

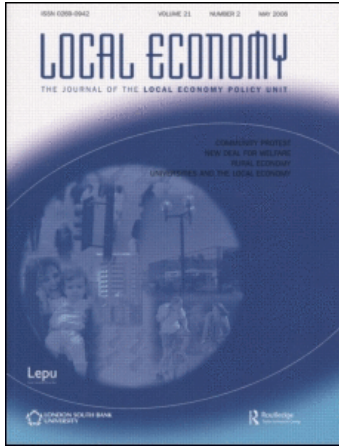
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Publisher Routledge

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Local Economy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713705644>

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To cite this Article Hope, Max and Alexander, Roy (2008) 'Squashing Out the Jelly: Reflections on Trying to Become a Sustainable Community', *Local Economy*, 23: 3, 113 – 120

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02690940802197531

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690940802197531>

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VIEWPOINT

Squashing Out the Jelly: Reflections on Trying to Become a Sustainable Community

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Introduction: A very different game?

The Sustainable Communities agenda promises a revitalisation of the relationship between state and community. Across policy areas as diverse as: Crime (The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act); Social Exclusion (Sure Start local programmes in 1998); Neighbourhood Renewal (The New Deal for Communities in 1998); Education (Every Child Matters in 2003); and Flood Hazard management (Making Space for Water in 2005), communities are being encouraged to become empowered and involved in the decisions that will shape their future. As Gordon Brown said in September 2007:

I want the voluntary and community sector to become more involved in a . . . wider range of community action and service provision . . . It is urgent that we do so because today each of the profound new challenges [we face] cannot be solved by top-down solutions, simply by saying the man in Whitehall knows best.

Active communities like these are at the heart of the government's sustainable communities agenda. *Sustainable Communities: Building for the future* (2003) makes a 'call for effective engagement by local people, groups and businesses especially in the planning, design and long-term stewardship of their communities as an active voluntary and community sector' (ODPM 2004).

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The role of Local Authorities is also being redefined. The UK Strategy for Sustainable Communities (2005), Local Area Agreements (2006) and the Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG, 2006) all offer Local Authorities a stronger role in driving sustainable local change in exchange for making themselves more accountable to communities. As Gordon Brown explained, what is being offered 'is flexibility and resources in return for reform and delivery-an age of active citizenship and an enabling state' (Brown, 2002).

These developments seem to offer significant opportunities for community empowerment, i.e.:

...the possibility of a partnership model within which both the state professionals and the community organisations accept the rules of a very different game. (Cochrane, 2003, p. 230)

This 'very different game' describes one in which local authorities, rather than delivering services to passive communities, enable and co-ordinate the views of empowered self-sufficient local communities.

However, as Cochrane (2003, p. 233) also notes, there remains ambiguity over the relationship between community-led initiatives and statutory authorities. Rather than an alternative to elected local government, communities may become managed, incorporated within established strategy and subject to regulation and oversight, and their ability to challenge the decisions of local authorities may become compromised. Communities may end up delivering the State's agenda, rather than steering the direction of change (Crawford, 1998, p. 258).

Ashton Hayes

The Ashton Hayes going carbon neutral project is a community-led initiative to become the first carbon neutral village in England (Alexander *et al.*, 2007). It is a high-profile success story. Around 45% of the community have been involved in the scheme and an early evaluation suggests that household carbon dioxide emissions were reduced by 20% during the first year of monitoring. The initiative has received a large amount of publicity locally (*Chester Chronicle*, *Dee 106.3 radio*, *Granada TV*, *BBC NorthWest*), nationally (*The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Financial Times*, *BBC Radio*, 2, 4, 5, *Channel 4 TV*, *BBC 1*, *BBC News 24*) and internationally (*Agence France Presse*, *Deutsche Welle Radio*, *Berliner Zeitung*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *New Zealand TV*, *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio*, *Live Earth*). Project members have given more than 65 presentations to other community groups wishing to learn from the Ashton Hayes experience. The community initiative has also formed partnerships with a number of private sector companies and with the local University and the University of East Anglia.

The Ashton Hayes initiative was awarded £26,500 by Defra to communicate the experience to other communities and has recently been part of significant successful funding bids to assess the feasibility of renewables-powered microgrids in rural communities. It is also in discussion with United Utilities concerning potential for an anaerobic digester within the village, and community members have given evidence to the Parliamentary select committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and met with the Rural Advocate, Dr Stuart Burgess, Claire Short MP and the Defence Academy. In the *Report of the Rural Advocate* Ashton Hayes is picked out as one of a number of 'small rural communities leading the way in demonstrating their potential to contribute to environmental sustainability goals' (CRC, 2008, p. 24).

As the initiative develops these formal links with funding bodies and central and local government, it seems a good time to reflect on its relationship with statutory agencies and its place within the wider sustainable communities agenda. Has the Ashton Hayes experience been one of empowerment or incorporation, or the partnership model that Cochrane (2003) describes? To this end, we conducted two interviews with 'key actors' in the Ashton Hayes project. We have also interviewed a local government officer who has played a significant role in developing the relationship between the City Council and the initiative. To ensure their anonymity, we have changed their names.

Empowering or Incorporating Communities?

From the beginning, the Ashton Hayes initiative has been community-led rather than delivered by statutory agencies. As John, one of the project's originators, explained:

The Ashton Hayes idea came from the grassroots . . . it wasn't started by any organisation . . . it was almost like social entrepreneurship. (John: Project Member)

The money needed to start the initiative came from local businesses and this allowed financial independence in the early stages of the project. For John this was 'how it moved so rapidly . . . because we didn't have to report through any formal processes'.

This considerable early momentum meant that the various statutory authorities had to run to keep up. For example, sponsorship allowed a number of signs to be made to advertise the aim to be 'the first carbon neutral village in England' and as John said:

We didn't ask the highways authority about putting them up . . . We thought if climate change is the biggest issue facing the world let's put them up and see what happens . . . The highways subsequently rang up and asked did we have

permission... Had we applied formally I don't think they would have given us permission frankly. (John: Project Member)

At the same time the Ashton Hayes group helped the City Council adopt the University of East Anglia's web-based carbon reduction tool, CRed. For Fiona, the local council officer, this was because:

Councillors are used to being in the driving seat. They listen to the community of course but are not used to taking the lead from them... The strength of activity and the pace at which change was happening... I have to say that initially I think the council might have felt a little bit threatened by what was going on in Ashton Hayes... Threatened to the extent that they felt that CRed and the activities around CRed were something they needed to be involved with simply to keep pace with what was going on in Ashton Hayes. (Fiona: Council Officer).

The council executive also suggested around this time that they would like the annual district debate to be around climate change. This was:

A formal recognition that they'd seen this as something they want to get to grips with and they wanted to do that in a public way... An open debate where anyone or everyone can come along and look at a particular issue... Undoubtedly (this was partly down to community pressure)... not just Ashton Hayes... there is also Westminster Park, Upton, Tattenhall. (Fiona: Council Officer)

Not only has the initiative been able to generate change, it has maintained control over its decision-making:

This is because of two of the 'Big Rules' by which our project operates: to remain both apolitical and non-confrontational. Group members see these as critical to the successful engagement of the whole community. (Phil: Group Member) (see Alexander *et al.*, 2007 for the project's 'Big Rules')

A recent example of this autonomy in action is the project's decision to decline an invitation to become part of a broader group contemplating direct action.

At the same time as there is evidence of significant community empowerment and autonomy there has been some pressure for activities to become more formalised and to be incorporated into the agendas of other organisations.

The main pressure to formalise the initiative has come from its success in obtaining external sponsorship. How the Defra money is being spent, for example, has to be accounted for as John explained:

We have to fill in a spreadsheet on how we are going to spend the money each month... and you have to write a quarterly report on how successful you are in meeting these criteria... We've had no problems with that, the report is quite easy to function... you can do it by email. (John: Project Member)

Rather more of a burden has been the need to formalise the relationship between the project and the Parish Council. To ensure that the initiative

had community support, it was decided early on to embed it within the local Parish Council structure. As the project has grown, there has been the need to account officially for any money obtained and to employ an accountant and an independent auditor. According to John:

You start to get the burden of administration arriving . . . primarily because the Parish Council has to have a report each month . . . they have to adhere to new governance and demonstrate that they are a 'quality parish council'.
(John: Project Member)

He went on to explain how:

Just recently we've had to do a terms of reference . . . we had no formal way of working and under (the terms of reference) the (Parish Council) want to have jurisdiction over the project because we are just a bunch of ordinary citizens.
(John: Project Member)

One consequence of this is that the Parish Council now has to approve any press statements that are released. While members of the Parish Council are also members of the carbon neutral initiative, it means:

We can't just say were going to do this and then do it. We have a little bit of a hurdle there. (Phil: Project Member)

The need to adopt formal procedures when dealing with the City and County Councils were also experienced as a burden at times. For example, John said:

We have spent a lot of our free time on this and everytime you go to a meeting the person sat across the desk is being paid and they ask you to do these targets and rules which is OK for them because if they do it they're being paid to do it, but everytime they put an obstacle in our way it costs us a lot of free time. (John: Project Member)

John continued:

When I've been asked by Chester City Council what could we have done better, I've always said you could skip all the requirements for citizens to see the planner, the recycling person, the community person, the conservation people . . . you could send an ambassador . . . a one-stop-shop . . . who could take our requests and questions back and come up with answers . . . I feel they are very much in control and we have to ask them but actually in this situation I think we're doing them a favour and they should be treating us as customers. (John: Project Member)

The sense of 'doing the council a favour' was borne out in other comments made by the project members:

The City and County Councils were appreciative of a willing community doing something that they were supposed to be doing anyway under government targets, without them having to do anything. We got such massive (media) coverage that it really made Chester (City Council) sit up . . . They suddenly thought we have this group of grassroots people who were ticking boxes for them. (John: Project Member)

Phil commented dryly how he'd seen Council documents come across his desk which 'present Ashton Hayes as something that the Council is now taking the credit for'. (Phil: Project Member)

The usefulness of the Ashton Hayes 'experiment' to the City Council was confirmed by Fiona who commented:

Ashton Hayes has provided the Council with a test-bed as to the sort of initiatives communities can become involved in and take forward themselves (Fiona: Council Officer).

Conclusion: Squashing out the jelly

The Ashton Hayes project has become more formal as it has developed links with other organisations and at times this has been a burden. There is some evidence to support the claim that its success has been used by other agencies to meet their own targets and further their own agendas.

However, it would be a mistake to interpret this as part of a 'strategy of co-optation and inclusion' (Diamond, 2001, p. 277). The relationship is more fluid than that and the community continues to be in control of its decisions and driving change.

An important reason for this is the way in which the initiative has actively created a media profile and used this to further its aims. As John explained:

My background is a journalist . . . and I know how you can get round red tape by having positive press coverage. So I spent a lot of time at the beginning sending out about 400 press releases to different organisations. (John: Project Member)

The City Council has therefore been positively encouraged to use the Ashton Hayes momentum to further its own agenda:

We've encouraged them to use it . . . we say we want to do this, will you help us? . . . And whoever helps us we give them lots of publicity through the media . . . So Chester City Council began to get lots of publicity. (John: Project Member)

This strategy has been adopted because:

The way to create change is to let people observe and admire and be inspired and then you don't put any obstacles in the way . . . It requires the people at the top to give the signal that they want to publicise these people . . . It's like a sandwich. Ignore the jelly in the middle because it will get squashed out as eventually it will have to do something too. (John: Project Member)

This has been confirmed by the very positive experience the group has had when working with central government. Thus, for example, Phil and John were asked to give evidence at the select committee on *Climate Change: the Citizens Agenda* (2007) and they said:

We really did feel like we were being listened to . . . the MPs wanted to know about what we were doing and why it had taken root in the community'. (Phil: Project Member)

Similarly, John said of Defra:

They were excellent at providing a kit for a community and what to say and how to say it and how to deal with communications . . . fantastic at facilitating the tools you needed to get going . . . It was very clever of them to give us that money to promote what we are doing because we wouldn't have done it otherwise. They have a very good model. Identify champions, stick them on a pedestal and then get them to inspire other people. (John: Project Member)

It is tempting to interpret this as evidence of the 'very different game' that Cochrane (2003) describes, of politics organised around diverse communities developing their own agendas and governments enabling these to be implemented:

If government does the education and provides the tools and packages we can implement them . . . we're the only people who can get the action going because we live in the place. (John: Project Member)

So where do the City and County Council fit in this interpretation? Overall, relations with the City and County Council have also been positive. John said:

I don't feel that Chester City Council have put any obstacles in our way at all . . . and the County also. (John: Project Member)

This was confirmed by Fiona at the City Council who talked of:

. . . moving forwards on an incremental basis - these ideas coming together and being able to support each other.

However this was more to do with commitment of highly motivated individuals rather than enabling structures. As Fiona said:

Its been very much me as an individual wanting to champion these ideas – through CRed and Ashton Hayes – the structure was sufficiently flexible a year or so ago back – was sufficiently flexible to allow me to do that. It has been difficult . . . piecemeal and a lot of it's been by chance rather than formal design and that remains the case.

Chester City Council (2007) outlines the plans to replace separate City and County Councils in Cheshire with two Unitary Cheshire Councils. It is also the response to the Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG, 2006). In it, there is a significant commitment to devolving decision-making to communities, to partner involvement and local governance.

For Fiona this is the ideal opportunity for there to be

A heading in the new authority around climate change and a team of people there who have feelers into every aspect of the council's activity and can influence that.

Is this the jelly being squashed out?

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