

**power** actually

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

**david boyle**

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## About the Author

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## **Acknowledgments**

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Lib Dem local authorities are not, of course, alone in their achievements. They draw ideas from their officers from local people and organisations, from partner parties in joint administrations, from think-tanks and other councils around the country and abroad. If this short book encourages councils to learn from each other, and from our sister parties in Northern Ireland and the rest of Europe, it will have been worthwhile.

**David Boyle**

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# foreword

It was 14 years ago when I went round the UK visiting people, places and projects to rediscover the 'real' Britain that we lived in, rather than the imagined country, coated in Westminster presumptions, that politicians are so often fond of describing. My conclusions then are not so different now; that central government cannot, and does not, provide all the answers. How we can lead happier, healthier and safer lives comes from building successful partnerships in society and communities. It is worth quoting from my observations at the time:

*"What hope there is in Britain is to be found not in our formal national institutions, but in our informal and voluntary structures and, especially, in our local communities. What has struck me is how often I have found solutions being practically worked out at local level to problems which seem to us in Westminster to be insoluble."*

**'Beyond Westminster - finding hope in Britain' (1994)**

Now over a decade later I am sure there is much changed, much improved and sadly, much still to be done. I am proud though, as a Liberal Democrat, to read here more stories of communities and individuals finding their own solutions suiting their unique circumstances - and more, achieving improvements often in the face of bureaucratic or central government intransigence or cynicism.

Liberal Democrats have a proud record of leading and running local councils at the forefront of public policy, and yet still retain the essential features of a group who are determined to remain close to the people they serve. Councillors are, after all, first and foremost dedicated volunteers from their own communities, often working full time jobs in addition to their political work. I believe there is still possibility for much hope and improvement in our country - and with these inspiring examples, much for us to learn and encourage others to adopt.

**Paddy Ashdown, March 2007**

# introduction

**beyond pragmatism**

*"Opposition is poetry. Governing is prose."*

**Cllr Susan Smith, leader, Woking Borough Council, quoting Mario Cuomo**

*"It is important to remember that our political goal is not just to be competent managers of local authorities, but to fight for our vision of society both locally and nationally."*

**Cllr Iain Sharpe, leader, Watford Borough Council**

"If this council was a dart board, and you threw a dart into it," said one local government official, "then anywhere it landed, it would land on a screw up."

He was speaking to a Liberal Democrat councillor of a new ruling group, having just taken over from Labour, and it might have been said in one of many places where Lib Dems have found themselves suddenly in control over the past decade.

Not all local authorities are in that kind of state by any means, but we know the ones that are: town halls where the phones are rarely answered, where nobody complains about the dire services because they have given up hope of anything new, and where the locals have been imprisoned in inhuman concrete monstrosities, where graffiti is never removed and corridors are never cleaned. Even local authorities which do not share that criminal inefficiency have been, until recently, deeply conservative places - either because they were politically Conservative or because of timid officers afraid of the consequences of standing up to powerful interests, or doing anything differently.

Local government is difficult these days. Local authorities are regarded with more cynicism and less deference. They are expected to deliver government targets that bear little relation to what local people need or want, while controlling only 15 per cent of public spending in their area. They are expected to work with an alphabet soup of local quangos and agencies, delivering health or other services within a multiplicity of conflicting boundaries and increasingly diverse communities - and to do so with a democratic mandate that is undermined by a combination of central arrogance and plummeting turnout.

But that democratic mandate gives them a legitimacy that the quangocracy lacks, and - with the right leadership - that can make all the difference. So, because they

have some room for manoeuvre and innovation, local authorities suddenly find themselves alone, in the morass of conflicting and constipated quangos, as the only bodies capable of local vision, co-ordination and action. And where the local political leadership has realised this opportunity, things begin to happen.

It would be ludicrous to claim that Liberal Democrats are the only councils that have grasped this, and the only ones prepared to be innovative, just as it would be ludicrous to suggest that all Lib Dem councils are at the forefront of innovation. They are not. But many of them are at the forefront of a new way of doing local government - that uses these tools to drive forward a process of change - and that means there is an important story to be told.

Good administration looks very different in different places - even in the same place. Good Liberal Democrat councils look different too, at least on the surface. But there are vital attitudes and objectives they share, which go beyond merely good government, which are not always shared - at least in this combination - by their political opponents.

It is difficult being in power, much more difficult than opposition. But Lib Dems in control are reinventing what 'power' means, moving on from the traditional political obsession with command and control, devolving power lower because that is where it works, and breaking down the departmental silos inside and outside the council so that things can happen. It means being pragmatic about who actually delivers services, so long as they remain responsive to local people. It means looking beyond the traditional areas of local government responsibility - to health or food or well-being - because that is the best way to improve people's lives.

There are now 85 councils in the UK that are run or led by Liberal Democrats. This short book can't possibly name them all, and we have chosen representative examples to stand for many more. But it is intended as a way to tell the story of all of them - and it is an important story, that harks back to the ambition of Joseph Chamberlain and his pioneering Liberal colleagues in local government 140 years ago. It carries within it the message, as he urged his colleagues then, to be more ambitious about what local government can do.

**one : power**

**the power of  
a hundred  
schoolchildren**

*"Toryism is distrust of the people, tempered by fear. Liberalism is trust of the people, tempered by prudence."*

**William Ewart Gladstone**

*"If we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society. We must go into the unknown, the uncertain and the insecure, using what reason we may have to plan as well as we can for both security and freedom."*

**Karl Popper, The Open Society and its Enemies**

When councils close a school, cut down a tree or build a new shopping centre, who has the right to force local councillors to think again - especially if the decision is controversial?

Other councillors? That's what the Local Government Act 2000 intended. Local businesses or local voters? That would be a bold innovation. But what about schoolchildren, if they are affected?

It was on that very issue - extending democracy to children - that one of the most exciting innovations in accountability hung in the balance when it was debated in the Kingston Guildhall towards the end of 1999.

It shouldn't have been a heated debate. It was an idea that emerged from discussions about how Kingston, in the south-west corner of London, ought to put the new Local Government Act into effect - with its new cabinet model of governance with enhanced scrutiny powers - and preferably go beyond it. But when you are pushing forward the boundaries of accountability, you can expect tempers to get a little frayed.

South-west London is one of those areas of the UK which has seen a consistent growth in support for Liberal Democrats over the past two decades. But in 1999, Kingston was actually controlled by a minority Conservative administration. And because the Local Government Act was a creation of the Blair government, they were as keen as anyone to upstage Whitehall if they could.

The Liberal Democrats on the council managed to persuade them to let the opposition party chair the new scrutiny committee, so that there would be an added bite to the

analysis of decisions by council leaders. That was a bold enough innovation, given the traditional monolithic exercise of power in local councils under Tory and Labour. But what else could be done?

This was no simple business of leaders bowing to the demands of the opposition. Kingston was undergoing a brief hiccup in what had been unbroken Liberal Democrat rule since 1994. Councillors on both sides realised that anything they agreed that would hold the ruling party to account would probably be used the other way around in a few years time. The boot could shortly be on the other foot - as, in fact, it proved.

The trouble, according to the Liberal Democrats, was that the new scrutiny committees still left all the power in the hands of councillors. What if politicians in all the main parties broadly agreed? What could people do then if there was widespread opposition to some plan or policy? How could they force politicians to re-think?

Among those taking part in Kingston's constitutional review was Derek Osbourne (now leader of the council). A former local government officer himself he was forced to choose between his politics and his career back in 1990, when the Thatcher government banned council employees from standing for local elections. In the middle of one of the review meetings, Derek had a brainwave. What if a hundred local people were given the power to call in any council decision, return it to those who had made it, and force a re-think?

It would increase trust in the council. It would be democratic too by letting ordinary people bypass the normal entrenched powers. The Conservative councillors were happy with the idea in principle, but had some reservations. But they balked at his next suggestion. What if a hundred local businesses had the same power? Or a hundred nurses, or even a hundred school children if a decision had been made affecting their school?

In the full council debate, the party divisions began to spill out. One of the Tory councillors - actually a prominent local history teacher - condemned the whole idea as ridiculous. How could a local authority hand over some of its power to kids? His speech kindled some enthusiasm for the plan among the handful of Labour councillors, and with their support, it passed.

Nearly eight years on, Kingston is firmly in Liberal Democrat hands - it has been since 2002 - and any group of a hundred citizens, whoever they are, have the right to call in any decision. It is the Liberal Democrat administration that is being held to account, sending decisions ultimately to the scrutiny committee, which is chaired by the opposition.

Whitehall is rarely keen on innovation at local level, and in fact a scrutiny committee controlled by the opposition turned out to be against the new act, making a mockery of using it as any kind of check on executive power. Derek and his group were taken by surprise by this. Instead, they have signed an undertaking not to take up all their places on the committee.

But even that has complications. Because of Kingston's long period of innovative Liberal Democrat rule, the borough was arguably the most imaginative in the UK when it came to new ways of sharing power. One of the first decisions by the new Liberal Democrat administration under John Tilley in 1994 was to organize a radical decentralisation of power to neighbourhoods.

London boroughs are particularly large units. Kingston has 153,000 people living in it: it is not easy to identify with the administration of a local government unit on that scale. Nor can the Guildhall know what works best in all the different neighbourhoods that make up the borough.

They were not the first local authority to experiment with solving this problem by decentralising to neighbourhoods - Liberal councillors in Tower Hamlets had pioneered the idea back in 1986. Nor were they the last: Liberal Democrat councils like Eastleigh and South Somerset have adopted a similar model - handing decisions to a committee of local councillors for the area concerned. It is a central tenet of Liberal Democrat philosophy that local people know best the complexity of the issues that confront them, and are best placed to take decisions about them.

Kingston's devolution has stood the test of time: each of their neighbourhoods has a budget of up to £2 million. But this particularly radical innovation does complicate the issue of who should scrutinise. If councillors representing one neighbourhood take the local decisions, then inevitably some neighbourhoods are under the control of another party. That's the way they voted. That's democracy.

So if a hundred voters call in a decision by a neighbourhood like Maldens and Coombe, which is under control of the Conservatives, then the ruling Liberal Democrats chair the scrutiny committee.

Derek agrees that giving powers to call in decisions can be an irritating business. Its purpose is to check the powerful, after all. But it has unexpected effects.

In December 2005, a hundred local businesses gathered their signatures together to review a decision to ban A-boards (the freestanding advertising hoardings that sit on pavements outside shops and pubs) from the borough's streets. In the event, the councillors found themselves listening to a debate in the Guildhall between local traders and local disability groups, with themselves holding the reins. The disability

lobby - for whom A-boards are a dangerous obstruction - won the debate, but a divisive internal council debate had been broadened beyond the council hothouse.

"The reason I proposed the idea of the call-in is that it's challenging," says Derek. "When all the groups on a council agree, it is very tidy for them, but it can exclude the community completely. Under our scheme, ordinary people have the right - not just the big people of the town - to force the politicians to re-think or explain what they're doing in public. It is a fundamental Liberal Democrat principle."

Kingston has been widely praised by local government's Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), but very few local authorities have so far followed their lead. It's an example of how Liberal Democrats deal with power: *they risk giving it to ordinary people.*

Labour and Conservative administrations have been accused of trying to gather as much power to themselves as possible: that was the way government was done traditionally. It is one of the main reasons trust in politicians has slumped. Liberal Democrats deny that is either effective or sustainable. What Kingston has managed is to share power with voters - even with the opposition, when that is what local people want - knowing that it could be hi-jacked by political opponents. Though so far, no group of a hundred children have taken advantage of their new power.

But then giving the opposition responsibility in their own neighbourhoods can be politically useful too, just as putting them in charge of scrutinising council decisions can keep the ruling group on its toes - and that benefits everybody.

That is why oppositions often say no to such responsibilities, just as they did when the new Liberal Democrat administration in Warrington in May 2006 offered the chair of the scrutiny and overview committees to Labour, the former majority party.

But there are other ways of having the same effect - keeping your own group outward-looking and calming the heat of political debate. The new minority Liberal Democrat administration in Hull have joint leaders' meetings, a monthly collective meeting involving opposition parties, and take care to involve ward councillors - from all parties - in sensitive issues affecting their wards.

"By involving everyone, it makes them less likely to exploit tough decisions, which is important in a hung council," says Lib Dem leader Carl Minns. "I believe that this is not only good politics, but good governance too. It makes council business much less volatile and partisan."

Accusations of arrogance come all too quickly to new administrations in power. Often they can't see it themselves because they have become too focussed on the wheels of

committee systems. Something needs to be in place to look outwards. When the new Liberal group in Richmond in 1980 found there was only one opposition councillor left, they offered to automatically second any motion he cared to put forward. That's good democratic practice.

But there are other examples too:

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### **Listen, listen and listen again**

Among the many reasons so many people regard their councils with exhausted contempt, is their patronising and dismissive attitude to the people they are supposed to serve. Decisions become elusive things which have always already been taken. Communications collapses into just about telling people, in ever glossier ways, about the glories of council policies. Focus leaflets are also vital of course, but often what people want most of all is to know they are being heard.

One of the first things the new Lib Dem administration in Hull did, having been catapulted into unexpected office by a split Labour vote at the annual meeting, was to introduce public question times at cabinet meetings. It was the same in Cambridge, where they immediately gave people the right to speak at planning committees and to ask questions at council meetings.

This attitude to people is also reflected - as it has to be - in local Lib Dem campaigning. Councillors and canvassers in South Lakeland surveyed 10,000 out of the 14,000 homes in Kendal between January and the run-up to the 2006 elections. It won them 66.4 per cent of the vote.

Others have tried to tackle the cynicism with which statutory consultation is regarded by people on the receiving end. When they consult people in Lib Dem Liverpool, they make sure all the information about needs and opportunities, both locally and city-wide, is made available. When Liverpool consulted on the small-scale demolition scheme for Toxteth, those who lived in the houses voted 72 per cent in favour, because they had been involved in working out local alternatives with housing providers.

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### **Bust through the bureaucracy**

Every day, 22,000 people contact Liverpool City Council. If they can get through and get help, every one of those calls is potentially providing information that can be used to improve the performance of council departments.

But what are vital details to some councils are just an annoyance to others. Visiting or phoning town halls can be a nightmare. People have to wait ages for the phone to be answered and are then shoved from department to department. Any new administration might reasonably be expected to tackle this clear generator of cynicism.

Once again, it was Liberal Tower Hamlets that pioneered the idea of one-stop shops in the 1980s, so that people do not have to shop around endlessly through different council departments, before finally finding the combination of help they need. Lib Dem Watford and St Albans were quick to set up one-stop customer centres to tackle the problem.

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### Devolve power downwards

Power that is gathered together in a few hands can often be misused, but it can also be ineffective, as new administrations often find when they take over. "After waiting for years to get our hands on the levers of power," says Watford's Lib Dem Mayor Dorothy Thornhill, "we found when we pulled them, nothing happened."

Devolving power is the Liberal Democrat solution to this problem of centralised constipation, but it is always pioneering and risky - and often the pioneers have had to invent imaginative structures that make it possible. The danger is that it can simply replace one bureaucracy with another. There is often no point in devolving formal decisions unless you also free up the council to devolve day-to-day decisions to frontline staff, so they can use their initiative to meet local needs.

Of all the devolution models, possibly the boldest is now Lib Dem Birmingham. The Liberal Democrats in the administration have re-organised the council into ten 'constituencies' and given them £100m in service budgets and 2,500 staff directly responsible to each. The 12 councillors representing each constituency have to meet in public, and to build links with the strategic partnerships and with key local agencies in each area. There are minimum standards for each service across the city, but they have wide powers to adapt services to local needs.

What lies behind all this is a basic attitude of openness towards the public, which any good administration needs. Openness towards the rest of the council can play dividends as well - macho 'city boss' politics does not always send the right signals.

When Hull Lib Dems took control so unexpectedly in 2006, their vision, and therefore their leadership of the city, was that much more effective because they had risked sending their draft plans to the council's senior management team, and to key people and organisations in the city. It also meant that the ugly rumours

spread by their political opponents could be checked easily by key people before they became accepted truths.

But it goes beyond that: Derek Osbourne developed the hundred-signature challenge deliberately as a way to keep challenging the self-satisfaction that besets any ruling group. He and other successful leaders know that deliberately devolving power, responsibility and information leads to better government - it solves problems. That is what 'open societies' do so much better than closed societies, according to the Liberal philosopher Karl Popper. Liberal Democrat councillors in power around the UK are proving he was right.

**two : green**

**every streetlight a  
power station**

*"Sooner or later, we sit down to a banquet of consequences."*

**Robert Louis Stevenson**

*"We were very good at generating leaflets exhorting others to take energy efficiency and water management seriously, but who enjoys taking lessons from a hypocrite?"*

**CLlr Christian Vassie, York's Liberal Democrat city strategy chair,  
about life in the Labour council before they took control**

It was the summer of 2001. Ray Russell was sitting in the public gallery at a planning inquiry in the Derbyshire borough of Chesterfield, the town famous for its strange twisted church spire, which now also adorns the top of their council website. He was listening to a rehash of some familiar arguments as the Royal Mail appealed against the council's refusal of planning permission for further development at their offices.

The inquiry was held in the town hall, and the Royal Mail employed a top planning barrister to represent them. Chesterfield was then run by the Labour Party - this used to be the constituency of Tony Benn - and their planning officers were explaining again why they had turned down the development: because it would add to congestion from commuters, and because the development lacked an accompanying green transport plan to divert staff out of their cars.

"Perhaps we could have a look at the council's green transport plan?" said the Royal Mail's barrister. He asked rhetorically, because barristers do not usually ask this kind of question without knowing the answer, and there was, of course, no such thing as a council green transport plan.

"Even though we were in opposition at the time, I felt really embarrassed for the town," said Ray. "We were asking people to do something we wouldn't do ourselves - even though we could have been benefiting from it."

That was the moment Ray decided to himself that, if the local Liberal Democrats ever managed to get the chance, they would set a green example in as powerful way as they could.

Ray is a former secondary school headmaster and a keen organic gardener. He has had a fascination for renewable energy for years, and when his group took control of Chesterfield in 2003, he finally got the opportunity he had been waiting for. The previous administration had experimented with geothermal energy in a new office block, drilling 70 pipes into the ground, so there was already some expertise among the council staff.

The chief engineer was another enthusiast. Ray went to see him as soon as he could and asked him to think about the best way forward. The result was that Chesterfield was awarded the one of the biggest central government grants to power their Queen's Park Leisure Centre with photovoltaic cells on the roof, enough for up to two thirds of their energy, investing £200,000 of their own money as well. The council has also built a new coach station that uses photo-voltaic cells and other public buildings that use geothermal heating and cooling.

But it was all very well putting the council's house in order, after the Royal Mail debacle. To make a real impact, they had to be able to have an influence on what other companies and developers did. They could do so partly by showing what was possible and partly by being more ambitious about what they demanded. One of the first opportunities to do this was a derelict site in the town which was planned to include a B&Q superstore. Ray's administration called in the developers and told them what they required.

It worked. The store will use solar panels and the store's lighting will use roof-mounted domes to focus natural light into concentrated beams, with new offices built to take full advantage of sunlight, with large windows on the elevations that receive most direct sun. The office block will also be fitted with photovoltaic cells, and the site will have a park, including a wetland area to encourage birdlife.

But the real challenge came after the meeting over B&Q, when the new Donkins development, on a former cylinders factory, provided an opportunity to do the same with a volume housebuilder. The question was: what could they achieve? Ask too little and they would have failed; ask too much and they would end up in a planning inquiry again.

Ray asked the borough's planners to bring Barratt Homes representatives along for a special meeting, and to press them hard on renewable energy. How many of the new houses would have renewable energy fitted? The answer was none. They told Barret that the council would expect at least ten per cent of the homes to be able to generate their own electricity.

The company sent their regional managing director to the meeting, and to Ray's relief, he became fascinated in the whole idea as well. Now ten per cent of the new homes (28) have solar panels to heat domestic water - the first time the home-building

company has built solar panels into new homes. After the success of the first panels fitted, Barratt now offer them as an optional extra on the other homes on the site.

"The point was that we were able to demand this from developers because we were doing something ourselves," says Ray, "and now I think it will be easier. At the beginning, these requirements were not in the local plan, so the fact that we had done it - and were doing it - was the only basis of persuasion that we had."

Over the past year, the Lib Dem administration has turned down its first major development partly on the grounds that the developers have no plans for renewable energy. They have been told to re-submit their plans with a proposal for how much energy the new buildings will generate.

Chesterfield's success is just one example of the major progress made by Lib Dem councils from Inverclyde and Aberdeen southwards. But there is no doubt that there are two in particular that led the way: Sutton and Woking.

Sutton's ground-breaking green shift dates back to 1985 when the Liberals, then in opposition, put forward a motion to green the council, which was then voted down by the ruling Conservatives. But having taken control the following year, they were able to put it into effect.

Sutton's then leader Graham Tope describes the decision partly as a conviction that this was the way forward, and partly the need to show they were making a mark. Lib Dem Richmond was then pioneering new forms of consultation, Lib Dem Tower Hamlets was doing the same for decentralisation. Sutton's innovation was going to be the environment.

It is sometimes hard to be the first - forcing through your agenda when the recycled paper jams the photocopier, or persuading the social service department that their purchasing and car fleet needs to be green as well. Graham's colleagues made it work partly by identifying champions in every office, and partly by working closely with the borough's green groups. "We never had much money in those days, but we made a virtue of using the community - so that the boy scouts, for example, took on some of the management of recycling and earned some of the proceeds."

Ten years later on, when Sutton was the first UK council to be accredited under EMAS (the EU's eco-management auditing system), and were presented with certificate 0001, the next seven certificates all went to Lib Dem councils too.

The ground-breaking work in Woking also began with a motion by a Lib Dem councillor for an environmental audit. The council was then run by a minority administration led by the Conservatives - though it is now controlled outright by Liberal

Democrats - but the parties worked together, thanks partly to the innovative leadership of a council officer Allan Jones. Lib Dem and Tory councillors gave him the space to make Woking a world leader in electricity generation without using the national grid.

All over the town, you will now find new mini-power stations, district heating schemes and thousands of electricity-generating cells on roofs, making the town centre a net energy exporter to the town - and generating it cheaper than the national grid, saving the council £5.4m a year just on water bills. The rubbish lorries run on liquefied natural gas, the parking ticket machines run on solar energy and even the public toilets are designed to do without water.

Allan Jones has moved to London to do the same for the capital. Meanwhile, Lib Dem Aberdeen has set up a not-for-profit company to develop combined heat and power schemes, Southampton has linked up with a French energy utility to run district heating systems to 40 buildings, Eastleigh and Kirklees are leading the way on photovoltaic cells on schools, homes and civic buildings. There is also a new push into developing wind energy, like Lib Dem Bristol's wind farm at Avonmouth Docks. Perth & Kinross is looking at ways of using biomass to heat their schools.

But as well as generating green energy, you will find that Lib Dem councils also:

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### Save energy and water

One of the most cost effective sources of new energy is actually energy-saving. The Home Energy Conservation Act 1995, pioneered by Lib Dem peer Baroness Maddock when she was MP for Christchurch, turned every council into an energy conservation authority, and is believed to have delivered more energy-saving than any other government initiative.

Lib Dem Cambridge has already achieved energy savings of 35 per cent in their housing stock - way ahead of government targets - with Lib Dem North Norfolk and Carrick in Cornwall not far behind. Others have championed low energy homes (like Newcastle or Sutton's Bedzed) or insist that new developments should be carbon neutral (Milton Keynes) or pioneered new kinds of council buildings, like York's ecoDepot, the largest timber-framed straw-clad building in Europe, built in the teeth of opposition from council officers and contractors. Or they give away low energy bulbs (Birmingham), or organise conservation loans to help locals save energy or water (Kirklees). Or use grey 'recycled' water for parks and planting (Sutton).

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## Accelerate recycling

Now that most of the remaining landfill sites around London are owned by American hedge funds, it makes financial sense - even if it didn't make environmental sense - to avoid dumping rubbish that might turn out to be a resource if it was treated differently.

Lib Dem councils have been pioneer recyclers, but because they have taken control of cities where little has been done, they have become particular experts in accelerating the process, even though opposition councillors are complaining that it is too expensive (Conservative) or a middle class obsession (Labour). North Norfolk pushed recycling from 17 to 40 per cent, Waverley added 33,500 homes to the recycling scheme within six months of taking control. They do this often by determinedly extending collections to plastic and organic waste, or by getting more detailed information about where things are working and failing (Inverclyde has microchips in each bin), or offering discounts to traders for pre-sorting their waste (Bath & North East Somerset).

Often (like Uttlesford's new plans) they are in the forefront of getting people to separate rubbish at source, because it makes it easier to re-use. Often it means investing in bold new plant like composting facilities (Somerset) or anaerobic digesters (South Shropshire, whose digester also uses recycled rainwater, pipes heat to surrounding homes and sells electricity onto the grid). Often it means recycling the big stuff too (Stockport has linked up with Tarmac to make sure highway waste gets re-used). Sometimes it means turning your recycling centre into an interactive learning centre for schools.

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## Reduce and re-use

Liverpool's Bulky Bob's (see Chapter 8) is a ground-breaking method of repairing and re-using furniture that used to go into landfill, an approach which is also being used by a range of other Lib Dem councils. But there are a range of other activities Lib Dem councils are involved in to reduce waste, either in partnership with local business (Stockport), or by setting zero waste targets (Bath & North East Somerset and Milton Keynes). Or by setting up waste minimisation networks or green nappy schemes (Three Rivers). Or just by making sure all the council printers are on double-sided default mode (Sutton).

Pioneering green policies mean tackling traffic and motor fumes (see Chapter 9) and refusing to turn a blind eye to the destruction that is on your own doorstep. This is why Lib Dem Uttlesford turned down a planning application for a new runway at Stansted

Airport which would mean the airport producing 30m extra tonnes of carbon dioxide a year, the same as all the homes and cars in eastern England.

But above all it means looking at your own assets with a different attitude, whether it is roof space that could generate power or furniture that is transformed in the space of a minute into rubbish, just by throwing it over the edge of a tip. All these things have value - but only if they are put to use.

# **three : crime**

**how Chard brought  
justice home**

*"He who does not prevent a crime when he can, encourages it."*

**Seneca**

*"They're used to putting six million pounds into something and the community still hate the police. Our project has cost sixty thousand and has achieved more than projects costing six million."*

**Cllr Jill Shortland, Somerset County Council, on the dilemmas facing the Home Office when it comes to cutting crime.**

Georgiana (not her real name) was drinking in one of the noisier pubs in Chard when she looked up and saw her boyfriend walk in with another woman. She had drunk a considerable amount that night, and she dealt with the incident by smashing a bottle over his head.

It was the kind of rowdy incident of minor thuggery that happens in many towns on a Saturday night, and which never comes to court. In this case, Georgiana's boyfriend refused to press charges, and in almost every other community in Britain, that would have been that. But in the Somerset town of Chard, she was referred instead to the innovative community justice panel.

After all, Georgiana's behaviour had not just affected her boyfriend. There were the other customers in the pub whose evening had been disrupted. There was the couple who ran the pub who had to clear up the blood and glass. There were the police and emergency services as well.

The community justice panel covers Chard and Ilminster, and is made up of a network of volunteers who live nearby, aged between 21 and 83. The panel's co-ordinator Valerie Keitch visited Georgiana, and then in the hearing the chair asked key questions - developed by restorative justice programmes in the USA - like 'who do you think has been affected by your actions?' Georgiana's boyfriend and the pub managers were there too, and at the end of the hearing, all those involved signed an 'Acceptable Behaviour Contract' (ABC), which Keitch calls "a conference agreement with a bit of legal bite".

As part of this contract, Georgiana had to spend three weekend evenings collecting glasses in the pub, and this turned out to be a transformative experience. From behind

the same bar, and with the objectivity derived from being stone cold sober, she was able to watch the behaviour of her friends and contemporaries under the influence. "I never would have believed people behaved in this way." She told the landlady after one evening. "I feel ashamed. I am never going to get drunk again." The landlady took the opportunity to take her upstairs and show her the CCTV footage of the evening with the bottle. Now Georgiana works regularly behind the bar and is paid for doing so. What was an unpleasant alcoholic scrap has been transformed, by the intervention of the panel, into a turning point in somebody's life.

Chard's community justice panel, backed by the local paper and even attracting the Lord Chancellor down to see it in action, was originally the brainchild of Liberal Democrat councillor Jill Shortland, who represented the town on Somerset County Council, where she was then deputy leader. The original spark was a murder in the town in 2004 - not something that happens very often - and the local outrage when the trial was diverted to a court so far away that the local paper couldn't cover it.

The panel itself was born out of a chance remark Jill made to a reporter on the *Chard and Ilminster News*, commenting on the way local courts were being closed down all over the country and what should be done about it. A week after Jill suggested a local justice panel, the paper had received a deluge of letters which - to Jill's surprise - were overwhelmingly in favour of the idea. "You'll have to do it now," said the reporter.

So Jill sent a more formal proposal to the Home Office together with copies of the letters. A month later - backed by the local paper's campaign to 'Bring Justice home' - she began the process of being pushed from department to department in the Home Office. "I'm a bit of a nag," she says. "I wore them down."

As it turned out, Home Office officials had been studying some of the youth courts in the USA, but had been unable to develop a workable equivalent for adults, so they were interested in the idea. After a great deal of funding applications, small grants and agonizing, the Home Office agreed to fund a pilot scheme, which began in 2005.

The panel's first case involved a man who was offended by the local Speed Watch - volunteers who register the speed of cars with a radar gun - and who got out of his car and threatened them. It was a difficult case because the people involved all knew each other, and went to the same church and pub. When rumours of the incident got out, people in the community split down the middle. But the local police thought this would be a good first case for the panel.

The offender turned out to be a retired police officer and was appalled by his own behaviour, but there were reasons why he had behaved like that. When he and the speed watchers came to the panel, and he told them everything, the mood changed immediately. "All the victims wanted was an apology, and to know his behaviour wasn't personal," says Valerie Keitch. "He couldn't apologise enough. At the end,

they asked him if he wanted to meet for a drink. Eventually they asked him to join the Speed Watch team, and he did."

The fact that the panel is local, and that local people can take some responsibility for justice, makes it very powerful. They deal with cases sent, not just by the police, but local authorities or housing associations as well. The offender has to accept that they are guilty, otherwise the police can't divert the case out of the court system. Every case gets an ABC, which can last from three months to a year, and which includes some kind of restorative action. In only two cases since have these been breached.

The biggest impact of the panel has been on those offences which are classed as minor but which have a corrosive effect on the life of any neighbourhood, anything from tipping over a rubbish bin to GBH, often - but not entirely - committed by under 30-year-olds after too much alcohol. It was widely perceived in Chard, as it is in many places, that these minor offences were ignored by the police and courts system. Yet as research shows on both sides of the Atlantic, it is often small misdemeanours which attract bigger ones and determine the crime pattern over the whole town. They also drive the fear of crime.

"We have had a really, really positive response to the panel," says Jill, who now chairs the South West Regional Assembly. Evaluation since the panel began shows that the perception of the police has improved, especially among offenders who are not forced through time consuming paperwork which is irritating for both sides. When a large minority of the locals said they were afraid to go out after 5pm before the panel began, they now say that is just late at night and at weekends. Most important, the panel has a re-offending rate of just two per cent - compared to 70 per cent for some crime reduction projects.

There remain the inevitable problems caused by central government targets. Because cases diverted to the panel are not defined as 'sanctioned detections', they can't go into the police figures for cases successfully cleared up, which undermines police support for the whole idea. Jill is trying to persuade the Home Office to start a new category called 'community sanctions' which will allow the police to count these cases too.

She is in fact a former police cadet herself, and was recruited to the Liberal Democrats by Paddy Ashdown when he was Chard's local MP, after she began campaigning for a new community centre. The community justice panel was a project she undertook as the local councillor, rather than anything planned by Lib Dem groups, either on the district or county councils. But it dovetails with other work being pioneered by Lib Dem Somerset County Council, including a mentoring scheme for young people called Promise.

Jill believes that the justice panel works partly because it is well run and partly because it exemplifies real community action. "The volunteers make an enormous difference. All I did was to help it along," she says. "We helped provide a framework for the community to use to make a difference, and my goodness they have put a lot into it."

It is also a genuinely different approach to crime - not a raft of new offences, more CCTV and overstretched and centralised policing - but the reinvention of an old idea. "The idea that communities should run their own justice goes back centuries," says Jill. "Every community had this system, but we have consistently lost it from civic society for generations. Chard has helped to put it back."

As crime and its consequences rise up the political agenda, local authorities find themselves more concerned with hammering out new ways forward. For Liberal Democrats, the conventional solutions - ever more prisons, ever longer sentences - are likely to increase crime over the long-term and do nothing to tackle that low level disorder that so undermines trust and quality of life. The Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs), used to such effect in Chard and Ilminster, were also Lib Dem innovations to tackle just this problem, which began in Islington's housing department, along with Parental Control Agreements (PCAs). They emerged also out of scepticism about the effectiveness of ASBOs. The purpose of ABCs was, as they put it, "to stop the bad behaviour rather than punish the offenders". It wasn't that Lib Dems were against punishment where it was deserved, but when the punishment got in the way of genuine change, then it was worse than useless (which is why Islington has developed a support rate around ASBOs which has dramatically cut the default rate).

ABCs are not legally binding, but are a useful step on the way to possession orders and ASBOs if they fail. As developed in Islington, they provided a voluntary, written agreement between an individual and his parent or guardian and the local housing office and police, not to behave in a certain way. ABCs were rolled out across Islington in 2000, designed originally for people under 18 - though they are used more broadly in Chard - and their success is demonstrated by the way they have spread to other places. Home Secretary Charles Clarke even went so far as to call them "better than an ASBO".

You will also find that Lib Dem councils:

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### **Tackle visible, low-level disorder**

Liberal Democrats taking control of big cities realised very quickly that making streets safer was absolutely crucial to other objectives like increasing business investment or tourism. The difficulty was that policing and justice systems were more geared towards serious crime. That is why Lib Dem Cardiff has been one of

a handful of councils to introduce a new phone number - not 999 for emergencies - but 101, part of a wider effort to integrate community safety staff with police, which has been particularly praised by the Cabinet Office.

Often there is no alternative to old-fashioned local policing, which is why Lib Dem Liverpool immediately put an extra £1 million into policing when they took over and set about recruiting 500 street patrols to deal with anti-social behaviour. Often it means new versions of ABCs like Good Neighbour Agreements (Bristol). Bristol has also opened the first Family Support Centre in the UK: those families that agree to learn about parenting skills and other ways to change their lives will have legal action suspended while they do so.

Often this means new ways of bringing all the relevant agencies together on one deprived housing estate (Bournemouth), which can have massive effects on the fear of crime, or providing money for local community safety fund committees to spend on small changes or projects to make communities feel safer (Hull), or getting developers to pay for youth workers through Section 106 agreements (Islington). It might also mean more community wardens and litter patrols (Southwark), though perhaps not everywhere will follow Southwark in sending officers out dressed like large bits of litter.

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### **Bust through the bureaucracy**

Rowdy street scenes in the evenings are one of the most obvious problems that undermine local people's confidence in their own town centres. Tackling this means helping local bars work together, as they do under the Best Bar None scheme (Newcastle and Liverpool) or experimenting with taxi marshals in the city centre on Saturday nights (Newcastle). It might mean just keeping locals informed about licensing applications so that they are more likely to hear about problems, launching a dialogue between locals, bar-owners and the police (Islington). Or, as in Watford, to set up a ticket system to be able to trace potent products in the hands of under-age drinkers back to the off-licence that sold them.

Bristol is also trailblazing the national Drugs Intervention Programme (DIP) which offers access to fast effective treatment to drug users who become involved in the criminal justice system, picking them up as they enter the system at police stations or the courts. By working with other agencies, it recognises that people who are getting to grips with drug problems do need other support to get back into the community.

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### Catch crime early

Preventing crime means paying close attention to truancy, and Bristol's 'Every Day Counts' attendance campaign has succeeded in reducing unauthorised pupil absences. The council also teamed up with Thomas Cook to offer parents and carers a discount on trips during school holidays as rewards. A related project, called Karrots, has been led by Southwark with local police and backed by money from the Treasury which rewards pupils with points for attendance and good behaviour, which can be spent on a range of things like ice hockey tickets. Making school curriculums more flexible (see Chapter 4) will also make a difference here.

Waltham Forest's award-winning Defendin Da Hood programme, where every couple of months up to 500 disaffected or disengaged youths - many of whom are known to the police for gang-related activities - gather to discuss issues that are important to them. The event that followed the London bombings in the summer of 2005 attracted nearly 500 Muslim youths.

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### Design out crime

The idea that crime could be designed out was developed by the geographer Alice Coleman in the 1980s, who showed that some design features of housing estates actively encouraged criminal behaviour by making it less risky. Adopting this approach was a success on the Taylor Hall Lane Estate in Mirfield by Kirklees Council, aware that the maze of footpaths behind and in front of people's homes provided increased opportunities for crime. The trouble with many estates regarded as utopian by those who designed them in the 1960s and 70s was that - like this one - there were no garden boundaries, little privacy, nowhere for children to play, and serious ambiguity about who owned and was responsible for much of the space outside. The changes have had a major effect: burglary, arson, robbery and theft are all down.

Taking this approach further might mean anything from an intensive programme of lockable alley-gates (Liverpool) to getting the prison campaigners Nacro to design public toilets differently (Cambridge). It might mean deliberately planning out crime hotspots (Somerset's Safer Homes initiative) or encouraging people to live in the city centre and making streets there more family friendly (Watford).

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### Tackle the outward signs

Watford has been paying particular attention to graffiti taggers and fly-posters, on the grounds that this kind of abuse attracts more serious criminals. They use

ASBOs and professional witnesses to catch offenders, but insist that there must also be measures that can actually change behaviour.

You can also make a dramatic difference, just by putting CANCELLED stickers over illegal posters (Oadby & Wigston), or attracting families back to parks (Liverpool). But big things are important too: Lib Dem Lambeth put enormous efforts into closing the borough's 84 crack-houses. By the time they left office in 2006, there were only ten open at any one time.

It would be glib to suggest that any of these are panaceas. Local authorities, however innovative, can have limited effect on crime if the prevailing culture encourages it or destroys the neighbourhood cohesion we know has some chance of preventing it. They have no national levers to pull to shift an underfunded justice system or to tweak the rhetoric of Labour and Conservative politicians, which does so much to increase people's nervousness.

But Lib Dem councils do have a clear agenda. Relying on prison is like locking the gate after the horse has bolted, and the Liberal Democrat approach to crime, as in ill-health, is to prevent it happening in the first place. Sometimes when prevention isn't possible, then the key is to intervene as close to the community as possible, and as early as possible. Even then, changing behaviour is a difficult business. Often it means concentrating on the details, the small elements of local life that matter enormously to local people, but used to be below the radar of traditional government. It is an approach that can easily be caricatured, but it is the only way to reduce the misery that crime and disorder inflicts on everyone.

It also works. Lib Dem Liverpool managed to cut domestic burglary by a quarter in two years, and reduce robbery by 18 per cent. Southwark's multi-agency approach to street drinking cut the numbers from 140 to 26 in one month in Camberwell over a period of a year. The community justice panel in Chard and Ilminster has reduced re-offending to a tiny figure. All these make people feel safer, and when they feel more secure then they are able to take more responsibility for local disorder - and that's when big changes happen.

# **four : young people**

**when schools burst  
out of their buildings**

*"I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education."*

**Thomas Jefferson**

*"Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire."*

**William Butler Yeats**

Lawrence Patterson had not taken over the education portfolio in Luton for more than a few weeks when he was invited to a primary school in one of the poorest parts of the town.

Luton is a former car-making town, famous for its football team, its university and its airport, but its schools had been struggling for some years. Of the twelve secondary schools in Luton, four were in special measures when Liberal Democrats took control in 2003, relying on Conservative support. Worse, an inspection of their secondary provision was under way that would criticise poor teaching, unacceptable behaviour, inadequate leadership and lack of strategy. Something would have to change, and education would have to be a top priority for the new administration.

Lawrence's morning visit was for a presentation by a visiting official from the Department for Education and Skills. He found himself among a group of parents - most of whom came from the nearby estate on the edge of town - who had taken time off work to be there. But there was something unusual about the atmosphere, and it took some time for him to identify what it was.

"I realised after a while that all these parents had been to the same school themselves, and they were all extremely negative about it," he says now. "But they were negative about it until it had taken on a family worker. Before they had been reluctant to go in through the school doors, but now they were taking part in reading help and coming into the school to help in other ways as well."

Luton had introduced the use of family workers based in primary schools, whose task was outreach - to talk to parents where the child was having problems, to advise or help in whatever way they could, more as a parental friend or support than a

professional. It was not a new idea: family workers launched under the title Flying Start in eight primary schools in Luton back in 2000. It had been pioneered in schools in the USA and tested in Kent in the mid 1990s. It was still a small project even in Luton. But watching the effects at first hand - and the broader implications of that for the success of the school by knitting it into the local neighbourhood - Lawrence realised that the experiment needed urgently to be increased in scale.

"It convinced me that there was something going on there," he says. "It wasn't just the educational achievement. I was seeing people who had been negative about the school who were actively engaged."

Even so, it was the improvement in educational achievement that he needed to concentrate on to overcome the scepticism of the council's education officers, who doubted whether extending the scheme so massively was worth the money. The first results showed that schools with a family worker had better performance in English, maths and science. He sold the scheme to officials by emphasising how the scheme was helping to meet Whitehall targets.

"Officers get so worked up about targets. It's like putting cheese in front of mice," says Lawrence, who is himself a Revenue & Customs officer. As a result, three years later, Luton's family workers scheme has been extended to 40 schools, covering all the children in the town at Key Stage 1, engaging with up to 160 families a week. Next year it will be extended to cover Key Stage two as well, and some schools - which have more problems than others - have as many as three family workers employed.

The money came from three different pots, partly from the Children's Fund, partly from Flying Start and partly from On Track so, to start with, all the family workers were doing something slightly different to meet the requirements of funders. But they are all directly managed by the schools, and are recruited - not from teachers or council officers - but from local people, knowing that it is a non-professional approach that seems to be most effective with parents. So they adapt to local needs as the job goes on.

Headteachers also dropped their remaining doubts about the scheme when they found how problems that used to take up so much of their time before, were now being dealt with - the frustrating calls to other agencies, the pleas to get parents to come in and see them, the obvious effects when children in care arrived inadequately clothed or fed on freezing mornings. Every teacher knows how family difficulties can undermine a child's attention or behaviour at school, but there is often precious little they can do about it - especially when the parents had bad experiences at school themselves and wanted as little contact with teachers as possible.

As a Liberal Democrat, the interest that Lawrence and his colleagues have in the scheme goes way beyond educational achievement. It is about broadening

education, knitting together neighbourhoods with local schools and raising the profile of education. "The scheme is an absolutely core part of making sure that schools are more user friendly environments," he says.

But the real crisis Lawrence and his colleagues had to face was in secondary education. It is a key Lib Dem message that increasingly narrow curriculums, and stultifying teaching for national tests, is not a solution to the problem of low educational achievement but part of the problem - because it is so dull. Faced with a devastating indictment of secondary education in the town by education inspectors, Lawrence was advised by officers that improving early years education would eventually filter through, but something needed to be done before that.

One measure they have taken is known as 'Campus Luton' and it has provided a new way of broadening education for Key Stage 3 (14-year-olds), paid for half by the council and half by the local Learning and Skills Council. The programme means that secondary schools can offer vocational teaching in hair dressing, construction, motorcycle maintenance and cookery, as well as other more academic subjects. It means loosely federating the secondary schools so that they can share resources.

But Campus Luton has wider implications than that, especially as all Luton's 12 secondary schools are now linked up in three groups of four. It means that teenagers who were in schools that might have been predominantly filled with one race or another - or one religion or another - find themselves learning alongside each other, and without undermining the status of faith schools. It also means that schools could provide a much wider range of subjects, and to enthuse their pupils better, without being forced to merge into the gigantic and impersonal schools so favoured a generation ago.

It means that heads, education officers, workplace providers and staff from the youth agency Connexions, had to start forming teams as well to make things happen. The present system tends to encourage the various agencies, like the schools, to compete with each other. Luton's programme forces them to treat each other like partners.

There are difficulties still to overcome - the cost of transport, the need for certificates to recognise vocational achievements. But it does mean they have taken the initiative before national reform is in place. "We could all wait for reform of Key Stage 3 education, but Luton had run out of time," says Lawrence. "With determination and a will to work together by all the responsible parties, we have been providing something better."

That attitude of dealing with what resources are available - whether they are government initiatives that can be brought to bear in ways they were never designed to, or innovative partnerships with public, private and voluntary bodies - is a familiar one in Lib Dem councils. Generally speaking, they have precious little room for

manoeuvre, even when education is such a priority, as it always is for Liberal Democrats. They are beset by tight budgets, ring-fenced funding, targets and league tables.

If they are going to make a difference, they have to be pragmatic and use what resources they have - whether that means bringing schools back into council management, as Lib Dem Southwark has done (they had been outsourced to the engineering company W S Atkins, part of the notorious Metronet group). Or whether it is using PFI to build more schools as in Bristol, or embracing academy schools to get more money into local education, as in Southwark. Or whether, as in Islington, it meant changes to arrangements for contracted out. Or whether, as in rural areas, it means determined efforts to keep schools small and local.

Somerset's small schools are coming under particular pressure now that the local schools forum - basically local headteachers - are determined that schools should be funded per pupil, which will mean that small local schools will close, leaving the council with an extra bill for bussing children - sometimes for journeys of an hour. Their solution is, like Luton, to federate schools so they can share resources, even sometimes share headteachers.

"As Lib Dems, we believe in local schools for local children, and we want to be able to maintain schools at the heart of the community," says Somerset's education portfolio holder Gloria Cawood. "But we have to make sure that is fair to the children."

Often Lib Dems take control in areas where schools have disastrous records. In Southwark, Portsmouth and Luton, Lib Dem councillors have become specialists at turning round poor performance. Often the part of the solution, as in Luton, is to find ways of ending the competition between schools and local agencies. When Lib Dem Kingston won the highest rating for children's services (outstanding), that was part of their solution, just as it is in Portsmouth's 'Community Improvement Partnerships' (see Chapter 5).

The effect is also often to broaden the remit of schools:

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### **Broaden education**

All the research shows that the education of children is affected by poverty and by their parent's own academic ability, and attitude towards learning. Broadening schools provides an opportunity to do something about this, and to make schools more central to a neighbourhood. Luton's family workers scheme means setting aside a corner of the school for families, which might include drop in mornings,

play mornings, toy library sessions, open to anyone with young children in the surrounding area - or family literacy and numeracy programmes.

Southwark is developing its own 'supplementary schools', often run by voluntary organisations on Saturdays or at weekends, like the Somali school in Bermondsey, which takes a hundred local children all day on Saturday, and enormously increases their confidence - as it does for their mothers, who meet next door at the same time, often the only time they have got out of the house all week.

Extended schools are now a mainstream government initiative. But the idea of making schools double as venues for adult education or other community activity was "in our manifesto for years," says Caroline Pidgeon, who has the Southwark education portfolio. "If we are funding a new playground, then we want to know how it can be made available to a wider community. It is a matter of using what we have and to see how it can be extended."

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### **Catch problems early**

The Luton officials were right in one way: if you get it right with the rising fives, then their success will eventually filter through the education system. But that means tackling problems early in the system, which might mean experimenting with keeping children in reception class for a year longer so they can master the basics of reading and writing (Liverpool) or setting up new pupil referral units, run by youth workers, for children whose teachers or care workers think are at risk of carrying out anti-social behaviour (Newcastle). It might mean new restorative justice programmes to tackle bullying - not just in schools but in children's homes (Portsmouth).

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### **Tackle boredom head on**

Listing all the initiatives by Lib Dem councils to engage young people in sport, leisure, arts or other activities would take a whole new book, but it can also mean links to employment (Birmingham's Youthwise project), or going to trouble spots to involve young people in more constructive activities (Luton's youth bus), or engaging young people in a range of activities where they live (Sutton's award-winning Phoenix Centre, which now has 692 members in the local youth club).

Schools are the core of education, but education has never meant just schools to Liberal Democrats - or just young people. Nor do they believe that education is just about preparing people for the needs of the market (Conservative) or the needs of the

state (Labour). It is to help everyone reach their full potential, and to enjoy life as best they can.

That means Liberal Democrats find themselves knitting together policies that cross the normal departmental boundaries, and therefore the normal narrow funding streams, to support education in its broadest sense. And so that it dovetails with the regeneration agenda (adult education), the health agenda (food in schools), the green agenda (awareness of the environment) and of course the crime agenda. That implies an approach which is bound to look pragmatic sometimes to outsiders, but which is in fact designed to achieve something which is not pragmatic at all: the fulfilment of people's individual dreams.

No local authority, however powerful and wealthy, can achieve anything as ambitious as that by themselves. But they can and do build steps along the way.

# **five : community**

**the possibilities of  
pocket parks**

*"The love of liberty is the love of others; the love of power is the love of ourselves."*

**William Hazlitt**

*"The justification for community politics lies in the belief that the key to releasing 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."*

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

If you wander off Islington's busy Upper Street, past the supermarket and some familiar brick London terraces, with the accusing fingers of the previous generation's tower blocks not far away, you will come to a small oasis of colour and green in what is officially the inner city.

Culpeper Community garden has organic vegetables, a rose pergola, lawns and vegetable plots, including raised beds for disabled people. It is also, in a small way, a source of healthy vegetables. The garden began life in the 1982 with some seedcorn funding from the council, but it is now run and managed by a local voluntary organisation called the Friends of Culpeper Community Garden, and the local Liberal Democrat council has given them a secure lease which means they can access lottery funding.

There are similar pocket parks emerging around this north London borough, cultivated and managed by new Friends groups, some of which are funded by the council, independent of the council but with access to experts in the parks department if they need it. Friends of King Henry's Walk Garden, on the northern border of the borough, on derelict land near a run-down park, came into being to protect the open space when the school next door was developed. Islington persuaded the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to provide some funding, but the work is now done by the Friends. It is open to the public and, above all, it is the responsibility of locals to transform it and keep an eye on it.

The pocket parks of Islington are not all new. But they are important partly because of what green space means in a dense borough like this, but partly because of innovative way they are administered. Because, although it is true that local people can tire of

endless consultation, and they don't always rise to the challenge of self-management - unless there is a direct threat to something they value - but they do often rise to the responsibility of *doing* things to make their neighbourhood better.

This is an alien concept to the way local authorities were run under Conservative and Labour. For Labour councils in particular, as one council officer characterised it in Labour Lewisham in the 1970s, "if something is worth doing, they think it is worth the council doing it for you". But it may provide a key to the knotty problem of how you rebuild a sense of neighbourhood and community, knowing the enormous impact that has on health and crime - and we now know that people without social networks run as great a risk with their health as heavy smokers.

Even so, the whole business of rebuilding community from the policy disasters of recent decades is fraught with difficulty for local authorities. It must be done because of the benefits and because of the consequences if it is not. But it is not clear where the levers are, and the whole area has been invaded by quangos with bizarre acronyms and jargon like 'capacity-building' and 'empowerment'. In former Conservative cities, community-building has no track record. But in former Labour cities, where Liberal Democrats are increasingly wielding power, their relationship with the local voluntary sector smacks of the feudal.

And so it was in Islington when Liberal Democrats took control in 2000. There was a gay committee, a women's committee and a regeneration committee all covering similar areas. The same semi-professional 'voluntary' organisations - often claiming to represent narrow racial groups - had been funded for years, and threatened with cuts annually, only to be reprieved at the last minute.

Something clearly had to be done. Islington's new Lib Dem leader Steve Hitchens and his colleagues decided quickly that all these committees would be bundled together as one new partnership committee, and the councillor landed with hammering out a new way forward was Bridget Fox. What she found was a strange creaking system of patronage - the council was still funding organisations for Irish refugees - and the decision was made to make £ 2 million in cuts and to take the councillors off the boards of voluntary organisations so they could be genuinely independent.

It was a difficult period for her and the new administration. The meeting which made the cuts carried on until 1.30am, and Bridget went home with the accusations of racism and worse ringing in her ears. She tried to make the transition as easy as possible, offering one-to-one meetings with any group that was losing its grant. She was also strengthened by evidence from the council surveys which showed that, while first generation arrivals from Bangladesh, for example, would still travel to find a specialist centre, their children now with families of their own preferred to have a good quality, well-run community centre near their home.

Islington's Lib Dem group was also instinctively against the idea of funding different racial interests as if they were silos, unconnected with each other or the mainstream. This was before the traumatic riots in Bolton and Oldham which shifted opinion about how councils could build cohesive societies. "Labour said we were being evil and anti-community, but we had been listening to people and at least the row allowed us to set out a different stall," says Bridget. "We wanted a vibrant voluntary sector, not one that was all stitched up every year, which nothing ever changed, and nobody new ever got a look in."

What lay behind all this were political differences about what the voluntary sector is. For Labour, voluntary organisations served as a dependent extension of the council. It was a mixture of old-style patronage and new-style political correctness that believes no one racial or gender or interest group can possibly interact with or understand another one. For the new Lib Dem council, it was a vital guarantee of self-help, a barometer of social health, which had to be independent - but which, if it was, could manage things that no professional ever could.

"We felt that people should be able to define their own community," says Bridget. "It wasn't the council's job to define the community for them. Our rethink allowed us to support new kinds of voluntary groups like after-school clubs, community gardens or time banks, where the boundaries of communities were hard to define."

All these were organisations that deliberately brought people together across racial, gender or age divides. The result has been a number of small-scale programmes, which are supported but genuinely independent of the council - and matched by real time, effort and imagination from the people benefiting - among which are the friends of parks projects. It also meant that, each year afterwards, more money was being brought into the borough from the lottery and other trusts and foundations.

"It is important that the voluntary sector doesn't get siloed within the local authority," says Laura Willoughby, who took over Bridget's role as lead for communities. "We wanted to break the voluntary sector out of the regeneration department so that it could relate to everything the council was doing - but to do so independently."

Another of the areas which Lib Dem Islington pioneered was time banking, a community rebuilding tool which allowed people to support each other - small tasks which might be no more complicated than ringing neighbours up when they were ill - and to bank the time until they needed help themselves. There are now five time banks in the borough, including time banks in a primary school, in housing offices, a hospital and a regeneration project.

Time banks arrived in the UK in 1999, and Islington and Lib Dem Southwark have been among the first local authorities to pioneer them as a way of helping people provide mutual support, and have found that they reached people which no other

volunteering projects seem able to reach: by measuring or rewarding the effort that people were putting in - visiting people who had come out of hospital, giving people lifts, learning about bike maintenance, or collecting organic vegetables from the wholesale market for distribution to members - off all of which were organised by some of the Islington time banks. Those involved are often those who have always been on the receiving end of services before, and who find themselves sometimes working alongside professionals, humanising public services as they do so.

After the riots in Bradford in 2001, and those that followed in other towns in the north, the reports condemned local authorities for exacerbating divisions between races in town by the way they organised voluntary sector grants. Lib Dems are now in control or leading many of the councils in nearby districts, and have had to be in the forefront of finding new ways forward.

In Lib Dem Pendle, Liberal Democrat councillors have been involved in setting up bridging initiatives, like the Brierfield Women's Group, linking up Asian and white women to campaign initially for more NHS dentists in the area. There is also the Bradley Young Adults in nearby Nelson which does similar work. The point here is not to link people up for their own sake, but to do something or to campaign for mutual interests.

Lib Dem Stockport has been particularly active in generating local activity, helping set up community centres in converted hard-to-let shop units, organising training in how to run small enterprises. The council has linked up with the local PCT to share resources, but often what is needed are quite small interventions. When high school students from Brinnington were unable to take part in after-school activities, unlike their counterparts, because of poor quality transport services between school and home, they were able to set up a project that encouraged young people to stay on at school and to provide safe transport for them. All this has an effect, with a ten per cent jump in people taking part in community activities and a nearly 20 per cent rise in people's sense of belonging, which is a key indicator of a cohesive community.

Lib Dem councils also:

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### **Give neighbourhoods the tools to flourish**

People protect places they have responsibility for. That simple truth has taken years to filter through mainstream local government, though it dates back to the pioneering work carried out by Liberals on Liverpool City Council in the early 1980s, with the Weller Street housing co-op and the Eldonians. But even then, people have to deal with quangos and are plunged into nightmare

bureaucracy. Weller Street was offered only two landscaping options by the Housing Corporation: red or green tarmac.

Often it is about providing the infrastructure for neighbourhoods to flourish. Lib Dem Durham identified community development, especially in their outlying villages, as an urgent need and launched their Flourishing Communities Fund so that local groups can apply for what they think they need - rather than what officials feel is good for them. Sometimes it means providing communication, like a broadband service for an area that lets people access free wireless internet from their homes (Bristol's 'Knowle West Web').

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### **Re-think services as community-building tools**

Lib Dem-led Portsmouth's 'Community Improvement Partnerships' are about education, but they are much broader than that. They began as an amalgam of two government initiatives, Education Improvement Partnerships and Extended Schools, which are about access to opportunities and services across a wide range of services, but based in schools. In Portsmouth it means making schools into neighbourhood hubs, with sports and arts facilities and local services. Liverpool is also planning to have at least one good primary school in every neighbourhood, as much as a way of forcing disconnected agencies to integrate as it is to provide a focus in the neighbourhood.

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### **Tackle traffic**

Reducing car-use is a health imperative as well as a green imperative (see Chapter 9), but making streets more available to people is also a way of re-building community. That might mean looking afresh at public space, as Islington is doing outside Highbury and Islington station. It might mean traffic calming in other ways to make way for pedestrians.

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### **Engaging young people**

Lib Dem councils are not unique in developing youth parliaments, but they are well in front. Bristol's 'Your Say...Your Changes' was a conference for 250 young people involved with developing a youth participation strategy for the city, and who are developing a mandate for a new Young People's Select Committee. Bristol also introduced a young people's councillor shadowing scheme, which built on a successful BME councillor shadowing scheme. They also elected a popular Lib

Dem Youth Champion, who polled 64 per cent of the vote after a local session of *I'm a Councillor; Get Me Out of Here!*

Lib Dem Cardiff has a youth parliament. Lib Dem Leeds has a Youth Council, where 80 per cent of high schools elect representatives to take part. They have an office in the Civic Hall so that they feel part of the council's work, and a direct budget of £2,000. Watford also has a youth council and youth area committees who regularly meet the mayor and councillors and involved local school children are consulted on the design of new playgrounds.

Southwark has given their youth council the right to decide where Youth Opportunity Funds are spent, drumming up bids from young people with leaflets, banners, press and the web, training young people to assess applications through Youth Bank and giving the money away. Over £270,000 has been awarded by young people to 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," says Caroline Pidgeon, Southwark's lead on children and young people. "It is central to our core beliefs."

Nobody suggests these are easy options. The most ambitious consultation schemes can often be torpedoed from within by a handful of semi-professional community 'representatives'. But then the community agenda is not just about consultation or management boards, or anything that is primarily passive and verbal. It is about taking responsibility to do things too - because only that fine mesh of local relationships and mutual support can make a neighbourhood a better place to live.

If you can achieve that, suddenly everything else - cutting crime, boosting local health, regeneration - suddenly becomes possible in a whole new way.

# **six : regeneration**

**the great demolition  
that never happened**

*"We are dealing with people who have no initiative or civic pride. The task, surely, is to break up such groupings even though the people seem to be satisfied with their miserable environment."*

**Newcastle city planning officer in the 1960s**

*"People's mental image of regeneration was demolition, and people being moved out into grotty flats. Regeneration need not be something which is done to them."*

**CLlr Greg Stone, Lib Dem former regeneration lead on Newcastle City Council**

It was over his breakfast of cereal, toast and coffee in June 2000 that Peter Arnold received the shock which led eventually to Liberal Democrats controlling Newcastle, after more than 30 years of unbroken Labour rule.

Peter was a former teacher and sports coach, and was then leading the 16-strong group of Liberal Democrats, eyeing the ranks of 62 Labour opponents across the council chamber. So the idea that they would take control was not an obviously practical one. But what he read in the *The Journal*, Newcastle's morning paper, over breakfast that day, provided him both with the impetus and the weapon by which it could be achieved.

Below the headline, council leaders had announced their long-term regeneration strategy for the city with the title *Going for Growth*. Peter swore, and read on.

In fact, looking more closely at the report, it was clear that *Going for Growth* only really concentrated on two run-down areas of the city, Scotswood and Walker, but the plan was as simple as it was devastating: large scale demolition, providing major tracts of land to developers to build housing for sale. That same morning across those two neighbourhoods, the people who lived there were discovering the plans for their homes for the first time, as television crews rang their doorbells and asked for their reactions.

"It was quite clear that this was a strategy devised in the Civic Centre with no significant consultation with the residents in the areas affected," says Peter. "There were Labour councillors representing those two areas, and had done for many years,

and it was clear that there was nobody else around but us who were prepared to speak for their own heartlands."

In the days which followed the revelation in the local paper, some of the realities behind Going for Growth became clearer. The latest elections had been in May, and there were no more for two years. The council leadership were clearly planning that, by the time the elections came, the populations of those areas would have been decanted and there would be no electoral reaction.

But, since no plans had been published for any other areas, it was clear also that this was based on a major deal with developers to provide large parcels of land. "It wasn't really a regeneration strategy at all," says Peter. "It was more like a get-rich-quick scheme." It also appeared to be part of an agreement with John Prescott's office to provide brownfield sites in return for the greenfield development they were pushing through on farmland near where Peter lived in Gosforth.

It also became clear that this was a major miscalculation. There was outrage in both Scotswood and Walker and, by the time proper consultation had been carried out, the timetable had been seriously delayed. The whole fiasco was enormously influential to Peter and his group. "We decided that, even on a bad day, we could do better than that."

Among the group was Greg Stone, a manager at Teeside University with a particular interest in regeneration, and he took on the task of drawing up an alternative policy based - not on a blueprint for the whole city - but something negotiated community by community with the people who lived there. It is a central plank of Lib Dem thinking - not just in regeneration - that if you devolve decisions to local people, they are liable to choose different solutions, but better and more sustainable solutions too.

The electoral strategy hammered out by Peter, Greg and their colleagues, gave them a realistic chance of taking control of the city in 2006. In the event, they missed their target by two years, sweeping to power with 48 seats two years early in 2004, and were able to put their alternatives into practice.

What was particularly potent about using regeneration as an issue was that cities like Newcastle - and so many other great cities in the north - had suffered since the Second World War from the most destructive regeneration policies, systematically breaking up traditional neighbourhoods and supportive social networks, demolishing swathes of old neighbourhoods to decant their populations into tower blocks and neo-brutal concrete slums, destroying local high streets and amenities and forcing inner urban motorways through the poorest areas.

Regeneration has been a big lie for cities like Newcastle, a Trojan horse used to disperse the poor and hand over their land where their homes had been to developers. It had also been vastly expensive. "The Labour leader admitted later that half a billion pounds had been sent to Newcastle for regeneration over the years and most of that money was wasted - mainly because it was wasted on schemes drawn up in the Civic Centre and imposed on local people. It was wasted because of city council paternalism at its worst," says Peter. "In that sense, we were pushing on an open door. Our regeneration was going to take longer to do, but it would succeed because it was based on what people needed and wanted."

But the consultation process was hardly painless, often making the divisions and mistrust only too clear. Greg's objective was to prove the new regime at the Civic Centre was open, transparent and could be trusted. It was at a five day inquiry, in Walker in October 2004, where he felt for the first time that they were getting this message across.

There were 250 people in the room at the Lightfoot leisure centre, with local Labour councillors out in force, behaving like the political opposition they now were. "I was in the chair and the first two and a half days were hell," says Greg. "But as each day passed, people became a bit more prepared to join in. By Friday, there was an enormous amount of positive energy in the room. I think people genuinely believed this was a different way of doing things. Regeneration need not be something which was done to them."

The process continues to this day. Newcastle is determined to become a leader in the development of good, green social housing, and is planning an exhibition by developers of new home designs over the next few years. There is also the new Science City emerging in the city centre, and a new emphasis in local schools about the way science and maths is taught.

"Regeneration is not just about bricks and mortar," says Peter Arnold. "It is about attitudes, work and education and every aspect of life. That is why regeneration is the key policy for us in Newcastle. Everything has to tie into the regeneration strategy. It's about getting the best out of people helping them encouraging them to raise their sights and to believe they can do things."

Regeneration is one of those areas where Liberal Democrats find themselves forced to be more innovative than in almost every other area. The alphabet soup of quangos, with their conflicting targets and inconveniently overlapping boundaries hold most of the purse-strings. The planning inspectorate will not always see issues the same way. Council officers will fear anything unconventional, liable to bring down legal or obscure financial penalties on the authority.

This is why Liberal Democrat councillors find themselves asking questions which officers often find inconvenient. Is this development really in the interests of the whole community? Will it destroy small shops which people need and use? Will it encourage local enterprise and keep money circulating locally, or will it siphon wealth and talent away?

It also requires a highly pragmatic approach to achieving what are actually recognisably Liberal Democrat objectives. Whilst consultation is the way forward for Newcastle, Southwark Lib Dems have found the plans to knock down and redevelop the notorious Aylesbury Estate compelling, because there is otherwise no central government funding to lift it out of its current degrading state (see Chapter 7).

But it is possible to discern common threads, apart from the need to regenerate by consent, which shows that Lib Dem councils:

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### **Keep local spending flowing locally**

Bristol is pioneering new ways of supporting small shops, supporting campaigns by local small retailers (Bristol East Side Traders and Bishopston Opposing the Glut of Supermarkets), and backing the growth of local food and community markets - and campaigning to keep local post offices open. Similar efforts to support town centre shops in new developments are under way in the Vale of White Horse.

Other councils might be forming their own joint ventures (Durham Villages Regeneration Company) to build affordable housing, community centres and a swimming pool and leisure centre, and to use the profits to regenerate villages (see Chapter 5). Or developing innovative ways of charging developers to contribute to local needs, like the innovative Roof Tax (Milton Keynes), which will charge developers a flat fee of £18,000 per new house to fund the infrastructure for the 73,000 extra homes the town is due to accept.

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### **Build on what you've got**

The fact that there is money being re-circulated locally by local business may not be new investment, but it is an asset - it is local people employing each other which gives the area a degree of economic independence. The fact that there are people with skills and experience is another one. But one asset which is often forgotten by councils is their own history.

Liberal Democrats control the three ancient university cities of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham, and have been looking for ways to enhance this distinctiveness,

aware that people want to live and invest in places which feel unique. Durham has plans to rebuild the medieval gardens that once existed on the river banks round the cathedral, and have made parks and open spaces a priority. They have also managed to turn the new local theatre, the Gala, into a success, understanding that culture is as much a regeneration asset as the rest. In the same way, Lib Dem-led Portsmouth has employed artist Pete Codling to redesign their Arundel street shopping area with dynamic new paving and seats that celebrate local personalities like Dickens, Brunel and Conan Doyle.

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### **Listen, listen and listen again**

Sutton's Roundshaw Estate, on the site of Croydon Aerodrome, which used to be so run-down that it was used as a regular location for The Bill, is a successful example of regeneration alongside local people, transforming this 2,000-home, run-down, ghettoised, concrete island into an integrated, thriving, proud place with a real sense of community. Strongly influenced by local people, the regeneration has created new homes, jobs, training and learning opportunities, businesses and enterprises, enhanced transport links, new facilities and an emphasis on healthy living, safety, environmental sustainability and community. Crime is down, fear of crime is down and unemployment is down. More people are taking up sport, using their library and local school attainment is up.

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### **Work with local business**

Lib Dem Kingston was one of the first councils to establish Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). Two thirds of businesses in the town centre voted for the project in the autumn of 2004, and it means that business rate-payers will invest £4 million over five years for local improvements, effectively doubling spending on town centre services.

Similar ideas include the 'gold zones', which mean intensive street cleaning and rubbish collections in key town centre areas (Liverpool, Watford and Portsmouth), or special enterprise weeks to bring local entrepreneurs together (Islington).

Islington has been involved in no less than seven major regeneration projects, including the new international rail terminal at Kings Cross. Their A1 project is particularly targeted at local business, aiming to create the longest stretch of wireless broadband in the UK - so that locally-owned cafes can offer the same service as the big chains - as well as tackling anti-social behaviour and improving recycling, using dispersal orders, ABCs and clean-up days where necessary.

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## Build an enterprise culture

If you are going to regenerate the economy for existing and homegrown business, rather than simply relying on big chains, middle class housing and outside investment, then one of the keys is to create a local culture of enterprise. That means going rather further than the tick-box style business training provided by the big agencies.

That might mean building a new Construction Skills Centre (Cardiff), or new workspace projects in disadvantaged areas (Bristol), or a special skills fund to help small to medium-sized private businesses to pay for the cost of extra training (Hull). It might mean, as in Leeds, a job apprenticeship guarantee scheme for 14-16 year-olds from challenged backgrounds. It might mean an new approach to science, linking schools, university and business (Newcastle).

It could also mean asking local businesses to target their resources to support their most vulnerable communities, or securing funding to set up a network of business catalyst centres in areas which have some of highest deprivation levels (Leeds).

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## Demolish the inhuman

Good regeneration requires councillors to find ways of recognising bad regeneration projects that are put forward, especially those which leave the area more dependent or which suck money out again. That was why the new Liberal Democrat administration in Brent pulled out of the bid for a regional casino. But if that was preventing future regeneration disasters, Lib Dem-led Portsmouth also had a go at tackling the disasters of the past. Their demolition of the infamous concrete 'monstrosity' the Tricorn Centre, after years of wrangling, finally allowed for the unveiling of plans for the complete regeneration of the Northern Quarter of Portsmouth city centre. Watford has plans to end the town's notorious one-way system and to tear down a particularly unpopular flyover to make way for a redesign of Charter Place and the Market.

Go to regeneration conferences the world over and you will see planning and economic consultants pedalling the same expensive solutions: gated communities, marinas, new motorways, the demolition of rented housing. Three decades ago, it meant vast demolition and the destruction of community. Lib Dem councils have been finding ways to make regeneration real, often by being honest about the destruction in their own area in the past. "Other councils have managed to resist poor design and

poor planning better than we have," wrote Liverpool's Richard Kemp and Mike Storey in 2001, in their outline for the future of the city.

Working out new ways forward has to start by asking why this was, and the answer from many Lib Dem councils is the same: because nobody cared what local people thought. Small-scale regeneration, planned alongside those who live in the area, is now practiced by increasing numbers of local authorities and voluntary groups. But Liberal Democrats have been in the forefront of hammering out these new ways forward.

To do this requires political courage and some determination, working with officers who are nervous of local regeneration of this kind, or with Whitehall officials who are encouraging councils to sell off anything of value to the highest bidder. Participation is difficult: it can be torpedoed by political opponents or infuriated locals. But it can and does work.

# **seven : housing**

**four generations, side  
by side**

*"The enemies are complacency and wrong values and inertia in the face of incompetence and injustice. It is against this enemy that we march."*

**Jo Grimond, 1963**

*"No-one will be able to tell me that I cannot do something - anything - ever again."*

**Resident of the first ground-breaking Walter Segal self-build housing development, 1988**

In the small village of Chirbury, in Shropshire, you will find - if you look hard enough - four generations of one family living near each other in the same place.

Not everyone wants to live near their family, of course - unless they need help with childminding. But if you do want to, and you live in a rural area without a reasonable private income, the chances are that the housing market will tear even two generations of your family apart, let alone four - driving them out to make way for second home owners and commuters.

But in Chirbury, the great-grandmother and great-grandfather live in housing association accommodation. Their daughter rents from a private landlord. Their granddaughter lives with her two children in new low-cost affordable homes under a scheme designed by the local Liberal Democrat council. Thanks to the same scheme, their grandson, who has been living in his mother's house at the age of 30, is now able to buy a shared equity home which is being built there, and can start a family at long last.

What makes this extended family possible in this village, and genuine community too, when it has become almost impossible in every similar village in the UK? The answer lies in an innovative - not to say revolutionary - approach to local housing pioneered by Liberal Democrats controlling South Shropshire Council.

To understand how the policy came about, we have to go back five years, when South Shropshire was run by an uneasy coalition of Liberal Democrats and independent councillors, with Lib Dem Heather Kidd, a former science teacher, in the uncomfortable position of joint leader. It was then that she was sent the draft local

plan, and with some surprise, since she had not been asked to input suggestions before it had been drawn up by the council's planning officers.

"I sat down and read it, and realised it really was just about delivering housing for people from London and the south east," she says. "There was nothing in it for the locals, and nothing that would help them stay living in their own villages if they wanted. It really was extraordinary that the planning officers could write this without any consultation with elected members, and expected us to rubber stamp it."

She turned up at the local plan hearing in Ludlow to say so, and found that her fellow joint leader had arrived with just the same idea. It was clear to all the officials present that, when both joint leaders arrive to criticise your draft plan in public, then something has to give. After the embarrassment of the plan meeting, the council's chief executive called everyone involved into an emergency meeting and said that nobody would leave until they had hammered out a way forward.

Thanks to that meeting, and political control of the council shifting to the Liberal Democrats shortly afterwards, South Shropshire now has a new way of looking at local housing, using a particular interpretation of the guidance, so that 50% of all future developments in the district have to be affordable. Not just that, but thanks to a new mechanism, they will stay affordable with an equity mortgage held partly by the owner and partly by the council.

The developers in the region reacted with outrage. All those who advised Heather - now council leader in her own right - warned her that developers would simply shun the district altogether, and there would then be no new homes built at all. They said so during a bitter battle over the local plan inquiry, but the planning inspector's report in 2004 finally backed the scheme on the grounds of an overwhelming rural need.

"We didn't know what would happen and there was an element of calling people's bluff," said Heather. "But we calculated that house prices were so high locally that it was very unlikely that developers would walk away from their plans in Ludlow." Sure enough, in the event, there were no disappearing house developers. What happened in practice was that the 50 per cent affordability policy allowed them to force down the price of land, so they were still able to make a profit.

Heather also wanted the council to build its own affordable homes, and they set up a joint venture to do so, and they are now able to build a home for £120,000. It is true that John Prescott demonstrated the same thing was possible for half that figure, but in Shropshire, that figure includes the land, the access roads and the drains and other services. And they are built to a good eco-home standard.

The result is not just that four generations can still live in Chirbury, but that there is a new affordable housing sector emerging in South Shropshire. Some homes are on sale at the cost of building, though they would fetch twice that on the open market. There is also another category which the council subsidises to take the price down to four times local wages, which is around £90,000. In the 2006-8 period, Heather believes they can deliver 200 new homes for locals: it represents a whole new tier of housing for local people. The 50 per cent is now rigorously enforced. Even if the development is for one house only, developers are asked to pay half the price of an affordable home into a development pot to fund new build.

Chirbury is also the ward that Heather represents, a village which had seen no affordable homes built since just after the Second World War. There was predictable rage from some locals when the affordable development was proposed there. But when the parish council objected, Heather hosted a meeting of everyone involved in her dining room, which thrashed out the local designs, and the scheme went ahead. "I thought if I couldn't do it in my own patch, I might not be able to do it anywhere," she says. "But having the development means we can keep people living here."

Heather believes they have been successful because they have refused to sink into the traditional political class divide over housing, where Conservatives back developers and Labour councillors cling to the public rented sector. "We have been able to deliver for everyone - for those who want to buy, but can't otherwise afford to, as well as for tenants. This is what should be done in the south east as well: it's the way we can house key workers in London."

The South Shropshire story exemplifies many of the themes which emerge when Lib Dems take charge of housing. One is the vital importance of making neighbourhoods possible - confronting the way that the housing market tends to ghettoize. The other is tackling the traditional division between right and left which has done so much to damage housing in the UK, sidelining mutual or affordable solutions which are neither municipal nor market.

If Conservatives fetishise the market, Labour has traditionally been able to see no further than public sector, and - while council housing in rural areas has been an enormous post-war success - Labour domination of council housing in the big cities has been disastrous. The results are still obvious: the destruction of communities for new slums, without democracy or proper maintenance, where tenants were dependent supplicants to direct labour organisations or private repair services which never arrived. Neither side ever understood that council tenants wanted to take part in the management of their homes, and often the running of them too.

It was left to Liberal Liverpool to set up and support housing co-ops in the late 1970s and Liberal Tower Hamlets to start equipping housing estates with proper lockable front doors in the late 1980s. Now Liberal Democrats in the cities have to deal with

the end game for the big municipal housing departments. On the road to achieving the 'decent homes standard' by 2010, councils are being financially blackmailed by Whitehall to try and force large scale housing stock-transfers into the hands of the private sector or housing associations.

Liberal Democrats inside and outside Parliament have been making clear the injustice of this situation - especially when the nominally 'voluntary' sector housing providers are often just as gigantic, faceless and undemocratic as the municipalities they are replacing. Lib Dem councils have insisted on balloting tenants, as in Cambridge or Watford, where they have adopted the 'community gateway model', which puts tenant empowerment at the heart of the organisation. But in some cities, where the estates are particularly derelict, as with Southwark's Aylesbury Estate, the un-funded fourth option is simply impossible to sustain.

In other places, you find Lib Dem councils:

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### **Listen, listen and listen - and then act**

Whatever the ownership model, listening to tenants and involving them in the management of their homes is a core Liberal Democrat practice and that also means being a responsible freeholder to their leaseholders as well, as the right to buy has turned many tenants into homeowners. That means tenant participation compacts, tenants' associations, tenant action groups to monitor the effectiveness of tenant participation, customer panels and sheltered housing forums. In Hull, the new tenant housing boards were elected using the single transferable vote system of PR.

When 95 per cent of tenants in Lib Dem Durham voted for the council to continue as their landlord, it led to a major investment programme, which saw the council setting a 'Durham Standard', above the decent homes standard. But it also brought a commitment by local Lib Dems to get tenants more involved in the running of their housing. Durham also set up a regeneration company with private sector partners to build affordable housing to buy and rent, using the profits from the land sales to fund other regeneration projects like swimming pools and community centres.

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### **Make them comfortable - and green**

Heather Kidd's new joint venture means that South Shropshire Council has tight control over the design of new affordable homes, either to rent or buy, and these include solar gain, solar panels, recycled rainwater and excellent insulation. "We're a low-wage economy round here," she says. "People can't afford to waste

money on heating." One new flat in Craven Arms last winter had an electrical heating bill of £7 for the quarter.

In a borough like Islington, where half the households are in social housing and the council owns 37,000 properties, the administration finds itself forced to use every possible avenue to improve the housing, including PFI. By doing so, they managed to modernise over a thousand homes in 2005 alone, and - like Durham, South Shropshire and others - are going beyond the government's Decent Homes Standard to create a new Decent Islington Standard, which also specifies a minimum standard for all the communal and outdoor areas too.

You will also find Lib Dem councils bundling up green and security advice, giving out energy efficient light bulbs in return for used ones (Islington), or linking up with energy providers to insulate homes (Watford). Or renovating derelict properties when the owners won't, and - where necessary - forcing their sale to recover their costs (Bristol and Cambridge).

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### Let Cathy come home

Last year saw the fortieth anniversary of the ground-breaking television drama *Cathy Come Home*, which coincided with the launch of Shelter. Local authorities now have widespread legal duties to deal with some categories of homeless people, but that can interfere with dealing with them all. You will find councils like Lib Dem Cardiff battling successfully to eliminate bed and breakfast accommodation for housing homeless people. Or refurbishing flats for emergency accommodation (Durham), or a whole range of measures like rent deposit guarantee schemes, support schemes to tackle domestic violence, mediation services, 'outreach and tenancy sustainment' service and back to work schemes, which in Watford have cut the official rough sleepers count to zero.

Then there is the problem of waiting lists, and Lib Dem Southwark has nearly 14,000 names on theirs. Islington offers tenants with unused bedrooms £100 for every extra room they give up if they move into a smaller property. Southwark has launched a new choice-based lettings scheme, known as Homesearch, which allows applicants to bid for the properties they want. The Vale of White Horse Council in Oxfordshire, which also has a project for young homeless people, offering shared flats, skills training and support for sorting their lives out, with the eventual aim of finding their own home and a secure job.

Heather Kidd calls South Shropshire's policy of mixed communities 'peppercotting'. It means putting affordable homes next to market price homes, and designing them in

such a way that nobody can tell the difference, and so that you get genuinely mixed communities.

Housing is one of those areas where the legacy of class-based policy for past three generations remains powerfully with us. Local administrations of all parties have to live with this legacy and the unbalanced Whitehall initiatives to deal with it. What makes Lib Dem practice distinctive is their refusal to accept the ideological baggage which goes with that battle. For Lib Dems, municipal versus market is not a relevant struggle, if indeed it ever was. What is important is balanced, sustainable communities, where everyone can be housed - however peculiar their predicament and income - and where they are involved in the management of where they live.

**eight : services**

**alternatives to the big  
black hole**

*"Local government is about delivering front line services, not about drawing lines on a map."*

**Cllr Cathy Bakewell, leader of Somerset County Council**

*"People are often pathetically grateful to have anything done effectively."*

**Anita Roddick**

Before June 2000, all those pieces of furniture, fridges and old wardrobes that people put out for the council to collect in Liverpool - most of them perfectly serviceable - were dumped in a large hole in the ground. Or they were when the council managed to collect them before they were vandalised and strewn around the neighbourhood.

After June 2000, something unusual happened to Liverpool's bulky waste collection service, which has made it a model for similar services round the country. Its contract was shifted - not to another faceless multinational, but to a local non-for profit social enterprise. It rescued and refurbished as much of the furniture that could be used, training local people in the process - and it managed to deal with almost twice the number of calls as before, at the same cost to council tax-payers.

That, in a nutshell, is the story of Bulky Bob's, one of the most successful social enterprises in the country. But it also became a model for dealing with Liverpool's other public services, many of which had been failing people for decades, and some of which were bywords for inefficiency and waste.

There is no agreed definition of social enterprises. They can be almost any shape and size, but their primary purpose is to provide a vital local service and train or employ local people, rather than - as with conventional businesses - to make a profit. They have to break even, of course, like any other business, but that isn't their main objective.

Bulky Bob's was not the first social enterprise - that was pioneered in Glasgow in the 1980s. Nor was it the first to be commissioned to organise public services. But it was one of the first to undertake such a mainstream service - and its spectacular success has made it probably the best known.

That success was all the more obvious when it was compared to the services Liverpool had become used to after nearly two decades of Militant and then Labour rule. When the new Liberal Democrat administration took over in 1998, and needed to show they were making a difference, the state of the city's services were an obvious priority.

"Very early on, we took a pragmatic view of service provision," says Richard Kemp, now leader of the LGA Lib Dems. "We didn't care who delivered them, whether it was the public, private or voluntary sector. We cared whether they were delivered, and how. We believed the old divisions between public and private were out of date."

Those same divisions in cities like Liverpool have tended to replace large inefficient and unresponsive public services with large inefficient and secretive private ones. But in Liverpool, at least, there was also a tradition of contracting to the voluntary sector. Two thirds of the city's youth clubs were run by the voluntary sector already. Soon the same thing would apply to community centres, which can be dull, echoing chambers if they are run directly by town halls.

But it was when they tied up with a social enterprise called the Furniture Resource Centre (FRC) that they really began to consider the small but growing third sector as an alternative.

The FRC was based in Liverpool, but had never actually done their work there. Richard and his colleagues contracted them to produce low-cost packs of furniture, refurbished after they were thrown out, for homeless families. In the first two and a half years, they proceeded to furnish a thousand homes.

FRC's chief executive Liam Black then made a formal approach to the council about the bulky waste service which, he believed, the council was not doing very well but which FRC could do better.

"It was true," says Richard. "People would be asked to put out their bulky waste on a specific day and they would be lucky if anybody turned up to collect it at all, and then it would be vandalised."

The new service became Bulky Bob's. It collected the bulky waste, repaired it in their workshops, sold it in their low-cost Revive stores or put it to good use if they possibly could. Within the first few months, it was clear that Bulky Bob's was so effective that it was causing the council budgeting difficulties. They were dealing with 200 calls a day, getting on for twice what the council had faced before.

"Once people knew that their rubbish would be collected, and it was going to be recycled and put to good use, they began to throw much more away," says Richard. "We realised we had under-budgeted for the service."

In short, it was effective and efficient. It employed people in Liverpool, and because it was in the city - rather than the branch of a multinational - it meant that the money spent on the service stayed circulating around Liverpool.

"That was what introduced us to the triple bottom line," says Richard. "When we contract services now, we expect not just a good service at the right price, but one that has strong environmental outputs and strong people outputs too. It means more bang for the bucks."

Richard and his colleagues had hit on one of the new roles for procurement as a regeneration tool. It meant that, if you can contract locally, then the money you spend on regenerating the local economy will go that much further, because your service contracts will be re-spent locally, and again and so on.

This was Liverpool's policy for radically improving services. It had the enthusiastic support of council leader Mike Storey, but the council officers responsible did not see it that way. Contracting services to local social enterprises had barely been tried before and they were nervous of the whole idea.

But now, six years after the start of Bulky Bob's, social enterprises play a central role in the council's services policy. Even so, it was all very well to plan to extend their role further, but the hard reality was that there were almost no social enterprises in the city capable of handling most of the contracts.

The finance to start social enterprises is increasingly available around the country, thanks to a new tier of social investment institutions, but it is still hard to expect local authorities to trust major contracts to brand new untried enterprises. That's why Liverpool has been experimenting with putting the fledgling enterprises under the wing of a larger organisation.

Not all housing associations have stayed true to their democratic and voluntary sector roots. But those that have - and Richard is also chair of a local one in Liverpool - are now beginning to take on social enterprises, look after them, do their back office functions and contract them to carry out services.

"It means you get the benefit of using local knowledge," says Richard. "It means you get the benefits of big and small. The lesson is to develop social enterprises which can piggy back on bigger contracts."

The difficulty for local authorities is increasingly that thanks to the rise of mergers and acquisitions, there might be only one - or occasionally two - contractors capable of taking on the old-style contracts. Thanks to an inadequate competition policy, the government has allowed a situation to emerge where there is almost no competition for many local service contracts, and that means higher prices and worse service.

The solution has to be both splitting up contracts into smaller lots, nurturing small enterprises to bid for them, or - as in Liverpool - to link social enterprises up with the big contractors for mutual support.

"This is a totemic policy for us," says Richard. "It means that we are prepared to let go so that community-led organisations can take on services, so that money is back in the community. It means there is a third way - that is community-led and involves local people in delivering services. It means that local people are recruited and the profits stay in Liverpool."

There can be political difficulties to all this, as well as practical ones. Contracting to local enterprises is probably better than contracting to distant multinationals, but there have to be ways that local people can still vote to change local services if they want. Because of this, the lesson of Bulky Bob's and the others is that councillors need strong political support to make sure it happens.

But what drove the re-organisation of Liverpool's services, more than anything else, was the urgent need to make them work, and the understanding that effective services require local feedback and local knowledge.

Liverpool's experience is an example of many of the themes of Lib Dem reforms in the places they control: rooting services in the neighbourhoods they are serving, using local assets more effectively - whether they are people or goods - rather than wasting them in landfill or unemployment, and keeping local money circulating locally. It is also about the reinvention of the old Liberal principle of voluntarism. That if people are not satisfied with the way services are done, they can organise locally and do it better themselves. Even so, it is also a pragmatic policy. As a bare minimum, people want their councils to be effective. "Labour had grandiose plans to rebuild a swimming pool at huge expense," said Cambridge Lib Dem leader Ian Nimmo-Smith, "but the council wasn't good at cleaning the streets, collecting the rubbish or collecting council tax." New administrations also need to demonstrate quickly that they mean change - and that might be about little things as much as big things. As the new Lib Dem administration in Watford found, it is often the mundane things that people notice,

concentrating in their first few weeks in power on cleaning chewing gum from the town centre, removing graffiti and tackling fly-tipping.

To do that sustainably, they also had to tackle a chronic sickness and absentee problem among their staff, which was also about improving moral. But then improving services can, in itself, improve morale, if people outside are beginning to notice. When Sutton put the environment at the heart of their policies in the 1980s, it had an immediate knock-on effect on staff morale.

"Council staff began going to conferences and finding that people had heard of Sutton - and it might not necessarily have been for anything they were working at," says Sutton's then leader Graham Tope. "But it began to give them some feeling of pride by association."

Improving morale has been the core of the 'Partnership at Work' approach with trade unions and council staff hammered out by Lib Dem East Dunbartonshire, has pioneered a non-confrontational system to discuss issues before each side takes up positions. "Industrial democracy was a key proposal by the SDP in the 1980s," said East Dunbartonshire leader John Morrison, also Lib Dem leader on COSLA. "It's good to put into practice what we believed and fought for twenty odd years ago."

Liberal Democrat councils also:

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### **Adopt fuzzy boundaries**

Often councils need to look outside their boundaries, either geographical or departmental, to make things happen more effectively, and to solve the problems they have in common. There are examples of close working with outside agencies, public and private, throughout this book. But Lib Dem Cardiff is in the forefront of forging ways to share back office functions with neighbours to make them more effective.

Cardiff provides the Consumer Direct Wales service centre for the whole of Wales. Then there is their 101 phone service for the police (see Chapter 4), their Connect 2 out of hours service for the local health board, and Connecting South East Wales, a project to share functions like recruitment with nearby social services department, as well as joint solutions for dealing with waste long-term.

"Under the previous Labour administration, Cardiff Council was viewed as very insular, and its relations with other bodies - including with surrounding local authorities and other tiers of government - was not good to say the least," says Cardiff's Lib Dem leader Rodney Berman. "We've tried to become pioneers of joint

working, recognising that collaboration can often achieve better quality and more cost-effective services for local residents."

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### **Use information to personalise services**

Somerset has a scheme which provides occupational therapists with tablet computers so that, just by walking round someone's home, they can alert community safety officers about chains on doors, or health services about walking frames needed, and order them then and there. On one occasion, the van drew up outside with the wheelchair just as the occupational therapist was leaving.

Kingston was also amongst the councils that lobbied originally to make direct payments to disabled people in the borough, on the grounds that they knew best what they needed it spent on, and among the first to put it into practice.

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### **Use what they have got**

The main problem about putting Liverpool's bulky waste into landfill was that it wasn't actually valueless. Much of it was perfectly serviceable; it was just that its owners wanted a change. Throwing it away was a serious waste of resources which were needed elsewhere.

But it might also mean using the information that service users can provide, as Southwark did by employing the local pensioners forum to survey how to revamp and extend public toilets (they also decided to open up toilets in council buildings to the public).

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### **Link up locally**

When Luton's family workers find problems which they can't sort out themselves, they have other agencies working alongside them in the same schools to help. One of the benefits of devolving services to neighbourhood level is that they can at last begin to tackle the local problems which are clearly inter-connected, which otherwise departments, agencies and quangos tend to hug to themselves with little co-ordination.

That might mean linking everyone from neighbourhood wardens, litter pickers and community police teams to the same hub (Durham) or building community resource centres to deliver health, childcare and learning together (Cheltenham).

Liberal Democrats sometimes find it hard to get the core message across that localising services isn't just more democratic: it is also more effective and more efficient. It is the key to genuine public service reform. The scandalous ineffectiveness of many quangos is a result partly of their distance from the people who they serve - who know best the complexity of local problems - and partly because their 'targets culture' disempowers frontline staff.

Lib Dems running councils are on the front line of this critical debate, demonstrating in different ways that devolution means less waste and more effective services.

**nine : health**

**the power of a local  
chicken**

*"The experience of the great towns is encouraging. By their wise and liberal use of the powers entrusted to them, they have... protected the health of the community."*

**Joseph Chamberlain, Hull, 1885**

*"Many kids can tell you about drugs but do not know what celery or courgettes taste like."*

**Jamie Oliver**

The days before Somerset County Council was Liberal Democrat are now so long ago that the memory is hazy. But those who do remember will tell you that the policy that sealed the fate of the previous Conservative administration - almost the last time that Somerset took to the streets in protest - was when they closed the county's school kitchens.

It was the nail in the coffin for school meals. Children were expected to bring packed lunches, which varied wildly between wholemeal sandwiches and Mars bars, and those on free meals were particularly badly hit. They were stigmatised by white paper bags, containing just the kind of cheap processed rubbish that you might expect in the days when contracts had to go, by law, to the lowest bidder.

In the decades since then, the range of fresh local food available plummeted, even in rural Somerset. Not just poor school meals, in the days before Jamie Oliver, but corner stores and small farms alike, forced out by supermarket power, the closure of local abattoirs, livestock markets and local processors.

If you wanted to eat healthy local food, there was precious little opportunity to buy it. But one place you could do so in Somerset by the mid-1990s was the Women's Institute market in Princes Market in Yeovil. And that's where Sue Miller, then leader of Liberal Democrat South Somerset Council went regularly on Fridays for her free range local chicken.

"The WI was one of those places which kept alive the concept of home-cooked local food in the bleak years," says Sue. "There were not many places you could buy healthy food then, even in Somerset."

Talking about the WI market with her colleagues and council staff led to a series of conversations about the emerging politics of food and eventually to a meeting between Sue, and the council's community development officer with the Soil Association in Bristol. The result was a small grant, matched by the council, and a clearer idea about what they might do about it. Out of these humble beginnings grew a new organisation, originally almost part of the council, shared by the county and neighbouring Mendip Council, and later an independent organisation, called Somerset Food Links.

They borrowed the name from a similar idea in Devon, but over the decade since then, its success - promoting, investigating, building new food markets - has provided a model that has been copied, to a greater or lesser degree of success, in many other parts of the country.

They began with the slogan 'Local Food for Local People', working with local farmers with marketing, printing maps of the county and directories of local producers. They launched new farmers markets all over Somerset, and they linked with up the surrounding counties as far as Gloucestershire one way and Cornwall the other.

But it was soon clear there was a great deal more that could be done. There was the importance of local food to the way the landscape looked, and therefore to tourism. There was the need for sources of healthy food for people on low incomes - not just those forced to eat the cheap, un-nutritious stuff in the free school meals bags - but for those in sheltered housing who couldn't drive to the supermarkets, and couldn't find much when they did.

But it was the foot and mouth epidemic in 2000, with its closed footpaths, devastated farmers and vast pyres of cattle, that made local Lib Dems realise just how urgent these food issues were. The abattoirs, local shops and markets were going; it was beginning to look as if everything would be swept away.

Somerset Food Links was the chosen vehicle to launch new local food co-ops, buying healthy food in bulk, even for green vending machines in schools, all before Jamie Oliver's critique shot unhealthy school food to the top of the political agenda. Even delving into obscure regulations to find ways round: when they first tried supplying fresh local apples to schools, there were procurement rules that appeared to make it illegal.

Sue Miller stepped down as chair in January this year. She is now Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer, Lib Dem spokesman on food in the Lords and has even opened a local food store in north Devon. But food is now a political issue, even if it rarely gets the time of day in Westminster.

"I think we showed the importance of local authorities being involved in this issue," she says. "School education authorities might have done something before. Health authorities have strategies in that direction, but only local authorities can take a lead and break through the maze of regulations to make things happen. Who else is going to make sure social services take a lead on improving the diet of older people in the area?"

Sue's project has helped make the food agenda mainstream, not just something extra local authorities might do if they have time. "But even now, many local authorities see it as an add-on rather than an urgent problem which is their fundamental duty to address," she says.

The moment she realised they were on the right track is when she met a resident in a council sheltered housing scheme in Yeovil, which had long since lost its local shops, and was now part of a food co-op. That meant weekly visits to the wholesalers for local fruit, followed by a community get-together to bag it up for the members to collect.

One of the members in her eighties told Sue how much she had got from it - not just from the eating the fruit, but taking part in the activities travelling to nearby towns to spread the message, and how it had transformed her life.

That is just part of the social networks of food that are being rebuilt. Because without a network of small farmers, abattoirs, distribution systems and local shops, people have to eat what they are offered by the supermarkets - if they have a car to get there.

"It is so fundamental for children that they should get started with decent food properly, and not just for them," says Sue. "If you go to any small town in France and you can see the networks to do that available. They spend more money on public services, but then we have obesity and diabetes and cancer and we spend all that money fixing the problems instead of preventing them."

Food is a new area for local government, or at least an old one re-discovered, and this is a sign that something is shifting. As the government searches for levers to make their public health ambitions work, local authorities are often the only ones with a sufficiently broad agenda and sufficiently democratic credentials to actually follow through.

Even so, it is often left to individual Lib Dem councillors to hammer out ways of pushing forward the agenda. It was Lib Dems on Ludlow Town Council, for example, who were at least partly responsible for the town becoming the first Slow Food city in the UK - as much about tourism and local economic success as it is about health

(there are now five specialist butchers in Ludlow town centre and four specialist bakers).

But Jamie Oliver's intervention has given strength to Lib Dem councils that want to follow Somerset's lead in improving school dinners, which is how Southwark linked up their education department with Borough Market to help raise awareness in schools about healthy eating, and why Portsmouth came to impose tough new standards in their new school meals contract to go beyond government targets.

The difficulty is that they have few obvious levers to pull, given that they have no legal responsibilities over healthcare. Not all councils can, like Lib Dem Watford, lead a partnership for a £750m new health campus to replace their general hospital (with a health business park). Or, like East Dunbartonshire, work with the local health board to leverage £50m for a new leisure and arts centre as part of their Kirkintilloch Initiative.

But that is the challenge to innovative councils, which is why Lib Dems:

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### **Find new ways to keep local people healthy**

That might be community exercise classes, walking and gardening groups for older people, or the Asian women's tennis group (Southwark). It might be to roll out increasing numbers of smoke free areas, ahead of legislation (Eastleigh). It might be a new football development fund as part of the community gain from the new stadium (Cardiff). Or it might be the Open Week of Sport (Bristol) or Community Games (Southwark again). It might also be emphasis on walking to school, like Islington's successful Walk to School week (free breakfast to primary school pupils who walked there). Or a major roll out of cycle routes and cycle facilities, as in Watford and other places too.

But these are all public health measures in their earliest stages. The hunt is on for ways of changing people's unhealthy lifestyles beyond the government's emphasis on scaring people with advertising or bullying them into submission. To start with, councils are increasingly looking for ways that people can choose to eat fresh local vegetables or walk to work if they want to - and to rebuild the food economies and pedestrian cultures that make that possible.

So you will find measures to support the owners of community cider orchards (Somerset), new green corridors with traffic-free cycle paths right into town (Luton), new rules about maximising open space, nature reserves or play space in new developments (Stockport). It might be a wider understanding, as in Luton

(where every tree that is removed has to be replaced by two) of the calming and crime-reducing effects of greenery.

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### **Rebuild public transport**

It's a big job, of course, and not one that local authorities can begin to do by themselves, which is why campaigning for new infrastructure (Southwark has been pushing in Parliament for the cross-river tram to link to Peckham) is part of the job. So is working in partnership with other bodies, like plans for Bristol's new £68m Greater Bristol Bus Network.

Often it means new subsidised bus services, but it also means getting contributions from housing developers for new bus services (Eastleigh). Or funding bus services at night (Cambridge, which found that the bus operator responded to the new climate of support). Transport policies in the UK are not usually designed for rural areas, which is why Somerset has hammered out community transport that is 'demand-led', so that villages can have buses when the people who live there actually want them - at 2am if necessary, to make sure young people are not marooned there after a Saturday night out

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### **Target traffic fumes**

We know how much air pollution from cars affects people's health, which is why so many Lib Dem councils have got involved in new ways of helping commuters out of their cars, with car-share schemes (Bristol Car Club), or school travel plans, 20mph zones backed up by physical barriers such as chicanes and humps, lorry bans (Islington cut traffic accidents by 20 per cent) or town centre commuting plans (Hereford).

It can mean co-ordinating other car clubs so that there are cars available at the end of every rail journey, so people don't have to drive between cities (Islington). Or green travel plans for the council itself - with showers for people cycling to work, reasonable cycle mileage allowances where possible and subsidised bus passes (all of which are included in the plan hammered out by Lib Dem leaders in Vale of White Horse in Oxfordshire).

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### **Take a stand against the gas-guzzlers**

Richmond hit the headlines recently with their plans for a sliding scale of charges for residents' parking linked to the emissions of the vehicle. "For too long climate change has been seen as a problem that only central governments or international

organisations could address," said leader Serge Lourie. "The truth is that we must all start acting now at local level."

But it also means tackling the worst offenders head on, which is why Eastleigh has developed penalty rates for second and third cars in residents parking zones. And it means tackling the impact of the council's own car fleet, buying ScootElectric scooters and G-Wiz electric cars (Islington) or bioethanol cars (Somerset, using wheat grown in the south west).

The battered remains of the great Victorian infrastructure for health in towns is hanging on by its finger tips: the public parks are often unsafe at night and dog toilets during the day. The NHS is an 'illness' service dedicated to maintaining people with chronic disease in their chronic state, and without the levers to help them recover. That is why it is not since the pioneering days of Liberals in local government under Joseph Chamberlain that health has been so high up the agenda for councils.

It is there partly because preventative health is increasingly important, and it is increasingly clear that the NHS and the burgeoning quangocracy have few means to achieve it themselves. But because it coincides with new local government powers to improve local people's well-being, and a rising local government ambition to burst out of the strait-jacket of the traditional agenda and make a difference for people, this is now an area where innovation is happening fast.

**ten : conclusion**

**the future**

*"We told them we wanted to be much more inclusive and listen to their ideas. This went down very well because it had not happened before."*

**Cllr Ian Marks, leader of Warrington Council, describing going round council managers and middle managers after taking control, 2006**

*"As Liberal Democrats we have very clear ideas about inclusiveness, liberty, fairness, ecology and internationalism that form the heart of our vision for the future. A successful Liberal Democrat Council is one that can take those big ideas, make them relevant to the area that they lead and pull the delivery mechanisms behind them to ensure that the vision becomes reality."*

**Cllr Richard Kemp, leader of the Liberal Democrats in local government**

The test of good leadership, and the greatest threat to it, is not so much the opposition - it's your own colleagues, says Ann Shaw, leader of Lib Dem Three Rivers Council in Hertfordshire. And she is in a position to know, because she has been a council leader for longer than anyone else in the country.

"The key thing for any group leader is to keep their group together and build it into a team," she says. "You must spend time talking to people, getting to know them, taking a real interest in their ideas and problems, and making sure everyone is involved in discussions. Being a leader doesn't mean you make all the decisions and it is vital that all group members have a real involvement and interest that makes it worth staying and helping make the whole project work."

The truth is that, although Liberal Democrats have an extraordinary track record of winning control, they are not always as good at holding on - and often the flaw that breaks an administration is divisions within their own group. Even so, involving the whole group is important for other reasons. It keeps leaders in touch with what's going on in the ground, and as Ann says: "We Lib Dems do demand a lot of discussion".

Her service as a councillor has seen major changes in local government. When she was first elected, as the first woman councillor in the area, she discovered after six months that the chief executive had taken it upon himself to intercept all her mail and answer it himself, and had not seen fit to show her either the letters or the replies. Those days are gone, and Three Rivers has been in Lib Dem control longer

than almost any other, but the importance of human skills in local government - and in politics generally - has never been so important. Just as business seems to be dispensing slowly of the Alan Sugar style, the same thing seems to be happening in local politics. A political team running a council needs to trust each other. They need to plan ahead, with local supporters, council officers and local organisations, if they are going to stay the course. They need to work out when to be political and when not to.

"I would urge all members to invite their political opponents into the decision-making process, put down their guns and broker a deal whereby you agree not to make political capital out of decisions arrived at through cross-party agreement," says Woking's environment portfolio holder Ken Howard. "An adversarial style of leadership will not deliver the ambitious brave action required to beat climate change."

Dealing with council officers, and with other members of the group, are both simple good practice. They are exemplified by the best Liberal Democrat groups in the UK, but there is no doubt that they are sometimes particularly difficult to achieve for Lib Dems. Fellow councillors have ambitions for their area which are likely to cost money. Their plans are likely to require imagination and effort on the part of officers, and any new administration needs to be more than just open. They need to be hard-headed and determined if these changes are ever going to see the light of day.

In the first weeks of a new administration, they also need to set out those intentions in a series of high-profile gestures that can be achieved quickly. That might mean cancelling the £18,000 spent on group awaydays at five-star conference venues by the Labour group (Brent). Or abolishing clamping (Islington). Or reprieving the countryside rangers (Warrington). Or just abolishing the private parking space in front of the council offices reserved for the leader (Vale of White Horse).

Of course, it is possible to be effectively Lib Dem in a whole range of ways. That is what democracy is all about, and Lib Dems believe above almost everything else in the good government and efficiency that stems from democracy.

But, even so, there are a number of clear themes that emerge from this book, and from Lib Dem councils, that makes them recognisable anywhere:

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### **They listen and devolve**

Lib Dems do not believe councillors can sit in town halls and decide everything for everyone they purport to represent. Nor do they believe it is very effective if they try to do so. They know that devolving power and responsibility to wards and

neighbourhoods, nine times out of ten, makes them more efficient and effective, because local people best know the complexity of the issues before them.

Lib Dems also know that, if listening to people effectively is not backed up by the localisation of power, it just becomes market research. Lib Dem power is about its determined devolution downwards, not collecting it in the hands of a few leaders at the heart of the council, in the fantasy that this approach leads to either good or effective action. It is about handing it back to neighbourhoods who know best what needs doing, or to individuals who know how best to spend their disability allowance, for example.

They also know that not everybody finds contentment representing communities on committees, but nearly everybody has a basic need to feel valued and useful, and no society can afford to waste that. This is the basis of an emerging new kind of politics, as much a response to the re-engagement of local government as it is to the powerlessness of people. It requires a whole new language, and Lib Dems are at the cutting edge of developing it.

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### **They are innovative and imaginative**

They have to be. The conventional answers will not deliver the kind of values they aspire to. The conventional political divide, and therefore the conventional national programmes, are not going to deliver anything recognisably Liberal Democrat. They need to be pragmatic, but it is a pragmatism born partly of fact that public versus private is not the central battleground of the party.

There are councillors who still regard the private sector or voluntary sector as anathema. But as Somerset leader Cathy Bakewell said about linking up with a business partner to run their back office functions: "Other members realised that turning a large organisation round to become completely customer focussed is not going to happen without the impetus of the private sector." The issue is how this is done, and what safeguards are built into contracts to guarantee openness and democratic oversight. Lib Dem councils are pragmatic to a single end: providing solutions that work for people, making them independent, helping them reach their full potential.

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### **They keep costs and taxes down**

Thrift is a slogan derived from Victorian Liberalism, yet when a new Lib Dem administration takes over in local government, it often has to be something they simply have to embrace - and not just because that is what local people usually require. Thrift is the opposite of the kind of bloated incompetence that has

undermined the reputation of so many councils under the rule of other parties. Often the most powerful signal that there is a new force in power is an end to the usual above-inflation council tax rises people face every year.

When Lib Dems took over Bristol in 2005, they set out seven principles to get the spending back under control. These ruled out cuts in public services and inflationary increases in budget, but asked for proposals for five and ten per cent cuts from departments and agreed to find savings mainly from cutting tiers of bureaucracy, new ways of providing back room services and using council assets more effectively - they are the first UK council to invest in open source software.

Since 1997, Newcastle had seen average council tax increases of 8.5 per cent under Labour Control. The Lib Dems took over with a manifesto commitment of no more than two per cent and they stuck to it. Liverpool cut council tax over three years, and cut staff by 2,000 without reducing performance. But these are savings for a purpose, rather than for their own sake.

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### **They seek out assets beyond the bottom line**

If Labour and Conservative-run councils believe either that spending money will fix problems - or sometimes that only the bottom line is important - Lib Dems look more broadly at the assets before them. Those assets include water, wind and solar power - which is not just about saving the planet but can also save money. They include the waste which is otherwise just thrown away. They include the people who live in the area, without whose efforts then all the efforts of police, NHS and local government will quickly unravel, and whose advice and involvement will make all the difference between success and failure of other projects.

The local spending power of the people who live there - however poor they are - is also an asset, just as council procurement budgets are. Can they be spent better locally, rather than allowed to seep out to companies or utilities that spend it elsewhere?

Even information is an asset. When it is wasted in layers of bureaucracy it is a problem; when it is put to use to make the details of places and services work better, it is invaluable.

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### **They speak for everybody beyond the town hall**

The new era of quangocracy complicates administration at every level, just as it divides people from those who make decisions on their behalf. The endless

complications of partnership working, where no one body has the power, the will or the ability to see clearly, can disempower councils who fear that, because they have no power to compel, they have no power to do anything.

Lib Dems recognise that councillors are the only elected representatives with a democratic local mandate. It is therefore their job to reach outside the town hall, to articulate a vision for the future and make things happen.

In many ways, this last point is both the most distinctive aspect of Lib Dems in power, and the most problematic. It is problematic partly because this is a test of leadership as much as the committee skills to take a city like Liverpool or Newcastle and herd the factions and quangos behind your vision. And partly because the latest government local government policy is encouraging all local authorities to adopt these and other Lib Dem characteristics - to devolve, to listen, to lead and to go green.

But Lib Dems have a head start. They understand that effective leadership in local government is no longer about wielding absolute local control like an old-style city boss. It means having the authority of democratic elections behind you, and the ambition to speak for the city or district or borough, not just for the town hall. It means having a vision and spelling it out in such a way that it draws the cacophony of local politics behind it.

Watford's Liberal Democrat Mayor Dorothy Thornhill believes that, as mayor, she has a wide remit to intervene in issues that affect Watford residents but are not directly under the council's control. "When you looked inside a council 40 years ago, when I first joined the party, you saw people who saw it as their job to steer the council," says Richard Kemp, "They didn't necessarily look at the city as a whole or see themselves as representing it. Now it's different."

Innovation matters in these circumstances. Lib Dems are innovative in power partly because of their position in the political system, forced to use what measures and systems are available to forge something they were not always designed to achieve. But that innovation beckons us towards a future we can dimly perceive - time banks to rebuild communities, community land trusts to deliver affordable housing, money flows analysis to test regeneration schemes, linking wind, sun and water to fund local utilities.

If you want to see local futures in action, then keep an eye on the councils which have swung Lib Dems into power.