

## Pavement to power



The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 450 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.



Leadership Centre for Local Government  
Local Government House  
Smith Square  
London  
SW1P 3HZ  
**Switch 020 7664 3131**  
**[www.localleadership.gov.uk](http://www.localleadership.gov.uk)**



## Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Foreword</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| Mark Hunter MP<br>Shadow Transport Minister; Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader |           |
| <b>The morning after the night before: first steps to cementing victory</b>                | <b>5</b>  |
| Cllr Mike Storey CBE<br>Liverpool City Council   |           |
| <b>Who are you?: building and communicating your Lib Dem identity</b>                      | <b>8</b>  |
| Cllr Dave Goddard<br>Leader, Stockport Metropolitan Council                                |           |
| <b>Keep on keepin' on: increasing your lead once in power</b>                              | <b>12</b> |
| Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson<br>Leader, Portsmouth City Council                              |           |
| <b>Let's dance: using power in a hung council</b>  | <b>15</b> |
| Cllr Kath Pinnock<br>Kirklees Council  |           |
| <b>I just called to say...: the importance of campaigning effectively</b>                  | <b>18</b> |
| Cllr Carl Minns<br>Leader, Hull City Council   |           |
| <b>Are you ready?</b>  | <b>21</b> |
| Cllr Richard Kemp<br>Leader, LGA Liberal Democrats   |           |
| <b>Appendix</b>  | <b>27</b> |

## Mark Hunter MP

Shadow Transport Minister; Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader

### Foreword

When I was the leader of Stockport Council (2002-2005) I often used to say it was my mission in life to prove it was possible to have a Liberal Democrat Council and local Lib Dem MPs in a reasonably happy co-existence. Back then of course the MPs were Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove) and Patsy Calton (Cheadle). Since becoming an MP myself, succeeding Patsy in Cheadle, I have had no reason to change my view - though others might say I have tested the theory to destruction!

As one of an increasing number of Lib Dems in Parliament who have an extensive local government background, I was delighted to be asked to write the foreword to such an important and timely publication, which showcases how Liberal Democrats have consolidated their strengths in pavement politics and campaigning into sustained political leadership of their authority. With the next general election fast approaching we shall soon have the opportunity, once again, to test our conviction that a firm local government base is the central plank of our platform for success at parliamentary level. Certainly I've always believed that this is so, whilst at the same time acknowledging that councillors are hugely important in their own right and not simply to be viewed as part of the poor bloody infantry for bigger battles ahead.

The real secret of the success of good working relationships between councillors and MPs in any constituency or local authority is that there are no secrets. Like any other relationship that's meant to last, it's based on mutual trust, respect and hard work. These things don't always come easily and in some cases are more difficult to achieve than in others, but they are nonetheless essential if the party is to continue to progress on all fronts. Integrated campaigning is, of course, another absolute pre-requisite for success. We are each, after all, part of a team in our own localities whatever individual position we hold. The question is do we always think and act like one? Are there, for example, enough opportunities for councillors and MP's to campaign and sit down together, share thoughts, and agree priorities? Do we always put across positively the team ethic in all our literature? There are any number of ways councillors and MPs can be seen to be working together, and we should never forget just how important it is to repeat and reinforce this message – that ultimately we stand or fall together.

Of course there is now much 'best practice' available from which we can all learn. Much of this experience is indeed detailed in this very publication, the contributors to which have in almost every case 'been there, done that and got the T-shirt'. One thing that we are all agreed upon is that there is really no need to re-invent the wheel. The challenges facing any new council administration may seem unique to those involved at the time, but they are almost certainly not. Help and advice from sources such as the ALDC or LGA (to name but two) are always readily available and, often more importantly, they can usually put you in touch directly with others who have had to battle the same or similar issues. I can remember attending a Leadership Academy event as council leader at a time when I was pre-occupied with falling school rolls in Stockport and the whole troublesome business of school closures. Whilst it's true that there are no easy answers to this kind of problem, it certainly helped me to see the issue from a different perspective and with the background context of the experience of other colleagues.

Thinking about the challenges I faced as the new leader of a large metropolitan authority back in 2002, the old marketing adage of 'Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance' was never far from my mind. Although it is impossible to foresee all the difficulties coming at you, many of the issues are predictable. The annual round of budget discussion, for example – always involving heavy decisions – could and should be considered well in advance. There must be plenty of opportunity, perhaps at a dedicated away-day for all members of the council Group, to discuss strategy and agree priorities – and your MP(s) should also be fully involved in this process.

Even more importantly, no Group should come into power without a clear idea of its immediate agenda. Whether it's a clearly identified 'Six to Fix' or some other plan, it is essential to target at least some tangible changes in the first few months of office. If people have voted for a changing of the guard, it's important they do actually see some changes quite rapidly. These things don't have to be earth-shattering, just things that will be noticed; are distinctively Liberal Democrat; and make a difference – and there's plenty of advice on how to do it!

As many of the contributors to this volume can testify, taking power is just the start: it's once you have taken up the reins of power that the fun really starts. Too many of our successes in the past have been too short-lived; we have swept into power at the Town Hall sometimes quite unprepared for office and have frequently been swept out again all too quickly. This publication goes some way to addressing the pitfalls and not only offers good advice on how to avoid them but also how to hit the ground running and continue building on each success.

Happy reading!



**Cllr Mike Storey CBE**

Liverpool City Council

## **The morning after the night before: first steps to cementing victory**

**“A new day dawns over the abandoned wine glasses of last night’s celebrations: we are now running the council - we are the new administration.”**

The first thing to remember is that it is the pavement that got you to power - all those years of being at the heart of your local community, all those hours of campaigning on local issues and my goodness, how many Focus newsletters delivered, must not be left behind. It is so easy for an incoming administration to get distracted from the local community who are their power base and be filled with their own sense of importance and be drawn into the centre. Endless meetings discussing visions and values and community plans are all well and good, but they must never mean that you become divorced from your community. The administration should and must keep their finger on the pulse of local people - it is so easy to be sidelined or pushed into a situation. Maybe because officers believe it is important, maybe it’s part of the budget-making process or a particular re-organisation, rationalisation or cost-cutting exercise that is deeply unpopular with local residents. Your political antennae are telling you this is plainly daft, but you feel it is a weakness to back down. Perhaps you feel you will lose face with officers or that you have just become determined to have your way. Well, don’t go there, use that political nous, that got you from the pavement to power!

### **Let me give you two Liverpool examples which illustrate the point:**

We were carrying out our budget preparations and officers identified a saving on School Crossing Patrols. There is a national shortage of people applying and each year there are a number of unfilled posts and furthermore we are putting in place automatic crossings, so take the saving. The Opposition were immediately able to start campaigning very effectively that we are putting children’s lives at risk and a momentum of protest grew, which was simple and effective and very difficult to counter. We had taken our eye off the ball, but we had the sense to withdraw the cut and actually put more money into road safety.

The second example was free early morning swims for senior citizens. To save money we decided to open the pools an hour later, thus depriving the elderly of their early morning swim. The budget saving was small but the political damage amongst our residents was enormous. Again we had the humility to admit we got it wrong and did not create a political flag pole for our opponents to campaign around. We now interestingly have free leisure passes for all our senior citizens and young children and young people.

### **How have we stayed in power in Liverpool for eleven years?**

#### **Firstly, the council Group is the key to your success.**

Everybody should feel valued and nobody feel they have been side-lined. Relationships with the leader, executive and council Group are crucial. The leader can be pro-active in this by formally and informally making contact with members on a weekly basis or having a period set aside when council Group members can pop in for a chat. The Group should agree that there will be ‘no surprises’ and consideration should be given to a set of protocols about Group behaviour. Liberal Democrats don’t like the word discipline but there definitely needs to be a disciplined approach to administration or the wheels will not only wobble, but completely fall off and all those years of pavement politics to achieve power will come to an end.

#### **Secondly, the relationships you engender are vital, particularly with officers and the local media.**

As a politician, you set the policies. It is the officers’ job to implement those agreed policies. The council staff, who are also voters, want to be proud of the council they work for and they do want you to succeed. They shouldn’t find out what’s happening by word of mouth or from the local media, but from their council. I will never forget a time in Liverpool when council employees were ashamed of the fact they worked for the council to the point that when they went out at lunch time they covered up their council identity badges. Council staff can be the best ambassadors for the administration. Sadly, I have seen too many councillors believe in their own self importance and treat their staff in a most appalling manner.

Your relationship with the local media is also crucially important. So on week one, invite the local editor and radio station manager out for lunch. Meet up with the local reporter on a regular basis - give him or her the occasional exclusive, tip them off when a particular policy is about to appear. When stories are not reported in the way you would have liked, avoid a full frontal attack and be more restrained - a sort of ‘sad of this parish’ approach, basing any concerns on hard facts. Conversely it is also good to ring up and congratulate them on a good story where appropriate.



I also believe that the council's own media capacity should be up to the job and of the highest quality: sending out press releases, monitoring news coverage both positive and negative and being pro-active at all times. If you inherit a weak team, sort it out immediately.

A municipal year is a very short period of time for an incoming administration and if you haven't achieved it by Christmas forget it. The first couple of weeks should be spent listening, understanding and creating the right ethos. Identify those potential barriers to your success and then ask the chief executive to draw up a plan to tackle them. At our request the IDeA carried out a peer review in Liverpool which was fantastic in enabling us to identify the weaknesses and the areas that needed sorting.

Your residents want to be proud of their city, town or village. So on day one have a very different style of administration. Talk up your area and spend as much time out and about with and amongst local people as you can, listening to their aspirations. Draw up a schedule of visits for you and the chief executive to tour the local wards with the local councillors. Be out and about and not stuck in some committee room in the Town Hall.

The golden rule is that you are a Lib Dem administration that wants to achieve something; not be something. That way the pavement and power will go hand-in-hand for a considerable period of time. Oh, and by the way - don't send any private emails on the council system!



## Cllr Dave Goddard

Leader, Stockport Metropolitan Council

### Who are you?:

### building and communicating your Lib Dem identity

Stockport Metropolitan Borough, was formed in 1974 and is made up of three-and-a-half constituencies. The story of these – Cheadle, Hazel Grove and Stockport – is fundamental to understanding the success of the council Group.

When the borough was formed, Liberals held 13 seats across all three constituencies, but this fell over the next few years until we reached our lowest point in 1978 of only 4 seats, facing a Conservative administration.

From this low point, the story of our rise to power is a long, steady progression, with no 'big bang' as experienced in some other areas – partly because we have elections by thirds. But Liberal Democrats have been on an upward trajectory for the past 31 years, only dropping back by one or two seats on three occasions, until reaching our present level of 34 seats. We became the largest party in 1987 and took overall control in 1999.

When we first became the largest party we formed the administration with a strong 'all party' approach to governance. The Liberal Democrats tended to develop an approach based on value for money and running an efficient council. There were important additional themes, some of them forerunners of our priorities today, for example education and green issues.

By 1999 there were 32 Liberal Democrats, 25 Labour, 2 Conservatives and 4 Independents. For a year or two our hold on control was fragile – some officers expected the council to relapse into no overall control. As it began to dawn that our control could be long-term, people began to feel that the Lib Dems needed to put their own clear stamp on the council – we needed to establish a clear image and direction for the future.



At an away day in June 2000, councillors and party activists identified four themes: **Cleaner, Greener, Safer, Stronger**. This was a crucial turning point as it moved the Group beyond the 'efficient management' agenda onto something which reflected the enduring values we sought to promote. Stockport was the first council to clearly define its new agenda, using words which have been copied by government and councils across the country and which are still in use to define the main funding streams for Local Area Agreements. When Mark Hunter became leader, he took the ideas and turned them into a brand. The image appeared on all council materials, and on council vans. Certain key ideas were turned in to campaigns, the most notable being 'Operation Springclean', an annual clean-up which operated throughout the borough. This caught the imagination of the public and was immensely successful.

This and other initiatives around recycling and regeneration were supported by much stronger council promotion through our bi-monthly civic review delivered to over 135,000 homes, and by taking more opportunities to carry the council's campaigns not only in the local paper but in all media forms.

By 2005, some six-and-a-half years after the original brand had been born, it was clear that it needed to be refreshed. A second away day was held, and it was agreed that within the brand three clear priorities for action would direct the council's work: A Leading Green Borough; An Attractive and Thriving Stockport; and Safe and Strong Communities.

Major new initiatives quickly took place in priority areas. We also reformulated our ideas on community governance and are building on the strengths of our area committees. We hope to give them more scope for consultation, and more control over budgets, while at the same time increasing local responsiveness through additional area-based teams in street cleaning and also highways initiatives.

Early in 2006, in the annual CPA, we achieved four stars, improving well status – establishing us in the top quartile of high performing councils in the country. We retained this through 2007 and 2008, and in 2009 we achieved four star, improving strongly. This is the highest rating possible, and we are one of only three metropolitan authorities to be awarded the highest accolade in the country, and the only Liberal Democrat run one.

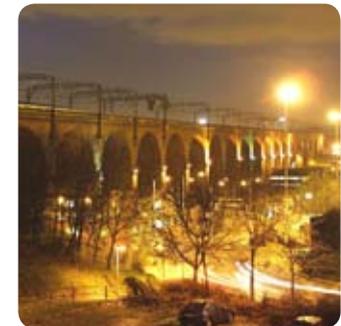
### What then has been our campaigning strategy? How have we gained control, and how have we kept it?

In the late 1990s a further new ward was targeted and resources from the Hazel Grove constituency were put into winning it. Our 'Metro' campaigns group was crucially important in helping to target activity throughout the period. This all-constituency group has the ability to target and to shift resources across the borough during campaign periods – such as Sunday night meetings to assess progress and decide where resources are needed – has been critical not just for winning but also for retaining seats.

The momentum from the mid-1990s has been considerable as an integrated council and parliamentary operation. Hazel Grove was won in 1997 when Andrew Stunell was still on the council; Patsy Calton's enthusiasm and drive led not only to winning council seats but also Cheadle itself in 2001. That momentum has also involved consolidation, building an army of around 600 deliverers and activists, identifying around 1500 poster sites, and recruiting staff in the constituencies to support us.

One question often asked is whether there are problems for the Group in that one constituency is fighting a Labour incumbent, while the two Lib Dem held constituencies have Conservative opposition. The answer is that we have a two-pronged strategy, and both elements are equally important. Both our parliamentary seats have a minority Labour vote we have to address, which coincides with our desire to break into more Labour areas. And an anti-Conservative strategy has to be important with two MPs facing Conservative opposition.

But the more positive message is that the issues we have been pursuing – Cleaner, Greener, Safer, Stronger – have equal resonance and appeal to voters across the borough, and are issues we can all unite behind. This ability to look beyond the narrow boundaries of a constituency through our Metro group, and to have a structure strong enough to move precious manpower resources, has been fundamental to our success. It is going to be equally important in years to come in retaining our control of the council.



I believe Stockport's success has been built on the three pillars: constant, year-round, effective campaigning; developing a coherent Liberal Democrat identity on the council, to which Stockport residents relate, and appear to like, for instance instigating initiatives such as Community Pride and My Place Awards; and effective, well resourced communication, the latter vital to protect Stockport's reputation and to ensure the simple messages are delivered clearly and effectively; one team, one vision.

This has been reinforced by having two Liberal Democrat MPs, adding an additional dimension to campaigning activity. The combination of a proactive council Group with a sharply focused agenda and a flexible, Borough-wide campaigning mechanism has stood us in good stead so far, and we hope will mean we are running Stockport Borough for many years to come.



## Cllr Gerald Vernon-Jackson

Leader, Portsmouth City Council

### **Keep on keepin' on: increasing your lead once in power**

The Lib Dems' growth to power in Portsmouth is unlike the stories in some other cities in two respects. The first is that their main challengers have been the Conservatives, not Labour, and the second is that they have continued to win when in power.

Portsmouth has had a small group of Lib Dem councillors for many years. Since the 1984 by-election victory in Portsmouth South the party has been centred on Mike Hancock. Mike has been a community campaigner in the city for over 40 years. He was first brought into politics by the fight to stop the council bulldozing terraced streets. Even to this day you can see the streets that Mike saved.

Around Mike grew a small team of supporters who campaigned on local issues and represented local people. Mike has always had a reputation for doing huge amounts of casework for local people and his dedication to this has meant many families became his firm supporters. Mike Hancock lost the parliamentary seat in 1987 and in 1992 to the Conservatives by about 200 votes each time, but won it convincingly in 1997.

The Lib Dems in Portsmouth have always been a small team, a team that campaigned hard but which was outgunned by the opposition, but a group which had Mike's political nose for issues, supported by people like Phil Shaddock, Richard Cole and Alex Bentley, among others.

Yet during the 1980s and 90s our place was always that of the third party on the council. There was a joint administration with the Labour Group in the 1990s, but our strength was always about 7 to 10 councillors out of 39. However since 2003 the Lib Dems have run a minority administration and in 2009 won majority control for the first time.



## How has this transformation taken place from small oppositional Group to one in power?

The change is down to four main reasons: taking political opportunities that were offered; taking advantage of the decline in other parties; surprising other Groups by our ability to manage; and never forgetting the politics and campaigning.

In 2002 we made a big leap. With redrawn ward boundaries there were all-up elections. Mike's political nose smelt that a building project – the Millenium Tower – was unpopular and got us to campaign against it. This city-wide campaign increased the size of our Group to 13, with 14 Labour and 15 Conservatives. We campaigned from within a three-party rainbow alliance on the same issues all year and in 2003 became the largest party with a gain of 3 seats. Since then the political landscape has changed. In the south of the city the Lib Dems have won seats from Labour and the Conservatives, in the north of the city the Conservatives have been able to compensate for the loss of seats in the south to us, by winning seats from Labour.

Since 2003 we have run the city as a minority administration. The Labour and Conservative Groups put us into power expecting us to fail when we got there. My experience as a councillor in West Berkshire, and working for the IDeA in other councils across the country, gave me some experience to help the Group and Mike Hancock's political experience of running Hampshire has been vital.

From 2003 onwards we have had elections every year except 2005. We have won up to 20 seats out of 42, and after the 2008 elections our numbers stood at 19. In the spring of 2009 our Group on the council was joined by two defectors from the Conservatives, and two from Labour who had been independents for a while. Their view was that we had done a good job of running the city. This gave us 23 seats and a majority on the council for the first time ever.

We have taken advantage of the collapse of the Labour party and divisions in the Conservatives in Portsmouth. Labour are now down from majority control in the city council in 1999 to just 2 councillors. We have been out and recruited good new Lib Dem candidates, strengthening the Group. We now have a lawyer on the council, a council tenant, a former president of the Chamber of Commerce, a fireman, a university lecturer and many more. We have increased the number of women councillors and put women onto the cabinet for the first time.

Our movement from pavement politics to power has been gradual and I hope that we have not lost the campaigning zeal that got us here.

We have survived because we have remained political. We have not tried to just do what the council officers have told us to do. In some cases such as the closure of the Kings Theatre and the Pyramids swimming pool we have actively campaigned against the suggestions of our officers. We have been aggressive in our campaigning against the Conservatives on issues like fortnightly rubbish collections, the imposition of gypsy and traveller camps on Portsmouth (using money taken from building social housing for homeless families in Portsmouth) and their desire to defend our one Town Council when in two referenda local people have voted to scrap it. We have also been seen as the voice of the city on issues such as the hugely successful campaign to save the naval base from closure, something that would have ripped the heart and soul out of the city.

We have taken a huge amount of effort to get the detail of running the city right. In my view that is the minimum people expect. If you can't do that, then what can people trust you with?

We are, however still a very small team. We continue to campaign, to leaflet and to knock on doors – but not enough. Some members of the Group really understand that power only comes to those that work and who both listen to their residents and communicate with them lots. Our increased numbers mean that people look to us as decision makers, but getting people to remember the basics about campaigning – and that if we forget this we lose power - is as much of a battle of us as for many. Putting 10 per cent of our allowances into campaigning has grown our capacity and allowed us to compete with the other Groups.

The trick is not to move from pavement politics to power, and then forget pavement politics. All too often Groups have done this and then lost power. Power has to be won by, from and for the people and each and every week we have to go and do it again.



**Cllr Kath Pinnock**

Kirklees Council

## **Let's dance: using power in a hung council**

Liberal Democrats are renowned for their effective local campaigning. We focus on the issues that affect the daily lives of local people and work to 'get things done'. Residents appreciate, and vote for, Liberal Democrat campaigners who fix the potholes; tackle litter; and get the park benches repaired. Local campaigns frequently take on national issues with a local impact. So we campaign to 'Save Our Post Offices'; for 20mph zones; and an end to free plastic bags.

Such campaigning is at the very heart of our political activity. Many pavements have been repaired and potholes filled as a result. Our wider campaigns demonstrate that we care for the future of our communities and the less advantaged who live in them. But unless we are in a position to make policy decisions and allocate resources, Liberal Democrat campaigners and councillors will never be able to fundamentally improve the lives of local people.

In Kirklees, a metropolitan council that serves 400,000 people in the heart of Pennine West Yorkshire, Liberal Democrats have been in a position of power for eight of the last nine years. Yet we have never in that time had a majority. Kirklees Council has been in balance for the last 11 years and we have used the bargaining position that has given us to make sure we have been at the centre of decision making.

But, some campaigners may ask, isn't it better to be in opposition and use the opportunity to throw bricks at the party in power? Our reply is that opposition can be fun but it can also be very frustrating. There is no power in opposition and no power to get our Liberal Democrat policies into action.

In Kirklees, we have always tried to make the connection between our local campaign issues and the big policy changes we wanted to make. From 2000, Liberal Democrats led the council as the largest political group for six years. For two of the years since then we have made 'arrangements' with the largest political group which has enabled them to run the Council in return for significant budget influence and policy changes.

### **So how have we used this power?**

One cold winter councillors had many calls from concerned older residents worried about heating bills. We discovered that we had significant 'excess deaths' during winter months caused by the cold and poorly heated and insulated homes, so we developed and implemented our Warm Zone scheme. Every home, regardless of tenure, is visited and offered free loft and cavity wall insulation. At the same time the Fire Service provide free smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors and residents are offered a benefits check. The result: fewer older people will die because of poorly heated homes; on average energy bills are cut by £140 per annum; at least two lives have been saved already by the detectors; and we have made a significant cut in carbon emissions.

Another issue that we Lib Dems often campaign on is improving road safety, especially for pedestrians. Of course, an effective campaign can result in improved road safety outside a school, for example, but what about the challenge of getting a better deal for pedestrians across the council district?

When we were the largest party and leading the council, we developed a pedestrian strategy. The aim was to think about pedestrian travel routes and not just individual pavements or road crossing points. The result was creating safe routes for pedestrians from their home to the local shops to mirror the safe routes to school programme. This meant strategic investment in public rights of way (including urban ones), new pedestrian crossings in the relevant points, better lighting and surfaces along the routes, and maps for pedestrians.

So we were able to link our traditional campaigns for better pavements and street lighting to a wider goal of thinking about the needs of pedestrians. The result was more people walking more often and using snickets and ginnels that had previously been regarded as unsafe.

Both the Warm Zone scheme and the pedestrian strategy were achieved when we were leading the council albeit as part of a shared Cabinet.



In 2006, we were no longer the largest party and no longer had a place in the Cabinet. Kirklees Council was still in the balance however. We quickly decided that we did not want to be in opposition when there was an opportunity to get involved in decision making. Only in power can you really get things done.

We negotiated an arrangement with the largest political Group which gave us a considerable say in the council's capital plan and a chance to influence revenue spending.

One of our key priorities was to develop more activities for young people and for these to be available across our large and diverse district. So out of the deal we have got two new young people's centres where previously there was no, or only minimal, provision by the council. We also achieved agreement for an adapted bus to take young people's activities and services to the more remote parts.

We have also been able to put some of our green ideas into action through this deal. For example, the council agreed to an investment in biomass boilers for some of our schools and one of our town halls. We also proposed using a weir to generate electricity and that scheme too has been given the go-ahead.

Since January 2009, we have been part of a partnership administration. The education policies of the political Group running the council up to the end of 2008 were completely against our Lib Dem principles. The consequence was that we decided to oust them in a vote of no confidence which required the support of two-thirds of council. All the other councillors bar one had to support the no-confidence vote for it to succeed, which it did.

Since then we have been working, and succeeding, in getting a more equitable and educationally sound approach to school changes. So the prize in this case for seeking ways to be in power is that children in our area will benefit for years to come.

In the last nine years Liberal Democrats in Kirklees have used the opportunities provided by a council in the balance to get into positions of power. We know that getting more of our key priorities into reality would be much easier if we were in majority control but the electoral chances of any party getting a majority in the near future is remote. We are in politics to create a more Liberal Democrat society. So standing on the sidelines isn't for us. We have, and will, take power to make a Liberal Democrat difference.

## Cllr Carl Minns

Leader, Hull City Council

### I just called to say...: the importance of campaigning effectively

“If you are angry, stick it on a piece of paper and stick it through somebody's door.”

– David Penhaligon

Ten years ago I was part of the Lib Dem team that was celebrating the then amazing feat of moving up to five seats out of 60 on Hull City Council! Ten years later I am leading a group of 34 and we have not lost a target seat defence or gain since 2004. This remarkable turnaround isn't unique, nor is it just to do with an unpopular Labour government. It is a testament to our underlying pavement politics philosophy that where we work with our communities, and communicate, we win.

Our belief in community politics, devolution and citizen empowerment goes beyond mere election strategy and it shows. Liberal Democrat councillors and campaigners up and down the country are taking the pulse of local communities on a daily basis and using that information not to control communities and impose solutions but to empower them to find local solutions to local problems. The first, last and only way to do this is effective communication and based on my experience in Hull, this is how to do it:

#### 1. Establish what the community issues are

You know what bothers you about your area, but are your feelings matched by the rest of the community? The only way to find out is to ask them. Deliver a survey, (addressed letters tend to get the best response) talk to people door-to-door, in the pub or supermarket and you will find that the answers will come quickly but will also be remarkably local.



## 2. Take action

Now you know what the issues are, it's time for action. People vote for people who take action so it's back to the streets again. What you do will clearly depend on the issues that concern local people. Here are a few ways good campaigners will deal with local issues.

Problem with a public service? Write to the council/PCT/police/bus company. Organise petitions on Focus leaflets, going door-to-door or by getting a stall at a local shopping parade. Organise a lobby of the relevant public body. Contact the local paper and let them know what you are doing. The key is to organise, be visible and communicate. If you're new to this you will be surprised about what you and your community can achieve.

Another alternative is to take direct action. Is there a problem with rubbish dumped on your local playing fields that the council isn't cleaning? If so organise a team of local people and clean it yourself.

Throughout your campaign keep in touch with your supporters and community at large. Do not rely upon people knowing what you are doing – you have to tell them. If you have run a petition, write to the people who have signed it with regular updates about how the campaign is going and inviting them to events. Deliver updates in your newsletter to the wider community. Finally tell them the result. If you save a bus route or a local post office - yes, it can be done! – tell people about it! It never ceases to amaze me how many people work hard and do the right things only to not let anyone know they are responsible for the good news.

## 3. Keep in touch all year round

You should be aiming to communicate with your community at least once a month via a newsletter and tell them what you have done, share news from the community and about your campaigns. People like being involved and informed and are rightly cynical about politicians who turn up just before the elections and ask for votes.

There is much more information out there on how to organise effective campaigns<sup>1</sup> so seek it out. The results of successful campaigning like this go far beyond elections (win or lose.)

Effective community campaigning helps put our core community empowerment philosophy into action and has a number of key community benefits:

- **It results in a stronger local community who feel empowered and that their representatives and activists are achieving something**
- **It improves civic pride and normally results in an increased voter turnout**
- **It can embarrass councils into taking effective action and can result in a better chance of councils taking the time to stop problems in future**

This action plan is not a panacea but successful Liberal Democrat Groups put this style of campaigning at the heart of what we do. Also, successful Liberal Democrat Groups do not stop campaigning when we take over the leadership of a council. When we win it is more important than ever to carry on working with our communities to highlight problems that they face and to find local solutions to local problems. We need to be, in the words of Liverpool councillor Richard Kemp, "the representatives of the community in the Town Hall and not the representatives of the Town Hall in the community". It is a lesson I have seen many councillors forget and they are quickly punished by the local community at the ballot box.

Bill Clinton in 1992 had a sign in his campaign HQ that said "It's the economy stupid" for us, as Liberal Democrats, we should replace that with "It's the community stupid" and never forget it. We should also cut out that famous David Penhaligon phrase stick it in every Lib Dem activist's room in the land and take it to heart. It may not be sexy and it certainly is basic but it is effective advise that successful Lib Dem teams have taken to heart.



<sup>1</sup> See for example the ALDC website (<http://www.aldc.org/-online-goldmine/campaign-packs/>) and the Leadership Centre's Cabinet Member for your ward publication (<http://www.localleadership.gov.uk/docs/CabinetMemberForYourWard.pdf>)

## Cllr Richard Kemp

Leader, LGA Liberal Democrats

### Are you ready?

“So you’re now the leader of the council what’s your first priority?

Er ... area committees”

“Do you really think that if I went out there and asked a hundred people about the priorities of the council would anyone would say area committees?

Er... I suppose not”

You may think that I dreamed up this conversation; regrettably I did not. This person happened to be a Lib Dem who, to be fair, had not anticipated the circumstances in which he came to be the leader of the council. You may not be surprised to know that he was not leader for long – the electorate saw through him and we lost control two years later.

Lib Dems are not unique in this. Far too many people can get elected because the swing nationally is against the other lot; or we know what the people who are currently in charge are doing wrong.

Both of these might be acceptable campaigning points and there is an inevitability to them in the checks-and-balances democracy that we have, but winning control and knowing what to do with it are two different matters. That is why one of the most common questions that incoming councillors ask their advisors and mentors is how to get rid of the chief executive and senior staff. Why do they want to do it? Because they believe that since the appointments were made by the other side and the senior officers delivered what the other side wanted, they must belong to the other side. I am sure that out there are officers who are partisan – who do their best to assist the controlling side because they support the political objectives of that party. My experience however, is that they are few and far between.

Chief officers yearn for direction. They will and should argue and discuss how that direction can be achieved; when, and with what resources, but most of them want to get on with the job of assisting the controlling party or parties get on with the job of leading. So what stops them? I believe that there are three things that councillors can do to help officers achieve their political objectives.

The first and perhaps the most obvious is to say what those objectives are. In the weeks and months before an election, officers should have no doubt about what you consider the major problems facing the council are. They should have seen it in your resolutions to council; in the newsletters that you put out; and in your questioning at scrutiny committees. If you haven’t understood what the problems are and proposed some solutions, then why did you get elected?

You will not put everything into your campaigning material. “What do we want? A new IT system. When do we want it? Now!” probably would not win you many votes although you may well think it a priority. So you need to be ready the day after your acquisition of power to start work with the officers on your priorities. The dream of most chief executives is for the new leader to come into his office with three sides of A4 which say what the key priorities are and, crucially, what old priorities have to go. I remember one council where such a meeting took place at midday on the day after the election. The Senior Management Team was called to discuss it at 2 o’clock. Within three days there had been a meeting between the new (but not yet in office) portfolio holders. Within two weeks an away day took place with the SMT and Cabinet and agreement was reached about what was and was not possible, what could be achieved and what the consequences were. This immediately began to inform a revision of the corporate plan and the objectives of the strategic partnership. That Group is still in control.

The second important thing is that the word ‘control’ is simply wrong. Lib Dems do not control a council, Conservatives do not form the administration. Councillors neither administer nor control councils. They lead them. It is our job as leaders to hold the big picture, to define a new future for our area and our council. It is our job to sell that to officers, to partners and to our communities. It is the officer’s job to develop for us the strategies to deliver those ideas and objectives and then to deliver the machinery that can implement those services. Our final job is to monitor them.

Good councillors do not create good councils. Rather, they create the space in which good officers can create good councils. Good councillors do not create good partnerships but they create the vision and enthusiasm which others want to sign up to.

Lastly, we need to understand that being in control is not being in opposition with knobs on; it is a fundamentally different animal.



The leader of the controlling group is not just the leader of a party but the leader of the council as a whole and answerable in a wide way for total performance and direction. (S)he is the leader of the city, county or town. The thinking must be wider than ever before. The controlling Group needs to work out how to give the leader and cabinet as much latitude as possible so that they can deliver the Group's key objectives. The leader and senior councillors will no longer be present at every Group meeting because they have a wider set of responsibilities. They will sometimes have to make decisions very quickly without fully discussing things with the Group.

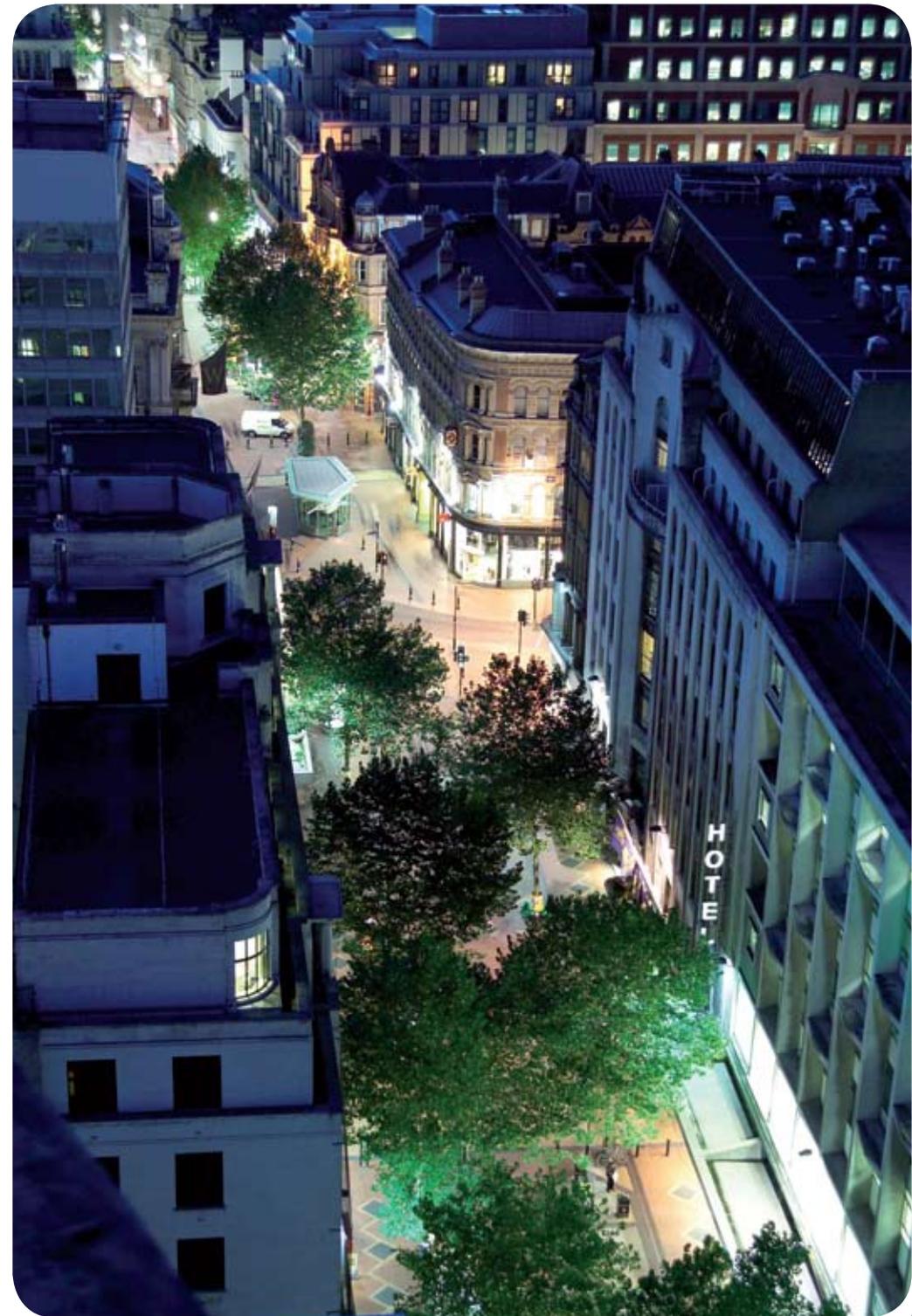
This is not a plea for a controlling Group to abdicate responsibility to a wise and all-powerful clique around the leader; it is a suggestion that Groups set parameters for policy and action within which the leadership will work. Good leaders never leave their followers too far behind – it's too dangerous!

Understand correctly how to set direction, how to lead and how to behave and you can often retain control against all the national odds and against all the national swings.

Above all remember why you joined the Lib Dems in the first place. You believe in a specific philosophy. If in doubt do what I do: take out your party membership card. Look at the 56 words on it from the preamble to the party constitution which defines our aim and purpose. If you cannot see how what you want to do will help achieve those aims and objectives then don't do it.

Good leadership combines a strong heart with a clear brain.

Good luck and good hunting!



## The ten commandments

Cllr Erica Kemp, Liverpool City Council

# 10

### 1. 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.

### 2. 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.

### 3. 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.

### 4. 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.

### 5. 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.

### 6. Have a life

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

### 7. Leverage commitment from partners

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

### 8. 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 and street surgeries. I will reach a greater and more diverse number of people if I do.

### 9. 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!

