How Councils Work

This is an unofficial guide to how power is exercised in a council. As business people you will already be aware of various ‘power structures’ and how to deal with them. Councils are just different versions with a different set of names!

**Officer run councils** are probably the hardest to deal with.

They are most easily recognised by the way significant numbers of the elected members enter the Council Chamber or the committee room and have clearly not even looked at the Agenda or the supporting papers. They are frequently to be seen opening the large brown envelopes such documentation is despatched in, at the start of the meeting.

It is human nature to be protective of your own ideas. One of the difficulties of working with an Officer-led Council is that the officer you are dealing with is likely to have been the person that decided to undertake the activity you want stopped or changed. There is also the ‘my job’ syndrome. If an officer has been running an event for some time, they feel comfortable with it and cancelling it will make them very insecure.

Of course, these feelings are there to a certain extent in other Councils, but they are much stronger in an officer led council. The reason being that they are used to running things to suit themselves without outside ‘interference’. Their attitude may well be – ‘The members let us get on with things, why should you get involved or tell me what to do?’

There are a few ‘Officer led’ councils that do not show these characteristics – welcome them with open arms and treat them carefully. Otherwise they may evolve over time to the type described above.

**Politically led Councils**

These take a number of forms, which do not necessarily match party labels or the size, or not, of majority.

Author’s note: Local Authorities are currently being required to change their structure. This section is under revision as we observe their operational characteristics. Feedback and comments are particularly welcomed on this.

What’s in a name - Do not refer to Lib Dems as ‘Liberals’ for two reasons – Firstly, you will identify yourself as ‘anti’ and secondly, ‘Liberals’ still exist in the SouthWest.
**Clear Majority**

Normally the political party with a majority of seats takes all the senior positions within the Council and decides Council Policy in private in ‘group’ meetings.

Usually power resides with 2 or 3 individuals. They may be contacted direct: but more usually contact is made through intermediaries who are part of their faction or ‘court’. They are only involved in the ‘big’ decisions, whether money or status. Be aware of them, and of their agendas. Ideally your local ‘big business hitters’ need to be on social terms with them.

A word of warning – when a political council changes its colour, much else can change. Do not become too closely identified with the majority party. This may be hard, especially if it is your own political persuasion. Look ahead and keep contacts alive in the minority parties. It is time well spent, as if both (all) parties support a proposal, you’ll have no problems. If it is identified too closely with a particular party, it may well go out of the window with a political change.

Occasionally a change in the leadership of a political group will change the way they run the council. They may involve the minority parties more closely in running the council, giving them chairs on minor sub committees, or even vice chairs on major committees. Such arrangements rarely survive a hard fought election!

**Minority or ‘Hung’ or ‘Balanced’ Councils.**

Both types are effectively ‘no overall control’, but the actual party split makes the way they operate slightly different. In certain situations, identical splits between the parties can result in either a minority administration or a hung or balanced council.

‘Hung’ or ‘Balanced’ councils – the media, Labour party and Conservative parties use the word ‘hung’. Some Liberal Democrats use ‘balanced’. You should use the word used by the people you are with.

If you say ‘balanced’ to a Tory, they will mentally note you as a Lib Dem. If you use it to a Lib Dem, they will note you as ‘one of us’. Generally it is safer to use ‘hung’, unless you have a particular reason for getting the Lib Dems on side, or unless Lib Dems in your area use it. In the latter case you should most definitely use ‘balanced’ when speaking with them.

The crucial time which decides which way a council goes is immediately after the election. Party Groups meet behind closed doors to decide strategy and negotiate. Council Officers will also be deciding their strategy. For people watchers, it is a fascinating time.
As a general rule, surprises and inexperience produce minority councils. The numbers have to be such that one party almost has an overall majority, and there are individuals or small groups that are favourable to that party on a number of issues. The smaller of the two largest parties is usually demoralised by their defeat and/or held in opprobrium for their previous administration of the Council.

The inexperience is a factor, as the losing party often disdains to jockey for shared power, preferring to sit back sneering, to let the others ‘make a mess of things’ as is recently happened in Bristol.

In a minority Council situation, the controlling party will often work with one group on some issues and a different group on another, always achieving a majority in the chamber.

A minority council has to bring all its members with it, as even one vote may be crucial. For this reason they are usually the most internally democratic and least likely to have power centred on one or two leaders. They also have to discuss and negotiate with the smaller groups on the council, so there are lots of opportunities to exert influence.

‘Hung’ councils have a number of formats that allow power to be shared. The parties may take turns in chairing the Council and/or its committees. The ‘turns’ may be annual or each meeting. The latter being known as ‘revolving’ chairs.

Again to quote Bristol, at one stage their cabinet was composed of 3 Lib Dems, 3 Labour and 2 Conservatives.

The Lib Dems provided the Council Leader. This was the arrangement the Lib Dems called for after the election and held out until the other parties, particularly Labour agreed. However, the price seems to have been that the Conservatives and the Lib Dems take some of the biggest hot potatoes, like education.

Subsequently, the Conservatives although the smallest group, put the Labour party back in control. Even though the Lib Dems were the largest group, Labour and Conservative together had a majority.

The following year, the Conservatives tried to push Labour out and put the Lib Dems in. They refused, enabling a minority Labour administration to continue.

The events in Bristol are a salutary reminder that business organisations need to maintain contacts in all parties.
**Council Structures**

The council structures have been changing over the past few years. They now have smaller committees, or a ‘cabinet and scrutiny’ system.

In both situations, the majority of members have little influence or power. They may be useful for information, especially if they are disgruntled. You need to spot a few rising stars and cultivate them.

Power is concentrated in a small number of ‘hands’ and you need to make sure they appreciate the problems faced by small businesses.

Cabinet members have the power to make decisions on their own up to quite significant sums of money - £250,000 and more in many cases. However, it seems many are still somewhat ‘shy’ of exercising such power, choosing instead to refer such matters to the Cabinet, or wherever, according to their structure.

In the South, Nick Winch is really the best person to talk to about the new structures. Colin Jamieson is a serving District Councillor so may also have valuable experience on the matter.

Vivienne Rayner
18th July 2003
Revised August 2004
Revised August 2008