

COMMUNITY POLITICS IN MY HEART AND IN MY SOUL

A collection of essays about working within their communities from seasoned activists on the eve of the full implementation of the Localism Act



FOREWORD

Dear Fellow Liberal Democrat,

I well remember the dark days just after the Liberal Democrats were formed when things looked bleak for the Party. We had slumped to 4th place in the vote at the European Elections and our poll ratings varied between tiny and statistically none-existent.

What saved us then and what will help us win again now is our army (somewhat small, but its quality and commitment that matters) of focus deliverers, door knockers and community campaigners. They set to with a will determined to continue the fight for liberal democracy. They proved to the people of many parts of the country that not only as there a point to liberalism and that it was a distinct political creed, but also that it meant something important to them. It meant better services in their communities and better government as we began to take control of large budgets inside more and more local authorities.

And we began winning again. I would never have won my Constituencies of Yeovil after seventy three years of Tory rule, had it not been for my dedication to community politics.

This booklet has two types of essays. Some from people who have lived and breathed community politics for years and those who have come to it more recently. Both sorts are enthusiastic not only about our 'Old practices' but also about the new opportunities that come the new ways of communicating with people through the new technologies; and from the Localism Act and other pieces new legislation that will, I hope put more hands in the power of LOCAL politicians and LOCAL communities than at any time for the past 50 years.

At the end of the day there is a fundamental difference between Lib Dems and our opponents. Our philosophy believes in decentralised power and our practice is to take that power and share it with our communities. Lib Dems see the area they represent as a place in which to do things; a place to exercise community partnership and community leadership. Our opponents see the areas they represent as a place from which to do something. For most of them their ward, division or Constituency is just a place from which to get to the Town Hall or Westminster.

There is only one way to fight back. Its to get back on the doorsteps and start winning people's confidence again – and then we will start winning in the ballot box again.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paddy". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Rt Hon Lord Paddy Ashdown



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WHAT COMMUNITY POLITICS HAS MEANT TO ME FOR 40 YEARS



An historical overview

There are few Liberal Democrats who were councillors BEFORE the Tony Greaves & Gordon Lishman motion at the Eastbourne Liberal Assembly in 1970 which committed the party to Community Politics.

When I was first elected as a Councillor for Aston in 1968 community politics was in its infancy with its origins based on the “streets” of Birmingham & Liverpool. It helped elect the first Liberal Councillor in Birmingham for generations - Wallace Lawler who later became an MP for Ladywood. It also started my own political career which has lasted over forty years.

Throughout my political career I've employed the principle of Community Politics to engage with people by listening to their views & opinions and by empowering them to become engaged in decisions which relate to their community and their daily lives.

However there have been times when I have had to show leadership and debate the wider picture.

It was a new experience for voters all those years ago for councillors & campaigners to be out on the streets throughout the year talking to people taking up their problems, delivering regular focus newsletters & holding weekly advice bureaux. New because the typical councillor all those years ago

would only turn up at election time to ask for people's vote.

The Council was engaged on a massive housing clearance programme in the late 60s & early 70s which was knocking seven bells out of my local community. Through community campaigning I was able to work with the community to assist with re housing families whose homes & community was being destroyed, by trying to get a just result for residents against the corporate juggernaut.

Highlighting & reflecting on issues

Community politics wasn't just about getting the housing department to carry out repairs, get a pothole filled in or fix a broken pavement it was also about highlighting significant issues that need to be addressed and resolved.

Many of the homes in Aston at that time had outside toilets and no bathrooms. To highlight this as an issue I took a family into the council House to use the Lord Mayors "facilities". I of course invited the press to come along and the associated publicity moved forward the urgent need

for the council to address this particular issue. Yes I did get a dressing down from the Lord Mayor!!!

Community politics can also highlight to a councillor the need to challenge the system to resolve issues. When calling on a constituent at their request I as usual knocked the front door only to be asked to "come round the back councillor". I thought that this was an unusual request but `as requested entered the property via the back door.

When I asked why, I was shown the front room that had been striped of all the floorboards with the explanation "sorry councillor we burnt them to keep warm – it's been a terrible winter and the demolition of our home will burn them anyway".

This incident highlighted to me that an individual issue affecting one family is also part of community politics – which is something I've never forgotten.

Inner city Birmingham is not known for high levels of voter turnout. The



engagement of people via community politics resulted in increasing the turnout figures and more importantly encouraged people to go out and vote some for the first time.

My own ward of Aston had the highest turnout in the West Midlands County Council elections when I was re-elected in 1981. Interestingly a neighbouring Liberal ward (Rotton Park) had the second highest turnout – testament to the fact that community politics can engage people who respond to the practice of community politics.

What community politics means to me

In brief I believe that community politics is about championing the needs and aspirations of local communities by involving and encouraging active participation in the decision making process and by bringing power closer to people & their communities.

In the forty plus years that I've been practicing community politics many Council's have taken on in part the vision of Greaves & Lishman.

In Birmingham' case we now have devolved community budgets and mechanisms to allow community/residents groups to submit proposals for local projects.

Birmingham has also devolved services to local districts and created Ward Committees where local people can debate in an open forum community issues.

This has been a massive step forwards from the 1960's where control of the council and its decision making process was entirely centralised. Following the elections in 2012 the new Labour council whilst claiming to give powers to wards insist that their District Committees to meet in the Council House!!!

We now allow members of the public to make representations on planning & licensing applications ask questions at council meetings & consult more openly on draft policies and plans.

All these developments have involved communities in the decision making process and returned a degree of power closer to the people.

This degree of localisation would have been unheard of in the 60s and all parties now use their own style of community politics – although believe that the Lib Dem style is far more “pure” to the original concept.

The new challenges post 2012

We now need to refresh our vision of community politics. It's simply no longer

acceptable to remain static. We need to devolve further an increasing number of decisions and budgets and develop new and revitalised campaigning techniques to ensure that community politics moves forward in the next forty years by much as its done in the pervious forty.

I'm also convinced that the use of email, Twitter, Facebook and other e campaigning techniques will be the new version of Focus.

We also need to encourage more people to play their part in community campaigning and become involved in the political process. Only by doing this can

we have active communities and localised champions committed to the ongoing development of their local community which will benefit everyone concerned.

The decline in voter turnout in recent years also needs to be addressed. The reinvention of a new effective community politics model could address this issue my making politics more relevant to the individual voter who is looking for an answer to question “why should I bother to vote”.

**Cllr Paul Tilsley MBE, Leader,
Birmingham Liberal Democrats**

PAUL:

Paul Tilsley has been a member of Birmingham City Council for Aston Ward 1968 – 1986 and Sheldon Ward 1988 to date. He was the Deputy Leader of the Council from 2004 to 2012

He also represented Aston Ward on the West Midlands County Council between 1973 and 1986 when the council was abolished) and was the Leader of the Lib Dem group on the West Midlands Regional Assembly between 1998 and 2011



He is now the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on the Council.

A NEWCASTLE PERSPECTIVE



There's a lot of talk going on in the party about renewing our commitment to community politics, and rightly so. Many of us who have had the privilege of running our large cities are now out of power and have the time – and indeed the necessity – to take stock. We did a good job, as was widely acknowledged, but did we do it as uniquely empowering and transforming Liberal Democrat authorities – or were we just a little more competent than the lot we replaced?

First a flashback.

It's now 41 years since Tyneside Young Liberals campaigned in the west end of Newcastle, working with the charity Toc H, Student Community Action and the West End Tenants Association to tackle

the issues of chronic poverty, appalling housing conditions and Rachman landlords, combined with a badly rundown and neglected physical environment. We brought in George Clark of the Notting Hill Community Workshop/Grove Community Trust to work alongside the local partners and share his experience of building effective community action and community development programmes.

Clark's conclusion was that “far reaching social change programmes will not be effective if they are mounted solely by the authorities or through the efforts of well-meaning middle class people” – I think he meant us (a little unfairly). “There needs to be a confidence among those affected

by social disorders that they must assume power over their own lives by making the decisions which create and determine policy. It is impossible to over-emphasise the importance of people doing things for themselves. It is self-evident that successful attainment of goals achieved by the people themselves will be more meaningful than if these same goals are fulfilled by an external agency”.

He recommended the development of “social action centres” in the area, local people learning new skills of organisation, management and bargaining, and a coordinated community planning framework with local people at the heart of it. Some of this happened, the council was shamed into action, a stronger tenants association came to play a full role and the west end was redeveloped. In truth, however many of the deep-seated problems remain today

As a 23 year old Liberal who two years later became the first Liberal to be elected to Newcastle City Council since

the inter-war years, these were heady messages at the time. We were acting as “catalysts” - which is what I understood “community politics” to be all about. We led on media and public awareness and on direct action – boarding up derelict houses, and occupying the staff loos at the civic centre to demonstrate how many houses in the west end had no indoor toilets! We created the forum that brought groups together, and we supported and helped the tenants to find their own voice and to lobby.

I wrote rather pompous articles in Liberator headed “Mobilising People” and arguing for forms of community control. I moved motions at the rather incredulous and patronising Labour-dominated council in favour of tenants’ self-management and neighbourhood councils.

Fast forward three decades to 2004 when an even more incredulous Labour Party watched us kick them out after 30 years of power. I had the privilege of being part of a Lib Dem administration, as Deputy



Leader and briefly as Leader, running the city council for seven years.

During that time we fulfilled our commitment to “devolve and empower”. We strengthened the powers and budgets of local ward commitments. We introduced neighbourhood charters through a process of grassroots engagement – local people and groups identified their priorities and we used the ward committee process as the way of being accountable as councillors for delivery.

We became the country’s leading authority for the practice of Participatory Budgeting, through dozens of projects and some mainstream spending, with local people presenting and choosing their own projects, making the decisions. We won the EuroCities’ annual award for participation. And we introduced a comprehensive empowerment framework through the Local Strategic Partnership to commit all partners to operate with and through communities.

However, although we were rightly proud of this progress, by the time we were swept away for collaborating with the Tories nationally, the job was only partly done. If I am honest, we had barely begun true devolution of power to local communities. Directly -elected

community councils (but not on a one-size-fits-all basis) and a transfer of locally-expressed priorities into mainstream departmental spending were on our agenda. But by no means all of our Liberal Democrat councillors understood this agenda, let alone were fully committed to it. I blame ourselves for not providing the leadership to press on even more quickly when we had a perhaps once-and-for-all opportunity.

We sometimes warranted the accusation of taking the pragmatic or populist line when the going got rough. Our election literature (especially as it morphed into the General Election campaign) could be populist, sometimes negative and quite demeaning at times. We defined the “community” in “community politics” as meaning only neighbourhoods – with little emphasis on engaging with communities of identity and interest.

I still believe that above all else our role is to be a catalyst for empowering our communities. It’s not enough to be a “good councillor”, to be diligent in taking up the issues that people bring you and to justify it all by winning re-election. Yes, too often we’re simply satisfied with doing the things that bring in the votes rather than the risky things that can bring real change by challenging existing power relationships. It seems to suit many of us

that people look our way for every initiative. It's dependency, not empowerment.

The new localism agenda is not really new at all. However, it does give us a focus in opposition, and we don't have the excuse that we're too busy running the council. We'll spend time getting a better understanding of the profile of our communities – the changing demographics, the groups who are becoming more vulnerable, the assets of community value, the people and groups who can become the progressive voices for their communities (not the nimbys) and who we can work with. This not only

helps identify the priorities for the new Local Development Frameworks and neighbourhoods plans but also how, and by whom, they will be championed and directed.

So my challenge to Liberal Democrats, not only in Newcastle, is this – make it your priority and passion to get involved afresh, listen, understand, support – and yes help “mobilise” your communities. That's real community politics, and always has been.

Cllr David Faulkner is the Leader of Newcastle Liberal Democrats

DAVID:

David Faulkner was Leader of Newcastle City Council in 2010/11 and Deputy Leader and Executive Member in the previous six years. He was first elected to the council in 1973, having been an active community politics practitioner as a Young Liberal. In between two spells as a councillor he was local party chair and a long-time election agent and campaigner.

He is now the leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on the Council.



40 PLUSV YEARS BEFORE THE MAST IN LIVERPOOL!



In 1967 I did something that changed my life. At the tender age of 14 I joined the Young Liberals. I haven't had an evening in since.

But the big that happened was not just joining who I joined for. I was signed up to the Party in the front room of a redoubtable woman, Cllr Neva Orrell. The fact that Neva was a councillor at all was a near miracle. At the time there were something like 50,000 Cllrs on UDCS, RDCs counties, Shire Boroughs, Cities and the like. Of these just 330 were Liberals although a few more were around as independents.

The phrase community politics didn't mean anything to Neva. The term hadn't

even been invented for her first 20 years as an activist. It was just something that she did. Being an intrinsic part of her community was part of her way of life. People trusted her political instincts but voted for her because they could not vote against 'there' community champion', 'their community activist'.

Of course she didn't always win but losing her seat did not stop hew campaigning for her community. So next year or the year after she got back on. She did this in one part of Leyland for more than 50 years. No-one was more surprise than her when not only did she become part of an influential group at Country Hall but actually became the chair of the County Council for a very successful year.

Neva set the pattern for my life because I admired her so much that I always wanted to emulate her. In the 1960s we Young Liberals door knocked and did surveys, again community politics but we did not call it that. I remember doing a survey in Chorley and found a reasonable number of houses with gas lighting. The council as furious when we revealed this – it was as secret that they did not want to get out. But it did lead to some action to ensure that everyone had electric lighting.

The things got really difficult. In the 1970 General Election the Liberals were reduced to just 6 seats in the Commons. 2,500 votes distributed differently would have meant the end of our Party. But that small band of brothers and sisters, which the Party then was, were not going to put up with that. We went to the Young Liberal Conference and then the Liberal Assembly having a read a new publication from Gordon Lishman and Bernard Greaves. And so community politics was given name, given shape and shown to be a necessary way of proving that our

political beliefs were fundamentally different to those of our opponents.

So I did community politics in Chorley, in Leeds when I worked for David Austick firstly to get him elected to the Leeds City Council and then t Parliament. Then I moved to Liverpool where I met the arch exponent of community politics in practice, “Jones the Vote”.

Trevor Jones was a brash Liverpool businessman who when he was having trouble with the council turned to the only person who would help him Cyril Carr. Cyril being not only the Leader but also the sole member of the Liberal Party on the 160 strong Liverpool City Council.

What Trevor did supported by people in Liverpool like (Lord) David Alton and in London like (Lord) Graham Tope was to take the philosophy and emerging practices of community politics and apply standard concepts of marketing to them He realised that political parties are there to ‘sell’ two things their



principles/policies and their people. If you want to believe in liberalism you have to show them liberalism. So the principles of community politics were added to the principles of marketing and what we now know as the ALDC way was formed. Blue letters, Focus, bring it with you set and action all year round – not just at election time became a way of life.

So that is what I have always done – but is it enough? As I advanced through the ranks and eventually became the Leader of the Liberal Democrats in Local Government I began to realise increasingly that Lib Dems well understood the practice of community politics but that often the principles were being left far behind. “We get power to give power away”, had become in too many cases, “we take power and consult with people about how to use it”. We usually governed well, particularly because we did consult meaningfully and have a detailed grasp of our community’s needs but we did too little to decentralise when we had the opportunity.

I have held all sorts of roles both local and national in our Party but the thing that always keeps me going is my ward. Frankly I love being a local champion, being engaged in the area that I have been elected for, above all other parts of my political life. Along with Erica I now

represent the ward in Liverpool where Trevor first practiced his ‘dark arts!’ Church Ward is one of the most prosperous parts of the city and the day-to-day problems are few. But here we have the challenge of their being few formal communities to work with. In another part of this publication Erica tells what we are doing to remedy this.

Before moving to Church ward I represented two deprived parts of Liverpool. It is fascinating to me how much things are the same in each area in terms of principles FO community politics but different in terms of practice.

In Toxteth and Picton the role needed to be that of ‘heroic leader!’ Being a good local activist was absolutely vital because we needed to effect massive change in the community. Houses were unfit and decisions needed to be made about which to repair and which to demolish. Schools were depopulating; communities were being stabilised. In such communities Erica, Bert and I needed to be almost omni-present using our mandate as local representatives to shape new ways of doing things and find new solutions.

In Church Ward many of our problems revolve around planning and licensing issues we need to be ‘calm coordinators’.

The problems are not so overt but there are many problems that are covert. Behind many of our front doors there are single people quietly going 'doolally' but because they have relations and money are neglected by many of our systems.

In both types of ward a good councillor is someone who 'knows when every sparrow falls'. A person who the community look to for local leadership. A councillor who partners look to as the prime coordinator of local action no matter what their policies and strategies

of their superiors happens to be. A strategist who knows how to pull down power and then give it away to local people and local institutions.

I hope after 30 years people, whether they vote for me or not, will say, "he is a good councillor". This is not always the same as saying, "he is a good politician".

CLlr Richard Kemp CBE is the Leader of Liverpool Liberal Democrats

RICHARD:

Richard Kemp has just started his 30th year as a member of Liverpool City Council and has held many positions both in control and opposition. For more than 6 years he was the Leader of the Liberal Democrats at the LGA and served in that role on a number of national policy committees. He leads the 'Winning with Localism' Operation within the Party and contributes to a number of national magazines and journals on localist and local government issues. He currently chairs the policy review group



for housing which will be reporting to the 2012 Autumn Conference. He is now the leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on the Council.

PRACTICING COMMUNITY POLITICS IN HULL



Community politics is at the core of what many Lib Dem councillors do. For a lot of people it is what motivated them to become councillors in the first place. Listening to local residents and empowering them to take part in the decisions that affect their communities is one of the most important things we can do as councillors.

As part of the team that ran Hull City Council I was in the very privileged position of putting community politics into action. During the Lib Dems time in power we delegated powers, set up ward budgets, established local forums and encouraged local people to get involved. I am proud of what we achieved.

The Localism Act is not the end of community politics. All it will do is add to the arsenal of weapons we have at our disposal to empower people and ensure decision making is made at the local level. For me the Localism Act is one of greatest achievements in Government. Not many people may know about it but it is something that aid people all over the country to decide the fate of their community and ensure their voice is heard.

What community politics means to me
Like most councillors I first got involved in politics because of community politics. I wanted to set up a Neighbourhood

Watch Group on my street because there had been a spate of vandalism to cars.

Then I was introduced to Dave McCobb who persuaded me to stand for election. Pickering Ward, the area I represent, is a place with a real sense of community with Hesse Road running through it, famous in its day for the fishing communities that along it. Many things may have changed since the fishing fleets stopped sailing from Hull but the sense of community in the area is still there.

After years of neglect from ward councillors and the council the area was run down, felt unloved and the residents left apathetic. So I stood in the 2006

election and put my heart and soul into putting community politics into action. I listened to what people had to say and within weeks I had ensured stopped a Park and Ride going down a residential street, got a Safer Route to School in place and set up a residents group.

Then I was elected as a councillor and the work continued. Friends associations were set up for our parks. Regular surgeries set up to listen to residents concerns. Forums and residents associations were established to ensure people had their voice heard. All this was backed up with a lot of old fashioned door knocking and surveying all year



round to make sure my ward colleagues and I had our fingers on the pulse.

I am happy to say six years on the residents of Pickering ward have come to expect a high level of service from their local councillors, we really have an excellent record of action. We still have a long way to go and I look forward to working with local people to face the challenges ahead. Playing a part in improving the area I represent and listening to local people is what community politics is all about for me.

Community politics in Hull (what we have achieved)

Before the Lib Dems came onto the scene in Hull community politics didn't exist. It was one of those traditional northern cities that had been returning legions of Labour councillors since time began. At one time every member of the council but one was Labour.

Then in the late 1990s things began to change. At first one Lib Dem Councillor was elected. Then a handful more then in 2002 the Lib Dems took control of the Council and Labour's power was broken for the first time since the mid-70s. To say this even took the then group by surprise would be an understatement. In the end they were in power for one brief year. In

that time however they started the work that we would pick up when we took back power in 2006.

During this time it was clear that the opposition thought this was all just a political trick. Even today you get the feeling that they think consultation is just a speed bump on the road to making a decision. That delegated budgets and powers are somehow a bit of a waste of time and it would be quicker and easier to make the decision centrally.

As a Lib Dem I am committed to community politics and I am proud of the steps we took in Hull. The reaction of the opposition has served only to reinforce that belief. Should we regain power in the future I think one of the first things we would do is re-examine what was achieved and look at ways of empowering local people further and ensuring decisions are taken at a genuinely 'local' level.

The future of community politics

The Localism Act as I stated in my opening remarks will not alter what many Lib Dem councillors are doing. What is important is that we take stock and reflect in what is for many of us in local government a time of opposition.

I think it is important that we define the terms of community politics. For too long I feel we practiced the spirit of community politics but not the law. We consulted, surveyed, set up forums, with some powers and budgets delegated. Most of this 'decentralisation' went only councillors.

I feel that we got very good at listening and very good at ensuring ward councillors have a say but I am not convinced we went far enough in empowering local people further. Community politics is not about listening and devolving budgets. It is about empowering people to make the

important decision about the areas they live.

The future of community politics for me will be identifying the progressive, forward thinking and impassioned voices in our communities and supporting those people. It will be about adapting our philosophy to the rapidly changing demographics and the economic situation our communities face. I suspect the challenge in the future for councillors will not be about working for communities but working with communities.

ABI:

Abigail Bell has been a Councillor in Pickering ward for 6 years. She was the Deputy Leader of the Council and a Cabinet Portfolio Holder from 2007 to 2011. She is now the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on Hull City Council, which is the main opposition.



COMMUNITY POLITICS STARTED ME OFF!

"I would not even be sat where I am today if it was not for community politics. I was a teenager on a run-down council estate in Tower Hamlets and knew things should be better than this for my family and my neighbours.

I challenged the Local Lib Dem Councillor about their leaflets complaining about state of local football pitch. Rather than sending me away with a flea in my ear the Lib Dems listened to what I had to say and encouraged me to take my thoughts and articulate them to other people and in different places.

That really tells you all you need to know, they listened and they encouraged and that is community politics. It is different to just representing a community or even your party. Tower Hamlet's and Islington helped me understanding that a good politician is one that gives power away and that is the reason why I joined the party. To let people make their own decisions.

At the time I could not have imagined that it would have led to 26 years of campaigning for my community and the door knocking and Focus delivery that goes with it. Maybe community politics should also come with warning!

But in those years, having sat on two inner London Councils, it is clear to me is that there are loads of great community



politicians. Not all of them are elected. Some of them are in other parties. As Liberal Democrats we do not have a monopoly. Good community politics is how you act when working with and representing others.

It is not easy, it takes time and energy to empower others and sometimes you have to leave your own strong views at the door for the greater good or because the majority want something different. As Liberal Democrats we sometimes struggle with this. We are involved in politics because we have views on a whole host of issues. We may not agree with others let alone empower those that may make our life harder or fight a different corner. Our democratic structures make it difficult too. Lack of interest from all sides of an argument



make us very conscious that not all views are represented. Our fear of political, financial and social 'failure' stops us from trying stuff out and seeing if it works or could be done better. In 26 years I can only point at a few instances where I have enabled real community politics successfully. But the localism act can, and I hope change this.

It is why we often retreat into describing community politics in terms of communicating our decisions or doing

casework, rather than the real revolution - which is day-in-day out conversations in the community that influence what happens. From where trees are planted and who plants them though to how services are delivered. Stretching further the stuff I learnt in Tower Hamlets about handing power to communities, tenants, friends groups, community organisation and the money to go with it. Things me and my colleagues in Islington put into practice during the 10 years we run the council.

So what would help me reengage with my youthful passion for community politics now that I am a cynical hack of over two decades. Here are a few thoughts.

SIX THINGS THAT WOULD MAKE COMMUNITY POLITICS EASIER AND BETTER:

1. The Government should stop treating local councils as the rationing arm for national Government. Go the whole hog and give us time, money and power and take the full responsibility. Only then can we engage our residents in a meaningful conversation that can deliver the holy grail of improved services and reduced costs that suit our area. The localism act is the start, we still have some way to go.

2. Make time for better conversations. If we were really honest we would all say that the solution for the future of libraries needs to be much more radical. But we never set aside the time to have proper conversations as a nation and locally. We only ask people to respond to proposals not explore the issues and variety of solutions. We need to be doing this on lots from how we police our streets through to the running parks but we never set aside the time.

3. Accept that empowering people takes skill and resources - it's not a short-cut to get something for free. So let's invest properly in developing the skills of those who want to engage, from the tenants association to elected representatives. Helping councillors be more facilitative in their community by giving them support. We would all get a lot more done and society would benefit as a result.

4. Stop pretending a £10k community fund here and there is community politics. It is playing around the margins. Call it something else. It is part of the journey but not the end result. We can often believe our own rhetoric too much.

5. Change the electoral system. I want our councils to be a mix of interests and backgrounds. I would like some of them to be Lib Dems but it is not necessary for delivering good local services. I want us to have elected reps based on the challenge and experiences they will provide and then create the space for the debate happen. Disagreements, collaboration and negotiation are all positive aspects of the decision making process and I would love to facilitate, through empowering leadership, a council that could do that. Our current system always means our hands are tied behind our back and not free to reach out.

6. Even in this party we spend too much time reinforcing the left or right spectrum in our political system. I don't give a damn if you a "orange book Liberal" or a fan of the "social Liberal Forum". You can never deliver community politics if you can only see the answers in those terms. The truth is the solutions will come from both those ideological positions and none. Community Politics is about how you got there, how every possibility has had the space to be aired and considered and whether our community or neighbourhood feel responsibility for the

result. I want us to win the argument not impose the solution. We don't know best.

TERRY:

Terry Stacy was Leader of the London Borough of Islington from 2009/10 and Deputy Leader and Executive Member in the previous seven years. He was first elected to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 1998, on his second attempt, having been an active community politics practitioner in the resident's movement. He has held a range of positions in both his local party and regionally. He prides himself on taking the battle to Labour heartlands, and is often the first person to "throw the punch" in the war, fighting stairwell, by stairwell.



He is now the leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on Islington Council, and is an adviser to the Liberal Democrat Group at London Councils the umbrella organisation for London local authorities.

LOCALISM IN PRACTICE IN CHURCH WARD



Although I have been a councillor for nearly 20 years I've not ever really been excited by any legislation coming from government. It has usually been the case that I've tried to work effectively in local government despite any legislation not because of it.

When I was 18 and in the Upper Sixth in school a young man came to talk to us about community politics. We were an all girls school so this was in fact a very exciting prospect and we gave this poor bloke our full attention. It's perhaps a measure of how sad I am that I soon forgot to sit watching him and thinking about how good looking he was, and

started to listen to what he was actually saying. I remember he spoke about getting people involved in making decisions about the area they lived in. He talked to us about how those who are elected to take decisions on behalf of people should involve them first in those decisions.

Time rolled on and 15 years later I became a councillor. Throughout this time I've endeavoured to work as a community politician. However, it's only since the introduction of the Localism Act that I feel like I've been given the opportunity to make this happen in a meaningful way.

A year ago our local vicar, Alan Kennedy, gave me a ring. He'd read about the Localism Bill as it then was, he'd rung Downing Street and was now ringing me to see how we were going to write a neighbourhood plan for our area.

Alan then called together a small group of people he knew who were also interested in the concept of communities deciding what they wanted for the area and we sat and talked about what we could do.

I made it clear that my role as a councillor would be to assist the group but not be the figurehead. I helped Alan with details

of all the resident's associations in the ward, all the voluntary groups who worked, all the schools, and anyone else I was aware of who might want to have a say in a neighbourhood plan. Alan of course knew all the church contacts!

I was able to help the group understand some of process regarding the Localism Act particularly with reference to the 21 people we might ask to sign a petition to get the council involved in writing a neighbourhood plan for our area. Alan wrote to all our "stakeholders" explaining in plain english the potential of the Act in terms of developing a neighbourhood plan. With the letter he enclosed a



“petition” for them to sign and return to the council.

Within a few weeks we had over 50 people who had returned the petition.

As a Liberal Democrat in a group of 10 on Liverpool City Council I’m very aware that we don’t have too much ability to influence how the council is run at the moment. I knew that the Localism Act would enable me to insist on the council developing a Neighbourhood Plan as long as I had those 21 signatures but I wanted to do this by a powerful act of persuasion rather than using the force of the law.

The 50 people who signed the petition were 50 people the council couldn’t ignore. They included the local Police Inspector, the headteachers of the schools in the area, the Practice Managers from the GP surgeries, most of the Chair’s of the Residents Associations, and other assorted groups such as the “Friends of Calderstones Park” and the “Merseyside Woodturners Association”.

Before we sent the petition to the council I wrote to the Cabinet Member, Cllr Malcolm Kennedy, who had responsibility for this area to explain to him exactly what the group had done over a period of several months, what the group would

eventually like to achieve and what help we would like from the council.

Malcolm agreed to meet Alan and Maggie (who was the secretary of the group and also knew a huge amount about localism!). He agreed to assist the group if we could outline the type of help we wanted and this is the stage we have reached as I write this.

The process has not been easy I have to admit. It has taken a lot of time and effort to get to this stage and we haven’t even begun to start the process of asking people what they want to go into the neighbourhood plan! This has simply been about getting the process started. However, I believe that we have set solid foundations and worked with some good principles. This is a community led process. Having Alan at the front is very powerful and much more effective than a ward councillor as well as being the right thing to do. Spending a lot of time identifying all those people who are involved in our area has been one of the best things we’ve done. Making sure we try to work with the council and not against the council is another important approach. Finally, having a clear goal in sight which is to make sure the future of our area will be decided by those who live and work in the area has made all the hard work worthwhile.

I am excited and daunted by the task ahead. Turning the Localism Act into something that is happening in our ward rather than a weighty tome sitting on a shelf somewhere in Whitehall is our responsibility as Liberal Democrat councillors. For those of us who came into politics to be community politicians we have finally been given the opportunity to make this happen effectively. Please don't let this opportunity pass you by.

In the meantime, if you were the young man who spoke to us all those years ago could you let me know as I'd love to know who it was!

EMMA

Cllr

ANDREW STUNELL,

ANDREW:

Clr

DAISY BENSON

Community politics is at the core of what many Libs.

DAISY:

Cllr Daidy benson

TESSA MUNT

cars.

TESSA:

Cllr Abigail Bell Hull

