




# Lib Dems and Localism

An NLGN series of party pamphlets

A collection of essays by

**David Boyle · Cathy Bakewell MBE · Richard Kemp  
John Shipley OBE · Andrew Stunell MP · Paul Tilsley MBE**

with foreword and conclusion by **Steve Hitchens**



The New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this collection as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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## About the authors

### Steve Hitchins

Steve Hitchins was Leader of Islington Council from January 2000 to May 2006 during which time the council was identified by the Audit Commission as ‘the fastest improving council in the country’.

While Leader of the Council, Steve chaired the Islington Strategic Partnership which entered a Local Area Agreement and administered Islington’s Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The Secretary of State appointed him as a non-Executive Director of the Islington Primary Care Trust. He was the Liberal Democrat Vice-Chair of the Association of London Government.

He is a former director of Greater London Enterprise and the Improvement and Development Agency.

### David Boyle

David Boyle is a member of the Liberal Democrat federal policy committee. He is the former editor of *Lib Dem News* (1992-98) and member of several previous working groups including *It’s About Freedom*.

David is the author of a number of books including *The Tyranny of Numbers and Authenticity*. His report on public service co-production, *Hidden Work*, was published in June by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

### Andrew Stunell MP

Andrew Stunell MP became Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in March 2006.

Andrew entered Parliament in 1997. Andrew was leader of the Liberal Democrats on Cheshire County Council for six years, holding the balance of power, and Vice-Chair of the all-party Association of County Councils from 1985 to 1990. He was a member of Stockport Council from 1994 to 2002. From 1989 to 1996 he worked as Political Secretary of the Association of Liberal Democratic Councillors (ALDC), heading the organisation. He has written several booklets on council practice and procedures. During his time in charge of the ALDC, Liberal Democrat councillor

numbers more than doubled across the UK to over 5,000. He was elected as Chief Whip in 2001 and stood down from the post in 2006.

Andrew came top of the ballot for Private Member's Bills in autumn 2003 and brought forward his Sustainable and Secure Buildings Bill, which passed into law in 2004. He was the Liberal Democrat Energy Spokesperson from 1998 to 2005.

### **Cathy Bakewell MBE**

Cathy Bakewell is Leader of the Council and has been Chair of the Executive since June 2001. She has been a Liberal Democrat member of Somerset County Council since 1993.

Cathy is a member of the Somerset Strategic Partnership and is also one of the Vice-Chairs of the County Council Network. She is a member of SW Regional Assembly and is a Director of the Somerset Rural Youth Project.

Cathy has also worked as a Constituency Agent for the Liberal Democrats and was PA to the Rt Hon Paddy Ashdown in the House of Commons from 1997 to 98. Before taking time out to raise a family, she worked as a personal secretary in a variety of organisations.

### **John Shipley OBE**

John Shipley became Leader of Newcastle City Council in May 2005 and was first elected as a Councillor in May 1975.

From 1978 to 1998 John was Leader of the Liberal and then Liberal Democrat group on the Council and Leader of the Opposition for ten years from 1988 to 1998. In addition to his responsibilities as a City Councillor during this period, John Shipley stood as a Parliamentary Candidate for the Liberal Party in 1974 (Blyth twice), Hexham 1979, Newcastle North 1983 and 1987.

John represents the City Council on a number of outside bodies including the Northern Way Steering Group and Core Cities, Tyne and Wear Development Co. Ltd Board of Directors and the Theatre Royal Trust Limited of which he is Chair. He was appointed a Board Member of One NorthEast in December 2005. He has just retired as Regional Director of The Open University. He was awarded an OBE in the 1995 New Year's Honours List.

**Paul Tilsley MBE**

Paul Tilsley MBE has been Deputy Leader of Birmingham City Council since May 2004.

Paul has represented Birmingham at various levels since first being elected a councillor in 1968. He became the first Liberal/ Liberal Democrat Lord Mayor of Birmingham for 70 years in 1993. As well as his work as a councillor in Birmingham Yardley he also is a Board Member for Advantage West Midlands and a Member of the European funds Programme Monitoring Committee for the West Midlands.

**Richard Kemp**

Cllr Richard Kemp is a Liverpool City Councillor where he is just completing 24 years of service, which includes being Chair of Housing, Education and Finance and Cabinet member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Community Safety.

Richard is leader of the Liberal Democrats at the Local Government Association where he is also deputy chair of the Environment Board with responsibility for green issues, housing, transport, waste disposal and planning.

He also serves as the senior Liberal Democrat Councillor for the IDeA in the three northern regions and particularly helps councils where there has been a change of control or the Council has been classed as poor or weak in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

## 1 *Introduction*

### **Steve Hitchens**

When Chris Leslie invited me to pull together and edit a New Local Government Network publication consisting of a number of Liberal Democrat contributions to the continuing debate in Localism and Neighbourhoods, I was both flattered and concerned.

Flattered to be asked both for the Liberal Democrats and for myself because this is our political territory and in all my own direct experiences with ministers they weren't listening to our arguments and less to our experiences in delivering this agenda. But concerned because I wasn't as confident as I should have been that we had something interesting, innovative and exciting to say in analysis, policy development, and putting both into real practice. How wrong I was, foolish boy!

Just read these seminal contributions by an all-star cast. Be as ever impressed by the breadth of David Boyle's contribution to public policy and the challenges he sets every elected Liberal Democrat. His contribution illustrates, better than most critics of government policy, that unless you know the question you can't provide the answer.

Rejoice at Andrew Stunell's overdue return to the front bench as the Parliamentary Party's Local Government lead. No one knows it better, listens more and to his credit suffers fools less readily! Andrew's contribution here necessarily reflects the new policy initiative the Liberal Democrats are launching. The challenge he addresses very well is to counter a government policy that has not been articulated but which is wildly believed to reflect an irrational contempt for elected local government.

In direct refutation of that, be bowled over by the achievement and justifiable pride that Cathy Bakewell, John Shipley, Paul Tilsley and Richard Kemp bring to delivering public services. Never again think that people who run councils are too busy to be interested in developing Liberal Democrat policy or that they are just doing the government's bidding. Local government remains the one area of public service where democratically elected representatives take decisions every day that affect people's lives in a very direct and accountable way. Radical, innovative, exciting and when it works immensely fulfilling – these guys are

delivering for their people. It is a very powerful drug and we are blessed to have them and all their councillor colleagues.

And Richard Kemp whose understanding and experience of local government is beyond comparison, of course, leaves us with challenges for the future. As you will pick up when you read his contribution he remains Leader of the Opposition. Never satisfied, encouraging us no matter how good the initiative to do more and better. Again let's be proud of having as leader of the Liberal Democrats at the Local Government Association someone who thinks about the issues.

I have tried in my own brief conclusion to pull together the threads of some very powerfully-made points. I still hold the view that community politics policy, referred to by Richard, led to the radical Tower Hamlets administration which, whatever else you may think you know about it, changed local government forever. I still maintain that one of my political heroes, Eric Flounders, has affected the lives of more people than any other Liberal Democrat (bar two) since the Second World War with the devolution of power in his mould breaking council in 1986. Eric was the first Lib Dem Leader in Tower Hamlets and their radical approach to devolving power went possibly further than any council has ever gone before or since. Where they charged forwards hundreds of councils have followed albeit more cautiously.

In case you haven't worked it out the other two are of course William Beveridge (and that report) and David Steel (with the Abortion Act).

We should be proud of our heritage, our record and now of our new policies and practices. Both John Shipley and Andrew Stunell refer to the English core cities group of Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield. Nothing better puts the Lib Dem contribution to the city-region debate in perspective. Of these eight councils three have Labour Leaders, three have Lib Dem Leaders and two have Tory leaders (but both with Lib Dem deputies). The political representation is 307 Labour, 273 Lib Dem and 87 Conservative. A similar shift is happening in central London Boroughs such as Brent, Camden, Southwark and Islington, which now all have Liberal Democrat council leaders while the incomparable Sally Hamwee appears to have been for ever either Chair or Deputy Chair of the London Assembly – the only elected regional government in the country.



The brief but proud history of Liberal Democrats in leading this debate through John Stuart Mill, William Gladstone and community politics resonates in Andrew Stunell's welcome to late arrivals to the Liberal Democrat Ball. Yes, this is our policy territory and I hope you are as stimulated, encouraged and enthused as both I and the contributors themselves so clearly are.

I am very grateful for the time and effort all have put into producing their thoughts to a very tight timetable. Their views here are all their own and may not be the public policy of the Liberal Democrats nor the New Local Government Network, but I hope and believe they are all invaluable contributions to the debate.

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**Where next for Lib Dem thinking on the localism agenda? This pamphlet – part of a series from leading thinkers in each of the three main political parties – answers this question, detailing the grassroots experience of Lib Dem councillors and exploring further where national policy is heading.**

Devising new ways to make devolution a reality is at the core of the contributions in this pamphlet, with a particular focus on the practical neighbourhood issues likely to make a difference to real lives.

In a series of thoughtful contributions free from partisan rhetoric, the authors deal with the challenges of economic and social change, practical constitutional questions, and the implications for campaigning.

New Local Government Network, as a non-party independent not-for-profit think tank, is delighted to host this broadening debate in all corners and all parties, pressing for a stronger commitment to devolution and a localist approach from the decision-makers of today and tomorrow.