

## 7      **An account of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative**

### 7.1    **Framing**

In the previous chapter, I drew on Spinoza's and on Naess' thinking and explored the notion of developing *repose in oneself*, and I suggested that our capacity to stay with the questions and challenges raised by the ecological crisis was intimately linked to a practice of psychological, psychic and spiritual development.

In this chapter, I turn to my experience of participating in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative and offer it as the grounding from which the arguments made in Chapters Eight emerge. My aim in this chapter is to present an account of *what happened* as part of this collaboration, focusing in particular on the kinds of conversations, actions and interactions in which we engaged as part thereof. As a method of doing so, I give a month by month account of what it was that we focused our collective attention on during (and between) each monthly open meeting.

To be clear, the stories and the text I present are largely adapted from the notes/minutes of the meetings which I put together and shared with all participants, in the manner described in Chapter Three. The account presented here could therefore be understood to be shaped by my own initial perceptions, reflections and interpretations of what had taken place in each meeting (based on my own participation and my subsequent engagement with the tape-recordings of these), and corroborated by others to the extent that these notes were accepted and publically shared as valid accounts of what had gone on. In order to distinguish the fact that the narrative of this chapter is constructed largely from the notes of our monthly open meetings, the main body of text is presented in Bookman Old Style italics font, thus: *main body*.

Of course, since the time when these notes/minutes were written (late in 2002 and throughout 2003) I have undergone many further cycles of action and reflection, both in relation to this particular field of practice and to others. At various points, then, I take a step back from the narrative, and I point to the ways in which I went

on to reflect on these experiences. Such reflective pauses are represented in violet-coloured Times New Roman font and are enclosed by brackets, thus: [reflective pauses]. Specifically, I use these reflective pauses to indicate the key issues and/or themes to which I return in Chapter Eight when, in some detail, I reflect on the experience of participating in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative and on what it suggests about the challenges encountered when seeking to act for sustainability.

## 7.2 November 2002: Convening our first open meeting

*As I explained in Chapter Three, participants at the first open meeting included the rector of one of the local churches, a teacher from the local primary school, a Parish Councillor, a professional organic gardener, the environmental officer from a local business, an Agenda 21 Officer from the county-level council, as well as four members of the team at Conservation and myself.*

*We began our first open meeting with a round of introductions in which we each said something about our interests and our reasons for attending the meeting. The kinds of themes, interests and areas of experience expressed in this initial round of introductions are summarised in the table below:*

### **Range of interests/experiences expressed**

Familiarity with sustainability issues (particularly relating to energy use and climate change) through professional life.
Wish to measure and assess the village's impact on the environment, to raise awareness of problems and opportunities and to set achievable targets.
Familiarity with Life Cycle Assessment, a decision-making tool for assessing the overall environmental impact of a product/service/technology throughout its entire life cycle.
Wish to explore the notion of joined-up thinking.

Links between the ways in which we relate to nature and our sense of spirituality.
Prior knowledge and experience of Local Agenda 21.
Familiarity with the slogan 'think globally, act locally' and interest in considering how people in Farmshire could respond locally to the challenges of sustainability.
Interest in how community groups can work together to address these problems in democratic and practical ways.
Interest in providing opportunities for children to engage with issues around the environment and to become involved in related activities, and in introducing these subjects as part of the school curriculum.
Interest in considering the different spaces within the community (existing or prospective) which may be used as educational and demonstrative spaces for issues around sustainability.
Interest in provision of suitable community services for youngsters and for the elderly.
Keenness to devote some space, time and resources to the community; a sense of giving back to the community.
Experience in permaculture and organic gardening.
Experience in forestry conservation and woodland planting.
Awareness of moves towards reusing green waste.
Suggestions to explore the possibility of a community composting site funded partly by landfill tax.

### ***Sharing practical examples of local community initiatives***

*Following the round of introductions outlined above, the Agenda 21 Officer, MS (fictitious initials), agreed to share some practical examples of initiatives taken by local communities. He indicated that although such projects can involve a great amount of work, they can also be refreshing and enabling processes.*

*[It is interesting to note that we often sought guidance and advice from the Local Agenda 21 officers who attended several of the open meetings, and that we sought to learn from ‘best practice’ in the field of community participation. In Chapter Eight, I reflect on this in some detail, and I suggest that establishing appropriate organisational frameworks and holding structures was a key challenge.]*

*As a starting point, he suggested that sustainability be understood not solely in terms of tackling environmental problems, but rather in terms of influencing people to reconsider and alter their lifestyles. He proposed that sustainability is about people developing a healthy and balanced approach to life.*

*From experience, MS identified some points which might be influential in determining the extent to which a local initiative is successful:*

- *The presence of (one or more) people to act as a core driving force.*
- *The engagement and participation of the whole community.*

*[The dual challenge of positioning ourselves as change agents/community leaders while at the same time seeking to engage and involve the wider community in a democratic process of social change is one which raised several tensions for us, and one which we considered in some detail in the reflection phase of the initiative (which I describe in the concluding parts of this chapter).]*

*MS also shared information about some of the funding available and some ways in which the process could be facilitated. One source of funding/support mentioned was that of the Countryside Agency, which MS introduced as the statutory body working to conserve and enhance the countryside. MS explained that the Agency encourages parishes to undertake a community appraisal process in order to build an understanding of the issues which matter for people living in the community.*

*As an example, MS explained that [Village X] embarked on such a process, and chose to stage a village meeting, where a number of community members could work together to consider how the community appraisal process could be extended to include the whole village. This launch meeting demanded a considerable level of facilitative work to help draw out and identify relevant questions and concerns, which could then be incorporated into a questionnaire. These were distributed door-to-door, and the findings were presented in a follow-up meeting. Villagers were thus able to identify and prioritise areas of concern, and volunteers formed action groups to move forward with these.*

*Another example was that of [Village Y], where community members organised a village conference. Following an extensive campaign promoting the event, over 100 people attended the conference held in the Village Hall. The conference began with a presentation of art and poetry by local school-children, and was followed by a SWOT analysis, where residents participated in identifying the village's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. A key facilitative choice was the use of accessible language when asking these questions. For example, in order to identify strengths and weaknesses, one question posed was 'If you had a foreign guest visiting, what feature(s) of the village would you like to show them? What would you like to hide?' From this initial meeting, concerns and priorities were identified, and action groups formed.*

*Another tool suggested by MS was that of a Village Character Statement, which reflects the infrastructure and character of the village, and may give villagers a stronger sense of identity.*

*The experiences shared by MS reaffirmed our felt need to engage local people in the process of making decisions and forming plans, and also of involving them in the process of collecting data, evaluating options and seeking to implement change(s). It also emphasised the importance of asking the right kinds of questions.*

*[As I explained in Chapter Three, from the early stages of this initiative the focus of our collaboration was external rather than internal, focusing on how we might engage with the wider community and enact social change in wider systems. I suggested that such an external focus meant that we gave less attention to*

considering internal group processes, and that this limited the extent to which we were able to shape this into a space in which we might engage in transformative, second-person inquiry. In Chapter Eight, I suggest that the focus on influencing the *wider public* and on shifting patterns in *wider systems* may be understood as a characteristic of the environmental movement in many of its forms, and that this presents significant challenges for people seeking to act for change in this field. In the concluding part of this chapter, I demonstrate that some participants seemed to develop an awareness of such challenges, as evidenced in the final reflection phase.]

### ***Proposed exhibition and envisioning/consultation event***

*It was suggested that we might usefully facilitate some form of awareness-raising as a first step. We felt that people may be more willing to become involved if they had first been introduced to some of the issues, challenges and opportunities of taking on such an initiative.*

*In particular, we agreed that it may be most effective to raise awareness through following the model of the Web of Hope (an organisation also working towards sustainability, and with which a former resident of Farmshire was involved), by showing where the opportunities lay and by sharing inspiring practical examples of success stories and initiatives being undertaken world-wide. It was felt that rather than focus solely on the problems and crises facing people and planet today, people are more likely to be inspired to take active steps if an awareness of problems is balanced with positive news and with the sharing of best practice examples.*

*As a way of sharing such ideas and examples, it was suggested that we create something along the lines of the Web of Hope Road-show:*

*The Web of Hope UK Road-show will tour the British Isles between 2003 and 2005, visiting schools, town halls, universities and farmers markets, taking 'best practice' role models for sustainability into classrooms and communities, using interactive displays and performances to inspire their replication at local level...and to provide a blueprint for similar community-level projects to be replicated across the globe.*

*(Web of Hope website, [www.thewebofhope.com](http://www.thewebofhope.com), Accessed 19 November 2003)*

*We felt that our own event could appropriately be presented as an interactive exhibition, with invitations for people to contribute their own comments, concerns and ideas. In this way, the event could also be designed as an envisioning or consultation space.*

*Alongside the proposed exhibition, it might be possible to carry out some form of door-to-door consultation, or to have this organised through the churches and school, in order to involve groups of people that are as representative and varied as possible.*

*Those present showed enthusiasm for these ideas, and agreed to consider these further in subsequent meetings. It was at this point that we made the decision to refer to our efforts as the Sustainable Farmshire initiative.*

### **7.3 December 2002: Linking in with the Parish Plan**

*In our second meeting, we were joined by BG, a Parish Councillor and resident of Farmshire, in order to discuss the potential crossover between our own remit and others' work in developing a Parish Plan (PP).*

*BG shared the background to the PP. Historically, Local Councils encouraged communities to compile village design statements, which would articulate their views regarding the built environment of their locality, and which could potentially influence any changes thereof. This was eventually substituted by a village character statement, which gave local residents an opportunity to comment not only on the infrastructure of their locality, but also on any other features which they felt were significant to maintaining and enhancing the locality's character.*

*The PP is a more recent methodology for encouraging community engagement, and is part of the Vital Villages scheme run by the Countryside Agency. The scheme encourages communities to '...Identify key facilities and services, set out the problems that need to be tackled and demonstrate how distinctive character and features can be preserved'. The PP process is*

*designed to extend over a period of one year, and although the initial application to the Countryside Agency needs to be supported by the Parish Council, once accepted the facilitation of the project becomes the responsibility of an independent, self-selected steering group. The cornerstone of the programme is community-wide consultation through many channels and media, so that all community members have the opportunity to put forward any concerns and ideas, and so that problems or challenges can be prioritised.*

*As an example of the PP process, BG shared the experience of [Village Z]. In Village Z, the Parish Council registered their intent to compile a Parish Plan with the Countryside Agency. This is the first step in any such process, and at the time of our second meeting in December 2002, this had just been concluded in Farmshire. The next step taken by Village Z was to get some general ideas about priorities from residents. To accomplish this, question sheets were dropped through every door. These sheets asked residents to briefly identify areas of concern or importance to them, listing prompt words such as 'buildings', 'transport', 'services' and 'environment'. This exercise would have been valuable in informing residents that such a consultation process was being undertaken. Moreover, the priorities identified (albeit briefly) could be used as a starting point for the PP steering group to write a more comprehensive survey, which would again be distributed across the village.*

*Finally, in the case of Village Z (as would eventually be the case with Farmshire) the results of this community-wide consultation process were drawn into an official document to communicate any action plans and priorities. From a future developments perspective, this is an important document because of forthcoming alterations in the current planning system which may result in a slice of consultation being removed from the planning process, with the aim of simplifying what is often a lengthy and convoluted process.*

*In considering a potential crossover with the PP process, we realised that the kind of work which we wished to undertake, both in terms of process (community-wide collaborative practices) and content (local sustainability) could contribute to the compilation of a PP. Rather than duplicate our efforts, it seemed likely that we would benefit from co-ordinating our work and acting at some kind of interface with one another. However, some of us who*



*had participated in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative so far feared that if we were to proceed with such a collaboration the sustainability angle may be co-opted and may become a minor part of a broad, tenuous process, and that we could also be constricted by a relatively prescriptive framework. Thus a tension surfaced between wanting to engage in collaborative relationships and establish ties with other community bodies, whilst also wishing to retain some sense of ownership.*

*Nevertheless, we felt that we could significantly contribute to the PP process. A participating Local Council Agenda 21 Officer had suggested that a common set-back of such processes was their tendency to be rather inward-looking and narrowly-restricted, and that whilst relatively easy to focus on predictable, long-standing concerns such as dog-mess, it was more difficult to look at the wider picture and explore systemic challenges, which we in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative were especially keen to raise into people's consciousness. We realised that we could secure that environmental issues were at the core of the consultative process. By participating somehow in each of the forthcoming consciousness-raising and information-gathering exercises, we could seek to interweave dialogue around sustainability into the core of parish life. Indeed, it may be that in some circles we would be seen to have greater leverage if our discussions were seen to be taking place alongside an official consultative process. Furthermore, if issues around sustainability were seen to be integrated into the broader PP process, not sitting outside of it or on the fringes, these might be experienced as legitimate and central challenges facing localities today and therefore necessarily part of mainstream conversations. Moreover, we could also carry on with our own discussions, actions and projects alongside those planned jointly with the PP steering group.*

*Having discussed the above points, we all recognised that it was important for the PP steering group to be representative of diverse interests and concerns. We envisaged that an ideal steering group would be composed of eight to twelve people involved in and passionate about different issues. To this end, BG requested that a member of the Sustainable Farmshire group join the PP steering group. RN, the local rector, volunteered himself for this position and as a well-known, active member of the community, was identified as an ideal representative. (As a brief aside, RN left Farmshire for another Parish a few months later, whereupon another member of the Sustainable Farmshire group, GY, replaced him in the steering group). To be*

*clear, the PP steering group was an independent body or interest group, and although some Parish Councillors served on it as volunteers, the group was not a sub-committee of the Parish Council, nor formally related to it in any way.*

*We envisaged that, as in Village Z, exhibitions and other events could take place alongside the surveys distribution. Thus we felt that we could incorporate our previous ideas regarding an exhibition space into our collaboration with the PP process.*

### ***Moving forward***

*We decided that in our next monthly meeting we would hold a brainstorming session about what we could do in the next six months, using flipcharts to capture any ideas. In this interactive way, we might be able to together map the topics, activities and skills represented by the group. To this end, we agreed that each of us would write a few lines/paragraphs about our own interests and what we may be able to offer to the process.*

*In the next meeting, then, we presented various ideas for the exhibition and for other actions we might undertake.*

## **7.4 January 2003: Brainstorming and capturing ideas**

*Ideas presented in the January 2003 meeting included the following:*

- *Climate change, carbon emissions and Future Forests*

*We considered the possibility of linking up with the Future Forests foundation, which identifies itself as working towards a carbon neutral economy. The foundation helps people to calculate the carbon emissions from their day-to-day activities, and suggests ways in which they might reduce these emissions. For those emissions which cannot be reduced the foundation suggests methods for offsetting these emissions by tree-planting or by investing in projects designed to cut down on carbon emissions.*

- *Linking environment, health and spiritual awareness*

*We agreed to prepare and display a video on the above theme at the exhibition. RN, the local rector, offered to write a draft script and to work with a local ex-BBC cameraman to produce it in time for the exhibition. The video could focus around the question: ‘What would it mean if we understood all the beings/creatures on the Earth as sacred?’*

- *Energy from Biomass*

*We discussed the potential for developing energy for a small community from biomass. This idea eventually formed a major part of a funding application to a not-for-profit body. In due course, we were granted this award and were able to undertake a feasibility study into alternative sources of energy for the local community, as I describe later in this chapter.*

- *Contributions to Village Magazine*

*A further proposal was that of contributing monthly features to the established Village Magazine, something we had been invited to do by the editor, who also professed to be interested in sustainability issues. We agreed that this might be an effective way of reaching people and might serve as a public forum whereby we could prompt people to think about these issues, raise awareness of what might be going on, and invite people to link in or to contact us if interested. We proceeded to contribute a number of features to the publication, and made a number of significant contacts with the wider community through this medium.*

## **7.5 February 2003: Articulating our sense of purpose**

*In our fourth meeting, we explicitly discussed our sense of purpose and positioning as a group/initiative within the community. We considered that so far our sense of purpose had been implied, and that it might help to unequivocally articulate what it was that we were setting out to do.*

*We agreed that if our overall sense of purpose was to extend people’s involvement with these issues, then we could consider ourselves as a kind of contact point, with our function being to act as an enabling process. So, if someone were to come to us with an idea, we could seek to support it in whatever way might be appropriate and useful. We could link people to*

*initiatives or to each other, provide advice, and generally position ourselves as somewhere to make enquiries.*

*We felt it would be sensible for this hub to locate itself physically in the Conservation offices, since these occupied a central location in the village and, as an energy consultancy, had visible expertise in the area. We agreed to also publicise the involvement of various other organisations, including the Churches, the school, the local organic garden, the scouts etc. We felt it was important that we not be seen as promoting a club, but rather that we be understood as putting forth ideas about how we might take this forward as a community. We identified that our objective was to stimulate community-led, long-term change.*

[Although at the time we seemed to accept this definition of our sense of purpose and of our positioning, in the latter stages of the initiative it became evident that concerns were felt (both by those within the initiative and those at its fringes) regarding the extent to which we had been able to articulate a clear and coherent vision for the project. Rather, many participants felt that by positioning ourselves as a network hub, we might have unintentionally framed our collaboration in ways which were more open-ended, un-bounded and ambiguous than was necessary, and that this was unhelpful and detrimental to the extent that it opened the initiative to criticism (both internally and externally) as being poorly organised and/or articulated. I consider this in some detail in Chapter Eight, when I reflect on the difficulties we experienced in articulating a concrete vision of what a Sustainable Farmshire would look like and how such shifts may be facilitated and/or enacted in practice.]

*We agreed that publicising these meetings and potential projects in the Village Magazine would allow us to maintain permeable, flexible boundaries around this group, which might be most effective in inducing wide-spread, long-term change.*

[In a similar vein, it is telling that we did not make space to consider the extent to which such arrangements might have been (un)helpful until the reflection phase.]

## 7.6 March 2003: Introduction to Spiral Dynamics

*In our March meeting, we explored the concept of spiral dynamics (Beck and Cowan, 1996; Wilber, 2001) and considered how it may help us in our efforts to initiate dialogue around these issues across the community.*

*NK, one of the team at Conservation, explained that a central principle of spiral dynamics is its recognition that different groups have different dominant sets of characteristics (values, ways of thinking, patterns of behaviour etc.). These sets are known as memes and may be understood as equivalent to social DNA. In the spiral dynamics framework, these memes are categorised into different colour bands; for example, the greens are generally concerned with consensus and conversation, the blues tend to be more traditional and conservative, and the oranges are generally more entrepreneurial and money/status orientated.*

*Spiral dynamics suggests that there are better and worse ways of approaching these differences. NK explained that first-tier thinking occurs when people ignore the variety of values and behaviours, and thus perpetuate conflict and misunderstanding. Second-tier thinking occurs when people understand that no one group is better or worse than another. Rather than neglect differences or impose our own values on others, the key is to play to the strengths of different groups, and to understand that maintaining variety is important to the health of the system.*

*This suggests that change agents may wish to relate to people/groups in different ways, and tailor their communications and processes to them (for example, taking into account that people may have different learning styles). We considered how we might act out second-tier thinking as we positioned ourselves as change agents and facilitators of community action. This would involve us actively seeking to understand the dynamics within the local community, and to adjust our communications accordingly.*

*We agreed that, at some point, it may be useful to dedicate some time to explicitly noticing and sharing with one another our observations and experiences of the wider system(s) in which we found ourselves, and drawing our attention to some of the wider system issues that we may have noticed through this process so far.*

[It is significant to note that although we explicitly discussed the need to acknowledge difference and to appreciate its creative potential, my own impression is that this was held as an espoused theory rather than a theory-in-use (Argyris and Schon, 1974), and that in some respects we actually sought to *collapse* difference. (In the chapter that follows I consider various reasons for why this might be so). I believe that it is possible to find evidence for this claim in the fact that we chose to speak about difference almost exclusively in rather abstract terms (by referring to Beck and Cowan's and Wilber's theoretical models on Spiral Dynamics, for example). In contrast, we seemed to shy away from exploring difference in practical and local terms, and for example, missed various opportunities to explore differences of perspectives and/or values within the core group of participants. Significantly, within the lifetime of the initiative we did not follow through on our stated intention to dedicate some time to explicitly reflecting on the wider systems in which we found ourselves.]

*We also recognised that something of a paradox may be faced when trying to achieve second-tier kind of thinking, which revolves around trying to look at the broader system dynamics, whilst at the same time knowing that we are always part of the system (rather than outside of it). We talked about how we could make sense of this paradox, and concluded that maybe it was sufficient to be open to and aware of the wider system, and to look at the social structure, dynamics and details of community life. In this way, we may be able to find more appropriate and effective ways of communicating with other people, and of being influential in a change process.*

[The discussion outlined in the above paragraph is, to my mind, indicative of what I now perceive as a limited ability to stay with the complexity and tensions raised when seeking to engage with such complex challenges. As the above paragraph suggests, we identified a paradox, and in seeking to make sense of it we seemed to collapse it somehow, rather than exploring its nuances and possible implications in any depth or detail. Again, I consider this tendency in greater detail in Chapter Eight.]

## **7.7 April and May 2003: Preparing our Exhibition offerings**

*Throughout April and the early days of May, we prepared our offerings for the PP Exhibition, held in mid-May.*

*Our own display at the Exhibition consisted of the following:*

- An interactive carbon-debt calculator – visitors were invited to calculate their carbon emissions and to enter their details in a database designed to hold information about local environmental impact. They were also given information about the Future Forests campaign, and were encouraged to make links between lifestyle and personal carbon emissions. For example, the calculator was used to show how emissions would change if different lifestyle choices were made, and the surrounding display presented relevant information on waste, transport, food-miles, biodiversity and so on. Long-life energy-saving light-bulbs were given to those who participated in the calculator exercise, as was practical information on sustainable lifestyles. Where participants agreed, the calculator exercise was displayed on a big screen so that others around the display might see what was going on. This proved a popular attraction.*
- A photography display revolving around ‘Nature in and around Farmshire’ – A couple of residents who had read our contributions to the Village Magazine, and who were also involved in the PP process in various ways, contacted us to offer us their photographs of the surrounding countryside. In our open meetings, we had discussed photography and art as creative and imaginative ways in which people might be invited to engage with nature. One of the options we considered was that of a photography competition, the results of which would then be exhibited in a public community space, perhaps in the annual Village Show. We believed that such a competition had the potential to encourage participation from different sectors and age groups of the community. The hope was that the initial photography display presented at the exhibition might promote interest in such an activity.*

- *A videoed message from the rector of one of the parish Churches – As already mentioned, the ministers of both churches became involved in the Sustainable Farmshire initiative. Both were familiar with and interested in the growing eco-congregation movement across Churches in the UK. This movement is designed to encourage and enable Churches to weave ‘creation care’ into their life and mission, and comprises a practical programme of materials/resources for use by any congregation. In the videoed message, the rector spoke about how creation care might be understood as part of our spiritual discipline. This also proved a popular attraction, with many visitors taking the time to watch the video and commenting on how much they enjoyed it.*

*We had decided that following the exhibition, and depending on any responses and interest shown, it may be appropriate to spin-off into more focused, self-organising project groups, which might meet as appropriate. We realised that we may need to take the initiative for setting up such project groups. Again, this linked to our framing of our role as that of a contact point which people could plug into as necessary, and which could help to make broader links between different project groups, and/or other attempts to stimulate dialogue and action around sustainability.*

## **7.8 June 2003: Holding a process review meeting**

*In our April meeting, we had agreed that we would dedicate our June meeting to reflecting on our experiences thus far.*

*We agreed to begin by taking some time to reflect on what had emerged from the Exhibition and from the PP process so far.*

*We picked up on some feedback shared by the PP steering group which suggested that the day itself had been perceived as reasonably well-organised and well-attended, and quite helpful and constructive for starting the consultation process and encouraging involvement. However, feedback from a number of visitors also suggested that there were questions along the lines of ‘What were all these disparate stands and exhibitions all about? How does that relate to the PP process itself?’*



*We acknowledged that we might not have been sufficiently clear as to how our own displays fitted in with the broader Exhibition, and in communicating our belief that issues around environment and sustainability should be central to the PP process.*

*[Again, this seemed to be symptomatic of the difficulties we experienced in articulating our intentions and particularising our offering in ways which could be understood and with which others could engage.]*

*It was suggested that the Exhibition as a whole might have been interpreted as not having much of a clear direction and/or focus to it. Indeed, we identified this as one of the key tensions facing facilitators of consultative processes. On the one hand, by setting direction too early, one runs the risk of missing out on people's creativity and original ideas; on the other, part of the role we envisaged the Exhibition (and similar events) fulfilling was that of stimulating and generating ideas.*

*GY, our representative in the PP steering group, also explained that as facilitators of the PP process, the steering group finds itself in a somewhat constrained position with regards to time and resources. He reminded us that the PP is a relatively short-term process, due to be completed within a year, and based entirely on voluntary involvement during people's spare time.*

*It was suggested that a year is indeed not much time to go about making the kinds of changes which we have been talking about, but that beginning to roll out incremental changes within that time would in itself be a positive shift. At the same time, we agreed that this raised an interesting question with regards to maintaining commitment and energy levels around these projects, when the changes themselves do not appear to be as visible and/or forthcoming as we might wish.*

*Our feeling was that more locally-bounded projects (such as the establishment of a community composting site) may well have a place in leading to change in wider systems and may therefore be of significance, but we also felt the need to be realistic about the difficulties and complexities which we might face/were facing in making change happen (whether understood as local or systemic). We had come to realise that action for social change demands a significant amount of effort and persistence, and*

*that the burden often falls on those who become involved on a voluntary basis, and who are seeking to balance this commitment with many others.*

*In thinking about how our own group and the PP steering group had developed, we wondered whether it might have helped to pay earlier attention to the following:*

- *Understanding exactly what resources are available to us, and somehow organising these and/or putting some kind of a framework and/or plan around these. Very simply, this might involve budgeting funds.*
- *Organisational and management skills to bring consultative processes to fruition, and somehow finding the ability to manage and plan such processes without putting strait-jackets around them.*
- *Issues around group formation. We recognised that when a number of people come together to organise such a process, there is also the need for these people to get to know each other and to gel as a group, which in itself takes some time. How are cohesiveness and effective working practices created within such community groups?*

*[The above could broadly be understood to relate to the challenges we experienced in organising ourselves effectively and in developing a structure capable of holding and containing our efforts, a challenge which I touched upon in Chapter Three when reflecting on my own inquiry practice (and in particular, on the opportunities I missed to raise questions around structure, roles, boundaries, and process with the group). I consider this further in Chapter Eight.]*

*We identified that both the PP process and the Sustainable Farmshire initiative seemed to be faced with something of a paradox. On the one hand, both processes might benefit from the steering committees articulating a vision for the parish, which although not too sharply defined, people could then choose to buy into (or not). On the other hand, discovering a common vision may be what the process/initiative actually sets out to do.*

## **Reflections on our contribution to the Exhibition**

*All in all, we felt that our contribution to the Exhibition had also constituted a good start to the process.*

*We were pleased with the interactive quality of the energy survey and with the favourable responses to it. We received positive feedback on the carbon emissions calculator, with some people commenting that it helped them to 'see in real terms' how they might make their energy usage more cost-effective (both in terms of economic costs and costs to the environment). Although the practical delivery of the energy survey worked relatively well, we agreed that we would need to reappraise it if we were to present it to larger numbers of people. We also felt that we could set up a system so that people are able to opt into a tree-planting scheme at the time of completing the calculator, should they wish to do so.*

*We felt that the rector's videoed message had been well-received, and that this could be used again in other presentations and exhibitions. We also discussed the difficulties inherent in seeking to track what kinds of effects (if any) such messages may have in how people understood themselves and their relationship to nature.*

*It was suggested that we may need to refine some of the information that we choose to display, since it was felt that the excessive detail given may have made it more difficult to grasp and 'take away'.*

## **Approaches to change**

*A further issue we considered was that of our approach to and understanding of change and how change happened. We felt that the implicit model(s) of change with which we had been working was one where we understood ourselves as 'drip-feeding' ideas through a variety of channels and community bodies, on the understanding that through this 'seeding process' we might in time produce 'ripple effects' throughout wider circles, so that attention to sustainability issues becomes embedded within what we do as a community.*

*In addition, it was suggested that if we wished to deliver long-term social change (changes in attitudes and in the ways people live their lives), and in order to achieve that critical mass where it becomes the norm, then it might be important to identify achievable, realistic, time-based ‘smart’<sup>3</sup> targets and projects, which can be rolled out professionally and incrementally, and then gradually built up from there. One participant argued that it was success, or actually seeing something happen in practice, which played an important part in convincing people that change is possible, and that somebody needs to take the first step to make this happen. To ensure success we may need to focus on those projects/changes which could be made to happen in relatively straight-forward and resource-efficient ways.*

*We felt that one such project was that of a local tree-planting scheme. Having spoken to the regional Community Forests organisation, we were aware that this organisation was capable of finding land and of mobilising volunteers to plant the trees, if need be. This organisation would therefore welcome a scheme whereby people could contribute towards funds to pay for the trees, and would make space for people join in the tree-planting if they so wished.*

*We identified that a first step would be to ascertain whether people were willing to spend money to make this happen. We felt that people were more likely to engage if they felt they were contributing towards a local woodland, one in which they might eventually walk and one from which the local wildlife may benefit. We therefore recognised that we would need to identify whether there might be such land available within the parish of Farmshire.*

*We felt that it would then be possible to do ‘much more than just plant trees’. We had a sense that a tree-planting scheme would need to be sold not only on the basis of carbon abatement and the reduced threat of climate change, but also on the other benefits which might also accrue. These might include other environmental gains, such as increased biodiversity, and local leisure and community facilities. It might be possible to set up a mini wildlife reserve, which children could visit and/or care for as part of a school project. Part of the vision might be the creation of a local woodland capable of producing its own sustainable mini forestry industry, which could then also provide additional employment and income for the community.*

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<sup>3</sup> Understood as ‘Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely’.

*We also became excited about the idea of developing a foot and cycle-path linking Farmshire to a nearby village. In its broadest vision, such a path would go hand-in-hand with a local tree-planting campaign, and could be one of the spaces along which we try to preserve and restore local biodiversity. We envisioned that such a path could also serve as a place for community and spiritual walks, and could also be part of a sculpture trail, engaging local artists.*

*We agreed that it was appropriate to adopt a holistic perspective regarding any actions and/or projects. So, if we identify sustainability as inclusive of economic, environmental and social dimensions, then we may need to be explicit about how we see the various projects covering each of these bases, and showing how projects may be relevant and/or beneficial in a variety of ways, using the kind of language and arguments which are relevant to particular audiences.*

*We concluded that not only might we not be able to sell this project to a critical mass based on the carbon abatement argument, but that we should not be doing so anyway, as it felt somewhat like a single-track approach to solving a systemic problem. Instead we felt that we could choose to sell the scheme on different levels to different people, which might in itself be more sustainable and engaging. Again, we linked this back to our sense of purpose, which we felt did not revolve around a single project orientation but rather revolved around developing holistic approaches to systemic problems. We articulated that this is what we felt our unique contribution might be: to make links between all these different approaches/projects and to understand how actions and interventions at the local level may feed into wider patterns.*

[Here, then, we seem to be attempting to give form to a vision of a Sustainable Farmshire which is pluralistic and inclusive of multiple perspectives. In a sense then, we could be understood to be embracing difference (rather than collapsing it) and seeking to work with it in creative ways. Nevertheless, we seem to take it for granted that the various viewpoints and value systems of multiple audiences could in fact be accommodated within a broad vision of sustainability. Moreover, we still appear to be talking about these visions and ideas in fairly general terms, by which I mean that we seem not to be engaging in in-depth explorations which would allow us to understand the nuances and subtleties of each, and to appreciate the extent to which they might relate, complement and/or challenge one another.]

*We acknowledged that this felt like something of a tall order. While we were excited and enthused by the ways in which we were developing our original ideas to do with the tree-planting scheme, we also felt that co-ordinating the different aspects and features of the scheme and communicating the many messages we felt needed to be articulated posed a serious challenge. In particular, we felt that there was a balance to be struck between acknowledging the essential complexity of a project (in terms of all of the ways in which it might relate to, contribute to and/or challenge systemic patterns) while actually focusing our attention on making particular aspects of it a reality, and also presenting it in ways which feel clear and manageable and which people can understand and buy into.*

[In Chapter Eight, I suggest that it is possible to interpret our tendency (evidenced throughout the initiative) to oscillate between several possibilities for action and various potential offerings as being underpinned by a sense of restlessness. I suggest that such restlessness may in turn emerge from the urgency we experienced in relation to the ecological crisis, and also from the socio-cultural aspiration for the attainment of ‘final healing’ and ‘immediate paradise’, as identified by Thomas Berry. I suggest that our desire to simultaneously consider and commit to various action projects, all of which we might understand as contributing to a wide-reaching social movement, might be indicative of conceptualisations of change which emphasise its radical, revolutionary potential.]

*We wondered whether the PP survey (due to be distributed in the autumn) might be a place to test the viability of the various options we had been considering. GY, our representative in the PP steering group, explained that it was unlikely that the survey could contain such specific ideas, and again we felt there was something of a ‘chicken and egg’ dilemma inherent within the PP and other community-wide consultation processes. The PP’s objective was to get as many responses to the survey as possible, and in doing so to generate ideas and voice the issues which were felt to be important for the future of the Parish. On the other hand, as a group we had been meeting for some time, and we felt that through our conversations we had identified a number of ideas and areas of concern/interest which were important to us. We felt it would be advantageous if one or more of these ideas could be fed into the PP survey and resulting document, so that these are also understood as the legitimate concerns of a number of community members of Farmshire.*

*So again we came back to a conversation around the nature of social change. We had set off from the perspective that it was important for us to make space for the wider Farmshire community to become involved, and for us as a community to develop a shared sense of how we might move towards a Sustainable Farmshire. Having accepted this as one of our primary objectives, we felt some dissatisfaction in that such community-wide engagement seemed elusive. We wondered whether we might more appropriately understand that change might come about as a result of the efforts of a small number of visionary people who have the motivation, commitment and inclination to take the responsibility to make things happen.*

*Thus we wondered whether we might reposition ourselves not as a would-be central hub or contact point, but rather as a small group of people who wished to take on the role of visionary change agents, while at the same time recognising that this would necessarily entail much time and effort and that larger-scale change of the kind we were looking for was not something that happened overnight. We felt that reframing our sense of purpose in this way may offer us a generative way for moving forward. We also felt that it was important that we acknowledge and trust that we each held valuable and/or local knowledge which would be valid and relevant in making these decisions, and that others across the community may not have the opportunity and/or inclination to become involved in the early stages of an initiative or change effort.*

*[As I show in the concluding part of this chapter, the recognition that we needed to develop greater awareness of the implications of how we had positioned ourselves and our work was identified as a key learning point coming out of this initiative.]*

*Therefore, in this meeting, we agreed to commit to specific projects, to choose a path and persist with it. We ended this meeting with various action points, whereby a number of us took responsibility for contributing to moving the tree-planting/foot-path project forward over the coming months (and in our meeting of July 2003 we shared and reviewed our progress with these various action points). At the same time, we kept coming back to the need for such projects to form part of a broader vision and to somehow contribute something of significance on various levels. We felt that for these projects to be meaningful and effective in challenging existing attitudes and patterns of*

*behaviour, they needed to be framed and understood as part of a larger social movement, or an overarching vision of sustainable and ecological living.*

*At the same time, we wondered whether this would require the statement of a very clear, definable purpose and/or sense of what sustainability might mean. One participant suggested that we ask ourselves the question: ‘what does sustainability mean anyway?’. Our ambition (still) was to turn community focus towards becoming sustainable, and so we wondered: does this need defining? Is it possible that the word ‘sustainability’ means all things to all people? We concluded that perhaps we did not need a fixed definition of what sustainability is nor of what our vision for a Sustainable Farmshire might be, and that maybe the flexibility of understandings around this may add to and enrich the process. We felt that although we admittedly did not have an unambiguous understanding of sustainability, it could be argued that we had a budding vision of what a more socially and ecologically just world would look like, and of what a community could do to make this a reality. We also agreed that we could not get to this by just talking about it or naming it, and that we may need to focus on this one step at a time at a local, practical and concrete level.*

*[Again, the line of reasoning evidenced in the above paragraph seems symptomatic of the challenges we experienced when we attempted to articulate in concrete and unambiguous terms what we meant by sustainability, and how we might contribute to making a Sustainable Farmshire a reality. I consider this dynamic in further detail in Chapter Eight.]*

## **7.9 September to November 2003: Presenting our findings**

*Alongside the various aspects of the initiative described so far, from April 2003 we were involved in undertaking a feasibility study into alternative sources of energy and their potential viability for the local community. The study was funded by a non-profit organisation, which itself receives funding from government and the private sector, and was largely undertaken by the team at Conservation.*

*In September 2003, members of the Conservation team prepared a report outlining the findings and recommendations of this six-month feasibility*



*study. The report explained that the focus of the study had been on identifying opportunities for reducing the environmental impact associated with energy use in the parish of Farmshire. With this in mind, the study investigated the potential of energy efficiency improvements in the housing stock, renewable energy use, and innovative solutions for dealing with organic human and farm waste, including utilising the energy resources within this waste.*

*The recommendations emerging from the study included the following:*

- That a locally branded and delivered marketing campaign be effected, to encourage domestic energy efficiency and to consider the possibility of drawing from renewable energy systems.*
- That a local, diverse and not-for-profit community group with a bona fide constitution takes the task of consulting with the community and developing and implementing the proposed energy-saving projects, and that Conservation be engaged as a local project facilitator.*
- That funding, both cash and in-kind, for different aspects of the project implementation be sought from a number of sources.*
- That the energy-saving projects be linked to other sustainable projects that may emerge from the full Parish Plan process.*
- That such a model be applied and/or adapted to other parishes in the region and beyond, as appropriate.*

*The ambition was that the roll-out of such an initiative would contribute to meeting the proposed sub-regional targets for generating energy from renewable resources, while simultaneously making a significant contribution towards the UK target of a 20% reduction of carbon emissions on 1990 levels by 2010.*

*Having completed the initial phase of this feasibility study, members of the Sustainable Farmshire group (myself included) briefly presented some of the study's findings and recommendations to the local Parish Council in September 2003, during their official monthly meeting. The Parish Council had endorsed our application for funding to the award-granting body, but had been uninvolved in the process/progress of the feasibility study.*

*Following our presentation, concern was expressed by some of those present regarding our reference to small-scale community-owned wind turbines as a*

*possibility which the community may wish to consider. The form and set-up of this meeting meant that there was little space and/or time to engage in a conversation about this there and then.*

*Some days afterwards, we received further feedback from some of those present at the Parish Council meeting, objecting to our suggestion that, as the Sustainable Farmshire initiative, we were working in partnership with the Parish Council. We had indeed listed the Parish Council as one of our partners in this study in one of the opening pages of the report, ostensibly based on the fact that it had endorsed our application for funding. It was rightly pointed out to us that no explicit mutual agreement had been reached on the question of partnership. Indeed, the issue had not even been raised or discussed, and therefore the Parish Council could not legitimately be professed as a partner. Furthermore, in doing so, we had failed to appreciate the fact that the Parish Council, in its formal role as the first tier of the country's government system, must act within responsibilities and powers clearly defined by statute, and must follow set procedures and act within a legal framework.*

*We agreed that referring to the Parish Council as a partner had been careless on our part. We removed all references of this from our report, as well as removing references to the mini-wind cluster, since we felt that this was possibly too controversial a suggestion to put forward at this point.*

*In response to our reissued report, we received further feedback raising a number of additional concerns and challenges. In particular, questions were raised regarding what was meant by the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable' as used in the report, and regarding the extent to which some of the proposals described in the report truly were sustainable. The point was made that there are many (often insufficiently explored) interpretations and understandings of 'sustainability', and that the term often has little practical relevance and/or meaning. Furthermore, the feedback we received suggested that it was not apparent how we had engaged with the multiplicity and range of meanings and with the assumptions underlying these (if at all). In response to this challenge, we acknowledged that we might have more thoroughly explored the multiplicity of understandings around the concept and practice of 'sustainability':*

'This point was raised in one of our earlier meetings as a Sustainable Farmshire group. The word sustainable does mean different things to different people. Perhaps this issue could be more widely debated.' (Personal communication, November 2003)

*Unfortunately (although not unexpectedly), from the September meeting forward, our relationship with particular members of the community (and by association, with the Parish Council as an organisation) appeared to have reached an impasse. For a number of reasons, it transpired that it would be difficult to pursue further engagement at this point, and that it would be foolhardy to seek to move forward with our previous plans. Not only had important community links (with the Parish Council and with specific community members) been damaged, but the reputations and motivations of the team at Conservation in particular were under scrutiny (one of the questions raised was whether Conservation, as an energy consultancy, hoped to make any profits from a move towards a Sustainable Farmshire). We were advised by other influential members of the community to put our ideas and plans on the backburner, and to consider the possibility of picking these up again once the PP process had been completed (so that these projects/initiatives could be seen as emerging from this more formal, authoritative process).*

*The opportunity which emerged quite clearly at this stage was that of devoting some time to making sense of what had happened, and to reflect on how our own assumptions, choices and positioning had enabled this. With hindsight, I believe that in reflecting on this experience we found a rich learning opportunity. At the time, though, my sense was that we were quite understandably, but also quite disappointingly, choosing to back away. In our monthly meeting of November 2003, we agreed that I would take responsibility for facilitating a reflection process by way of drawing to a close this phase of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative. I found this meeting quite distressing, and I felt regret at what I experienced as the crumbling down of our hopes, of the possibilities, and of the enthusiasm with which we had set out, nearly twelve months before.*

[In Chapter Eight, I consider that a possible interpretation of the manner in which the initiative ended is that, having experienced forceful opposition and an adversarial response to our proposals and/or positioning, we seemed unable to deal

with the resulting sense of conflict and anxiety in ways which were sufficiently creative and/or generative so as to allow us to proceed with our collaboration and with our plans.]

## **7.10 December 2003 to April 2004: Reflecting on our experience**

*I end the present account by reflecting on the kinds of themes and questions which emerged during the one-to-one conversations and the collective reflection session which marked an end to the Sustainable Farmshire initiative. The reflection processes in which we engaged, as well as the questions and issues we identified, could be understood to evidence an emerging willingness to question and explore some of our own initial expectations and aspirations, as well as a shift in how we made sense of our own positioning in relation to ecological challenges and work for sustainability.*

*When we decided to hold a reflection process as a way of ending this initiative, we explicitly agreed that the purpose of such a process would be:*

- *to pull together the key learning points and questions which had emerged for us (individually and collectively) from having engaged in the initiative;*
- *with the intention of being appreciative of these learnings, and of considering ‘what can we take away from this experience?’ and ‘how might we draw on what we learned here in future?’; so that*
- *we are able to ‘close down’: to say what we feel needs to be said to one another and/or into the group space and to make it possible for us to move on/forward from this experience.*

*As a first stage of the reflection process, I prepared and distributed a reflective document, highlighting some of the key issues and questions which I felt had emerged out of our time together. I distributed this document late in December 2003, and suggested that in the New Year we hold a formal reflection session to discuss what had been raised for us by our reading of the document and by our own individual reflections on what had happened. For various reasons, we found it difficult to find a date early*

*in the New Year to suit us all. It was suggested that I hold one-to-one sessions to begin with, and that, based on those conversations, I facilitate the group discussion later in the year. I agreed to this, and held the one-to-one sessions during February and March of 2004. These included conversations with the four senior members of Conservation (referred to below by the fictitious initials NK, RF, LS, and GY), the minister of one of the local churches, as well as the Parish Councillor who had invited us to participate in the PP process and to be represented on the PP steering group. Each conversation lasted between one to two hours, and unfolded as an open-ended conversation around the challenges that we had experienced as part of the initiative, and the key themes and learnings which we felt had come out of it. The final collective reflection session was held in April 2004. This reflection and sense-making period, which emerged out of our presentation to the Parish Council in September 2003, spanned a period of seven months.*

*The themes and questions I present below are those which emerged from the one-to-one conversations and on which we jointly reflected in the collective session. Of course each person had particular perspectives and ideas about, for example, different choices we might have made and/or suggestions for how we might approach these kinds of challenges in the future. In this section, I seek to represent and give credit to these different perspectives. At the same time, I have made the decision to present these themes and issues as questions, much in the way that participants did in the one-to-one conversations and in the collective reflection session. Indeed, in the collective session, we agreed that it felt appropriate to frame these as questions for us to consider and also for us to hold into the future, and we agreed that we would consciously avoid seeking to find 'answers' to these questions.*

*My sense is that this question-posing and question-holding approach evidenced a shift in our interactions, whereby we felt better able to raise challenging questions and difficult issues with one another, and more willing to come face-to-face with the different tensions and sources of anxiety with which we had felt less able to engage as the initiative unfolded. Others also saw the reflection process as being of value. For example, NK made the following point:*

I've found the whole process of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative so far, and especially the outcomes with the Parish Council and the difficulties we experienced around the feasibility study, very useful to help me reflect on what we were doing. And my feelings are that it's kind of felt as if we stepped into an arena perhaps prematurely really, without really having thought through all of these issues around what are we doing, why are we here—and I know that these things can become clearer as you become involved in a process, and as you do things—but it feels as if we started meeting, we started having discussions, we started looking at what we might do, how we might go about it, we came out with something that was an output, and then that met with some quite strong reactions. And I suppose it's made me think that it is really good to be doing some reflection on this, because I think we do need to look at how we reposition ourselves and learn from what happened, and from the choices we made, before anything else happens.' (NK, one-to-one conversation, February 2004)

**The tensions and questions raised included those around:**

- ***Initial choices and positioning:***
  - *How did we position ourselves? How could we have positioned ourselves differently?*
  - *Was it helpful or necessary to frame this as a community project? Was this possible without the initial commitment or buy-in of the community at large?*
  - *Were we weighed down by the felt need to speak and act on behalf of the community?*

*Questions similar to those presented above, around the initial decisions made and particularly around how we had sought to position ourselves, were expressed by the majority of participants. For example, RF expressed the following views:*

'The initial choice, the first question, seems to be really important. We wanted to be doing something and we felt that the community ought to be doing it also, but I'm not sure now that this needed to be a community project. There was no initial commitment or signing up by the community at large, and maybe through the Parish Plan process a commitment may still be identified, but we actually never asked this question at the start. So I guess what I'm wondering is did we have to take the community with us, or could we have acted as individuals or as a small group, still doing stuff, but not being weighed down by the expectation that we take community with us?' (RF, one-to-one conversation, March 2004)

*Parish Councillor BG made the following related points regarding how she positions herself as an activist working with the wider community, and the complex challenges she faces in doing so:*

'Government rhetoric says that what we have to work towards is community involvement, but often there doesn't seem to be either money to achieve this or a system to facilitate it...And so as an activist actually trying to make this happen on the ground, you face a lot of difficulties, because you are faced with a 'silent majority' and there are a whole lot of assumptions that you can make about this, about what the inertia means. Is it lack of time, is it laziness, is it disinterestedness, or is it to do with lack of skill and confidence to get involved? And so then you realise that you don't know what's behind this, but you can try to talk to people wherever they are; you can try to make tentative links; you tap into contacts; you get in touch with people and maybe you pass on some information that you think might be useful to them or you ask for their expertise and knowledge and help in something...maybe you keep ideas on the back-burner for a while, and then something happens and you think, ah, now's the right time to offer this, and then you offer people something, whatever it is, and see whether or not they take it,

whether they're interested in what you have to say...' (BG, one-to-one conversation, March 2004)

- **Options for repositioning**

- *Might we have chosen to allow ourselves to act for what we felt was appropriate and necessary, as a group of concerned individuals, rather than worrying about getting full community backing before we had begun?*
- *Might we have chosen to share and build on discrete projects and concrete successes, and see what response we got to those?*
- *If what we were after was indeed community-wide participation, might we usefully have asked the question: does Farmshire want to be sustainable? If so, how? In what ways? What does this mean?*

*A number of participants shared their perspectives on how we might have differently positioned ourselves, and/or what kinds of choices groups of people might make in seeking to work within a community context. It is significant that a common theme of the views expressed seemed to be that of acting with assertiveness and self-confidence as interested individuals who were committed to working towards particular objectives:*

*I think what would be really good is if coming out of this initiative, and also through what you write in your PhD, you could give an honest account of how difficult this is. You read a lot about community participation and community engagement but you don't realise just how difficult it is...so maybe a different way of approaching this might have been to say, ok, we have respect for what we want to do as individuals, for doing something that we personally felt was right, rather than worrying about whether other people wanted to focus on litter, or recycling, or whatever...Maybe we could have started by trying to change ourselves rather than changing others...so maybe what would be better would be to say, let's drop sustainability as a community thing and see what we can do as individuals. Maybe we're not interested in whether the community wants to be sustainable, but maybe*



we just do what we feel is right and see what response we get.’  
(RF, one-to-one conversation, March 2004)

‘It felt like what we set out to do was to present a blank sheet of paper to people, but what we’ve found is that to some degree you have to seed ideas, offer something that will act as a creative stimulus...Maybe this is necessary when you don’t have an urgent, highly visible problem that the community will rally behind...Even one or two small successful action projects to begin with might have created interest and engagement. What I’m left thinking is that if it’s a good idea, and a small group of people have checked it out against each other, then have the courage of your conviction to just get on with it! Then you can share your success stories and others may want to become involved, because they think, oh yeah, that was possible, they did that. Individuals have to get on and do what they think is appropriate; of course, what’s important is that they do this with reflection and thought and due care, but also not shying away from criticism or opposition...’ (GY, one-to-one conversation, March 2004)

- ***Appreciating the contribution we can make***

- *Could we seek to attend to the contributions we might be able to make, through our existing work and in our personal lives?*
- *How might we develop the quality of what we do on a personal or small group level?*
- *How might we identify our chosen position along the ‘long wall of change’? Is this a useful concept?*

*All of those involved in this final reflection process expressed a wish to focus on the particular ways in which they did feel able to contribute something of significance. For example, each of the four members of Conservation spoke about what they felt they could do within their organisational context, and also in their personal lives (including, for a couple of these, the positions they already felt comfortable occupying as part of the local community). RF made the following point:*

I like the idea of “weak connections”<sup>4</sup>, of people talking to other people and exchanging information and ideas in that kind of way. Maybe the best thing we could have done is to drop little bits of information and form connections with different people, and see what happened from that, but not try to make out that it would be possible to have a huge democratic kind of thing happening....and see, from our perspective as an energy consultancy, I think there’s a lot that we could offer to the local community from our particular area of expertise, but this would mean us acting from our position as an organisation with particular strengths and a particular knowledge base, and not being scared of putting ourselves forward in this way.’ (RF, one-to-one conversation, March 2004).

- ***Seeing this as a process of personal development***

- *What might it mean to see sustainability work as linked to a process of personal development?*
- *How might we pay attention to what motivates us and sustains us in engaging in this kind of work?*
- *What might it mean to understand this as work for the long-term?*

*Related to the questions around how we might appreciate the contributions we feel able to make, some participants seemed able to appreciate the opportunities for personal development and for living out their personal values and/or potential in relation to this work:*

‘...What I’ve learned about myself is that I prefer to be involved in projects that could potentially benefit the community as a whole, but where I’m less worried about making it a community-wide democratic process, but really where I can focus my energy on my own personal contribution to the project or to a small group. Basically, I see work in this field as something that you have to choose to do of your own free will, and that the only thing you can do is to put yourself

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<sup>4</sup> See Ballard, 2006.

through it and it's great if you can find other people to do it with, small groups or organisations that support you, or a workplace that allows you to live out these values and ideas. I feel very lucky that I am in a job where I feel that we're actually doing something positive, and I think this is where I need to put my energy.' (LS, one-to-one conversation, March 2004)

'What I think has come out pretty strongly for me is that it's really important that we learn about what to do with the challenges we face in this kind of work, and that we see these as opportunities for personal development and also for expanding our understanding...I think yes, we made many mistakes and we need to do things better and be more rigorous, but we can also approach this from the perspective that these challenges are actually calling on the positive aspects of wherever each of us are, and that there is a lot of positive potential in that.' (NK, one-to-one conversation, February 2004)

*Parish Councillor BG was also clear about what she saw as sustaining her engagement in this work:*

'...and of course making connections, and the occasional success, all of that helps, because you realise that there is value in doing this that you can't necessarily see as you toddle along, and you realise that you are learning all the time.' (BG, one-to-one conversation, March 2004)

- ***Skills we might usefully develop***
  - *How might we develop more critical, informed political awareness and context awareness?*
  - *How might we develop better skills in organising, including in setting boundaries and clarifying tasks and purposes?*

*In the collective reflection session, we agreed that our experience with the Parish Council could in part be explained by our insufficient awareness of the context, politics and system in which we were acting, and by our lack of critical consideration and problematisation of the arguments we were presenting:*

'I think really that we need to better understand the institutional and political contexts in which we are operating. We need to understand the local context, and I think this means also understanding how the [county-level] council and the Parish Council operate, and how both national government and the EU also influence that. Really more thought needs to be given to that, to appreciating the complexities. Because we have this desire to interface with local groups and organisations but I think our experience has shown that perhaps we needed more critical awareness of the nature of these organisations and relationships, and we didn't have this...' (NK, one-to-one conversation, February 2004)

*With hindsight, we realised that we might have considered more fully and more critically how others were likely to react and respond to our various proposals (including, for example, the mention of community owned wind-turbines as something the community might like to consider), and we might have considered ways of creatively responding to these and any other challenges raised by complex and/or controversial issues.*

'Opponents are healthy in stimulating reflection but unhealthy if you let this paralyse you, or if you think that this means that you have to have everyone's support before you move on, because that's not going to happen. And I don't think we were very good in dealing with opposition and conflict and criticism, and we made a mistake in thinking that we didn't have good ideas that we could just get on with ourselves'. (GY, one-to-one conversation, March 2004)

*We also realised that some of the choices we had made early in the initiative had resulted in making us feel vulnerable and unprotected. For example,*

*we had chosen to make all of our meeting notes public to anyone who requested them, and had distributed these to people who we felt may be interested but who had not been involved in our conversations at all. Following the difficulties we experienced in relation to the feasibility study, we discovered that our meeting notes could be used to criticise us and our actions, and that rather than open up possibilities for working with others, the decision to make these public had the unintended consequence of putting us in a vulnerable position—one which ironically made us less able to engage with others.*

*In thinking about different ways in which we might have organised ourselves and made decisions about boundaries, objectives and a sense of purpose, we spent some time talking about how we might have made space for more particular and less conceptual engagement with the challenges of sustainability. For example:*

LS: 'I think that once you've got some ideas on the table then you have to put some structure and procedures around it to make it happen, and I think we also lacked this. And really what we tried to do was to get people involved in a conceptual space, and I'm not sure how easy or useful it is for people to join into these kinds of conversations. I think really we needed to be much more specific about what we wanted to do...'

RF: 'Yes, something that would capture their attention more. I think that people here do value the beauty of nature. The local countryside is more specific and real to them, and I think really instead of introducing the concept of a Sustainable Farmshire we could have made space for the kinds of things that are linked to sustainability that people here do seem to value...' (Interaction from collective reflection session, April 2004)

- **Options for moving on and moving forward**

- *Could we continue to create and value ‘weak’ connections (Ballard, 2006)? (Linking up with other sustainability projects, maintaining presence in the Village Journal, etc.)*
- *Could we listen and relate to what emerges from the Parish Plan process?*

*We concluded our collective reflection session with some thoughts regarding how each of us might forward with work for sustainability. As already mentioned, the team at Conservation seemed keen to focus their energies on what the organisation could offer to the community, particularly in providing residents with information about energy usage and alternative energy and about government subsidies of which they might be able to take advantage in making their homes more energy-efficient. The feasibility study had been well-received by the award-granting body, and the report had been praised for its thoroughness and for the proposals it presented. The Conservation team agreed to apply for funding for the next phase of this process, in which they were successful. Two years on, Conservation is actively embarking on a not-for-profit community project which draws and builds on its area of expertise.*

*We also agreed to wait and see what came out of the Parish Plan process, and whether projects relating to sustainability could usefully be undertaken as part of whatever emerged from this. Apart from seeking to maintain and build upon ‘weak’ connections of this kind, in the months that followed, NK played a significant role in forming an eco-psychology discussion group, made up of approximately ten individuals all working and/or living in the South West area (including myself), all of whom were interested in exploring the links between ecopsychology and action for sustainability. This discussion group meets every three months, and seems to be experienced as a source of support, inspiration, and interesting conversation by those who attend.*

*As far as I can tell, many of us who were at the core of the Sustainable Farmshire initiative have sustained our interest in working in the field of sustainability, and continue to put energy and effort into this, albeit in different ways. For example, the Minister of one of the local churches continues to make use of his role as a School Governor to encourage interest*

*in environmental issues and in sustainability within the primary school. My sense is that along with acknowledging the many regrets and tensions which were raised for us as we participated in this project, we were also able to move on from it feeling that we had learned something of value regarding how we might appropriately position and organise ourselves and how we might choose to act for sustainability.*

