Cabinet Member for your ward –
A new challenge for all councillors
Councillor Richard Kemp, Councillor Erica Kemp, Councillor Colin Eldridge and Billy Maxwell
For some, it all started with the Local Government Act 2000 when councillors were sorted into the sheep of the cabinet or the goats of the rest. For others it was really the Local Government & Health Inspection Act 2007 which spoke unambiguously of the role of the ‘front-line’ councillor. For Liberal Democrats, however, it all started in 1970 when the Young Liberals and then the Liberal Assembly adopted what they called the ‘dual approach’ to politics. Campaigning within the council or parliament and seeking the levers of power is of course why we join a political party rather than a pressure group. At the same time, though, we campaign within the community as well – not only to gain power to but to empower the community to take power for themselves.
It, of course, is the role of every councillor to be the activist within their ward. We campaign not only to get elected but to change things. We should use our ward as a place in which to do things rather than, in traditional terms, as a place from which to do things.

And there’s the difficulty. Too many politicians of all parties still see the action as being almost exclusively town hall. Of course they produce a sporadic Labour Rose or an intermittent Conservative in Touch, especially in the last six months of a four-year electoral cycle. We cannot boast as Lib Dems to be that much better: for many of our activists Focus is an electoral tool, a mantra, a ritual. “Deliver three before Christmas and one a month after Christmas and we will be okay,” say the campaigns pundits. They are probably right, but in Church ward we don’t believe that Focus is just about winning elections, even though producing it often clearly has deep electoral benefits. Focus should be the tip of the iceberg in terms of informing people; listening to people; involving people, empowering people; and shaping communities around the real concerns of neighbourhood needs and neighbourhood opportunities.

In this treatise the three of us show how we try to act as cabinet members for our ward. Of course we play our part in the council, its committees and the other fora in which councillors find themselves. Of course we often go mad and send aggressive letters to staff and others about poor performance; of course we occasionally wave our arms about in the council chamber or metaphorically in the press; of course we often bleat about how difficult it is to get things done. These are not the best parts of being a local councillor, they are the worst.

The best bit is getting things done. It’s knowing what is needed because of your relationship with the ward; being able to make positive suggestions about the area’s future; involving local residents in sorting out their own futures and actually doing something; pulling together staff from the array of organisations that are supposed to work together to ensure that they do. There are few things better in a councillor’s life than getting a thank-you letter saying that we made a difference.

As you read this, you will notice that the chapters have been written by different people. This is because we all do different things. All councillors have to have some ideas about not only policy but also administration, campaigning and casework. The casework leads the campaigning, the Focus newsletter brings forth the casework, delivering Focus makes contacts for us and the campaigning creates contacts for the party. A virtuous circle if you realise that not all councillors can do all of this and that not all councillors have the time for this.

In Church ward Erica is the ‘case work queen’, handling a good 75 per cent of the casework and originating most of the Focus stories.

Colin is the ‘campaigning genius’, taking our stories and bringing them to life in a variety of ways.

I am the ‘legal eagle’, dealing with planning and licensing issues. My long legs also mean that I do a lot of delivering!

In council Colin and I are usually the most vocal, although we readily confess that Erica’s quiet style can often be more effective.

We all play to our strengths and respect each other’s skills and knowledge. We hope to deliver the service which the people of our ward have the right to expect.

What follows are our thoughts and our methods. We don’t claim to be the best councillors in the world, but we do hope that reading our stories will stimulate you to think afresh about your work in your communities.

Cllr Richard Kemp
Leader, Liberal Democrat Group,
Local Government Association
February 2009
Church ward is a prosperous part of Liverpool. One of its boundaries is Penny Lane so everyone of a certain generation knows that we live ‘underneath the blue suburban skies’.

For many years, however, I represented one of the most deprived wards in the country. Listening to residents telling me about the diverse problems they were experiencing became one of the major parts of my work as a councillor. Often the problems were intractable and very distressing as levels of poverty were extreme and with this often came poor health. Given the very complex needs of the community, developing empathy was quite often a key skill in order to see what could be done to improve the quality of life for those residents.

I now represent one of the most affluent wards in Liverpool and I will confess that at the beginning I found it very hard to empathise with my new residents and listen to their problems with a degree of understanding. How could not being able to park outside your own house be a problem when in my previous ward only one in three residents could even afford a car? Residents in Church ward would complain to me that the council had not collected the grass cuttings after mowing the patches of grass in front of their houses. In my former ward none of the houses even had grass out the front!

The failing was with me. Problems are always relative and being able to empathise is crucial to our ability to represent those people who elected us. If you can empathise, you listen better and are better placed to resolve issues and deal with problems. Having empathy, however, does not mean we have to agree with what people are saying – helping people may mean not doing what someone is asking for. In order to empathise we have to listen and listen carefully. It is at surgeries that this skill can be acquired and developed.

Advice centres
Residents come to advice centres often having previously tried to deal with a problem. They have contacted the council, phoned appropriate people, they have written letters: now they come to see me. I have to listen again, make sense of what has been said and offer advice, solutions or at times a paper handkerchief!

As we know, sometimes problems are very particular to one person and can only be dealt with at this level. Sometimes however, it is important to recognise that a problem may be indicative of a wider issue which can be raised with the council or partners.

One of the things I hate doing is to tell a resident that their concern is not a council issue and therefore I can’t help them. One of the ways I have tried to resolve this issue is to engage partners with our advice centres. For example the police now join me at Allerton Library and from time to time we hold joint advice centres.

I didn’t get arrested! I attended a public event and spent some time talking to the police cadets. This was a good opportunity for the cadets to hear about the work of a local councillor and for me to cement the strong partnership we have with the police in our ward.
On the way to the shops

Are small matters indicative of larger problems? I sometimes feel it is now impossible to get to the newsagent at the end of the road without picking up half-a-dozen bits of casework. The lollipop man at the end of the road recently asked me why he was no longer entitled to a free lunch at the local school. It’s an easy enough question but led to me asking myself: “if we have a shortage of people wanting to be lollipop men and women and then start taking away what might be a considerable perk, are we not making the problem worse?” And all this came from going out to get my newspaper in the morning.

Talking about matters on the way to the shops is a very useful opportunity to pick up issues that some people think are too small to bother you with normally. When we demonstrate that we take small issues seriously residents have more confidence in our ability to manage the wider problems.

Door-knocking

We knock on residents’ doors for a variety of reasons. Some time ago I was struck with a comment made by Dorothy Thornhill, the Liberal Democrat Mayor of Watford. She told me that when she gets bogged down by the weight of leadership at the town hall she takes herself off to a street in Watford and knocks on doors for half an hour, just to remind herself why she is there. This was an excellent tip and something I try to do myself.

When you knock on doors you get to see a very different group of people to those who come to the advice centre. Most people are taken by surprise and just pleased to see you.

On-the-street surveys

Doing ‘on-the-street’ surveys is another excellent way of listening to residents. Sometimes unless we ask for people’s opinions we will not hear anything. Setting up a table stall in a district shopping centre and then door-stepping shoppers with just a couple of questions can reveal all sorts of issues that you didn’t know about previously.

On-the-street surveys can help fill the gaps in ward knowledge. Is the local bus route adequate? How near is their GP to them? Are they able to see an NHS dentist? Some of these are not council issues, but in listening to residents’ experiences of the quality of services delivered by partners we are better placed to raise their concerns at a higher level and with supporting evidence.

Looking at key performance indicators

I remember sitting at a select committee some years ago. We were all looking at the KPI that told us that over 97 per cent of street lighting in Liverpool was now working. All the councillors commented that the 3 per cent of lights not working must all be in their wards. It is the perception of achievement that is more important than the KPI achievement. You can’t argue with some KPIs but you can, through listening to people, understand that perception and reality can be very different things. Or that in pushing to achieve a KPI you have made a mess.

Take road re-surfacing. In trying to achieve a KPI to get road surfaces in Liverpool to reach a certain standard, a new method of re-surfacing was introduced. In our ward this consisted of re-surfacing some roads by spraying blue chips onto the road. Once ‘bedded in’ it looked fine; the problem was that it littered the road and pavements with small blue chips for months afterwards that were impossible to clear effectively. After many complaints, a huge number of emails and a site meeting our officer agreed that this method of re-surfacing would not be used again as the problems encountered in achieving the KPI were too great.

As local ward councillors we have an obligation to point out to those desperate to hit government targets that residents can be adversely affected along the way. I am not a great speaker, I like to listen. I endeavour to create opportunities to listen to residents. The trick is translating the listening into the real message and then using what you have heard to drive strategic improvement.

Part of the ‘Your Community Matters’ event, this was taken at our local district shopping centre. It was an excellent opportunity to both door-step local shoppers and for councillors and officers to work together.
I have been told that in order to get my message across, people have to hear it eleven times in as many different formats as I can think of. This is not easy. It is time-consuming, exhausting and can be very dispiriting, but if I don’t get my message across how will people know about all the good things I do? How will they know about how hard I work and what a good politician I am? I am unashamedly political when talking to the ward. If we don’t give residents feedback, how will they know we have taken up their issues?

In practice people in Church ward will receive at least nine items from us in a standard year outside election and three (or many more if it’s a general election) during local elections. We invariably have a Christmas card which is, of course, not political but reminds people who we are and how to contact us.
**Focus**

The *Focus* newsletter was invented in Church ward when the diligent work of Cyril Carr, our first Liberal councillor for thirty years, was supplemented by the marketing skills of a brash young businessman called Trevor Jones more than 40 years ago. Despite Church ward being the safest Liberal Democrat seat in Liverpool, I feel very strongly that it is my duty as a ward councillor to deliver a Liberal Democrat leaflet to residents at least six times a year (in practice we do more). Across the country we know that people are turned off by politics, so our aim as Church ward councillors is to make our Church ward *Focus* full of local information.

The stories in our *Focus* that have been most popular recently were the human interest stories, including a picture of me running the London Marathon and a story of me offering to babysit and ending up delivering a baby! To be more serious however, keeping stories local maintains a degree of interest but also sits alongside our mantra of community politics. It’s often the pavement politics that gets the readers’ interest. If residents see their road mentioned or the local district centre highlighted they are more likely to read the newsletter. It goes back to having empathy and a clear comprehension of the issues that are important to people: I have listened to what you say, I understand your problem and I have tried to do something about it.

Giving residents credit for helping resolve issues is also important. For example, the Allerton Road District Centre decided to enter the Britain in Bloom competition. As councillors we used some of our neighbourhood fund to give them a hand. We also turned up to dig flower beds and plant flowers. In this case, we as councillors have not achieved anything – our role is to help others achieve. We turned up and helped and provided areas of expertise in the early days, but anything that happens now is their achievement. It goes in our *Focus* to show our role but also to emphasise the credentials of *Focus* as the place to read local news. We know the power of this only too well as every delivery of *Focus* increases our advice centre attendance in the subsequent weeks!

**Street letters**

Street letters are an excellent way to make legitimate use of council resources to communicate with residents. Many political groups get very exercised about whether or not they should have political advisors in their offices at the town hall. Most councillors have some form of administrative support but not many of us use it to its full potential. In Liverpool we are able to use the Liberal Democrat office to send out street letters. There is a mail-merge system that uses the electoral register to create a personalised letter to every registered resident in any street. There are obviously guidelines regarding the type of letter that can be written and the number that can be put out in any one session. These understandable restrictions notwithstanding, street letters are a very useful way of personalising an issue pertinent to a street or road.

For example, at the time of writing, I’m just about to put out a letter to 50 residents in one road to tell them that, weather permitting, the council will be pruning the trees in the road within the next two weeks. Tree pruning in a particular road won’t usually be of interest to the whole ward, and it is not difficult to send a street letter out to one road telling them when the trees in their road may be pruned. I know of one ward in Liverpool that systematically aims to cover each road in the ward with at least one street letter every six months.

Street letters from the council cannot be overtly political. Some councillors use their own letterheads with a very personalised political message and these serve a very useful purpose as well. A mixture of both types of letter is an ideal to strive towards.

One of the questions I often ask councillors seeking re-election is, “If I gave you a list of every street in your ward, could you write a letter to each street that would deal with an issue pertinent to its residents?” This makes letter-writing a two-way process: you need to know your ward well enough to know what might be an issue in every road, and to be able to let people know you understand these issues enough to do something about them. Once you’ve done something, don’t forget to let residents know!

Street letters demonstrate that councillors are able to keep our eye on small local issues as well as the big strategic picture. For those political groups that have been in control of a council, ‘losing touch with local people’ is all too easy a jibe to throw at a controlling group (although sometimes all too true, unfortunately).

Our electorate is not stupid. They understand and appreciate that trying to address the big issues in dealing with a city is important. I can use street letters to let residents know that the small issues are still important to me.

Running the Marathon was a human interest story and as you can see I ran for RNID. We put this picture in *Focus*, which led to interest and support from residents.
Newspapers

Newspapers are very obviously a different format. My daughter once picked up one of the hundreds of newspapers that were stacked up in the hallway ready to be delivered and cynically asked, “Do people really read this?” Yes people do. In fact, someone came to the advice centre this week and asked me about one of the articles in the paper we’d delivered only the week before. I thought it was interesting as he’d muddled our newspaper with the local free weekly newspaper!

People read a newspaper in a different way to reading a street letter or Focus leaflet, and newspapers reach some of the residents and voters that Focus does not connect to. A newspaper gets put on the kitchen table and read while having a cup of tea, whereas when writing a Focus leaflet you have to grab the reader’s attention on their way from the door mat to the rubbish bin. With newspapers, you have the chance to write in more detail and can do editorials. Using quotations from senior police officers in your articles will give them more gravitas. Newspapers are the best place to put photographs of the leader on a visit to Liverpool.

In the newspaper we take the opportunity to draw attention to our national policies with the sort of article that people expect to read in a newspaper. Our most recent one addressed the issue of the cold winter and rising fuel costs. Delivering this during a particularly cold spell in Liverpool was excellent timing and judging from some of the responses we’ve received was well read.

Newspapers are horrible to deliver! They are heavy, dirty and truly impossible to deliver in wet weather. I have to constantly remind myself of why they are essential in talking to the ward when I’m out there shoving them through letter boxes.

Media

I think it comes with the job description that just as councillors spend a lot of time delivering leaflets to let people know what we are doing, so we should take responsibility for getting our message across to the local and national media.

In using the media we are reaching out to yet another audience and talking to that audience at a time chosen by them. People engage in a different way and we must recognise this and use it to our advantage.

We have a number of councillors who write regularly to the local and national press. It’s easy to claim that the press never print our letters, but in fact if you write regularly enough you stand a greater chance of getting your letter printed. It is a well-known fact that it is the letters page that readers first turn to when opening the local paper. Before I became a councillor I wrote regularly to the paper and colleagues at work always let me know that they had read my letter. Not only did they read the letter, but they took notice of the person who had written it.

Press releases are also a great way of talking to residents. Photographs and articles that include residents are always well received – there is no doubt that people like to see their picture in the paper. It is another way of demonstrating that we have empathy with residents and the issue they want to bring to people’s attention.

The number of journalists is decreasing rapidly. They don’t have time to research or to get to know everyone. Give them a couple of good reliable stories and you may find they are never off your phone!
Allies

We can talk to the ward through our allies. In engaging with various associations and helping those associations deliver their objectives we have the ears of many more people. For example, I am very proud that the world famous Penny Lane is one of the roads that defines our ward boundary. Some years ago a highly motivated group decided they wanted to do something with a piece of land on Penny Lane after it had been threatened with a housing development. The Liberal Democrats opposed this development and helped save the open space. Since then the Penny Lane Development Trust (PLDT) has been formed and recently got lottery money to develop a disused building on the site for community use. We now have an excellent rapport with the Trust and work together on a whole host of issues, such as outreach youth work and the possibility of the PLDT having a role in the proposed children’s centre in the ward. In working with this group, who are happy to give credit to the local councillors and the council for our support, we also connect with the ward. Being a good ward councillor is about recognising similar groups with aspirations that we identify with, and working in partnership with them.
I love working with residents – and I deliberately use the word “with”. Although I’m quite happy to take up complaints on behalf of residents, I much prefer to tackle issues together. I recognise I’m the elected representative, but if I bring together a group of residents to articulate a problem I get a much better result. It is also important that I remember that I’m the community’s representative in the town hall and not the town hall’s representative in the community.

Residents’ and tenants’ associations

Every ward in the city has its own version of residents’ groups, residents’ associations, homewatch groups, action groups and so on. One of the most important actions you can take as a new councillor is to familiarise yourself with all these groups. Referring again to the skill of empathy it is essential to understand the context of the group, how it came into being, how it has evolved and who the activists are within it. You also have to ask yourself whether the activists are representative of the group they claim to represent.

One of the challenges for all councillors is to engage in a meaningful way with each association without letting them dominate your life as a ward councillor. It’s all too easy to be drawn into the group and resolve all the issues that need a council response and to forget about looking at the bigger picture.

After the boundary changes in Liverpool, the three Church ward councillors wrote to all the residents’ associations that we knew of to introduce ourselves. We had positive response from all the associations and I was stunned to discover that for some our letter was the first pro-active letter they had ever had from a councillor. Residents’ associations are initiated and developed for a number of reasons. Some start as a lobbying group around a particular issue. Others are formed to manage an on-going issue in their area or to form a link between someone on the group and the council. Some are short-lived while others have been active for years. As councillors we have to understand and appreciate the context of each of these groups.

Residents, officers and councillors working together – helping residents tidy up an entranceway. Getting everyone involved meant the dumping of rubbish in the area stopped and residents later planted flowers and put out tubs and hanging baskets.
Self-help

I believe very strongly in enabling residents to resolve issues for themselves. Our council has a call centre called Liverpool Direct which is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week to enable our residents to contact the council with an issue at a time convenient to them. As politicians we deliberately set this strategy. Putting in place a system that enables residents to help them solve their own issues in the long term has to be more effective. If I am the person who they see as being their problem-solver what happens when I’m no longer a councillor?

Helping residents to help themselves in council issues will also have a knock-on effect in enabling them to deal with other issues. If the council is available at all times, residents might expect partners to be similarly responsive and demand to know why their GP can’t provide the same level of service.

Enabling residents has the potential to enable me to work more effectively with organisations and partners outside the council. Liverpool Direct is only one example of strategically driving an organisation to put the customer at the heart of everything they do. An effective ward councillor could seek to influence council policy based on his or her own experience of working with residents and residents’ groups.
Point in the right direction

As already mentioned, I thoroughly enjoy working with residents. What I don't enjoy is staggering out of a residents' meeting overloaded with casework which will take a disproportionate amount of time to deal with and not actually progress the aims and objectives of the association.

As ward councillors we should be effective sign-posters for people. For example, I worked closely with a newly formed residents' association who wanted to enter our local district centre in the annual ‘Britain in Bloom’ contests. As this was a new association I tried to attend all the early meetings and fund-raising events. I did this because I see it partly as my job to build capacity within the group so they could get off to a flying start. From that initial frequent attendance and high involvement I’m now not as involved. This is because I’ve been able to point the group in the right direction. I’ve introduced them to all the appropriate officers within the council. We’ve helped the group write its constitution, apply for grants, and publicised its activities in our residents’ newsletters. I am of the opinion that if this group is to continue to work effectively it must now manage more independently. My role now is to ensure the council is responsive and we have the support and structures in place to help groups like this continue to work independently of the ward councillors.

Strategically, my role must be to ensure the council is responsive to enabling residents to help themselves. My challenge to executive members of the council is to get them to develop self-help mechanisms within each portfolio area and my job is to hold them to account for this. We must enable networking opportunities and facilitate, not manage, them.

Giving residents the credit for, and autonomy over, their work is important. Here a local resident is receiving one of the Britain in Bloom awards for cleaning and greening the entry behind their houses.

Appropriate involvement

When is enough not enough? When is too much too much? You could drown under the weight of your responsibilities as a councillor and work all day every day and it would still not be enough. Appropriate involvement however is a different matter. Some time ago the council identified an area in our ward as needing traffic-calming measures. Without contacting the ward councillors, the council issued a full consultation document to residents in the area and notified them of an exhibition that would be taking place in the area. The residents were also told they would be asked to express a preference for a number of proposals being suggested.

To me this was an excellent example of how not to do it. Within days I was being besieged with letters, emails and phone calls about something I had no knowledge of. Not only were residents upset that they were getting quite short notice on a major proposal in the area, but there seemed to be no rationale for the suggested proposals. I was cross. Together with a group of very articulate residents we managed to get the exercise halted and the ensuing work has become one of the most satisfying projects I’ve been involved with during my time as councillor and one I think is a very good example of ‘appropriate involvement’. It can also easily be applied to issues in other areas.

Officers, ward councillors and those residents who had protested most vehemently agreed to have much more hands-on approach to resolving the traffic calming issue. We asked a number of residents who had expressed varying opinions to serve on a focus group. From the beginning of the exercise I had no opinion regarding the type of traffic-calming measures required and felt residents were the best people to decide, within reason, which proposal they could best accept. Therefore my appropriate involvement at this stage was to agree to chair the focus group.

It was at this point that our officers came into their own. At our focus group meetings they explained the vagaries of the law to us all and explained clearly why certain actions could not be taken. They appreciated and understood residents’ concerns about certain proposals and modified the plans accordingly. When the focus group finally agreed some further proposals to put out to the wider community, those residents who had been involved in the focus group agreed to attend the presentation to residents and defend the proposals they had developed.

Appropriate involvement means having to decide when you need to stand back and be neutral and when you need to take sides. We don’t always get it right!
As a former teacher I often think I developed my mediation skills while doing playground duty. Sorting out arguments between two pupils was not always easy and stopping punches being thrown and tempers lost honed my mediation skills.

As a councillor there are many times when we have to mediate. We listen to neighbour disputes; we try to mediate between the council and residents; we even have to mediate between council departments!

Some time ago a group of residents came to see me. They lived in a small block of flats and were quite a close-knit community. Their lives had recently been made difficult by anti-social behaviour. I took the evidence, reported the matter and the problem seemed to go away.

A few months later the residents came to see me again. The matter had got worse, with the radio now blaring at all hours and the resident screaming and being abusive to other residents in the block. The straw that broke the camel’s back was a bowl of urine being hurled down the communal stairs at another resident. I reported the matter again and this time insisted that the council look for a long-term solution and that the resident’s tenancy should be reviewed. In response an officer contacted me to tell me that the resident had been sectioned due to having mental health issues and that due to privacy and confidentiality issues I would not necessarily be given any more information. I was however told that in all likelihood the resident would not be evicted from the property and might at some point return. I contacted the residents in the block. They perfectly understood the confidentiality aspects of the situation but were very unhappy.

After many months of prevarication I mediated a meeting between some of the social work officers who had been dealing with the case and the residents who had been affected. I asked the social workers to just listen to the residents. They were reluctant to do so but eventually agreed. The result of this mediation process was that the officers told me afterwards that they were better able to understand things from the residents’ point of view after having heard from them. I learned from this example that sometimes it takes a long time to get a mediation event to happen but it can yield excellent results.

I do get it wrong though! Hands up if you groan when a resident asks for a ‘No Ball Games’ sign to be put up or taken down in a road. I’m sure this is a scenario many will be familiar with.
In one case I dealt with, I was presented with a petition to remove such a sign on the grounds that the ‘problem children’ that had led to the sign being put up some years ago had grown up and moved on. All the residents who had signed the petition wanted their children to be able to play out in the cul-de-sac where they lived, and parents had agreed to supervise their children in the street. I wrote to all the residents in the cul-de-sac asking for a response, and the majority opinion was that the sign come down. I arranged for this to happen and then got a solicitor’s letter writing on behalf of a resident telling me my consultation process was flawed, he wants to know how much this is all costing, the signs are not enforceable by law, children should not be allowed to play on the street anyway and finally the children who originally caused the problem had not left the area.

No amount of mediation, action, or inaction on my part would have resolved what was essentially a dispute between neighbours. I am just not going to be able to resolve this issue in a way that pleases everyone. The skill is to recognise this and bow out gracefully from the situation. I can’t claim I get this right though, even after 17 years on the council.

Establishing new groups

While writing this chapter I’ve had two emails come through asking how to go about setting up a residents’ group as the people concerned want to ‘do something’ about the traffic and parking in the area.

My first reaction was, “I can’t deal with any more meetings, groups, petitions, or AGMs”. Then of course I re-read my opening paragraph espousing the pleasures and rewards of enabling groups to act for themselves and how much I enjoy working with residents.

So how will I go about responding to these emails? I will meet the residents who have contacted me and talk about the objectives they want to achieve, I will suggest a venue where they can meet and agree a time and date for the first meeting that I can attend. I will explain carefully that it will be their group and that my role will be to enable and assist where appropriate. I can point them in the right direction and give them contact details within the council for officers who can help them deal with their various issues.

Hopefully at some point in the future I can use their voice as a bona fide residents’ group to press partners to become more engaged with ward issues. I might be able to use some of the members to talk with passion to the planning committee about the effect on the area of all the wine bars that are opening up and thereby influence the next unitary development plan that we produce. The possibilities and potentials are great.
So the big question is, “are our officers our greatest asset or our biggest obstacle?”

If I had a pound for every time I’ve heard, “this council is being run by officers”, I’d be very rich. If councillors don’t set the strategy, the officers have no choice but to make it up. I hope this chapter will demonstrate ways in which we can work effectively together.

Approaching council officers

I’ve seen every type of email, listened to every type of phone conversation and read every type of letter that councillors have written to officers. A lot are complimentary but many are rude, arrogant and sometimes offensive. An officer in Liverpool was once brutally honest with a councillor and asked “do you honestly think, councillor, that when you are rude to one of my staff they’re going to go that extra mile for you in the future?” I’m told that the councillor concerned got the message.

My attitude in dealing with officers of the council is that, like me, they are there working for a better quality of life for residents. Some officers, like some councillors, are better at their job than others. It is not my place to be openly and publicly derogatory about our officers. I will not be drawn into being sarcastic or offensive in an email, letter or phone call. If I have a complaint to make there are proper procedures to deal with this. This attitude directly affects how I approach officers to assist me with the work I do. I like to think I have established a reputation for working constructively with officers to our mutual benefit.

There are two main points I have tried to make to officers during my time as a councillor.

The first would be to say, “don’t draw me into operational activities”. If I report to you a concern about graffiti, waste land, or street-sweeping, my aim is to get the issue dealt with or at the very least to make contact with the resident as to why the matter cannot be resolved. I don’t want to be drawn into the ins and outs of the cleaning schedule or the type of soap used to remove the graffiti. I may want to know who owns the waste land we want cleared, but only if it needs my intervention to help resolve the problem. I once did a ward walkabout with officers and we came across some dumped rubbish on the pavement. “Ah, this is not a walkway,” said one officer, “it’s part of the highway so we don’t clear it.” I said I was not interested in who should clear it and nor was Mr Smith who had told me about the problem. I was interested in getting the area looking clean and tidy. Don’t involve me in the operational side of the council’s work.

Being able to identify and distinguish between operational matters and strategic leadership and intervention is a skill that takes time to develop, and councillors need support in this. Investing in appropriate member training in this field is time and money well spent. Those councils that do not invest find officer and member relationships can become strained as neither group really understand their role within the council and in relation to each other.
The second point is to say to our officers, “I’m not interested in your politics, but I will ask you to think politically from time to time.” For example this year in our ward the leaf collection schedule was not successful. On one occasion after much prompting the operatives returned to a street to clear the leaves on a Friday afternoon. The collection was long overdue and work in the street was going well until 2pm, when the workers packed up and went away with half the street still unswept. After many emails, phone calls and tearing my hair out it turned out that 2pm was the time that the workers clocked off. In theory this is fine as it is the contract we have agreed. However, thinking politically, what must this look like to Mrs Muggins who is waiting to have the leaves cleared from outside her house? If our officers were to think politically more often then perhaps similar issues would not arise.

Casework

As councillors we get a plethora of casework across a range of issues. We all develop our own systems for dealing with this efficiently (or not in the case of some!). The council has a duty to help councillors deal with this but often a council system will not work for a councillor. The council has to understand that when dealing with casework from a resident, we need the resident to understand that we have made the system work for them. We need to ensure that the resident understands that not only have we fixed the problem but if the system was broken we’ve attended to that as well. For example, in an area of terraced property some of the large recycling lorries were regularly not collecting the bins. Residents phoned our call centre and were told that the lorry could not gain access to the road due to cars being poorly parked at the bottom of the road. Residents complained to me that if the weekly bin lorry could gain access to the road why could the recycling lorry not do the same?

I had two jobs to do here. The first was to ensure the collections were regular and the second was to ask pertinent questions around the monitoring of the service. Additionally, I had to contact those residents who’d brought the matter to my attention and let them know that I’d looked into both issues. This takes me back to the point about empathy and understanding exactly the point that residents are trying to make when they raise issues. Is it the issue itself or is it the system? Or is the issue indicative of the system? Gathering evidence of small examples is useful when demonstrating to officers that something is not working.

Officers need to understand the range of casework we deal with. At any of our advice centres the first person who walks through the door can bring a relatively simple issue regarding a council tax query, while the next person may raise a very disturbing problem relating to social care and health. I find it helpful when officers produce answers for me that assume I am not an expert in the area they are dealing with and may never have had an issue like this before nor will have for another 18 months. We have recently been told that we may have a children’s centre in our ward. When we first talked about this with the officer concerned she assumed we had followed all the information the councillors had been given about children’s centres since they were first introduced in the city. We had not. I pointed out to her that to all intents and purposes I could well be a newly elected councillor and to assume I knew nothing about children’s centres. Once we had established this, communication between us was improved.

As councillors we can go the extra mile in working with officers. After many difficulties in trying to get some casework done recently I have offered to go and talk to a group of officers about how I manage my casework. This I hope will lead to an improvement in the system and a greater understanding of my role. You don’t have to be part of a controlling group in a council to work constructively with officers.
Encouraging officers

Being positive about the work our officers do is much more productive than being negative, scathing and rude. Explaining the problem clearly, succinctly and giving some direction as to the solution you are looking for works well. Officers respond well when I ask, “If this was your elderly mother’s street would you be happy with how the council has dealt with this issue or responded to that problem?”

We regularly do ward walkabouts with our officers. I aim to make these events a joint problem-solving opportunity rather than an officer- and council-bashing session that leaves us all demoralised. This is not to say that if an issue has not been attended to I can’t complain bitterly. The best example of this was when I did a ward tour with our Chief Executive some years ago. I double-checked with him that we still had an agreement with one of our partners to respond to pavement repair requests within 28 days, then when we stopped by the site of one such request and I handed him the email trail that demonstrated that this problem had been reported five weeks ago and was still not repaired. I did not need to be sarcastic or scathing – the evidence was there.
Working alongside officers

Being a cabinet member for my ward means that I must avoid ‘revving in neutral’ and only dealing with the pot holes. Much as I get a sense of satisfaction from resolving issues for residents and improving the system along the way, I want to get stuck into the more challenging areas and the ones that in 20 years’ time I can look back and say, “I helped make that happen”. Just prior to writing this I have been at the sort of meeting that I most enjoy as a ward councillor.

We have a district centre in our ward. It is basically a main arterial road leading to the city centre with shops, bars and restaurants. I am told it is the most successful district centre in Liverpool. Areas like this need maintaining and managing to ensure they continue to be successful. You have to be pro-active. Too often decision-makers have not taken responsibility for anticipating the factors that can lead to district centres going into decline. Ensuring that the Allerton Road District Centre continues to prosper is part of my responsibility as the ward councillor. I have a key role to play and if others are not round the table then I must get them there. I bring to the table my knowledge of the area and the opinions of the residents who live in the area.

We recently held a consultation event in this area. Not only was I there asking shoppers questions and giving out hot drinks and cakes against the November chill, but our neighbourhood officers were as well.

This then translated into a meeting with a host of officers and partners to discuss how we spend some Section 106 money given to us as a result of an extension to the supermarket further down the road. Having done the consultation event we all felt much better informed to make some longer-term decisions about the area. We were able to provide other officers with firm evidence about residents’ opinions and perceptions of the area. Officers brought their expertise about the money they spend in the area on an annual basis.

This is an example of the council working at its best. I bring my local knowledge and my mandate as an elected representative of the area. The officers bring budget, legal, and service area knowledge. Together we can come up with a long-term plan for the district centre that we can use for future decisions such as planning applications.

Finally, officers have a key role to play in enabling councillors to be successful cabinet members for their wards. During the run-up to our local elections we knock on doors, canvass and speak to as many residents as we can in quite a short space of time. After the elections we are armed with lots of knowledge about residents’ opinions and wishes for their area. This is an excellent opportunity for officers to organise meetings for councillors with key partners in their wards. I know of a London borough that does this as soon after the elections as possible. My plea to officers is, “Get in there quick! It will be worth all the effort.”
Much has been written about partnerships. Indeed, it seems that for the last 15 years partnerships have been the order of the day. These partnerships seem to have been built around two platforms:

1. The council as a whole where the leader, the chief executive and their equivalents in the partner bodies of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) put their names to the grand plan and the glossy brochure. The government has extended these with the concept of Local Area Agreements which bind the council and its partners to joint key performance indicators and spending plans.

2. Regeneration areas where a variety of initiatives and programmes such as single regeneration budgets, task forces or city challenges have brought local partners and the community around a table in a feeding frenzy for the grants and special funding streams that were allocated to them.

In 1999 the government tried to do something different. In its National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal it noted that even in the most disadvantaged areas the special regeneration funding amounted to no more than three or four per cent of the public sector spend for the area. It argued that perhaps more would be achieved by making better use of the 97 per cent of ordinary spend. That analysis was correct but not followed through. It allocated money in similar ways to the special programmes that they were supposed to replace and there was no understanding that areas that had declined for more than 70 years would not be put right in a mere handful.

In Liverpool we accept that the council has to respond to problems and work with organisations at four distinct levels:

1. The city as part of the conurbation of Merseyside and a part of the wider North West region.

2. The city as an entity delivering some services centrally and engaging with partners at the citywide level.

3. District level. The city is too big for local activity to take place. There are some services and partners who can best be engaged at the district level – in our case about 90,000 people.

4. Ward level or smaller (15,000 people) where councillors and their communities can work together with a detailed knowledge of the streets, the people, the opportunities and the threats.

It is at these last two levels that we are trying to understand the new role of front-line councillors. The council with its political majority has decided its big strategies and priorities. The LSP partners will have decided their priorities based on needs of their service and national diktat but also, hopefully, by engaging with the council and the other LSP partners to understand the global needs of the communities they serve.

What then is left for the ward councillor to do? Plenty!
A fundamental tenet of Liberal democracy is that problems cannot be solved by town hall or Whitehall. They can only lay down the framework and structures within which policies and delivery mechanisms must be fine tuned to meet the real needs of localities.

At ward level we try and recreate the partnerships within which the leader of the council operates at the whole area level. We have looked at the city-wide structures and organisations and worked out which of those have a particular resonance for our ward. Some of them are obvious and will apply to every ward in every council in the country.
The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership for Church ward meets when needed in our front room. We know what the city-wide priorities are as most of them are the same as the priorities in our ward. What we can add to the delivery of the strategies to implement those policies is local knowledge and local focus. The ward police constable and police community support officer, Erica, the youth service rep, community groups and head teachers between them know every problem area in the ward and most ‘problem’ children. Between them they can find joined-up solutions which can be implemented within budgets already set and which can be put in place immediately when a report has been written and approved. This means that a solution is available before the problems get out of hand.

That is not to say that we don’t meet police at a higher level from time to time about mutual concerns, but because there is a great trust between us, senior police officers and their local officers, their staff have been allowed to engage with us and get on with things. All the organisations concerned have small, area-based budgets which we can put behind those initiatives if necessary. As councillors we have £20,000 a year to spend on almost any initiative. The other organisations have similarly small pots. What is most important however is better use of the day-to-day resource. It is far better to have two PCSOs look at a big problem for a week and crack it then us spending all our time working out how to spend £500 or work out where we can get a grant from. Indeed our view is that as ward councillors we don’t want lots of money to spend but we do want an increased ability to ensure that mainstream work is better directed.

Our key partnerships are not always with the public sector – key for a Lib Dem must be effective partnerships with the community where the community (or some members of it) are prepared to take responsibility. A good example of this is the Green Lane Focus Group. Green Lane is a suburban street which has caused local contention because of the high number of empty buses running along it.

The council was aware of the problem and established a traffic control plan for the Green Lane area. The proposals for Green Lane itself were difficult as the suggestions from staff were opposed by the residents on Green Lane as they did not appear to address the key issues of over-use by buses. Councillors are aware that our ability to deal with these issues is limited. What we did was to establish a partnership between the local community, bus companies, PTA, police and council staff which we chair to deal with these issues.

By doing so we have raised the awareness of the community about what the council can and cannot do. More importantly, the community reps have tested every bit of the officers’ proposals for traffic calming. Having done so they have largely agreed with what the officers originally said but have put in important tweaks to make it work better. The result is that we have a report going forward which encompasses not council proposals but proposals endorsed by the community’s own representatives. Nothing is now being done to the community; it is being done by the community.

Lastly, we are starting a luncheon club for all professionals working in the ward. Four times a year we will invite the clergy, school heads, police, PCT, doctors – in fact everyone we can think of to join us for a sandwich and a chat about challenges in the area. The best partnerships are not the structured ones but the informal ones. When someone from the council can just pick up the phone to someone in another department or in another organisation to try and deal with a problem or opportunity then partnership is really working.

We have an excellent relationship with the local police. Often CDRP meetings is held in our front room and we regularly use the police station for residents meetings.
Where we are struggling is to work out what needs to be done at the level between our ward and the council – in our case the district. Clearly not everything can be done at a ward level. Allerton Road district centre is in our ward but has two other wards starting within 50 yards of it and affects parts of two more wards. A secondary school might be based in our ward but have an intake from half of Liverpool. A Section 30 dispersal order might be made in one ward but if it simply moves people to another ward has not really served its broader purpose.

In some ways though, the district committee is too remote. Of our six wards I know two well in addition to my own, because they are in the same constituency. Two others I know a little about and one other I know quite well because the housing association that I chair is the major stockholder there. The council and its partners are quite good at arranging information on a ward basis but not on a district basis. Should district reports be an aggregation of the information for all six wards – should key information be taken which will enable district decision making?

Crucial for us is knowing how much we as councillors can press for enhanced resources within this structure. Within the six wards in the district, we have one of the poorest wards in the country, Princes Park. Should I demand exactly one sixth of what is available? Should I ask for nothing for my ward because of the major problems surfacing in one just two miles down the road? In practice we resolve this by pitching in to the district committee and its officer-led groupings to ensure that the city strategies are carried out and that our ward gets its fair share of what is available. By supporting the whole we find it easier to get assistance for the smaller-scale interventions required by our ward.

The concept of the district committee implies a higher level of strategy than we would apply in our ward. What can we do effectively in our area to implement a strategy that has city-wide implications and resources? Can we take a city-wide strategy – say teenage obesity – and work out on our patch which schools, GP centres and sports centres are doing something about the strategy and create interventions where they are not?

If all you can see of an LSP is a city-wide glossy brochure with the signatures and fingerprints of the great and the good all over it, then it is a poor partnership. As councillors we need to ensure that our organisation delivers things differently and behaves differently because we are in partnership. What applies to us applies even more so to our partners. Unless we can all show that we have devolved some budgets, some authority, some power and some decision-making downwards then partnerships are a myth and not a reality.
Chapter 6  Linking the local with the national  
Colin Eldridge

As ward councillors we all deal with a whole range of issues every week and every month. More often than not these casework issues can be dealt with by a simple email to a council officer or partner agency. There are however some issues which are too big to deal with in this way or even within the council’s strategies and programmes. They may require national action either through legislation or through Whitehall or a government quango.

That is an important part of my role as a prospective parliamentary candidate (PPC) for a target seat. My job is not just to change service delivery locally but to join with colleagues nationally in pressing for change in legislation not only in Westminster but also in the devolved assemblies.

The link between national and local works in three ways:

Firstly, by promoting new legislation either by the government or through our own parliamentary party. Liverpool’s ground-breaking “alleygates” scheme is a great example of taking a local initiative and making national waves. In 1999 Liverpool City Council started a programme of gating all the city’s thousands of rear entries in the terraced streets. This alleygating programme was hugely popular and saw burglary cut by a massive 36 per cent across the city as a whole and also brought communities together. However, alleygates were technically illegal as they closed a public right-of-way. In most cases this did not matter, but proved tricky where there were objections from local residents. Local leading councillors, council officers and police officers very effectively lobbied ministers and civil servants for a change in the law. This directly led to an Act of Parliament, which included gating orders, being successfully introduced in 2004.

Secondly, by highlighting areas where councils are acting within an unsatisfactory remit from legislation. Planning issues can often be of this nature: local residents may oppose a planning application due to their dislike of the proposed development. For valid planning and social reasons their local councillors might agree with them. This often happens with commercial developments, particularly licensed premises and supermarkets. These situations often lead to ward councillors opposing applications in situations where the planning committee will receive legal advice against refusal. Put simply, if the application complies with planning law the planning committee will find it hard to refuse permission. If they do, they could leave the council open to paying costs if the decision is overturned at appeal. These circumstances open up debate regarding planning law, which can obviously only be changed by an act of parliament. Local people, local councillors and local campaigners can lobby their MP and the government of the day to change the law to give local people a greater say in local decisions.

Celebrating the reduction of burglaries due to the installation of gates securing entries in areas of terraced properties.
Thirdly, by linking national campaigning to the daily needs of local people in our ward. A good example of this is the “Save our Post Office” campaign which saved some post offices but brought home to many more communities the sterility of government policy. Here is a clear local problem being caused by the actions of the government, in this case through a type of quango. The parliamentary party fought hard in the Commons and Lords and Cowley Street and the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors (ALDC) produced a lot of excellent material. We took to the streets in our thousands with petitions and demonstrations which caught local imagination and engendered local support.

When we stand for election we make the same promise; that we will work all year round and stay in touch outside of elections. This is our contract with the electorate. We produce regular Focus newsletters which provide an update on local issues and promote the work we are doing, both local and national. These are generally popular and seem to be well read. However, these local newsletters only go so far.

Not everyone will read a political leaflet. Therefore alternative forms of communication are important to get our message across, tabloid newspapers, area leaflets, street letters; stories in the local paper are all equally as important. We aim to build a relationship with our electorate and communicate regularly and through different mediums with local and national stories.

Most years we will produce a detailed questionnaire for every house to identify issues of concern for our constituents. Questions will be about both local and national issues.

Every local councillor represents a group of people. Whether a parish councillor representing a few hundred or a city councillor representing tens of thousands, our constituents will each have their own opinion on what issues matter to them and what judgements they will make come election time. They may choose to ask their local councillor – whether parish, district, county, borough or city – for help in any matter at any level. Pot holes, leaf collection, public transport, post office closure, solving global warming, the public get to choose what matters and who they will ask to solve it.

What some Lib Dem campaigners seem to forget is that although we see different roles for councillors and PPCs for the local party and the national party this is not how our constituents or would-be constituents see us. If a councillor screws up their casework or fails to deliver the Focus, it will mess up the opinion of the party as a whole. Conversely, success and hard campaigning for local elections rubs off on general elections and vice versa.

Clearly, as a representative you have the right to say you cannot deal with the issue, or that they should go to another representative, such as their MP, who can. However, surely if they have come to you, they want you to do something. Ultimately, few politicians or representatives have real tangible power. What power they do have is that of persuasion. So as a representative you can write on behalf of your constituent to whomever has the power to resolve the issue.

I happen to be a PPC, so by definition the other five wards inside the Wavertree constituency do not have a PPC as their councillor. But their need to link national and local is just the same. Even if at some point the constituency does not have a PPC, we are still part of that national party. Our MPs and Lords are hard at work saying things that affect our constituents. They are helping shape legislation which may have an effect on the lives of those in your ward. They are not another party on another planet, but one part of the continuum of political life. You will win or lose votes because of what they do and say. It makes no sense to argue – as some do in our party – that it’s best not to mention national politics because it may lose us votes nationally.

The ultimate aim of any political party is to gain power at every possible level. We know too well the limited role that we can play in the lives of the people that vote for us as councillors. We can only make the major changes needed if we achieve either national power or national influence, preferably the former. Councillors have an important position and mandate of their own. Whether part of a small group or a controlling group, whether as leader of the council or working hard within our own communities you can make a difference. As part of a national party you can make an even greater difference.

It’s our ability to link together the local and national in policy terms that make Lib Dems different from Independents (although we are mostly independently minded!). It’s our ability to campaign together at local and national levels that makes our community politics real politics and differentiates us from both our main rivals.
“Councillors are the wild cards we officers get dealt.”

That was how my former boss at Blackpool Council used to describe councillors. This long-serving officer was, like many of the managers I have most admired in my career, a keen supporter of local democracy. He was not suggesting that having these ‘wild cards’ affecting officers’ work was a bad thing. He believed, as I do, that councillors are integral to the functioning of local government. He also knew that their position in relation to officers can cause tensions. It is these tensions that I will look at, focusing on four areas where as an officer I have had to find a way of making the most out of my relationship with councillors.

Don’t stop me now

Fifteen years ago I got my first local authority job and was keen to make an impact. Coming from the community sector I was used to ‘just getting on with things’.

I quickly realised that this did not always sit comfortably with local government’s political dimension in that the projects I wanted to push forward seemed to be subject (at least in my mind at the time) to unnecessary and unwelcome involvement by councillors.

This involvement of a new intermediary between me and my work directly with the public could have been interpreted in one of two ways.

1. Councillors want to ride on the back of the hard work of innovative and dynamic officers – with an option of using officers’ activities for petty political point-scoring.

2. It is the council as the employer that has provided, through its officers, a service to local people. As the democratically elected local champions, councillors views matter and officers should support them and work with them as a core part of their job.

To fulfil their role, councillors occasionally adopt positions that lead to political ‘knock-about’. However I came to realise that the majority of the time this is not the way councillors operate (though an enormous amount depends on the individual councillor and on the circumstances). Most of the time issues raised by councillors with officers are non-political. So awareness of the political dimension is important for officers. However, deference to councillors as the elected leaders does not preclude officers’ work being recognised within the wider council environment.

In short then, I found working closely with councillors did not mean I lost my ability to make a difference as an officer; if anything it strengthened my work.
I'll tell you what I want

Moving to a new authority, I was struck by a very different culture in officer/councillor relationships. Having previously found a way of accommodating and even welcoming the local government dimension of councillor involvement I was now faced with a very hands-off approach to my work from councillors. To my surprise this also created some unexpected problems.

Later, running a small unit, I was faced again with two opposing positions to reconcile.

1. Embrace the low level of councillor interaction as a sign that I was trusted to get on with my work.

2. Make extra effort to inform and involve councillors so as to provide a greater understanding of and legitimacy to my work.

The first, *laissez faire* option meant that I did not know if councillors were happy with my activities. This loss of feedback was a risk both in the lack of councillor input to inform service improvements and in my loss of influence with the very councillors who make hard decisions at budget-setting time.

The second option was not ideal either. When attempting to communicate my work unprompted I was nervous about providing excessive and possibly unwelcome information to councillors. I am acutely aware that councillors already have a mountain of paperwork to wade through and me copying them into every activity I am involved in could well be a source of irritation.

What I have learnt is that there needs to be an open and frank exchange early on between an officer and a councillor as to what each expects from their relationship. This is preferable to second-guessing and risking mistakes. I think that it is the duty of the officer to make this approach and also helpful if a councillor thinks carefully about what they expect from officers.

I want it all and I want it now

As I moved again and properly into management at a new authority, I again arrived at a challenge to test councillor/officer relationships. This time it was over councillors’ role in directing services in response to concerns from constituents.

The principle is clear at a ward level that the councillor should be aware of developments specific to their local areas, such as a road closure or a bid for improvements to the local park.

At a higher level the decisions about these activities may be part of a strategy to improve parks and open spaces across the authority or in the case of a road closure, part of the local transport plan. So the impact of a high level plan or strategy may have a local effect, but it may not be easy to change the overall plans in response to local circumstances. The same principle about being locally responsive can also apply to authority-wide contracts, for example over grass cutting.

In short, the impact of a service may be locally felt but the administration of it has to take account of authority-wide commitments to a consistent standard of provision. This leads to officers wondering if they should either:

1. Focus on developing the best service delivery possible across the authority in the hope that this will then also lead to local improvements.

2. Work with councillors in response to residents’ concerns at ward level to try to bring about a more localised delivery of authority-wide services?

The difficulty of the first is that it is unlikely to wholly satisfy local councillors.

The difficulty with the second is that it is sometimes hard in the value for money ‘contract culture’ to deliver a service that can be responsive to all local circumstances.

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1 With proper consultation prior to consulting plans and strategies, this should not occur. However, even when consultation is thorough it does not stop people from continuing to take issue, through their councillors, over things that they disagree with.
For officers it sometimes feels as though the principle of councillors ensuring officers respond to local issues is tough to do in practice. This inability to respond because of the constraints of contractual agreements or the knock-on effects of delivering a service in a different way in each ward can lead to councillors blaming officers for intransigence. In some cases officers can and do use the rigidity of authority-wide provision not just in their defence but as a get-out clause absolving them of the responsibility for looking for solutions that are still possible within the terms of contracts or the wider strategic plans. It is incumbent on officers to determine whether there is scope for a local solution and if there is not, to explain in detail why not, rather than just dismiss councillors out of hand. It is down to councillors to listen carefully, and at times sympathetically, to officers facing such predicaments. Sometimes it isn’t obstinacy but genuine complexity. Arbitrary blame from both sides is unhelpful.

This is one circumstance where a good, in-depth, reasoned discussion is extremely valuable between officers and councillors, as councillors will in turn have to return with an explanation to their constituents. As an officer I have also learnt to welcome this as an opportunity to check that everything that can be done to respond to locally expressed concerns is being done. I would like to add here that the way a council is able to organise its services to take strong account of ward or neighbourhood working can be effective in minimising the tensions described.

And the fish swam out of the ocean

This leads me onto the last of the areas where the officer and councillor role can, in my experience, be tested: strategic versus management roles. To put this into stark relief, all officers who have been around a while have councillor horror stories to tell. The two I will refer to have both happened to me in previous authorities (which for obvious reasons shall be nameless).

1. I was asked by a councillor to sack an admin officer because they did not like their telephone manner.

2. I was told to waive a bill for a service to a particular individual despite this being against the stated charging policy of the council.

I am sure every councillor has a story of poor officer conduct to match, however, when councillors do act inappropriately, this leaves officers with a couple of dilemmas: how to on one hand take forward concerns about a councillor’s conduct without it damaging their career, while on the other responding to councillors in a way that recognises their democratic legitimacy while also balancing this with due processes within the authority.

Officers have the right to expect a minimum standard of behaviour from councillors. For serious breaches of conduct such as sexual harassment, there are local and national procedures in place. In my experience though, a major cause of tension is not because of poor inter-personal skill, but an inappropriate blurring of roles. What I am focussing on then is where there is a misunderstanding of councillors’ strategic role in influencing service provision in response to constituents’ concerns and manifesto commitments and the officer’s role in implementing, professionally and consistency, council policy.
My approach is always to try to think of how I can direct councillors to the result they want without it being done in a way that compromises the separation between the officer (managing resources) and councillor (strategic influence) roles. Besides this approach, which has mixed success, officers also have to accept that there is tension built into the system of local government and that this may not always be a bad thing. If councillors were all professionally trained, groomed and knowledgeable about every formal organisational protocol within the council, then perhaps they are not the best people to be councillors.

Why? Because surely councillors should be direct and outspoken, reflecting the person in the street rather than suited, smoothly spoken senior officers; to be the wild cards that can change the game? At risk of being strung up by some of my colleagues, it can be a bit like fish complaining of water if officers who have chosen a career in local government can’t hack what comes with local democracy; the occasional uncomfortable challenge, voiced bluntly by the chosen representative of the community.

Some like it hot
As a local government officer I have felt marginalised by councillors both because of too much interference and because of too much distance. I have been caught between conflicting ward and authority wide priorities and had to grapple with behaviour that at times has been shocking. Despite all this I have met and worked with many local councillors who are hard-working, passionate, compassionate and highly skilled in working with officers.

I see local democracy as integral to the provision of public services, and for providing a voice and a choice for citizens. If I had to lodge one final comment appropriate to both councillors and officers it is this: in order to support the exciting new empowerment and localism agendas, embracing learning is essential. Officers stubbornly entrenching themselves into their professional disciplines and councillors wanting influence but not engaging positively with the complexities involved, will both hinder the devolution of more power to neighbourhoods.

We must all learn to work better together if we are to get services closer to people and elected representatives into positions of greater local influence.
Wholesale changes need to be made to the way things are done. The outline of what is required is obvious: the questions about what, how and why are set out below. In short, councils, quangos, the government and sometimes the community fail to recognise the role, knowledge and hard work of the country’s 25,000 principle councillors. At our best we can be the eyes and ears of all the public sector; the bridge between officialdom and community; and the information source most trusted by the community. At our worst we are a bunch of time-wasters who like to be something not do something; who like to whinge rather than act; and whose commitment to any political belief is incredibly hard to define.

In the 2007 Local Government and Health Inspection Act the government set up some clear opportunities and challenges for local councils and their councillors. All other LSP partners have a duty to cooperate with us, but what does that mean? The council is now ‘first amongst equals’ at the LSP table. New Local Area Agreements put some areas of public service delivery outside the council into joint agreements on targets which councils lead. Front-line councillors are given a new role and opportunities with both their ward responsibilities being recognised and the new ‘power’ they have been given in the community call for action to call other agencies to account.

Lamentably, progress on developing both councils and their partners has been disgracefully slow. Councils have failed to act on the opportunities both presented in this legislation and in past legislation. Few types of council I know have been able to find ways to deal with problems through the opportunity to do things based on the economic, environment or social well-being of an area given to us in the 2000 Local Government Act. Sadly, political campaigning, including in some areas of our party has regressed from inclusive community politics style campaigning into tightly controlled campaigning based on demography and achieving that magical formula: ‘50 per cent of those likely to vote, plus one’!

In our view from our ward in Liverpool there are massive and increasing opportunities inherent in the present system. We try to live up to those opportunities but in fact in this ward we have been doing the same things since the late Cyril Carr became our first councillor in 1962. We work within the community, we listen to what people say; we argue their case wherever possible; we campaign with them as well as for them. When we first took this ward and Liverpool in 1973 the opportunities were nowhere near as good, but the fighting spirit within our party was much stronger.

To really ramp up the work of ward or front-line councillors we need fundamental changes in attitude and a major shift in resources. In our opinion no one organisation or party is looking holistically at the role of councillors and most of the responses that have been applied in recent years are tokenistic and half-hearted.

Myself and Erica in front of the local pub at the corner of Dovedale Road (where we live) and the world famous Penny Lane.
But we cannot put the blame just on someone else. Too often councillors neither articulate our needs nor rise to the opportunities (no matter how limited) that are available. Because of my work in London at the Local Government Association, Erica and I have a flat in the Brixton Hill ward in London. In the two-and-a-half years since the ward elected their three councillors (not Lib Dems I am relieved to say), I have received precisely no leaflets from them. I have received one leaflet from that party during the mayoral election and have just received my first missive from a new PPC some six months after they were adopted (which did mention the councillors). This frankly is a disgrace.

Regrettably, too many councillors in all parties make little effort to inform, communicate or jointly campaign. “I know what’s going on”, they say! Or even worse, “people know what my views are!” The front rooms of the UK have many people spending a lot of time watching television who thought that the town hall would not work if they were not at every committee, subcommittee and working group. They have found out, alas, the wrongness of their thoughts.

Some thoughts for all:

For the government
What is the point of passing legislation if you are not prepared to do anything about it? The Act is empowering, not mandatory, in some aspects. Where it is mandatory no one in central government seems to be doing anything about it.

• Almost 18 months after passing the 2007 Act we still await with interest guide lines about how to introduce elements of it
• The government has provided little or no support to train councils and staff into taking advantage of the new reforms
• The government has failed to get its message across within separate ministries. Although some improvements have been made, too many ministers rule their areas like Napoleon with diktats being sent to regional offices and quangos about localised delivery
• The government has failed to get its message home to the rest of the public sector. Few partners have a clue that the duty to co-operate even exists, never mind what it means
• The government is wandering off into other areas of ill-thought-out nonsense about petitions and involvement without consolidating the effects of existing legislation

For councils
Are you up to the challenges of the legislation?

• Why have so few councils acted under the powers given to improve the ‘well-being’ of their areas?
• How many councils have looked at the role of a front-line councillor and worked out how to support them properly with staff, resources and training?
• How many councils have tried to educate partners about the duty to cooperate and the community call for action?
• How many councils have asserted their first amongst equal status with partners?
• How many councils have delegated anything to local councillors or local people for decision or implementation?

For quangos
Do you really use the councillors properly or do you think they are ‘politicians’ and best dealt with from the end of a long pole?

• How often do you meet the councillors in your patch?
• How often do you inform them of what you are doing?
• How often do you listen to their overview of their community and try to understand their holistic view of the communities they represent?
• How often do you ask them to put information out into the community?
• Have you thought of merging your PR and marketing budgets with those of the other parts of the public sector to provide and efficient and effective information and feedback to communities?
It may seem that in this conclusion we are raising more questions than answers. That’s true but in the rest of this publication we have tried to provide our own answers to these questions. No other councillor should necessarily do what we do or in the way that we do it. Our response to the needs and opportunities in our ward is to campaign in a certain way. Each councillor must find their own appropriate way to do business.

We hope that in doing so, all councillors will live up to the opportunities and not play down to the weaknesses. At the end of the day you won’t be a good councillor because someone else has given you permission to be one, you will be a good councillor because you use your role and mandate to make others listen to you as you articulate the needs of your constituents.

Don’t wait for power to be given to you. Seize it and run with it and really shape new opportunities for your area based on your mandate and your relationship with your electors.

For political parties (including our own!)
Do you believe in community politics or just politics within the community?

- What resources do you apply to finding good people to stand as councillors?
- What resources do you apply to training and supporting councillors as distinct to getting them elected?
- Do you see councillors just as pawns in the fight to get MPs elected?
- Are you destroying the concept of community politics by aligning the role of councillor too closely to that of national politics?
- Are you damaging communities by developing policies and practices which appeal to 50 per cent +1 instead of the whole community?
- Do you take strong action against poorly performing councillors or just wait for the electorate to do it for you?

For councillors
Are you up the modern challenges and opportunities?

- Do you see yourself as the cabinet member for your ward?
- Is your instinctive approach to a problem in your ward to send an email or do something about it?
- How often do you call meetings with officers about your own ward?
- Do you regularly and frequently communicate with your electorate?
- Do you see your ward as a place from which to do things or a place in which to do things?
- Are you ready to take advantage of the community call for action?
- Do you see your job as being to represent or empower your constituents? (Yes this is a trick question!)
Appendix 1 The Church ward team

The current team for Church ward have represented it since it was created in 2004 by boundary changes. 70 per cent of the ward came from the former Church ward, which was held continuously by the party and its predecessor since 1962. 15 per cent of the ward came from the former Allerton ward and 15 per cent from the former Grassendale ward, both of which have been represented continuously by the Party since 1983.

Cllr Colin Eldridge has been a member of the council since 2004, and served as a member for the Cotham ward of Bristol City Council between 1998 and 2001. Originally arriving in Liverpool to run the cabinet members’ office, he quickly gave up that position to stand for the council. He has served as chair of the Neighbourhood Committee and was cabinet member for Leisure, Youth & Community Safety before becoming a backbencher to concentrate on the Wavertree parliamentary campaign. In his spare time he runs a dry-cleaning and laundry company!

Cllr Erica Kemp, known universally as ‘the nice councillor Kemp’, has been a member of the council since 1993 when she held a seat at a by-election in the Picton ward. She has fulfilled many roles within the council and is best known for her competent and thoughtful chairing of an area committee for two years and chairmanship of the Children’s Services Select Committee for three years. She is an approved peer for the IDeA and is the Lib Dem special advisor at the Leadership Centre for Local Government. She has assisted Lib Dem and other groups in a variety of councils throughout the country.

Cllr Richard Kemp served as a councillor between 1975 and 1984 and from 1992 to date. The wards he represented before Church ward were all inner-city wards with multiple deprivations. He has chaired many council committees in Liverpool under that system. His last major post in Liverpool was as cabinet member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Community Safety. He is now the leader of the Liberal Democrat Group at the Local Government Association and deputy chair of the Plus Dane Housing Group based in Merseyside and Cheshire.

Billy Maxwell is the long-suffering neighbourhood services manager for the South Central district which looks after a range of activities in an area of five wards in addition to the Church ward. As the chief officer within the district, he works with councillors to adapt city-wide strategies and policies. Coming to the council last summer from Blackburn-with-Darwen Council he has served local government in a variety of outward-facing, community-led capacities for 15 years.
Church ward is one of the most affluent wards in Liverpool with a mean household income of £36,662 against a Liverpool mean of £26,800. It has a population of 14,500 residents of whom 10,750 are electors. Allerton Road is the jewel in the crown of South Liverpool. It still has a reasonable range of shops, although it generates much of our case work with continual checks needed on highways, planning and licensing applications linked to a massive growth over the past 5 years of licensed premises. The cheapest housing (even now) is about £150,000, and most of the houses are in the range of £200,000 - £500,000, with some going up to £750,000. Its schools are good quality, the environment is nice and its unemployment is half the national average and therefore very, very much lower than for Liverpool as a whole.

It has a higher than average proportion of BME residents of 9.6 per cent, most of whom are from long-standing Liverpool families and at 17.3 per cent has a below-average level of long-term illness.

Only 1.7 per cent of homes in the ward are social housing with the vast majority of the remaining 98.3 per cent owner-occupied. It is a hugely popular area for housing with only 3 per cent voids, most of these being short-term voids between sales or lettings.

In November 2006 the worklessness rate within the ward was 11.3 per cent compared to 26.3 per cent in the city as a whole. The incapacity benefit claimants are 5.8 per cent compared with 13.8 per cent and 1.8 per cent were claiming job seeker allowance compared with 5.4 per cent in the city.

In 2006/07 it had a crime rate of 44.1 per cent compared to the city rate of 100 per cent. Educationally its pupils score well, 71.2 per cent achieving 5+ A*-C at GCSE level.

Church ward has three Victorian parks either in it or adjacent to it; an excellent district centre on Allerton Road and a high level of Japanese tourists on a magical mystery tour along Liverpool’s internationally renowned street, Penny Lane.

People love the area but have no clear idea of what it is. People who live in Dovedale Road could say they live in Penny Lane, Wavertree, Allerton or Mossley Hill. The six square miles of the ward (fairly large by urban standards because of the amount of green space) has four distinct neighbourhoods within it and three half neighbourhoods which also relate to part neighbourhoods in adjacent wards.

Its community activitism is hard to see but definitely exists. Although the ‘community’ does function, it is through neighbour action, family action and amenity groups rather than through residents’ associations.

Within this ward – our patch – we try and do all the things that the leader and cabinet do for the city as a whole:

- We have a clear vision for our ward and how it fits into the overall vision of the city as a whole. We have shared that with our constituents and received broad approval for it
- We listen to what people want and more importantly what they need
- We campaign to get things done either directly or in the Town Hall and other corridors of power in Liverpool or outside where decisions are taken which affect our constituents
- We empower people to actually do things for themselves
- We form partnerships within the officer structures of the council and its partners and with the community to move things forward
- We do all this within the context of liberal democracy and the great desire to elect a Liberal Democrat MP for our area
- We campaign to get ourselves elected

Our objective through these is to make our area a better place to live. We do this as a team within the party and within the community.
1. Be proud of your politics
   I am a Liberal Democrat and I hold dear to the ambitions espoused by my Party. I will try to work, live and campaign in a way which testifies to those beliefs.

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

3. Know your ward better than anyone else
   Officers go home at 5pm. Residents know their street, their school. You go everywhere and talk to everyone.

4. Represent your residents to the system not the system to your residents
   I have to relate to the residents who contact me, listen, understand the issue and aim to resolve where possible what I can’t achieve.

5. Focus locally but think and act strategically
   I won’t fall into the pot holes – I will aim always to think strategically where possible and won’t get drawn in to purely operational casework issues.

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

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

8. Walk the talk not just talk the talk
   I will aim to communicate in a range of ways including; different types of literature, phone calls, door knocking, street surgeries, I will reach a greater and more diverse number of people if I do.

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

10. Never forget that next election day is your date with destiny
    Enough said!
Acknowledgments

Our thanks to the Leadership Centre for Local Government and particularly Joe Simpson who bullied us to write this, Rebecca Cox for editing it and Siobhan Monaghan-Coombs who actually made it happen.

To Billy Maxwell for being a highly professional officer and writing this is in his spare time for no fee; assisting us as he would assist councillors of all parties and of none.

Our heartfelt thanks to the people of Church ward who have continued to elect Liberal (Democrat) councillors continually since 1962 and whom we hope to continue to serve for at least another 47 years!