

# **communities actually**

**communities: a study of liberal democrat  
localism in action**

**david boyle**

# Acknowledgements

With thanks to Bernard Greaves, Gordon Lishman and Tony Greaves who made us think about what liberalism meant in practice and showed us how to convert theory into reality.

**Cllr Richard Kemp (Church Ward, Liverpool)**  
**Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the**  
**Local Government Association**

# contents

foreword	<b>John Swinney, Pinnacle</b>	<b>5</b>
introduction	<b>David Boyle</b>	<b>7</b>
one	<b>the idea</b>	<b>15</b>
two	<b>campaigning</b>	<b>25</b>
three	<b>listening</b>	<b>35</b>
four	<b>reinforcing</b>	<b>47</b>
five	<b>devolving</b>	<b>57</b>
six	<b>empowering</b>	<b>69</b>
seven	<b>the future of community politics</b>	<b>79</b>
resources	<b>useful websites and resources</b>	<b>86</b>



# foreword

Pinnacle is aligned with communities through the delivery of a broad range of public services from managing the social housing to cleaning the local schools. We put the community and the individuals that live within it at the heart of what we do. We are unique in doing this.

Pinnacle's passion for communities dominates our entire business philosophy. It drives our commitment to quality, our determination to put something back into the places where we work, usually through our charity *Elevate*, and our desire to be an advocate for the people we provide services to. It is also why we want to find new ways of providing services which really do join up at the point of delivery and support communities in shaping their own destiny within a framework of high quality management, targeted investment, effective consultation and involvement and confident and committed local leadership.

It is in this context that we were enthusiastic about sponsoring this book which, above all else, puts communities at the heart of empowering individuals and sees empowered individuals as the catalyst for successful communities. It is a model which very much reflects our position as a community provider. We believe that the support that a community can give individuals who are disadvantaged, vulnerable, returning to work or ex-offenders, is critical to building a sustainable and vibrant place for people to live and thrive in our big cities.

The book talks about the contradictions in pursuing community politics. Those same challenges face us as a provider – for example in the way silo-based bureaucratic structures undermine not just community management but also the empowerment and engagement of local people. The debate around how community politics should evolve will influence future structures, procurement frameworks, delivery models and democratic processes. As such, it will help shape our business and hence our enthusiasm to join the discussion.

**John Swinney**  
Chief Executive Officer, Pinnacle  
[www.pinnacle-psg.com](http://www.pinnacle-psg.com)





# Introduction

*“In many practical measures for improving the material conditions and the security of the masses of the people, Liberal and Labour men will go together, as with them will go many Tory reformers. But as distinct from Labour, Liberals will always have more consciously in mind as their aim, not material progress but spiritual liberty.”*

**William Beveridge,**  
**‘Why I am a Liberal’, 1945**

*“We want to stimulate action by communities to take and use power.”*

**Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman,**  
**The Theory and Practice of Community Politics, 1980**

**if we win, you win**

Eastbourne is a polite place of gentle sea breezes and white stucco hotels. To comfortable seaside havens like this one, the Liberal Party would descend annual for its party assembly, in the days before the party outgrew the medium-sized conference rooms that used to host them in places like Scarborough, Llandudno or Tenby. But it was Eastbourne, in September 1970, that the party retired to lick their wounds after a particularly depressing general election.

The world had changed over the previous twelve months. Neil Armstrong had stood on the moon. The Vietnam War had reached unprecedented levels of ferocity. The summer of love had petered out in a haze of dope, LSD and bitter inner city rioting in North America, but for the perennially optimistic Liberals, everything seemed nightmarishly the same.

Despite all the talk of a Liberal revival over the previous decade, the 1970 election had come and gone – Edward Heath had replaced Harold Wilson as prime minister – and the party was back to just six MPs again. Just 2,500 votes cast differently across the country and there would have been none at all. It was their own Liberal Groundhog Day: they seemed destined to relive the same experience, decade after decade.

Party mythology pinpoints the identification of a way out to the moment in that same Eastbourne Assembly, when an English teacher called Tony Greaves, then national chair of the National League of Young Liberals, successfully moved an amendment to an anodyne strategy motion that marked the party's response to the election result. It committed the party to a primary strategic emphasis on community politics.

The amendment also defined the new strategy as 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'. For a party once more driven back into what were then known as the 'Celtic fringes', it was refreshing but ambitious to commit to something as bold as building a Liberal power base in the major cities and capturing people's imagination as a credible political movement.

Even so, community politics was a puzzle for most of the party's rank-and-file. It was neither quite an ideology nor quite a strategy either – neither a technique nor about elections according to *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* ten years later. It was, said the authors, something that was both high-minded and deeply practical – to "work through the established political structures not to win and exercise power but to remodel that structure itself".

There were contrasts, to say the least, with traditional Liberalism. The practical contrasts were particularly sharp. Political activity in the 1950s and early 60s for most Liberal party members meant policy discussion, endless coffee mornings, fundraising and the obsessive husbanding of resources – often avoiding local council elections to save money for the general.

The party was not exactly sedentary, but there was an assumption somehow that members were enabling action by the handful lucky enough to represent the party at Westminster. It was a new idea that politics might be about action wherever you lived, whether you were elected or not – and through whatever organisation or club you happened to belong to, from churches to trade unions and community groups – and especially new that this was now supposed to be the essence of Liberalism.

In fact, community had always been important in Liberalism. For the New Liberal theorists in the late nineteenth century, collective action was the way to bring about change. Even before, the idea that people could work with each other for change was itself a guarantee of liberty: if a service is poor or unfair, then people had the right to act together to change it – or even do it for themselves. But it was, and remains, a means to an end.

“The objective of community politics is not the welfare of communities themselves,” wrote Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman, the community politics theorists, in 1980. “Communities are not in themselves an end. The end is the quality of the experience of each individual within them. The justification for community politics lies in the belief that the key to realising the potential of each person as a unique individual lies in bringing together all individuals in voluntary, mutual and co-operative enterprise within relevant communities.”

In the three decades or so since the Liberal Party adopted the idea – in a last ditch attempt to break out of Groundhog Day – community politics has become the driving force that led to the election of up to local 5,000 councillors and then to more than 60 MPs. It also led, just as its originators intended, to building a powerbase in the regional centres. Newcastle, Liverpool, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Cardiff, Edinburgh, all have come under Liberal Democrat control or partial control.

In the process, or so it is said, some of the ideology of community politics rubbed off. The other parties also adopted some of its outward forms, but without the basic objective of spreading power. Even some Liberal Democrats came to believe it was about the energetic distribution of political propaganda through letterboxes in order to win elections.

It did win elections, but when the other parties copied the techniques, the ability of Liberal Democrats to hang on to their hard-won seats depended on whether or not they really had managed to put tentacles into the local institutions, and to work alongside local people.

In the meantime, through the 1980s and 90s, many of the places with the deepest Liberal Democrat powerbases began to make changes to make their local institutions more democratic, in line with the community politics philosophy. When Tower Hamlets Liberals took control of the borough in 1986, dramatically forcing through a radical decentralisation – reassigning senior council officers in the middle of the night with messages via motorcycle courier – it changed the localisation agenda overnight.

Three and a half decades on from Eastbourne, the legacy of community politics has been an urban powerbase, a series of campaigning techniques, and some progress towards a different kind of bottom-up democracy in many of the places Liberal Democrats hold power. But the philosophical grouting that held it all together has, in some ways, been eroded. There is a feeling inside the party that the heart of community politics has shrunk: that it is transformed itself into a empty shell capable of winning elections but not capable of driving either radical change or radical political success – and which can easily be copied by political opponents.

That is beginning to change, partly because the party needs to be genuinely different from mainstream politics if it is going to breakthrough the next glass ceiling. Partly also because of a revival of interest in the ideas behind community politics as an intellectual driving force. Partly it is also that mainstream politics suddenly needs some of the insights of community politics just to operate effectively. When so many objectives now depend on people changing their behaviour – recycling, for example – then you can no longer just tell them what to do, or manipulate them into doing it, at least without deep resentment.

The party's councillors' organisation ALDC published a collection of essays called *Community Politics Today* in 2006 and is now developing training modules. The party's campaigns chair Ed Davey MP is also determined to update community politics and re-infuse the party's campaigning, recognising that it still represents a challenge to conventional ways of doing politics. It remains an antidote to the kind of politics which assumes a passive electorate gratefully receiving the largesse of politicians.

“The ideology of community politics is about handing back power to people to sort their own problems, not doing things to them,” he says. “It is about giving them the tools they need.”

Then, in March 2007, the Liberal Democrat group at the Local Government Association published a short book about some of the ways in which the party was making a difference in power in local authorities around the country. It was called *Power actually*.

The tongue-in-cheek reference to the film *Love, actually* was not quite so glib as it sounds. Like the film, *Power actually* was a series of intertwining stories about what individuals and those around them were managing to achieve. Its purpose was to showcase what Liberal Democrats were achieving to the outside world, at the same time as reminding the party’s councillors that their purpose was not simply about making the status quo more efficient.

My main objective writing that book was also to write about political action as a series of personal journeys – more like an American business magazine than a political tract – because I thought a new tone of voice might get across some of the fascination with making things happen in the political world. I also wanted to try to be as honest as I could about some of the problems, the sheer slog, the opposition, the nervous moments of experiment – as well as the passionate moments of revelation – that lie behind practical Liberal Democrat politics in action.

This book is intended as a kind of sequel, but about the practice of community politics. It is about campaigners – who may be councillors, MPs or potential candidates – who are working in their neighbourhoods, putting some of these principles into action. Some of this is experimental, most of it is difficult and all of it can certainly be exhausting, and I hope that the stories in this book are honest about the drawbacks and pitfalls as they are about the possibilities.

It is also politically contentious. In many ways, the government has discovered its own brand of community politics. There are increasing noises emerging from Whitehall about how local structures can connect better with the people they serve. And if their emphasis on filling a few places on advisory bodies, or tick-box consultation and a multiplication of local quangos, then Liberal Democrats also need to re-examine their own community principles. That is the only way they will be able to define why the current prescription – official *ersatz* community politics – is neither working nor delivering local power. It is also the only way to hammer out

solutions that are both distinctively Liberal Democrat and which actually work.

None of these questions are as easy as politicians claim, either local or nationally. Nor is community politics a simple alternative. What those who genuinely attempt to make it work in practice find is that a balance is required between working alongside local people and struggling to make the levers of power effective.

There is, in short, a series of paradoxes at the heart of community politics that need to be resolved differently in every case. How much it should be campaigning for what the neighbourhood wants and how much campaigning for votes? How much should it mean working in the council and how much working in the community? How much leading the community and how much following it?

The truth is that community politics works best when it is neither one nor the other but in a unique mix that is both effective and genuinely Liberal Democrat. Misjudge it – and of course the balance changes all the time – and those efforts will not be sustainable and may actually be counter-productive. Get it right, and there is a strange alchemy which can genuinely begin to turn the political system upside down – reminding the most powerless people that they have power, and delivering the Liberal Democrat means to provide more.

But community politics is not indivisible. There are different aspects of the activity which overlap with each other, none of which is really possible without the others. But for the sake of argument, this book divides it into five very practical verbs:

- **Campaigning:** using community politics to campaign for Liberal Democrat votes, between and during elections.
- **Listening:** making politics more responsive: better listening, better consulting and re-organising council structures to make this possible.
- **Reinforcing:** working alongside and strengthening the campaigns run by people in the local neighbourhood.
- **Devolving:** decentralising power to local people so that it is more responsive and so they can exercise it themselves.
- **Empowering:** building Liberal neighbourhoods, handing over responsibility as well as power, co-producing the kind of services and places local people want.

In practice, any of the case studies outlined here could probably belong in almost any of the sections, because effective community politics involves this whole orchestra of verbs. Even so, these are the levers and – taken together – they have the potential to make Liberal Democrat campaigning both distinctive and effective.

**David Boyle**  
**September 2008**



# one : the idea

*“The task of liberals is to give back power to the individual and to reform society, the state, the government and the nation so that they serve individuals.”*

**Jo Grimond,  
The Liberal Future, 1959**

*“I have enough confidence in people,  
when they have power to exercise.”*

**Gordon Lishman,  
Scarborough Perspectives, 1971**

**it was an amendment  
to a strategy motion**

It is a truth universally acknowledged that student activists – and especially Liberal activists in the nether world between university and career – must be in constant need of transport. When they have to get to a Young Liberal meeting in Leeds at the weekend, with piles of pamphlets and leaflets to carry, then often that means they have to borrow their parents' car.

And so it was that, in November 1969 (the same month, incidentally, that saw the launch of the 50p piece into circulation in the UK), two former Manchester students – Gordon Lishman and Lawry Freedman made their way to Yorkshire to Gordon's parents house to borrow the car.

There, in the village of Harle Syke outside Burnley, they came up with the phrase that became so crucial to the growth of political Liberalism over the next generation. The idea of 'community politics' had been developed over the previous few years by a wider group, but the phrase that described the idea that would provide the driving force for the recovery of the party from six MPs to more than sixty, was born that afternoon.

"We had an idea and needed something to call it," says Gordon now. "It was about the community and it was about politics, so it was pretty simple. But it fitted, and it still does."

Gordon is being modest. The phrase may have been simple, but it came before the whole raft of other 'community' phases – everything from community banking and community architecture to community policing – and its very simplicity was part of its power.

The idea itself was not simple at all. It wasn't a strategy and it wasn't an ideology. It was both – both a concept and a very practical way forward, both action and idea, and more than a quarter of a century after its formal adoption by the Liberal Party, it is undergoing something of a revival.

That wider group of Young Liberals and others who developed community politics in the late 1960s are now at the pinnacle of glittering careers. Gordon Lishman is director-general of the mega-charity Age Concern; Lawry Freedman is Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, professor of war studies at King's College London and author of Tony Blair's Chicago speech on international intervention; Tony Greaves is a peer of the realm and Peter Hain, the South African student activist who was among the most determined popularisers of the idea, is now Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in Gordon Brown's Labour government.

Not all of them remain in Liberal politics by any means, any more than the wider group around them, but community politics has a potent legacy, even though its genesis was as much to do with solving a short-term rift inside what had become one of the best-known radical political movements of the day.

The late 1960s were an angry period in politics. The satirical approach of *Private Eye* and *That Was the Week That Was* of the early 60s had petered out in widespread disaffection, the Grovesnor Square riots against the Vietnam War, mass demonstrations in Washington, student sit-ins and racial conflagrations from Chicago to Miami. It was also a period of disillusion with conventional political systems and, more particularly, with socialism. It was clear even then among young activists – watching Harold Wilson presiding over mass demolitions and the manic construction of motorways, nuclear power stations and high rise bastilles – that socialism was neither achievable and desirable. Nor was it much fun.

That led to an influx of two opposing factions into what had once been a polite group of earnest undergraduates with short back and sides, known as the National League of Young Liberals. By the mid-1960s it was beginning to boast of itself as a ‘movement’, but it was bitterly divided between the revolutionaries calling themselves the ‘Red Guard’, who wanted to smash the system, and the more conventional Liberals who wanted to change it.

“The community politics approach was about working within and outside the system,” says Bernard Greaves, one of the key theorists of community politics, setting out an idea to bind these two sides together. “It was about change not just through the political process but also action outside the political process which drove change within it.”

But the high rise flats epidemic was also a clue. People like Bernard were also increasingly aware of a fragmentation in society around them, especially in the cities where the bricks and mortar aspects of community were being demolished before the very eyes of the residents, and replaced by the debilitating passivity of high pressure marketing brands and consumerism. People’s old loyalties and ties, inside and around families, were disappearing in a flurry of bulldozers and patronising professionals, and were being replaced by what he calls “irrational loyalties to things that had no meaning – to amorphous youth culture with no substance.”

Community politics was also a critique of this destruction, realising that – without local roots or institutions – people felt increasingly alienated from politics and powerless in the face of change. It was also a critique that was

widely shared inside the Liberal Party, but that wasn't enough to endear the two sister organisations to each other, and the party and its youth wing eyed each other with increasing suspicion. This boiled over into conflict between the Young Liberals and the new Liberal leadership under Jeremy Thorpe, as the new ideologues chafed at what they saw was a party without ideological roots or a campaign strategy. Those student activists who wanted political Liberalism to succeed found this particularly infuriating.

In 1968, when others of their generation were relaxing into the Summer of Love, the Young Liberals struck during the party assembly in Edinburgh, inspired by some of the direct democracy experiments of the radical student movement on the continent. They held their own alternative 'free assembly', without a platform, where anyone could turn up and speak. Nearly 400 people came.

Meanwhile, Bernard got up from the floor of the official assembly and proposed that they should abandon the official agenda and break up into commissions and discussion groups. It was voted down, though party conferences have held policy commissions ever since.

"It was a time of enormous ferment," says Bernard now, "It was a time of different ideas firing off in different directions, of revolutionary direct democracy and anarchic free living. Community politics was an attempt to be the intellectual forcing element to keep us together. Those who were behind it were largely those who stayed in the party."

What had begun to emerge in that period was a set of ideas about how change could happen in politics, not by lordly disdain of the community or ever more sophisticated use of the marketing megaphone, but by working alongside them in whatever forums and local institutions there were. They called it the 'dual approach', both inside and outside Parliament. But it was dual in other senses too: it was a strategy that was both working locally and nationally. It meant working for change outside elections and working to win elections as a result.

It was also dual in the sense of being both about ideas and action. "One of the strengths of community politics was that it was the development of political ideas in the context of doing things," says Gordon. "It suggests that, fundamentally, ideas only have meaning when they are being put into practice and, if they don't work, then they have to be changed."

For a party too poor to scrape up more than a few hundred parliamentary deposits, and certainly too poor to fight local elections – though there were

now pockets of local government success in places like Hendon, Liverpool and Manchester – this was truly something new.

None of this was completely unprecedented. It was the heyday of worker priests in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, the idea that they should engage with people directly by working alongside them. It was the era of Tom Hayden and his Students for a Democratic Society in the USA, and their championing of participatory democracy, which in turn built on the work of the barefoot lawyers in the American civil rights movement. It was a period of enormous interest in the peacefully anarchic ideas of Proudhon, Kropotkin and Gandhi, and their modern interpretations by E. F. Schumacher and Ivan Illich, which were themselves influential on the development of community politics too.

It was also a period of renewed interest in community engagement. It was the beginning of the squatter movement, and the dramatic seizure in 1969 by housing activists of an empty building in Piccadilly. The Wilson government had just published the Skeffington Report into the future of planning, a radical vision of bottom-up involvement by people in the places they lived (never of course implemented). There were flurries of half-forgotten political techniques, sit-ins, demonstrations and petitions. “It is hard to imagine now how shocking this was to the conventional political system,” says Tony Greaves now. “People just hadn’t done that for so long. Petitions sent to the town hall were often simply binned.”

All these trends fed into the spirit of the developing ideas behind community politics, and there were also important parallel activities going on inside the Liberals. Jo Grimond had stepped down as leader in 1967, but not before lighting the touchpaper of an intellectual revolution in the party, recognising the failure of Westminster politics to tackle the debilitating blight that bureaucracy represented in people’s lives.

Michael Meadowcroft, later the MP for Leeds West and then the party’s local government officer, had also coined the vital phrase that councillors were “the political arm of their people”. In Liverpool, a rope ladder manufacturer called Trevor Jones was pioneering a new kind of political newsheet, delivered through people’s doors, which came to be known as Focus. Another manufacturer and Liberal activist in Birmingham called Wallace Lawler was building up a grassroots political organisation based on a door-to-door tote.

Lawler was the object of deep suspicion among the student activists for some of his views. But when he was elected as MP for Birmingham

Ladywood in the 1969 by-election, the news leaflet approach earned the imprimatur of success.

It also revealed some of the immediate drawbacks of what became the outward form of community politics. Without a massive investment of time working alongside the community and, as a by-product, recruiting armies of volunteer delivers, even when you did do so, it could be absolutely exhausting. When Lawler died in 1972, there were comments that taking and holding a seat using this form of community politics might have played a part in his exhaustion.

In fact, Lawler had lost his seat in the electoral disaster of 1970. So did Richard Wainwright and Michael Winstanley, who were between them employing Gordon Lishman as a researcher, so he lost his job too. But there was a silver lining.

“What 1970 did do was it made the party willing to consider something different,” says Gordon, and at the party conference in Eastbourne three months later, he helped to draft the amendment to the strategy motion that outlined a community politics approach for the party.

It was moved by a teacher from Bradford called Tony Greaves (no relation to Bernard), another former Manchester student, who had been persuaded at a party in Moss Side to stand as Young Liberal chair, in order to prevent a complete break with the party leadership.

The amendment was carried at Eastbourne, committing the party to a ‘dual approach’, working for electoral success at the same time as helping people “take and use power”. Other parts about Europe, and building a powerbase in industrial areas, were voted down – the European phrases after an intervention by the Inverness MP, the late Sir Russell Johnston – but the party had now adopted community politics officially.

“Our message all the time was that there was no point the party existing if we couldn’t win elections or if we couldn’t be involved in the structures of politics – that we had to be inside as well as outside,” says Tony now. “The party was at such a low ebb after the general election that it was prepared to clutch at straws.”

Not a great deal happened immediately. But the hum of innovative activity began slowly to be audible from around the country. A Yorkshire councillor called John Smithson launched the *Radical Bulletin* newsletter, including a

community politics section describing what people were doing, and hosted regular conferences around the country to share ideas.

The profile of the Young Liberals also rose dramatically when one of their leading figures, Graham Tope, won the Sutton & Cheam by-election in 1973, using the same Focus newsletter techniques. It was one of a series of by-election victories that put the party back into the centre of political debate – Rochdale, Ripon, Isle of Ely – but it was Sutton & Cheam that fused the ideas of community politics with Trevor Jones' new Focus newsletter style of campaigning.

Gordon Lishman also found a job with the party as a travelling local government and community politics organiser, with special responsibility for beefing up campaigning in Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear and Dorset. He was paid £975 a year and was offered no expenses for overnight stays. But it was a start.

The other thing that happened was that those who had led the development of community politics began to realise that – since most of them had graduated around 1968 – they were probably getting rather old to be Young Liberal activists. Even Peter Hain, who had taken over as chair from Tony Greaves, and – thanks to his Stop the Seventy anti-apartheid campaign against the South African cricket tour, the most famous Young Liberal in the nation – was 23 by 1973. They began to look around for a new powerbase and chose the Association of Liberal Councillors.

ALC had been set up in 1958 by the pioneer Liberal campaigners Cyril Carr (Liverpool) and David Evans (Southend). After the Sutton victory, the community politics theorists made a determined effort to take over. Having done so, Gordon persuaded a new Dorset councillor, also called Trevor Jones, to stand as chair and he in turn persuaded the Rowntree Trust to fund them enough to rent space in the trust's new building in Hebden Bridge.

The rest, as they say, is history. ALC became the crucible where this combination of community politics philosophy and the populist Liverpool newsletter style was forged. Tony Greaves became organising secretary, and he began looking around for a way to set out community politics as a Liberal philosophy for a wider audience.

Hain's edited collection of essays on community politics had been published in 1976, but he left the party and joined Labour in the hiatus of the Thorpe fallout. In any case, there were other questions about whether Hain's own contribution – with its emphasis on direct action – was quite Liberal enough.

Direct action and protest may be important political weapons, but they do tend to confirm existing power relationships: it reminds those in power that the noisy demonstrators out there remain supplicants. Liberal community politics was attempting something different. It was a way that, slowly and where possible, ordinary people, neighbourhoods and communities could take back more of the levers of power into their hands.

So it was left to Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman to write *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* in 1980, a brief but influential guide published by the ALC in 1980.

“Community politics is back at the centre of things,” says Bernard now. “It had collapsed in some ways into being simply a campaigning technique when it was never intended as that. Even so, the *Theory and Practice* looks and feels dated now. It needs to be reworked.” Lishman agrees that community politics is a work in progress, but the signs are that the progress is now accelerating.

It is true that it had, in recent years, lost its way. Other parties had aped the election style without any of the active work alongside communities. Even Liberal Democrats came to believe, in some case, that it was simply a formula for winning elections rather than a way of constant campaigning and an attitude to power – a long-term heave to make change happen. Even as long ago as 1973, the pamphlet *Liberals and the Community* warned that some had “misunderstood and mis-used the essence of community politics”.

Liberal Democrat Focus leaflets became ubiquitous around the country. Wherever you lived, down leafy country lanes, in the middle of moors and bogs, in high rise tenements and luxury flats, you could expect the click of the letter box, a Focus leaflet on the mat, and the back view of a volunteer deliverer – of almost any age – walking away. And if, occasionally, the leaflets were boring or offensively political – as they can certainly be – they were often very much better than those in blue or red that were soon following them through the same letterbox.

On the other hand, community politics also became divorced from some of its practical roots. Since 1970, a whole worldwide community movement has emerged – new participation methods, new consensus-building tools, ambitious community architecture and planning (some of it pioneered alongside Liverpool Liberals in the 1980s). There were whole new community banking movements and, in the third world, dramatically ambitious projects like the Orangi squatter camp outside Karachi – where the community managed to provide itself with a network of drains and piped

water – showed just what it was possible for ordinary people to achieve. When they did achieve it, researchers noticed, then it also lasted – it wasn't vandalised and it didn't fall down and need replacing a few years later.

Some of this reached the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats. Some of their administrations pioneered some of the ideas. Some them never did. Some of the practice anyway became captured by massive global agencies which complicated and perverted it, but the debates about what worked and what was possible usually took place in a separate box from practical local politics.

Then something began to change. Partly this was because of the emergence of communitarian ideas from the USA, led by sociologists like Amitai Etzioni and *Bowling Alone* author Robert Putnam – what Lishman calls the 'Etzioni Fallacy'. These were rapidly assimilated by Tony Blair and those around him, but they suffered from having almost no practical prescription, except for authoritarian gestures. They also seem to have had a corrosive effect on the Blair government in office, making them both aware of communities and terrified of them at the same time. Yet the communitarians also provided a compelling statement of the problem: the devastating implications of the collapse of community, and its effects on health, crime, work and the economy, going beyond the original analysis of community politics.

But there is another, very practical factor, in the revival of interest in community politics as the wellspring of practical Liberalism. Because it offers the kernel of a theory about how change happens, just as personal and political change – and whether it is possible at all – has become the key underlying cultural issue of the age.

What community politics suggests is that real, permanent social change simply can't be packaged and delivered by government, at any level. Nor can it be guaranteed by unravelling the processes of government either – still less sweeping it away. Real change works, paradoxically, when ordinary people realise they have the power to change their own lives – and do it. Real change often requires very tiny changes, which no bureaucrat can define or politician deliver. But then small-plus-small-plus-small can add up to something enormous.



## two : campaigning

*“People know I am a Liberal Democrat.  
They know what that menu is.”*

**Dorothy Thornhill,  
Liberal Democrat Directly Elected Mayor of Watford.**

*“Liberal Democrats do best and are at our most natural when we  
remember that we are the representatives of the community in the  
town hall and not the representatives of the town hall in the  
community.”*

**Richard Kemp,  
Liberal Democrat city councillor in Liverpool**

**it's about what you believe in,  
it's not just about votes**

If there is one class of institution that can really get things done in 21st century Britain, that can pick up the phone to the Prime Minister and get an awkward school or nature reserve 'moved', then it is the Big Four supermarket chains. Governments struggle with the sheer intractability of things and events, local authorities struggle with the same thing on smaller budgets, but if you want to build a superstore almost anywhere, then the world is your oyster.

The trouble is, of course, that supermarkets can devastate local economies, shut down whole high streets, put their staff out of work, and leave people even more dependent on their cars than they were before – and demolishing schools may not be that popular either.

That was exactly what Roger Symonds, a Liberal Democrat councillor in Bath for the past sixteen years, found when the popular local primary school used by children from his ward was suddenly ear-marked for removal to make way for a supermarket. He was joined by two Lib Dem colleagues from Odd Down ward, Steve Hedges and Nigel Roberts. It was less than a year before the local elections where all three were defending marginal seats, and the result was a textbook piece of community campaigning which didn't just retain the seats with a heavy majority, but gained one more from the Tories, saw off the Tesco and saved the school too.

Roger's campaign was certainly an example of community politics in action at its sharpest: actually winning an election. Of course, all election campaigns are supposed to be like that, if you can manage it: mount a successful local campaign about some issue, win the argument and claim the credit – that is how politics is supposed to work.

But there are differences here. For one thing, traditional electioneering is not necessarily about campaigning to actually win anything except the vote: it is about finding issues that strike a chord and posturing on them – it is about soundbites and local column inches in the local paper. Traditional election campaigns are not really about resolving issues: that would threaten the energy and intensity of the campaign.

It is also hard to stand up against the sheer power of a supermarket. They operate under commercial confidentiality, and many local authorities simply roll over and beg at their first appearance, terrified of the costs involved if their planning application should go to appeal.

Then there is the question of taking credit for the success. Community politics is more paradoxical than that. Roger, Steve and Nigel, took the

credit for winning the vote in the council, but they also gave credit where it was due – to the powerful neighbourhood campaign that played such a decisive role in winning the campaign.

It was a joint effort and the truth is that – thanks to the successful flexing of local campaign muscles – the local community probably needs Roger and his colleagues that much less in the future. They have tasted their own strength, and community politics suggests that is the real success. This is a tough idea for elected politicians, but it may be – in the great scheme of things, at least as far as community politics is concerned – that Roger's election victory was a necessary stepping stone to achieving that local sense of confidence, and not the other way around.

There was another added complication. Bath and North East Somerset Council has no one party in overall control, and some of Roger's Liberal Democrat colleagues were at the time in the local cabinet. In fact, the planning brief was in fact held by one of his group. Campaigning against what was a leadership policy, and standing alongside his local community to do so, meant the ticklish business of campaigning against policies espoused by some of his colleagues. Since the last elections the Tories, as the largest party, were in minority control.

But what was he to do when, in July 2006, he received an email from the head of the local primary school to say they had been unexpectedly included in a development site in the draft local plan. The proposal came not from the council but from a planning inspector, who suggested that a site ear-marked for development might be extended to attract a food store by moving the school into a far corner onto a smaller plot.

St Martin's Garden School has somewhere over 300 pupils. It has a brand new £800,000 Sure Start children's centre, not even open at that time, and an autistic unit that had been built just two years before.

"There had been a total investment in the school of about £2 million in the last few years and they were proposing to knock all three buildings down and rebuild them," said Roger. "There was no reason to knock them down, except to provide a site big enough for Tesco. It was totally unsustainable."

The local neighbourhood, known as Odd Down, already had good local shops including a local greengrocer, chemist and ironmongers. If there had been a massive Tesco, all those would have been under threat.

Term had ended by the time the situation had been clarified, and it was too late to mobilise the parents to object. In practice, there would be only four or five days from the autumn term beginning again and the deadline for a decision by the council on 6 September.

Roger, Steve and Nigel asked the council's cabinet to defer the decision to give them more time, but the nine member cabinet (four Conservatives, four Lib Dems and one independent), with only one Lib Dem against, voted to go head to the original timetable. They were furious.

"The cabinet seemed to be able to see only the prospect of fat capital receipts," said Roger. "But there had been no consultation about a food store. The inspector had just put it in the plan – there had been no thinking about the impact on local shops. The council did not even have a 'retail strategy'. It was an absolute shambles."

There had been considerable publicity by now, and two powerful local campaigns – Ask Odd Down and It's a Super Rip-Off – had been launched by parents to fight the plans. So Roger had no difficulty finding the ten councillor signatures he needed to get the council's scrutiny panel to call in the decision. This time, he was able to present a paper about the issue and one Conservative scrutineer broke ranks and voted with the Liberal Democrats to refer the issue back to the council's executive for further consideration. It was a small chink of light.

By now the campaign was also gathering pace. A straw poll demonstrated that about 95 per cent of the parents opposed demolition of the school. Roger's partner Nic Rattle, who works for the Liberal Democrat group on Bristol City Council, was able to use her web talents to set up an online presence for the campaign with an online petition. Behind the scenes, Roger's colleagues on the council were also now united against the plan.

Roger and candidate Cherry Beath – who later took a seat off the Tories in Combe Down – ran a direct mail campaign to parents in their ward, and were using regular Focus leaflets to draw attention to the issue. There were now five months to the election and 350 people had signed the web petition, from all over Bath and beyond.

The mothers and children from the school gathered outside the Guildhall with placards in October for the full council debate. Conservatives in the cabinet, and the independent member for education, complained later that the children were being exploited, and the council confirmed the designation of the land again, issuing fulsome denials about rumours that Tesco was

already planning to develop the site. But with the support of Labour councillors, Liberal Democrats in the council managed to pass an amendment adding so many other plans for the development site that a supermarket would find it hard to squeeze themselves onto it. Then the statutory six-week consultation period began.

It was at this point that the campaign experienced one of those rare pieces of luck that allows skilled campaigners to shift intractable positions. The local campaign for the school recruited a retired former civil servant from the Ministry of Defence, Liz Lewis, with expertise in access to information. She set to work and soon uncovered the bombshell. It was a set of superstore plans for the site, minus the school, which showed clearly that – despite all the denials – it was indeed a Tesco plan. Even the executive member for education, who had been kept equally in the dark, came over to the campaigners in the council chamber and asked to see the plans.

The formal consultation produced more than 1,800 objections, asking for the school to be taken out of the development area. Roger and his three local colleagues helped local campaigners make presentations and found themselves at a number of local campaign meetings. The local elections were also reaching a crescendo as the proposal came back to the full council meeting in April 2007. Roger took one supportive Conservative councillor aside and asked him to sit on his hands for the vote. “It’s more than my life’s worth,” he said.

Roger believes now it was the expert presentations by the Ask Odd Down and It’s a Super Rip-Off campaigns and the proximity of the local elections that changed the council leaders’ minds. The campaigners made four critical points: about the value of the school, the potential destruction of jobs if the Tesco store went ahead, and the fact that there had been no consultation – and the secret negotiations going on even as any such thing was being denied. Whichever one of these arguments swayed the decision, the campaigners won: the school was taken out of the development site.

A few weeks later, Roger won his seat with a majority of more than 300 and the local Conservative councillor in the same ward lost her seat to Lib Dem Cherry Beath and Lib Dems Steve Hedges and Nigel Roberts both retained their seats. They won despite – and probably because – they had tried hard not to exploit the Odd Down campaign success by taking away from the skill and effectiveness of the local parent campaigners.

“I claimed the credit for moving the motion in council, but I always gave the credit to the two campaigns, and always included, thanked and praised them

where I could,” Roger says. “Community politics is all about getting local people active, getting things done for themselves. That means, as a local politician, I am playing a fulfilling and enabling role. It was their campaign which we enhanced.”

Local Lib Dems helped them start up, advised them about council procedures, supported them at meetings, but in the end it was campaigners that did it – and who also gave the Lib Dems fulsome thanks in the local press. They were not dependent on local councillors, and are less dependent as a result of their joint success. Conventional politics suggests, rather quietly, that this is not quite what was intended. But community politics suggests that it is actually the point and, paradoxically, that – the more local politicians can work their way out of a job by empowering those around them – the more electable they become.

What do you do when you are an elected mayor, your party’s policies tell you that must not transfer housing stock out of council ownership, but the borough’s finances mean that keeping local rented housing in council control is no longer practical politics?

The answer is, at least for Watford’s Liberal Democrat mayor Dorothy Thornhill, is to ask the tenants, provide them with the resources they need to come up with a plan, and put them in charge of their own destinies. But not so much from the position of an enlightened bureaucrat dispensing largesse, but as a campaigner – aligning herself with the interests of tenants – and prepared to take on the bureaucracy on their behalf.

There are other stories about community politicians aligning themselves with tenants and about listening and devolving. The point here is the campaigning stance, because – even as executive mayor of Watford – Dorothy regards herself as a campaigner.

The result of the tenant’s consultation has been the creation of a new tenant-run mutual called the Watford Community Housing Trust, chaired by a tenant. It isn’t the first ‘community gateway’ solution in the country, adopting the model developed by co-operative housing activists (it is the second). But it is an important precedent nonetheless, and it was backed in a poll by a clear majority of the Watford’s 5,800 tenants. It is also an antidote to the vast housing associations which barely involve or consult their batteries of new tenants, and who clearly believe that – because they are theoretically part of the voluntary sector – they must automatically be on the side of the community.

The point here is partly how the decision was taken – in the end, Watford's ruling Liberal Democrats had to choose between rival plans, put forward by housing staff and those put forward by tenants (they chose the tenants' plan). It is also partly that community politicians remain campaigners, even after you have actually taken over the so-called levers of power.

“We looked at the figures and we knew we would have to transfer the housing stock. The situation didn't stack up under the current rules, and the rules weren't going to change,” says Dorothy. “But we looked at what we believed in and that meant handing over power to the tenants to go forward themselves – even if they came up with an option we didn't necessarily like.”

The council invested in capacity-building to help the tenants come up with a plan and, in practice, they came up with the Liberal solution too. It is one of the central tenets of community politics that, when you trust people with responsibility, they tend to do the right thing.

The stock was transferred in September 2007, and it is far too early to know how many ripple effects this kind of measure is going to have, but it has been an important milestone for Liberal Democrat Watford, and an example of how to be both mayor and community politician. This means not just handing over power, but campaigning about it. It means a dual approach which is powerful, but also potentially uncomfortable.

“The knack for me is to be above politics, and yet be fiercely partisan about what I believe,” says Dorothy. “People know I am a Liberal Democrat. They know what that menu is. I'm not an independent like many of the mayors – I mean, what does that mean? And what it says on the tin is that we will listen to local people and be on their side. I never forget that I am a campaigner and not a bureaucrat. I'm not a glorified manager.”

What this means is that, even as mayor, Dorothy is a campaigner. She insists that she is representing people to the council, not representing the council to the people. She insists, for example, on having her own office and staff separate within the council.

“I have to be very clear that I am not an apologist for the town hall. My job is to hold the council to account on behalf of the residents. The mayor is not the council,” she says.

That is not a simple balance to strike, and it often means campaigning for necessary compromises. Building two new leisure centres in Watford recently means that an old one had to close. It was a compromise solution,

but Dorothy believed it was the right way forward. The new acute hospital required a short stretch of new road. In both cases, having been convinced that there was no other practical way forward, Dorothy had to campaign for the compromise.

“I had to make absolutely sure that the council and the strategic health authority made the case for the road. Once I’d been convinced that they had a case, then I campaign to say it’s a necessary evil – though it remains their road.”

That is partly what distinguishes this brand of community politics from rabble-rousing. It is not just following the equivalent of local focus groups; it is also about inspirational leadership. So when a recent planning application for a home for adults with Down’s Syndrome in Watford sparked opposition from people who lived nearby – and when the complainers were backed by the local Conservatives – Dorothy had to provide information (it wouldn’t devalue their homes) and leadership (it was the right thing to do).

Putting your reputation on the line in pursuit of what is right is authentic and just as likely to raise your respect long term – even if it causes difficulty in the short-term. But, as Dorothy says: “You can’t do that without a clear belief in what you stand for.”

One indicator that she has got the balance right is the sheer weight of Dorothy’s postbag. She is Watford’s first executive mayor, but she inherited some of her office staff from the previous council leader, who used to have on average between two and five letters or phone calls from ordinary residents every week. Thanks to her campaigning approach to the new job, Dorothy now gets about 200 contacts a week. They start with phrases like: “As mayor, I thought you would like to know....” or “I thought you would be concerned about...”

One of the indicators of success for successful community politics in action is this same sense of churning contact. Successful community politicians are in demand, for advice, guidance, support and help. But, once again there is a balance to strike. One of the key theoreticians of community politics, Simon Hebditch, talks about local authorities working themselves out of a job.

That is line with the latest management thinking: the most successful managers are supposed to work in such a way that, within a short period, the organisation can do without them. These are theoretical ideas, of course, and people will never be so clued up and active that they can

consign government to the scrapheap. But equally, a politician who is just working to make themselves indispensable is not spreading power – they are spreading dependence, and dependence in the end breeds apathy.

So community politics requires a sceptical approach to the business of government, to avoid what the former Liberal MP John Pardoe called “warming ourselves too well” in the drapes of the establishment. But the purpose is not to tie people more tightly to the coat-strings of politicians but to set them free, to help them realise the power they possess and to find ways of getting rid of whatever is in the way of exercising it.

The old community politics election slogan ‘If we win, you win’ simply has to be more than a glib phrase. People know instinctively when the message of empowerment is real. The great paradox of community politics is that, the less dependent people are on politicians, then the more they are active themselves. That means community politics is not primarily about elections. Nor is it primarily about delivering leaflets – though that certainly helps. Yet when you work in the community and help people “take and use power” for themselves, then something alchemical happens, and they also want to elect you. That is a leap of faith, but it is one – over the past three decades – that has been proved by experience. All this implies the following *campaigning* advice:

#### **Give credit where it is due**

When Roger Symonds campaigned alongside his local neighbourhood in the run-up to an election, he took credit for the parts of the campaign that he was responsible for, but he made sure he paid tribute to the other campaigners working with him. This is both confidence and trust-building, and it deliberately recognises the dignity and ability of people in the local community, publicly acknowledging that their contribution is vital and expert, and that nothing can be achieved without them. This is not just true, it is an acknowledgement that politicians traditionally find it hard to make.

#### **Be outward-facing**

Community politics means aligning yourself with the people you represent or aspire to represent. It means slipping out of the cosy embrace of local authority schedules, procedures and privileges – or the status of administrative control – and remembering whose side you are supposed to be on. Looking outside beyond both council and party is also the very best way of collecting the ideas, inspiration and people you need to build a long-term campaign. In Hull, Liberal Democrat council leaders try to take the heat out of local debate by

organising monthly leader's meetings, informal conversations involving opposition councillors – especially those representing wards affected by whatever is on the agenda. Even in control, it makes sense to draw the opposition in if you can. When Kendal Liberal Democrats managed to talk to 10,000 of the 14,000 homes there in the run-up to the 2006 elections, it won them two thirds of the vote.

**Stay on the front foot**

There is really no reason to be defensive – or even to attack the integrity of opponents – if you are aligned with local people in your campaign. If compromises have to be made, because you control the council, and there are good reasons for them. You need to make sure you are communicating effectively and learning from the people those decisions will effect, and then to prepare the ground and campaign for a solution.

# three : listening

*“He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.”*

**John Stuart Mill,  
On Liberty, 1859**

*“Where Britain has succeeded, it wasn’t because of governments. Governments did not invent the Spinning Jenny, or build our manufacturing base, or construct the first computer, or discover DNA, or win the World Cup – people did.”*

**Paddy Ashdown,  
Beyond Westminster, 1994**

**are we consulting  
or are we listening?**

When you take over a city and decide you have no alternative but to demolish homes in the neighbourhood where one of the Beatles grew up, you can expect opposition. When previous generations living there have seen rising crime and decay, where the mere appearance of anyone with a clipboard would provoke furious memories of previous disastrous regeneration schemes – how do you conduct a proper consultation? How, in fact, can you possibly build and a share plan with the people who live there?

Those were some of the questions before Liverpool's Liberal Democrat councillors, when they took over the Council in 1998. There were no Lib Dem councillors in this part of Toxteth, so they puzzled over what could be done to revive the area of run-down terraced housing where practically every regeneration project ever invented seemed to have been tried already.

The fact that they succeeded, and persuaded nearly three quarters of those involved in one scheme that some homes should be demolished, is testament that consulting people can work – and make plans more robust – as long as it is accompanied by a genuine process of informing, listening and feeding back to people.

The background to the Welsh Street area consultations – a traditional working class area, birthplace of Ringo Starr – is a familiar one in northern cities. Many of these areas of traditional terraces appear to be in terminal decline: the houses are small and the dwindling number of residents led to a social vacuum that lets in crime and disorder and drives even more away. Yet John Prescott's Pathfinder programme, providing resources for regeneration based on large-scale demolition, is often bitterly resented.

When Liberal Democrats took control of Liverpool in 1998, they began a review of the housing, especially what to do about the two-up, two-down housing that dominated so much of the city. Housing associations, even in Toxteth, might win very high satisfaction ratings from their tenants, but still found it hard to let their homes.

Something had to be done, and – even if councillors opposed big demolition – some space was needed for more diverse housing and greenery if the neighbourhoods were going to recover. And that meant persuading people that some demolition was needed.

Toxteth has come a long way since the events of 1981, and the notorious night of rioting that culminated in rioters charging the police on milk floats. But two trends still flow inexorably from the night of the riot. The first is that – despite the enormous achievements by local people and the Liberal

Democrat council – Toxteth has never quite shaken off its reputation for disorder. The second is that it has also been a honey pot for a whole hive of regeneration agencies and acronyms, many of them with competing objectives, boundaries and democratic legitimacy.

The new Liberal Democrat council believed Toxteth and its surroundings represented an opportunity. There were people living there with great imagination, energy and enthusiasm, and the area was right next to the city centre. But what the last two decades has also made clear is that regeneration – real regeneration rather than selling off the homes to yuppies – will only work with the active support of the people who live there. That meant that they had to be involved in the plan from the start in the Welsh Street area.

Yet the council itself had to recognise that it was too big and distant to build a relationship with local people. What was needed was some local agency that could manage the dialogue, and draw together the efforts of some of those regeneration acronyms on the ground. The solution for Liberal Democrat councillor Richard Kemp, who was the executive member for housing, neighbourhoods and community safety, was to set up a neighbourhood management agency. This was called Include and it is, legally at least, an industrial and provident society, a social enterprise subsidiary of the local PLUS housing association.

Part of its job would be to co-ordinate council services so that they worked together effectively – after decades of painting people’s window frames and then replacing them a week or so later – but also to work on a long-term plan for the area that could halt the decline of local housing.

The other task given to Include was to be a sounding board on behalf of the council, and the rest of the public sector, to run the consultations which would feed into the long term plan. And here there was an immediate problem: local people had gone beyond boredom with consultation. They were actively hostile to anyone with a clipboard, who they regarded – justifiably – as another herald of a set of plans and promises that would either never materialise or would emerge in a way that simply wrecked people’s lives.

“Toxteth was notorious for its housing. There had been every set of regeneration initiatives here known to man,” says Richard. “Liverpool 8 has been consulted upon – and I use the phrase deliberately – more than any other part of the country. What we didn’t want to do was consult anyone like

that, because the next person anyone met with a clipboard was liable to be kicked.”

The first lesson of consultation, he says, is not to consult at all about what is blindingly obvious. If the area is filthy and dangerous and it is obvious what needs doing, then you can only gain respect by getting on and doing something about it.

“Why should anybody talk to us about long-term aspirations if we can’t do the blindingly obvious,” he says.

That was the first task for Include. It meant setting up a temporary board including the councillors, representatives of local housing co-ops and housing associations and other agencies, and then organising a lorry and cleaning up. Then setting up gates into the alleys which had become rat runs for criminals.

The basic issue of keeping the place clean has certainly been a success. “Even the areas which are going to be demolished are cleaner and better kept than some regeneration areas of other cities,” says Richard, who is now also chair of Plus and Include. “If you are the very last person living somewhere, you still have a right for it to be kept clean.”

By 2001, they were ready to launch more specific consultations, including the ones in the Welsh Street area. This was an enormous undertaking, taking more than two years, beginning with a series of drop-in consultation sessions in the local school, church hall and social clubs, and ending – once the plan was pretty much in place – with a three-month door-to-door survey with in-depth interviews. All that time, the neighbourhood officer, Dave Tai, was based in a local office and available for people to talk to.

The key was to explain to people exactly what the problem was – over supply of crumbling housing of an unpopular type, rising crime, government funding with bizarre and awkward conditions – and what the bounds of possibility were.

“The trouble with so many consultations is that it is done when the decisions have already been made,” says Richard. “If you are asking people’s views when they can’t do anything about the plans, then it is at the very least misleading. What we said was: ‘here’s what can and can’t be done’. We couldn’t, for example, raise the money to build new council housing, however much anybody might want that. The truth is that, if you give people

the parameters and are honest about the problem, then they usually come up with very sensible suggestions.”

Not only did the two-year consultation process come up with sensible plans, which minimised the demolition, but it won the support of 72 percent of those affected – many of whom would have to move house as a result. That was the result of the detailed door-to-door survey of the area, with interviews sometimes lasting as long as three hours, and it was confirmed by an outside survey company immediately afterwards.

The Welsh Street regeneration is a slow business. It has to be, because building trust is a long-term business. It remains controversial even now, but people know broadly what is going to happen, they have helped construct the plan themselves and they broadly support it.

One of the keys to this was to be able to reassure people that Include was in for the long haul. The plan would take seven or eight years, but Include had a commitment to be there for thirty years. People know that nobody, however committed, is going to solve the problems of Toxteth overnight.

The other is that the consultation was also carried out in the form of a dialogue, reaching its height during a three-month door-to-door survey of the affected area. What councillors needed to find out was what not just what the area needed, but what individuals in the area needed. Many people might have agreed to being rehoused, but were fearful of suddenly being uprooted from friends and neighbours. They might, especially if they were elderly, be worried about the process of moving.

“It’s no good saying to people they have to concentrate on the big picture, if they are worried about these issues,” says Richard. “But if we know about those fears, we can make sure they will still live next door to Sally, for example. We can say we can move them and say they can keep their existing investment in their home. We can set up procedures for dealing with these issues, if we know what they are.”

Taken together, this allowed for a plan to emerge that could be continually refined over the years. By the time Richard came to defend it in the council chamber, he felt secure in describing it as a local people’s plan. Outside the debate, there were 180 demonstrators backing the plan, and only eight or so who were still against.

Include is now responsible for co-ordinating local services in the area, running the property pool, the youth service, school playing fields and much

else besides. They employ local people to do the work. It is one solution to the perennial problem of distant departmental silos that so hamper progress in other cities. They also carry out all the consultation in the area for all the agencies

Liverpool has been a pioneer of new housing solutions for more than a quarter of a century. But the highly successful housing co-ops like Weller Street and the award-winning Eldonians, ambitious schemes that allowed people to provide themselves with housing, designed by themselves, emerged in Liverpool's bad old days under Militant in the 1980s.

Even when the giant bureaucracies came to terms with the shocking idea of people taking initiatives on their own, they barely trusted them not to trash the place (Weller Street was offered a choice of landscaping between red and green tarmac). But Militant took things to extremes. They had the absolute conviction that, if something was worth doing, then the council had to do it for people. It was the very opposite of community politics.

Militant provided a dismal approach to local government, as the Conservative environment secretary Kenneth Baker recognised at the time, when he capped the budgets of sensible local authorities but happily let Militant get on with it – on the grounds that they were such a good advertisement for centralised Whitehall rule.

What the socialist approach failed to recognise – and not just in Liverpool – was that there were resources of skill, enthusiasm, knowledge and time in the most impoverished communities that were being wasted. What was more, if those assets were ignored, then neighbourhoods would never drag themselves out of poverty and disintegration.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were a period of exploding activity in community architecture and a new set of techniques – known then as community technical aid – helping neighbourhoods plan and build their own housing. When the Liberals took minority control in 1979 from Labour minority control, Liverpool rapidly became the capital city of housing co-ops and all the new techniques of community planning.

This experience fed into training events and workshops for community activists and for Liberal politicians, and one of those who listened on the edge of his seat at one Liverpool workshop about tenant control was a young Liberal councillor from Bristol called John Kiely.

John was later Liberal Democrat campaigns officer for Avon and Wiltshire, but at the time in 1983 he had been working for a travel agency. He was one of only a handful of Liberal councillors in Labour-controlled Bristol, and the first Liberal to be allowed onto an important council committee like housing. He went back to Bristol determined that his own city should follow the Liverpool lead.

John describes himself now as “a little naïve”, but these were still the days of vast local authority landlords, administering batteries of council tenants, and Bristol was no different. The Labour chair of housing poured cold water on the very idea of tenant involvement, even of having tenants on the housing committee – which was then almost entirely made up of owner occupiers.

For the next two decades as an opposition councillor, with a three-year gap from 1990, John fought for tenant representation in Bristol, until finally he found himself in a position where he could do something about it. By 2003, the housing world looked very different. The local authority housing empires had shrunk over twenty years with the right to buy, leaving local authorities with the concrete Bastilles of the 1960s. But Bristol’s big estates were still under council control and John became chair of the neighbour and housing services scrutiny committee, pushing to defend and increase the tenant representation.

Two years later, Labour lost control of Bristol, and John became executive member for housing in the minority Liberal Democrat administration, just as tenants were being asked to vote again on the government’s so-called ‘options appraisal’ – three options for their future landlords, which was all the government would give them. They voted overwhelmingly again to stay with the council. But going through the process had revealed at least some of the wasted assets.

“We found we had some very good committed tenants,” says John. “We realised that the council had problems, and they had a very good understanding of the issues and experience from the point of view of being tenants. There were very good people. It was a waste not to involve them.”

John realised that, if they had voted to create an arms-length management organisation (the government’s approved ALMO), then the council would have set up a housing management board to oversee it. Why not, John wondered, set one up anyway – and put tenants on it?

Even when you are nominally in charge of a city, especially without overall control, these things take a long time. The council brought in a consultant to

advise, who – rather to John’s surprise – turned out to be very keen on the idea. There were also delays while they sorted out what would replace the original 13 housing area offices and committees which had advised on housing – paternalistic affairs with little power and a budget of just £20,000 (“the only thing they had in common was that every phone line was always engaged,” says John).

It was a frustrating period, watching the council’s various consultants struggling with the different options there – “I could have knocked nine inch nails into my head,” he says now – but, two years later, the housing management board was a reality.

It remains the only one of its kind in the country, taking strategic decisions and looking at big picture policy. It means that tenant aspirations can no longer be fobbed off with the news that decisions had already been taken. The council wrote to every tenant and there were 90 applications for the four seats on the board, where they joined three scrutiny councillors, the executive member and a leaseholder – one of the unfortunate minority to have exercised their right to buy their flat in large blocks of municipal housing – and a housing policy academic.

“It means the tenants can hold the managers to account,” says John. “It means they can genuinely work in some kind of partnership, that the tenants are not just passive recipients of services. That is the Liberal Democrat community politics way – investing in people and in democratic accountability.”

The board is now up and running, but John is not there to steer it. He lost his seat in May 2007 and - thanks to the Tories - Labour is back in minority control of Bristol. John is left hoping the committee will assert itself – take and use power – but recognises that it is going to be up to the tenants to have the confidence to use the committee as much as they can.

“It is all about sharing power and using resources to support people to take control,” he says. “It means that, rather than handing them over to faceless bureaucrats and quangos that never have to face the public, and don’t have to live with the electoral consequences of what they do, they have some control over their destiny.”

One of Peter Cook’s most successful cult films, *The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer*, follows the progress of a suave and Machiavellian pollster who gets himself voted dictatorial powers. The last stage of his scheme, having taken over the government, is to install flashing lights on everybody’s

television sets. These would wake people in the middle of the night with the words: “Your government wants to know your views on the Seychelles.” A sleepless population, consulted into boredom and exhaustion, voted Rimmer absolute power to get on with whatever he wanted.

The film was released in 1970, just after the disastrous general election that ushered in community politics and before the days of statutory consultation, at least in the form it takes today. The idea of asking people what they thought, before a policy or plan was put into practice, was considered bold and radical.

We now live in rather a different world, where – in the UK at least – people are constantly consulted, and greet the experience generally with boredom and cynicism, unable to tell the important and honest consultations from the hurricane of perfunctory ones where the decision has long since been made.

You can hardly blame people for being cynical, even occasionally aggressive, when they meet someone with a clipboard, or are asked to return another tick-box form, when they can usually be sure that nothing they might say will make any difference. Yet the political class, generally speaking, has yet to grasp how counter-productive official ‘consultation’ has often become.

Yet asking people what they want is a key tenet of practical community politics, and it leaves those who are pursuing that path of helping people take and use power with a dilemma. They need to ask people what they think – or the redevelopment plan is doomed – but how to prevent that just entrenching the cynicism? And if you are consulting before finalising the plans (and what’s the point otherwise?), how do you explain to people what is possible – and how do you remind them that, in any case, nothing may happen for years?

Liberal Democrats in Southwark took over the borough in 2001, just as one of the biggest consultation programmes ever constructed – the series of ambitious neighbourhood committees set up to advise on the redevelopment of Elephant & Castle – was unravelling in a bitter flurry of accusation and disillusion.

For many of those taking part, Elephant Links – the old Labour administration’s consultation programme – was a reason to shun mainstream consultations forever. The idea of organising semi-professional ‘community representatives’ into their own advisory committee is always fraught with difficulty. Whose side are they on, after all? But there is also a

phenomenon whereby, sometimes, the more you consult people, the more frustrated they feel that they can't get their message across.

James Gurling, the Liberal Democrat councillor now responsible for Elephant & Castle, believes the main problem before was a lack of context: those taking part were never given the information they needed. There were no parameters, no understanding of timescale or objective. When they wanted to discuss their own homes, the consultation was focused on grand visions, and vice versa.

“Too much consultation goes on without putting it in context for people.” says James. “Consultation builds expectations and needs to be carefully framed.”

He says the other problem is the very long gap between the end of consultations and the day when anything actually happens. Even now, five years after the first consultations around Welsh Street, no houses have yet been pulled down. That means one of the key factors in successful consultations is bearing in mind how people perceive them:

### **Keep in touch, inform feed back and remind people**

It is only polite to let people know the result of consultations they have taken the time to be involved with. But it also makes sense to tell them how what they said fed into the final plan, and to remind them continually what the outcome was. Otherwise the rumours very quickly start to fly around and, in five years, anything up to a third of the local population may have changed. It is also vital to share as much information as possible, not just about parameters but about costs and constraints, and historical background. People sometimes come to different conclusions simply because they have access to all the facts

### **Co-ordinate the consultations**

There are so many official consultations, anything from draft planning documents to where to put new parking places, safe routes to school or traffic orders, says James Gurling. “It is hardly surprising that people get confused. It is difficult for them to pick out what is most important and what can be ignored.” It makes sense to co-ordinate what local people are being asked to comment about, just as Include co-ordinates all the consultation in Toxteth.

### **Value information**

The information that people can provide, about the way things work and connect locally, is a valuable commodity if you want policies that are going to work. Valuing information means valuing local people.

So it makes sense to have systems in place that can capture and use this information throughout your systems – whether you are running councils or aspiring to do so. When 22,000 people in Liverpool contact the city council every day, every one of those calls is potential vital information which can improve the performance of council functions. Equally, the redevelopment of the Roundshaw Estate in Lib Dem Sutton is successful – less crime, more employment – simply because its regeneration was a joint plan shared and constructed with the people who live there. The point is not so much to show you are open-minded listening administration, as the jargon goes. Nor is it just to get a set of statistics for your next Focus. Community politics suggests something much more important: local people have expertise about the neighbourhood, and the peculiar complexity of what makes things happen there, which no councillor, campaigner or official can do without.



## four : reinforcing

*“Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realised.”*

**Daniel Burnham,**  
Chicago architect

*“Local campaigners ... can wield power without ever getting elected.”*

**Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman,**  
The Theory and Practice of Community Politics, 1980

**if you are not involved  
you are effectively opting out**

Andrew Dakers has lived all his life in Brentford that narrow, half-forgotten strip of London between the massive motorway flyover to Heathrow Airport and the medieval high street and ancient wharves of the River Brent. He has been a WWF campaigns officer, a community activist and a Liberal Democrat councillor, but he has reserved most of his ingenuity and considerable energy for his home town, part of the London Borough of Hounslow, where he has been a councillor since 2006.

This is partly because it is home, partly because – ever since he could remember – the local high street has become tattier, while distant supermarkets have siphoned away more of the customers – and the ancient wharves have been slowly disappearing. When he stood for the council in 2006, one of his three election pledges was to grasp the nettle of Brentford's high street, blighted by an on-off development, and make it work for local people.

“Everywhere I've gone in the world, I've come back here to Brentford,” says Andrew. “I want to feel I belong somewhere that offers a quality of life and community spirit and I've always hoped that one day I could do something about it. And my favourite pub is also in the local high street.”

The task of revitalising the high street has seemed beyond the council for years now, and a critical site along the high street was owned by a new, slightly shadowy developer – and it was unclear who the actual owners were. So how was he going to achieve it as an opposition councillor in a tiny group of four Liberal Democrats?

The answer was that there is ingenuity, imagination and power if you can work alongside local people to formulate a plan and a positive vision. The key is to develop a consensus and positive energy behind the shared vision. This is community politics in the classic sense, but it is also the application of some far newer ideas to local politics in the UK, known by the collective title as ‘community visioning’.

The idea of building a shared vision of a local future emerged in a series of massive consultation exercises in the USA in the 1990s, including Imagine Chicago, Imagine Chattanooga and a massive two-year project to develop a sustainable way forward for the city of Seattle. They were based on a participative idea known as ‘appreciative inquiry’, which recognised that getting large numbers of local residents and professionals in a room together and asking them about the future was liable to unravel in depressing complaints, leaving everyone feeling a little bit more powerless than they were before.

But if the meetings – and the radio phone-ins, children’s competitions and local newspaper supplements they used in Seattle – asked people to start by listing what they liked about the place, and building from there, a completely different kind of energy could be unleashed. What was more, if the vision was widely shared – and here was the key point – it would have a momentum of its own.

Conventional wisdom might have suggested to Andrew, as he contemplated Brentford High Street, that he held none of the levers of power that he needed. Only half of the high street was owned by the council, which have treated it as a cash cow – raising rents without investing – and even the council was Conservative controlled. The key site was owned by a shadowy property company which had been negotiating with the council in secret for five years without any deal being closed. In fact, the long-term decline of the high street seems to have been direct result of planning decisions taken nearly half a century before, when they demolished most of the historic centre of Brentford in a road widening scheme.

“There had been no holistic thinking about how to make the high street succeed in the medium to long term,” says Andrew. “The main decisions seem to have been taken on the basis of what would get the highest financial return for the council in the short term, and some of the units had been left vacant for up to two years.”

There was also absolutely no marketing of the high street. Tens of thousands of people drive through Brentford on their way west every day, and the local hotels are stuffed with leaflets about attractions and superstores in other parts of London, but nothing to suggest they stay and see any of the 140 or so shops and organisations (and two museums) on the high street– or to suggest local people might benefit from shopping locally.

Andrew brought in some outside expertise from local economics consultant Paul Sander-Jackson, who runs the economic development programme at the New Economics Foundation, a local economics think-tank in London. On his advice, by the end of his first summer as a councillor, Andrew had formed a local steering group, including traders and shoppers and with representatives from all the political parties locally. There was an agreed terms of reference document and a member of staff at the local community development trust provided part time administrative support. There was a little money from the council’s community investment fund.

Another disadvantage was that Brentford ward, which Andrew represented, did not actually cover the high street. But that was held by independent

councillors who were delighted with thrust of what he wanted to do. Labour had recently lost control of the council and the new Conservative administration were also keen for something to happen in Brentford. Andrew's project was all-party: all the councillors were named in the same leaflets and they all used their own delivery networks to get it through people's front doors.

A little bit of research by the steering group and it was able to track down the real owners of the company calling itself Geronimo, which had recently acquired the site on the south side of the high street from the previous developers. Geronimo was backed financially by the Irish development company Ballymore, and they now revealed that they were going to put in a new planning application. If Andrew's group was going to have any effect, they would have to get in first.

More research on where money was re-spent in the area (using the LM3 measurement tool of local money flows) showed that spending was leaking out of Brentford to Tesco in Osterley, Waitrose in Ealing and Sainsburys in Chiswick, rather than being re-spent locally to keep the local economy alive. It would be up to the steering group to suggest ways of getting that spent locally instead.

Andrew was also able to track down data from the American group Main Street USA to show what kind of wider economic impact came from different patterns of ownership and rents. He needed to show the council that simply charging all the shopkeepers top whack until they went out of business might not be the most economically beneficial way forward.

But the first major priority was to reach a common analysis of the problem. That meant recognising that even the steering group would have different perspectives and that not all their issues were going to be solved. One of the key points was to recognise that the abortive 2001 plans, including a massive superstore with a car park on the roof and a five-screen cinema – which had divided people bitterly – were now dead and those divisions could be put to one side.

The next task was to build a consensus around a workable plan for the high street that had such energy to it that the developers and the council would be forced to listen. That meant the community needed to be aggressively proactive, rather than defensively reacting to whatever the developers put forward.

“I had to build personal relationships with people, and had to start to acknowledge that there were bound to be these different perspectives, but that – on all sides – people were passionate about the place,” says Andrew, who had to constantly check back with the key stakeholders on the steering group, keeping them onboard and involved. “It helped that I had an electoral mandate too.”

Sub-groups were given the task of pulling together ideas on the local economy, environmental sustainability, the arts, history, urban design, marketing, young people and older people. They quickly organised a launch event in January 2007 at the local Watermans Arts Centre with a copious supply of post-it notes, together with market-style stalls for each sub-group. Nearly 150 people turned out on a dark and stormy night.

Andrew told the launch meeting again that they had to “acknowledge there were different perspectives, and reminded them that the objective was a practical plan. It also had to be economically viable. If it wasn’t, that would be a key weakness that the developer would be able to exploit to reject it. Andrew managed to find a developer who lived locally, who could use an Excel spreadsheet to model all the costs for the new plan per square metre and the potential profit margins from different options.

“This was the one area where we couldn’t be completely open and transparent,” says Andrew “We haven’t disclosed the costs, or how many residential units we think would be required, beyond a few core members of the steering group. This is because past experience suggests the developers might exploit it and use it as a starting point for negotiations, rather than focusing on what we believe is already a viable set of plans.”

By then Brentford local inquiry process was in full swing. February saw a survey across the whole local community about what people spent. March saw a series of workshops on the different task groups, a young people’s conference attended by more than 60 locals and the launch of a project website ([www.brentfordhighstreet.org.uk](http://www.brentfordhighstreet.org.uk)) – using a software called [openplans.org](http://openplans.org) developed in New York, which could be constantly updated to see how the plans were progressing. The steering group also webcast key meetings on YouTube.

April saw the beginning of work on the draft report, which had to be ready before the council published its Brentford Area Action Plan if they were ever going to be aligned. Council officers were briefed throughout the process on emerging ideas and provided technical briefings at a number of the March workshops.

The final report had a hundred key recommendations and demanded that the high street should stay diverse and distinctive, with smaller shops and independents. Many recommendations turned out to be similar to the parallel process Kensington & Chelsea council were organising to rescue the Portobello area from being 'cloned'. The consultation also strongly urged some kind of 'anchor' store for the high street – and a small car park.

"I never expected as a green Liberal Democrat that I would find myself advocating a new car park, even a very small one," says Andrew. "But the irony is that, if you want people to have shops to walk and cycle to, you also need somewhere for people to park."

By the summer they had to shift from visioning to straightforward campaigning, and they needed some quick wins. First there was another website, leaflet and guide to Brentford High Street. They also launched the local Wedge Card – the loyalty card, a brainchild of *Big Issue* magazine's John Bird and his daughter Diana. The group discovered at one time Diana was a student at Brentford School for Girls. But by then the energy was such that another local loyalty card sprang up there at the same time.

Next tasks include identifying benchmark data on rents for the smaller shops to help some of them tackle the problem of high increases.

By the end of the initial visioning process, three *High Street News* newsletters had been delivered to at least up to 8,000 households, and three quarters of the 12,000 local population were aware of the project.

Of course, the Brentford vision is still no more than a plan, but the community has taken the initiative. The council has responded and now the developer will have to as well, though they have already written an initial response with a six-page document. Detailed discussions are now taking place with the developers about moving the Waterman's Arts Centre closer to the heart of high street activity. But the first glimmerings of success were the sheer energy at the launch.

"There was phenomenal energy and buzz there," he says. People had never had this kind of space before where they could circulate wherever they wanted to, write ideas, have direct contact with the councillors."

Another hundred people came to the feedback event in June, and another 200 have fed in suggestions and ideas. The steering group went through each one systematically, accepting some, explaining why some might not be viable, and every response went on the website.

There is a paradox here, and a familiar one for community politicians. Andrew is a Liberal Democrat and well-known as such, but he has tried to include all his political opponents in the project. In fact, doing so was a pre-requisite of success.

“I have taken party politics out of it for the time being,” he says. “But I was elected as a Liberal Democrat and it was part of my election platform to do this. I also have a high local media profile as a Lib Dem and I am being seen to put my values and beliefs into practice. And in the end, everything about the final vision is probably also Lib Dem and green.”

This is community politics, but a new variety: using the latest participative techniques, which are increasingly mainstream but not generally yet part of the armoury of local councillors – even of Liberal Democrats.

The difficulty, again, is that this kind of engagement is immensely time consuming. Andrew found himself working up to three days a week without pay just to make it happen, and is consequently arguing for a better deal for local councillors. “If backbench councillors are going to take on a place-shaping role, and be active community leaders, it does take a lot of time,” he says.

The battle is also a long way from being won, as Andrew says. But, through his leadership, local people have been able to take the initiative, and that is a powerful position to be in.

It is one of the paradoxes of community politics that campaigning alongside the community – helping them with the political aspects of what they want to achieve – is sometimes more effective than trying to swallow their efforts and subsume them into an overtly political campaign.

What for example should Richard Grayson, the party’s ppc in Hemel Hempstead, do in the face of an expert, brilliantly-led and innovative local campaign to save the local hospital? Does he ignore it and attempt to set up his own campaign, as the local Conservatives tried to do and failed, or does he simply ignore the issue because there is no distinctive Liberal Democrat mileage in it?

Those are the two conventional political responses. But in practice he has taken a third direction: to get deeply involved in the campaign as a Liberal Democrat and to do what he can to lend the party’s campaigning power to what was far more effective than anything he could organise on his own.

In fact, the Dacorum Hospital Action Group has been fighting for Hemel Hempstead hospital since the 1970s, led for most of that time by an indefatigable campaigner – and former Labour councillor back in the 1940s – called Zena Bullmore. Over that period, with the drip, drip of hospital cuts and centralisation, every ward closure has been fought every step of the way, and probably many of them have been delayed.

Even so, the local hospital trust remains determined to centralise services in Watford, so Hemel Hempstead hospital is in trouble again. “Having been born in one Hemel Hempstead hospital closed by the Tories, I was personally determined that we shouldn’t also lose our main hospital,” said Richard, a historian and former party director of policy.

That meant getting involved with the campaign, which still has the ability to mobilise more than a thousand people on demonstrations. So, together with his Labour and Conservative opponents, Richard has become closely involved, offering the party’s printer where necessary, and the party’s delivery networks for door-to-door leafleting. In fact, before their march and candlelight vigil in 2006, all three parties co-operated on designing, printing, paying for and delivering a publicity leaflet, actually bringing parts of their delivery systems together in one operation.

“I started looking at the issue from the perspective of the ordinary community, and that led me to feel I should lend it any skills I have to their campaign,” says Richard. “I am involved as an individual, but also as a Liberal Democrat, which means that we have credibility on the issue. Also none of our leaflets go out without some mention of the hospital and we make it clear that we are at the core of this community-based campaign.”

When it comes to party campaigning then, Richard believes he is at an advantage, because Liberal Democrat policy has a potential answer to the problem – local democratic decision-making on health spending.

The other problem – which is inherent in community-based campaigning – is that this could potentially bring them into conflict with their party colleagues in Watford. Where Hemel Hempstead is losing, Watford is gaining, and that is under the control of Liberal Democrats too. But there are hospital campaigns in both towns and, as the time has passed, both realise increasingly that they stand or fall together.

“The issues on which we campaign are around the overall ineffectiveness of the West Herts Hospital Trust, rather than narrower issues of concern to the two separate towns,” says Richard. “Even though the temptation might be to

compete, together we are stronger, and much more able to put pressure on a hospital trust that is so woefully failing to deliver what people want locally.”

The accusation that is endlessly thrown at Liberal Democrats – that they say different things in different places around the country – stems partly from getting the balance wrong: it is counter-productive to end up contradicting other Liberal Democrats whose communities are demanding something contradictory, and it isn't necessary to do so. It might take difficult negotiation, and a clear idea of what the overarching issues are, to make sure this doesn't happen, but that is a small price to pay.

On the other hand, community politics activists working alongside their communities, and accelerating their efforts as a result, are bound to attract accusations of that kind. It may even be a symptom of effectiveness, but let's not pretend that it is easy to get the balance right and keep it right.

Nor is the kind of innovative campaign that Andrew Dakers has been running in Brentford a simple matter. For one thing, he has been using techniques for reaching consensus that are now used quite regularly in the voluntary sector but which have yet to filter down much into the political world – though Lib Dems on Godalming Town Council have recently organised their own visioning exercise for the future of the town.

For another thing, the lesson of these kind of 'appreciative inquiry' projects, like the massive two-year project to 're-imagine' Seattle, can often lead to people feeling less consulted than before. In Seattle, in fact, although there had been weekly phone-ins by the mayor and countless other opportunities to take part, over three quarters of the city felt they hadn't been adequately consulted. But – and here's the paradox – they overwhelmingly loved the plan. The problem is that reminding people that they have an opportunity to make an input can also remind them that they feel disempowered, though Brentford campaigners try to avoid the problem by providing more opportunities to keep involved – like helping to organise Christmas lights.

Then there is the issue, which faced both Andrew and Richard in these examples, which is the risk of subsuming the party's identity into an all-party campaign. Community politics suggests that effecting campaigning is all about working in the community, leading where necessary, lending support where appropriate, but not taking over. It is about being a Liberal Democrat and getting involved, rather than being the conventional political megaphone that people have learned to dislike most about their elected representatives.

Conventional political campaigning, which subsumes local issues into one demand, articulated by the local representative and – if you are lucky – delivered from on high to a grateful populace, is disempowering at heart. It reminds people that they are merely supplicants to the powerful and its keeps them in that position.

If it works, community politics should be the opposite. It means working with the community to help them grasp what levers of power they have. It is intended to be empowering and to create a genuine shift in power.

Andrew Dakers' plan for Brentford High Street might not come to pass. There are many hurdles to cross along the way. But it may do, and it's the process of creating it – as a Liberal Democrat – has had an alchemical effect on the power relationships. His local community is now proposing a plan which developers and planners will now have to respond to. They have moved subtly from opposition to proposition, and the way the plan was created gives it a democratic legitimacy which makes it hard to ignore.

So those are the lessons of *reinforcing*:

**Get involved**

But get involved as a Liberal Democrat. Being is as important as doing in this respect. If councillors have effective and deep local roots, they have an authenticity that other politicians who dream only of elections can only imagine.

**Keep in constant touch with stakeholders**

People like to be involved, even if it is only a couple of words every week or so. Don't let any of them drift too far away from the central effort.

**Be positive**

Political campaigning often has to be against things. It is the nature of the process, but there is a different atmosphere about being for things as well – especially when they involve people where they live and work. And if you can be for something that has been created by the local community itself, it has a special power about it that transforms local power relationships more effectively than any amount of negative campaigning.

# five : devolving

*“Life is a perpetual instruction in cause and effect.”*

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

*“Community politics is quite incompatible with the centralisation of power at the level of the nation state. Indeed, it is incompatible with the concentration of power at any level.”*

**Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman,  
The Theory and Practice of Community Politics, 1980**

**democracy is untidy  
with it's alphabet soup of agencies**

The village of Bursledon, nestling in Hampshire between the river Hamble and the sea, where Henry VIII built his warships, is now a place of marinas, regattas and ancient pubs. It is also a prime example of Liberal Democrat community politics in action, and of what happens when you effectively decentralise power to neighbourhoods.

It was there, in the local school hall – the usual venue for meetings of the local area committee, after radical devolution by the local Liberal Democrat Eastleigh council – that committee members found themselves discussing the miserable lack of NHS dentist in the neighbourhood. It caused difficulties for those who couldn't afford private dental work, difficulties for children and it wasn't how the NHS was supposed to work.

This is an issue that politicians outside government have discussed for years. It is one of the mainstays of local authority debates, constructed mainly to make a political point to the distant bureaucrats and ministers responsible for the NHS. But the advantage of handing power to really local committees is that, if you are clever about it, you will have local people in the room who might be able to do something about it. So it was in this case.

Bursledon's area committee, like the other devolved committees of Eastleigh borough, has the informality about it that is a hallmark of local Liberal Democrat rule, and one of those in the public gallery – or what would have been the public gallery if this had been a traditional debating chamber - was a local dentist. As a result of what he heard, he decided he would provide NHS dental services. His local community needed it and he provided it.

How do you provide NHS dentists in your community? Do you beg the government? Beg the dental bodies in London? Either way, it's an obvious target for political campaigning, but none of the levers seem to be in local hands. In this case, thanks to the discussion being local – and thanks to its informality – the neighbourhood solved its own problems without resource to petitions or central government largesse.

Conventional wisdom about localism suggests that there is a neat hierarchy of what every level of government can achieve, from the level of Europe right down to parishes, each with their appropriate powers. It is an idea borrowed from the Catholic social doctrine of Pope Leo XIII, exhumed by the green economics pioneer E. F. Schumacher and adopted as a philosophy by the European Union.

It's correct too. But Liberal Democrat Eastleigh, which was a pioneer in the decentralisation of power, suggests that community politics might open out a range of more complicated possibilities.

When they took control of Eastleigh in 1994, local Liberal Democrats were determined to make local government run in a totally different way. It had been eight years since Liberals took control of Tower Hamlets and put in place the most radical decentralisation scheme yet, and Kingston was then about to devolve power to much smaller units, but it was the very early days of decentralisation.

The determination to do things differently was driven partly by the council's new leader, Keith House – then in charge of membership services for the party– who had been struggling with new ways forward ever since local Lib Dems lost control in 1990.

“We made some mistakes before,” says Keith now. “The problem was that we just wanted to run the council better. We wanted to do things like keep the Audit Commission happy, and that really wasn't good enough. We had to do something different.”

There were also two other peculiarities about the borough that seemed to demand a local solution. One was its shape: Eastleigh is an old railway town and the council that bears its name traditionally saw its role to serve the town. But a good half of the council boundaries covered a rural and suburban area to the south, which felt no allegiance to the council, resented the way their resources were funnelled there and demanded more local control.

The second peculiarity was the anomaly of the so-called 'special expenses' in the council tax regulations. These meant, in effect, that people in areas with parish councils were being charged twice for services like play areas, footpaths, leisure areas – once in the borough rates and once again in the parish rates. The solution seemed to be to give them more local control.

There was a big internal debate, and some resistance from those not steeped in the community politics tradition. What if local people spent the money badly? What if they spent it on something illiberal? What was the council supposed to do if it handed over all its powers? When the party took control, this debate had not been entirely resolved.

The breakthrough was to take the new group away for a discussion, away from the council – in fact in the new Southampton Airport terminal outside

Eastleigh town – together with a facilitator, senior council officers and members of the opposition too. The awayday worked.

“It was like a light bulb going off,” says Keith, and the basic decision to decentralise was taken then. Some of the councillors then went to see radical devolution in action in Kingston and South Somerset, and at some of the rival Labour and Conservative models in Surrey and Watford (then under Labour control).

They were not impressed by all the rival models. One Labour model, for example, allowed area committees to take local decisions, which were then simply overturned by the council’s Labour majority. They also rejected some aspect of the Tower Hamlets model, deciding not to decentralise the council’s employees in case it led to wasteful overstaffing.

The simplest change that Keith’s council pushed through was that any member of the public could wander into any council meeting, any time, and take part just by putting up their hand – including at full council. There was to be no form-filling, no vetting and no complicated regulations.

Next, they were determined to localise, to bring the administration of the council closer to people. People had elected local councillors and they would sit on new area committees that followed the real boundaries of local communities, and would take decisions affecting their local areas – and, crucially, they would have the budgets to do this properly. “You must devolve budgets,” says Keith.

“One of the key problems was to get round the officer culture that things are impossible. We did this by setting out the principle that everything would be devolved unless they could prove that it shouldn’t be.”

But there was a third shift that Eastleigh’s new administration was determined to push through. It wasn’t enough to devolve decisions closer to where people actually lived; they also had to devolve some of the implementation. That meant devolving to local bodies like parish councils and any other elected groups.

“If a parish council comes to us and says they want to take over responsibility for local parks, community facilities and playing fields, then they can,” says Keith. “They don’t have to – it isn’t compulsory. But if they want to, we will give them the budget to go with it.”

Often, in practice, that has meant that communities have taken responsibility for services and then contracted them back to the council – insisting, for example, on doubling the number of toilet cleans or the frequency which streets are swept. It means they can use the budget how they want. It's their decision.

None of this was risk free. Two of Eastleigh's area committees were largely dominated by Conservatives, and devolution meant handing real power over to them. Anyone could also put anything they wanted onto the area committee agendas. They could clearly be hijacked by political opponents. But there were also good democratic reasons for going ahead anyway: those two Conservative areas had voted that way, after all.

The theory was that these fears should be ignored, with the minimum of safeguards. Experience shows that – if the committees genuinely gave people power, not as talking shops – then they would protect them from political destructiveness. That is as true of political vandalism as it is of vandalism on bricks and mortar housing estates.

But it is also a key tenet of community politics that, if people are given genuine responsibility, then they rise to the occasion. That may not be either proved or provable, but Liberalism suggests that devolving power can not just be educational, it can be transformative – even for political opponents.

It seemed to work like this in Eastleigh. Opposition councillors had the opportunity to do something about the things they objected to. And when local people put the issue of youth disturbance on the agenda of a Tory-led area committee, the council's area co-ordinator helped with video equipment so that local young people could provide a real insight for the committee into their lives – including strong language. It sparked a whole new attitude to disorder there, and continued contact with the local young people.

Then there was the issue of the lack of NHS dentists in Bursledon, and the ability of the local community in effect to tackle a local issue itself. For Keith, that is the proof of the effectiveness of Eastleigh's decentralisation, and it is community politics at its simplest and most effective.

“In the old way of doing things, we would have put a motion to the environmental health committee, which would have sent a letter to the MP, who would have forwarded it to the NHS,” says Keith. “They would have written some anodyne reply which would have been reported back to the

committee. This way, no letters were written at all. The committee just solved its own problems.”

Community politics was developed as a tool of opposition. The experience of Eastleigh is a partial answer to what you do once the community politicians get into power. The answer is to do what you can to give it away – and find the barriers that prevent people from exercising it.

But there are some unexpected side-effects too. Once different levels of government are held to account by people at very local level, much more becomes possible. It is hard to imagine Eastleigh’s current programme to provide libraries for every community being possible in the days when everything was decided from the town hall. And in two-tier Hampshire, libraries are not even a district responsibility.

You can’t do it in the old way, which meant building libraries, the filling them with books, computers and staff. But you can by working with existing institutions like schools and by recruiting volunteer groups to look after them – and, at the same time, get some of the posh end of the villages working with some of the young people from the outlying estate.

Community politics in action can be messy. It can offend the tidy-minded bureaucrat. Its outcomes are not always in the hands of those taking the decisions, but – if you don’t mind the complexity – it can make an enormous difference.

“You can’t always predict the unintended consequences,” says Keith. “One of the ways we knew we were being successful is that we suddenly found we didn’t have any problems finding candidates for the local elections. The following year after decentralisation, they were queuing up to stand.”

When Eastleigh won a major national award for an innovative community project which encouraged and raised awareness for recycling in a low performing area of the borough, it seems to have been partly this local engagement that made it possible. The project increased recycling on the estate which used to produce such contaminated recycling bins that it was impossible to process them. After a year, there had been a 95 per cent increase in awareness of recycling.

Activities to get there included a traffic light scheme to give residents feedback about the level of contamination in their bins, litter picks, give and take days at the community centre on the estate, a children’s fashion show using recycled materials and weekly coffee mornings with the recycling

officer, who spent most of her working week on the estate talking with residents. The bottom line was that high levels of community engagement and support made it possible to achieve good recycling levels, even in an area of social deprivation.

That is among the reasons that Eastleigh is now one of the party's local success stories, both for its community approach to administration and its pioneering green record, and they have been queuing up ever since.

Eastleigh has a relatively new Liberal tradition. Rochdale's tradition goes back much further, way past Cyril Smith – the town's most famous MP since John Bright – arguably to the Rochdale Pioneers (it has never been clear that the co-operative spirit has much in common with either state socialism or New Labour). But the business of devolving power to local people meant very similar dilemmas for the Liberal Democrat council leader Alan Taylor as it had in Eastleigh.

Alan is a long-standing councillor, first elected back in 1971 when he ran the family's fruit and vegetable business in Rochdale market. He lost his seat in 1987, seven years before Keith House launched the devolution plans in Eastleigh, and watched from his new greengrocery business, as the town's present Liberal Democrat MP, Paul Rowen, took the first steps towards devolving power to four local 'townships'.

But the same questions dominated then and later, even among Liberal Democrat councillors. Why hand back power to the opposition (two of the four townships have cast-iron Labour majorities)? Can we trust people with real budgets?

It is easy to dismiss these kind of worries from the point of view of distant theory. Community politics may suggest that people will always rise to the responsibility of handling local decisions themselves, but – UK politics being the way it is – these ideas are rarely tested in research. Especially in a politically contentious borough of knife-edge majorities like Rochdale.

Devolving power – real power with budgets to match – remains an act of considerable political courage. Even so, when Alan was re-elected to the council 17 years after leaving it AGAIN, he had reached the conclusion that more could and should be done.

"It hit me very quickly that the townships were largely talking shops," he says. "They didn't really have either power or budgets. I intended to go back on the council as a member of the awkward squad. I thought people

had the right to expect better from politicians and the council. But I found I was kicking at an open door.”

Alan Taylor is steeped in local Liberal politics. He was Cyril Smith’s election agent and Liz Lynne’s campaign manager when she took his place as the town’s MP. He ended up in hospital with a suspected heart attack when she lost in 1997. When he sold his business a few years later, he began to wonder whether to go back on the council.

Alan’s second period as a councillor saw his meteoric rise, from backbencher to council leader in a year.

He became council leader when Paul Rowen was elected to Parliament in 2005, and immediately set about wooing the council officers, meeting them all individually for long conversations – getting to know them, and at the same time, impressing on them how central devolution of power was going to be in his administration. They seemed to appreciate the human approach.

“Many of the chief officers had been office boys when I was first on the council,” he says. “I was afraid that I had been gone for so long that they would ask who on earth this was, coming from nowhere. In fact, they said nobody had ever talked to them like that before.”

Alan appointed a cabinet member in charge of the devolution process, realising that the business of giving the townships real spending power was not going to be solved overnight. It was going to be a step-by-step process.

But it still continues. In 2007, they devolved decisions about a £1 million from the highways budget to the townships. When Rochdale’s recycling improved more than expected, and the council got a £300,000 rebate, that was distributed to the townships to spend as well.

Alan argued that, if they spent the money stupidly, there were checks and balances in place and people would complain. But the townships would have to have budgets or they would just disintegrate into being talking shops again – even if that meant handing responsibility to Labour councillors where they had been elected.

“I still haven’t convinced my wife,” he says.

Even so, the first results seem to support the decision. There are fewer complaints about the council from the townships as they take more responsibility for themselves.

Lib Dem Kingston pioneered a system whereby a hundred people – a hundred school children if necessary – could force a council decision back to the scrutiny committee to look at again. Rochdale is now following suit – Alan claims it is like a “verbal grumble sheet”.

There were complaints also from some of the Labour controlled townships, especially about the public question times they were forced to hold. In contrast, Alan insists on going to meet members of the public who are putting a question.

“Some people can just stand up and do it, but some find it terrifying,” he says. “So I tell them that nobody will criticise them and I ask if I can help.”

His latest scheme is a ‘People’s Champion’ for Rochdale, the first in the UK, to stand up for anyone who feels they have been banging their head against a brick wall in the council’s bureaucracy. The new champion will also be responsible for looking at how all the council departments deal with the public and with complaints, and will have the power to instruct them to change. It was an idea he had while he was fighting the council from the outside as the owner of a local business.

Alan is not impressed by the direction local government administration is going, to increasing cabinet government and narrower band of decision-makers.

“I am quite embarrassed by the amount of power I now have as council leader,” he says. “I am determined to bring democracy back into local government if I can. I believe that, when you force public agencies to be responsible, then you also force them to put people first.”

That is the pragmatic case for devolving power, rather than the ideological one, and – as theory of community politics has drifted into the past – that pragmatic case has often been left to go by default by Liberal Democrats. Localising power is certainly more democratic, but community politics suggests that it is also more effective. It solves problems, is more innovative, helps avoid the vast inefficiencies and expensive mistakes that giant institutions make. It almost certainly, therefore, provides better value for money.

The devolution of decision-making power to increasingly local bodies, usually elected ones, has become a hallmark of Liberal Democrats in local government, starting in Tower Hamlets and most recently the major devolution in Lib Dem Aberdeen. Their experiments are by some way the boldest and the most genuine. But it is only part of the localism agenda, which includes devolving responsibility to front line staff, to clients and service users, tackling the debilitating cult of giantism and the powerful emerging monopolies of the big retailers which are sucking the life out of local economies.

Bernard Greaves, the co-author of *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, is one of those who believes the community politics agenda will need to be extended to cover community economics. More that in chapter 7.

There are risks about all these strategies, but they are usually not the risks that council officers or opposition politicians complain about. Bureaucrats worry about clarity (Kingston officers worried about whether some of the hundred signatures might be forgeries, as if the fact that only eighty electors had made the effort was a problem). They worry about tidiness of procedure and decision-making. There is no doubt that the complexity of Eastleigh's multi-levels of responsibility means an end to the ideal that local authorities should be smooth humming machines of objective decision-making. But the truth is that, while the bureaucracy might have hummed under the old system, it disempowered, ignored and rode roughshod over people who might have had a critical role to play in local success if they had only been asked.

Democracy is untidy, and the new environment for councils – with its alphabet soup of different local agencies and quangos – is certainly untidy, and no amount of streamlining can ignore that.

The dangers in devolving power lie in the populist forces that will undoubtedly be unleashed sometimes by community politics. The Liberal administration in Tower Hamlets, with their brave devolution and involvement with tenants groups, ran into trouble because some of the groups and individuals were undoubtedly infected and influenced by racism and racist attitudes.

There is a world of difference in theory between community politics and populism, but it isn't always immediately obvious in practice. As Watford's Lib Dem mayor Dorothy Thornhill says, the difference is leadership. Sometimes community politicians have to put their reputations and political

stock on the line to explain why they are backing Liberal solutions. That is the first lesson of devolving power:

### **Provide leadership**

Community politics is not about handing over decisions to the rabble-rousers. It is about giving responsibility and power, plus information and responsibility, to local people – because they know more about their complexity of their local issues than anybody else. But it also shifts the role of local politicians, from provider to catalyst. Devolution without leadership and vision means only part of the job is done.

### **Hold to the theory and test your success**

Devolving power is about drawing more people into decision-making, but it is also about getting them active locally – not by sitting on committees but by building social networks, looking after people and making things happen. It is about giving people responsibility and thereby releasing local energy and innovation to transform local life. It isn't enough just to assume that this will happen automatically. We need to set out ways to test whether devolution is achieving these objectives, and if it isn't, re-thinking it and re-engineering it until it does.

### **Humanise local institutions too**

Decision-making power is important, but it isn't going to be effective unless you can also make the local institutions more responsive. That means that frontline staff need to be able to take decisions to take action where necessary, and it means those institutions need to be more local themselves – and more outward-looking.

Localism also means humanising the dismal bureaucracy that dominates our new generation of factory hospitals, giant schools and distant courts. Just because we have devolved local authority decision-making power, it doesn't mean the campaign is anywhere near won.



## six : empowering

*“A government cannot have too much of the kind of activity which does not impede, but aids and stimulates individual exertion and development. The mischief begins when, instead of calling forth the activity and powers of individuals and bodies, it substitutes its own activity for theirs; when, instead of informing, advising, and upon occasion denouncing, it makes them work in fetters or bids them stand aside and does their work instead of them.”*

**John Stuart Mill,  
On Liberty, 1859**

*“Only connect.”*

**E. M. Forster,  
Howard's End, 1910**

**little things make  
a really big difference**

The American liberal magazine *Atlantic Monthly* published an article in 1982 called 'Broken windows', by the sociologists James Wilson and George Kelling, which began what has been a slow revolution in way crime is being tackled on both sides of the ocean. The article made public detailed research in the South Bronx area of New York. If you broke one window there in a deserted block and mended it the following morning, the building would stay intact. But if you didn't, every window would be broken within 72 hours.

What the 'Broken window' theory proved was that very little things make a big difference, but it meant there was a problem too: town halls – and certainly governments – do not have the power to do much in the way of little things. They deal in policies, programmes and targets. Often the best information about the small signs of disorder that attract bigger crime is the people who live locally – and, without their help and support, police are pretty powerless to do anything about them.

New York took the theory on board before almost anywhere else, first by its police of 'zero-tolerance' policing. It wasn't a success – it simply moved crime from one part of the city to another. Their second response was a series of partnerships, laboriously brokered, between local neighbourhood groups and local police. This was the real cause of the massive drop in crime there since.

This realisation that local neighbourhoods hold the key to the little things – their knowledge not just of why things happen, but the interconnectedness of what happens locally – is still not widely understood in the UK. But it is also a core insight of community politics, and one of those places where Liberal Democrats have been most active in putting something similar into practice – bringing police and other agencies together at a very local level – is Liberal Democrat Stockport.

It may not be quite on the same scale as New York – Stockport is one of the more civilised outposts of Greater Manchester – but it has an almost unparalleled experience of localism, devolving decision-making to a more local level than almost anywhere else, and then joining it up.

Stockport first devolved decisions to area committees more than three decades ago in 1974, when there were only 13 Liberals on the council. This is both a disadvantage and an advantage. The difficulty, as the council's Lib Dem executive councillor Maggie Clay explains, is that it is very hard to see what difference localisation has made on local life and politics, as there is no

previous experience to measure it by. They have just been doing it for so long in Stockport that it has become second nature.

But it is an advantage as well, because they have a broader sense – perhaps broader than anywhere else – about what works and what is possible. They understand in Stockport that, just as Liverpool needed to draw together disparate services and initiatives locally in Toxteth or there was really no chance of co-ordination, the area committees in Stockport also needed to deal with issues such as highways and transportation at a local level. In Stockport, they also deal with most planning applications.

The other advantage is that they are well placed with ambitious plans to go more local still, and devolve as many decisions as possible down to ward level. From November 2007, in fact, and convening in a school in Stepping Hill ward in Stockport, will be one of their very first experimental ward-level decision-making committee.

Under the recent legislation, local government and public health is beginning to reconnect with joint strategic needs assessments, and these decisions connect far better – and make far more sense – as locally as possible. This could be the start of area committees being involved in planning services for their area.

The local police, and Stockport's area condition officers – those charged with dealing with graffiti, rubbish and litter – also connect at the area committee level. Stockport has also just finished reorganising their youth service, finding ways to get the youth workers out of the youth clubs and into the community.

It is in these area committees where the police and the public have a chance to hear each others views, and to hammer out local issues with councillors, a bit like they do in New York. It means police can target resources more flexibly according to what people local people need – but also explain the specific help they need themselves.

“The idea of devolving further to ward committees is partly a response to the problem that the area committees have become grossly overloaded,” says Maggie. “They spend a great deal of time talking about highways or traffic management issues, a lot of which would be done much better more locally, and which are issues people tend to be much more involved with at local level.”

It is partly also a sense that the Liberal Democrat leadership have that a forum covering 10,000 people is probably more appropriate sometimes than area committees that cover three times that.

So, starting this autumn, the Stepping Hill area committee – covering Maggie's own ward – will experimentally devolve any decisions which can go to three ward committees, where the local elected councillors will decide, with the active involvement of local people. There will also be far greater opportunity for less formal discussion about local issues.

It is a good moment to start. There is a major traffic management scheme coming up in Stepping Hill, but there is also a looming struggle over the future of green open space called Mirrlees – originally the staff recreation ground for a local company – and now a much loved park and wild area, being eyed up by developers.

The experiment is in its early stages. The decisions about what kind of budgets the ward committees will have still have to be made – or how they will be staffed. But they will have loose standing orders so that people can join in the discussion as far as possible.

Ward level is also more likely to spawn the kind of informal voluntary groups that can really make things happen. Maggie has hopes, for example, of a new friends of the local park group (one of over 40 in the borough) – rather as Liberal Democrat Islington has been encouraging friends groups to look after their community gardens, with great success.

Connecting up locally opens up new possibilities, if it works. It means that very flexible, sometimes tiny interventions, become possible. When pupils from Brinnington in Stockport were unable to take part in after-school activities because of poor public transport between school and home, they were able – not just to set up a project to encourage them to stay on in school – but to provide safe public transport to get them home again. This kind of co-ordination was much more difficult for old-style town halls with their silo services.

As a Liberal councillor in Leeds for eleven years from 1978, Maggie Clay was one of those who played a key role putting the ideas of community politics into practice. Being in opposition in Leeds back then was a very different business from being a senior councillor in a Liberal Democrat administration in Stockport, but there are parallels, says Maggie. You need the same kind of community development to make a difference, to lead,

inspire, cajole and make things happen. Once again, community politics here is about helping people realise they have the power to act.

Stockport has been particularly active trying to generate local activity, setting up community centres in hard-to-let shop units, organising training to run small enterprises, sharing resources with the local PCT before it became fashionable to do so. And it does seem to have an effect. Recent surveys found a ten per cent rise in people taking part in community activities and a nearly 20 per cent rise in people's sense of belonging.

But you also have to be realistic, and if people feel they belong – and are active locally – they may not want to spend their evenings on committees. Already one area committee experiment, deepening local management, has fizzled out after an exciting start. People faded away. The art may be to centre on issues that focus community attention and demand their engagement.

“The truth is that the structures are needed so that when people need to engage, they are there to support them,” says Maggie. “Ninety per cent of the time, they just want to get on with their lives. But if there's a problem, they want to know there are structures they can use to do something about it – just as when the Mirrlees issue emerged again there was a structure they could use to make their views known.”

That is the reality of community politics. The government imagines that people will be so fired up with the sheer joy of consultation that they will be at it the whole time, like members of Orwell's Junior Anti-Sex League from 1984. In practice, they have other things to do. The structures for engagement need to be there but, in the long run, what will keep people engaged isn't having a say or sitting on committees – it is active involvement in making the park better, or befriending, or running a football team. Community politics needs to recognise the vital importance of non-political action too.

In the three decades or so since community politics burst onto the political agenda, the business of rebuilding neighbourhoods has changed considerably. In the 1960s, the voluntary sector was made up of a multiplicity of small voluntary groups, often linked to churches or pubs, doing basic work like visiting and befriending. Now those microcharities are disappearing, forced out by the hoops and bureaucracies of centralised lottery programmes.

The new voluntary sector is dominated by a handful of massive agencies, delivering government targets, which Hoover up most of the available funding. It is ruled by an obsession with health and safety that often seems to exclude people from doing anything much for themselves. The rest of the sector exists on a hand-to-mouth diet of grants, desperately trying to prove that what they are doing is somehow innovative, and whose prime purpose is often to keep their professional team in salaries. It is a process that has been described by the academic Stephen Thake as ‘farming the poor’, a reference to the way the voluntary sector requires the needy to stay needy because they are the ticket to future grant-funding.

Community politics in the future faces a battle to deliver empowerment in a new situation. So imagine for a moment turning that debilitating grant-dependency on its head, so that the money is given directly to the people who are going to benefit – and they dole it out themselves.

There is a familiar whiff of the kind of risk that community politics involves here – will they give it to their friends? Will they spend it on anything inappropriate, dangerous or selfish? But that is the path pioneered by Liberal Democrat Southwark and their youth bank.

There is nothing revolutionary about the government’s Youth Opportunity Fund. It is a national pot of money available for young people to spend where they live, but there is something revolutionary about the way the council decided to allocate it. Instead of setting up a new bureaucracy, Southwark councillors asked the local Youth Council to organise leaflets, banners, press and web announcements to get young people to bid for the money.

As many as 36 young people got accredited training by the charity Youth Bank, so that they are now experts in grant applications – from developing the criteria, to assessing the grants and monitoring them. Much of half term in 2006 was spent interviewing and assessing over 100 applications and, by the end of the process, over £270,000 was awarded by young people to other young people for projects such as running a fun day, creating a film, holding a fashion show or installing a dance floor at one of the youth clubs.

“This is genuine empowerment and devolution of power – central to our core beliefs,” says Lib Dem councillor Caroline Pidgeon, who led on youth services in Southwark, until her election to the Greater London Assembly in May 2008.

Youth services used to be the Cinderella of council services, but all that has now changed. In Southwark, what with schools and children in care, Caroline presided over a third of the council's budget. Youth has also been one of Southwark's success stories. They have over 19,000 young people aged 13 to 19 in the borough and, in 2006, their youth service was in contact with a third of the local age group.

That means junior street leaders, young friends of parks, 180 millennium volunteers, a local film-making competition and Southwark's successful community games – a year round programme of sports coaching and competitions for young people across the council's eight devolved community council areas. Over 9,000 young people have represented their community council area in a wide range of sports.

Of course, part of running youth services is about finding out what young people actually want, rather than assuming they are an indistinguishable lump that is all interested in the same things.

“That means we ask young people what they want,” says Caroline. “We don't set up provision that we think is suitable for them and that they should enjoy. The number of times I have been to a youth centre where there has been dancing in one corner, a scrabble contest in another and a chill out chatting area in another! Never assume what young people want.” They carry out a 'pupil voice' survey across all their schools every year, and have carried out a MORI survey to find out what young people want and what their perceptions are on the quality of life in Southwark.

Many Liberal Democrat councils have set up youth councils. Southwark is setting up youth forums through youth groups and clubs and school councils, structured in parallel to the council's eight devolved committees, and feeding in to one Southwark Youth Council. As a good Liberal Democrat local authority, Southwark has also devolved decision-making and spending power to geographical areas.

There is also a borough-wide Youth Council, which meets the local Children's Trust twice a year, and met Caroline whenever they sent her an email – after which, she would find herself wandering through Peckham to the youth club where the meetings are held. And what they have to say was often extremely useful.

When, in 2006, they brought up the issue of getting emergency contraception at local pharmacies – and how young people were failing to do so because of the attitude of some of the pharmacists behind the counter – it

meant Caroline and her colleagues could do something about it. Teenage pregnancies are now falling, and largely because of insights like that.

The youth councils can also be a means of communicating for other agencies. If local police find young people with two mobile phones deeply suspicious, they need to understand why – and how common it is for young people in Southwark to have one phone for cheap rate, and another for pay-as-you-go.

These are not insignificant conversations. All the research suggests that, the more young people trust the police, the less low level crime there is. And, because of the phenomenon set out in the Broken Windows research, the less low-level crime, the less serious crime.

“If young people can have the confidence to talk to us in a mature way about real issues, it is enormously valuable,” says Caroline. “Our structure is designed to make that possible.”

The same principle applied when the council Southwark decided they needed a young people’s website. From a pool of just under 100 entries, the council selected two teams of young people to battle it out to create the winning idea for the new website. The teams were put together to make sure there was a good balance of skills and both teams have members with writing, photography, web or media skills and experience, alongside other talents and interests such as football, fashion design, singing, acting, BMX riding and public speaking.

In August 2007, the teams spent four days working with industry professionals to develop ideas for the website. The council then asked young people in Southwark what they thought of the two designs. The comments went to the judges and they chose the winning format. “It wasn’t necessarily the one that I was most attracted to, but it is not aimed at my age group – no matter how young I may think I am,” says Caroline.

A raft of Liberal Democrat councils have been looking for ways to giving young people more of a voice. Lib Dem Bristol brought together 250 local young people to help them hammer out a youth participation strategy. Lib Dem Watford has a youth council; Lib Dem Cardiff has a youth parliament. Lib Dem Leeds’ youth council has an office in the Civic Hall and a budget of £2,000. Lib Dem Newcastle has an ambitious U-decide project to help young people decide how to spend money in their local area.

The bottom line is that, as always with community politics, this is all about being outward looking. It goes beyond offering new kinds of representation and seeks out ways of giving more responsibility. It also means sometimes stepping out of the limitations of office. I think it's really easy to get young people into our comfort zone," says Caroline. "It is much more difficult to go out and talk to them."

This theme – getting out of the comfort zone and working alongside people, where they happen to be – runs throughout the community politics agenda. It includes, for example, trusting neighbourhoods with real assets to help them be more independent: Lib Dem Devon has set up the Devon Reinvestment Service to support communities that want to take over and manage under-used council buildings or land.

All these seem to be a necessary condition of *empowerment*:

### **Recognise how much you need people**

Handing back power means recognising the hard truth for politicians and bureaucrats alike: that nothing the council wants to achieve is possible without the active engagement of their ultimate beneficiaries. Not just by getting them sitting on advisory boards or asking their opinion: most people will get and stay involved only if they are doing something. In fact, getting people actively involved in making the neighbourhood better – not just demanding that somebody else should – puts them into a whole new reciprocal relationship with public services. When Lib Dem Islington and Southwark got involved in launching local time banks, encouraging mutual support, they found there was immediately a different quality to the relationship with those involved.

### **Building bridging capital**

When sociologists pioneered the concept of social capital – the networks and trust that make it possible for a neighbourhood to work effectively – they also talked about 'bridging' capital: those aspects of local energy that bring communities together rather than drive them apart. After the riots in Bradford in 2001, a series of reports condemned local authorities for exacerbating divisions in the politically correct way they organised their voluntary sector grants. For Liberal Democrat Pendle, that meant building a series of local action groups – like the Brierfield Women's Group, linking white and Asian women to campaign for better NHS dental services locally.

**Only connect**

Interconnected services, and local interest groups, may look untidy to traditional bureaucrats, but they enable innovative local solutions to happen. The sheer complexity of local life seems impossible to traditional politicians, bred in the world of command-and-control, but this is the environment where the new kind of local politician can prosper – working alongside local people, but with the leadership to draw people along behind them, and the vision – in the end – to enhance people’s power rather than drain it away to maintain their own.

# seven : the future of community politics

*“Without political power, Liberal principles and policies will forever remain in the wings ...[but] we must never clutch the cloak of establishment too close around us or warm ourselves too well in its folds.”*

**John Pardo, *The Liberal Road to Power***

*“Individual people who have more control over their lives and the things which affect them live longer and are more healthy. They are less likely to be depressed and more likely to engage with and support their parents, their children, their friends and their communities.”*

**Gordon Lishman, *Community Politics Today*, 2006**

**the debate often takes place  
outside of the political parties**

School action groups which get pupils working with each other on joint projects – involving up to a third of the school in a range of objectives to tackle bullying, revamp the toilets, green the school or improve the food.

An innovative local court system that takes minor offences out of the court system, bringing victim and perpetrator together in front of volunteer juries of local people from the same community.

A depressed housing estate which is trying to keep their local earnings re-circulating locally by setting up social enterprises for takeaway food or plumbing or other needs, to plug the leaks in their local economy.

Three innovative projects, all in Liberal Democrat controlled areas – though none of them actually the initiative of the council or the party, though the Chard Community Justice Panel (slogan: Bringing justice back home) is the brainchild of backbench Lib Dem councillor Jill Shortland.

The school action groups, part of an innovative project called Learning to Lead, began in nine schools in Somerset with dramatic improvements in the physical environment and well-being of the children, and their academic results – involving up to a third of all the pupils in activity.

But all three of them – including the third, the Marsh Farm estate in Luton – are indicators of the future of community politics. All of them are transforming those involved from passive supplicants to local agencies into active producers of their own future.

All three are, in their different ways, indications of where the mainsprings of community politics are heading: finding ways to allow people to use their skills and time locally, politically but not just politically. They are based on the growing realisation that, unless communities can use people's abilities – old, young, 'hard to reach' – then all the massive resources poured into welfare and services are probably not going to work very effectively.

Those who developed community politics in the 1960s were then learning from brand new ways of looking at society, and new ideas about how change might happen. That was before the explosion of social research that has proved, with increasing certainty year after year, just how vital social networks are for achieving any change at all – and just how disastrous their destruction has been.

Research in Chicago in 1997 by the Harvard School of Public Health revealed that what made the difference to crime levels in Chicago wasn't

anything socio-economic. It was the existence of local trust, social networks and the confidence to intervene when they saw young people hanging around suspiciously around. In its own way, this proved at least part of the theoretical case for community politics.

We know now – as Lishman, Greaves and all the others didn't know then – that people embedded in social networks are less likely to be depressed, more likely to support their parents and children, and more likely to be healthy. In fact, the risk factor for having no friends is as high as smoking. We know now that the pressure on local doctors can double when people feel that plans for their future are being imposed on them from above, for example when their estate is going to be demolished.

We know more now about what is capable of building sustainable change in communities, thanks to new insights by people like the theorist John McKnight, and the gurus of asset-based community development in the USA. Edgar Cahn, Anna Coote and the co-production theorists have been shown how neither education, health nor crime-fighting is going to work properly unless people are engaged as in the actual delivery of services – broadening what public services can achieve.

In the UK, the recent Power Inquiry has demonstrated a democratic crisis in the political system as our centralised system – distant, patronising and sclerotic – grinds ever slower in its own inefficiencies.

These are debates that are taking place largely outside the Liberal Democrats, and the political wing of community politics has not yet meshed with it very closely. Nor have they engaged yet with any of the Conservative or Labour community theorists either. But if community politics remains distinctively Liberal – compared to all the other community movements on the political market – it lies in a series of apparently small differences which have enormous significance for the future.

First, community politics isn't just about *doing* more things for people – more advisory groups and yet more official consultation. It is about turning the political process on its head so that people can do more for themselves.

Second, community politics is not about *giving* people power from on high – a modern version of *noblesse oblige*. It is about helping them realise they have the power already and helping them use it.

Third, community politics is not about the manipulation of artificial distinctions between different communities and racial groups, but concerned

about good relations between communities, as well as within them. It believes that local activity, rather than local supplication, is a way of bridging those divides that have been so misused by racists and fanatics.

Fourth, community politics remains a critique of conventional politics. It isn't about manipulating the levers of power in ways that shower goodies on their grateful electorates more profusely. It is about the politician as *catalyst*, the element of a chemical experiment that makes it possible for the reaction to happen.

At the heart of all these distinctions is a distinctively Liberal Democrat belief in people. There is a leap of faith in community politics, that if people have the information they need and the responsibility to act, then they will rise to the occasion – and will take better, fairer, more innovative and more effective decisions. It is a belief for which there is no final proof: a simple belief – not just about human nature – but about how things work, though there is plenty of anecdotal evidence in this book that community politics does work.

There are risks at the heart of community politics. But, equally, there are risks in not doing it, and the present apathy, lethargy, sclerosis and inefficiency is predictable result of ignoring the assets that local people represent.

In the end, community politics is about change, and how it is possible, at a period in human development when this is the central question – whether personal or political change is possible at all. It is a formula for making change happen, in a period where politics seems is threatening to collapse into ineffectual rituals where nothing is possible at all, except when the rich and powerful will it.

Community politics therefore claims to be an antidote to this hopelessness. It says that, when politicians look outwards – outside the internal obsessions of party and technique, and the trappings of establishment authority – and work alongside the people they want to represent, they will not just change the way society works, they will also be elected. As long as, once elected, they carry on the process of sharing access to the levers of power.

It also says that, actually, the levers of power are not where we think they are. Politicians and bureaucrats play with them, ritualise and fetishise them, but achieve so little, despite the flurry of targets and statistics. The levers remain with ordinary people, acting together, if they can only realise it and use them.

Liberal Democrats have reassured themselves over the years that other political traditions might ape the style but could not swallow the community politics ideology. This is true, but only half true. There is now such interest in the whole area, and all parties have related strands of thinking, however well buried they are. Labour Preston pioneered the housing gateway; Hackney Conservatives led the community campaign against the council sale of small shops. There are some Labour and Conservative politicians that are successfully campaigning alongside communities, just as there are Liberal Democrats that are so far failing to do so.

On the other hand, it is rare to find anyone but Liberal Democrats taking on the whole community politics agenda simultaneously – all five verbs at the heart of this book. There are also signs that the party is once again recognising that, to achieve political progress, they have to be recognisably different in the way they do things and that this is the way forward. Hence ALDC's Community Politics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century campaign. Taken together, this renewed excitement means paying attention to ten challenges about modernising community politics in the years ahead:

### **1. Rethink the central purpose of political parties**

If politics is about encouraging neighbourhoods to take and use power, then the central purpose of political parties shifts – partly at least – from electioneering to training. It means more concentration on training people, wherever they are, how to achieve change in their own lives and in their surroundings. Political parties have the combined membership no bigger than the circulation of a small women's magazine. They badly need a new function likely to capture people's imagination and gratitude (Liberal Democrats in Hounslow have already launched their own training module for new members).

### **2. Rethink the evidence**

Community politics rests on beliefs about people and how they behave, and we need more evidence – anecdotal or more formal – about how and why community politics works, just as we need more evidence to prove the efficiency and effectiveness of local power. The mainstream assumption that institutions need to be bigger, more distant and less human in order to be more efficient is still far from vanquished.

### **3. Rethink the voluntary sector**

Centralised funding regimes and bizarre reporting requirements have transformed the voluntary sector into two halves – the giant agencies delivering government targets and a struggling mass of local activity,

constantly forced to prove their own innovation, hopelessly spending their dwindling resources on collecting irrelevant statistics for distant funders. It is harder for them to work alongside communities, and when the voluntary sector starts to get in the way of communities taking power for themselves, then we need new methods of sustainable funding – and new ideas about spreading power – so that they do what they do best.

#### **4. Rethink risk**

Community activity of all kinds is being hampered by debilitating health and safety regimes where both public and voluntary sectors have become fearful of local people taking any action or initiative on their own account. We need to find new ways of protecting the right of local people to act, to make a difference and – if necessary – get it insured.

#### **5. Rethink success**

How do we know when community politics has succeeded? If the only measure we have is votes and elections then, in the end, we will miss the point, just as it would be impossible for a football manager to improve his team just by looking at the score. We need to find other ways of testing whether we are getting through – the number of young people involved, the number of local organisations set up, the number of new businesses and enterprises launched, for example. We need to benchmark the process of spreading power to make sure we are achieving it.

#### **6. Rethink the tools**

The kind of techniques used by Andrew Dakers to build an alternative plan for Brentford High Street are almost mainstream now in parts of the voluntary sector, but have not generally filtered through to the political world. It is time they became part of the armoury for community politicians as well.

#### **7. Rethink local economics**

Bernard Greaves is right that Community Politics 2.0 must include methods whereby neighbourhoods can take better control of their economic destinies. These are increasingly available: ways to monitor where local money is disappearing – and whether it can be recirculated locally – through to ways that communities can profit from their own renewable energy schemes. But these need to be built into the toolkit of community politicians too.

## **8. Rethink where we campaign**

Local authorities are elected, and it makes sense that they should remain the local focus for political campaigns. But the world of unelected quangos, health authorities, PCTs, regional development agencies and all the rest badly need the attention of campaigners too. They have the power and we need to get on there as community politicians, and to use them as the bases for political campaigns to open them up and make them face the public.

## **9. Rethink policy**

There is currently a mismatch between the practice of community politics and the bulk of Liberal Democrat official policy. It isn't that the two contradict each other, it is that too little policy addresses the central issues of community politics beyond the devolution of power – community politicians need the support of policy about how to cut our giant institutions down to size, how to tackle the growing monopoly power of retailers and other corporates, how to set professionals free of targets and empower frontline staff, and how to engage public service clients in delivering services – and a great deal else besides.

## **10. Rethink ourselves**

Liberal Democrats need to look critically at their campaigns. Are we working alongside the local community or are we simply using a megaphone to reach them? Are we genuinely sharing power? Are we transforming people's ability to take and use power for themselves? And if not, why are we doing politics in the first place?

# Useful websites and resources

ALDC

Bath campaign

Brentford High Street campaign

Campaign merchandise

Community Action Network  
(social entrepreneurs)

Community change tools

Community planning

Community visioning

Dacorum Hospital Campaign

Dorothy Thornhill

Enterprise training

Local Government Association

Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation

New Economics Foundation

Petitions

Planning aid

Plugging the leaks (money flows)

Scarman Trust

Surveys

Theory and Practice

Transition towns

Unltd (social entrepreneurs)

[www.aldc.org.uk](http://www.aldc.org.uk)

[www.savestmartins.moonfruit.com](http://www.savestmartins.moonfruit.com)

[www.brentfordhighstreet.org.uk](http://www.brentfordhighstreet.org.uk)

[www.spice.co.uk](http://www.spice.co.uk)

[www.can-online.org.uk](http://www.can-online.org.uk)

[www.hounslowlibdems.org.uk/pages/](http://www.hounslowlibdems.org.uk/pages/)

[Tools-for-changing-your-community.html](http://Tools-for-changing-your-community.html)

[www.communityplanning.net](http://www.communityplanning.net)

[www.ctcnet.org/what/action/?page\\_id=30](http://www.ctcnet.org/what/action/?page_id=30)

[www.savehemel.com/](http://www.savehemel.com/)

[www.watfordlibdems.info/mayor](http://www.watfordlibdems.info/mayor)

[www.bizfizz.org.uk](http://www.bizfizz.org.uk)

[www.libdemgroup.lga.gov.uk](http://www.libdemgroup.lga.gov.uk)

[www.nif.co.uk](http://www.nif.co.uk)

[www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org)

[www.thepetitionsite.com](http://www.thepetitionsite.com)

[www.planningaid.rtpi.org.uk](http://www.planningaid.rtpi.org.uk)

[www.pluggingtheleaks.org](http://www.pluggingtheleaks.org)

[www.thescarmantrust.org](http://www.thescarmantrust.org)

[www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)

[www.cix.co.uk/~rosenstiel/aldc/](http://www.cix.co.uk/~rosenstiel/aldc/)

[commpol.htm](http://commpol.htm)

[www.transitiontowns.org](http://www.transitiontowns.org)

[www.unltd.org.uk](http://www.unltd.org.uk)