

## Local government

Growing success in local government was a key aspect of the Liberal revival of the 1960s and 1970s. David Williams examines how this took the Liberals to power in Richmond-upon-Thames in 1983. Mark Egan provides an introduction and overview.

# The Liberal rise

## The Liberal revival in local government: Mark Egan

‘Something different had started in Kew’ writes David Williams in his account of the rise of the Liberal Party in Richmond in the 1960s and 1970s. What he describes will be familiar to observers of the Liberal Party during this period. A handful of Liberal activists – perhaps even just one man (it was almost invariably a man) – threw themselves into more intensive community campaigning than was ever contemplated by the two major parties in order to win a council ward. The seat would be fought ‘all year round’, with leaflets going out months in advance of the local elections. The leaflets might barely mention the Liberal Party and would be devoted exclusively to a small number of local issues, particularly road schemes and planning issues. There would be strong criticism of decisions being made behind closed doors: Liberals consistently argued for more transparency in local government. David Williams gives a striking account of how Richmond’s one-party state operated, with public council meetings used to rubber stamp decisions taken in private committee meetings, something which was not unusual in local authorities at the time. In response to this, Liberals asked people to suggest issues they should take up and this community campaigning generated more activity, more leaflets and more momentum towards the election victories which often followed.

Richmond was far from the first place that this new approach to winning local elections was attempted. The earliest example I have found was in Rugby in 1955. The town’s Young Liberals had started to work to win council seats in 1952, although using entirely traditional tactics. Derek Gee became Rugby’s first Liberal councillor for twenty years when he was elected in 1954, primarily because he was the

surprised beneficiary of a straight fight with the Conservatives. He believed on principle that councillors should seek the views of ward residents and, having sought them, in a post-election canvass, he produced a regular ‘report-back’ letter, explaining what he (and, in later years, his colleagues) had been up to. Strikingly, these letters were almost impossible to identify as Liberal Party leaflets and made no mention of national issues. Opening up council meetings to the press and public was one of the Liberals’ main campaign themes.

Something similar happened slightly later in Southend. Report-back leaflets – known as *Council Comments* – were produced by David Evans, who was elected in Prittlewell in 1956. Like with Gee, Evans owed his victory to the fact that he had a straight fight, on this occasion because Labour accidentally failed to stand a candidate. Evans was aware that he needed to do something different to secure re-election, so used report-back leaflets to show how he had voted in council. The Conservatives attempted to copy the style of the leaflets, but only did so in the run-up to the elections, missing the point of the innovation. There were other places where new campaigning techniques were introduced before 1964 – in Greenock, Finchley, and West Ham, for example and, of course, in Liverpool. Cyril Carr had plugged away at Church Ward, Wavertree, for several years before deciding, in 1960, to introduce a new leaflet, *Contact*, which would ask residents for their ideas for Carr to adopt. According to one activist, the response was ‘like taking a cork out of a bottle’ and Carr was inundated with casework. This helped him achieve victory in 1962.

David Williams mentions that new campaigning techniques were introduced in

# e in Richmond



David Williams at the moment Richmond changed hands, at the count for the two by-elections in 1983. His digital watch helpfully times this at 10.24pm on Thursday 10 November.

## The Liberal rise in Richmond

Richmond in the early 1970s through the influence of a party member who had been a councillor in Liverpool, alongside Trevor 'The Vote' Jones. Jones had been recruited by Cyril Carr, having entered politics in order to campaign against a motorway scheme. Jones was a tireless proponent of community campaigning and popularised the techniques of community politics, as it became known, to Liberals around the country. However, he was not the only advocate of the new style of campaigning. Community politics tactics appear to have developed spontaneously in a number of constituencies at a time when the national party was uninterested in local politics. This changed in the late 1950s, almost entirely due to Richard Wainwright, who headed the party's organisation department in the middle of the decade and went on to become MP for Colne Valley.

Wainwright was convinced that local politics mattered and in 1960 he personally funded the creation of the party's local government department. Writing in the first Liberal *Local Government Handbook*, he stated, 'A successful [Liberal] Association must be rooted in local service, without compromising liberalism for the sake of mere office or mere prestige'. The handbook made no mention of the new campaigning techniques then being devised, but this changed with the appointments of Pratap Chitnis and then Michael Meadowcroft as the party's local government officers. They (particularly Meadowcroft) toured the country to meet Liberal councillors and discovered for themselves what was happening on the ground. The *Liberal News* was also used to share best practice but crucial was the establishment of the Association of Liberal Councillors in the mid-1960s.

Writing in *The Independent* over Christmas 2020, Vince Cable called for a return to community politics following the disappointment of the 2019 election result. The circumstances now are not dissimilar to the situation faced by Liberals in the mid-1950s: the election results of 1950, 1951 and 1955 showed that the Liberal Party was on life support and needed an urgent injection of something different in order to survive. However, any return to community politics will need to address the deficiencies of community politics, rather than dwell on the successes, which were limited, both geographically and temporally.

Firstly, the techniques of community politics are now well established. Glancing at my Twitter feed today, I noticed a Conservative MP out campaigning 'all year round' asking constituents for feedback. Liberal Democrats must

think of different approaches to campaigning to make an impact today.

Secondly, the Liberal Party never truly embraced the theory of community politics, in which it was envisaged that the party should become a means of assisting communities assert themselves and take power. The theoretical basis for community politics developed well after the campaigning techniques were devised and, although formally adopted by the party in 1970, the theory was not, in my view, well understood or accepted. The Liberals always remained a party with a programme of policies to implement when in power, not a mechanism to transfer power to the people. It is noticeable that after Stanley Rundle, who instigated community campaigning in Richmond, stood down in 1978 Kew Liberals were unable to hold his seat, as a result of a community campaign of which the Conservatives were able to take advantage. In Southend, the Liberal surge foundered because different councillors took different positions on local issues, which rendered the party unable to campaign effectively. I have seen no signs of a new approach to this dilemma.

Community politics emerged as a response to the strategic challenges faced by local Liberals in the 1950s and 1960s. It was particularly effective in areas where one party had held sway for many years and the opposition was ineffective. Liberals were also adept at arguing for more openness in politics, a reasonable appeal which proved impossible for the two main parties to argue against. The political landscape looks very different today. Voting behaviour is far more volatile; there are more direct channels of communication between politicians and the public than before (think e-petitions and social media); and the Liberal Democrats have a recent record in government, seemingly still fresh in the minds of many voters. A return to community politics looks no more likely to succeed than a new campaign for Peace, Retrenchment and Reform, the great Liberal slogan of the nineteenth century. But the lesson from the development of Liberal community campaigning is that the reinvention of Liberal politics, if it happens at all, will start at the grass roots and take forms which cannot easily be predicted.

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## The Liberal rise in Richmond: David Williams

**A**N IMPORTANT PART of late-twentieth-century Richmond political history is the rise of the Liberal Party and its success in winning control of Richmond upon Thames Council in 1983. This article covers the rise to power from the 1960s to 1983, followed by control of the council up to the 1986 elections. Although the story is about Richmond upon Thames, the new politics started in Kew, extended to the rest of Richmond, then to the whole of the borough.

Local government in what is now Richmond upon Thames had, by 1933, become three borough councils: Richmond, Barnes and Twickenham. After 1945, most councillors were elected with a party label, though there were still some genuine independents in Kew and Richmond up to the formation of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames in 1965, with the first elections in 1964. All three borough councils had Conservative majorities, except for 1963 in Richmond, when three independents defeated Conservatives, reducing them to 19 out of 40. As with most ‘safe’ councils with political groups, there was little specifically local campaigning. The split between Conservative and Labour largely reflected national swings in opinion. Occasionally contentious local issues influenced elections, but rarely. This still was the case with the Liberal revival in the 1960s.

### The first Liberal gains

Table 1 shows wards won from 1959 to 1963 in Richmond, Barnes and Twickenham councils. Each year a third of the councillors were elected, one per ward, plus the occasional extra vacancy. 1959 was a typical year in three solidly Conservative councils. Liberal gains started in 1960, and 1962 saw a remarkable upsurge of Liberals in Twickenham, but even this largely reflected national opinion following the Orpington by-election two months before the local elections. A Middlesex County Council seat

was also won in a by-election. Twickenham Liberal Association was certainly very active in 1962, but the campaigns were traditional. Lots of door-to-door canvassing was supplemented by public meetings and press releases, but the traditional election address was the main leaflet. This was still good enough to win seven of the eleven wards, and South Twickenham was only lost by four votes. I was told in the seventies that this was because all six helpers in the Liberal committee room forgot to vote! Liberals also had won several seats in Richmond and in Barnes.

The 1962 Twickenham gains should have been a springboard for further success, but only three wards were won in 1963. The elections in 1964 for the new Richmond upon Thames Council saw no Liberals returned. This drop in Liberal councillors elected followed national opinion in the absence of much local campaigning. The traditional pattern seemed to be still in place when the Conservatives won every seat on the council in 1968, a very bad year nationally for Labour. However, something different had started in Kew.

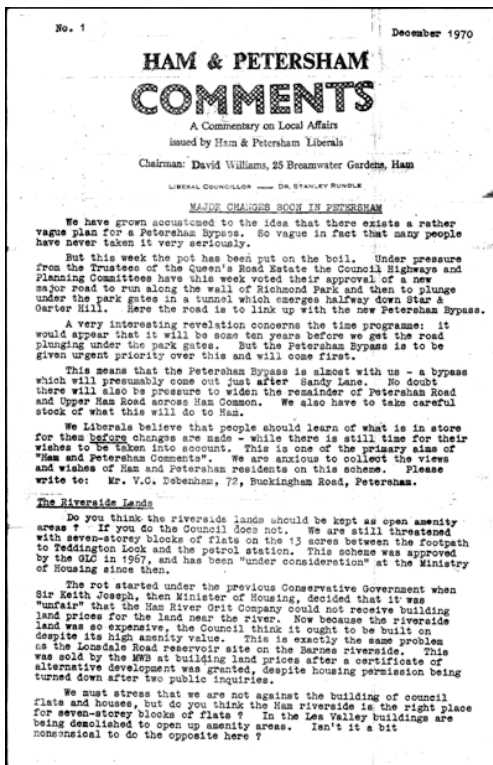
### Stanley Rundle and *Kew Comments*

If there was one piece of paper that triggered the Liberal rise in Richmond it was *Kew Comments*. This was a community newsletter started in 1965 by Stanley Rundle. It was duplicated on foolscap size paper (8 inches by 13) and was his individual take on local issues in Kew. He publicised his campaigns, never mentioned national politics, and it resembled contemporary parish magazines. The newsletters in this format gradually spread across the other wards in Richmond and Barnes, and then to Twickenham. The Gestetner duplicators were only pensioned off in 1975 with the purchase of a cheap offset litho printer. Overleaf is the first edition of *Ham and Petersham Comments*, which Rundle helped me to put together in 1970. The amateurish cross hatching for the word Comments avoided

**Table 1. Wards won by party in the May council elections in the three boroughs**

	Richmond				Barnes				Twickenham			
	Con	Lab	Lib	Other	Con	Lab	Lib	other	Con	Lab	Lib	Other
1959	7	2	0	1	6	2	0	0	9	2	0	0
1960	7	2	1	0	6	2	0	0	11	0	0	0
1961	5	2	2	1	5	2	1	0	10	1	0	0
1962	3	3	3	1	4	3	1	0	3	1	7	0
1963	3	2	2	3	5	2	1	0	6	2	3	0

## The Liberal rise in Richmond



Front page, *Ham and Petersham Comments* no. 1

Stanley Rundle (1913–78)



too much ink building up on the master stencil and stopped it falling apart!

Stanley Rundle had been a councillor for North Sheen ward, elected for the last two years of the old Richmond Council. He won a by-election to Richmond upon Thames council in 1966, but lost in 1968. Only a few months later one of the Kew Conservative councillors resigned, and Rundle won the by-election in February 1969, again the only Liberal councillor, joining no less than sixty-two Conservatives (fifty-three councillors and nine aldermen).

*Kew Comments* was delivered monthly to every household in Kew by volunteers, enthused by his campaigns to help on a regular basis. Only a few were party members. He ran a successful campaign to stop the Broad Street line from closing – still open today as the North London line. He campaigned to stop the subway at Kew Gardens station from closing. He got no support from Richmond Council, but the government minister accepted his proposal as the only way to save the subway. After that the council supported him. Again, the subway is still open. In contrast to almost every other politician he never indulged in personal criticism. I asked him once why he didn't reply to personal attacks. He said he only mentioned the Tories in his newsletter to thank them for supporting his campaigns. Stanley Rundle was an extraordinary man. He was nearly 50 when he started in politics and died in 1978 after serious illness since 1974. But from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s he transformed Richmond politics.

Rundle was also a first-class public speaker and liked nothing better than impressing a large meeting. As the only opposition councillor, he held a pre-council meeting in Kew the night before every council meeting. He contrasted this with the private meeting the Conservatives had at the council offices. He would go through the council meeting agenda, asking for views, and discuss Kew issues. I will never forget the first 'pre-council' meeting I attended in 1970. A very irate resident was complaining about lorries using the industrial site next to his house at all hours: 'I've complained to the site owners, the council, the police, the MP and the press. If nothing happens soon, the only option I have is to go and lie in the road in front of a lorry.' Rundle immediately replied, 'If you feel you have to lie in front of a lorry, will you please promise me one thing? Ring me first and I will come and lie in the road with you.' This brilliant off-the-cuff reply did four things: it showed the complainant Rundle was on his side; it showed the audience he was a man of action; the tense atmosphere at the meeting disappeared; and if this man was reckless enough to lie in the road, Rundle might stop him getting run over! In 1971 Kew elected three Liberal councillors on the back of the community campaigns and frequent leafleting.

### Spreading out of Kew

By now several other wards had active Liberal campaigners, but success outside Kew didn't happen until 1973 in a by-election in Richmond. Meanwhile the Labour Party were

winning by-elections. In 1972 they won three Twickenham seats from the Conservatives, and were confidently expecting a fourth gain in Richmond Town, only narrowly held by the Conservatives in 1971. With no ward organisation, John Waller and I, as candidate and agent, mobilised the Liberal activists across the borough. Eight leaflets were delivered in six weeks across the ward, including an early morning leaflet through every letterbox on polling day. With the helpers and the enthusiasm, a dominant campaign was organised as had never been seen before in Richmond. Waller won comfortably by over 300 votes. The Tories were surprised, expecting Labour to be the challengers. Labour were stunned. Neither could understand how this had happened.

This was the first of a long chain of success in council by-elections in Richmond upon Thames, all with intensive campaigning and large numbers of enthusiastic activists. Liberals and Liberal Democrats won twenty-six out of thirty council by-elections from 1973 to 2005. Successful by-election campaigns were big catalysts for more confidence and more campaigning.

**Constituency elections**

In April 1973 Stanley Rundle won the Richmond and Barnes constituency in the Greater London Council election. Again, this was done with intensive leafleting and activity, helped by a token campaign by the Conservatives who thought they couldn't lose, and the Labour Party who knew they couldn't win. Most of the Labour activists helped in the Twickenham constituency which they nearly won.

1974 saw two general elections where the Liberals strengthened their position in both Richmond and Twickenham. The Liberal Party was doing much better nationally, and the local campaigning was impressive. But parliamentary elections are dominated by national issues, not local campaigns, and the local success only translated partially to national elections.

The May local elections saw another significant improvement for the Liberal Party. All the seats in Kew and Richmond Town were won, together with three seats in Mortlake and one in Ham and Petersham. Mortlake was the strongest Labour ward in the borough, but an intense community politics campaign turned this round with a huge swing. The organiser of this success was Barnes resident Chris Graham. He had been a Liberal councillor while still at Liverpool University in the same ward as Trevor Jones, the best-known exponent of Liberal community politics. This style of local council campaigning was spreading across the country.

**More Liberal success**

As Table 2 shows, the initial Liberal success on Richmond upon Thames Council was from Richmond and Barnes, but in 1978 this started to change. Interestingly, the two wards won by the Liberals in 1978 were both organised by Richmond activists who had moved to Twickenham. John Waller had moved to Twickenham as the Liberal Prospective Parliamentary Candidate. He not only had an incentive to be a Twickenham councillor, but the need to organise the whole constituency, and raise the game of the many activists already there.

East Twickenham was the most dramatic Liberal gain on election night in 1978. One of the defeated Conservatives was the leader of the council, Harry Hall. He had been the leader for fourteen years, since the new borough was formed, and was very much in charge. Two weeks before the election, East Twickenham Liberals felt confident enough to tell the press they thought they would win and defeat the council leader. The Twickenham Tory agent responded by saying, 'Pigs may fly!' His embarrassment after the election was increased with letters to the local press such as, 'Sir, Today I have seen a large pink flying object over East Twickenham. Can this be ex-councillor Harry Hall disappearing into oblivion?'

**Table 2. Councillors by party in Richmond-upon-Thames elections 1964–1982**

	<i>Richmond and Barnes</i>				<i>Twickenham</i>				<i>Richmond-upon-Thames</i>			
	<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Lib</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Lib</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Lib</i>	<i>other</i>
1964	15	8	0	1	26	4	0	0	41	12	0	1
1968	24	0	0	0	30	0	0	0	54	0	0	0
1971	15	6	3	0	22	8	0	0	37	14	3	0
1974	12	2	10	0	24	6	0	0	36	8	10	0
1978	9	0	13	0	25	0	5	0	34	0	18	0
1982	6	0	16	0	20	0	10	0	26	0	26*	0

\* Liberal/SDP Alliance group: 24 Liberals and 2 SDP

**Liberal councillors were active in traditional policy areas like education and housing, but, starting with Stanley Rundle in Kew, they took a radically different approach to representing the community. Open government was always a strong campaign. Public consultation was considered fundamental to all major council decisions, then made privately by a few councillors. Scrutiny of council spending was also demanded.**

There was one setback, though. A proposed bail hostel became a major issue in Kew during the election, and by opposing this vigorously the Conservatives gained three Liberal seats, one of which had been Rundle's. David Blomfield, the Liberal group leader first elected in 1971, and new candidate Jenny Tonge, the future MP, were defeated.

### **Local council politics before the 1970s**

In considering the sea change that Liberal community campaigning brought, it is important to understand how different local council politics was up to the 1970s. Decisions were made in private, rubber stamped at council meetings. These had been open to the public since 1908, but only the education committee also had to meet in public. Richmond Council set up two education sub-committees, meeting in private, which had all the discussion and made the decisions. These were referred to the education committee for formal approval in public, lasting only a few minutes. The only accountability of councillors was at the local elections, but this was illusory as most councillors were elected on a party ticket in safe wards. The opposition Labour councillors also considered themselves as privileged decision makers, accountable more to the party than the public. They had some influence as they were part of the club. Only in 1974 were all committees open to the public, not through choice but by a change in the law.

Publicity about the council was very limited. Richmond Council meetings and articles about local issues were well covered in the local press, but no more than a quarter of the local residents read a local paper. Liberal newsletters went through every letterbox every month in the stronger wards. There were no council press releases or press officers, no public meetings unless called by residents. There was one major issue well debated in public in the early 1970s – grammar schools and comprehensive education. But this was the local dimension of a national debate.

Inevitably, the Conservative and Labour councillors disliked the Liberals' approach to local politics, accusing them of stirring up controversies in a populist way. This antipathy increased the stronger the Liberal council group became, fuelled by unwanted criticism and lost seats. For the Labour Party this was about survival. By 1980, the strongest areas of Liberal support were in the council estates, traditionally solid Labour territory. Liberals won the

tenants' votes through campaigning for them and taking up their problems far more than Labour councillors had. Around this time the council's housing manager told me that 80 per cent of his department's casework came from Liberal councillors.

Liberal councillors were active in traditional policy areas like education and housing, but, starting with Stanley Rundle in Kew, they took a radically different approach to representing the community. Open government was always a strong campaign. Public consultation was considered fundamental to all major council decisions, then made privately by a few councillors. Scrutiny of council spending was also demanded. The Conservatives inevitably objected to being told that they were not running the council's finances efficiently. The Liberals wanted the community engaged as fully as possible and believed this would produce better decisions and more accountability. Community engagement would lead to community empowerment. All this was done by communication with the voters in a way that had never been done before.

### **Why did the Liberals succeed?**

One way to understand this Liberal success is to look at the differences among the four groups involved in elections – the party activists, the other party members, party helpers and the supportive voters.

By the late 1970s there were far more Liberal Party activists than in the other two parties, and they were more energetic and motivated. It was slow progress with local elections only every four years, but political success meant an expanding local party, and winning control of the council was a realistic target.

Inactive party members were the majority of Labour and particularly Conservative local parties, but most Liberal Party members did something more than pay their subscription and attend the annual general meeting. Similarly, only the Liberals had significant numbers of helpers who were not party members, including hundreds of regular deliverers.

Conservative and Labour election campaigns were aimed at the committed voters and, in what was generally considered as a safe Tory borough, this made sense. The Liberals ran their elections trying to convert people. All the successful campaigning saw a bandwagon effect where support got stronger and stronger, peaking on polling day. Running dominant campaigns with much more activity, visibility and presence made this possible.

### The run up to 1982

After 1978 the Liberals were confident that they could win Richmond upon Thames Council. Labour had no council seats. All five by-elections were won very comfortably. Two of these were Liberal 'holds', the other three were gains from the Conservatives, including David Blomfield and Jenny Tonge in Kew. In 1981 Adrian Slade was elected in the Richmond half of the borough to the Greater London Council. Only six gains were needed in 1982. One complication was the need to agree an electoral pact with the SDP, founded in 1981. The eventual agreement saw forty Liberals and twelve SDP candidates contest the fifty-two council seats. The six gains were made, but with one loss. At all council meetings, voting on party lines was 26–26. In these circumstances, the mayor had a casting vote, which was the Conservatives' 'majority'. So the vote to elect a mayor in 1982 and 1983 was literally a vote for control of the council.

Why had only twenty-four Liberals and two SDP been elected when the target was a clear majority? Two reasons seemed likely. The campaign had not been coordinated across all the target wards properly. Wards had been left to write some of their own leaflets with patchy results. Also, the Falklands war had boosted the Conservative vote, even if this was a local election.

### May 1982 to November 1983

The next eighteen months on the council were tense. All twenty-six Conservatives had to turn up to every council meeting and vote together otherwise they would lose. In the summer of 1983, one Conservative fell seriously ill, and died in October, resulting in a by-election in Hampton Wick. However, a Liberal councillor had to resign when his firm moved him to Holland. He had a majority in Hampton Nursery ward of just one vote. So, to win the council the Liberal/SDP Alliance, as it was by now, had to hold its most difficult seat, and win the ward with the largest Conservative majority.

The double by-election campaign was more intense than any before or since with so much at stake. It was the typical Liberal community politics campaign, but the threatened service cuts that the Conservatives were considering featured heavily too. Hundreds of helpers got involved. By the last weekend opinion was clearly moving away from the Tories, and change of control looked increasingly likely. Election day on 10 November 1983 saw both wards won more comfortably than expected, and a new regime took over Richmond upon Thames Council.

Campaigning, communication and commitment had seen the Liberals succeed in a 'safe' Conservative borough, but, even with all their energy and ability, it had taken them the best part of two decades.

For this to happen in Richmond upon Thames was surprising in one way. Every MP elected in the area for more than a century had been a Conservative, except for one Liberal representing Middlesex, Brentford (including Twickenham) in 1906. All the elected local councils from inception in the late nineteenth century had been Conservative controlled, or run by independents of Conservative persuasion. This was a generally affluent and Conservative place. After the change of control, I was asked several times how long the Tories had run Richmond. My reply became, 'No one really knows, but the two most likely dates are since 1660 or 1066.'

The party balance was now 27–25, with the mayor able to stand aside from the politics of the council in a traditionally non-political role. The handover to the new administration was uncharted territory for everyone involved; but the chief executive, Michael Honey, was determined to make this a smooth transition, not just for the councillors but for the staff of the council who were wondering what would happen next. As the new leader of the council for only a few hours, I met the chief executive and the director of finance with my deputy, Tim Razall, the morning after the by-elections to discuss next steps. A council meeting already fixed for the following Tuesday would see the formal change of control. This all went remarkably smoothly and was a credit to the flexible way local government has always operated. The losing Conservative leader also helped to make the changes work without the obligation to do so.

### The financial crisis

The new administration was buzzing with ideas for changing and improving services. But the first priority was the council's financial problems, heavily featured in the two by-election campaigns. In 1982 the rates had gone up 28 per cent, then 30 per cent more in 1983. Despite all this extra income, severe service cuts were threatened, including making some teachers compulsorily redundant. The new committee chairmen spent many hours going through the detail of all the options and found a way through to avoid the worst cuts. From mid-November to the Christmas break, the senior councillors in the new administration had little time for anything else.

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The approach adopted was to involve the public – the people who had to pay the rates demands. This was very much in line with the emphasis on consultation and public involvement which the local Liberal Party had been advocating for many years. The decisions seemed too important to be simply imposed on the borough's residents. A leaflet offering three options was printed and delivered to every household, paid for by the Alliance local parties. Thousands of tear-off slips were returned with hundreds of letters. Four big public consultation meetings were held.

Both tear off slips and meetings showed a strong majority in favour of the middle option of 10 per cent to 20 per cent rates increase with some cutbacks. By March when the 1984 rate was set, this option only needed an 8 per cent rates increase. The 1984 budget was a tough challenge, though, for the new untested and inexperienced administration. Many difficult decisions had to be accepted. There were still service cuts. The education committee, whose composition could not be changed, voted against every education cut. Every Conservative on the education committee voted against cuts they had been proposing a few months earlier. But politics is always like this.

Meaningful public consultation was very important to the new administration, and the tough choices balancing service levels with rates increases were ideal to share with the public paying the bills. But consultation wasn't just a policy difference. It was a fundamental

attitude about how a local council should make major decisions. The new administration said that no major council development project would go ahead unless it had majority public support. The council officers thought this was mad, and the attitude of the other political parties was dramatically demonstrated when a major consultation started in 1985 on plans for improvements and changes in Twickenham town centre.

Proposals were put to the public, in a special newspaper, on a dozen town-centre sites, including new civic offices, eventually completed in 1990, and the Twickenham Baths site, still being argued about in 2021. The 1985 proposal here, supported by a majority of the responses, included a Cinderella/Rockerfella disco. At a public consultation meeting on the proposals, I was amazed at some of the reactions. A former Conservative candidate said, 'Weren't you elected to make decisions? Can't you make up your mind?' A former Labour candidate said, 'Don't you know what to do? Why are you passing the buck to the people?' I replied that councillors were elected to represent the community and should listen to their views. The council was putting real options to the public, which is consultation, not asking for approval of a pre-determined choice.

## Planning

The planning subcommittee, deciding the more important planning applications, was immediately opened to the public, and a year later the public were allowed to speak. The Conservatives opposed both decisions, but within a few years every council operated this way. Having to listen carefully to the objections and supporting arguments for planning applications is healthy for the councillors and the planning system. If the public feel they have some say in the decisions, they will be happier. Whether it's consent or refusal for a disputed application, councillors upset someone. So they need to get it right. On one occasion a neighbour of mine spoke against an application, and said to me afterwards, 'I don't agree with the decision your committee took, but I must compliment you on the procedure.' The most heated arguments are usually about house extensions, and still are. In one Petersham case, a neighbour told the committee that if this extension was built, people would be able to see into his daughter's bedroom. It turned out that the daughter's bedroom was in an extension like the one he was objecting to.

### YOUR 1984 RATES

**What increase in April?**

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 80px; margin: 0 auto;"> <p><b>25%</b> to <b>35%</b></p> </div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 80px; margin: 0 auto;"> <p><b>10%</b> to <b>20%</b></p> </div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 80px; margin: 0 auto;"> <p><b>under 10%</b></p> </div>
<p>No cuts, and some improvement in the services, but large rate increase as Government Rate Support Grant is cut drastically by penalties. The Council services ought to be better but in 1984 this can only be done by an unacceptable rate increase. Without penalties the rate increase would be similar to the middle option of 10%-20%. The huge penalties rule out this "no cuts" option in our view.</p>	<p>Some cuts, but most of the services are unaffected. Medium rate increase with small Government penalty similar to 1983. Standstill in Social Services, less road repairs, stopping Adult College expansion at Clifden Road, slight decrease in pupil/teacher ratio without redundancy, maximum rating of empty offices. Provisionally, our preferred choice, but some details and the precise rate increase not yet known.</p>	<p>Savage cuts and 330 compulsory redundancies. This is the full £3 million "hit list" produced by the previous administration on 31 October, but not acted on. Over half of the redundancies are teachers. Other cuts were 5 branch libraries, 3 day centres, and ending nursery education. This option we have rejected as unacceptably hard. We believe that the public do not want the services of the Council savaged in this way.</p>

TELL US YOUR VIEW

Published by Richmond & Twickenham Liberals and Social Democrats and printed and delivered at no cost to the ratepayers.

The unprecedented 1984 rates consultation leaflet (extract)

A major planning challenge that had started under the Conservatives, and wasn't resolved for many years, was Sainsbury's wanting to develop a supermarket at St. Clare's Nursery in Hampton. The land was owned by Hampton Fuel Allotment Charity. ASDA then Sainsbury's were refused planning permission. Sainsbury's went to appeal and the planning inspector recommended the government minister to refuse the appeal. Strangely, Patrick Jenkin allowed the appeal. Richmond Council took the minister to court and won. The Department of the Environment was told to rewrite the decision letter to correct its deficiencies. Eventually, Sainsbury's did get permission, and the supermarket was built. But Sainsbury's had to pay £21.75 million to the charity, rather than £3 million plus interest. Hampton Fuel Allotment Charity as a result is much the biggest charity in the borough, which wouldn't have happened without the stand that Richmond Council took.

### Opinion surveys

At the end of 1984, MORI was commissioned to do an opinion survey of borough residents. This produced some remarkable information about residents' attitudes to the council. The *Surrey Comet* (10 January 1985) said, 'Residents of Richmond borough have given their council a reasonably clean bill of health – and most of them prefer paying out a bit extra in rates to see borough services preserved.' The chief executive was delighted that refuse collection got over 90 per cent satisfaction. He had only heard the complaints. In the context of fixing the 1985 budget, the questions on service cuts versus rates increase were very useful, and confirmed what the administration had done. Half the residents supported a 10 per cent rates increase to avoid service cuts with only 17 per cent preferring an inflation rise only with some cuts.

The Conservative councillors repeatedly complained about the £20,000 the MORI survey had cost, but changes to the services based on the responses must have saved much more. One resident asked in the *Richmond and Twickenham Times* why the opposition were not scrutinising the £2 million of savings Richmond Council was claiming instead of complaining about the £20,000 survey.

Why professional opinion surveys were value for money was clearly demonstrated in a £15,000 survey of council tenants, a group less satisfied in 1984 than borough residents as a whole. Every councillor had anecdotes about repairs problems, but the survey pinned down

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the main problem. It wasn't that the repairs were done badly. It wasn't that the repairs took too long. It wasn't that too many workmen turned up for simple jobs. The biggest complaint was the appointments system and the frustration of not knowing exactly when workmen would call. Tens of thousands of pounds could have been wasted solving the wrong problem – several times the cost of the carefully planned survey.

### Services and efficiencies

Housing repairs were one of the big successes and were almost doubled from 1983 to 1986. The ringfenced housing revenue account had always run a large surplus. Many council tenants felt they were being treated as second-class citizens and said so. The housing department reception desk in Regal House at Twickenham was difficult to find. This was moved to a much more accessible place. Getting the council out into the community, and reducing the remoteness highlighted in the MORI survey, resulted in two mobile offices at ten different sites every week. They weren't cheap, but generally were very welcome for residents, particularly council tenants, who didn't have to phone, write or go to Twickenham.

A major effort was made to find efficiencies in the council's spending. All charges were looked at, and a thorough review was done of all the council's property holdings. As mentioned earlier, £2 million was found in this and similar ways, without cutting services. The controversial worsening of the pupil-teacher ratios at schools was reversed, and in the 1985 budget there were no service cuts for the first time since 1979. The new administration had wanted to improve services as far as the financial constraints would allow, and did make improvements particularly in education, social services and housing. The housing manager was asked for some ideas for new initiatives. He presented six to the next housing committee and was amazed when five were accepted immediately. Glass and paper recycling, started in 1980, was much expanded. Not only this this save money, it was helping to reduce landfill.

Another way the new administration was prepared to be innovative happened over Hampton Pool. The open-air pool had been closed in 1981, at the same time as Twickenham Baths, to save money. The Conservative council wanted to hand the site back to the Royal Parks, but they insisted that the whole concrete basin had to be removed and the land reinstated. This was very expensive and still hadn't

## Going out in style



WHAT a way to go! Retiring Mayor and Mayoress, Derek and Pat Wainwright rode out in strange style last week just prior to handing over to new Mayor, Tony Simmonds and his wife Audrey.

But they were back in the Mayoral Daimler come the evening. The duo were paying a call to the council's Cranford Way depot to meet staff before they retired. And they opted to get into the mood by hitching a ride on a dustcart.

Derek and Pat Wainwright 'helping' with the refuse collection (*Richmond & Twickenham Informer*, 23 May 1985)

been done by the end of 1983. A Hampton Pool Group was now campaigning to reopen the pool and set about fundraising. They asked the new council for help. After careful evaluation of their plans, and wishing to help a worthy community initiative which would bring the swimming pool back into use, we agreed to match the funding they raised, if they met their target. They succeeded, the council paid over the matched funding, and Hampton got its pool back, now much improved.

### Continuity and change

For all the changes on Richmond Council, some things stayed the same. The Conservative

mayor was in office for the first six months of the new administration. Harry Hall had been leader of the council from 1964 to 1978, but then lost his seat before getting back on the council in 1982. He was relieved to avoid the casting-vote embarrassment at council meetings, and made his mark as a successful non-political mayor. He also chaired the council meetings impeccably. He was succeeded in May 1984 by Derek Wainwright, the first Liberal mayor. Not only did he look the part but was hugely popular by the end of his mayoral year. He got a rave editorial from the *Richmond and Twickenham Times* – very few councillors achieve that – and joined a refuse collection round in his last week. It was a shameless publicity stunt but produced some great photos.

One traditional activity that was stopped was smoking at committee meetings. Smoking had always been banned at council meetings, but several councillors puffed away during committees and subcommittees. In February 1985 smoking was banned at all meetings to the distress of the smokers. They were in a minority and were never going to win once the proposal was made. The local press covered the debate with several articles, noting that this was not a political argument. It was smokers versus non-smokers. As a former smoker who had quit at age 26 (and increased my life expectancy by ten years), I knew which side I was on. The journalists who smoked at meetings also had to stop, not least the chain-smoking *Surrey Comet* reporter who had to keep his roll-ups in the tin.

One council service that was expanded was press and public relations. Perhaps a sign of the times, with public relations even in complacent local government growing, this department had a greater role than previously. An experienced media professional ran this small unit and was responsible for a new council logo in 1985. This is still in use today thirty-three years later. The stylised R has the blue of the Thames and the green of our open spaces. Despite criticism at the time, it has had remarkable longevity.

### The opposition and the local press

An inevitable question is how the Conservative councillors reacted to all this. They were distressed at losing control of Richmond Council, and found it difficult to put together a successful opposition role. They didn't do opposition, having always run the local councils. They were aggressive at council meetings and put out press releases, but attacks and abuse were never balanced by alternative proposals or policies.

There was no counter to the regular leaflets at ward and borough level put out by the Liberal/SDP Alliance.

Possibly the biggest change since the 1980s has been the local media. Then it was just newspapers, but there were six of them – three broadsheets and three free tabloids. Half of these covered the whole borough. What they reported and said mattered. There were dozens of articles about Richmond Council every month. Now the only survivor is the *Richmond and Twickenham Times* as a patchily distributed free tabloid.

### The run up to the 1986 elections

As well as having the advantage of running the council, with all the well-publicised new initiatives, the new administration was also helped in one way by the Conservative government. 1986 would see the abolition of the Greater London Council, and the government were determined to show that this saved a lot of money. The Government Rate Support Grant to London boroughs for 1986 was very generous compared with previous years. The rates could be frozen, and with a late extra grant were cut by 1.6 per cent. This was a dramatic contrast to the 28 per cent rates increase in 1982 and 30 per cent in 1983. It also helped that the rents had only gone up in line with inflation for three years.

In the months before the May 1986, local elections leaflets were distributed across the borough publicising the achievements of the Alliance council. Ward newsletters also went out regularly. The election campaign was carefully planned in a centralised way for the first time with tailored borough leaflets for every ward. The Liberal/SDP organisation was active in every ward, and all nineteen wards campaigned to win. In the event forty-nine of the fifty-two seats were won with only three Conservatives returned. This was a success beyond anyone's expectations and must have been a huge blow to the Conservatives. However, despite losing every ward in the Twickenham constituency the Conservative MP held his seat a year later. The runaway success at a local level didn't translate to parliamentary success until 1997. The Liberal Democrats, though, continued to run Richmond Council until 2002, then from 2006 to 2010. In May 2018, Richmond upon Thames saw thirty-nine Liberal Democrats returned with only eleven Conservatives. Four Greens were also elected in an electoral pact with the Liberal Democrats.

### Reflections

How successful was the 1983–86 Richmond Council administration? I think it was very successful, starting with a financial crisis and ending with a cut in the rates. The initiatives started then still benefit Richmond residents today. But the calibre of the leading councillors was perhaps the best Richmond Council ever had. Three of them are in the House of Lords, and the others, not ennobled, would have made successful peers (or MPs as one of them became). All are still alive except for Alison Cornish, who chaired the education committee. She sadly died from a brain tumour in 2003.

More than thirty years later, the most important aspect of these two and a half years has to be the approach to community engagement and consultation. All public bodies like to claim that they 'consult', but they all struggle to give examples of a change of direction following consultation with genuine options. The best biography of Richard Nixon, by Anthony Summers, is called *The Arrogance of Power*. It is more time consuming, more challenging and more expensive to have genuine open-ended consultation on important projects or decisions. But it is better government and produces better results. Would Richmond Council and the residents still be arguing about the future of Twickenham Baths, which closed in 1981, if the council under both Liberal Democrat and Conservative control had not tried to impose their preferred solution on the site?

### After 1986

The intensive community campaigning in Richmond which led to winning control of the council in 1983 seems history now, as does the successes of the first two and a half years of control. Perhaps it is selective memory, but I find it hard to think of any failures during that first period of office other than the continued dereliction on the Twickenham Baths site. Of the nine elections for Richmond upon Thames Council from 1986 to 2018, Liberal Democrats have won six of them – a better record than most.

*David Williams was a councillor for Ham & Petersham ward from 1974 to 2014, Leader of Richmond-upon-Thames Council from 1983 to 2001, and Leader of the Liberal Democrats on the Local Government Association from 1996 to 2001. He received a knighthood in 1999 for 'Services to local government and the Local Government Association'.*

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