seen as a 'jolly'. Mention going abroad to see something interesting and the local paper thinks you are off to the Bahamas on the rates!

But often the problem lies with us. We think our previous experience in, for example, running a business is the experience needed within the council. Often it's not. Good councils and good councillors are those who take time out to go and see what others are talking, who go to the right conferences and work at them to learn things.



A bad council is one that measures itself by its past and whose members think that there is nothing they can learn from others.

If we are to fully take advantage of the devolution agenda that is being offered by the Government we must all up our game. Everyone needs to have these skills. Even if we have them we need to be better at using them and they will always need updating for new opportunities.

My fear is that as the recession bites we will drop training and support initiatives for councillors. If we do that councillors as a whole will not realise their own potential and so will not realise the potential of new ways of doing things.

But I have an even bigger fear – that the culture of big organisations will prevent full devolution from happening. There is already a massive disconnect between the chief executives and leaders signing up to things within the LSP system and real change occurring in the communities that need those changes most. We all need training in new skills if the devolution agenda is to work. The Government, Local Government Leadership, Local Government Improvement and Development and above all the Local Government Group as a whole must be pressing for adequate resources to ensure that the skill enhancement takes place for officers and members alike.

Erica Kemp's 10 commandments

01 Be proud of your politics

I am a Liberal Democrat and I hold dear to the ambitions espoused by my Party. I will try to work, live and campaign in a way which testifies to those beliefs.

02 Love your ward and your place

I love Liverpool and I'm motivated to work as a Liberal Democrat to improve the quality of life for Liverpool residents and to make this a great city for us all to live in.

03 Know your ward better than anyone else

Officers go home at 5pm. Residents know their street, their school. You go everywhere and talk to everyone.

04 Represent your residents to the system not the system to your residents

I have to relate to the residents who contact me, listen, understand the issue and aim to resolve where possible what I can't achieve.

05 Focus locally but think and act strategically

I won't fall into the pot holes – I will aim always to think strategically where possible and won't get drawn in to purely operational casework issues.

06 Have a life

I am allowed a life away from the council – I have my allotment.

07 Leverage commitment from partners

I will work with partners – recognising that most of them have to work with me by law.

08 Walk the talk not just talk the talk

I will aim to communicate in a range of ways including; different types of literature, phone calls, door knocking, street surgeries, I will reach a greater and more diverse number of people if I do.

09 Reach out – not everyone hears you

I will recognise that I have to work harder to communicate with some groups who I don't hear from – such as people with visual or hearing disabilities; parents with young children; housebound elderly and people who cannot easily speak English.

10 Never forget that next election day is your date with destiny

Enough said!



Case study 1

The Big Society in Sutton

Councillor Sean Brennan,
Leader, London Borough of Sutton

Liberal Democrat Sutton

Sutton is a thriving borough in South West London whose residents enjoy a good quality of life. We have a very active voluntary sector, with a large number of community groups from Friends of Parks, to Residents Associations, to a whole range of interest based factions.

But it's not all leafy suburbia in Sutton – we have significant pockets of deprivation where social infrastructure has fallen behind other parts of the borough. We also know that a sizeable proportion of our residents do not

feel engaged and empowered to shape local services and communities who feel less connected to each other and to their elected representatives.

What can the Big Society add to Sutton?

As a Liberal Democrat council we believe in handing as much power as possible into the hands of local people and that people need to be empowered to make decisions on how to shape their communities and make the best of their lives.

We now have a Government which supports that vision and has made a commitment to hand power back to local communities. For their part, the Government has asked us a simple question; what rules need to change so that we can make it easier for people to make a difference? They have given a firm commitment to address the answers.

So we will be talking to our community to agree what barriers should be dismantled to make it possible for those groups and individuals to help build a stronger society. Our aim as a council is to enable all our residents to get involved in making decisions about their local area and services and take on more responsibility for how services are provided and what their neighbourhoods look like.

Sutton's Big Society projects

Firstly we will be looking at how to give people greater power over traffic and transport schemes in their communities from bus services and trains to speed humps and yellow lines. Currently we are forced to bid and negotiate schemes that are deemed suitable by layers of regional and central government above the council. We will be working with Transport for London and the Department of Transport to consider how greater control of funding that comes to the borough can be devolved to Sutton, involving residents in deciding how it is spent.

Secondly, we want to use our recently built Sutton Life Centre which focuses on the skills and needs of younger people from access to training to getting involved in music and social media, all with a view to them using these new found skills to take a lead role in their local community. Securing funding available to support such a programme involves bidding for assistance from various pots of money



controlled by a whole range of departments, quangos and other organisations.

We also want to give people more responsibility for deciding how to improve their local area and support greener living in a way that suits local people. In Sutton we're already

working with residents to develop the first UK eco-suburb in the Hackbridge area based on the innovative Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZED). We will be looking at ways to give greater inclusion and influence to residents in the Hackbridge Community Forum, creating zero carbon energy networks, developing community involvement in the management of the River Wandle and an area of Metropolitan Open Land.

Lastly with the newly launched Health White Paper we will be working with the local community to make health services truly local. Key aspects of this project will look at the public health role for local authorities, promoting the involvement of local people in shaping local services through the proposed Health and Wellbeing boards and HealthWatch bodies and working with GPs to support commissioning of services for the local community.

Community Politics and the role of ward councillors

The role of the council in enabling our residents to become active citizens is fundamental to Sutton's approach; not only do ward councillors represent a vital link to the needs and wishes of residents they can also help drive community action across their wards. Two of our four formal projects have a geographic focus, with the Hackbridge Project covering a number of wards in the north of the borough and the Life Centre in one ward acting as a hub for our work with young people.



While all four projects seek to develop lessons for the wider borough and beyond, it is essential that individual communities directly affected also have a voice in how the projects are progressed. Ward councillors will play a significant part in feeding in the perspective of their residents, helping to 'community proof' each project as it develops further.

As Project Champion for Hackbridge, a local ward councillor chairs the Community Forum, giving their role even greater importance. The forum enables residents and people who run businesses in the area to receive regular updates on the overall project. More importantly the meetings allow residents to raise issues and concerns and ensures that it is the community which shapes the development of the project.

While the council is undertaking four projects, there is of course a swell of enthusiasm and ideas for how the wider community sees the 'Big Society' developing and ways in which people want to engage. The traditional role of ward councillors, in bringing people together through local campaigns, providing a focus for new ideas and spreading the word about good practice already happening in their local area, will serve to take the 'Big Society' away from those four projects within the council and help to embed the community as a driver for taking forward ideas for how they wish to see their area develop.

True Community Politics, encouraged by ward councillors, is the base on which we can bring the 'Big Society' to life.

What next for the Big Society in Sutton

It's true that the words 'Big Society' don't mean a great deal to some people. Some wonder whether a big society will damage fairness, others whether our culture of risk aversion will smother it, if it's a covert route to oversize cuts or whether our highly complex public sector will be impossible to alter anyway.

Most worryingly some people, who have grown up in a time of ever growing centralisation and growth, are astonished at the idea that the state might do less and they might do more.

But here in Liberal Democrat Sutton, we are already the kind of place where people do come together to solve the problems they face and build a better quality of life. The devolution of power we are now seeing is a golden opportunity to remove the barriers that have alienated people from what is happening in the very places where they live. Our challenge is to extend our reach so that all our residents feel that they live in a borough where all can take part and all take pride.



Case study 2

The rural challenges of the Big Society in South Somerset

Councillor Tim Carroll

Leader, South Somerset District Council

South Somerset District Council – the largest district council in the South West with a population of 162,000 and a land area of 370 square miles, equating to half that of Greater London. The population is split relatively equally between the largest town of Yeovil, 11 market towns and the deep rural areas comprising picturesque villages and hamlets. By any definition, South Somerset is a sparse rural area. Unemployment is low at 2.3 per cent. The landscape and scenery is variable mix of rolling countryside and gentle hills.

But there is picture beyond that of the perceived chocolate box image of the rural idyll and a weekend playground for the city folks. One of pockets of hidden deprivation, inaccessible services, continued loss of local amenities like local shops and post offices, poor public transport, 4,000 on the housing waiting lists, relatively low wage economy, high house prices, low broadband speeds and an aging population.

Against these current and ongoing challenges, we have the prospect of severe public sector service cuts and the advent of the

‘Big Society’ and localism. The big question is, will, or can these concepts offer a solution by harnessing hitherto untapped resources and fill the vacuum left by a retreating state?

Whilst we are serving many dispersed communities, South Somerset District Council and its 60 councillors are already playing a significant part in enabling robust civic engagement.

Localism is no stranger to South Somerset. There are those who would argue that, as the longest controlled Liberal Democrat administration nationally, we have had ample time and opportunity to perfect and refine the concept and we have delivered. From the early days in the 1990’s when the then innovative four Area (sub-District) System was conceived and implemented, the mechanism and structures have evolved to enhance local democracy, optimise and distil local aspiration and maximise local third sector capacity – forerunners of the new Big Society agenda.

The Area System comprises two vital components – a local decision-making structure where ‘real’ decisions are made – executive decisions around funding local activities, groups and projects – regulatory decisions involving locally significant planning applications or applications of local concern – scrutiny decisions where any matter of local interest can be discussed, resolved locally or referred.

Accountability, transparency and public involvement are key characteristics in the operation of the four Area Committees – any member of the public can turn up and speak on any topic – the archaic bureaucratic barriers of giving prior notice or only submitting written questions or statements do not apply. Community aspirations in the form of community (Town/Parish) plans are bought



to these committees, adopted and tracked for progress. Once adopted, they also formally become part of the evidence base of the Local Development Framework.

Of equal importance are the Area Offices, their staff and the activities that are carried

out from these bases. These offices represent the presence of South Somerset District Council in the local area plus the 'platform' to deliver those activities. The core functions are Community Development and Regeneration plus a full front desk service offering advice on all services, processing welfare benefit claims together with advertised sessional visits by planning and other staff. The core functions are key to the success of the initiative as they optimise the interaction between the council and a whole array of local organisations ranging from parish councils to play groups.

The real key ingredient in all this is the involvement and commitment of the local ward members. Acknowledging their pivotal role, South Somerset has invested significant resources in training and development over the past years. This has resulted in wider

recognition – one of our three Beacon awards was on the category 'Neighbourhood and Community Champions: The role of the elected Member', and South Somerset was the first local authority in the South West to be awarded the Charter for Member Development.

However it is the narrower recognition and the activities at local level that are the really meaningful measure of success. It is also fortunate that the relationship between our members and officers is one of equal partnership and common purpose and there is a determination not to let the constraints of structure, formality and ritual get in the way of achieving things for our communities. South Somerset councillors are also actively encouraged and supported to participate within the widest possible activities in their own communities, whether it is regular



attendance at parish council meetings at one end of the scale to being a fully involved member of local community or voluntary organisations. That support comes both corporately from training and advice from the centre but also locally from the Area Office and staff.

All this allows us to apply and deliver the South Somerset 'Enable-Partner-Deliver' philosophy at ground level. But what does that mean to the communities and the host of voluntary and other groups in the local area? Simply that they have an existing system that adds capacity to their endeavours, funding and a conduit for specialist advice plus advocates or champions in the form of their ward councillors who are proactive in getting involved.

Our record of volunteering is impressive. Pro rata South Somerset District Council has the highest proportion of volunteers than any other surrounding district. This is in part due to the local activities described above but also attributable to the co-operation at corporate level where another scheme deals with grants and support for the larger voluntary organisations.

We would therefore maintain that as far as localism and the 'Big Society' ideas are concerned – these concepts aren't new and the Liberal Democrats are already putting them into practice in South Somerset. There are however practical barriers which prevent them being taken further:

- **Capacity/skills**
Is there sufficient capacity, skills and indeed willingness out there to make a difference – in an area like South Somerset, my observation is that those who are willing are already engaged.
- **Finance**
Funding cannot be completely replaced by human effort.
- **Sustainability**
Everybody's enthusiasm and willingness to contribute has a shelf life – a statutory responsibility is enduring (unless repealed) – a voluntary endeavour will only last as long as the participants are willing to serve.

The challenge for us in South Somerset is that if we are forced by funding restriction to abandon what we have built – how much of the void can actually and practically be filled?



The way forward for Community Politics

Councillor Richard Kemp
Leader, LGA Liberal Democrats

4

Despite the obstacles faced it is clear that many Lib Dems around the country are taking the initiative on the government's localism agenda. There is a mixture of optimism about the opportunities that this agenda will present and some trepidation about what effects funding cuts may have on councils' ability to take these opportunities.

By taking the initiative, the councils mentioned in this book have shown that there are many things being done to successfully engage with people in a way that encourages them to take the driving seat. There are some simple rules that we could all take to heart:

- **Explain the cause and effect of our actions better** by bringing programmes and projects down to a level on which we can all understand the consequences.
- **Only consult if you are going to take notice of the results** and describe the parameters within which the consultation can be applied. For example don't consult on a new tram system if you only have money for a new bus lane! Consultation can mean different things to different people. It can mean, "We have not made a decision yet and want to know what you want". Or it can mean, "We have made the decision and need to know what you object to so we can tailor some of the work to mitigate the problems you may have".
- **Don't blind people with long words and glossy strategies** and talk to people about the things they want to talk about not the things you think should be talked about. Give people good and relevant information before consulting. You won't get much out if you don't put much in. And take time – rushed consultation is bad consultation.
- **If there is a 'political' message that needs to be delivered** then councillors should take the lead in the consultation. Only use officers who are skilled at consulting face to face and can relate to services.
- **Simplify service delivery and access points** so that people can do things for themselves. Make sure they know how to and ensure the contact information and advice system is coherent and genuinely accessible for people in terms of time, location, disability and language. Ensure an officer takes responsibility as the entrance point into the system so that hard pressed people do not have to turn to different individuals to deal with complex problems.
- **Help people organise themselves to achieve solutions.** Encourage residents, tenants and amenity groups. Work with them so they see you as the 'council' side of their work and they become the eyes and ears for you about how the system is performing. If they have tried to do things themselves but have been frustrated by the system or if they cannot quite get there on their own – help them. Services and programmes must be built around the needs of the people and communities not around the bureaucratic production silos we have laboriously built up over the past five decades.
- **We cannot do everything that people want us to do** and we must be completely honest about this. If there is no money – say so. If the law won't let you – say so and say what you have done or will try to do to change the law. If you think people should do more for themselves – say so. If there are better people or organisations that can help – say so. It's better to be brutally honest than to frustrate people with false hope.

In order to succeed the agenda will need community politicians, as activists and agitators, energising local residents to solve local problems and ensuring the whole community has a voice.

Whilst all the examples mention a major role for councils a consistent thread through the case studies and, it is also clear, through the entire publication, is the importance of the ward councillor. Whether it is the leader within the community in Liverpool, the driver of community action in Sutton or the community champions in South Somerset, Liberal Democrats have recognised that the Big Society initiative will not sustain community action in the long term without ward councillors. In order to succeed the agenda will need community politicians, as activists and agitators, energising local residents to solve local problems and ensuring the whole community has a voice.

None of this will be easy. It is true that the imminent cuts will add to the other challenges mentioned already that local government Liberal Democrats face in engaging

communities in their area. There will need to be a great deal of resolve to achieve this, councils will need to setup the necessary structures to allow for formal involvement at each level of devolution below their own and councillors will have to be committed leaders and drivers of change in their community. However I hope the councils mentioned here have shown how it is possible. For those of us present at Eastbourne in 1970 and all those who have joined the party since, the government's agenda presents an unprecedented opportunity to turn that vision for Community Politics into hard reality. It cannot be missed.

30 years of Community Politics: keeping it local

Simon Hughes MP
Deputy Leader, Liberal Democrats

5

On the first Saturday of September this year, there was a huge turnout at St. George's Cathedral in Southwark for the funeral of one of the first people to work with me in my constituency office after my first election. In the tributes to Hilary Wines, people remembered gratefully her role in the campaigns to save Guy's Hospital, to save Borough Market and to restore and use again the war memorial in Borough High Street.

One of the reasons so many people came to the funeral was that Hilary was such a great campaigner in and for her community. This is the way she – and I – engaged with local people, politicised local people and fought local battles for our community – sometimes successfully and of course sometimes less so.

Some local campaigns clearly have the capacity to grow from just a local battle to a national or even international one.

The Save Guy's Hospital Campaign ended up with a petition to parliament with more than a million signatures because Guy's had a great reputation not just in Bermondsey and London, but in the whole of the country and many places overseas. Another campaign was to save the remains of the Rose Theatre, discovered when the preparation for the building of an ugly office block in Southwark Bridge revealed one of the treasures of Elizabethan England. This campaign to list the site was fought with the aid not just of locals but of luvvies too. Laurence Olivier and Ian McKellen, Peggy Ashcroft and Janet Suzman and many others joined us to save the site from the bulldozers. And we won. Not far away we had earlier won another battle – this time against the then Labour Greater London Council and local council who were resisting Sam Wanamaker's plans to build a local replica of Shakespeare's Globe – now a huge cultural and tourist success.

Campaigning is not just about defending buildings or public services, sometimes it's an individual who is the focus of a campaign.

The battle to prevent the gay teenager Mehdi Kazemi from being returned to Iran with the risk of imprisonment, persecution or worse because of his sexuality, gained national and international attention – which I'm sure added pressure on the Home Secretary of the day. He is now able to stay in the UK and is starting a pharmacy degree.

Community campaigning sometimes needs more than spontaneous positive responses and ad hoc organisation.

When Liberal Democrats first became the administration of Southwark in 2002 we were determined to deliver our political vision of devolving power locally. Within a year, eight community councils were set up in Southwark, where local ward councillors consult, debate, decide – and spend significant amounts of a devolved budget. It seems inconceivable now that any future administration in Southwark will wish to reverse this localisation of power.

All politics is local

It was Tip O'Neill, one time Speaker of the House of Representatives in Congress, who said "All politics is local". Certainly much politics begins locally, and certainly many people are willing and able to become more engaged with political decisions in the area they know and care for. If we are really committed to engage the largest number of people in the largest number of community and political activities then the more influence and power people can be seen to have the better. Sometimes political processes can be lengthy and tedious.

Engaging and holding people's attention often requires speedy consultation and as speedy decisions as possible. If you want people to put time and effort into influencing their neighbourhood, then early wins rather than struggles for a generation are the most encouraging way to start. However maintaining that momentum requires dedicated community campaigners such as Hilary Wines – who learn and practice really effective campaigning for change both within and for their community.



Appendix

Devolution: five levels of Liverpool

| Level | Who in the council | What | What budget | What overview/ drawing together | Which staff from the council |
|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| Conurbation 1,650,000 people | Leader and Cabinet working with other councils in city region activities | Macroeconomic, planning, housing, transport and economic development activities | City region macroeconomic generation, planning, transport and economic development activities | City regional bodies; strategic health activity | Chief Executive and Senior Management Team |
| City 450,000 people | Leader and Cabinet challenged by the Scrutiny system | Macroeconomic, planning, housing, transport and economic development activities; City wide delivery mechanisms; Responses to Government; ip of LSPs co-ordinating all public sector services | All services directly controlled by the council | Health; Police; Housing associations (capital and revenue); Universities; Colleges; Fire Authority; Highways Agency; Environment Agency; Transport Authority | Chief Executive and Senior Management Team |

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|--|--|
| District 90,000 people | 18 councillors for the 6 wards plus key parts of city wide delivery agencies | Ensuring the efficient utilisation of resources to deliver city wide delivery programmes and strategies using local knowledge to create local priorities within those strategies | All services directly controlled by the council; community development functions | Health; Police; Housing associations (capital and revenue); Universities; Colleges; Employment and business creation | Representatives of SMT; District Managers |
| Ward 15,000 people | 3 councillors; local staff; local residents; local community organisations | Empowered to deliver responsive local actions with local residents and local staff of service providers | All services directly controlled by the council; participatory budgeting for small projects and really local services/ programmes | Local residents commenting/advising on service delivery of all public sector bodies | District managers; Local Delivery staff from all departments |
| | 3 councillors; local residents; local community organisations | Working together with sleeves rolled up to deliver local activities supported by the relevant citywide organisations | Delivery of small projects and programmes | Local residents delivering small scale projects using small public sector grants | Local delivery staff from all departments |