

Part I - The field of inquiry and action
Theory, Method and Practice

2. Bridging: The Context of the Field

My research was set within the field of local government in the UK. In this chapter I will introduce the context of that field together with an overview of my activity within it. The primary purpose here is to fill in enough context to support what is to come and to sketch out the extent of the work. During the course of the research I engaged over a sustained period with seven local authority organisations and I had contact with several others. In this chapter you will be introduced to the participating organisations and you will get a précis of the four learning histories that are not included in the main body of the thesis. Additionally this chapter illustrates some of my research process: the way sites of inquiry were selected and the interplay between strategy and opportunism within that.

Context of Local Government

In keeping with the nature of this research which is based on narrative rather than on case analyses, the context of local government is described in a way that is intended to give sufficient support for the discussion in this thesis but no more. This mirrors the way structural context is handled in learning histories. For example in the Merton history, enough of the planning procedures are explained to support the story rather than to explain the working of these procedures in detail. Here, in support of the research story, I will describe how local authorities are distinct from each other and why it might be that different breakthrough projects have occurred there.

There are 434 local authorities (councils) in UK. These authorities are distinguished between urban and rural areas with the former being organised as city councils and metropolitan boroughs and the latter being originally organised as district and county councils. In recent years there has been a push to flatten hierarchies through the creation of unitary authorities. This reorganisation is still ongoing with district councils in Wiltshire and Cornwall for example being disbanded last year in favour of unitary authorities. Councils are directly or indirectly responsible for a wide provision of services in the local area that include transport, waste management, social support, leisure,

education and health. As a result any council manages a wide range of issues relating to the socio-economics of its locale and oversees a large estate within its geographical boundaries. This estate includes roads, schools, parks, woodlands, rubbish tips, municipal buildings and leisure facilities.

Local authorities are necessarily tuned to the local context in which they are situated and priorities within councils vary greatly in accordance with that context. Social issues – some examples are teenage pregnancy, unemployment, fuel poverty, community cohesion – and the need to address them vary greatly from council to council. Environmental, transport, land-use and economic issues are similarly localised. Councils are highly politicised environments. Elected members are usually politically aligned to a party and are answerable to the community as well as to their party. Unelected council officers - with whom I have mostly worked in this research - operate the council and provide continuity and political impartiality. Elections occur every 4 years and in areas with staunch political following the administration can have a strong bias to one of the country's main political parties: Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat. However in other areas with split political loyalties the elected majority administration can change quite often and when this happens there can be a sudden change in strategy and priorities. In this context cross-party consensus is vital if an issue is not to become politicised.

The unique situation of each authority and its responsibility to community agendas puts it in tension with central government where national agendas meet local constraints in a nexus of rhetoric, policy and scrutiny. Central government policies affect a wide range of areas ranging from land-use planning to waste-disposal and impact directly on a local government's degrees of freedom. Centrally dictated approaches to scrutiny and evaluation have traditionally been uniformly applied across all councils. At the time of conducting the research, the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) was the evaluative framework for local government.

In 2006 the National UK carbon emissions were estimated to be in the region of 530-550 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and new statistics from Defra provide a relatively consistent set of figures that break the emissions down for each local authority (*source*: (Defra 2008)). These range hugely: from just 12,000 Tonnes CO₂ emitted in the Isles of

Scilly to 50 Million tonnes emitted across Greater London in the same year. However most local authorities emitted between 1-3 Million Tonnes of CO₂ in that year almost half (46%) of which came from the industrial, commercial and public sector. A further 29% of the emissions came from the domestic sector and a further 25% from transport (Defra 2008). What is important to note beyond the actual figures is that local government is one site where the delivery of carbon reduction in keeping with the government national targets can be stimulated and monitored. And this is something of which the field itself is acutely aware. In a self-critical report that pulled no punches in its evaluation of local government's track record on climate change thus far, the Local Government Association called on the local authorities it represents to step up to the plate:

Local government has a unique opportunity. On an issue of such global importance, it must demonstrate the power of community leadership. In doing so, it can lay claim to the mantle of place shaping. To date, with notable exceptions, its response to climate change has been largely 'business as usual'. The challenge is how we lever an historic shift in the response.

(LGA 2007 p.24)

However up until recently and within the timeframe of the research there was no criterion within the CPA framework that related to how a council was addressing climate change. Increasingly though, as the research was ongoing, climate change was becoming more accepted as an important issue at a national level. Publication of the Stern report in 2006 (Stern 2006) was the first governmentally sanctioned report to recognise and quantify the economic cost of climate change. And a legally binding framework to tackle climate change was put in place when the Climate Change bill became law in November 2008. Finally toward the end of the research period, in 2008, with a view to more devolved governance the CLG⁵ started to put in place a new performance framework in place. This new framework sees an increased focus on partnership working and greater flexibility for a council to set its own priorities. From a set of national indicators of performance a local authority can select and prioritise the key areas that will drive their

⁵ Department for Communities and Local Government

strategy. Of these national indicators, two are directly related to mitigating climate change⁶ and a third relates to climate change adaptation⁷.

With this summary I have wanted to convey a sense that the institutional field in which I was researching is continually changing in relation to the issue of climate change. I also want to convey a sense of what is distinctive about this field that leads to it sometimes creating the conditions for breakthrough carbon reduction projects to occur.

In summary that distinctive nature arises from the way that each local authority is unique and locally defined whilst being strongly bound to others via central government control and national policy. The federal nature of local authorities means that generally councils are more rooted in their difference than in their similarities with each other. This diversity is more likely to be allowed to flourish in the local government sector than in the corporate sector where uniformity of process will be more deliberately sought and diversity will be quashed. And it is this diversity that stimulates an entrepreneurial spirit to drive individuals or groups to address issues that are tangible and locally focussed. Finally the large size of each Authority, its substantial budget and responsibility for an estate that includes a large amount of infrastructure and building stock supports this spirit by offering sufficient freedom in which to innovate.

⁶ NI185: Reduce CO₂ across council's estate; N186 – Reduce per capita emissions in the council's jurisdiction.

⁷ NI188: Planning to adapt to climate change

Engaging in the Field

The London Borough of Merton was the first of seven local authority organisations involved over a sustained period in the research. In this section I will give an overview of the remaining organisations that participated. Four of these were, like Merton, involved in the creation of a learning history about a breakthrough project. I then went on to work with two further local authority organisations to inquire into the value and learning to be had from the original set of learning histories.

Learning history selection

The four learning histories that were written in addition to Merton are available in the appendix of this thesis. These fruitfully support the discussion in several chapters though are not essential to it.

The main reason for including these learning histories in the Appendix is because they are important artefacts of the research process. So it is as much for their historic importance as it is for their supporting content that they are included here. They are unedited, left exactly as they were written and shared with participants from local government. The tone and detail in the learning histories reflects this as later chapters will describe.

The next section will summarise the four remaining learning histories giving an overview of each project, the basis for its selection and the writing of the history itself. In doing this, I will also keep the thread of happenstance alive. Whilst there was a logic guiding my search for projects to feature there was also an element of opportunism that, when exposed, conveys some of the realistic challenges there can be with inviting oneself into a particular field.

The Nottingham Declaration

Organisation: Nottingham City Council

Region: North East

Population (2006): 286,000

CO₂ emissions (2006): 1.8 Million Tonnes

Project overview

The Nottingham Declaration is a declaration on climate change that was set up in 2001 and relaunched in 2005. As the name suggests it originated with a group in Nottingham who galvanised several local authorities to sign the declaration and so make a voluntary commitment to put a plan in place to tackle climate change within two years. Like Merton it was an innovative idea that had had some considerable success in spreading. Over half the local authorities in the country had signed it when I visited Nottingham. Unlike Merton it was an executive-led campaign with strong ministerial backing so it offered a good comparison.

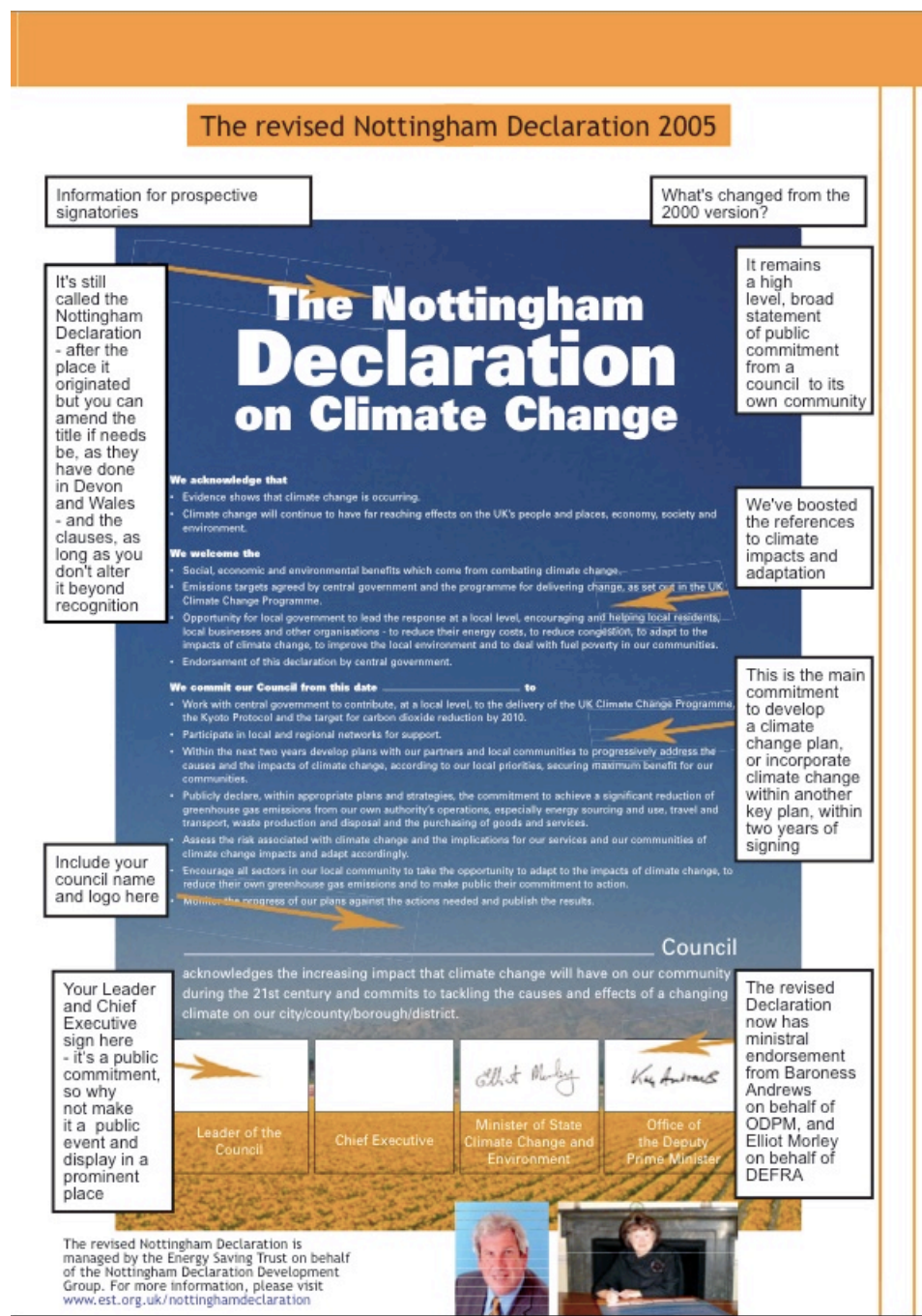


Figure 6 The Nottingham declaration on climate change

Engaging: Jan 2007-October 2007

A friend Helen had told me about the Nottingham declaration. She mentioned she had a contact at the council there and she sent me his details in late 2006. I sat on it. Finishing Merton, I wasn't yet ready to decide which case to do next. Nottingham was a possible

rather than a definite next step.



9th January 2007

Then, I get an e-mail: It is a nudge to get in touch with that contact in Nottingham that I had filed away until I was ready. I need to reply, I pick up the phone. It is meant to be a holding call. I'll tell him what I plan to do and when my plans will be finished. But it doesn't go like that. One thing leads to another and I suddenly have a meeting set up in Nottingham for the 16th February

In February 2007 I interviewed Mike Peverill from Nottingham City Council. I wrote some of the history up soon after but the interview data showed gaps in the early history. And those gaps could be filled by Steve Waller who had left Nottingham and who worked now at the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (I&DeA). His role there was very relevant: he was involved with running the Beacon scheme, which is a scheme for sharing learning from best-practice within local authorities. In June I contacted him, introduced myself and, as he would later say, was lucky to get him at a good moment on a Friday afternoon. We had a good call and he became interested in the research. In July 2007 I met him to interview him about Nottingham and also to discuss the research overall. His interest and endorsement of the work was later to play a vital role in opening up channels into the local authority networks when it came to recruiting people to come to the workshop. With Steve's input I could now complete the Nottingham history which I finalised in Autumn 2007.

The Nottingham learning history (précis)

A tale of symbols, strategy and confidence

The Nottingham learning history tells two intertwined stories. In Steve's story it traces how the idea for the declaration emerged against a backdrop of political support and championing of environmental issues that had been steadily built up in Nottingham city council through the 90s. It was his boss's executive level interest in green issues that gave Steve the freedom to devise the declaration as a way to link rising concerns about climate change to a commitment to act. However with a switch to Mike's story, the history then charts how subsequent changes at executive level in the council saw priorities shift in a way that made sustaining energy behind the declaration almost

impossible. Mike's story describes how he worked in this context to maintain confidence and tenacity. A key moment occurs when he acts as an 'agent provocateur' and convenes a group of stakeholders from outside the council to Nottingham saying 'look guys we need to do something'. Together this group re-forms a coalition that renews the energy behind the declaration.

This then is a history about waxing and waning fortunes. It dwells on the symbolism of the Declaration and muses on the mythic qualities of the story that features portentous floods, executive gatherings, giant postcards and ceremonial signings.

Selecting

With two learning histories involving the spread of the *idea* of using low carbon technology I was keen now to have examples that directly involved the technology. Through web research, mail-shots and conversations with various contacts I was starting to build a picture of what projects would be worth featuring. One key contact at this time was a friend, John Malone who works as a renewable energy consultant. Together we talked about potential projects, the different qualities they had and, as importantly, the key characters involved. From this discussion Barnsley and Kirklees both came out as fascinating projects that involved low carbon technology but were different from each other in so many ways.

Barnsley

Organisation: Barnsley Metropolitan Borough

Region: Yorkshire and the Humber

Population (2006): 223,000

CO₂ emissions (2006): 1.95 Million Tonnes

Project overview

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, over a period of twenty years, has drastically reduced their heat-related annual carbon dioxide emissions through the use of locally sourced wood biomass. Heat emissions that stood at 70,000 Tonnes in 1990 had been

reduced by a third to 48,000 Tonnes by 2005. The reductions in CO₂, that put Barnsley some fifteen years ahead of government targets, were achieved through a range of energy efficiency measures and an unrelenting and successful program to shift the majority of the council's estate heating from a coal-base to wood supplied largely from the some 12,000 Hectares of South Yorkshire woodland surrounding the county.



Figure 7 Waste wood awaiting chipping at Smithies Yard in Barnsley

Engaging: June 2007-December 2007

With Barnsley and Kirklees, I watched clips on the Internet to get a feel for each project and for the characters involved. John had cautioned that Barnsley was known to be a bit like Woking – it was a project that had been brilliantly executed by a technical expert. The internet clip of Dick Bradford confirmed this for me. He was clear, factual and very expert. Getting a human story of highs and lows might be tricky. Nevertheless I went ahead. Just because I might not get a good story was not a basis to exclude Barnsley. The challenge of shaping a technical story would be interesting for the research.



Journal June 5th 2007 - Barnsley

Good news! John has made contact with Dick Bradford and Dick is happy not only to talk but also to meet. I start to prepare and write briefing notes and wonder why does this never get any easier! It is 12:41 - why don't just pick up the phone and call him and set the date?

That introductory call went well and a meeting was set up for a few weeks later. In June 2007, in the beating rain I drove around Sheffield to get to Barnsley and spent just two hours there speaking to Dick. I wrote the learning history soon afterwards completing a draft in July 2007. Later in the Autumn I added one additional perspective.

The Barnsley learning history (précis)

Biomass: It's a no-brainer!

This history largely focuses on the journey of one man, Dick Bradford, who formed a vision for Barnsley's energy future and then set about making it happen. In Dick a breadth of technical and strategic knowledge supports an unswerving confidence as to how to do things. The story describes how, over twenty years, as success builds on success, Dick wins unequivocal trust in his expertise and with that the freedom to innovate. Inspired by the sight of vast storage sheds 'stacked to the gunnels' with wood when he visits Switzerland in 2003 he forms a vision of using local biomass back home. And on his return he puts in place the complex links to make this possible. The history charts a very elegant journey of innovation where risks are pitched perfectly as the vision rolls forward in stepwise projects that fit in a timely way to the current needs of the council. Dick's expertise and his grim determination create the conditions for the project to fly and for his vision to be realised. This is a champion's story suggesting perhaps that it is extraordinary people who make extraordinary things seem possible. "It's a no-brainer" is a phrase Dick often repeats. This refrain is discussed in the history in an attempt to understand why something apparently so simple in Barnsley has been difficult to recreate elsewhere.

Kirklees

Organisation: Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council

Region: Yorkshire and the Humber

Population (2006): 398,000

CO₂ emissions (2006): 3.1 Million Tonnes

Project overview

In Kirklees solar power (thermal and photovoltaic) has been installed on new and old council buildings as part of an ongoing and long-term commitment to improving housing in the community. Though the carbon reductions are not high - they quoted a mere 175 tonnes/annum savings of CO₂ - the anomalous nature of this project is fascinating. The picture below shows Primrose Hill, Huddersfield that at one time was known to be one of the most deprived areas in the country. Note the saw-toothed eco-houses side by side with older council houses all sporting solar panels. How had this happened?



Figure 8 Solar panels on council houses old and new in Kirklees

Engaging: April 2007 – February 2008

Kirklees was a great comparison to Barnsley. They were in a neighbouring borough and yet were using a completely different technology. If ever there was ferment, then this was it. The video clips I watched only increased my motivation to feature Kirklees. I smiled as I watched pensioners pointing proudly to their solar meters and competing with each other on the readings. Kirklees included a community aspect that had been absent from the other histories. Again, using John as my contact I made an approach. However as easy as Barnsley had been to set up, Kirklees was difficult and protracted.



Journal April 4th 2007 - Kirklees

The reply from Kirklees is evasive - perhaps she hasn't had time to read my mail properly and/or perhaps she's handling this kind of request all the time? She invites me to an open day but makes it clear there will be no time for interviews.

Eventually, after several calls and e-mails with the contact there, I was able to persuade her to ask those involved if they would be willing to be interviewed. Of the original team, two people volunteered but to my disappointment, no one came forward from the local authority itself. Jimm (sic) Reed was from the registered social landlord company (RSL) and had project managed the new-build of the eco-houses. Richard Gardner was from the housing association and had been involved with tackling fuel poverty. He had worked with council tenants, explaining to them the energy improvements the council were making and eventually encouraging them to opt into the solar scheme.

I conducted the Kirklees interviews the day after I had been to Barnsley in June 2007. It was raining again as I drove around Sheffield to get there. That evening, in the beating rain I got the train home. The North of England suffered severe floods that week and these were to be repeated throughout the UK that summer. Later that week Sheffield suffered extensive damage when the river Don burst its banks. A 14-year old boy and a 68-year old man were killed.

The Kirklees learning history was difficult to write because the two threads were so different. And I was clearly missing a lot. Eventually I wrote the history in November 2007 and signed it off, with no additional perspectives in February 2008.

The Kirklees learning history (précis)

A lonely Solar Pioneer

The history intertwines the two different stories of Jimm and Richard that share the common thread of what it is like to be on the ground and working to introduce a new technology. Challenging interactions with funders, communities, engineers and managers pepper the account. These give way later to celebrations and royal visits as the solar projects become successful and a source of kudos. The history highlights the unstoppable nature of a project once it builds a momentum. Jimm describes the genesis of the eco-houses when, riding on the positive vibe in a meeting, he sketches out their saw-toothed roofs. From there the project unfolds and problems – technological and otherwise - simply must be met head on. Richard's story brings the council tenants to life not as end-users of solar technology but as people who have whole lives. His tireless engagement around energy improvement is in tune with those lives and with the social issue of fuel poverty. He doesn't talk about solar panels, but about fridge magnets, helplines and keeping the whole house warm so that accidents are avoided during the commercial break of people's favourite soap opera on TV. The learning history discusses why Kirklees is a lonely pioneer. Though solar installations save a relatively small amount of CO₂ relative to their capital costs, Kirklees shows how solar power has been much more broadly beneficial in terms of building community, reducing fuel poverty and supporting social regeneration.

Selecting

By Summer 2007, I had four learning history interview data sets and had written up 3 of them. I was now more familiar with what was going on in the field and with my contacts, particularly with the support of Steve at the I&DeA, I had more legitimate ways of approaching people. The fifth case then was one I had the luxury to select. Southampton's District Energy Scheme had become an obvious choice. Using geothermal water from an aquifer below the city and combined heat and power (CHP) technology they had built a localised energy distribution network that was comparable with Woking. Unlike Woking however it was little known in the public domain.

Southampton

Organisation: Southampton City Council

Region: South East

Population: 228,000

CO₂ emissions (2006): 1.4 Million Tonnes

Project overview

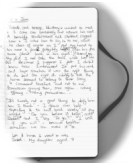
Some 11K of pipes run underneath the city of Southampton to supply heating and, more recently, cooling to some forty commercial and civic buildings. The network saves its customers an estimated 11,000 Tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. They had 'done a really good job persuading commercial customers to connect' I heard when I was up in Nottingham. I was interested to hear how.



Figure 9: The geothermal heat station in Southampton

Engaging: September 2007 – February 2008

With an introduction from Steve Waller, and Histories already written, my approach was now much clearer and was successful.



19th September 2007

A good call with Bill at Southampton gives me a lot of hope that it will be a good learning history.

In September I travelled there and interviewed Bill Clark in September and started writing up soon after. As I did it became apparent there were gaps in the early history. Bill had only recently taken over from Mike Smith who had set up the scheme and run it for many years. So, in January I returned to Southampton and interviewed Mike at the heat station. After that I gathered perspectives from others who were involved. Of the five histories, this felt like it was the most 'properly' written benefitting perhaps from my cumulated experience but also from the collaborative nature of the project I was featuring.

The Southampton learning history (précis)

A tale of collaboration and steady ambition

The Southampton learning history follows the project from the fuel-crisis in the 70s when the first geothermal well was dug by the Department of Energy. Mike goes along to have a look and so starts a journey that sees him convert into a passionate and tenacious advocate for geothermal energy. The history is characterised by a constant movement in this story between champions and coalitions that form and reform around an idea that itself changes over time. Political will underpins the project. Trust and partnership are recurring themes throughout. A pioneering private-public partnership to run the scheme is put in place by those in positions normally risk averse: the chief finance director (Mike) and the council's lawyer (Jacqui). The interdisciplinary team put in place to operate the scheme is described to have had a 'special quality' of capability.

The vision of the scheme changes over time. Whereas the early years see a pre-occupation with the wells and the geothermal waters, Bill tells how, in more recent years project's sense of itself gradually refocuses onto the potential of the energy network itself.

The ambition is also vested over time in many actors. This is a striking antidote then to the champion's tale. Though extraordinary characters come into relief through the story, the over-riding story is one of collaborative achievement. Over the course of the project, layered partnerships of trust and knowledge link players from different disciplines and organisations together in timely ways. End users, commercial partners, different council departments and even projects of a similar nature at home and abroad are drawn into a framework of mutual learning and collaboration that characterises the project. This distributed capability sets Southampton apart as a project with good chances of being sustainable and growing to enjoy continued success.

Second cycle participants

By second cycle participants I mean those organisations that worked with the learning histories that were produced. The purpose of these inquiries was to understand the value to had with the learning histories and the different possible ways of working with them. At the learning history workshop that will be described in Chapter 5, fifteen further local government organisations participated. These organisations are not described here. However two further local authorities became directly involved in the research over an extended period. They are introduced briefly below for completeness. The work with them is described in later chapters of the thesis.

Brighton and Hove

Organisation: Brighton and Hove

Region: South East

Population (2006): 251,000

CO₂ emissions (2006): 1.3 Million Tonnes

Engaging: May 2007 – September 2008

Brighton and Hove council was the site for 1:1 work with Thurstan Crockett. My meeting with Thurstan was opportunistic. I was going to Brighton to give a seminar and had been passed his contact details by my project colleague Susan.



17th April, 2007, E-mail from colleague Susan Ballard

Hi Margaret, Just had a good call with Thurstan Crockett: sustainability officer at Brighton. I told him more about what you are up to and he's very interested and willing to give you interview time (within reason) I suggest you follow up either with an "actually I'm not interested anymore" or to fix a date for a meeting or phone call. Strike while iron is hot!

To which I replied on the same day

Thanks, thanks Susan. Have organised to meet Thurstan in May (took a chance and phoned him with kids + dog settled :)

I will write more about that meeting later in Chapter 4. Thurstan read learning histories as I wrote them and, in a series of phonecalls spread over about a year, we inquired together into the value of them and their relevance to his work. Chapter 7 will touch on some of this work.

Bath and NE Somerset

Organisation: Bath and NE Somerset

Region: South West

Population (2006): 176,000

CO₂ emissions (2006): 1.1 Million Tonnes

Engaging: June 2007 – Mar 2009

Bath and NE Somerset is my local council and was the site for a sustained inquiry into working with learning history. Over a period of six months from June to October 2008 I ran a series of seminars with a small group of council officers there. These seminars were orchestrated with the help of my key contact at B&NES, the corporate sustainability manager Jane Wildblood who is a passionate advocate for green issues. My engagement with B&NES was one I sought out quite strategically. I will describe this and the work in more detail in Chapter 12.

Scoping the field: reflections

This short account hopefully conveys some of the typical realities of working in an institutional field the way I did. It was only by engaging in the field, not really knowing what I was doing, that I could start to know what I was doing. The difference between my arrival at Merton in September 2006 and at Southampton a year later was very different. By the time I arrived in Southampton everything was clear, convincing and authoritative. I knew what my story was by then. I had practiced telling and re-telling it over time.

In describing my engagement with the field I have wanted to be somewhat consistent with learning histories which are messy accounts. They have highs and lows, moments of doubt and dilemmas of decision. Writing this way helps me reflect more levelly on how

I engaged. I remember that particularly in the early stages I had to be watchful not so much of the decisions I was making but of which decisions were making me. I needed to constantly trade-off opportunity against coherence in the research. And this leads me to reflect now on the decisions I made *not* to include certain projects. For example I pursued, with some energy, the possibility to feature a low carbon exemplar building from the National Trust, a much loved heritage charity in the UK. Researcher colleagues rightly challenged me that this did not fit with the local authority field. I reflected on the challenge, reviewed how I was drawing boundaries and decided ultimately not to follow the lead. In another case I actually interviewed an individual who had influenced at a regional level the putting in place a new zero-carbon target. Here the storyline fitted but on reviewing the interview data it just didn't work for me. So I dropped it. It was only months later, when I asked the participant for feedback that I learnt how my ambivalence about the case had confused and disappointed her. I realised I had not been watchful to treat this participant with due care, but luckily my checking procedures had surfaced the issue and we concluded our relationship on good terms.

In Chapter 6 I will talk in detail about the quality criteria I evolved for the research. They are in evidence in the above reflection. I had them in mind as I wrote. However at the time of acting they were less explicit. Likewise they remain, for now, implicit.