

Public involvement in Local Agenda 21:
the impact of local authority policy processes

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by

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SUMMARY

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The signing of Agenda 21 by the UK government committed local authorities in England to drawing up local action plans for sustainable development in partnership with their citizens. This Local Agenda 21 (LA21) initiative appeared to provide the opportunity for radical changes in the trajectory of development and in the nature of local governance. This research set out to explain why this did not take place and what happened instead.

It investigated how the nature of public involvement in LA21 was shaped by the local authority policy making processes through which it was developed, based on the premise that these involved the working out of the ambiguous and contested concepts of public involvement and sustainable development in a complex policy and institutional environment. Two contrasting LA21 processes were studied in detail, primarily through interviews with key policy actors, supplemented by observation and documentary evidence.

The research showed that public involvement in LA21 was the outcome of contestation between actors with differing interpretations of the key concepts, who also had a range of other policy and institutional goals which affected their attitudes towards the initiative. Outcomes were determined by which interpretations were present and the ability of actors to control policy making processes to promote their goals. This explains both the variation within the LA21 initiative as a whole and the absence of 'radical' impacts: such goals were simply not present or they were suppressed by more powerful actors.

The thesis develops more practically adequate characterisations of both sustainable development and public involvement. It also challenges Agenda 21's concept of a consensual participative planning process for sustainable development. It concludes by suggesting that policy making for sustainable development is inherently conflictive, and that public involvement in it is both a tool for policy makers and a channel for democratic input into policy making.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Preamble

For most of the past decade many UK local authorities have been grappling with the challenge laid down for them at the Rio Conference in 1992. This was to draw up a sustainable development strategy at their local level which represented a consensus between themselves and all other groups in their area – a Local Agenda 21 (UNCED 1992; LGMB 1994a). For many people outside and within local government this initiative was not only about making major changes in the trajectory of policy making towards more environmentally friendly ends, but its emphasis on participatory processes also gave an opportunity to revive or replace a moribund representative democratic system with a more direct, participatory democracy. Ten years after Rio this radical change in local governance has not apparently taken place: this research sets out to examine some of the reasons why this has been the case.

1.2 Local policy for sustainable development

1.2.1 The promise of Local Agenda 21

Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. We are confronted with a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being. However, integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to the fulfilment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future. No nation can achieve this on its own; but together we can - in a global partnership for sustainable development.

UNCED (1992: §1.1)

With these words the world's governments gathered at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development at Rio in 1992 publicly and formally recognised the enormity of the environmental threat to humanity's well-being. They simultaneously asserted the possibility that the threat could be averted - that environmental and developmental concerns could be reconciled through the

integration of economic, social and environmental policy making (§1.1, §8.2*). Moreover, they recognised that achieving sustainable development was not simply a task for concerted governmental action, but that the involvement of all groups in society in both policy making and action would be necessary (§8.3, §23.1). Agenda 21 was thus profoundly democratic and egalitarian (LGMB, 1993a), explicitly requiring 'broad public participation' (§23.2) as an integral part of and prerequisite for sustainable development.

Local governments were amongst the many groups assigned roles by Agenda 21. In one brief chapter their importance was spelled out:

Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. ... As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development (§28.1).

They were given a mandate 'by 1996...[to] have undertaken a consultative process with their populations and achieved a consensus on "a local Agenda 21"' (§28.2a). Thus a new local government policy initiative was born.

As a group UK local authorities were enthusiastic: by 1997 over 70% (Morris and Hams, 1997) were taking active steps towards developing a Local Agenda 21 (LA21) and across the globe UK local authorities have been the most active in developing this component of Agenda 21 (ICLEI, 1997; Buckingham-Hatfield and Percy, 1999). They were encouraged and assisted in this by the national local authority associations and the Local Government Management Board (LGMB), who set up a LA21 initiative to train and guide local authorities in developing their own individual LA21s. This action was supported by their claim of a major role for local government in achieving sustainable development, encapsulated in the oft-repeated statement that

over two thirds of the statements of Agenda 21 which have been adopted by national governments cannot be delivered without the commitment and cooperation of local government (LGMB, 1993a: 1).

A substantial body of writing by practitioners and academics embraced Agenda 21 as the cornerstone of a 'new environmental agenda' (Agyeman and Evans, 1995: 36)

* References in this format are to chapters and paragraphs in Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992).

with the goal of a 'revolutionary transition' to achieving integrated and equitable economic, social and environmental development through a thoroughgoing participatory democratic approach (Voisey *et al.*, 1996; Marvin and Guy, 1997). This agenda posed three substantial challenges to dominant approaches in policy and practice: a reorientation of *aims* away from purely economic development to a more holistic conception of improving quality of life, of *processes* through the integration of the hitherto largely separate economic, social and environmental fields, and of *politics* through the demand for effective public involvement in these processes. Furthermore, although based in an environmental or sustainability agenda the fundamental nature of these challenges gave LA21 an almost independent aim of transforming local government in general – it was seen by some as the opportunity for realising a better, more participative governance and giving 'a new mandate for local democracy' (Tuxworth, 1994: 212; Freeman *et al.*, 1996). The LGMB espoused a similar viewpoint. Environmental goals and the political agenda of more public involvement in governance were linked together through being seen as mutually supportive and equally necessary for the achievement of sustainability. Much of this literature follows Agenda 21 in viewing the transformation as conceptually and politically unproblematic, if difficult to implement in practice (Agyeman and Tuxworth, 1996). It is implied that it can be carried out without implications for and potential conflict with other policies or established interpretations of the role of local government, or conflict between different interest groups in society.

1.2.2 An unfulfilled promise?

By the end of the century it was clear, as many commentators have noted, that this apparent opportunity for a radical democratisation of British local politics had largely been missed. Although some local authorities made progress on 'sustainability issues' great changes in governance had not obviously taken place as a result of LA21 processes (Church *et al.*, 1998; Evans and Percy, 1999). LA21 neither 'grabbed the mainstream of local government' (Cameron, 2000), nor was it apparent that the increase in public involvement through LA21 initiatives had led to more democratic government (Selman, 1998a). By 2000 the initiative was drawing to a close, superseded by new developments in central government policy ostensibly oriented towards making local government as a whole both more responsive to its citizens and more concerned with sustainable development than before (Christie, 1999a; DTLR, 2001a).

Thus there is a perception of some kind of ‘implementation failure’. An apparently coherent, unitary policy was adopted when the UK central government very publicly signed up to an international agreement, which then became an input into the policy making process in all of the UK’s local authorities. The outcome should have been both a locally agreed plan for achieving sustainable development and the implementation of that plan, with an associated change in the relationship between state and citizen. In fact the outcomes were extremely diverse: a salient characteristic of the initiative was the great variation in the way that it was taken up by UK local authorities in terms of the approach taken (including that of engaging the public), the institutional structures used and the rationale and justification for taking action at all. Similarly there was great variation in both the nature of outcomes and the magnitude of the changes that they have involved (CAG Consultants, 2001). However, neither overall nor in individual authorities – except perhaps in a very few cases - did they fulfil the radical aspirations enshrined in the original policy document for both holistic policy outcomes and democratic policy processes (CAG Consultants, 2001). This raises an obvious question for those interested in supporting increased democratisation of government and progress towards a less environmentally unsustainable and more equitable society: *what went wrong?* Less judgementally, it suggests that it would be interesting and worthwhile to answer the questions *what actually happened?* And *why?*

1.3 The research

1.3.1 Premises and aims

These two questions are the primary focus of the research. It is my contention that they have not previously been adequately addressed, although since early in the initiative’s history a number of different prognoses and analyses of its progress have been produced. These are considered in detail in Chapter Five. Here it suffices to say that collectively they suggest that there is something complex and in need of explanation going on, when a policy process seen by its proponents as conceptually unproblematic though practically challenging is judged by others as impossible to implement either because it is fundamentally misguided in its approach or based on an incoherent conceptual framework. Moreover, while all these analyses may have some validity, they appear to share a neglect of the complexity of the initiative and the context in which it is embedded. Two observations therefore underpin the basic premise of this thesis:

- LA21 involved the practical working out of two principal concepts - public involvement and sustainable development. Both of these are profoundly ambiguous and contested in terms of their meaning and at a political level;
- LA21 was principally – though not exclusively – a local authority initiative. It was not pursued in a policy vacuum, but in the context of a large range of other policies, each of which would to some extent be tackled idiosyncratically by different authorities. Further, local authorities themselves are large, complex organisations, operating within a complex web of governance institutions, and within and between these there is likely to be disagreement and competition over the appropriate course of any given policy.

The research is based on the premise that the outcome in practice of the LA21 initiative can be best explained by a combination of these two. The process of implementing an ambiguous and politically contestable policy within complex organisations was legitimately driven by complex goals and thus led to complex outcomes – and these do not fit the relatively simple, unitary aims which appear to be present in the Agenda 21 itself and in subsequent policy statements.

This research thus set out to provide a fuller understanding and explanation of the LA21 initiative by looking at the mechanisms by which it was developed – policy making processes within local authorities. It focuses on the evolution of policy making for *public involvement* in LA21 for three reasons. Firstly, it is this element which is most distinctive: ‘LA21 is defined, in major part, by its relationship to the community’ (Evans and Percy, 1999: 180) and an examination of this aspect allows much of the interesting variation between authorities to be exposed. Secondly, despite the demands of Agenda 21 there are major conceptual problems inherent in the idea of ‘widespread public involvement’ in sustainable development, and an examination of how these are manifested in practice is an opportunity to increase an understanding of these concepts. Finally, it is a personal choice to examine the processes and political implications of LA21 rather than the equally important relationship between LA21’s substantive ends and the broader economic context in which it evolved.

The research examined in detail what happened and why in two of these policy-making processes, and in so doing explored the fate of the radical aims attributed by some to Agenda 21. This led to a more general understanding of: how sustainable development is operationalised within local authorities and, in particular, how the inherent tensions between public involvement and sustainable development are

worked out in practice; how, as a concept, sustainable development relates to wider issues of politics and public involvement in governance; and, more generally, of the place of public involvement in local government policy making.

1.3.2 Justification for the research

The research was motivated by normative, contextual and academic considerations.

It aims to improve policy: it is based on a belief that no matter how irrational policy processes appear to be, they have a core of rationality, or at least a normative drive towards rationality, which is presupposed by the policy process itself and by the concept of policy-related research (Stewart, 1982). Thus it aims to assist policy making for both public involvement and sustainable development through furthering an understanding of how policy processes work in practice. While at the outset of this research this aim was conceptualised in terms of furthering policies in line with the 'new environmental agenda', the research findings suggested that this was perhaps inappropriate – an issue which is returned to in the concluding pages of this thesis.

An examination of policy making in the context of public involvement and sustainable development is very timely. In the past two decades local authorities have been exposed to a policy environment which has emphasised increasing public involvement, a change in the role of local authorities in respect of their publics and the rise in importance of environmental issues, and – latterly – sustainable development. In the late 1990s these were brought together in the central government's Modernising Local Government suite of policy initiatives, and in particular the Local Government Act (2000) and the imposition on local authorities of a statutory duty to draw up Community Strategies. These overarching plans for local sustainable development are to be drawn up with substantial public involvement, and so have many parallels with LA21s (Christie, 1999a; Pinfield and Saunders, 2000) and will ultimately subsume the earlier initiative (DTLR, 2001a). Concerns with sustainability and public involvement are also salient in specific policy fields such as planning (DTLR, 2001b). This research thus contributes to policy debates extending well beyond the often insignificant confines of LA21 into the heart of current concerns. (The importance of this context also determined the limitation of the research scope to England, in recognition of the different local government structures present and emerging elsewhere in the UK.)

Thirdly the field is under-researched. While there is a considerable amount of descriptive material published on LA21 in general and public involvement in LA21 in particular, there is far less evaluative and even less analytical and theoretical work. Most of the evaluative work is focused on the outcomes of policy development – for example the public involvement aspects of LA21 programmes – and identifies constraints in a rather piecemeal fashion, both in individual case studies (for example Scott 1999; Rowe 2000) and in the wider ranging evaluations (Church and Young, 2000; CAG Consultants, 2001). At a more theoretical and general level, while there are very substantial literatures on both sustainable development and public involvement, there is very little analysis of how these can and do come together in practice (Baker *et al.*, 1997; CAG Consultants, 1998). There are some recent exceptions to this generalisation but these also tend to view LA21 on its own terms rather than within a broader context of local government policy making (for example Evans and Percy, 1999; Selman and Parker, 1999). To the extent to which they consider this context, it is to see LA21 as pushing out against constraints and evaluating the degree to which it succeeded in penetrating other policy fields. Overall, what is largely missing are attempts to analyse and explain the progress of LA21 as one policy amongst many developing in a pre-existing political and policy environment – one in which other objectives and processes may have legitimate claims to priority.

1.3.3 Approach to the research

The focus for the research was thus the policy-making processes *within* local authorities through which they developed approaches to the involvement of the public in LA21. It was not the involvement itself, which has been the subject of considerably more research, but the processes which frame it and which - to an extent at least – were expected to explain the form it took.

Many approaches are possible to policy analysis. In this research a realist approach was adopted, informed by the philosophical approach of Bhaskar (1979) and Sayer (1992, 2000), and recent applications of this to policy evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Sanderson, 2000), supporting its concern with causal explanation and the possibility of generalisation of research results to wider policy issues. It thus recognises the existence and causal efficacy of structures of many types, while rejecting the ‘crude functionalist marxism’ (Stoker, 1991: 233) which might argue that LA21’s transformative programme was doomed to failure. In contrast this realist approach recognises the existence of human agency, and in particular the

great extent to which structures are constructed through communication and social interaction, and are therefore mutable.

Within this approach policy is seen as being driven by the goals of actors, in turn motivated by their values and interests and informed by their understanding of the world. The two observations made above – of the multiple meanings of sustainable development and public involvement, and the institutional complexity of the local government policy environment – suggest that policy making can usefully be conceptualised as a process in which many actors will interact, bringing together their differing goals and interpretations of the key concepts, leading to outcomes in action, new structures and policy rhetoric which will embody some interpretation of the key concepts, and may also fulfil the goals of some of the policy actors. The process is assumed to be goal driven, and thus to embody a certain rationality, or multiple rationalities. This is appropriate since the Agenda 21 explicitly lays down goals for the LA21 initiative, and it seems plausible that for the initiative to have been taken up in the way that it has, at least some goals were being pursued by policy makers. However, this does not rule out the possibility that other principles are present in the policy making processes (March and Olsen, 1989).

Understanding such processes involves analysis of richly detailed descriptions of actors' understandings and motivations. The research therefore adopted a case study approach, and investigated what happened during the course of two LA21 public involvement programmes through interviews with key actors, supplemented by documentary records and direct observation. This material was analysed in terms of the actors' values and motivations, the nature of interactions in the policy making process and of the outcomes, using classificatory frameworks which separated out approaches to sustainable development and public involvement. One subset of these goals and outcomes are the radical, transformative ones, which formed a particular focus throughout the research. This analysis enabled the answering of the basic research questions – *what happened to LA21 and why?* - for the cases studied and more tentative generalisation of the results to suggest reasons for the overall pattern of outcomes of the LA21 initiative.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

In Chapters Two to Five the literature relating to the concepts and contexts which the research investigated is reviewed and used to identify analytical frameworks and gaps in current knowledge and conceptual understanding. Chapter Two establishes

the framework within which the research is set, explaining the critical realist approach and showing how policy making processes are conceptualised within this, and so provides a structure and a language with which to investigate the policy-making processes in the field. This conceptualisation is not exclusively drawn from a single theoretical model of the policy-making process, however, and leaves open the possibility of a number of models contributing both heuristically to the field research and to an analysis of the findings.

The next two chapters are a critical exploration through published literature of the expected substantive content of debate and policy making over the role of the public in LA21. Chapter Three examines the role of public involvement in governance, and consequently the role of a local authority in relation to its public, and Chapter Four looks at the concept of sustainable development and the possible roles of public involvement in achieving it. Chapter Five concludes the literature review with an exposition of what is currently known of the LA21 initiative in the UK, and consequently what lacunae exist in knowledge and understanding.

Chapter Six brings together the basic questions of the research with the material from the review chapters to pose a specific set of research questions and present an analytic framework through which the empirical work was structured and analysed. This is followed by a description of the methods used in generating and analysing field data. Chapters Seven and Eight present the empirical findings, initially in narrative form and then in a series of analytical sections structured by a consideration of the different actors' goals and how these interacted with each other and their context in the policy-making process. These chapters provide answers to the research questions for the individual cases studied.

The final chapters are concerned with a more general analysis of the empirical findings and drawing general conclusions. Chapter Nine addresses the issue of generalising from the cases to the LA21 initiative as a whole, while Chapter Ten returns to issues identified in the literature review to develop existing theoretical understanding of sustainable development and public involvement in the light of the empirical work. Finally, Chapter Eleven draws together the conclusions of the research, and then reflects on the effectiveness of the general approach taken, and identifies areas for further investigation. The thesis concludes with a re-evaluation of the motivation and purpose of the research.

Chapter 2 Framing the research

2.1 Introduction

This research is about policy making for public involvement in sustainable development at a local level. Before exploring the key substantive concepts there is a need for a conceptual framework and a language with which to describe and understand policy making processes which are appropriate to the specific context and subject of the research.

It is primarily about policy making within local authorities, these being the institutions to which Agenda 21 gave the role of leading the development of local sustainable development strategies. The policy process framework needs to recognise and incorporate the shared and significant characteristics of these bodies – of which the most obvious are that they are large and complex. They have two main functions, as the principal organ of local democracy and as the provider and regulator of services, many of which are mandated by central government. The complexity and variety of these roles dictates that they should have formal internal structures, both political and bureaucratic, the latter typically being many-tiered hierarchies within a number of separate departments (Wilson and Game, 1998).

‘Policy’ itself is notoriously hard to define (Barrett and Hill, 1984). Vague definitions abound and there does not appear to be any complete, well-developed and generally accepted theory of the policy-making process. Instead there is a wide range of partial theories and models, which prioritise different aspects of the process and highlight different kinds of explanations for its form and outcomes (John, 1998). This chapter draws on some of this literature to develop a broad view of factors which come together in policy making, then gives a brief exposition of the realist approach which provides a philosophical grounding for an explanatory and causal analysis, and finally draws this material together in a simple ‘model’ to provide a heuristic tool and guide to analysis of how policy making happens.

2.2 Policy making as a complex process

2.2.1 A rational model

At first glance the policy-making process for LA21 appears straightforward. The nations of the world signed up to Agenda 21, which committed them to a process whereby local government and local communities were jointly to develop action

plans for pursuing sustainable development and then implement them, so meeting the specific goals set out in the Agenda 21 document*. Thus described, the process appears well-defined: the goals, actors, processes and procedural norms are specified, and it follows a logical pattern of problem definition, solution agreement and goal setting in Agenda 21 followed by implementation through LA21. This in turn was to be a similar logical process of goal setting and action planning (DETR *et al.*, 1998). Such a process is implicit in the Agenda 21 concept, and the involvement of the public in drawing up a local plan for sustainability is predicated on it.

Similar processes have been widely viewed as typical, or at least desirable, in policy making, and have been theorised as the 'rational model'. This views policy as 'an attempt to define and structure a rational basis for action or inaction' (Parsons, 1995: 14), developed through a process which follows a set of distinctive stages in which a problem is defined, all potential courses of action are compared to see which best meets the needs defined in the previous stage, and a decision is made to take this path (Easton, 1965; Simon, 1957). Implementation follows, unproblematically (Barrett and Hill, 1984). This view of the policy-making process rests on two principles: instrumental rationality as the basis for decision-making, and a separation of decision making from both the search for alternatives and the implementation stages. It also involves the distinction between decision making as 'political' and the other two stages as 'technical' and so the purview of politicians and technical staff respectively (Barrett and Hill, 1984).

2.2.2 A complex model

Although the rational model remains in good currency amongst policy makers and in policy rhetoric (Leach, 1982) there is a great deal of empirical work which demonstrates conclusively that this is not the way that policy making takes place in practice. Two principal problems beset it: that goals are frequently insufficiently clearly specified, and that policy making typically involves many actors, who may not share goals, or a common understanding of even those goals which are ostensibly shared (Hill, 1997).

* Exactly what Agenda 21 committed governments and local authorities to is not clear, since the text itself is inconsistent, and the meanings of the key terms are ambiguous. These important matters are dealt with in Chapters Four and Five - what is significant here is the apparent and assumed simplicity and linearity of the process set in train by Agenda 21.

Looking back to the observations made in Chapter One – that LA21 is based on concepts which are both ambiguous and vague in their policy implications, and implemented from within local authorities – it seems likely that policy making for LA21 will suffer from both problems. Agenda 21 enjoins the achievement of sustainable development at such a general level that its conversion into policy opens up multiple possibilities – further multiplied by the inherent ambiguity of the concept and of the idea of ‘public involvement’. The size and internal complexity of local authorities, the further complexity of the wider set of governance institutions of which they are part, and the interlinked nature of the policy fields (particularly around cross-cutting issues such as sustainable development and public involvement) means that the normal situation is that both policy formulation and implementation are carried out by a number of actors. The very fact of their structural division within their institutions raises the likelihood that they will approach the policy-making process in different ways. As March and Olsen put it, ‘many of the rules within political institutions are essentially devices for partitioning politics into relatively independent domains...the division of labour creates significant barriers between domains of legitimate action – areas of local rationality’ (March and Olsen 1989: 26).

Furthermore, the supposed linearity of the rational policy process and the separation of policy development from implementation also appear unrealistic. In practice action and policy-making are almost inseparably, recursively and interactively linked, and actors at any level in the process are potential generators of ‘policy’ (Fudge and Barrett, 1981).

In contrast to the rational model, Barrett and her co-authors developed an empirically-based conception of the policy making processes typical of local authorities and other state institutions (Barrett and Fudge, 1981; Fudge and Barrett, 1981; Barrett and Hill, 1984; Hill, 1997). Rather than focusing on ‘policy’ *per se*, they emphasise the need to understand ‘organisations, what is going on, who is doing it and why’ (Barrett and Fudge, 1981: 26). Policy making processes are seen as processes of interaction between many actors with many goals, which are derived from the complex mix of values, interests and ways of understanding the world which make up the ‘assumptive worlds’ of the actors (Young *et al.*, 1980). Understanding them involves identifying these actors and exploring these worlds, as well as the nature of the linkages between them and the form that their interactions take (Fudge and Barrett, 1981). These will often be competitive and conflictive, and

their resolution will be to some extent determined by the distribution and deployment of power (Barrett and Hill, 1984: 237).

The idea of rationality has not been lost completely, however. Leach (1982) argues that some concept of purposive, goal-oriented rationality as the driver for policy making is central to the notion of policy itself. It therefore makes sense to examine policy-making processes for such rationality, not in the expectation of finding it as the sole driver, but as a norm against which actual processes can be compared and so as a way of 'opening-up' critical discussion (Leach, 1982: 7). This idea forms a central premise of this thesis: that it makes sense to look at policies for public involvement in LA21 in terms of the goals that policy actors have and how these are worked out through the policy-making process.

2.2.3 Insights from theories of policy analysis

Barrett and her colleagues' work provides a useful basis for this research, through setting out a persuasively realistic picture of policy making within local authorities and establishing the dimensions of its complexity. Although this is useful in sensitising a researcher it is insufficiently developed to structure an investigation or analysis (Barrett and Hill, 1984: 221). This section therefore brings together insights from more detailed work elsewhere in the policy analysis literature, which will be used in the final section of the chapter to develop such a structure. The aim is *not* to review this immense literature, still less to debate the relative merits of the different approaches, but to draw very selectively on ideas which are compatible with and can contribute to a richer model of local government policy making. Four different aspects of policy making are relevant: the existence of non-substantive goals, the impact of structures in creating non-instrumental rationales for decision making and in influencing communication and resource flows, and the varied implications of the communicative nature of policy making processes.

Rational choice theory asserts the importance of instrumental rationality and the goal directed-ness of policy making, but takes to an extreme the idea that the process is carried out by individuals with differing goals. It rests on the premise that policy makers are self-interested, and will therefore make decisions which are based on maximising their interests, and so pursue power, patronage, perks of office and financial rewards rather than value-based goals (Niskanen, 1971). While researchers disagree over the impact of this, and the extent to which it dominates policy making in practice (Dunleavy, 1991), the possibility of such behaviour clearly adds to the

potential complexity of the process, and needs to be considered in any analysis of real processes (John, 1998: 141).

In contrast to the focus on the goals of policy making, institutional theorists claim that characteristics of institutions play a significant, perhaps determining, role. Thus for March and Olsen 'organisational life makes a difference' (1989: 1), since policy choices are made between a limited number of options according to what is perceived to be the appropriate thing to do given the circumstances. Appropriateness is determined not only by the formal regulations and structures of an organisation but also by the informal 'beliefs, paradigms, codes, cultures and knowledge that surround, support, elaborate and contradict' the official rules (March and Olsen, 1989: 22). This approach thus also adds to the range of motivations to be looked for in a given policy making process, complementing instrumental rationality with an explanation for the inertia and apparent non-rationality of bureaucratic behaviour.

Rhodes and others have investigated the impact on the policy process of relationships between actors (see, for example, Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; Rhodes, 1997). They show that policy is often made by groups of individuals which span a number of institutions and sectors – potentially outside the state – and suggest that these networks matter more than formal organisational structures and divisions. In itself this suggests that LA21 policy making analysis should look outside the 'LA21 unit' and its management line within a local authority and identify all the actors involved, whatever their institutional affiliation. Moreover, it is suggested that organisation in such networks has a range of impacts on the policy making process. Networks tend towards stability and self perpetuation, suppressing innovation in either structures or policy ideas (Rydin, 1997: 165; John, 1998: 84). More positively, Smith suggests that networks give policy makers access to resources and freedom to manoeuvre beyond that granted by their formal organisational roles (Smith, 1993: 70).

The most structured and complex work on policy making processes is that of Sabatier and his colleagues, who have developed a model in the context of US government policy making which brings together a number of the foregoing ideas (Sabatier, 1987, 1998; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Their 'advocacy coalition framework' offers a model of the policy system which sees preferred policy *choices* as being the result of values and beliefs, and policy *outcomes* as the result of groups of like-minded actors competing with each other to achieve their policy aims

through a process of bargaining and negotiation, mediated by neutral power-brokers, in an arena constrained by institutional forms and resource allocation. Every aspect is also affected by – and reciprocally affects - an external environment. This is clearly compatible with Barrett's ideas, and appears to advance them by specifying in more detail the linkages and processes within policy making systems and offering a causal explanation for changes in such systems over time. However, the details of the model are not, perhaps, applicable to English local authorities, nor to such all-encompassing policy issues as sustainable development. Moreover, Sabatier has adopted a resolutely positivist, anti-interpretivist stance (Sabatier, 2000; Radaelli, 2000), and the model does not take into account the potential role of communication and processes of social construction in policy making processes.

However, many authors have shown that the analysis of such processes is greatly enriched by a consideration of the role of language and social interactions. The approaches discussed above focus on the actors, their motivation and the constraints under which they make policy. Rydin claims that all the ideas at the core of these approaches are 'fundamentally imbued with a communicative dimension. They have to be talked about and argued about before they become effective' (1997: 165). This focus on language as the medium for policy making introduces new layers of complexity. It opens up the possibility of policy-as-presented-in-language and policy-as-instantiated-in-action being different – that rhetoric and action will be different, even if they are purportedly 'the same policy' (Richardson, 1996). It also shows that the process by which actors press their claims – the mass of interactions that form the core of the policy making process itself - is neither one of straightforward, rational and logical argument nor one of 'brute force' where the actor with the most resources wins, but one where language is also used to persuade and to argue (Majone, 1989; Mazza and Rydin, 1997). Further, this process of communication is used to affect the distribution of resources including knowledge (Rydin, 1997), and so part of the discussion and argumentation of the policy making process is directed to shaping institutions, to changing the 'rules of the game', as well as to achieving substantive policy ends (Majone, 1989; Clegg, 1990).

More fundamentally, insights from a social constructionist perspective suggest that the policy process is not simply shaped by actors' beliefs, values and interests but it concurrently and continually shapes them and that structures of every kind are continually reproduced by the actors, and are thus in principle mutable. The project of investigating a policy-making process then becomes at least partly an enquiry into

its construction, rather than simply into its functioning (Fudge and Barrett, 1981). Such approaches have been usefully deployed in the environmental policy field as a way of exploring the different claims made about the nature of environmental problems (Burningham and Cooper, 1999) and how the meaning of key concepts is constructed, manipulated and changes through the policy process (for example Hajer, 1995; Hastings, 1999a; Sharp, 1999). It would seem, therefore, that in a field of policy making which rests on the inherently ambiguous concepts of sustainable development and public involvement it will be essential to attend to the issue of how the meanings of these phrases are constructed by different actors in the process (Rydin, 1997).

However, there is a potential problem here in that more thoroughgoing and consistent applications of constructionist thinking lead to the problematising of the concepts of causation, the distinction between agency and structure and even of the acting individual (Burr, 1995). All these concepts are fundamental to the realistic and 'commonsensical' approach to policy making which has been building up in this chapter (John, 1998: 18 ff.), and a philosophical approach which calls these into question would be an unhelpful basis for the current research. To avoid this, and support a conception of policy making processes that can bring together the useful insights of these various theories, an explicitly realist philosophical underpinning was chosen for this research. This is set out in the following section.

2.3 Realist policy studies

The key issues for empirical policy research are *how and why did this result emerge from this process?* and *what can we therefore say about how such policy processes work in general?* Both the positivist and social constructionist philosophies which dominate the theoretical field present problems: the former in its search for lawlike regularities and eschewal of non-observable mechanisms, the latter in its problematising of the key concepts, as noted above (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). In practice much empirical work avoids both of these and adopts a naturalistic approach based on a common sense ontology of 'physically distinct persons capable of independent action' (Outhwaite, 1987: 108). Even work which explicitly adopts one of the paradigms tends to rest on such a base. Thus Lane (1996) plausibly argues that much avowedly positivist policy theory is more realist than positivist, since it endeavours to explain *why* policy develops as it does, rather than simply to correlate different observables, and in order to do this it postulates unseen entities

with causal powers. Similarly many social constructionist studies share a limiting approach to constructionism. Jacobs and Manzi (2000) and Burningham and Cooper (1999) explicitly defend social constructionist approaches as having empirical and political utility because they can be applied to 'real' social problems. While rightly claiming that by problematising the definitions of those problems such studies generate different insights from positivist approaches (which treat the definition of problems as a given), in order to gain a purchase on these policy issues they work within an essentially realist framework in which many of the basic components of the process are taken as fixed.

It would appear that in order to be empirically applicable, concepts of truth and causality tend to be smuggled into work ostensibly based in both dominant paradigms (Jensen, 2001). These are the hallmarks of scientific realism and its social science counterpart, critical realism* - a third paradigm which provides a valuable middle ground 'between the trenches' of positivism and constructionism, incorporating aspects of both and avoiding their principal problems (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Næss and Saglie, 2000). This research works in this middle ground, adopting realist tenets which provide a coherent theoretical underpinning for the intuitively desirable aim of establishing generalisable, causal explanations for the evolution of policy making processes.

Critical realism postulates the reality of social structures and their interdependence with human actions, being neither reducible to them nor existing independently of them (Bhaskar, 1979). Such structures are continually reproduced and transformed by individuals, and are thus products of a process of social construction through interaction, primarily though not exclusively linguistic. However, the structures with which any given individuals interact are only to varying degrees in their power to transform – to a greater or lesser extent their interpretations will constitute *construal* of relatively fixed and shared situations rather than *construction* (Sayer, 2000: 91). The implication for research is to adopt a pragmatic approach, assessing empirically which structures are shared, not affected by contestation within the specific policy making process under consideration, and can therefore be treated as fixed and unproblematic.

* Also known as 'transcendental realism'. For present purposes the distinctions between these are irrelevant, and Andrew Sayer's term, 'critical realism', has been adopted.

Realist causation is understood in terms of causal powers, which are intrinsic properties of structures. It is thus not reducible to, or necessarily visible in, regularities between pairs of similar events – that is, ‘causes’ and ‘effects’ (Sayer, 1992). Instead, outcomes of causal processes are viewed as the result of the activation (or not) of causal powers in a specific, contingent situation – a combination of causal mechanisms and context. Figure 2.1 shows this schematically.

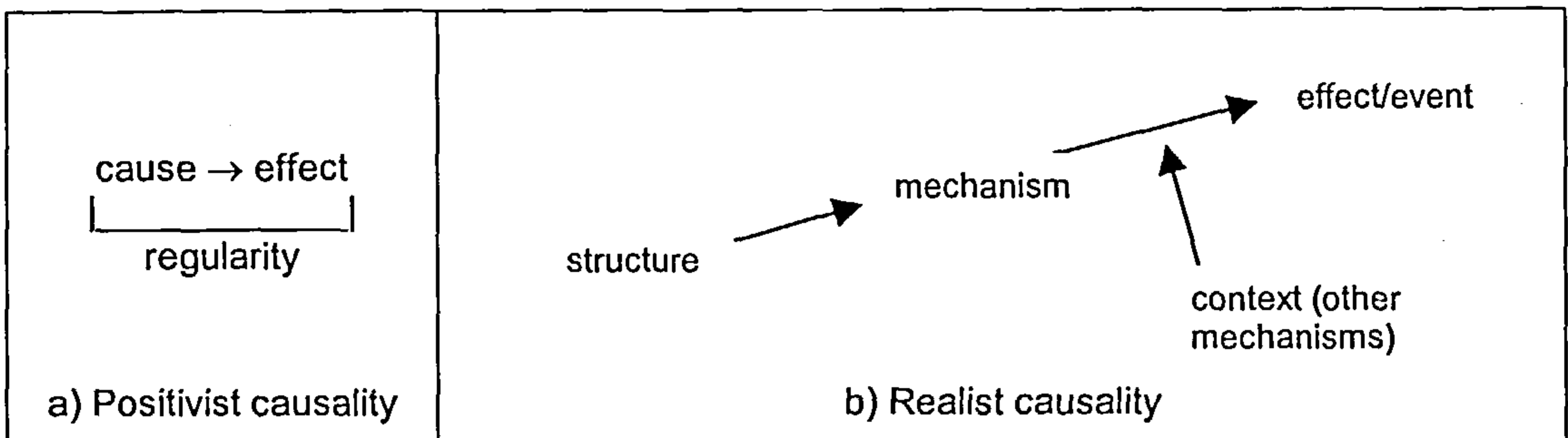


Figure 2.1: Models of causation (from Sayer, 2000:14-15)

In a policy process these mechanisms are combinations of the reasoning of individuals and the capacity they have to act by reason of the resources they derive from the social structures in which they are embedded (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 66). The contexts are likewise mechanisms and structures with causal powers - the distinction between ‘mechanism’ and ‘context’ is thus an analytical one, determined by which aspect of a process is being singled out for study (Outhwaite, 1987: 115-116). In the complex open systems that characterise the social world we should not expect to observe precise regularity: each mechanism is to some extent unique, as is each contingent combination of mechanism and context. The goal of realist analysis is not the development of predictive theory based on lawlike regularities, but rather a diagnostic understanding of what happens in unique historical contexts (Lane, 1996; Radaelli, 2000).

There are thus two levels of contingency involved in a realist explanation. Firstly, there is an inherent contingency about real world events - the very notion of a policy-making process as an interesting subject of research presupposes that the outcomes of policy initiatives cannot be ‘read off’ from some analysis of fundamental social structures and that policy actors possess a degree of individual agency (Barrett and Hill, 1984: 238). Secondly, our knowledge of these events is necessarily tentative and revisable, as a result both of the impossibility of unmediated access to ‘the real’, and the continually shifting nature of social

structures and their dependence on human action. Descriptions cannot therefore be known to be 'true' in an absolute sense, but can be judged as being more or less 'practically adequate' (Sayer, 1992). Causal explanations are exercises in 'retroduction' – the construction of hypothetical, consistent stories, given force by their adequacy when tested in other situations, through counterfactual reasoning and the elimination of less plausible alternatives (Sayer, 2000). They do, however, allow a process of 'analytical generalisation' from a given case to others where similar structures plausibly exist (Silverman, 1985) and so to the possibility of generating similar case-specific explanations. This is clearly very different from the positivist notion of lawlike generalisations leading to a coincidence of explanation and prediction, yet it does provide a rationale for making tentative predictions – of crucial importance if research is to inform changes in practice.

2.4 A conceptual framework

This final section draws together the insights from the various policy theories with the basic realist explanatory structure to develop the conceptualisation of the policy making process which was used to inform the structure and analysis of the research. In it the policy making process is seen not as rational in a simple, linear fashion but as an interconnected web of decision making. The actors making these decisions can be from any level in a formal hierarchy, with responsibility for policy-making or for implementation, and scattered across a number of different organisations or drawn from the 'general public'. They are seen as being motivated by goals related both to achieving substantive policy ends and more self-serving objectives. These goals derive from actors' value and belief systems – their 'assumptive worlds' – and lead them to pursue a range of desired policy outcomes. This process brings them into contact with each other in interactions which can take a number of forms:

- negotiation, in which actors may persuade, bargain or coerce each other;
- learning in a range of senses, including increasing technical knowledge and therefore altering policy goals (Sabatier, 1987), and developing mutual understanding of participants' positions and so moving forward collectively to create new, shared understandings (Healey, 1997);
- formal decision making procedures, such as voting;
- direct control without negotiation; and
- ignoring (the converse of control, where a participant simply disregards the attempts of another to influence the process).

These potentially very complex interactions take place in a structured environment which allocates resources and constrains the forms in which interaction can take place, both through formal institutions and also through the informal 'rules' which constitute the culture of an organisation and define acceptable behaviour and routines of action. At the broadest scale, beyond and pervading any policy making process of immediate interest, are macro-socio-economic structures, which affect all the other components of the process: the goals that actors might have, their interests which some of those goals may be intended to serve, and the institutions and rules and resources which enable and constrain their actions.

It is clear that in reality goals and constraints are intimately linked, as are those elements of the process considered as mechanism and those as context. What is important is that for analytic purposes it is feasible to make these distinctions, in order to trace how certain value-based goals fare in these complex processes.

From these interactions emerge policy outcomes of various kinds. They include actions which further the substantive policy issue under consideration or cause institutional changes to structures or resource distribution within an organisation, and the rhetorical expressions of policy documents which may be linked to actions or only have purely symbolic importance (Edelman, 1971).

While this conceptualisation sees value systems and beliefs as the drivers of the policy making process, and thus as the explanation of why the process occurs at all, it does not suggest why particular outcomes result from a given policy process. This raises the importance of power. In any instance some desired outcomes are likely to be not only mutually incompatible but affect actors' perceived interests. As a result policy making is characterised by contestation, with people in general acting to further their interests and resist detrimental change. The extent to which they are successful will depend on their power*. This is in turn dependent on their ability to control resources, including knowledge, and the authority derived from their positions in the formal and informal hierarchies of the institutions involved (Leach *et al.*, 1994). Power is exercised in a number of ways, many (but not all) of which are discursive, involving the framing of issues and constructing their significance for

* There is a distinction to be made between the general causal power of realist theory and the power of individuals to achieve their ends. The former is an attribute of all structures, whether individuals, objects or relations (Sayer, 2000: 11 ff.), while the latter can usefully be seen as a subset of this.

other actors, and also in defining what will count as knowledge with an appropriate function in the process.

It is also manifested at different 'levels' in the policy making process, as explicated by Lukes (1974). The most obvious of these is in the policy interactions themselves, where power relationships will influence the outcomes of processes of negotiation and attempts at control. However, these processes themselves are subject to power at a second level. Following Bachrach and Baratz (1962), this level is characterised by the mobilisation of bias and 'non-decision-making' – the myriad ways in which the agendas of decision-making processes can be controlled, and thus the desired outcomes of some actors excluded from consideration, and by which outputs from the decision making process can be selectively prevented from developing into substantive outcomes. At this level there may well be linkages between policy making processes – decisions taken in one arena may be concerned, explicitly or implicitly, with controlling the content or impact of decisions taken elsewhere.

The highest level that Lukes describes is that at which power is manifested in hegemonic control of society, by which the interests of powerful groups are served through shaping the preferences of others in ways which (perhaps) do not serve their own interests, or through limiting what are conceived of as possible policies (Cochrane, 1993).

Although power is notoriously hard to define and to attribute to individuals (Lukes, 1974; Richardson, 1996), it appears to be unevenly distributed, given the regularities in policy outcomes of actors' goals and of types of policy that are more successful than others. As Fudge and Barrett observe, despite the complexity of the policy-making process one 'inescapably' concludes that 'certain individuals, groups or governments tend to find a way of doing, or of getting done, what they *really want to do* while others do not' (1981: 275, original emphasis). It is one of these apparent patterns which stimulated this research – the apparent non-realisation of the more transformative aims of Agenda 21, which raises the question as to what mechanisms control this process, and whether particular kinds of actors are systematically able to determine which desired policy outcomes are actualised.

2.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to develop a conceptualisation of policy making processes which is appropriate to the context and subject matter of the research. The setting is English local authorities and their existing plethora of functions and

policies, within which the policy making processes specifically concerned with public involvement in LA21 were developed. These involved the working out in practice of two ambiguous concepts, whose translation into practice potentially had implications for most of a local authority's work, and therefore was likely to be of interest to a great number of policy actors.

The conceptualisation developed is grounded in a naturalistic, 'commonsense' understanding of the components and processes involved in policy making. The realist philosophy which underpins it describes the world in terms of objects and structures possessing causal powers, and in which human agency and social structures are both real and interdependent. While it therefore recognises the constructed nature and continuous process of reproduction of social structure through human agency, it rejects the more radical implications of thoroughgoing social constructionism. While epistemologically and ontologically distinctive from both constructionism and positivism, it can be seen as occupying a fruitful middle ground between the two, providing the possibility of explanation and prediction in a socially constructed world. Realist understandings of policy making are in terms of causal mechanisms consisting of the reasoning and capacity to act of the individual actors in the process, whose outcomes will depend on the way these mechanisms are activated or constrained by the context in which they are embedded.

This general understanding was brought together with Barrett and her co-workers' empirically-grounded characterisations of policy making in local authorities and other state bodies, along with more detailed theorising about aspects of specific aspects of policy processes. This synthesis produced a conceptualisation with the following characteristics and components:

- policy making processes are complex, iterative and recursive, rather than simple and linear – in particular policy making and implementation are inseparable and continuous;
- policy making typically involves many actors, drawn from across local authorities and other sectors, some of whom may be organised in networks which form structures relatively independent of formal institutional boundaries and hierarchies;
- actors are motivated by goals, in turn resting on values, beliefs and the way they understand the world in general – their 'assumptive worlds';

- actors' goals may include those associated with the ostensible substantive aims of the policy making process – in this case of achieving public involvement in the planning and attainment of sustainable development;
- actors' goals may well also include institutional and personal goals *not* related to these ostensible aims;
- these goals will be brought together in interactions which form the heart of the policy making process. Because they are almost inevitably mutually incompatible there will be contestation to determine outcomes from the process;
- these outcomes potentially include action, structural changes and policy statements;
- the outcomes will be affected by the nature of the interactions, in particular the relative power of the participants based on their authority and resources they bring to the process;
- outcomes will also be affected by the structures within which the interactions take place. These include the local culture which encourages non-goal-oriented behaviour determined by local rules of appropriate behaviour, the formal and informal structures of communication and resource allocation, and external policy and social influences; and
- values, goals and context-forming structures are intimately linked as a result of their continuous construction through social interaction. They are therefore all potentially mutable, though many will remain relatively stable over the span of the policy process being studied.

This study of policy making for public involvement in LA21 therefore focused on the interactions of those actors explicitly involved in named LA21 processes. While these were concentrated within local authorities, they also included those involved in networks which extend outside the authorities into other sectors, including 'the public'. The recognition of the intimate association between mechanisms and context required that actors and structures lying outside the LA21 processes themselves were incorporated in the study.

The study's purpose was to understand and explain how goals associated with the stated aims of Agenda 21 were developed and implemented during the course of LA21 policy making. However, while this determined its focus on goal-oriented aspects of the processes, the foregoing arguments also imply that it could not assume

from the outset that any particular set of goals would be dominant. On the contrary, it was motivated by an assumption that the fate of the Agenda 21 goals could be explained at least in part by rationales which lie outside those associated with interpretations of sustainable development.

Using this conceptualisation the objects of study were the mechanisms within the policy making process: actors' reasoning based on their values and interests and their attempts to act on these given the resources available to them, and the interactions between these attempts. They were also the outcomes of such policy making: processes of public involvement in LA21, together with statements of policy concerned with such involvement, carrying with them varying degrees of commitment to action, and also changes in the policy making structures and processes caused by the process.

The above establishes a framework – a structural skeleton of the processes through which policy is made. The remainder of the literature review is concerned with the expected substantive content of the studied processes - the two closely linked fields of public involvement in governance and sustainable development – and the local government context in which they evolved.

Chapter 3 Democracy and participation: public involvement in governance

3.1 Introduction

The overall purpose of Agenda 21 was to reorient the trajectory of development towards sustainability. It is abundantly clear from it and other major statements on sustainable development that an intrinsic and necessary component of the process was intended to be the involvement of the population as a whole, not simply in changing their behaviour but also in making policy (WCED, 1987: 65; UNCED, 1992: §23.2). In consequence the policy processes that local authorities engaged in to advance sustainability also had to address public involvement in policy making - part of their substantive content was the process of local government. In the UK, however, local government is founded on an already existing system of public involvement, a mature and complex representative democratic system. Sustainable development as a policy aim and the prescription for public involvement contained in Agenda 21 thus had to engage with the basic principles of government and potentially posed challenges to current accepted practice.

They did this, moreover, in the context of other challenges to the system. For the past thirty years there have been repeated policy initiatives attempting to enable or coerce local authorities to change the way in which they engage with their communities. Running through the early calls for more participation in planning and other services, the urban Left experiments and market-oriented reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s and the current 'modernisation' of local government is a common sentiment: that local government has become unresponsive to the wishes of its public and should somehow 'get closer to the public' (LGTB, 1987; DETR, 1998a). However, despite this common critique the proposed ways in which the people should therefore become more involved in local government have varied greatly, supported by a wide range of rationales (Barnes, 1999).

The investigation and analysis of policy making for public involvement in LA21 must therefore take into account the theory and practice of local democracy. This chapter deals with these as substantive issues in their own right, and so also provides a ground for the discussion in Chapter Four of the special case of the role of the public in governance for sustainable development. It draws on published work in this field in order to provide a framework with which to describe and analyse the norms and practices of LA21 and its context and to give an overview of relevant

aspects of that context. This review also identifies theoretical issues which appear insufficiently developed in this literature and which are therefore the subject of investigation through the empirical work and further development in Chapter Ten.

The chapter falls into two sections, each dealing with a distinctive body of theoretical work. The first reviews elements of political theories of democracy, which deal with rationales and values concerned with the role of 'the people' in governance. This is followed by a consideration of how these are embodied in the practice of local government in England, and how these in turn are embedded in more complex governance structures which add layers of complexity to local democratic practice. The second part reviews a distinctive and separate body of theory consisting of more specific conceptualisations of the nature of the engagement of the people in governance. These are the theories of participation in a narrower sense which provide the basis for the descriptive and analytic framework for the empirically investigated public involvement in LA21.

3.2 Democracy

3.2.1 Models of Democracy

Democracy is underpinned by the simple idea that the broad mass of the people should rule - consequently some form of public involvement in governance would seem to be a fundamental aspect of a democratic society (Stoker, 1997: 157). However, this simplicity cloaks an indeterminacy – what that involvement should be has been the subject of argument for over two thousand years. Democracy is the quintessential 'essentially contested concept', with a widely accepted but vague core meaning which allows the word to be used and a range of legitimate, incompatible and therefore contested interpretations as to how the concept should be put into practice (Gallie, 1955).

Underlying these are a range of justifications based on democracy's ability to achieve fundamental values or goods – such as liberty, equality, and self-development – and arguments based on the nature of society and humanity which claim to make differing conceptions more or less possible (Held, 1987). Drawing on arguments from Thornley (1977) and Stoker (1997) three axes are identifiable along which conceptions can be arranged:

- a social stability axis, ranging between positions which see society as essentially consensual and stable or necessarily conflictive and dynamic, with a middle

range in which conflict is endemic but managed within a more or less agreed framework – participation is thus a means to agreement, a victory over an opponent or a deal;

- an elitist/egalitarian axis, with polar positions of a low opinion of the ability or interest of the masses to play a responsible part in governance and one which views participation as both a universal capacity and right; and
- an individualist/collectivist axis distinguishing positions which see the objectives of participation as the furthering of individual interests and the creation of collective goods such as social cohesion or class-awareness.

While a large number of different ‘models of democracy’ have been described, characterised by different rationales and proposing different governance structures, a fundamental distinction can be made between those in which a small group of representatives are selected to govern on behalf of the majority of the population, and those in which the masses are directly involved in making decisions – a distinction between representative and participatory forms of democracy (Held, 1987). The former are the basis of the existing local democratic system and are discussed first, before considering the various participatory forms which are proposed as providing improvements or alternatives to representative democracy.

Representative democracy

In an ideal representative democracy, decision making power is exercised by a group of individuals who derive their authority and legitimacy through being chosen by election. The electoral mandate gives them sole responsibility for government, as it is the only way that legitimates an individual to act as the people’s representative. As a matter of practical necessity representatives are assisted and advised in carrying out their functions by non-elected, politically neutral professional officers (Renwick and Swinburn, 1980). Such systems are justified by a range of arguments, of which four are particularly salient (Thomas, 1996).

The first rejects continuous mass involvement in decision-making as both impractical and undesirable, given the apathy and inability of the masses to play a responsible part in governance. Rule is therefore to be exercised by an elite, who have a greater interest in and understanding of the issues involved, and are able to take decisions based on the long term good of society (Schumpeter, 1967). In the interest of stability public involvement is to be limited to expressing broad policy

preferences at elections, and possibly through other means of canvassing opinions (Almond and Verba, 1963).

A contrasting strand of thought sees representation as regrettable and risky in terms of transferring power away from the people to their representatives, but necessary for effective governance in complex societies (Mill, 1972; Arblaster, 1987). In this conception representatives have a duty to be responsive to and therefore in communication with their electors, rather than acting as independent 'trustees' elected for their elite qualities to exercise their own judgement (Gutch, 1979).

The recognition that society is composed of competing and organised interest groups leads to two further, contrasting conceptions of the role of the elected decision maker in relation to the public. In the pluralist view of society having many different centres of power, interest groups compete for influence over neutral decision-makers (Dahl, 1956). An 'open-door' approach to participation opens up equal opportunity for all to influence public affairs with essentially equitable outcomes (Thomas, 1996). In contrast, in party political systems the decision makers are anything but neutral, being themselves the representatives of interest groups. Such systems reduce the scope for direct, local public involvement in governance: representatives are subject to party discipline, the legitimacy of which is established through processes which are separate, and often distant, from the local political arena (Hill, 1974).

In terms of the axes set out above, these four conceptions of democracy all rest on the notion of a basically stable society, where inter-group conflict - if present - is confined as bargaining within a fundamental consensus over political and social structures. They are all elitist in practice, sharing a basic structure with separate roles for an elite governing group and the masses. They also assume that a collective interest can be identified - the legitimacy of the elite is supported by their claim to be able to work towards a conception of a common good recognised by (at least) a substantial proportion of the population.

Challenges to representative democracy: towards more participation

This concentration of decision making in the hands of a purportedly representative elite has always been susceptible to challenges from other conceptions of 'rule by the people'. At an instrumental level, it is argued that periodic elections do not give decision makers sufficient information to enable them to represent the electorate effectively, particularly in delivering services which accurately reflect the diversity

of their needs and desires. Increased involvement of the public is therefore a pragmatic process for improving service design, through using users' own assessments of their requirements and local knowledge to supplement the more generic knowledge of the professionals who support the elected representatives. In addition to improving the quality of service, public involvement at the early stages of policy or project design is asserted to improve overall efficiency by reducing opposition later (Govan *et al.*, 1998). Such proposals pose no intrinsically political threat to the representative democratic system – their normative agenda is one of improving administration rather than changing the distribution of power.

However, there are also political challenges from a number of very different directions, all of which claim that the system is 'wrong' in some essential sense. One group of these stems from the same liberal tradition which gave birth to representative democracy, but views the system as inadequate to protect liberal values from the impositions of the state. For some the rights of individuals and interest groups are better safeguarded by an intensification of the pluralist approach so that all not only have the right of direct and frequent access to decision makers, but also a legitimate expectation that their views will be acted upon (Campbell and Marshall, 2000). For neo-liberals such as Hayek (1976) the preferences of individuals as expressed through the market are paramount. Although the logical, neo-liberal extreme is the complete dissolution of the state, more moderate neo-liberal thinking dictates the reduction of the role of the state to that of a facilitator of the market and the transformation of the citizen to sovereign consumer of services and the source of public funds (Ridley, 1988).

In contrast to the above are viewpoints which argue that on principle the mass of people should be an intrinsic part of the state, involved in controlling the society in which they live. Stemming from the 'republican' democratic tradition (Held, 1987) these take positions in opposition to traditional representative democracy along each of the three axes identified above. The basic participatory democratic ethic opposes elitism, holding that individuals have the right and the capacity to participate in the ruling of their lives. Since such participation is a skill acquired through practice, democracy also has a developmental aspect for both individuals and classes (Rousseau, 1968; Freire, 1974). The individualism of liberal representative democracy is challenged by socialist and communitarian views which claim that common goods are created through collective action and deliberation, in particular

social cohesion and the ability of the group as a whole to adapt to change and solve collective problems (Tam, 1998).

Finally there are arguments for increased public involvement from the perspective that there is no shared fundamental value-base in society. 'Society' is composed of groups with conflicting interests, and the claimed consensual base of representative democracy encompasses a range of attitudes from genuine support to enforced compliance with the system by relatively powerless and disadvantaged groups (Mann, 1970). The extent to which groups can realise their interests is (more or less) determined by the mutually reinforcing structures of power distribution and resource control (Held, 1987). Since the apparatus of government is an important part of these structures, participation in the political process is one way through which disadvantaged groups can hope to gain some degree of control over resources and possibly even change social structures, or at least deflect from themselves some of the impacts of the activities of more powerful groups. However, such citizen control is clearly not a guarantee of social justice, since there is a risk that some groups will wield more power than others and that structural inequalities will persist (Fainstein, 2000).

Each of these viewpoints implies alternative, more participatory processes of governance than traditional representative democracy, and their realisation in a pure form would imply enormous changes in the existing distribution of power, though not necessarily a complete change in the democratic structures. Thus the liberal alternatives envisage the state:citizen divide remaining, but with the state responsive rather than pro-active, and engaged in continuing dialogue with its citizens.

In contrast, conceptions of participatory democracy which require continuous, mass participation in making the rules of society present more radical alternatives. However, in their pure forms it is not clear that any of these adequately specify a possible state structure. The classical model of direct involvement through referenda on individual policy decisions is vulnerable to Weber's criticism that it is unworkable in a complex modern society (1978: 949). Held (1987: 272) claims that none of the Left's attempts to develop workable participatory models successfully reconciles the tensions between effective mass public involvement, individual freedoms, social justice and protection of the democratic state. Communitarian and related deliberative democratic approaches (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996) claim to provide such a model, based on the development of a high level of value consensus and of continuous and deliberative participation. However, these too suffer from

tensions between articulated substantive value systems, individual freedoms and widespread participation – tensions perhaps solved through the privileging of deliberation between citizens as the way of establishing a consensus on values and on individual policy decisions (Dworkin, 1992; Gutmann, 1992; Shucksmith, 2000).

Despite these difficulties, these different normative conceptions of democracy are influential in suggesting alternative possible trajectories of reform for existing forms of local democratic government. Moreover, while all challenge the acceptability of a purely representative system, from the point of view of an existing state there are significant differences between them. The instrumental, liberal and communitarian stances share with representative democracy the assumption that despite local differences society does or should rest on an underlying consensus on basic values. In contrast is the last of the viewpoints outlined above, traditionally associated with the political Left, which denies the existence or possibility of such consensus. Thus while each enjoins more direct involvement of the people in government, this has distinctly different purposes and outcomes depending on which analysis of society is adopted (Thornley, 1977). For the first group participation has a role in maintaining or strengthening the existing order – for the second its function is the opposite.

Two observations follow from this which raise questions about the theoretical basis of Agenda 21. Firstly, for a state to embark on introducing participation to a representative system carries the risk of uncovering dissensus (Renn, 1998) and creating instability. For this to be justifiable such reform must be underpinned by an assumption that consensus is either present or achievable, and that dissensus represents a correctable deviation from this norm. Secondly, political science traditionally recognises a connection between assumptions of consensus, low levels of direct participation and conservative attitudes to social change, and a converse association of high levels of participation with conflict and change (Thornley, 1977; Salmon, 1995). Given this, Agenda 21's reform programme involving significant change in social and economic structures through high levels of participation within a consensual framework is unusual.

3.2.2 Local democracy and government

Democratic systems

The preceding section dealt with interpretations of the concept of democracy which have been influential in western political thought, so reviewing some of the normative arguments which may be expected to surface in debates about public

involvement and providing a grounding for the examination of how the concepts of sustainable development and public involvement are brought together in Local Agenda 21 (Chapters Four and Five). This section places these in the context of the English local government system, since this research rests on the assumption that that existing structures, processes and policies within this system are important explanatory factors in the evolution of LA21, through their influence on the value systems of actors, structural constraints on policy development and the possibility of policy conflicts or synergies. The first part of the section deals with the way in which these strands of democratic thought have influenced and are embodied in local government, before considering how the complexity of the institutions of governance affect the practice of local democracy.

The traditional basis of UK local government is a representative democratic system, within which the primary interaction between state and citizen is through the ballot box and areas are in principle governed by an elected council. This system is the present outcome of centuries of struggle and compromise between radical demands for democracy, the vested interests of landed and capitalist classes and the competing claims of national and local authorities (Renwick and Swinburn, 1980). Defending the system on a mixture of elitist, managerial and class interest grounds, councils of both the political Right and (Old) Left have traditionally shared an antipathy to the extension of public involvement (Hill, 1974: 133; Leach and Wingfield, 1999).

The ideal liberal conception of representative democracy has considerable normative power, in particular in defining the official relationship between councillors and officers and how they see themselves vis-à-vis other would-be representatives of the people and the general public. However, in practice the system has never been purely representative. On the one hand, the formal separation of roles and powers between officers and elected members is inevitably blurred with consequences for policy making and public involvement which are examined in more detail in the following sub-section. On the other, members of the public as individuals and organised groups have traditionally had access to elected councillors, by which they have attempted to affect policy to support their interests (Stoker, 1997). This access and its degree of effectiveness have varied enormously between groups and individuals, perhaps systematically reflecting the degree to which they share dominant council values and wield economic power (Dearlove, 1973; Simmie, 1981).

Such informal and partial engagement between local authorities and citizens has long been viewed as unsatisfactory on both instrumental and democratic grounds. In response to the perceived inadequacy of the stereotypical post-War local authority both central and local government started to promote 'officially sponsored' participation to supplement the normal policy and decision making processes (Stoker, 1997). The Left's interest in participation in the late 1960s and 1970s influenced the policies of some authorities, although this first wave of participatory activity faded and left the fundamental relationship between local government and the public unchanged (Boaden *et al.*, 1980). Concurrently central government reports and legislation gave prominence to the ideal of participation and local control of resources, albeit in a curiously depoliticised form (HMSO, 1968; Town and Country Planning Act, 1968; MHLG, 1969; Bailey, 1975). These early initiatives and policy changes are still important, having left an institutional and cultural legacy which to some extent influences current approaches to participation (Stoker, 1991).

Changes in the relationship between local authorities and their publics, and so what were seen as appropriate approaches to public involvement, were central to subsequent, broader programmes of local government reform. Two main ideological strands and a subsidiary one can be identified within these programmes, which were important in shaping the local authority context into which LA21 was introduced and then developed.

The main strands were a reform programme largely imposed by central government – though not without its local government supporters – aimed at radical change in local authorities' functions and interactions with the public, and a countering set of proposals for reform from within that became the 'official ideology' of much of local government during the 1980s and 1990s (Stoker, 1991). The first, characterised by Orr (1998) as the 'new public management' agenda, emphasised the service delivery role of local government and took the private sector as its ideal. The rights of the public as taxpayers and consumers of services were the dominant factors in determining the relationship between state and citizen (Gyford, 1991; Lowndes, 1995). In contrast, the supporters of a 'new local democracy' (Orr, 1998), which included the Local Government Training Board (LGTB) and its successor the LGMB, prioritised the role of local authorities as local *government*. Their proposed reforms were to enhance local authorities' democratic legitimacy through making them more responsive to the public and involving the public more in policy making. This would in turn enable authorities to be both effective providers of services and

play a broader role as leaders of their communities (LGTB, 1987; Stewart and Stoker, 1988; Stoker, 1991). In such a conception the public role is that of citizens active in the governance of their own communities (Lowndes, 1995).

The minor strand in participation policy was a successor to the early experiments in participation. Radical participatory approaches pursued by some left-wing urban councils in the early to mid-1980s involved support for groups in the community and experiments in neighbourhood decentralisation (Burns *et al.*, 1994). Such programmes have continued sporadically through to the present, but this model of local governance was marginalised by the destruction of the Greater London Council and the metropolitan counties and the eclipse of the New Urban Left (Stoker, 1991).

These reforming agendas drew their inspiration from all the various theoretical challenges and alternatives to representative democracy outlined in Section 3.2.1, each of which had varying degrees of influence at different places and times. The outcomes have been to change the nature of local authorities, both in their approach to public involvement itself and in their broader perception of their role. During the 1980s and 1990s most authorities extended their interaction with their public. These changes took a wide range of forms, from consultation and market research approaches inspired by neo-liberal thinking, through giving marginalised groups a voice in policy making to engaging the public directly in partnerships for policy making and service provision (Reeves, 1995; Stoker, 1997). To an extent this occurred in an *ad hoc* and unstructured way, but in some authorities at least changes in the relationship with the public were associated with changes in overall ethos and working practices, or at least with aspirations in that direction. This has been described as representing a shift from the traditional to one of two types of 'enabling' authority, which reflect the interaction of the major reform agendas with the realities of local government. 'Market-oriented enabling authorities' take a central role as the promoter of local economic development and potentially as provider of services as long as this can be done efficiently and accountably, whereas 'community-oriented enabling authorities', are leaders of their communities which 'enable' the provision of services by the best possible means, with no ideological predilection for public or private sector solutions (Leach *et al.*, 1994).

Together with the traditional authority, this analysis provides a three-fold characterisation of authorities, parts of authorities and trajectories of change, each with a complementary approach to public involvement. In a traditional authority this will be limited, market enablers emphasise consultation to assist service design

and assess customer satisfaction, while community enablers engage in a wider spread of public involvement with the intention of both eliciting the public's views and involving them in governance. However, this extension of participation is constrained by the key concern to protect the basic representative democratic system rather than make fundamental changes - the repeated claim made by proponents of community enabling is that increased popular participation will strengthen, not weaken, the representative system in general and the role of elected representatives in particular (Stewart and Stoker, 1988; DETR, 1998b). There is a stress on the importance of consensus and dialogue (Stewart, 1996), and thus on 'new' inclusionary techniques for involving the public (DETR, 1998b; Burgess *et al.*, 1998).

A second, distinctive aspect of the rise in importance of public involvement has been the increase in neighbourhood-based community development initiatives. These have been inspired and informed by ideals which are contradictory but nevertheless cohabit within programmes established by local authorities and as components of centrally-funded regeneration programmes. The more traditional strand of thought within these is explicitly political and aimed at empowering marginalised and oppressed groups (Henderson and Salmon, 1999). The second is associated with communitarian ideas about community and social cohesion, and underlies government support for increased 'community involvement' and the creation of autonomous community organisations (DETR, 1998c). These very different perspectives can be seen as informed by different positions on the conflict-consensus axis, with the same process potentially either promoting significant social change over limited areas or containing threats to the system by promoting limited community influence or local autonomy (Salmon, 1995; Henderson and Salmon, 1999).

Although undoubtedly some change had occurred in local authorities, when LA21 was being introduced in the early 1990s there was still a perception that further reform was needed (LGMB, 1994b). Despite LA21 this perception persisted through to the late 1990s and local authorities were consequently subjected by central government to a further round of reforms intended to break the traditional mould. These were more coherent than their predecessors, in that they constituted substantial central government pressure on all authorities to conform to a single model, set out in the Local Government White Paper, 1998, and its daughter documents (DETR, 1998a, d). This model represents a fusion of the strands

identified by Orr and Stoker. Best Value and the general extension of performance indicators, coupled with the stress on consulting with the public as service users, represent a deepening of some aspects of the new public management agenda (Boyne, 1999; Taylor, 2000). The emphasis on increasing public participation (as opposed to consultation) and the leading role given to authorities in developing community strategies as umbrellas for all other local strategies (DETR, 2000) appears to represent everything the proponents of the new democratic agenda could have wanted. The envisaged authorities thus neatly combine aspects of the market- and community-enabling types.

Increased public involvement of many types is at the core of the model: '[t]he Government wishes to see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils and undertaken across a wide range of each council's responsibilities' (DETR, 1998a: §4.6). This is underpinned by a communitarian understanding of the desirable relationship amongst citizens and between them and the state, reflected in the emphases both on 'community' as the repository of shared values and a vehicle for social improvement and on consensus and partnerships as values and tools for governance (Frazer, 1996; Blair, 1998; DETR, 1998a).

Under the rubric 'modernising local government', these reforms were in their infancy at the time of this research. They were nevertheless an important part of the context for LA21, both because they had been suggested as future government policies from the mid-1990s onwards (CLD, 1995; DoE/MAFF, 1995) and because they were coming to dominate authorities' policy making during the field work in 1999-2000, following the 1998 White Paper and 1999 Local Government Act.

Complex structures of local government

The preceding sections have considered democracy in theory and as a bundle of concepts and programmes concerned with the relationship between local authorities and the public. However, local governance in practice takes place in a complex institutional environment, which affects the extent to which conceptions of the state:citizen relationship based on democratic theory are applicable. The following paragraphs therefore provide a sketch of some of the more important contextual factors which can be expected to affect the evolution of LA21.

Firstly, within local authorities themselves there are structures which impinge on the policy making process. The organisation of councillors by political parties affects policy making through councillors' identification (or not) with national party

policies (Stoker, 1997) and the limiting of democratic choice between policy alternatives where councils are dominated by single parties over long periods (Hall and Leach, 2000). The elected members also share the task of local government with a much larger number of paid staff, organised as a hierarchical bureaucracy. In consequence, as was suggested in Chapter Two, authorities are also prone to possess structures of informal relations and goals related to the formal structures rather than substantive policy goals, in addition to the informal rules and culture found in any organisation (March and Olsen, 1989; Leach *et al.*, 1994). The importance of this is increased to the extent that policy is not made by the councillors alone, but also by paid staff. Although a number of differing accounts have been given of who does in fact make policy, it seems plausible that neither those which ascribe complete control to elected members nor to an elite of paid technocrats capture the complexity of the situation. A third model which suggests that power is shared and decisions are jointly made by an elite group of senior elected members and senior officers has some empirical support, but is perhaps still too restrictive (Wilson and Game, 1998). Stewart (2000) suggests that we should see everyone in the local authority as potential or actual policy makers – a view supported by the thesis that policy making and implementation are inseparable (Fudge and Barrett, 1981: see Section 2.2.2). Overall, the picture is unsurprisingly complex, and it is likely to be an empirical question as to which actors carry the day in a given policy making situation, or generally within an authority.

These factors all have impacts on the nature and possibility of public involvement in policy making. Clearly the liberal model which would see policy preferences being expressed through some democratic process and then translated directly into action is analytically inadequate. The involvement of paid officials in policy making both obscures the democratic process and also opens up possible alternative forms of public involvement directly with officials – as is the case with much officially sponsored participation, which is typically developed and managed by officers. Party organisation can influence this process, as the parties are broadly characterised by differing attitudes to public involvement beyond the ballot box (Leach and Wingfield, 1999).

Similar issues arise when the position of local authorities is considered in the context of broader structures of local governance. They are but one level in a hierarchy of government, within which they have defined duties and powers, and also increasingly share responsibility for governance with a plethora of non- and

indirectly-elected bodies (Stewart, 2000). Thus external actors are directly involved in local authority policy making processes, while at the same time the unavoidable inter-institutional tensions and competition introduce further non-substantive issues into policy making. This fragmentation of governance clearly creates practical and theoretical problems for local democracy when this is conceived of in terms of the relationship between public and elected councillors (Abram and Vike, 2001). The role of this relationship is diluted in a 'shared power world' (Bryson and Crosby, 1992), and there are obstacles to public influence on policy makers in the other governance bodies. Finally, in terms of the 'sharing' of responsibility for governance, the ability of local authorities to develop and govern according to *local* policies informed by the expressed wishes of their local electorate is further constrained by central government's dominance of policy making and mechanisms for controlling local authorities (Wilson and Game, 1998).

Local authorities are also embedded in social and economic structures which go beyond the formal institutions of government, and which arguably constrain still further their ability to be responsive to their local population or to engage them meaningfully in the policy making process. In particular, and of clear relevance to the possibility for public involvement in policy making for sustainable development, the undoubted influence of economic interests on government has been the subject of much debate. Although this cannot be reviewed here, this research necessarily takes note of the constraints that such interests apply through their control of investment resources and their role as, for example, local employers. To some extent this influence is exercised in the policy making process through lobbying, but their structural position means that their interests have to be taken into account in policy making even in the absence of direct lobbying (Stoker, 1991). Increasingly such interests are formally institutionalised in the structures of fragmented local governance over which local authorities may have little control. They are concurrently driven by the concerns of a similarly intractable globalised market economy (Cochrane, 1993; Stoker, 2000). However, it should be stressed that such constraints are not seen here as deterministic, but as one, admittedly powerful, element of the structural context in which policy making takes place.

3.3 Public involvement: models and critique

3.3.1 Introduction

The previous section was concerned with the ways that public involvement can contribute to governance, both normatively and in the context of local government practice and currents of change. It is apparent that on democratic grounds alone many rationales exist for such involvement, and consequently there are a number of forms that it can legitimately take. This section looks in more detail at this engagement of the people in governance, in order to provide a framework for the description and analysis of the outcomes that are the ostensive aims of LA21 policy making processes in a way which links them to the rationales and functions of public involvement.

It thus moves away from democratic theory to analyses and theories of public participation or involvement in a narrower sense. In general the academic literature in this field makes only loose – if any – connections between public involvement and theories of either democracy or the policy making context. Most is concerned with public involvement processes in themselves, focusing on analytical classifications or what such processes can and should achieve in a rather isolated and non-contextualised way. This isolation is reflected in guidance and practice, being manifested in the rarity with which the connections between underlying principles and the practice of public involvement are made (Thornley, 1977; Campbell and Marshall, 2000), the combining of potentially conflicting rationales in government guidance (Audit Commission, 2000) and the treating of the linkage between public involvement and policy making as unproblematic and effective (MHLG, 1968; LGMB, 1994a).

This suggests that there may be problems with using existing analyses as the basis of this research. Having dealt briefly with the issue of defining public involvement, this section therefore examines the two principal, currently influential approaches to analysing public involvement and notes their insights and their limitations. It then uses them and a promising, though smaller and fragmented, set of writings to develop an approach to characterising public involvement which will be used in the research, and finally identifies areas in which the research may assist further theoretical development – issues which are returned to in Chapter Ten.

Definition and scope

For the purposes of this research, Stoker's (1997) broad definition of public involvement has been adopted:

members of the public taking part in any of the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies (Stoker, 1997: 157, following Parry et al., 1992).

This covers a very wide range of activities, all of which may embody and consciously draw on underlying rationales for extending public involvement in policy making drawn from the arguments for participatory democracy set out in the preceding section. This range does, however, extend beyond the traditional scope of democratic theory. While the latter is concerned with the public's influence on policy making, 'public involvement' as normally used includes implementation – of particular importance here due to the tradition of community and individual involvement in practical environmental schemes which has been drawn into the process of public involvement in LA21 (Sharp, 2001). Conversely, voting is excluded – the concern here is with Stoker's 'officially sponsored participation' (1997).

'Involvement' is used in preference to the more value-laden 'participation', and carries no implications of effectiveness nor value judgements as to what form is appropriate. This consciously neutral stance is taken in order to encompass the full range of activities that practitioners classify as involvement or participation, and acknowledges the legitimacy of different justifications. It also avoids the ambiguity arising from the common restriction of 'participation' to describe involvement which gives the public a more than consultative role in policy making.

3.3.2 Dominant models and approaches

Arnstein's Ladder and its derivatives

The first of the dominant bodies of theoretical work is that which draws on Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (1969), a way of conceptualising public involvement which has been repeatedly cited and reworked. In her paper Arnstein shows that not only does the phrase 'public participation' have many meanings in practice, but that these meanings are not morally equivalent – that hiding behind the rhetorically 'revered idea' are practices that range from the manipulative and cynical to the genuinely empowering. Her seminal contribution was to identify a single axis along which these multiple and competing meanings of 'participation' could be

arranged and to present it using the simple, visual metaphor of a ladder. This axis is power, and the nature of public involvement is defined by the balance of power between the people and the combination of state and economic interest groups.

Each rung is characterised by the 'extent of citizens' power in determining the end product' - from 'non-participation' through token levels in which citizen voices are heard but no influence is actually guaranteed, to the rungs in which citizens have 'increasing degrees of decision-making clout', through partnerships, delegated powers and complete control (Arnstein, 1969: 217). Arnstein saw this level of involvement as a ground for conflict, and her analysis is normative – 'citizen participation is citizen power' (p. 216) and is desirable as a way by which 'nobodies' can become 'somebodies' who can influence institutions so that they address the needs of the have-nots.

Arnstein claimed that the Ladder had broad application, and despite its origins in the highly politicised and violent urban struggles of late 1960s USA her idea has been repeatedly invoked in less conflictive contexts. The basic idea of participation taking place at different 'levels' still forms the basis of much theorising. Despite its non-explanatory nature and acknowledged oversimplifications – particularly the use of discrete 'rungs' rather than a continuum, and the portrayal of a struggle between two undifferentiated blocs (Arnstein, 1969) – the model is often reproduced without caveats to provide an analysis of participation and a range of possible positions that could be adopted or striven for by those organising or participating in public involvement (for example NEF, 1998; Counsell *et al.*, 1998).

The Ladder has also been refined to suit current British concerns. Within this work two strands can be distinguished by the stance they adopt on consensus and power. The first of these, typified by Young's early work on LA21 strategies (1996), takes a community development perspective and maintains Arnstein's normative stance of promoting high levels of public involvement. Young distinguishes four types of strategy for LA21 programmes, defined by the relative balance of local authority and community control between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'. He notes that the former are 'always widely criticised...for structuring the participation stage...to prevent any real input from local communities' and so in fact limiting the offered 'participation' to consultation and information giving. From this perspective, 'real participation' involves genuine power transfer to communities, though Young's highest level is one of dialogue and power-sharing between state and citizens – typical of the more

moderate British adaptations of the radical handover of resource control that Arnstein saw as the ideal for deprived American communities.

The second, currently influential strand is exemplified by Wilcox's *Guide to effective participation*, which is explicitly drawn on by the major central government guidance on participation (Wilcox, 1994; DETR 1998b). He presents a modified five-rung ladder which covers a realistic scope of what local authorities would consider to be participation:

- informing
- consulting
- deciding together
- acting together
- supporting independent community interests.

In contrast to Arnstein and Young, however, these are presented as 'horses for courses' without a hierarchy of values attached to the rungs on the ladder (Wilcox, 1994: 4). Participants should be free to choose at which level they wish to participate and higher levels should not be forced on those who wish merely to be kept informed. Although Wilcox explicitly recognises the power that the initiating authority or individual has to control the process (and, in passing, the power to influence who benefits) the issue of selecting which level to adopt is seen as an unproblematic, managerial decision for the authority, and the process of managing effective participation at appropriate levels by others as a technically difficult but essentially non-political task. Subsequently Davidson (1998) took this approach a step further, maintaining the basic analytic concept of 'level of community control' but rejecting the implicit normative thrust of the ladder metaphor in favour of an endless wheel. This strand effectively depoliticises and de-problematizes the choice of public involvement strategy, and is prevalent throughout guidance and much other literature on public involvement in LA21 and other state initiatives.

This divergence between the normative and purportedly neutral uses of the same basic approach to characterising public involvement can be understood in terms of different stances on the consensus/conflict axis discussed in Section 3.2.1 above and is closely linked to two conceptions of 'power', the central concept of the Arnstein model. The normative strand follows the tradition in political theory in which society is seen as inherently conflictual, and power is 'power over' - the power to prevail over others in decision-making, most crucially over distribution of resources (Lukes, 1986). The capacity to further one's interest follows from having such

power. Wilcox is closer to a different tradition, exemplified by Parsons (1957; Lukes, 1974), in which power is capacity: that is, the ability of groups or individuals to achieve what they want. This combines with an essentially consensual model of society to envisage the possibility of the increase rather than transfer of power when interests are brought together in 'win-win' situations where partners in a consensus all increase their ability to achieve (Parsons, 1957). The distribution of control in this tradition is an agreed distribution of authority - not a subject of contestation between groups with different interests but a matter to be decided using criteria of maximising effectiveness and efficiency in reaching common goals.

Despite their similar analytical structure these two strands obviously have very different normative content and practical implications. However, these are usually implicit rather than explicit, particularly in the second strand. Similarly the more general parallels between ideas of increasing levels of citizen control through public involvement and moving from representative democracy to more participative politics, and their rationales in terms of underlying beliefs about social stability, individualism and so on, are rarely explicit. This is partly related to scale – public involvement processes are frequently at a project or programme level, and not usually overtly concerned with broader issues of the organisation of the state. However, the lack of explicit theoretical linkages between public involvement and politics becomes problematic where these models are extended in scope to cover initiatives such as LA21 which have the potential to affect the entire workings of a local authority, as they fail to provide an analysis of how public involvement could or should engage with the existing democratic structures.

While this is true of both the above strands, it is particularly a problem for the first. Young's (1996) approach is typical, in that his very normative analysis and associated proposals for the initiation of wide-ranging bottom-up LA21 programmes are described in a policy and political vacuum, without consideration of their implications for the existing political order. Yet it would seem that any plausible account of, or programme for, a transformation of governance such as that envisaged by some supporters of LA21 must show how the new methods interact with the old system to produce the ideal. This these accounts fail to do.

Overall the success of the Ladder and its derivatives appears to rest on its successful identification of a politically and practically important way of distinguishing between the many activities described as 'public involvement'. However, despite the undeniable importance of its insight this review shows that there are some

unresolved issues raised by this kind of analysis. The first is whether the (usually ignored) simplifications of the model reduce or even remove its practical adequacy as an analytical tool and make it an unreliable normative guide. Although much cited, the Ladder is rarely applied systematically in practice. Its adequacy is reconsidered in the light of the empirical findings in Section 10.3.2. Secondly, while these analyses are closely concerned with the sharing of power, the simple binary state:citizen conception used prevents these analyses showing how in a given context such power sharing relates to other political and power structures.

Consensus building and deliberative processes

The second dominant body of writing on public involvement is more reflective and has had a more diffuse influence on policy and practice. This explores the potential benefits to governance of forms of public involvement which emphasise the rational development of consensus through deliberative processes (Stoker, 1997; Healey, 1997). It thus draws on a very different theoretical and normative base from Arnstein's original Ladder with its characterisation of public involvement as being essentially about power. It focuses on a narrow part of the spectrum identified by Arnstein, privileging involvement from the upper rungs of the ladder but not from the very top and so, while proposing more participation than in traditional representative democracy, it does not see complete citizen control as a desirable goal. The literature and guidance advocating this approach offer justifications for and guides to achieving participation which is 'good' and 'effective' in that it successfully brings citizens, state and other groups together and achieves consensual decisions (Weisbord and Janoff, 1995; Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999). These authors emphasise the positive nature of *consensus* as a decision in which all parties not simply concur, but which expresses a collective will, distinguishing it from *compromises* which are defined by mutually agreed trade-offs between different parties' interests. Consensus-building is thus a win-win process rather than a zero-sum game (Govan *et al.*, 1998). As a crucial corollary, participants are seen not as bearers of fixed and opposing interests, but as sharers in a common interest in the issue at hand, stakeholders who by definition should be able to come to a consensus if rationality prevails (Healey, 1998). Two contrasting approaches exist. In the first, pre-existing, conflicting value positions are assumed not to be constrained by objective, fixed interests but to be mutable and open to revision during the deliberative process. Alternatively such conflicting positions are ignored in favour of

a process which focuses on identifying shared interests around which decisions can be made (Richardson and Connelly, 2002).

Some of this work – for example that of Healey (1992, 1997 and elsewhere) and Forester (1989, 1993, 1999) – has a more explicit theoretical base than much other writing on public involvement, and is closely linked to the development of the idea of deliberative democracy introduced in Section 3.2.1. It draws in particular on Habermasian ideas for its underlying faith in the possibility and desirability of a society whose social norms are developed and governed by a ‘communicative rationality’. At a more practical level, the creation of arenas for public involvement which approximate as closely as possible to the Habermasian conception of an ‘ideal speech situation’ is held up as a goal for participatory practice and as a norm against which practice can be critiqued (Forester, 1993; Skollerhorn, 1998).

The practical aspects of the work of these collaborative and communicative planning theorists have close affinities with less explicitly theoretical ideas which have increasing salience in policy and practice across a wide range of fields. More or less explicit assumptions of consensus - achieved through the deliberative participation of a broad group of stakeholders - underly LA21 and the preparation of community strategies, programmes for the sustainable management of complex environments with potentially conflicting uses (Margerum and Born, 1995) and processes aimed at resolving planning conflicts over specific sites (Petts, 1995). The development of partnership working is also implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, based on an assumption that partnerships will be arenas within which conflicts will be overcome and common interests identified (for example Edwards-Jones, 1997; Wragg, 2000). While in many cases it appears that an assumption is made that consensus will issue unproblematically from appropriate structures (Richardson and Connelly, 2001) there has also been a growth in the use of explicit formats such as Future Search conferences and citizens’ juries which are designed and managed to facilitate genuinely deliberative processes and consensual outcomes (Environmental Resolve, 1995; Petts, 1995).

Again, these analyses appear to have strengths and weaknesses. The major strength is that by moving away from an assumption of conflict, approaches have been inspired in which progress can be made on otherwise difficult or intractable policy issues (Renn *et al.*, 1995). However, against this must be balanced a number of linked criticisms which collectively suggest that the agreements which issue from

such processes are less inclusive, equitable and consensual than claimed by proponents.

On theoretical grounds and from empirical evidence it has been suggested that the basic assumptions that actors can come together in ways which are meaningfully less structured by power and will voluntarily give up power are ill-founded (Johnson and Wilson, 2000). Consequently it is suggested by critics that the outcomes of attempts to apply consensus building or collaborative approaches will often, perhaps always, conceal non-consensual processes behind a mask of claimed consensus (Richardson and Connelly, 2001). These may include situations in which consensus is only achieved between some of the relevant stakeholders, while others are only consulted or are excluded altogether (O’Riordan and Ward, 1997), or where the outcomes reflect coercion or compromises determined by the aims and values of the more powerful actors (Hastings, 1999b).

A second criticism of these approaches is that the focus on communicative action and the associated power relationships places an undue emphasis on arenas of public involvement themselves, and neglects the broader policy and political context within which they are embedded. Not only does this plausibly contribute to a degree of ‘blindness’ concerning the power relations which participants bring to such arenas, but it also overestimates the importance of the overt participatory processes themselves in terms of the creation of policy (Fainstein, 2000; Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000). Lastly the high value given to ‘good’ process neglects the issue of the desirability of the outcomes (Fainstein, 2000). This is not necessarily a problem, but there is clearly potential for conflict where substantive ends such as social justice or sustainable development are also valued, which is clearly the case with an initiative such as LA21.

A general critique

This second criticism also applies to the other theoretical accounts and guidance concerning public involvement considered so far: public involvement is seen as an identifiable and separate activity indulged in by government and the public, the value and function of which follow from the nature of that activity rather than from how it articulates with the rest of the policy making process and wider political and social structures. Thus most of the public involvement literature makes no reference to the extensive literature on communities or on policy implementation (Stoker, 1997; Hambleton, 1998). This separation has its origins in the liberal democratic view of how policy making and politics relate (Barrett and Hill, 1984), and the

consequent placing of the (highly valued) processes of public involvement within the political sphere. The policy process is implicitly conceived of in simple terms, essentially as an extension of the rational model in which public involvement generates outputs which have clear functions as unproblematic inputs into a linear policy making process (Boon, 1999). The appropriate nature of this function varies depending on the favoured model of democracy, ranging from information on preferences gleaned through consultation which will guide representatives, through decisions made collectively by representatives, the lay public and other stakeholders, to changes in the distribution and/or control of resources, through, for example, devolving power to citizen groups.

As was noted in Section 2.2.2, although this model is widely accepted by practitioners as 'the appropriate way to talk about policy making' and thus influences the way that public involvement is conceptualised (Leach, 1982: 7), both theoretical considerations and the nature of local authorities mean that this is not the way that policy making takes place in practice, even within the structures of a traditional local authority. It does seem, however, that much public involvement in practice assumes that this model holds good, and the neglect of how public involvement links to policy leads to the problem of its isolation and ineffectiveness. Thus a major government review in the early 1990s found no cases of community involvement where 'it [was] possible to extract a clear set of principles by which the information, ideas, attitudes and aspirations of an involved community were to be assembled, weighted and judged' (DoE, 1994: 38). In consequence more recent guidance stresses that local authorities need 'to recognise that participation has got to make a difference...[and]... needs to be linked to the political processes of the authority'(DETR, 1998b: §7 summary). Existing ways of conceptualising public involvement do not appear adequate for analysing such linkages.

To sum up, the theoretical work which supports most current participatory practice suffers from being over-simplified both in its conceptions of the actors involved and their relationships, and through its isolation of public involvement from the rest of the policy making process. Different strands of theory have different weaknesses. Arnstein's Ladder and its politically aware derivatives provide valuable insights but are hampered by their conflation of a number of analytically distinct variables onto a single axis and of the institutional complexity of the policy making environment into two monolithic and undifferentiated blocs. The consensus building and collaborative approaches arguably underestimate the importance and fixity of power

relations between policy makers. The more consensual derivatives of Arnstein suffer from both these problems. All these models have a strong normative base, deriving arguments for public involvement from a number of different theories of democracy. While this is clearly of value, it raises problems for their use as analytic tools, since as a corollary they are implicitly based on a 'romantic view' of the democratic process, and often of the role that public involvement could play within this (Abram and Vike, 2001).

3.3.3 Public involvement and policy making

Given these criticisms of existing conceptualisations and analyses of public involvement, this research requires a redescription which is more practically adequate, more power aware and less normative. Progress can be made towards such a framework through drawing on the work of a number of authors who, in different ways, have addressed the complexity of both the context in which public involvement takes place and its 'internal' characteristics. These two aspects are tightly connected through the way that the multiplicity of functions that a single process can be associated with gives rise to the possibility of strategic use and the management of public involvement, while their complex nature potentially provides the opportunity and the means for such management.

Considering the external context for public involvement first, policy making in local government typically involves many actors, both individuals and groups, each with their own interests and values which will affect the goals they seek and the decisions they make to support or resist particular policies or changes to the system. Public involvement programmes are plausibly no different. With potential impacts on other policies and on the processes of governance they are likely to be of concern to a range of actors, each with their view on what the public involvement should achieve and whether anticipated effects are desirable or not, depending on their particular political, institutional or personal agendas.

Alterman (1982) lists a very large number of possible goals for organisers and participants, ranging from instituting a participatory process as an end in itself through various substantive outcomes to personal and institutional goals. Of these the first is the aspect which is privileged by practitioners and theorists, but it is clearly only one among many. It also seems plausible that many, perhaps most, actors who engage in or have an interest in the effects of a public involvement process are more concerned with particular material and institutional outcomes than

with democratic values (Alterman, 1982; Rydin and Pennington, 2000). Alterman further suggests that due to this multiplicity of goals public involvement programmes are to be viewed as contested objects which are developed by a range of interested parties in a political arena. Contestation may occur both between the public and state actors, between different sectors of the community and between state actors, whether these are individuals or sections within a single institution or separate agencies (White, 1996; Johnson and Wilson, 2000). This contest will largely determine both the nature and the effects of public involvement, and so the power relations between the various actors will have a significant influence on the way public involvement is conceptualised and developed (Hastings, 1999b).

'Decision variables' for planning public involvement

Given that actors have such grounds for influencing public involvement, it remains to consider the characteristics of such processes which might be manageable, and which can form the elements of a descriptive framework. There are two possible focuses for management and influence – what actually happens in public involvement and what meaning it is given in the policy making process. Characterising a process by 'level of citizen control' is inadequate to capture the complexity of the distribution of control between the actors, and what it is that they have control over. The analyses of several authors who have recognised the need for a more detailed characterisation are drawn on and developed here. Alterman (1982) shows how public involvement strategies can be analysed in terms of 'decision variables' which need to be considered by initiators in devising a strategy, and which will be the subject of contestation. Thomas (1996) has used Alterman's framework, illustrating it with modern examples from the UK to produce perhaps the most useful current descriptive framework for public involvement relevant to LA21.

In addition to the 'level' of public involvement in a sense close to that of Arnstein (that is, the extent of effective impact on policy by members of the public) and the goals of the programme discussed above, these variables are

- the stage in the planning process at which the public will be involved
- the type of issue that is to be covered
- the resources which will be committed to the process; and
- who will be participating.

Burns *et al.*(1994) show that a variable which is missing from this and other analyses is geographical scale. A final variable is the actual methods to be used to engage with the public. It is widely recognised that different methods are more or

less suited to different purposes of public involvement (Thornley, 1977; Wilcox, 1994).

The following paragraphs briefly discuss each of these variables in turn.

Stage in the planning process

Timing is important in that early involvement increases the possibility of greater influence over the issues to be considered (Wilcox, 1994). This is consequently a frequently contested issue, with the public often demanding earlier involvement and thus more influence but often being excluded by those controlling the process - typically in contrast with other participants in the policy process (Simmie and French, 1989). The duration and continuity of involvement are also important to the role that the public can play in the policy making process and thus their opportunity to influence the nature and significance of their own inputs.

Type of issue 1: policy or action?

The second issue is the extent to which public involvement will be oriented towards influencing policy formulation. Despite the academic focus on such influence, much current practice which is referred to as 'participation' is more concerned with practical action on the part of the public (Sharp, 2001; Sharp and Connelly, 2002). Public involvement thus occurs along a continuum from individual actions within a framework established by the state and which are perceived as furthering the public good (for example, recycling waste) through planning and carrying out actions planned within the community to planning actions which will be implemented by an authority or other institutions (i.e. public involvement in policy formulation).

Type of issue 2: topics

Alterman and Thomas are both concerned that public involvement strategies should be tailored to the 'type' of issue under consideration - its degree of technicality, tangibility and so on. Further, the substantive content of the issues has consequences in terms of motivating potential participants to get involved, the possible outcomes of the process, and thus also the motivation for those outside the process to attempt to influence its nature. Since the nature of the issue is itself inevitably constructed (Yearley, 1992; Hajer, 1995) and may be contested, the agenda of a participatory process may not be fixed but be the subject of corresponding contestation, and so in turn affect who are considered to be appropriate participants.

Resources

The allocation of resources to public involvement is an obvious opportunity for control, and one which is often cited as a factor limiting the scope of public involvement (Wild and Marshall, 1997).

Participants

The question of who is to participate is obviously important, as this will determine who from the population as a whole has the opportunity to influence policy. Much public involvement is organised on a spatial basis, although it is increasingly recognised that the notion of a unitary 'community of place' with homogeneous interests and values is naïve and simplistic (Lowndes, 1995). This raises the issues of who from a geographically-defined population is to be involved and how they are to participate - as individuals, collectively as interest groups, or through representatives on either an interest or area basis. This in turn raises two linked issues about representativeness. If participants engage not simply as individuals but as representatives of groups, there will be questions as to how they interact with their group and thus the extent to which they can represent its interests in the participatory process (Chanan, 1997). Secondly, given the non-homogeneity of spatial communities any set of participants may not be 'complete', in the sense of representing the values and interests of the entire population - some groups expected to have divergent values and interests may not be represented or involved (Johnson and Wilson, 2000).

Extent in space

Public involvement is necessarily related to policy covering a specific location, but this policy will almost inevitably be connected to others concerning larger or smaller areas with which the area of interest is nested, and over which the level of citizen control may be very different (Burns *et al.*, 1994). The scale over which public involvement takes place clearly also can be a defining factor in who participates.

Methods

Finally, which methods to use to engage the public are obviously an important issue for those initiating a process, and in practice consideration of 'tools' often seems to override considerations of purpose (Thornley, 1977; Wilcox, 1994; DoE, 1994). However, to the extent that they are chosen with the purposes of public involvement in mind, there are clear differences between methods in terms of the ability to engage different groups, elicit views in more or less unconstrained ways and so on.

For example, questionnaires with closed questions provide a form of public involvement exercise in which the potential outputs are controlled (Thornley, 1977), as do some highly structured public meetings, while many of the more recently developed and innovative methods are explicitly aimed at 'opening up' the process to those less confident about airing their views or who are otherwise normally excluded (Stoker, 1997; NIF, 2000).

Impact: the significance of outputs

This final element of the process is that closest to the 'level of citizen control' of Arnstein and Wilcox. The determination of the significance that the outputs of a participatory process shall have is the point at which its potential to have an impact on policy is realised - the nexus between the public's involvement and the wider policy making processes in which it is embedded. Like the other characteristics described above it is a potential subject of policy making, an issue over which decisions have to be made, and therefore likely to be contested.

It is clear from the above that this 'level' is not a unitary characteristic of an entire public involvement process such as a LA21, but one which can only be specified relative to the other variables, in particular scale, issue and participants: processes can be characterised by the extent to which they give certain groups a certain amount of control over some issues in a specified area. Given this caveat, Wilcox's five-fold typology is useful, distinguishing between informing, consulting, deciding together, acting together, and supporting independent community interests. The first of these - in which the public's input is to receive authority information - can be extended to include 'acting on council instructions/advice' to incorporate active public involvement in schemes over which the public has no managerial control (for example recycling schemes).

The management of public involvement

This set of 'decision variables' provides a useful analysis of the nature of public involvement in practice. They are interlinked, each with potential impacts on others, and in particular on how seriously outputs are taken. Together they constitute a complex characterisation of public involvement processes, identifying aspects which are contestable and potentially manageable by actors in pursuit of their ends. However, as presented they are not related to each other in a structured way, and the literature gives little guidance as to whether such patterns might be expected to show up in predictable ways in practice. Alterman's analysis is essentially apolitical, while Thornley mentions the possibility of particular methods being used to control

the outputs of public involvement but does not elaborate (1977: 44). From a different perspective, Forester (1989, 1993) suggests that the involvement of the public is consciously managed through the directing and distortion of communication by those with power over the process, and moreover that an analysis of their interests can be used to partially explain and predict this process. While it is apparent that there is more to such processes than the control of information and 'shaping attention' this work does suggest that predictable regularities should exist between the characteristic variables of a particular public involvement process.

The literature reviewed does not develop this further. This material does, however, provide a descriptive framework which enables public involvement to be characterised in terms of timing, location, issue type, resourcing and participants, the level of influence the outputs are accorded, and related to the goals of the actors in and affected by the process. This is used in the case study analyses to describe the public involvement studied empirically, and the relationships between these variables and the possibility of *a priori* prediction is returned to in Chapter Ten.

3.4 Conclusion

This concluding section summarises the preceding review, and identifies in particular categorisations that will be used to structure and analyse the empirical research, implications for the discussion of public involvement in the context of sustainable development and LA21 in Chapters Four and Five, and areas of theoretical problems which will be addressed again in Chapter Ten.

The appropriate nature and extent of public involvement in governance is clearly much contested, supported by a great number of rationales. There are two important divisions within these positions: between those which favour a representative institutional arrangement and those supporting more direct public involvement of various kinds, and between those resting on consensual and conflictive theories of society. These divisions do not coincide, and within both approaches to democracy public involvement can be viewed as leading to either consensus or conflict. For the state to promote public involvement consequently carries risks to stability, and therefore requires management.

In practice representative democracy is the dominant institutionalised form in local government, and thus the main organising principle of the structures into which LA21 was introduced. Participatory forms are present, however, augmenting the representative democratic system, complementing it in localised citizen

involvement, and challenging it through citizen action. While past decades have seen a general rise in the levels of officially sponsored public involvement the representative structure remains intact. This structure is, however, only one element in a web and hierarchy of governance institutions, which collectively limit the impact of 'official participation' and call into question the adequacy of traditional democratic theorising.

In consequence the nature of local democracy as instantiated in local authorities is very complex, particularly as it is the outcome of processes and reform agendas which have drawn on diverse rationales yet been expressed in a single institutional setting. However, two patterns or trajectories of reform have been identified, which are plausibly embodied in recognisable types of authority. Together with the traditional authority, these market- and community-enabling authorities form a typology which relates authority structures and democratic culture which was used to identify authorities with potentially differing implications for LA21. There is also a further strand in participatory democratic values and practice found in local authority support for local community development.

The nature of public involvement processes themselves has been theorised and practised rather separately, despite the apparently clear need to link such processes with broader policy making. The literature in this field shows that important aspects of public involvement are the degree to which it delivers citizen control and/or the possibility of state and citizens working collectively on policy. However, it would seem that public involvement and its links can be analysed in more complex and less normative ways, leading to a characterisation in terms of timing, location, issue type, resourcing and participants, level of influence, and the goals of the actors involved.

Given the above, the introduction of a putatively participatory initiative such as LA21 raises a number of issues. Firstly it necessarily enters an existing policy and institutional environment, with its own rationales, history and current trajectories, including those concerned with public involvement (Healey *et al.*, 1998; Hull, 2000). Secondly, although the notion of 'public involvement' is ambiguous, the language of Agenda 21 raised the possibility that LA21 could transform local governance (Tuxworth, 1994; Freeman *et al.*, 1996). From the perspective of the existing representative democratic system, 'radical change' could mean either giving the public substantial control over local authority policy making, or control over a significantly decentralised local government system. Less radical, but still

constituting a major change, would be the creation of structures and a culture which would give the public substantial influence if not control.

The last of these is close to the reform agenda embodied in the community-enabling authority concept and present also in the current 'modernisation' reforms. It might therefore be expected that LA21 and these agendas would be mutually supportive, both involving high levels of public involvement premised on the existence of consensus. The relationship of these ideas with the substantive, sustainable development content of LA21 is the subject of the following chapters and a focus of the empirical work and analysis.

Finally, the review has revealed a number of theoretical problems with the current literature. Neither democratic theory nor the conceptualisations of public involvement appear to be well articulated with existing, complex conceptualisations of policy making processes. The former is largely normative, concerned with the underpinning democratic rationales and thus the justification for public involvement, rather than its broader functions in real processes or its limitations in really-existing patterns of governance. Much of the latter focuses on public involvement to the exclusion of the broader policy context in which it is embedded as part of the functioning of local government. One aim of the research is therefore to use the empirical findings to address these problems, and make some progress towards improving theoretical understanding of how public involvement engages with policy making.

Chapter 4 Sustainable Development

4.1 Introduction

Sustainable development has become a dominant concept in modern political rhetoric and policy making and is the driving force of the Local Agenda 21 policy initiative, which ostensibly aims to plan for and realise sustainable development at the local level. It is therefore an important factor in policy making for LA21, though given the material presented in the preceding chapters it should not be expected to be the only concept involved.

While 'the concept' has become dominant, it is subscribed to by people from a very wide range of political viewpoints, who clearly use the term 'sustainable development' in different ways (Lélé, 1991). Rather than concluding that this reflects its vacuity, Jacobs (1995) and others see sustainable development as another essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1995: see Section 3.2.1). It is over its many possible legitimate but conflicting operational interpretations that contestation takes place, and despite the fixing of the core meaning when the term was first given widespread political currency in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), disagreement inevitably continues. Policy-making for sustainable development is likely to be constituted at least in part by a contest over whose interpretation of sustainable development is to prevail in rhetoric and practice (Jacobs, 1995).

This chapter investigates this key concept in three stages. The first sets out its primary, widely accepted definitions and the assumptions that underpin these. The second section looks at how the substantive content of these is susceptible to differing interpretations, producing different operational meanings. It reviews how these have been characterised in the literature, leading to a framework used to characterise the approaches to sustainable development found in the empirical work. The third stage looks at the roles that have been envisaged for the public in achieving sustainable development, and draws on the literature and ideas from Chapter Three to explore the relationships and tensions implicit in these roles which will aid the analysis and explanation of the evolution of the policy making processes.

As in the preceding chapter, a further outcome of these reviews is the identification of problems with the theoretical material – issues which will be returned to in Chapter Ten, where developments are proposed in the light of the field work. A final section draws together these different strands to suggest how the theory and practice of sustainable development, public involvement and democracy appear to

relate to one another, and the consequences for this research in terms of analytic frameworks and issues to be investigated.

4.2 The core meaning of sustainable development

The broadly agreed, first level meaning of 'sustainable development' is set out in two widely used definitions:

- the Brundtland definition: development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987: 8);
- the World Conservation Union definition: improving the quality of life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems (WCU et al., 1991).

UK policy is also framed by the government's own definition:

- Sustainable development is about ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come (HM Government, 1999).

Despite their differences, these encapsulate a concept which sets out a trajectory for the development of society which is different from dominant actual and other possible trajectories. At its heart, sustainable development is a redefinition of the goals of human activity away from purely economic and material 'progress' towards a recognition of the importance of wider human and environmental needs and constraints.

There are a number of interrelated but separable core components of the concept (FoE, 1989; Jacobs, 1991, 1995):

- **environmental protection**, leading to the imperative of **economic/environmental integration** in planning and implementation;
- **equity** both within current populations (intra-generational equity) and between current and future generations (inter-generational equity) - the latter is also known as **futurity**;
- improving **quality of life**, recognising that human well-being is not defined (solely) by increasing income and material standard of living; and
- **participation** by all groups in society in achieving sustainable development.

Economic growth is also a core component of the Brundtland Report and subsequent international declarations. It is given particular and unusual prominence in the UK definition, which includes ‘maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment’ (HM Government, 1999).

None of these ideas is new: all but the first are the traditional core issues of political struggle (Jacobs, 1995). What is new is their integration with each other and with the need to consider the environmental context of development into a single policy trajectory. Sustainable development is thus a very powerful and hopeful concept, incorporating the principle that goals which have traditionally been believed to be incompatible can be mutually adjusted and collectively realised.

4.2.1 Underpinning assumptions

The concept is underpinned by several important and interlinked assumptions and principles (Jacobs, 1995). The first three concern its substantive content.

- **Human welfare** is the over-riding goal of the sustainable development programme, which incorporates the view that the value of the environment is principally as a human life-support system (Redclift, 1997).
- **Scientism and environmental realism.** Sustainable development embodies a realist and positivist view that science describes the world objectively, and thus that carrying capacities and environmental problems and solutions can be accurately identified and specified*.
- **Environmental economic optimism:** the belief that economic growth and environmental and social goals are compatible.

The next group relate to the processes of achieving sustainability.

- **Environmental political optimism:** the belief that in an increasingly globalised economy any political and social programme such as sustainable development can deflect the current path of capitalism. More broadly, the assumption is that a sustainable society is either compatible with the basic principles and values of really-existing liberal capitalist democracies or at least that a transition can be made smoothly from the current position. Jacobs argues that without support

* This environmental realism is not to be confused with the critical realism introduced in Chapter Two.

from capitalist forces such a belief is hopelessly idealistic, but also that such support is increasingly evident (1995).

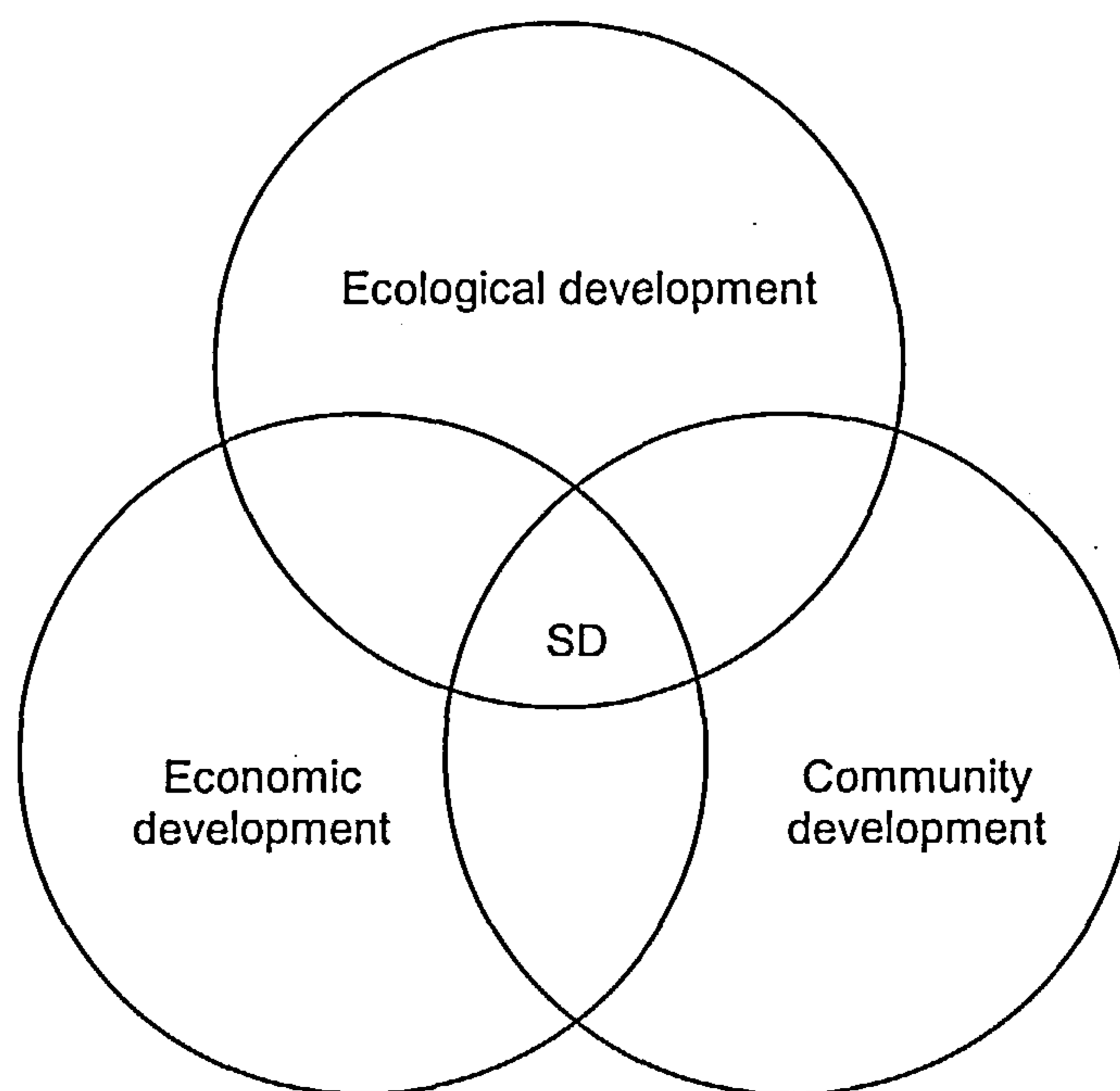
- **Consensus.** The possibility of integrating traditionally opposing viewpoints on major issues such as equity, growth and environmental protection is premised on an overarching and overriding consensus, grounded in the realisation that humanity collectively faces environmental problems, and must act collectively to solve them if we are to have a future (Healey, 1996). Proponents of sustainable development thus implicitly claim that there are and must be no insuperable structural conflicts in society.
- **Modernist managerialism:** the belief that humankind can manage the environment in a rational, planned way, and thus that the currently unsustainable development path can be corrected through concerted effort, based on scientific knowledge and technological ingenuity.
- **Institutional trust and legitimacy.** The sustainable development programme is based on the assumption that the institutions which could carry out such a managerialist project have the legitimacy and can engage constructively with the public to achieve shared aims.

It is apparent that these include principles which are not universally accepted and assumptions about the world which may not be well-founded. Two kinds of challenges are identifiable. First are political issues concerning the state and its citizens which form the principal subject of this research – the relationships between consensus and managerialism, and the extent to which political optimism is justified given political and institutional realities. Secondly, it is possible that environmental economic or political optimism are unjustified, and that economic forces - however these are conceived of – will undermine the feasibility of sustainable development, and particularly of locally-focused programmes (Jacobs, 1995; Gibbs, 1998). Further, governmental ability to act ‘to contribute to, or detract from, citizen well-being’ (Harding, 1996: 645) is also constrained by the sheer complexity of the policy issues and the limits of current understanding of the policy changes needed to bring about sustainable development, compounded by the institutional fragmentation referred to in the preceding chapter. These broader constraints and challenges are not the subject of this research. The policy making processes of local authorities are premised on the basis that sustainable development is at least a rational aim for policy, and the same assumption is made here, while acknowledging the possible presence of such constraints.

4.3 Contested meanings

The broad concept of sustainable development is often presented in guidance by modelling the field of interest as three overlapping circles representing concerns with economic growth, social justice and the environment, with sustainable development represented as occupying the overlapping centre, to suggest that it integrates the three areas of concern (see Figure 4.1, drawn from ICLEI, 1996). However, to give operational meaning to the concept a set of ‘operational objectives’ has to be specified (Lélé, 1991), each of which sets out the bare bones of a solution to the ‘environment-and-development problem’ through showing how social, economic and environmental programmes will be integrated (Lafferty, 1996: 187). This is the level of contestation, since within the central triangle differing conceptions of sustainable development are possible, incorporating different visions of a sustainable society, means of achieving the transition and thus roles for the state and various sectors of society in working for sustainable development. It is these – both as values and outcomes – that are the substantive issues of the LA21 policy making processes. They are potentially very varied, and a substantial theoretical literature has developed which simplifies and classifies them into a number of distinctive positions with differing operational outcomes and underlying ethics.

Figure 4.1 Sustainable development (from ICLEI, 1996)



4.3.1 Characterisations of sustainable development

The literature is dominated by typologies based on single analytical axes. These group together disparate aspects of sustainable development, claim that these are inherently linked and so conclude that in practice there is a rather limited number of coherent interpretations of sustainable development. For example, Pearce (1993: 18-19) and Baker *et al.* (1997) draw on distinctions made by environmental philosophers to identify four conceptions of sustainable development which each consist of associated ethical positions, types of economy and management strategies. To this list Baker *et al.* add characteristics of civil society. Such analyses are very similar, in particular in that the extreme positions identified are hardly recognisable as 'sustainable development' (Baker *et al.*, 1997). This reduces the sustainable development typology to two contrasting positions characterised as 'weak' and 'strong', bracketed by a purportedly unsustainable, traditional economic paradigm position at the weak end and a model of an ideal 'green' society at the other.

More circumspectly other authors have identified opposing positions in a number of fields and then claimed that in practice these tend to cohere into two conceptions which approximate to these 'weak' and 'strong' versions of sustainable development. Thus Dobson (1996a) examines a range of problem causes and proposed solutions across ontological, epistemological, social, economic and institutional domains and identifies contrasting 'market' and 'equity' approaches into which these can be sorted. Jacobs (1995) identifies 'faultlines' within the concept of sustainable development which generate opposing pairs of positions on the scope of the subject area, attitude to environmental protection, equity and public involvement and claims that in practice these coalesce into 'conservative' and 'radical' conceptions.

However, as analytical frameworks these various binary characterisations of sustainable development are unsatisfactory. The claims for consonance between the different facets of each position either embody unsubstantiated theoretical claims or reflect empirical observations which both Jacobs and Dobson accept are generalisations. Two aspects are particularly problematic: the conflating of concerns with equity with the relationship between economics and the environment, and the assumption of a close relationship between sustainable development which is 'strong' in its view of the importance of sustaining natural capital and its incorporation of participatory democratic political structures.

These bipolar distinctions reflect normative rather than analytical linkages between the philosophical, political and institutional aspects of sustainable development. They have their roots in a deeply *political* disagreement over the trajectory of development which is present throughout the history of sustainable development as a concept in widespread usage (Jacobs, 1995). Its origins lie in rising concerns during the 1960s and 1970s about the damage that the dominant paradigm of economic development was doing to the environment (Baker *et al.*, 1997). Beneficiaries of the status quo – pre-eminently Western governments and economic interests – supported a response which minimised the challenge to the political and economic order by promoting reform to deal with the environmental problems. This developed into the idea of sustainable development as ‘ecological modernisation’ – an adaptation of capitalist production systems (Hajer, 1995). Concurrently a broad range of groups interpreted, or used, the environmental threat as a way of challenging the dominance of Western capitalism by claiming that fundamental reforms were necessary to avert environmental disaster, and so proposed a radically different trajectory of socially and environmentally sustainable development. The explicit grounds for this challenge were thus different from those of the traditional Left, though proponents could draw on Left as well as Green political theory to sustain their viewpoint.

Both conceptions were in circulation by the 1980s and contributed to the development of the definition of the concept that entered the political mainstream through the Brundtland Report and Agenda 21. These specified operational objectives incorporating elements of both, including emphases on both growth and on cutting consumption in the North, and proposing a managerial approach as well as highlighting the importance of public involvement in achieving sustainable development. For some of its proponents this is sustainable development’s achievement and an explanation of its dominance – the genuine synthesis of traditionally mutually opposing goals and so the development of consensus between traditionally antagonistic groups (Jacobs, 1997; Connelly and Smith, 1999: 57). However, the existence of different conceptions of what sustainable development means in practice, and in particular the historical roots of some of these, suggests that this synthesis is incomplete and traditional tensions continue to be played out in the arena of sustainable development policy making. Nevertheless, the introduction of the term into policy has clearly achieved some reconciliation and changed the terms of debate – as witnessed by the rejection of the concept from the very different perspectives of some neo-Marxists (Luke, 1995), Greens (Richardson, 1997; Næss, 1997) and free-market economists (Beckerman, 1994).

4.3.2 A descriptive and analytical framework

Despite the importance of these normative viewpoints in the literature, a more open, agnostic approach is more appropriate to the investigation and analysis of what 'counts as' sustainable development in the field. Following Dobson's injunction not to let 'analytical purity ... sully our understanding of political practice' (Dobson, 1996a: 421) the various dimensions of the concept will be separated, allowing their connections (or lack thereof) to be explored both in practice, as instantiated in actors' views and policies, and theoretically in the light of the empirical work.

Returning to the simple notion represented by the three overlapping circles, sustainable development can be located in the very broad field of competing views of society which specify the appropriate relationships between growth, social justice and environmental protection. Characterising any given conception as represented in a policy, an individual's values or a piece of policy rhetoric then involves the questions:

What are taken as being the appropriate productive and ethical relationships between humans and the environment and amongst humans? and

Who is to control the process of policy making to achieve and support the appropriate relationships? (The latter question can be restated as what is the appropriate relationship between citizens and state in respect of achieving sustainable development?)

These are considered in turn in this and the following section.

Instead of adopting a normative stance, the aim here is to establish a simple analytical framework for describing the goals of sustainable development. The starting point is the principal distinguishing characteristic of sustainable development, its bringing together of economic, environmental and social priorities in some kind of 'integration' (UNCED, 1992 §8) or 'harmony' (WCED, 1987). Within the concept there is clear potential for different emphases and levels of success in incorporating these three – variations which can be considered by assessing the 'scope' of any particular conception of sustainable development (Jacobs, 1995). While Jacobs considered this to be one of the four faultlines which separate out different interpretations of sustainable development, and was particularly concerned with the marginalisation of equity in many interpretations of sustainable development, the concept is more generally applicable as a way of

characterising the extent to which social, economic and environmental priorities are present and the balance between them.

It is also apparent that there are ambiguities in the notion of 'integration' of the three fields in sustainable development: whether it implies the successful pursuit of goals in all three, decision-making which takes all three into account, or simply the pursuit of the three in isolation without such consideration or attempts to achieve synergy (Hams, 1994). Achieving either of the first two will require at least co-ordination between organisations or departments with different sectoral responsibilities, and will plausibly be facilitated by the integration of organisational structures. Adopting sustainable development objectives thus has implications for policy making structures and consequently the degree of integration may be contested, as its pursuit is likely to intersect with important organisational issues and potential conflicts. This degree of integration – the extent to which the three fields are considered jointly – is thus another dimension which will be used to characterise sustainable development in practice.

Whatever the interpretation of the concept, sustainable development implies some degree of change from previous development policies. The potential extent of such change varies between interpretations, from the trivial to the revolutionary. What would constitute 'radical' change is clearly not precisely definable, but it is taken here to mean substantial change either in the direction of giving environmental issues significant weight in decision making, particularly over economic policy, or in the direction of giving more priority to equity in the name of social sustainability. Equally, the genuine integration of all three fields in policy making and outcomes would constitute a radical departure from previous policies.

The foregoing also implies that what can actually be considered to be 'sustainable development' is not well-defined. To enable any interpretation adopted by actors to be considered it was their definitions that were used to set the boundaries of the research – policies claimed to be 'sustainable' were not ruled in or out according to prior, normative criteria.

4.3.3 Summary

To summarise, the concept of sustainable development is taken here to refer to a range of solutions to the issue of how to reconcile the potentially conflicting goals of economic growth, social justice and protection of the environment. However, different interpretations of the concept involve different relative prioritisations of

goals between these three fields, and disagreement between proponents of different positions as to which is 'really' sustainable development. From this perspective there is no unitary meaning of 'sustainable development' but rather a range of possible meanings, any of which could be subscribed to by actors in the policy-making process, and over which there may be contestation between actors giving rise to different local interpretations of the concept in rhetoric and in practice. The common grouping of these meanings into an opposing pair of positions only captures some of the potential range, though it may well describe common positions found in practice.

Some of these meanings hold the potential for radical change, including the prioritisation of the environment over human development, prioritising social justice, or the achievement of a synthesis between environmental and human needs in a society no longer dominated by the imperative of economic development. This potential reflects the concept's roots in challenges to the dominant economic and development paradigm, and also the synthesising aspect inherent in some interpretations which claim that environmentally and socially sustainable economic development is possible and necessary. This in itself poses challenges to traditional development paradigms and political traditions, particularly in the implied abandonment of material standard of living as the only measure of progress and its substitution by a more holistically defined 'quality of life'.

So far the discussion has provided answers to the first of the questions above, setting out criteria of holism and degree of integration for characterising interpretations of sustainable development. Leaving aside the arguments that suggest that sustainable development is a chimera, whose achievement is precluded by economic and political forces, the following section addresses the issue of its political feasibility and the question *who is to control the process of policy making to achieve and support the appropriate relationships between humanity and nature?*

4.4 The role of the people in sustainable development

4.4.1 Introduction

Policy makers and commentators approaching sustainable development from every perspective are agreed that public involvement is an essential component of the process of achieving a sustainable society. The recognition that the transition away from unsustainable practices involves changes at every level from macro policy down to details of individuals' daily consumption and resource use entails that in

some way everyone in society must be involved, whether in policy making, in changing their own actions or in supporting others in their actions (Jacobs, 1991; CAG Consultants, 2001). The roles that are proposed for the public and the state vary greatly, deriving partly from different interpretations of sustainable development but also from the wider philosophical and political arguments about the rationales for public involvement in policy making and implementation which were explored in Chapter Three. Of particular importance, and placing constraints on the debate over appropriate roles, is the emphasis on consensus which dominates sustainable development policy.

While the principal issues raised by the discussion of the substantive content of 'sustainable development' are related to its inherent ambiguities, the following examination of the public involvement aspects of achieving sustainable development reveals not only ambiguity but also tensions within each possible interpretation. It starts with Agenda 21, which laid the basis for public involvement in LA21 with its pervading emphasis on public involvement. This asserts a combination of rationales which are difficult to reconcile with each other and the logic of the concept of sustainable development. Following an exploration of this normative position the discussion turns to the two opposing, more coherent but still 'unstable' positions that can be developed from it, and so identifies potential problems with the implementation of public involvement policies which were examined in the empirical research.

4.4.2 Three approaches to public involvement in sustainable development

Normative public involvement: the Brundtland Report and Agenda 21

The emergence of sustainable development into the mainstream of political discussion with the publication of the Brundtland Report and the Rio Conference involved a substantial commitment to the principle of public involvement in governance (WCED, 1987; UNCED, 1992). These documents stress the importance of 'a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making' (WCED, 1987: 65) and 'broad public participation in decision-making' (UNCED, 1992: §23.2). Agenda 21 in particular makes frequent references to such involvement throughout. These references emphasise and re-emphasise two basic principles: that democratic involvement is essential to the achievement of sustainable development, and that all groups in society must work together. While many of these references are vague, the document also proposes a range of specific kinds of involvement:

- receiving information, and so supporting and legitimising state action (WCED, 1987; UNCED, 1992: §23.2);
- learning and changing values, leading to personal behaviour change and further participation in the following categories (WCED, 1987; UNCED, 1992: §28.1, §36.3);
- contributing views in a consultative process, as in the key local government chapter in Agenda 21: ‘By 1996, most local authorities in each country should have undertaken a consultative process with their populations...’ (UNCED, 1992: §28.2);
- policy making in partnership through consensus building processes: Chapter 28 continues ‘...and achieved a consensus on a “local Agenda 21” for the community’ (UNCED, 1992: §28.2);
- controlling policy, both at a local authority area level and through local decentralisation (WCED, 1987, but not found in Agenda 21).

Each of these implies complementary roles for the state – instructing, raising awareness, consulting, sharing and devolving decision making powers.

The above list presents the roles in a spectrum of increasing ‘level of involvement’, in the sense described in Chapter Three. They also span wide ranges on the policy-action spectrum and the scale over which public involvement is to be effective, from the personal to the national. Within them can be identified two kinds of roles for the public and the state, essentially distinguished by who has the responsibility or power to define problems and solutions, and to control the subsequent policy process. These fall on either side of Jacobs’s ‘participation’ faultline, distinguishing conservative and radical views of sustainable development (1995). In the above list, the first two give the public an instrumental role in achieving sustainable development and the state the responsibility for deciding the goals and policies to be followed, while the last two give the public a degree of control. Consultation lies closer to the middle, though public consultation leaves final decision making power in the hands of the state.

All these forms of public involvement are, however, present together in Agenda 21 and the Brundtland Report, with the implication that they are all mutually consistent and desirable. The rationale which supports this is the very general assertion that in order to save both humanity and the planet everyone needs to contribute and to work together (UNCED, 1992: §1.1) - we are all ‘in the same boat’ (Macnaghten, 1996).

This provides powerful and concrete grounds for the assumption that consensus is desirable and feasible that underpins Agenda 21's version of sustainable development in several ways, and so denies or ignores the contested nature of the concept. At Gallie's first, most general level, it is assumed that a broad consensus exists over the need for sustainable development, and that education and awareness raising about the reality of environmental problems will extend the scope of this consensus. At the level of operational objectives, where contestation might be expected, it is assumed that public involvement will generate consensus, through consultation and consensus building processes. Finally, the general consensus over the nature of the problem and the need for action will generate public support, and so legitimacy, and public co-operation.

These varied forms of public involvement, and the general requirements for both widespread participation and consensus, could be incorporated in a modified representative democratic system. At local level this would be a local authority more responsive to the public, allowing them more involvement in goal setting but maintaining the role of elected representatives in balancing out competing interests, enforcing collectively desirable but individually unwelcome policies, and managing the inevitable tensions between expert and lay knowledge, and economic, social and environmental ends (Jacobs, 1991, 1995). Such a system is obviously very like the community enabling and 'modernising' local government reform agendas described in the preceding chapter. Agenda 21 and the development of LA21 thus potentially offer support to such reforms, particularly since the latter have no substantive grounds for their necessary underlying consensus apart from a general notion of the public good, whereas sustainable development is solidly grounded in the need to stave off environmental disaster.

However, the substantive ends of sustainable development raise two potentially serious issues for the widespread involvement of the public in governance. Firstly, in contrast to local government reform Agenda 21 envisages a process which is not only consensual and participatory, but also oriented towards very substantial change – as was suggested in Chapter Three this is a combination with few antecedents in political theory.

Secondly, there is a tension imposed by the philosophical basis of Agenda 21's version of sustainable development, which treats environmental problems as real, objectively knowable by science and susceptible to managed solutions (Jacobs, 1995). However, if there is also to be 'widespread public involvement in decision-

making' what guarantee can there be that the outcomes will be solutions to the environmental problems? If the assumption of a basic consensus is ill-founded, the outcomes of public involvement could be socially acceptable but not environmentally sustainable. Equally plausibly, public involvement might not generate consensus, given that policies for achieving sustainable development goals will have uneven distributional outcomes. Thus there is a dilemma, that while sustainable development appears to imply a level of democratic public involvement, there is no guarantee that the outcome of such involvement will be environmentally sustainable. There are a number of potential responses to this, distinguished by whether they attempt to embrace both horns of the dilemma or opt for one or the other.

Consideration of the public involvement enjoined by Agenda 21 and subsequent guidance on LA21 shows that they take the first of these approaches. For instance, the LGMB guidance envisages a participatory but managerialist approach to sustainability, underpinned by a realist position on environmental problems but a more-or-less subjective approach to defining quality of life (LGMB, 1994a, b and elsewhere). The whole range of public involvement is promoted. This is not necessarily a coherent approach, with potential problems for policy making in terms of accommodating the different kinds of public inputs. The extent of these problems, and the ways in which actors in policy making processes have coped with or resolved them, are an important subject of the empirical part of this research.

Attempts have also been made to reconcile the tensions in a number of different ways. As an ideal, Jacobs (1995) envisages a collaborative process bringing together equally valued scientific and local knowledges and value systems in the sustainability planning process, though the mechanisms of this are not made explicit. More pragmatically, where the possibility of valid lay scientific knowledge is acknowledged, public input can be accommodated within a process based on a realist understanding of environmental problems (Wynne, 1996). Further, within the realist perspective scientific environmental education is seen as empowering (Paehlke, 1996): for citizens to engage in the political processes of defining acceptable environmental limits to economic activity policy making they must have access to good information and be able to understand it (UNCED, 1992: §8.4, §36).

Education is more broadly seen as an important way of overcoming the tension in a process of increasing consensus through aligning public knowledge and values with that of the scientists and managers. Even strong proponents of public involvement

in sustainable development planning have conceded the need to combine it with long-term education for sustainability (Agyeman and Evans, 1995). This does, however, represent a move away from a reconciliation of the tension towards an adoption of the less participatory horn of the dilemma. The following sections look more closely at positions which unambiguously embrace one or other of the horns - Jacobs's 'conservative' and 'radical' approaches to public involvement in sustainable development. Neither is free of internal epistemological and political tensions, yet both are positions which are held by actors in policy making processes. As with the normative position outlined above, these tensions are potentially important drivers and constraints for policy making as actors attempt to operationalise theoretically troubled concepts.

A conservative approach to public involvement

The realist and managerialist conservative position informs many policy documents, in particular those emanating from central government and some local authorities (Macnaghten *et al.*, 1995). Its justification for reducing the role played by the public derives from both epistemological and political arguments.

Epistemologically it is rooted in environmental realism and scientism. The reality and severity of environmental problems, the complex physical nature of many of them and their undetectability without sophisticated instruments and modelling imply that they can only be defined and solved by scientific experts and state politicians and officials acting on the basis of scientific advice. In an extreme form this viewpoint was prevalent in early formulations of the environmental problem, which justified authoritarian solutions in the name of humanity's survival (Hardin, 1968; Pepperman Taylor, 1996). Although such political views are now considered to be discredited (Pepperman Taylor, 1996), the unavoidable tension in the 'green case' still exists: that while 'science' (i.e. technology) is widely believed to be the cause of environmental problems, scientific knowledge seems inescapably implicated in their definition. For invisible or long-term problems, rejecting technological methods of detection and scientific theory can fatally undermine the claim that a problem exists at all (Yearley, 1992)!

The case for expert decision making is reinforced by the converse arguments that public involvement might generate 'wrong answers' in terms of environmental sustainability: that people simply have neither the knowledge nor the right values to make sufficiently informed decisions on such matters; that a consensus would not be reached, and therefore it is important that experts decide, even if the people are

consulted; and that there is no way to adequately canvass the views of all those who might have a claim to participate. The last reflects not only the normal problems of extending public involvement, but the global, future and environmental aspects of sustainable development. Dobson (1996b) argues that the democratic community must include those who cannot represent themselves through traditional means. Future generations and other species can only be represented indirectly and their claims weighed against local, current and human interests by disinterested decision-makers.

The above arguments have clear parallels with those which more generally support representative democracy (see Section 3.2.1), with particular emphases and additions due to the specific nature of sustainable development as a substantive policy field. Given the unacceptability of political authoritarianism, this conservative position envisages roles for the people in achieving sustainable development which are close to those of traditional representative democracy. Achieving the necessary reforms requires legitimation, support and uncoerced action on the part of the public (Jacobs, 1991: 47). Consensus over their necessity is important in easing such changes, but following the argument made above (Section 3.2.1) that representative democracy in practice rests as much on acquiescence as genuine consensus, the latter can be seen as a pragmatic rather than ethical requirement within this viewpoint.

Within this approach, therefore, the role of the people is to change their behaviour in line with expert advice and legal requirements, but *not* to be involved in setting the policy agenda beyond supporting sustainable development programmes through the ballot box. In order to ensure that members of the public act 'properly not only in elections but in their own behaviour' (Weber, 1995) they must be well-informed and have the right values – thus in parallel with managing sustainable development the state has a role in awareness raising and educating the public (UNCED, 1992: §36). As Jacobs (1995) points out, however, there is scope within this approach for the inclusion of 'major stakeholders' in society at a policy making level, since they are perceived to have expert status within their own fields. Thus academics, business groups and major non-governmental environmental organisations can be brought in, whereas 'ordinary members of the public' do not have a role in the process.

This position thus excludes a fundamental aspect of sustainable development as envisaged by both the Brundtland Report and Agenda 21. Despite the apparent strength of its case, the assumptions on which it is based are challenged on both

epistemological and political grounds by approaches to sustainable development which embrace the second, radical and participatory horn of the dilemma.

A radical approach to public involvement

Proponents of Jacobs's radical interpretation emphasise the involvement of 'ordinary people' in objective setting as well as in implementation of sustainable development. As with theories of participatory democracy more generally, this interpretation is far from unitary, encompassing a range of positions on both the appropriate forms and forums for public involvement. Thus public involvement can be in local governance, as prescribed in Chapter 28 of Agenda 21, or in control and/or management of resources, as envisaged in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987: 63), and can range from working in partnership with the state to control through management or referenda. What these positions have in common is a belief in the importance of effective public involvement, and a rejection of the 'top down' conservative approach. Similarly the justifications for these positions are equally varied, but can be divided into epistemological challenges to environmental realism and scientism and political objections to the assumptions which underpin the economic and political feasibility of the project.

Both the capacity and the objectivity of science, and so its claim to pre-eminence in defining and tackling environmental problems, have been challenged. There is a strong case for supposing that many environmental problems are too complex and uncertain for traditional scientific knowledge to comprehend (Carpenter, 1995; Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996). Moreover, the 'facts' on which environmental policy-making processes are based derive largely from very indeterminate research, of which both the design and analysis involve assumptions which are the product of social and political processes. These are typically obscured from public scrutiny and preclude public involvement, yet it is the myth of 'objectivity' which justifies this exclusion: recognition that scientific 'facts' are value-laden removes the justification for privileging scientific over lay knowledge (Jacobs, 1995).

Whatever the status of the scientific inputs, decisions about their policy implications are inherently political. Within the realist perspective even such apparently technical concepts such as 'carrying capacity' and 'safe pollutant level' involve trade-offs between different values (Owens, 1997), while it can also be argued that the construction of environmental states of affairs *as problems* at all is a social and political process (Burningham and Cooper, 1999). This implies that even a narrow definition of sustainable development in terms of environmental problems involves

inherently subjective processes, and so challenges the claims of elite decision makers.

Broader interpretations which address the concerns for quality of life and meeting needs explicit in the WCU and Brundtland definitions of sustainable development are more clearly subjective. Defining either of these concepts and the subsequent policy requirements implies the participation of those whose needs and quality of life is at stake, and thus the task of defining the goals of sustainable development is one for the public through debate (Myerson and Rydin, 1996). Similarly, the necessary – and great – changes needed to bring about the transition to a more sustainable society are intrinsically a matter of values, and thus political rather than technical (Buckingham-Hatfield and Evans, 1996). Further, it is argued that such value change will not arise from instruction, but can only be engendered by involvement in goal setting (WCED, 1987; Maclaren, 1996).

The political challenges cluster around the assumptions that the state is able and willing to manage the transition to sustainability successfully, and the corollary that the public recognises this ability and the state's legitimacy to act. Beck (1992) and Fischer (1996) argue that industrial society has 'progressed' to being a 'risk society', in which people's lives are affected by global environmental dangers over which they have no sense of personal control, and no trust in 'science' and government to solve the problems, since they are implicated in the creation of the problems as part of a combined industrial/political establishment. Macnaghten *et al.*'s research (1995) provides empirical support for this, suggesting that the assumption of a basically benign and co-operative relationship between state and citizenry does not hold good, and failure by local authorities to recognise this fatally undermines the whole consensual thrust of Local Agenda 21.

Further, it is argued that the current political/economic system has not only been the cause of environmental crisis but that it has systematically resulted in an inequitable distribution of environmental goods and bads (Eckersley, 1992; Evans, 1997). Unchanged it cannot therefore be trusted to deliver equitable solutions to the crisis, and must therefore be modified. Supporters of this view assert that this should involve the inclusion in the policy debate of those affected, and derive support from empirical evidence that democratic systems tend to be more environmentally responsible than either authoritarian regimes or the inherently undemocratic global private sector (Paehlke, 1988, 1996).

Despite the breadth and variety of these challenges, they essentially all make the same claim: that the possibility of achieving environmentally sustainable and equitable development rests on the introduction of more public involvement into governance. However, as with the variants on participatory democracy outlined in Chapter Three, there is a wide range in the democratic forms proposed as being most appropriate for achieving sustainable development. Many of the same arguments are deployed in this more specific context, and proposed political forms include a range between the broadening of current government structures to enable more citizen influence, through partial decentralisation to political struggle in opposition to the state (de Geus, 1996; Dryzek 1996) or radical decentralisation into self-sufficient communities practising a form of primitive, direct democracy (Bookchin, 1971).

Two questions arise at this point concerning the possibility of introducing more participatory democracy as a step towards sustainable development: can the state adapt in such a way, and, more fundamentally, is the case for participatory democracy as a way to sustainable development a good one? Although a close relationship is often assumed by proponents of both there are significant tensions which can be expected to be revealed in any practical attempt at implementation.

If the assumptions of consensus over the need for change from current unsustainable policies and of the possibility of reaching consensus on the policy implications hold good, then in principle the state should be able to adjust, either by finding new ways to engage with its citizens or facilitating their empowerment and disengagement. Several authors suggest that if consensus does not currently exist it could be built through participatory processes. These might be deliberative forums for overcoming conflicts of interest and discursively creating consensus around newly developed understandings of shared interest (for example Healey, 1996), or more general initiatives to devolve power in order to rebuild trust between state and citizen and so enable further public involvement (Macnaghten *et al.*, 1995). The practical challenge for the state, and so the central political policy imperative of Agenda 21 is to create structures and adapt current workings to enable these processes to occur.

However, as expected from the discussion in Chapter Three, proponents of a more participatory Green politics do not all subscribe to a consensual approach. Beck's arguments and many people's experience of the state and 'big business' overriding local communities' wishes to the detriment of their environment (Kousis, 1997) both support an argument for participatory approaches to sustainability exactly on the grounds that they enable either a struggle or disengagement from 'the system'. Such

positions clearly present a more fundamental challenge to the kinds of state initiated programmes to achieve sustainable development envisaged by Agenda 21 and WCED.

Whether or not the possibility of consensus is accepted, there is a more fundamental problem that besets the linkage between participatory democracy and sustainable development. Although it can be plausibly argued that sustainable development needs public involvement and that as a matter of fact more democracy tends to lead to better environmental practices (Paehlke, 1988, 1996), there is no logical or necessary political connection between the two in this direction: democracy does not necessarily lead to sustainability (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996; Saward, 1996). Indeed, as indicated above, at the root of the anti-participatory position lies the belief that democracy and achieving environmental sustainability are antipathetic, and despite the strength of the arguments in favour of public involvement this problem seems inescapable for any position which admits of the reality of 'the environmental crisis' (Yearley, 1992). Radically participatory approaches can dismiss this challenge as incoherent: if sustainable development is defined as the pursuit of quality of life, then any genuinely democratically chosen course is sustainable by definition. This extreme prioritisation of participatory democratic process over environmental considerations would seem to be in such contradiction with commonly held characteristics of the concept of sustainable development (notably environmental responsibility) that for many it could not qualify as an acceptable interpretation. However, it is recognised as a logical outcome of some arguments for public involvement (Brugmann, 1997) and has prompted a number of different theoretical responses defending participatory approaches to sustainable development.

One approach has been simply to assert the affinity between the two ideals: for example Gran (1987) states that 'democracy is an inherent part of the process. If we can end monopoly of economic, political or cultural resources then equity, sustainability, efficiency and the environment all gain' (quoted in Roseland, 2000). This will not do. It is based on the highly contestable assumption that it is only the distortion of political and economic processes by powerful interests that stands in the way of people freely choosing a sustainable path of development.

More sophisticated arguments rely on deliberative approaches to democracy to make the link: through such processes people will uncover both their 'real' underlying interest in environmentally responsible action and the necessity for consensus

(Eckersley, 1992; Gundersen, 1995). This is an environmental version of the deliberative democratic thesis that given processes of open debate and free choice humans will work for the collective good. Such faith appears somewhat naïve, given the conflicts, generally anti-collectivist ethos and consumption levels of many contemporary societies. Recognition that democratic process alone – situated within existing liberal, individualistic societies - is unlikely to lead to the discovery, or development, of shared values or interests leads to considering broader social/political approaches that would create societies in which shared values developed organically. Two forms of communitarian theorising are relevant to the current argument. On the one hand the importance of small communities is important in much Green political thought – they are envisaged as ideal political systems, within which the link between democracy and environmental sustainability will be made on the practical grounds that small communities are more amenable to the development and delivery of sustainable policies than other forms of social organisation, and because they are ‘the form ... most attuned to the imperatives of ecology’ (Kenny, 1996: 24). However, such ‘ideal’ communities have been criticised for their potentially anti-democratic character – the risk they carry of suppressing the wishes of individuals and the identity of minorities in the name of higher, environmental, goals (Kenny, 1996). More sophisticated approaches, which examine the possibilities of developing larger communitarian societies, are less prevalent in environmental and sustainability theorising. An exception is Tam, for whom environmental sustainability is a potential core value for society, and who proposes a broad-based reform of education and governance structures which would simultaneously foster ethics of social responsibility and environmental care alongside the habit of involvement in deliberative democratic processes (Tam, 1998). As a practical project developing this would clearly be a long term proposition: he envisages a ten year period over which a local authority could restructure its activities in order to support such a transition (Tam, 1993). Similarly Achterberg writes of ‘forming a new consensus on a broadened conception of the general interest or the common good’ around the ideals of sustainable development (1993: 83).

However, these various attempts to develop a necessary link between democratic processes and sustainable development all rest either on a pre-existing environmental ethic or the emergence of such from democratic debate or the ecological pressures of living more communally-connected lives. Since such an ethic is clearly not present across society and the necessity of its emergence is

exactly what needs to be demonstrated, these arguments are circular. Though arguably necessary, participatory democracy does not appear to be sufficient to generate environmentally sustainable development without the imposition of constraints on acceptable outcomes, whether directly or through a long-term process of changing societal values. It thus appears that some compromise of the participatory ethic is necessary, as was suggested in the section above discussing the broad approach to public involvement proposed by Agenda 21. Nevertheless, despite this philosophical defect, there are many proponents of participatory democracy as a key part of achieving sustainable development.

4.4.3 Summary

It therefore appears that there are inherent and inescapable tensions within the idea of public involvement in achieving sustainable development. It is not just that there are different rationales for public involvement which are in opposition to each other, but which separately could be the bases for public involvement programmes. Rather, the tensions are between any appreciation of real environmental goals and the necessarily essentially value-driven decision making process, and between local quality of life goals and the broader global and future aspects of sustainable development. Three positions can be identified which incorporate different views on the appropriate roles for public and state in sustainable development, none of which is philosophically coherent:

- the normative position found in Agenda 21, which is an essentially incoherent mix of different rationales;
- a 'conservative' position which down plays the importance of public involvement in policy and emphasises the role of expert definition;
- a 'radical' position which proposes the introduction of more participatory forms of democracy and emphasises the role of public involvement in determining what sustainable development means and at every stage in the process of achieving it.

Figures 4.2 and 4.3 set these out, distinguishing them by the types of public involvement enjoined by Agenda 21 which they support and their component epistemological and political positions.

Public role	State role	Approach to public involvement		
		normative	conservative	radical
knowing	instructing	*	*	
learning and changing values and behaviour	raising awareness	*	*	
contributing views	consulting	*	*	
policy making in partnership	sharing policy making powers	*	lay experts only	*
control over policy	devolving policy making powers	*		*

Figure 4.2: Three positions on public involvement in sustainable development – state and citizen roles

	Normative	Conservative	Radical
Epistemology 1: nature of environmental problems	objectively real	objectively real	objectively real ↔ socially constructed
Epistemology 2: nature of sustainable development issues	objectively real ↔ socially constructed	objectively real	socially constructed
Attitude to public involvement in policy making	public involvement inherent part of sustainable development	public involvement disruptive	public involvement primary
Role of state in achieving sustainable development	managing process; facilitating consensus amongst all groups	managing, legislating, educating	responding to wishes of the people
Role of people in achieving sustainable development	reaching consensus on policy; learning, value change, personal action	value change, personal action	controlling process – action at all levels in policy-making process
Democratic form	representative democracy augmented with public involvement	representative democracy	participatory democracy

Figure 4.3: Three positions on public involvement in sustainable development – epistemology and politics

These positions have been evolved from within the concept of sustainable development as it is presented in the accepted definitions, with the implication that the different aspects of each (the rows in Figure 4.3) are at least to some extent coherently linked. However, it is stressed that such analytical coherence is not necessarily expected in any real situation, where positions of epistemology and politics may derive from a range of sources which include both this internal logic and the broader issues arising from the principles and practice of local government dealt with in the preceding chapter (Pepper, 1996).

4.5 Conclusion

The evolution of positions on public involvement in sustainable development in the preceding section was carried out in isolation from the earlier discussions of the substantive goals of sustainable development and of local government and democracy. This concluding section looks at how these aspects might articulate with each other and finally summarises the positions established in this chapter, identifying both frameworks for the empirical research and outstanding theoretical issues.

It was suggested in Section 4.3.1 that the conventional characterisations of 'weak' and 'strong' sustainable development are analytically unsatisfactory, though they describe some empirically important positions and reflect the conflicting historical roots of the concept. Instead, positions on the substantive values and goals of sustainable development were distinguished by differing priorities given to economic, social and environmental issues, and treated as separable from positions on the appropriate political arrangements for achieving sustainability. In contrast, the faultline identified by Jacobs and others does usefully separate out analytically distinctive positions on public involvement. These do not, however, exhaust the possibilities, since Agenda 21 and subsequent policy rhetoric embody an all-embracing, though incoherent, third position. The question is whether these various positions are linked either conceptually or empirically, in a way which would allow a simple categorisation of sustainable development encompassing both process and substantive ends.

Turning to the issue of how public involvement in sustainable development might fit into the local democratic system, it was suggested in Chapter Three that there are a number of approaches to democracy present within local government which have different implications for the form and function of public involvement. Alongside

the representative democracy of the traditional authority, two reforming and more participatory agendas were identified, as well as a minor strand of support for potentially radical but localised community development. Together these form a varied context for a sustainable development initiative proposing 'widespread public involvement'. To some extent there are parallels between these and the approaches to public involvement in sustainable development reviewed above. The clearest of these is that between community enabling and the normative approach to public involvement present in Agenda 21, both of which propose public involvement in various forms as a way of modifying and augmenting the existing representative system. There are also parallels between 'traditional' community development and the strands of radical environmental thought which emphasise participation as a way to challenge the power and policies of the state and economic interests and the importance of self-reliant communities. Correspondence between the more conservative positions are less clear, although both traditional and market enabling authorities are antipathetic to public involvement in policy making, and so to some extent correspond to conservative interpretations of sustainable development.

However, while such parallels might be expected to affect the development of policy for public involvement in sustainable development – for instance, by predisposing individuals or authorities towards particular approaches to public involvement – the relationships are complicated by the substantive goals of sustainable development, and the inherent tensions between these goals and public involvement which were examined above. While sustainable development can provide the motivation for an increased public role, and so support the 'enabling' reform agenda, the latter is concerned with the processes of local government, envisaging a shift to a more participatory but essentially consensual local democracy. Agenda 21 shares this but also requires substantive policy changes – an unusual combination which does not build on previously existing reform currents in local government. Further, although sustainable development strengthens the case for consensual and participatory policy making, such processes carry risks for the state: the input of the public may not only conflict with the goal of environmental sustainability, but is potentially threatening to the existing political system. It would also seem that the substantive goals implicit in *any* interpretation of sustainable development pose challenges to the existing system, particularly in traditional authorities, both in requiring a reorientation towards new objectives, and integrating different sectoral policy making processes. The scale of such challenges will vary from case to case,

depending on how far the scope and degree of integration in the local interpretation of sustainable development differ from existing policies and processes.

In conclusion, the outcomes of this chapter can be summarised as follows. A wide variety of different and legitimate interpretations of sustainable development exist, providing a rich and complex source of potentially competing goals for policy making. These can be characterised by their scope – the extent to which they include social and environmental goals alongside economic development objectives – and the degree to which they integrate these components. This variation is paralleled by the extent to which sustainable development poses a challenge to existing policies and structures. ‘Radical change’ would be constituted by substantial shifts away from the current situation, but this could be of different kinds – towards a greater concern with equity (in keeping with traditional notions of radicalism), or towards prioritising the environment, or both.

This rather loose characterisation in terms of scope and integration is separate from the characterisation of the public’s role in achieving sustainability. Three positions on this were identified – the overarching normative standpoint enjoining widespread public involvement in a number of ways, and two more coherent but rather insecure positions distinguished by whether or not they give the public responsibility for defining the problems and solutions to be addressed as ‘sustainable development’.

These two characterisations do not fit neatly together. While it is apparent that there are links between them, these are indeterminate - it is not possible to ‘read off’ the position that an actor in the policy making process will take on public involvement from their view of what sustainable development means.

This multiplicity of possible meanings and theoretical tensions and incoherencies leads to a set of issues for the research. It is a matter of empirical interest as to which interpretations are present, dominant and successful in policy making, and how the tensions between public involvement and substantive goals are tackled in the practice of developing and implementing policies. In turn, the analysis of this empirical material suggests ways to develop the characterisation of sustainable development and improve theoretical understanding of how public involvement and sustainable development are linked.

Chapter 5 Local Agenda 21 in England

5.1 Introduction

This research set out to examine the evolution of an apparently unitary policy initiative – the local implementation of Agenda 21. Given that both national government and local authorities committed themselves to the programme, the questions *what actually happened and why?* are appropriate, given the wide range in outcomes. Adopting an approach to policy making which sees it very broadly in terms of outcomes being the result of actors promoting goals in a complex policy and institutional environment, the preceding chapters have shown that the key concepts of Agenda 21 generate a multitude of possible goals and provided ways of characterising these, the outcomes of the policy making processes and some aspects of the context. This chapter concludes the review section of this thesis by examining what is already known about the LA21 initiative in England and so provides a context for the research questions developed in the following chapter. It first reviews the policy context which was common to all local authority LA21 programmes and then published material about their evolution and analyses and explanations of this. It closes by assessing this material and identifying weaknesses and lacunae in existing knowledge which are addressed by this research.

5.2 The policy context

5.2.1 Central government and beyond

Two key supranational policy statements stimulated and framed the initiation of LA21. One was Agenda 21, and the other was the European Community's *Fifth Action Programme on the Environment: Towards Sustainability* (CEC, 1992), which was developed concurrently with the process leading up to the Rio Conference.

Despite Agenda 21's ambiguity the broad thrust of its intentions for public and local authority action is clear. Local authorities and their communities are to work together on drawing up a local action plan, a Local Agenda 21 which is holistic in scope, stresses equity between current and future generations and establishes a new trajectory for social development. The community aspect of this is to be meaningful – the action plans are certainly not to be drawn up in a top-down, technocratic way, but should involve public input at every stage. The crucial ambiguity is over the

degree to which the public are expected to have decision making power or merely consultative status.

The *EC Action Programme* adopts an interpretation of sustainable development closer to ecological modernisation, with an emphasis on changing economic processes to reduce environmental impacts, and without the emphasis on public involvement in policy making that characterises Agenda 21. It does, however, aim to encourage change in social behaviour and establish new relations between all the actors in the environmental sector and argues for a significant role for local authorities (CEC, 1992: §5, §6; Morphet and Hams, 1994).

These policy documents had the potential to affect the development of LA21 through stimulating and influencing central and local government policy making. The former might have been expected to set out both a national policy on sustainable development and specific guidance for local authorities on LA21. In practice the response of the incumbent Conservative administration was limited. National sustainable development policy embodied an imbalanced and non-integrated interpretation of sustainable development, stressing a commitment to economic growth with a recognition of the need to mitigate its environmental impacts but with little or no consideration of equity or quality of life issues (HM Government, 1994; DoE, 1996; Mullaney and Pinfield, 1996). The national initiatives established in response to the Rio Conference were similarly limited and have been characterised as a 'poorly articulated and funded national framework' (Burgess *et al.*, 1998: 1450). Perhaps more significant in terms of influencing policy was the appearance of sustainable development as a guiding principle in revisions of planning guidance (DoE, 1992a, b).

LA21 itself was strikingly absent from the central government response to Agenda 21 and the *EC Action Programme*. The DoE apparently did not recognise any value in the initiative and local authorities were given neither the duty nor the resources to carry it out (Church and Young, 2000). A corollary of this was a lack of guidance, and local authorities were very much left to develop their own initiatives in a policy vacuum (Carter and Darlow, 1997).

This situation changed after the general election of 1997 with the production of a new national strategy and set of indicators (DETR, 1998e, 1999; HM Government, 1999). Significantly entitled *A Better Quality of Life*, the strategy indicated the new government's adoption of a broader interpretation of sustainable development, encompassing social goals alongside environmental protection and the pervasive

emphasis on economic growth, although again the indicators were criticised for lack of integration (Levett, 1999) (see Figure 5.1).

“Sustainable development ... is about ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come. Our vision of sustainable development is based on four broad objectives:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone
- effective protection of the environment
- prudent use of natural resources
- maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth.”

Figure 5.1: Central government definition of sustainable development (DETR, 1998e: 4-5)

This definition formed the framework within which LA21 developed in the late 1990s. Concurrently there was a general raising of the profile of sustainable development in government policy proposals across a range of fields affecting local government, including regional economic policy (DETR, 1997), transport (DETR, 1998f) and urban regeneration (DETR, 1998c). At local level this culminated with the Local Government Act (2000) which gave local authorities a general power to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their communities and contribute to the UK’s national sustainable development policies, implying that sustainable development should be at the heart of all their policies.

However, the government’s attitude to LA21 itself was ambivalent. On the one hand the prime minister publicly committed the government to ensuring that all local authorities had a LA21 in place by 2000 (Blair, 1997), and subsequently the DETR published its first guidelines on LA21, jointly with the LGA and LGMB (DETR *et al.*, 1998). The initiative was apparently being given an important role as a leading policy vehicle for local sustainable development, summed up by *A Better Quality of Life* stating that LA21s ‘should also inform all other local plans, policies and programmes, including local development plans’ (DETR, 1999: §7.80).

On the other hand LA21 was conspicuously absent from some key pieces of government policy closely concerned with sustainable development and public involvement, notably the local democracy and transport White Papers (DETR, 1998a, f), and elsewhere given a narrowly environmental remit (DETR, 1997). The role of LA21 was increasingly played down, as sustainable development became

incorporated in other central government policies and the local government modernisation agenda (Church and Young, 2000). During the late 1990s community strategies were increasingly being seen as the mechanism by which sustainability principles would be 'mainstreamed' into local authority policy and practice (Prescott, 2000). In a parallel development, the emphasis in the modernisation agenda on increased public involvement was without explicit links to the definition or achievement of sustainable development (Local Government Act, 2000; DETR *et al.*, 2000) and largely failed to acknowledge the existence of the experience and structures developed by LA21 programmes (CAG Consultants, 2001; see, for example, DETR, 2001).

Thus for several years local government policy making for LA21 was carried out in an environment not only of uncertain support from central government, but in the presence of a much more powerful, statutory and explicitly reforming agenda with overlapping goals. The situation was made more complex by the lack of guidance from central government on the relationship between LA21 and community strategies until late 2001 (DTLR, 2001a: §4.22). In the period before then – which included this research's field work - practitioners were consequently working with a very uncertain future, although it was widely anticipated that formal central government support for LA21 would end in December 2000 (Fisher, 1999; Christie, 1999b; Church and Young, 2000).

Overall, central government has played a largely indirect and unsupportive role in shaping LA21 programmes. The initiative has had, at best, intermittent rhetorical and policy support, without local authorities ever being given a statutory duty to adopt a LA21. It has thus been a voluntary activity, carried out in the midst of the restrictions and turmoil imposed by statutory changes on local authorities in the 1990s (Church and Young, 2000). Central government's sustainable development policy has shown both continuity and change over the same period. There has been a continual emphasis on economic growth as a prerequisite for any kind of development, but also a broadening of the scope of interpretation of sustainable development to encompass more social policies and a marked shift towards promoting a more participatory style of governance.

5.2.2 The Local Government Management Board

The weakness of central government guidance left a void, which was quickly and enthusiastically filled by the local government organisations, and in particular the

LGMB (Voisey *et al.*, 1996; Burgess *et al.*, 1998). These had already been involved, prior to the Rio Conference, through the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) which shared with the LGMB an interpretation of sustainable development which contrasted sharply with that of central government at the time (Morphet and Hams, 1994). For them it was an inclusive and participatory agenda, which stressed social progress and equity, the non-material dimensions of human well-being, and the prioritisation of development over economic growth (ICLEI, 1996). It implied the need for state intervention and management, and the importance of all, including the disadvantaged, 'having a say in decisions about environment and development' and of groups from all sections of the community working in partnership (LGMB, 1994b: 4). Unsurprisingly, these organisations claimed a central role for local authorities.

Their vision was of active local authorities, with the power to take leading roles in restructuring local economic and social activity, deriving their legitimacy from a democratic mandate generated both through the ballot box and through widespread, continuous engagement between authorities and the public. This was close to the vision of the community enabling authority which the LGTB and LGMB had been promoting for several years (LGTB, 1987). There was clearly the potential for synergy between the LA21 initiative and this existing agenda, particularly as LA21 could provide a powerful focus for the enabling role through supplying both an overarching substantive goal and a rationale for increasing public involvement (Aydin, 1995). LA21 could be a vehicle for creating enabling authorities, which at the same time would be able to deliver sustainable development for their own and the global community (LGMB, 1994a).

Strikingly this rather ambitious project was presented as intrinsically unproblematic, though difficult to execute and in particular to need central government commitment (LGMB, 1993b). Whatever the theoretical incoherence of the vision, and the realities of entrenched power and bureaucratic inertia which potentially opposed its achievement, it formed the basis for the extremely influential guidance to local authorities produced by the LGMB's LA21 Initiative (Eckerberg and Lafferty, 1998). This included general framework statements (LGMB 1993b, c, 1994c), a series of 'notes' covering specific areas of LA21 practice which started with community participation (LGMB, 1994a) and a series of practical guides (LGMB, 1994b, 1996, 1998). The first of these guides was seen as particularly influential at a time when most local authorities were starting to work towards the 1996 deadline set

by Agenda 21 (Tuxworth, 1996). Like all the LGMB guidance, it stresses the importance of involving communities in a genuine way, and presents a number of different ways in which this might be done, mirroring the range of relationships between state and citizen envisaged in Agenda 21 (see Figure 5.2).

1. Managing and improving the local authority's own environmental performance
2. Integrating sustainable development aims into the local authority's policies and activities
3. Awareness raising and education
4. Consulting and involving the general public
5. Partnerships
6. Measuring, monitoring and reporting on progress towards sustainability.

Figure 5.2: The LGMB's six steps to Local Agenda 21 (from LGMB, 1994b)

Following the general election in 1997, the LGMB took a lead role in guiding local authorities through the modernisation process. Initially it also tried to link sustainability concerns into the broader process of institutional and constitutional change (DETR *et al.*, 1998; LGA and LGMB, 1998). However, in late 1998 the Sustainable Development Unit, hitherto the centre of support for LA21, was merged with the generic Best Practice and Research Unit – a change widely seen to reflect the government's diminishing support for LA21 (Ross, 2000; Church and Young, 2000).

5.2.3 Local government and environmental policy

The final aspect of the policy context is the local level. Authorities adopting LA21 as a new initiative already had a myriad of policies and routines in other fields, including but extending far beyond those concerned specifically with sustainable development or democratic processes. In principle all of these might affect or be affected by a holistic LA21, and some at least were likely to already incorporate some public involvement and so influence the authority's predisposition towards a new participatory initiative. The breadth and variation in these policies makes a review here impossible, but it is important to note the prior existence in many authorities of policies concerned with environmental and sustainability issues, since these frequently formed the basis for LA21 development (Church and Young, 2000).

Local government has long had responsibility for a wide range of what are now considered to be 'environmental' policy issues, spanning public health and planning for resource use and protection. Until comparatively recently these were not seen as a single policy field, or to be connected to concerns about wider, even global, health and resource issues (Hams, 1994). In isolation from these responsibilities many local authorities developed 'environmental programmes' such as recycling schemes from the 1960s onwards, reflecting rising societal concerns, changing constructions of 'the environment' and related external policy developments (Healey and Shaw, 1994; Sharp, 1999). These were peripheral to the mainstream of local authority policy making, both in that they had no internal impact on, for example, economic development policies, and in that they were not aimed at giving the public influence on policies affecting more than very local areas. However, the development of the concept of sustainable development and its rhetorical adoption by central government offered a politically acceptable rationale for pursuing a broader environmental agenda within local authorities (Healey and Shaw, 1994; Davoudi, 2000). This opened the way for a sudden increase in corporate environmental policy making in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the support of the LGMB and Friends of the Earth. The resulting policies were still essentially managerial, with an emphasis on public involvement through action rather than policy making, and without any recognition of public involvement as desirable in itself (FoE, 1989, 1990; LGMB, 1990; Raemakers, 1993).

Thus the context for LA21's introduction was one in which many authorities had some experience of environmental policy making, but without a corollary emphasis on public involvement or a holistic interpretation of sustainable development. This history, and the impact of government guidance in fields such as planning, also opened the possibility that LA21 would be developed in parallel with other explicitly environmental and sustainable development policies (Hales, 2000).

5.3 LA21 in practice

5.3.1 Introduction

The preceding section completes the description of the components of the LA21 policy making process. Overall the situation is one of purported simplicity and underlying complexity of both policy inputs and context. The UK central government's signing of Agenda 21 committed local authorities to plan and implement policies for sustainable development in ways that involved the public at

every stage in the process. However, it is clear that the meaning of 'sustainable development' and what role the people should have in it are open to many interpretations. Moreover, local authorities were acting in a policy environment characterised by mixed signals and guidance on sustainable development, complex pressures for reform which influenced their approach to public involvement, and their own individual and unique histories. Finally, local authorities are complex organisations operating as part of wider webs of governance institutions, with implications for LA21 as for any policy initiative.

The remainder of this chapter reviews what is known of the initiative and published explanations for its nature. Despite the ambiguities surrounding what the initiative was to achieve and its potentially challenging nature it did not remain merely a paper commitment by central government but was seized upon with alacrity by local authorities (Voisey *et al.*, 1996). By 1997 over seventy per cent of UK authorities were taking 'active steps' towards developing a Local Agenda 21, a similar proportion had actually produced one by the 'Blair target' of December 2000 and overall the country was recognised as a world leader in developing this component of Agenda 21 (Buckingham-Hatfield and Percy, 1999; Church and Young, 2000).

The principal published sources of information on the progress of LA21 as a whole are the surveys commissioned by the LGMB, which used questionnaires addressed to the LA21 coordinator or equivalent in every local authority (Tuxworth and Carpenter, 1995; Tuxworth and Thomas, 1996; LGMB, 1997a; IDeA, 1999, 2000a). These provide a series of snapshots of what activities were taking place and how much impact LA21 was having. An early review of progress emerged from an international conference (Whittaker, 1995) and the LGMB published an official major review to mark the first five years after the Rio Summit (Morris and Hams, 1997). There has been no complementary review to mark the end of the LGMB/IDeA's involvement with the initiative, nor any comprehensive overview from outside the local government institutions. The most thorough external reviews that exist are by Church and Young (2000) drawing on the LGMB/IDeA surveys and other published work, and CAG Consultants' two national reports that drew on a limited number (thirty and forty respectively) of qualitative inputs from practitioners, policy makers and academics (CAG Consultants, 1998, 2001).

There is also a substantial body of academic writing on LA21. Early publications were largely normative, laying down guidelines and purported prerequisites for achieving sustainable development (for example Agyeman and Evans, 1994;

Hoggett 1995; Young, 1996). Over the following years more empirically-based work appeared, mainly from writers who shared an enthusiasm for the potential of LA21 to achieve a shift towards sustainability and the transformation of local governance (for example Voisey *et al.*, 1996; Freeman *et al.*, 1996; Carter and Darlow, 1997). Very little of this material is sceptical, with the exceptions of the work of Macnaghten *et al.* (1995), which highlighted major problems with the assumptions underpinning LA21, and Wild and Marshall's (1997) case studies. There has been a marked falling off in publication on LA21 over the past few years, though there have been a few in-depth case studies of mature LA21 programmes (Selman, 1998b; Selman and Parker, 1999; Scott, 1999; Rowe, 2000). These are more analytical than most of the earlier work, with Selman and his collaborators in particular probing beneath the surface to uncover some of the reasons for the development of LA21 in leading authorities and assessing its overall impact.

5.3.2 Outline history

An outstanding characteristic of the initiative as a whole has been the immense variation in its form, ethos and impact in different authorities (Church and Young, 2000). While this limits the possibility of making general statements, there are patterns and repeating structures within this variation, reflecting both the impact of guidance and the common characteristics of local authorities (Freeman *et al.*, 1996). Furthermore, many generalised claims have been made for 'LA21 in the UK' which form the basis for perceptions of its success or failure - one of the motivations for this research is to unpack some of the variability concealed by these generalisations.

The structures adopted reflected differing responses to the challenge presented by the LGMB to local authorities to initiate but not control the LA21 process. They ranged between keeping the entire process within the authority, through a variety of structures linking external groups to the authority, to the separation of the LA21 under the management of a non-governmental organisation (Freeman *et al.*, 1996; Church and Young, 2000). (The last group are a special case and were not the concern of this research, since it seemed likely that their policy making processes would be significantly different from those taking place within a local authority.) The internal organisation of LA21 also varied significantly, with its institutional location and mechanisms for linking it to the rest of the authority being structural factors with potential impacts on the LA21 policy making process and its relationship with other authority policies. Most LA21s have been coordinated by a fairly junior officer located in a broadly environmental department, although a

substantial minority have been based in the corporate centre (IDeA, 1999; Church and Young, 2000). Authorities have linked these officers' work to their mainstream operations in various ways, including officer working groups and awareness raising for officers and members. Links with political structures have generally been weak, however. There was a perception from early on that the initiative was being officer driven and that this was problematic given its ostensible involvement with an agenda of democratic renewal (Tuxworth, 1996; IDeA, 1999).

The adoption of LA21 was marked by a rapid rise in public involvement activities in most authorities, initially using existing structures. By 1997 new processes were equally widespread, involving the public across the hierarchy from awareness raising and consultation to involvement in setting policy priorities and steering the LA21 through forums and other partnership structures. Some of this work was innovative in approach and ethos, successfully reaching out to traditionally hard-to-reach sectors of the community (Morris and Hams, 1997; IDeA, 1999). The initiative also stimulated a great deal of local project work, led by both local authorities and community organisations and generically aimed at 'building sustainable communities' (Church and Young, 2000: 13). These diverse projects typically linked socio-economic and environmental issues and often arose from the work of activists frustrated with local authority approaches to LA21, although increasing state-sponsored public involvement in sustainable development was arguably a key factor in their emergence (Church and Young, 2000).

This initial expansion phase lasted a few years, but by the mid-1990s doubts were being expressed about how far LA21 could advance sustainability and governance agendas (Tuxworth, 1996). By 1997 there was a sense that the 'easy bit' had been achieved and that the initiative as a whole had reached a 'plateau' (West, 1997). Church and Young identify four courses that individual LA21s then followed: marginalisation as they failed to meet early expectations; adoption of a sectoral, environmental focus, often coupled with internal environmental management programmes; adoption of integrated cross-sectoral approaches and a broader social agenda; and full integration of 'LA21 priorities' into all council activities (Church and Young, 2000: 6). Of these the first represented a descent from the plateau, while the others reflected progress towards different interpretations of sustainable development – the second being environmentally-oriented and tending to be managerial, while the latter two reflect more holistic and participatory

interpretations of sustainability, differing principally in the extent of their impact on local authority processes.

This second phase coincided with the development of the modernising local government agenda. Discussions abounded in print and at conferences over the likely fate of LA21 and whether its transformative objectives were best served by maintaining its separate existence (Evans and Percy, 1999; Christie, 2000; Bosanquet, pers. com.). Despite this flurry of public debate there is no record of how the two policy initiatives interacted in practice within individual local authorities. Church and Young plausibly speculated that the local fate of LA21 would vary depending on its strength as an institutionalised policy and suggest a third phase in which LA21s either maintain their separate identity, 'limping along' and being downgraded, or 'unravel' and have their various components incorporated into new policies linked to central government's modernisation agenda (Church and Young, 2000: 17).

5.3.3 Outcomes: Interpretations of sustainable development and public involvement in LA21

Assessments of the outcomes of LA21 vary enormously (Church and Young, 2000). Some practitioners and commentators have been enthusiastic about both its impact and its potential to achieve change (Morris and Hams, 1997). Others are sceptical and explicitly critical of the positive assessments made by the LGMB surveys. Littlewood and While (1997), for example, critique the initiative for not realising its transformative potential, and being inward-looking, under-resourced and failing either to tackle the dominance of economic development as a policy goal or to transfer power away from local authorities. Others again are ambivalent, recognising both strengths and weaknesses in achievements and the potential offered by LA21 (Selman, 1998b; Church and Young, 2000).

To some extent this variation can be attributed to the variation in the nature of individual LA21s, and thus the difficulty of making generalisations with any substance to them. Further, the breadth of the implications of LA21, ranging across the introduction of sustainability as a substantive policy goal, integrating policy making processes and enhancing the role of the public in local policy making, provides a parallel range in criteria for assessing its impact, with different authors' normative stances influencing the weight they attach to these different aspects. This situation is still further complicated by the strategic function that assessment of LA21 may serve. There is an observable tendency towards reporting progress and

impact in a positive way which quite possibly overestimates the initiative's importance (Eckerberg and Lafferty, 1998; Percy, 1998; CAG Consultants, 1998). The local authorities, their national organisations and individual officers all had clear interests in promoting LA21. The tendency is also present in the academic literature, however, much of which appears to set out to support the 'new environmental agenda', with relatively little questioning of either the feasibility or desirability of LA21's success.

This section presents an overview of what has been claimed for the outcomes and impacts of LA21, distinguishing between the substantive content and public involvement aspects of sustainable development.

Substantive content

In contrast to the rhetoric of Rio as interpreted by the LGMB and the local government associations, LA21 was initially interpreted principally as an environmental initiative in the UK. Church and Young (2000) suggest that the fundamental nature of the changes implied by Agenda 21 were little understood, and at a time when local authorities were developing their environmental responsibilities the initiative found a natural home in local authority environmental departments. Over time the initiative broadened in scope. The LGMB surveys show many LA21s undertaking more social and economic projects and integrating sustainability principles into non-environmental policy areas within local authorities. Their major review claimed that LA21 was 'really starting to make a difference...in the integration of environmental concerns with social and economic considerations' (Morris and Hams, 1997: 25), and more disinterestedly both Selman (1998b) and Church and Young (2000) report some progress in 'mainstreaming' environmental and sustainability considerations into authority policy-making.

This was seen by Tuxworth as a 'natural progression' (1996) towards what Selman and Parker described as an 'emerging 1990s pursuit of "local governance and sustainability"' and a 'dominant paradigm' in which LA21 dealt with a broad quality of life agenda (1997: 172). This contrasted with the ecological modernisation interpretation of sustainable development which had become dominant at a national level (Selman and Parker, 1999). This was attributed to a learning process by those implementing LA21, who increasingly recognised that achieving environmental ends required a consideration of social and economic needs (Selman, 1998b) and also to the involvement of the public, who forced consideration of wider issues onto the agenda (Rowe, 2000).

While most authors concur that this shift towards a broader interpretation of sustainable development has taken place, its extent and strength are unclear. The LGMB themselves accepted that in some places LA21 was 'not really challenging the status quo' (Morris and Hams, 1997: 74), a view reinforced by research showing its irrelevance to the mainstream economic planning of many authorities (Ahrel *et al.*, 1999) and the continuing prevalence of the belief that employment and environmental considerations conflict (CAG Consultants, 1998). Church and Young (2000: 3) further conclude that even less progress was made with integration of sustainability considerations into social policy making. They also suggest that the broadening of LA21's scope was hampered by a continuing perception outside the 'LA21 community' that it was an essentially environmental initiative. However, this uneven and probably limited impact at local authority policy level contrasts with the holistic and integrated nature of many sustainable community projects (Church and Young, 2000).

Public involvement

Increased involvement of the public has been the most emphasised aspect of LA21 in the UK, arguably to the extent that the focus has been more on process than on policy content (Selman, 1999; Church and Young, 2000). It is generally accepted that LA21 prompted the engagement of many people in state-initiated public involvement across the entire range from individual behaviour change and action on environmental and sustainable development projects to processes which, ostensibly at least, gave them a say in local sustainability policy making (CAG Consultants, 2001). This involvement has been seen as a good in itself, in that it enriched civil society, stimulated demand for more public access to decision making and created new channels for communication between local authorities and their publics (Carter and Darlow, 1997; Wild and Marshall, 1997; Selman, 1998b). LA21 is seen as having given local authorities an opportunity to experiment with new ways of engaging with the community (Morris and Hams, 1997), and there is limited evidence that this has influenced approaches to public involvement in other areas of activity such as planning (Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998; Counsell, 1999).

However, the observable increase in public involvement processes, no matter how innovative, carried no guarantee that policies had been influenced (Evans and Percy, 1999), and there is no evidence from the surveys of the extent to which these innovative methods were used for the redistribution of decision making power rather than for consultation. Selman and Parker (1999) claim that one of the successes of

LA21 was to blur the distinction between these two and that it was a process in which grass-roots and state-sponsored initiatives were meshed together. This analysis would fit the emphasis on consensus in the rhetoric of Agenda 21, and suggests that characteristic initiatives lay around the 'deciding together' and 'acting together' rungs of Wilcox's 'ladder' (Wilcox, 1994) and could contribute to a new, revitalised local democracy. On the other hand, it is also possible that many participatory initiatives represented an incoherent mix of rationales, in some cases reflecting conflict within the authority over whether public involvement represented a threat or a useful supplement to the representative system (Selman, 1998b).

Moreover, the involved public appear to have been relatively small in numbers and largely limited to those already active in the environmental field (Freeman *et al.*, 1996; Carter and Darlow, 1997). Morris (1998) maintained that by the late 1990s the 'average person' still had no awareness of LA21, and particular concerns were raised over the low level of involvement of ethnic minority and other traditionally under-represented groups (Church and Young, 2000).

The overall picture is one of some progress but not the widespread and radical changes in public involvement and governance that some foresaw or desired. As with the adoption of integrated sustainable development policies, however, the situation may have been different at the very local level. Church and Young (2000) and Selman (1999) attribute some success to LA21 in empowering local groups and raising self-esteem in deprived neighbourhoods. It is recognised, however, that this was not universal and that LA21 did not succeed in generating a 'green community development approach' (Church *et al.*, 1998).

5.3.4 Current explanations

It thus appears generally accepted that the intention of LA21 being *the* local action plan for sustainable development in a locality was realised in very few cases, if any: it neither 'grabbed the mainstream of local government' (Cameron, 2000) nor led to a 'revolutionary transformation' of local governance (Voisey *et al.*, 1996). Three principal kinds of explanations are proposed in the literature: that the initiative was basically feasible and worthwhile but undermined by lack of support; that it was fundamentally flawed by its assumption that the public would engage in the process; and that it was essentially misconceived, based on false assumptions of the economic and political feasibility of local planning for sustainability.

The first of these is dominant. From early on the lack of support and dedicated resources at both local and central government level was identified as limiting LA21's ability to achieve substantial progress (Voisey *et al.*, 1996; Morris and Hams, 1997; CAG Consultants, 1998). Local opposition was seen to result from a perceived threat from increased public involvement to the existing distribution of power. Some elected members saw their role, legitimacy and even competence being challenged by largely officer-led public involvement, and opposed it on the grounds both of their superior ability to make decisions and the unrepresentative nature of the 'public' which became involved in LA21 (Morris and Hams, 1997; CAG Consultants, 1998; Church and Young, 2000). More generally it was observed that both councillors and senior officers might resist the transfer of power to other groups (Scott, 1999), and that the traditional organisation and culture of local authorities is inherently inimical to the kind of transformation threatened by LA21 (CAG Consultants, 1998).

It has also been shown that lack of support stemmed from a lack of understanding within local authorities of sustainability in general and LA21 in particular (CAG Consultants, 1998; Evans and Percy, 1999). Tackling this through awareness raising, education and training (particularly for elected members) was emphasised in guidance, with an implicit assumption that increasing understanding would lead to increased sympathy and support for the initiative (LGMB, 1994b, 1997).

Such opposition could clearly be manifested in a lack of resources for LA21 programmes. However, such shortages could also be less directly related to attitudes towards LA21. The initiative developed during a generally lean period for local government in which there were constraints on both expenditure and staffing. This inevitably hampered their ability to take on new initiatives, particularly resource-intensive attempts to widen public involvement (Wild and Marshall, 1997; Wilson and Game, 1998). This was largely the result of central government policies for local government in general, compounded by the lack of explicit support for LA21. Given that the initiative was not a statutory duty, attracted no extra resources and was given a low priority by DoE/DETR (Church and Young, 2000), authorities had neither incentive nor support to put their own resources into LA21, and the general lack of commitment at the centre was seen to 'rub off' on local leaders (Carter and Darlow, 1997; Wild and Marshall, 1997; CAG Consultants, 1998).

A much smaller number of commentators have criticised proponents of LA21 for overestimating the willingness of the public to engage in such an initiative.

Macnaghten *et al.* (1995) found that although members of the public sympathised with the concept of sustainable development, they neither shared the state's conceptualisation of the problems that LA21 was supposed to address nor trusted it to act in the public's interest. Further, they also felt that they did not have the personal agency to take action in the face of more powerful and impersonal forces. From a public-choice perspective, Rydin and Pennington (2000) suggest that in general insufficient attention is paid to ensuring that the perceived benefits of involvement outweigh the personal costs, which may be a significant factor in the limited engagement in LA21 of 'the general public', given the marginal importance of environmental issues for many people (Carter and Darlow, 1997).

Church and Young (2000) also found that the assumption of a benign and consensual state:citizen relationship was not shared by some community and environmental activists and groups, who for historical reasons saw their role as one of campaigning and opposition. Rather than being overcome through the participatory process, this attitude was strengthened by differences in interpretation of the key concepts and the persistence of a fundamental rejection of LA21's emphasis on consensual decision making by those who saw their interests as essentially in conflict with state and business sector 'partners'. This was heightened by cases of local authorities apparently manipulating and controlling public involvement to avoid or conceal areas of conflict.

More general criticisms of LA21 have also been voiced which parallel the wider debates around sustainable development reviewed in Chapter Four, and suggest broad political, economic and institutional grounds for its infeasibility and consequent failure (Marvin and Guy, 1997; CAG Consultants, 1998; Buckingham-Hatfield and Percy, 1999). Selman (1998b) identifies a problem with moving within a normatively consensual process from local issues over which consensus can be achieved relatively easily to a larger sustainability agenda, and a resulting lack of engagement with 'big issues' and blandness of LA21 outputs. Scott (1999) reinforces this by contrasting two observed approaches to consensus-building, in which there is a trade-off between breadth of public involvement and ability to generate concrete plans. These observations raise the question of whether achieving a local authority-area-wide consensus on both overarching development principles and a strategy to achieve it was feasible – and thus challenge a basic assumption underpinning the LA21 initiative.

A wide range of explanations have thus been proffered, with equally wide ranging implications for devising further sustainable development policies. As general explanations, providing 'the reason' for the apparent failure of Agenda 21, they are clearly incompatible. Given the variation in outcomes of the initiative it is not likely that any single, simple explanation will hold good as a generalisation, and it seems both possible and plausible that all of the above identify factors which have had an influence on LA21 programmes. However, leaving aside the more general arguments about LA21's inherent infeasibility, the explanations attributing its problems to lack of support or to ill-founded assumptions about public involvement are problematic, given the material reviewed in the preceding chapters about policy making and local government.

The 'lack of support' arguments appear to be based on assumptions of an unambiguous specification of meaning of the policy and of the universal acceptance of this meaning by those charged with implementation and those intended to participate. They implicitly accept the normative stance of Agenda 21 and in consequence view lack of support as illegitimate opposition. This appears to be too simple. Preceding chapters have demonstrated that a policy imperative of pursuing sustainable development through widespread public involvement could legitimately be interpreted in many ways, and that with many actors involved there is a real possibility that differing and incompatible interpretations might coexist in a single policy making process. While Church and Young (2000) recognise this, they do so in the context of differences in interpretation between local authorities and those outside, rather than within authorities.

The suggestion that the initiative failed exactly because of these assumptions is also to some extent simplistic. While recognising the differences between state and public, both are characterised in monolithic terms, as entities which hold particular views and adopt uniform approaches to each other. Again, there is no reason to suppose *a priori* that this is the case, and the known variability in the nature of authorities, the 'public' and the outcomes of LA21 suggest that something more complex is happening.

Current explanations thus seem to be rather unsubtle, and while they provide partial accounts of LA21 outcomes they do not provide insights into why these were so varied. Discussions of the constraints faced by LA21 do not examine the ways in which those constraints actually influenced policy making, beyond the obvious statements of the impact of powerful champions. Nor do they examine the linkages

between levels of understanding, political support and resourcing. They are further limited by their focus on LA21 processes themselves, which obscures the influence of other policies on the initiative.

To some extent this must reflect the nature of the empirical base, since the main primary source - the LGMB/IDeA survey data - precludes by its very nature any understanding of the mechanisms by which LA21 had an impact. The surveys do not link the answers to separate questions, so no inferences can be drawn about structural connections between them: as, for example, between the location of the LA21 section in an authority and influence over corporate policy. In general the internal policy making processes through which LA21s developed are almost unrecorded, with the exception of some of the more recent case studies (Scott, 1999; Selman and Parker, 1999). However, these analyses are limited by their focus on reputedly successful authorities and on the LA21s themselves, rather than seeing these as small parts of much larger webs of policy making processes. The most penetrating reviews are those of Church and Young (2000) and CAG Consultants (1998, 2001) since these canvassed the views of people outside LA21 processes and used a qualitative methodology which generated more reflective and deeper analyses. However, they were very broad in scope and did not explore individual processes in detail.

5.4 Conclusions

To conclude, the literature on LA21 presents a picture of an initiative enthusiastically adopted and subsequently characterised by the enormous variation in its form and outcomes as it was implemented by individual local authorities across the UK. This variation contrasts with the policy rhetoric which ostensibly framed, drove and guided the initiative. This largely drew on a holistic interpretation of sustainable development, the achievement of which required public involvement across the range from behaviour change to engagement in policy making – that is, the normative public involvement interpretation of Agenda 21.

Within the observed variation some general trends have been identified. Firstly, the overall initiative is widely accepted to have developed in two phases. The initial stage was one of rapid uptake and growth in innovative activities, particularly in the field of public involvement. In the second activity appears to have stagnated to some extent, perhaps as a result of the easy gains having been made, but also perhaps because over-optimistic initial assessments were tempered by more empirical studies

of what had actually been achieved. There also appear to have been more consistent changes over time in the nature of the initiative as a whole. Many commentators recognise a shift from environmentally-focused beginnings to a more holistic interpretation of sustainable development. Some also have described a parallel development in policy making, marked by some authorities' successes in merging 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches and a more general shift towards a concern with governance rather than environmental protection and enhancement. The extent and impact of both these trends is contested.

The broader policy context within which LA21 developed also changed over time. Initially it was supported by an enthusiastic group of practitioners and academics, but operated in a context of central government policies largely hostile to both inclusive approaches to public involvement and holistic interpretations of sustainable development. This changed during the 1990s, particularly after the election of 1997, towards an ethos more in sympathy with both the sustainability and participatory aims of Agenda 21. This was not, however, necessarily more supportive of LA21 itself, which by the end of the decade was threatened with being superseded by other policy initiatives commanding more support at both central and local level.

Explanations of the outcomes of the initiative identify a large range of factors which prevented it achieving the transformative aims apparently embodied in Agenda 21 and the guidance provided by the LGMB. Whether these factors are seen as symptoms of opposition to a worthwhile programme or of fundamental flaws in the approach implicit in Agenda 21, these explanations largely fail to provide an adequate account of how and why such factors operated, and of the nature and reasons for the observed variability in outcomes. Collectively they appear to take an over-simplified view of the initiative and its context, and particularly of the complexity of the processes which linked policy rhetoric with policy outcomes. It is these processes that this research explored in order to reach a better understanding of the evolution and outcomes of LA21.

Chapter 6 Research questions and methodology

6.1 Introduction

The broad purpose of this research was set out in Chapter One: *to understand how and why LA21 did not result in radical changes to local governance in England, and to understand what happened instead*. The importance of this lies not only in its historical interest, but also in the lessons which the development of LA21 has for current and future attempts to initiate similar change and for theoretical understanding of the relationships between public involvement, sustainable development and local government policy making.

As indicated in Chapter Five, existing published material analysing LA21 is of limited use in addressing these issues. However, the earlier chapters reviewed a wealth of literature from wider fields concerned with the key concepts and institutional setting of LA21. The first section of this chapter summarises the findings from those chapters to provide the conceptual framework used to organise the empirical findings, and identifies both gaps in current understanding and theoretical links and tensions between the concepts which were explored through the field work and its analysis. The research questions themselves are then set out, followed by a consideration of the methodology used and a description of the processes of collecting and analysing the empirical data. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of the ethical issues involved in the research.

6.2 Conceptualising the policy making process for public involvement in LA21

6.2.1 The nature of policy making processes

The starting point is a general conception of policy making for a local authority-based initiative such as LA21, drawn from the empirically grounded work of Barrett and her co-workers together with insights from elsewhere in the policy studies literature. Policy is made by actors within and outside a local authority, who have differing interests and values, and so pursue a range of substantive, institutional and personal goals. They do this through an interactive and potentially conflictive process, from which emerge policy outcomes which are only likely to reflect some of the goals and values of those involved. This process is structured by both formal and informal rules, including intangible but powerful institutional cultural norms,

and is permeated by power. This is manifested both in the relationships between actors during interactions in the policy making process and in the structures which enable and constrain the process.

Policy making is far from linear: policy formulation and implementation are both continuous and intimately linked, the overall structure is complex and recursive and has indeterminate boundaries. The processes are also essentially communicative. Language is used to persuade and argue, to control the distribution of resources, and, most fundamentally, continuously sustains and shapes all the components of the process, from actors' values to the formal institutional structures.

This conceptualisation of policy making is inherently and explicitly realist, relying on the philosophical underpinning provided by critical realist thought to justify its development of causal explanations for the evolution of policy making processes. While necessarily provisional, such explanations provide the grounds for tentative predictions: an important aspect of the analysis is a consideration of the extent to which the explanations of the processes studied can be extended to other situations.

6.2.2 Substantive goals and values

Of the various aspects of policy making, the pursuit of substantive goals in the LA21 process has been prioritised in the current research in order to examine the apparent *non*-realisation of those goals in practice. The preceding chapters reviewed literature relating to democracy and sustainable development - fields which provide some of the values and policy goals found in the LA21 initiative itself and its broader local government context.

Chapter Three showed that there is a wide range of rationales for public involvement in governance, with fundamental and significant divisions between representative and participatory democratic approaches and between positions which assume that society is essentially consensual or inherently conflictive. In practice the local government context for LA21 is a complex mix of democratic forms and supporting rationales, founded on a representative system but incorporating participatory elements which have developed as the results of pressures for the 'reform' of unresponsive local authorities. These elements fulfil a number of roles, variously augmenting the representative democratic system, complementing it in localised citizen involvement, and challenging it through citizen action. The first of these stems from two distinctive reform agendas, respectively prioritising public roles as consumers of services and as politically active citizens.

Public involvement processes themselves can be described in terms of a number of different 'variables' which are interconnected and potentially contested subjects for policy making. Any given process is characterised by the stage in the wider policy process at which the public will be involved, the issues to be covered, who will be participating, the geographical scale over which it will take place, and the resources which will be committed to it. Two further aspects determine the connection between a public involvement process and policy making elsewhere in an authority. The first is its function – whether it aims to engage the public in action or in policy making. The other is the degree of influence on policy that the public are accorded – the 'level' of public involvement - characterised here using Wilcox's spectrum of informing, consulting, deciding together, acting together and the state supporting independent community interests (Wilcox, 1994).

The material reviewed in Chapter Four revealed the considerable ambiguity in the operational implications of adopting sustainable development as a policy objective. Interpretations can be characterised by the relative importance they assign to the three principal components of the concept – economic development, environmental protection and social justice. Rather than attempting to divide possible combinations of these into, for example, 'strong' and 'weak' conceptions of sustainable development, interpretations will be described by the extent to which they incorporate and integrate the three components.

The role that the public should have in achieving sustainable development is equally indeterminate, with three broad positions identifiable in the literature. The first, put forward in Agenda 21 and adopted in guidance on LA21 in the UK, is that widespread public involvement in policy making and personal action is necessary and desirable. Such a stance suffers from internal tensions caused by the dilemma that while sustainable development appears to imply a level of democratic public involvement, there is no guarantee that the outcome of such involvement will be environmentally sustainable. The second and third positions are distinguished by which horn of this dilemma they choose to embrace: one is 'conservative', giving the public an instrumental role in achieving sustainable development and the state the responsibility for deciding the goals and policies to be followed, while the other is 'radical', giving responsibility to the public for both defining what would constitute sustainable development and devising appropriate policies to achieve it.

A salient concern throughout the discussions of public involvement in relation to both democracy and sustainable development was the need for consensus. While it

is argued that more participatory governance is necessary to maintain the legitimacy of local government, it theoretically carries risks of creating instability and further weakening the state. The desirability of increased public involvement thus rests on the existence of consensus, or the possibility of creating it. A powerful rationale for such consensus is provided by the environmental argument for sustainable development: that we are 'all in the same boat'. At the same time it is this argument, and the assumption that it is widely accepted, which is essential to overcome the dilemma described in the preceding paragraph and reconcile the uncertainty inherent in participatory processes with the putatively objective necessity for environmentally sustainable development.

6.2.3 Policy making for public involvement in LA21

Bringing this material together provides an outline understanding of a policy making process driven in part by values and goals concerned with the overall trajectory of development together with the role of the public in achieving 'sustainable development' and in governance in general. These values and goals are derived from the many possible interpretations of the key concepts involved, between which there are both conceptual and political tensions. The policy making process is therefore likely to be marked by contestation between different interpretations of its goals and by interactions prompted by the implications of sustainability and public involvement goals for other policy and institutional agendas.

From this perspective it seems extremely likely that the outcomes of attempts to engage the public in LA21 can be at least partially explained in terms of the internal processes through which these attempts were designed and managed. It is this premise which underlies the current research. Figure 6.1 shows this model of the policy making process in diagrammatic form. It contrasts with the somewhat naïve view which appeared to underpin both guidance and much policy making in LA21 and some of the criticism made of the initiative (shown schematically in Figure 6.2).

This assumed that there was a straightforward, linear relationship between a unitary set of goals and values and the approach taken to engaging the public – an approach which might or might not have been successful, and which might have been thwarted to an extent by lack of support from within the local authority. Although itself based on the more complex view of policy making, an important component of this research is the investigation of whether and to what extent the 'naïve'

expectations of direct links between intentions and outcomes can be traced in the empirical findings.

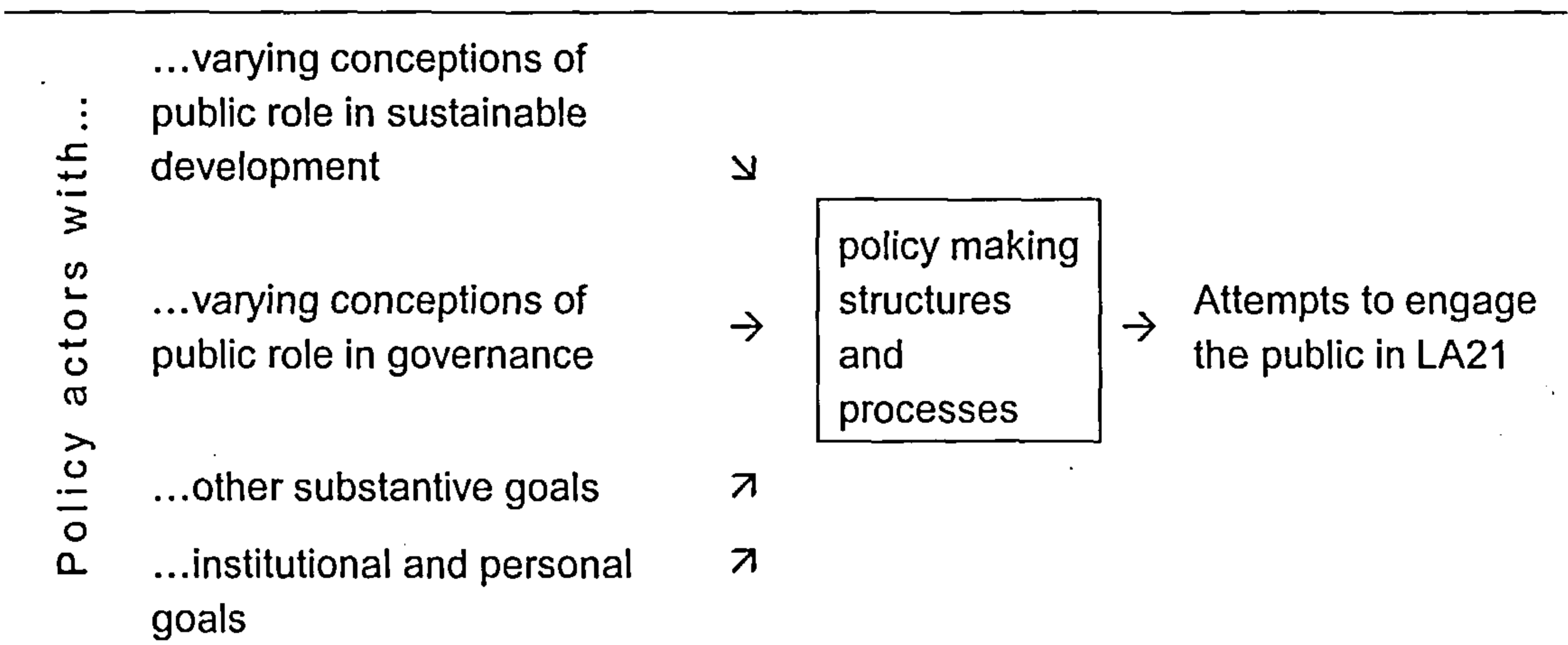


Figure 6.1: Components of the policy making process for public involvement in LA21

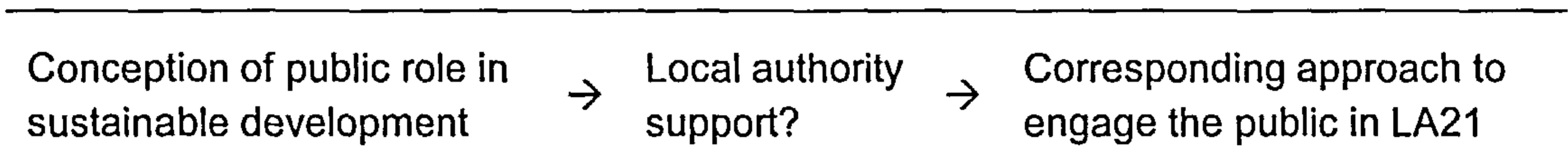


Figure 6.2: A prevalent understanding of policy making for public involvement in LA21

Given the complex conception of policy making, one final issue remains before presenting the specific questions addressed by this research. This is the extent to which the literature review generated expectations about the nature of policy making for LA21 and so provided guides to the empirical research. As suggested above, the existing literature on LA21 has little to offer in this context, with its over-simplified model of policy making and recognition of only a limited range of values and goals. The wider literature clearly provides a larger range of possible values and goals, but it is also possible to go further and suggest that in practice there may be links between these. These were set out in more detail in the conclusions of Chapters Three and Four. Together they suggest that the values and goals associated with the substantive aims of sustainable development, the role of the public in achieving it and the extent to which an authority embraces one or other of the reform agendas in its approaches to public involvement and policy integration *might* be found in mutually supportive groupings. In consequence, it is tentatively suggested that two kinds of strategies for public involvement in LA21 are identifiable, or that at least local authority approaches could be described as lying on an axis between two ideal, polar positions:

a) a *conservative* approach, prioritising economic growth and environmental amelioration, with public involvement limited to individual action and consultation; and

b) a *holistic* approach, promoting widespread public involvement in policy making across a broad, 'quality of life' agenda with a commitment by the authority to be responsive to the community.

This distinction allows a clearer view of what would constitute 'radical' change. From the point of view of the first of these positions the second would be a radical shift in local governance. However, it is a relative notion, and there are environmentalist and left-wing viewpoints which are possible components of the LA21 policy making process and which would be considered radical by proponents of the second position. Conversely from these positions the holistic approach is not radical, since it implies the modification rather than the overthrow of existing political structures and norms.

However, it is stressed that these proposed links are tentative and were principally used heuristically to guide the empirical research (see Section 6.4.2). Analysis of the literature strongly suggested that the associations between values from the different fields are contingent – in particular that there are no necessary links between interpretations of sustainable development and the appropriate role of the public in achieving it. Moreover the extent to which authorities are characterisable in terms of the reform agendas is questionable and, at the individual level, actors do not necessarily hold consistent and mutually supportive views on separate issues. Finally, very little of the literature makes these links explicit. To a great extent it simply provides ranges of possible values and observed outcomes and ways of classifying these, but leaves the policy making processes that link them as a 'black box'.

6.3 The research questions

This research set out to look into this black box. It sought to provide a fuller understanding and explanation of the LA21 initiative by looking at the mechanisms by which it was developed – policy making processes *within* local authorities. It was therefore principally concerned with the questions:

How did local authority policy processes shape the nature of public involvement in Local Agenda 21?

In particular, *what happened within local authorities to subvert the radical aims apparently embodied in Agenda 21?*

These determined a set of more detailed research questions, designed to provide as complete an account as possible of how values, resources and context came together to deliver policy outcomes. These were:

- What rationales and values concerning sustainable development, public involvement and democracy were present in the policy making process?
- What was the impact of ‘contextual factors’?

These factors included substantive and institutional goals relatively independent of the LA21 process and the formal and informal structures through which policy making was carried out.

- How did these interact?
- What were the outcomes?
- Which and whose goals were represented in outcomes?
- Which of all these components were dominant in determining outcomes?

The literature review identified a number of conceptual tensions and apparent incoherencies within and between aspects of sustainable development, public involvement and local governance. Attention was focused in the examination of policy making processes on whether and how these theoretical tensions were revealed in practice, both as potentially important factors in the explanation of outcomes and in order to provide a basis for further conceptual development. The investigation was thus sensitive to the following potential ‘problem areas’:

- tension between the apparent necessity of public involvement for sustainable development and a realist understanding of unsustainability;
- conflicting goals arising from the different rationales underlying the range of public involvement enjoined by Agenda 21;
- tension between encouraging public involvement and the representative democratic foundation of local government; and
- the possible need to reconcile the assumption of consensus with its empirical absence.

At a more abstract level the review also identified problems with existing typologies of sustainable development and with conceptions of public involvement which do not take into account the complex nature of policy making processes. The final set of issues for the research was therefore to address these weaknesses through using the empirical material to make progress towards more adequate analyses in both these fields.

6.4 The research programme

6.4.1 Introduction

The following sections describe the research process through which these questions were addressed. Its form was influenced by three principal considerations. Firstly, while the research aimed to answer general questions about ‘the LA21 initiative’ it is clear that local authorities have adopted very varied approaches. To illuminate the initiative as a whole, the data collected therefore maintained a balance between the need for generalisable results and sufficient depth of understanding to generate practically adequate theoretical descriptions – that is, between external and construct validity (Kirk and Miller, 1986). Secondly, studying the internal workings of policy making processes raised problems of access. The LA21 initiative is now largely finished, many aspects and moments of policy making typically go unrecorded, and much of the subject material consisted of actors’ perceptions, understandings and motivations. The research was therefore largely reliant on testimony from those involved, raising inevitable issues over the validity of research findings (see Section 6.4.3). Finally, the amount of field work possible was constrained by the limited financial resources and the available time of both the researcher and the policy making subjects of the research.

6.4.2 Data collection I: Case studies

The first of the above considerations dictated a case study approach. On the one hand the research was predicated on generating understanding of outcomes in terms of complex and contextualised processes, and so required the intensive examination of whole policy processes across rather broad areas of local authority activity (Yin, 1994). On the other, the logic of realist explanation entails that even a single case produces general results, which can be applied tentatively to other concrete situations where it is plausible that similar causal mechanisms are present (Silverman, 1985). Consequently studying many cases is unnecessary to develop an

understanding of the basic mechanisms involved, which can be done more efficiently through a small number of cases with hypothetically interesting contrasting structures (Sayer, 1992). Balanced against the third, pragmatic consideration, this suggested the selection of two case studies which exemplified the conservative and holistic polar types of LA21 processes identified above. Given the theoretical fragility of these positions against a background of diversity, it was not expected that cases would exactly correspond to them. This rationale for selection was principally intended to guide the research to interesting and 'interestingly different' authorities, in which the existence and coherence of such positions could be investigated.

The cases in question were policy making processes concerned with how public involvement was carried out within LA21. Such processes did not have well-defined boundaries, however, since the public involvement and substantive aspects of LA21 were in practice inseparable. Further, any LA21 process was potentially connected to any or all other policy making related to public involvement and environmental, economic or social issues, and to the broader structures within which local authority policy making takes place. Conversely, identifying the core 'LA21 process' amongst other policies aimed at sustainable development was not necessarily straightforward, yet was important not only for delimiting the field of the research but also because the explicit naming of an initiative as LA21 plausibly has real impacts on its development (Lafferty and Eckerberg, 1998). These definitional problems were resolved by treating LA21 processes named as such within the authorities as the core of the cases, and the relevant areas of associated policy making as matters for empirical examination. The units of analysis for the research were thus rather ill-defined 'LA21 policy making processes and linked processes'. In practice case selection was a process of identifying local authorities in which appropriate LA21s were centred.

Three additional selection criteria were that the authorities:

- were actively pursuing a public involvement strategy within a well-developed LA21; but
- were not amongst the handful of recognised and well-researched pioneers in LA21; and
- welcomed the idea of being researched, and thus could be expected to be helpful.

An initial screening process was carried out through a review of documents in order to select a short list of candidate authorities which appeared to fit the first two of these criteria. This was necessarily rather *ad hoc*, since there is no complete collection of LA21 documentation and much of what exists is oriented towards publicity and awareness raising and is therefore not a reliable guide to process outcomes. Information was gathered from:

- the LGMB/IDeA Sustainable Development Unit, which held the country's most complete collection (material from approximately 200 local authorities);
- a personal, *ad hoc* collection of documents on LA21 and other public involvement from 41 local authorities, including reviews by LGMB (1997 *et seq.*) and Laughton (1997);
- information on LA21 and other relevant activities (corporate strategies, proposals for Best Value programmes and so on) from local authority websites accessed through the Tagish directory (Tagish, 1999); and
- guidance from two academic researchers and a commercial consultant with expertise in LA21 and public involvement.

This first stage yielded a shortlist of twenty-three authorities which appeared to fit the criteria. A second stage of telephone and face-to-face interviews was carried out to determine which LA21 processes most closely approximated the two ideal types and whether the pragmatic fourth criterion was met. This process yielded two suitable cases, with the others failing to meet one or more of the criteria: many processes appeared to be either less active or less radical than suggested by the documentation; several were particularly complex and hard to classify; a few authorities were hostile to the idea of being subjects of research. The authorities selected were Durham County Council as the 'conservative' case and St Edmundsbury Borough Council as the 'holistic' case.

6.4.3 Data collection II: Methods of data collection

Interviews

A key purpose of the case study approach was to generate as rich a description as possible, and to this end interviews, observation and written materials were all used as data sources (Robson, 1993). Interviews were the principal method, a choice dictated by the research's focus on actors' subjective experience and the historical and largely unrecorded nature of the policy processes. In order to cover the LA21

process and its policy context in as much detail as possible, interviewees were sought from the following categories:

- ‘proponents’ of LA21: the officers directly responsible for planning and implementing LA21, together with other promoters of LA21 in the authority, such as senior officers and politicians;
- other actors directly involved in or affected by the process: officers senior to the LA21 unit, other officers formally involved in relevant decision-making, elected members from relevant committees, and field level staff implementing LA21 public involvement;
- other actors indirectly involved through responsibility for policy areas potentially affected by adoption of a LA21 process. These differed between the cases and included members and officers responsible for economic development, environmental programmes and other fields in which public involvement was significant such as community development. This category also included senior members and officers who were expected to have views on the appropriateness of public involvement, the adoption of an environmental agenda and the impact of these on their roles and that of the authority as a whole;
- people from outside the local authority involved in the planning and delivery of LA21, including staff from other tiers of local government, individual activists and representatives of non-governmental organisations and the private sector.

Potential interviewees were identified through a snowballing process, relying initially on the primary contact in the LA21 section in each authority, supplemented by contacts suggested by interviewees. Individuals who appeared relevant on the basis of their position in the authority or from documentary sources were also approached. In practice the interviews actually conducted were constrained by the time available and the willingness of potential interviewees to participate.

Figure 6.3 lists the interviews carried out. They took place between October 1999 and June 2000, with the majority being carried out in November and December 1999 in Durham and April and May 2000 in St Edmundsbury.

	Durham	St Edmundsbury
Councillors	4	2
Senior Officers + Officers (‘senior officers’ were departmental Directors and Assistant Directors)	5 + 9 from: Corporate Policy, Economic Development, Environment and Resources, Planning, Social Services	6 + 9 from: Chief Executive’s, Economic Development, Environmental Health, Housing, Leisure, Planning, Policy Unit, Waste Management
Other government tiers	4	3
Non-governmental actors	10	0
Total interviewees	32	20
Repeat interviews	7	7
Total interviews	39	27

Figure 6.3: Interviews

Each interviewee was in some sense unique through their particular formal position in their organisation and in the individual role they played in the policy process. Together with the emphasis on trying to uncover respondents’ rather than the researcher’s conceptualisation of the process, this required that each interview was treated as a unique event, tailored to the individual in question, and taking the form of a ‘guided conversation’ (Lofland, 1971, quoted in Fielding and Thomas, 1993). Adoption of this relatively unstructured approach was also motivated by the need to establish trust between researcher and interviewee (Fontana and Frey, 2000), given both the political and ethical nature of the issues around conceptualisations of sustainable development and democracy and the potential sensitivity of questions about the roles of different actors in the policy making process. It also allowed for checks and an assessment to be made of the extent to which interviewees were responding strategically, within an expected range from relative transparency through to deliberate deceit.

Each of these ‘conversations’ was guided by set of questions used as an *aide memoire* to ensure that all topics of interest were covered during the conversation. Most interviews covered the same broad topic areas, with specific focuses

appropriate to the roles played by each interviewee. These topic areas were as follows:

- the interviewee's conceptualisation of sustainable development, and in particular of the roles and relationship of public and local authority in achieving it;
- their view of the appropriate role of public involvement in local governance.

For each of these any changes in their beliefs or understanding during the process were investigated.

- The interviewee's perception of what happened during the process of developing the LA21 public involvement strategy, and what its outcomes were.

These questions focused on their perceptions of who was involved, whether policy was made through rational discussion, direct control or other forms of interaction, and the relative importance of different substantive goals and structural factors in determining the form and outcomes of the process.

- The interviewee's perception of the authority's approach to public involvement in general; and
- their perception of synergies and conflicts between different policy areas and actors.

The repeat interviews were used for deeper investigation of emerging salient issues, to clarify areas which were initially unclear and to revisit issues which had not been viewed as important during the first interview. Most of the repeat interviews were with the senior LA21 officers, and were further supplemented with more informal discussions.

All but two interviews were tape recorded, and at the interviewees' request sections of a further two were not recorded. Notes were made openly during the two untaped interviews, and as much as possible of the content of the untaped sections was committed to paper immediately after the interview ended. Notes were also made after each interview of non-verbal aspects such as body language which would help assess the nature of the responses and to record initial impressions of how the new information fitted in with expectations and any interesting and unexpected new issues arising from it.

Direct observation

Observation played an important though subsidiary part in data collection, particularly in Durham. In principle it has the merit of giving access to policy making in a way which is relatively unaffected by the researcher, particularly if observation occurs over an extended period (May, 1997). Such extended observation also allows access to the process *as a process*, in a way that single interviews or other 'snap-shot' methods cannot provide, and - to the extent that the observer is also a participant - the experiences of the subjects can be shared and thus learned about in a very direct way (Schwandt, 2000). However, the observational data is necessarily mediated through the researchers' conceptual framework, and only gives access to the surface phenomena of interactions in the policy making process and not to the conceptualisations and interpretations of experience which were central to this research. Practically, the short time available for field research relative to the lifespan of the LA21 initiative also limited the possibility of direct observation, as did the spatially and institutionally dispersed nature of the process (May, 1997).

In practice the extent to which direct observation was possible was very different in the two case studies, due to the different nature of their LA21 processes and the nature of my access to it. Durham's initiative was very active during the fieldwork period, providing opportunities for observation of three routine steering group and Round Table meetings. A desk in the open plan LA21 team office also allowed continuous observation and informal interaction with the team members, leading to a level of engagement and acceptance which culminated in my performing administrative tasks and answering telephones during periods of intense activity. Such opportunities for rich and unstructured data collection were absent in St Edmundsbury. The LA21 was in a hiatus during the field work period, and the team was split between two offices. The desk space provided was in the senior officer's individual room, precluding observation and limiting opportunities for informal discussion.

Documents

The third source of data was documents produced by the case study authorities: publications, committee reports, minutes of meetings and miscellaneous notes and letters. Durham County Council had produced several substantial publicity documents and a regular LA21 newsletter and kept a fairly comprehensive record of minutes of committees, officer groups and various LA21-related forums together

with abundant miscellaneous documents. In contrast St Edmundsbury produced few publications, had fewer formal meeting structures and kept no systematic collection of miscellaneous materials – the documentary record was restricted principally to committee and officer group minutes. Both suffered from the limitation that they tended not to document the details of policy processes, since minutes typically only reported the outcomes of formal meetings, although in Durham some processes could be inferred from series of draft documents.

In general such material is somewhat problematic, as it provides two kinds of data which are not necessarily separable. While some purportedly record events and decisions and as such are of use in reconstructing the course of policy making processes, particular in the introductory stage of field work, documents are also components of the policy making process. In this guise they are both outputs which instantiate particular interpretations of sustainable development and other concepts, and elements with a structuring effect on the process which serve a more or less strategic purpose. These twin functions can be hard to disentangle, particularly since documents cannot be directly interrogated, and so their reliability as either historical sources or as representing particular viewpoints is always in doubt.

Validity

This raises the important issue of assessing the validity of data and its value for developing a reliable, practically adequate report of a social process. The specific limitations of observation and documents were noted above, and the following points apply in particular to the interview-generated data. Theoretical positions differ over the extent to which interviews report on an objective world or are social interactions which only give information about the interaction process itself, with no reporting function (Fielding and Thomas, 1993). The positivist and ethnomethodological extremes are both problematic, but between them lies a plausible realist approach, which recognises the social nature of the interview and thus the locally constructed nature of the data, but also a wider, albeit socially constructed, reality which the data describes (Silverman, 1985). This intuitively attractive position is adopted here, with the recognition that it suffers from two problems.

In any given situation it is important to distinguish reporting from strategic construction and unconscious interpersonal influences, yet these three aspects are not independently accessible and separable. Secondly, the realist approach recognises that while some of the structures reported on are relatively enduring,

others are more transient and changeable, being constructed and transformed in the evolution of the policy making process, and others still are the product of individual interpretation and construction and without shared existence (Sayer 1992; Næss and Jensen, 2002). There is a corresponding variation in the extent to which reports of them are open to checking through triangulation using multiple data sources. A pragmatic and flexible approach was therefore adopted, in which cross-checking within and between interviews and other data sources was carried out continually, in order to reveal both shared constructions and also the expected *non*-coincidence of views and varied interpretations of important concepts (Stake, 2000). The overall validity of the narrative that emerged was checked with the principal contacts in each case study authority. However, the process of determining validity and assessing the balance between the effects of the research process and some independent though multiple and subjective reality was the researcher's responsibility, pursued through prolonged exposure within the case study authorities, conscious testing of ideas as the research process unfolded and skilful interviewing. Like all realist inquiry its findings are necessarily provisional, though intended to be as practically adequate as possible. In consequence, the final test of its validity is the plausibility and coherence of the present report, and the extent to which it provides a description sufficiently rich that other researchers or practitioners will be able to apply its arguments to their own experience.

6.4.4 Analysis

Concurrently with the field work a continual unstructured process of review and analysis took place which informed subsequent interviews and produced a record of ideas as they occurred in the field. This preliminary stage was followed by transcription and indexing of the interview tapes which, together with notes and documents collected in the field, provided the basis for a series of analyses at increasing levels of generalisation.

The starting point was the 'mapping' of each of the processes studied, identifying the actors involved and producing a relatively simple narrative description. These were then augmented by a detailed description of the inputs, interactions and outcomes of the processes, using the various characterisations developed from the literature review and summarised above in Section 6.2.2. This provided rich descriptions of each process, including analyses of the links between inputs, context and outcomes, which are presented in Chapters Seven and Eight.

While this material addressed the detailed research questions for the two processes studied, the next stage of the analysis was to assess which explanatory elements could be generalised to the LA21 initiative as a whole. This drew on the individual case studies and comparisons between them, together with the literature reviewed on local government and LA21, to identify patterns of structures and mechanisms which were plausibly common across many local authorities. This enabled the principal research questions to be answered by identifying factors which explain, at least partially, the evolution of LA21 and its failure to achieve radical changes. The final stage of the analysis brought together the theoretical problems outlined in Chapters Three and Four with the empirical findings to generate suggestions for developing more adequate theoretical conceptualisations of sustainable development and public involvement in general.

6.4.5 Ethics

Although the research raised no ethical or legal issues significant enough to involve committees or legal constraints, carrying it out inevitably had ethical aspects, principally concerned with the balance of potential benefit and harm and related concerns over confidentiality.

The potential benefits and risks were unevenly distributed. The research aimed both to provide some benefit for society at large and for the researcher. The former was to be achieved through improving policy making – an aim which itself rests on the clearly contestable judgement that policy can and should be improved through more effectively incorporating public input and sustainability considerations. Presumably the funding body and local authorities which consented to host the research shared this aim and believed that such benefits outweighed the financial and time costs. This laid a responsibility on the researcher to ensure that the results entered the public domain, and that they should be made available in a useful form to the case study local authorities. It also created a responsibility to be continually conscious of the potential impact of the field work on the policy making process. Some impact was inevitable: the ethical issue arose in making judgements over what impacts were desirable.

In contrast to these potential benefits, those to interviewees were not obviously very great, except insofar as they shared the aim of improving the policy making process and welcomed the opportunities the research offered for them to reflect on practice.

The potential risks were rather high, arising principally from possible infringements of respondents' autonomy and in particular from breaches of confidentiality.

This was guarded against at three levels. The first was through obtaining informed consent. This was granted by the corporate management teams on behalf of their authorities, but this clearly did not mean that every individual was either informed or consenting. Little could be done about internal pressures or instructions to cooperate with the research, beyond mitigating them by respecting apparent reluctance and not pursuing interviews in which people seemed unwilling. In practice interviewees appeared to choose freely whether or not to participate, and only one of those approached declined to be involved. Within interviews the very occasional reluctance to deal with particular topics was respected, but in general participants appeared to be very open and so raised the problem of protecting them by maintaining confidentiality.

All information collected was treated as confidential within limits set by the need to produce a valid and informative account of the process to which informants had implicitly agreed to contribute. Maintaining anonymity thus became paramount. This was relatively unproblematic in written outputs through the removal of names and not quoting directly on sensitive issues. The problems were more acute during the field work and in providing a report for verification and the authorities' own use, since the sources of anonymously reported views may be identifiable by other actors, and some of the most revealing information was derived from informants reporting on conflictive processes. Managing this situation was a matter of researcher judgement and appears to have been carried out successfully, given that no negative repercussions on individuals were reported either during or after the fieldwork.

The final level at which autonomy was protected is the most problematic – the recognition of an obligation of veracity in reporting. While a researcher has a responsibility to report interviewees as accurately as possible and generate an analysis which does not intentionally *misrepresent* the process, within a non-positivist paradigm there is no clear boundary between interviewees' reports and the researcher's interpretations. There is no single truth to be represented: actors differ amongst themselves and researchers' interpretations will inevitably be different again, particularly given their privileged access as outsiders. (Without such difference there would be little point in outsiders conducting research.) As noted in Section 6.4.3 the adequacy of my interpretation was checked during interviews and

with my principal contacts. Beyond that the responsibility rests with the author for producing an account which respects the information provided, attempts to represent the researched processes in a way that is recognisable and makes sense to others in the light of experience and theory, but is necessarily a personal interpretation, a narrative constructed through a process involving re-presentation and selection of material.

Chapter 7 Public involvement in LA21 in County Durham

This used to be a horrible place but now it's a beautiful sea of flowers.

Michelle Lenagh, age 10 (Co. Durham
LA21 Partnership, 1997)

7.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the findings from the first case study: the Local Agenda 21 process in County Durham. Proponents of sustainable development were faced with the challenge of devising a strategy for a county with a population of half a million scattered across a diverse physical, economic and social landscape, encompassing remote hill farms, small mining communities centred on defunct coal pits and a relatively prosperous cathedral and university city (DCC, 2001a). Much of this area faces a legacy of industrial decline and restructuring, with extensive problems of low economic activity, social deprivation and environmental degradation (DCC, 1996a).

The local authority charged with tackling these problems, Durham County Council (DCC), is a shire county authority, lying within the North East England Region and with seven Districts as its lower tier. Politically it has an unbroken history as a Labour authority of a very traditional type (Boyne, 1998). The question posed by this research is how did such an authority, with its engrained culture and current priorities, engage with the new agenda of participatory and sustainable development? Perhaps surprisingly the response was a Council-led LA21 widely lauded for its inclusive approach and innovative projects, based on a partnership of more than fifteen hundred individuals and organisations drawn from across the state, private and voluntary and community sectors (DCC, 2000a). This chapter explores in detail what was achieved and the processes by which the LA21 was developed, and analyses the nature of the public involvement and sustainable development embodied in this apparently successful programme.

It starts with a brief introduction to the principal actors and structures involved in the LA21 and a narrative description of the process. This is followed by analyses of the outcomes and the values and goals of those involved which acted as the drivers of the process. Relevant contextual factors are then described, including prevalent values in the local authority and the structures in which policy making took place. These components are then brought together in an analysis of the LA21 policy making processes themselves, allowing conclusions to be drawn about why certain actors' values were evident in the programme while others were excluded.

7.2 Structures and principal actors

The LA21 was based in the Environmental Section of Durham County Council. Three officers, informally known as 'the LA21 team', had responsibility for developing and facilitating most of the varied activities of the initiative. They worked closely with their senior manager, the Assistant Director of Environment and Resources, who initiated the LA21 and was the driving force behind most of Durham County Council's environmental and sustainability work. He in turn reported upwards through departmental and corporate management teams to the council's Environment Committee.

These four officers were also key members of a set of networks and more formal structures through which the LA21 initiative involved organisations and individuals from outside the authority. The broadest of these was the LA21 Partnership, consisting of any group or individual wishing to 'sign up to a sustainable future' and be kept informed about the progress of LA21 (DCC, 1994e). It formed a pool from which partners came together for the specific projects which were the core activities of the County Durham LA21.

From the Partnership were also drawn the members of the Round Tables, the main formal structures through which people from outside the authority were involved in the LA21. These were forums for the generation and discussion of projects, commenting on policy proposals and sharing ideas and information about sustainable development. They were open to any interested group or individual and chaired by people from outside the authority, though each notionally had three councillors on it. The six dealt with separate substantive topics:

- energy
- transport and planning
- economic sustainability
- natural resources
- waste; and
- education, participation and awareness raising.

A seventh group, the Community Action Forum, was established as a sub-committee of the education Round Table, with a specific remit to promote community involvement in sustainable development. It was distinctive from the Round Tables

in having its own steering group, latterly chaired and serviced by staff from the Groundwork Trust*, and dedicated external funding from the National Lottery.

While largely free to go their own ways in terms of organisation and agendas, the Round Tables were linked through the LA21 Steering Group, made up of their chairs and deputy chairs. This met quarterly to pool ideas from the separate Round Tables, discuss initiatives concerning the LA21 as a whole and comment on general sustainability issues emanating from the authority. Thus it had the dual role of drawing together the other Round Tables and being a 'sustainability Round Table' in its own right.

These authority and external structures were linked through the Assistant Director of Environment and Resources as chair of the Steering Group and the participation of the LA21 team in this group and the Round Tables. The team also had more general support and facilitation roles servicing the Round Tables, producing publicity material, representing LA21 inside and outside the authority and continuously working in an informal way with actual and potential Partners to stimulate and support activities.

7.3 The story of the LA21

7.3.1 Genesis: 1980s - 1994

The approach taken by the authority to LA21 developed out of a coordinated approach to environmental issues adopted in the late 1980s, which brought together its statutory activities and 'greener' initiatives. These included a long-standing programme of reclamation of land left derelict by the shrinking coal mining industry and a number of community-based projects in partnership with organisations such as Groundwork. The new approach was initiated by the Assistant Director of Environment and resulted in the setting up of an officer group within his department and the appointment of new staff, with the remit to 'encourage the greater involvement of an increased number of groups, organisations and individuals' in environmental work and introduce environmental policies within the authority (DCC, 1991: i). They produced an environmental charter and state of the environment report (DCC, 1991, 1993a), but neither these nor the officer group's

* Until 2001 there were two Groundwork Trusts in Durham, with a joint executive Director. This structure is immaterial to their engagement with the LA21 and they will be referred to collectively as 'Groundwork' from now on.

work were perceived by those involved as having had significant impacts on authority policy or public involvement.

The state of the environment report was quickly superseded as the focus of policy making by the authority's response to Agenda 21. By late 1993 the Assistant Director and other officers involved in the report were advising councillors on comments on the draft UK sustainable development strategy and simultaneously introducing the concept of LA21 to the officer group. Over the next few months they developed ideas about how LA21 should be approached by the authority and presented these to the group and senior officers. They initially envisaged a LA21 run by a forum with strategic and monitoring responsibilities for all aspects of the authority's activities and policy making. These ideas met with fierce criticism and opposition, and by mid-1994 a proposal was agreed by the officers for an initiative focused on practical action, carried out in 'active partnership with key groups, organisations and individuals' through a structure of topic-based Round Tables (DCC, 1994a). This fully-fledged proposal was put to members, framed as a way of continuing previous authority environmental programmes (DCC, 1994b). The council approved the initiation of this 'Local Agenda 21 for County Durham – a programme of environmental action for all' and it was launched at a public event in November 1994.

Organisations already working with the authority on environmental programmes and others thought to be potential partners were invited to the launch, which took the form of a seminar to identify 'the main environmental problems for the county...and agree on the combined action necessary to tackle the[m]' (DCC, 1994c). Around one hundred people attended. Following introductions establishing the principal objective of 'encouraging local people to adopt more environmentally sustainable practices through their own actions' participants were divided into groups based on the topics used by the LGMB for the national Round Tables (DCC, 1994a, d; Morphet and Hams, 1994). Within these themes they identified key issues and agreed that these should be the starting point for the agendas of permanent local Round Tables. The launch thus established the basic structures described above for developing and managing the LA21, which subsequently endured with little change.

Beyond the involvement of officers and members in these structures no formal links were established between the LA21 and the authority. The original staff complement of a junior officer and the Assistant Director was perceived to be insufficient to sustain the authority's responsibilities and commitment, and two posts

dedicated to LA21 were created in 1995. These were part-funded by major institutional partners and included a Community Projects Officer to work with the Round Tables to identify new projects and 'increase awareness of LA21 throughout the community' (DCC, 1996b). Expansion of the programme led to the appointment of a third officer in 1998.

7.3.2 The development of the LA21: 1995 onwards

The LA21 was thus set up in a way that involved people from outside the local authority in almost all its activities from 1995 onwards. These were divided between policy making through the formal structures, primarily focused on the LA21 itself, and projects intended to promote sustainable development.

Participants in the formal structures worked on a series of strategic documents which in principle shaped the development of the process. They identified their 'key issues' and developed indicators for a selection of these, which were then used in an awareness raising document setting out the nature of the prioritised problems and how people could address them (DCC, 1995a; Co. Durham LA21 Partnership, 1996). This was followed by a progress review, ostensibly the basis for the preparation of a LA21 strategy by the Partnership but subsequently presented as the strategy itself to the LGMB and to meet the requirements of Best Value (Co. Durham LA21 Partnership, 1997). Attention subsequently shifted to the preparation of the authority's own environmental strategy (DCC, 2000a) and a county-wide sustainable development strategy in recognition of the expansion of sustainable development initiatives beyond the confines of the LA21 programme.

The Round Tables and Steering Group concurrently became increasingly involved as consultees in wider local authority policy making, for example on air quality and transport. However, their principal focus remained on managing the LA21, and in particular on generating and approving ideas for project work.

In terms of the numbers of people involved and demonstrable, concrete progress towards sustainability, these projects were the core of the County Durham LA21. The numbers of partners and projects grew substantially and widened in scope beyond the initial environmental focus, as the team and the active partners in the Steering Group and Round Tables publicised the initiative through the media, engaged in continuous informal networking and made a succession of attempts to bring particular groups into the process. Many of the projects were innovative and successful, leading to the initiative's recognition by national and European

organisations as a leading example of local authority-led action for sustainability (European Sustainable Cities Project, 1999; IDeA, 2000b). Its processes for involving non-governmental partners have been particularly praised, by ICLEI amongst others (DCC, 2001b).

A number of concerted attempts were made to increase the numbers of projects undertaken, and to involve more people 'from the community' – as opposed to state, business or large non-governmental organisations - in the LA21 management structure. The first was the commitment by the authority of funds to support projects. Although formal authority for approving proposals was necessarily retained by the council's Environment Improvement Sub-Committee, in practice decisions were made by the Round Tables, none of whose recommendations was ever overturned. Between 1996 and 2000 the fund supported thirty-six projects with £42,000 of local authority money (DCC, 2000b) (see Appendix A).

One of the earliest of these projects was of particular importance to the development of the LA21, generating experiences for the LA21 team which shaped their subsequent approach to public involvement. A request for support in developing a village-level LA21 came from community activists in Croxdale, a fairly typical rural Durham village (DCC, 1996c). The stated aim of the initiative was to 'help [to] rekindle a sense of community in the village through involving local people in social and environmental improvements' (LGMB, 1997b). It thus appeared to embody the values and goals of Agenda 21: it was to be a grass-roots programme pursuing integrated social, economic and environmental goals, developed explicitly under the rubric of LA21 and sustainable development. The proposal was approved and progress was initially rapid, with the community activists and local authority staff working together to organise local planning meetings and develop sub-projects. This 'Croxdale LA21' attracted national and international publicity as an exemplar of community-based approaches to LA21 (LGMB, 1997b; European Good Practice Information Service, 1997). However, after a few months the partnership between the LA21 team and community group dissolved, leaving the activists to continue the project independently on a much reduced scale. This was partly due to local, intra-community problems but also because the level of support that the LA21 team felt able to give, beyond the grant from the project fund, was viewed as insufficient by the Croxdale group. Thereafter the LA21 team viewed working in such an intensive fashion with single communities on wide ranging projects as being beyond their capabilities, both in terms of time and their skills in community development.

The fund also came to be seen by some members of the Round Tables and the LA21 team as insufficient on its own to promote community action, and a shared feeling developed that a structure was needed to increase the representation and expression of community wishes within the LA21. Organisations working 'in the community' on non-environmental issues and which had not previously been involved in the Partnership were invited to a meeting to discuss how this could be achieved. The outcome was the creation of the semi-autonomous Community Action Forum in late 1996 to act as an information exchange. However, by mid-1997 the Forum was seen to be wilting and efforts to revive it by involving the Durham Rural Community Council (DRCC), on the grounds of its experience working with local communities, provoked the most serious internal conflict to beset the LA21. One of the Forum's initiators was an independent community activist with very strong views on the role of the Forum as an independent platform for the expression of community needs. He consequently rejected the involvement of 'agencies', as opposed to community or voluntary groups, and resigned over the addition of a DRCC representative to the steering group. According to another group member the Forum was then 'defunct'.

Groundwork's representative on the steering group and the authority's LA21 Community Projects Officer subsequently obtained funding from the National Lottery for workers to support a revived Forum and to develop projects with targeted communities in areas of high deprivation. The Forum was re-launched in September 1998 and resumed its programme of information sharing meetings, with its steering group chaired by a Groundwork officer. The perceived problem of dominance of the steering group by 'agency' staff and the under-representation of community groups persisted, however, despite repeated attempts by Groundwork staff to achieve an even balance and their long term aim of creating an independent community-led organisation. The targeted project work, although seen by all the participants as delivering LA21 'on the ground', was entirely independent of the rest of the LA21 process, being managed solely by Groundwork without any involvement of the LA21 team or the Forum.

At the same time as the team, Groundwork and the other community partners were working to revive the Forum, two initiatives were developed within the authority to involve more communities in the LA21. One was intended to provide a way for the town and parish councils to become involved, and the other was an attempt to stimulate a large number of community-based projects through the provision of information. They were launched together at a conference on the revised UK

sustainable development strategy, *Opportunities for Change*, at which thirty representatives of local councils were present. An advisory group was set up as a link with the councils' county association, which formally endorsed the initiative as 'offer[ing] a practical way forward for the benefit of local communities' (Co. Durham ATPC, 1997). The group petered out after a few meetings, with little enthusiasm to sustain it from either the LA21 team or the town and parish councillors themselves. However, the process of involving the local councils had become subsumed into the second initiative – the Sustainable Communities Campaign.

The focal point of this was a leaflet which illustrated what a sustainable community would look like and provided a list of projects which could contribute to developing such a settlement. Each was linked to a contact organisation which had committed itself to supplying a 'factsheet' containing the information necessary for a community group to start a project (DCC *et al.*, 2000). Starting from an initial draft by the Assistant Director, the greatly modified published version included a broad-ranging list of activities including encouraging participation, ensuring disability access and setting up community enterprises as well as more traditional environmental projects (DCC, 1999a). The Campaign was launched publicly in November 1999 at an event introduced by the Leader of the Council, with the intention of publicising it widely using the Partnership, Forum, local councils and the mass media. Initial response was slow and the campaign's impact was unclear by the end of the field work for this research.

In addition to its core activities the LA21 was associated with other initiatives to promote public involvement. Its affiliation to the multi-agency *Investing in Children* programme (DCC, 1998a) was significant for LA21 policy making as it caused tension between the council leadership and the LA21 team. As part of this programme the latter supported a group of young people in carrying out an apparently innocuous piece of research on their public transport needs. However, their findings and recommendations raised the issue of whose public transport should be subsidised by the local authority – an issue with financial and political implications and a previous history in the county which made it one of extreme political sensitivity. The public airing of the issue through the research and the criticism of authority policy implicit in the recommendations attracted the attention and ire of senior officers and members, including the council Leader. The existence of the LA21 initiative as a whole was briefly threatened, necessitating the LA21

officers to distance themselves from the research and their senior managers to intervene on their behalf within the authority. The storm passed, but, like the Croxdale project, it had a lasting influence on the team's judgement about subsequent work.

In contrast, LA21 was very little involved with the authority's development of a corporate approach to community development and its evolution into a key component of 'modernisation'. Started in late 1998, this initially aimed to provide a coordinated response to community appraisals but had the long term objective of 'engag[ing] individuals and groups on a genuine participatory basis' (DCC, 1999b: 2). It was subsequently linked to providing professional community development support to backbench councillors on the new Area Member Panels (DCC, 2001c). Despite the LA21 team's experience with public involvement they were only peripherally involved in this development process, although the Sustainable Communities leaflet has been adopted by the new Community Support Unit as a useful set of 'off-the-peg' solutions for some of the issues raised by communities.

7.3.3 Summary

Overall the policy making process for LA21 in County Durham had two distinct stages. Between the Rio Summit and late 1994 officers within the authority engaged in an internal process of designing the structure and setting the initial objectives and ethos of the initiative. This phase ended with the public launch of the LA21 Partnership, following which many more actors became involved, both in the policy making structures and in activities under the aegis of the initiative. This second stage was one of steady growth in numbers of participants, accompanied by further development of the structures and programmes to encourage more public involvement but with relatively little success in encouraging 'ordinary people' to become involved in the LA21 management structures.

Figure 7.1 provides a summary description of the process.

Year	Environmental/LA21 policy	Components of public involvement in LA21			
		Round Tables	Project Fund	CAF*	TPCs/SCs†
1989	Action for the Environment officer group established				
1990					
1991	Environmental <i>Charter</i> published				
1992	Environment Unit established				
1993	October: LA21 introduced to officers				
1994	November/December : LA21 launched at County Hall; "Partnership" and Round Tables established				
1995		●			
1996	April: Community projects fund set up	●	●		
	June: Croxdale funding approved	●	●		
	October: Community Action Forum launched	●	●	●	
1997	September: National Lottery bid for LA21 project; community activist resigned from CAF	●	●	●	
1998	May: <i>Opportunities for Change</i> conference for town and parish councils - Sustainable Communities project mooted	●	●		○
	September: Town and parish council LA21 group inaugurated; CAF relaunched; Groundwork project started	●	●	●	○
1999	September: conflict over young people's transport research	●	●	●	○
	November: Sustainable Communities campaign launched	●	●	●	●
* CAF: Community Action Forum					
† TPCs/SCs: Town and parish councils (○) and Sustainable Communities project (●)					

Figure 7.1: The LA21 in County Durham

7.4 Analysis

7.4.1 Introduction

Having set out this brief narrative description, this section considers the LA21 policy making process in more detail. It is organised analytically, addressing the empirical research questions for this individual case study. Firstly the outcomes – the projects and the deliberative and policy making LA21 structures - are described in terms drawn from the frameworks set out in Chapter Six. Actors' values and goals are then characterised in the same way, as are those found in the authority and beyond which formed one aspect of the context for the process. Institutional structures are considered as a second group of contextual factors before a fourth section which analyses the policy making processes through which the drivers interacted with each other and the contextual factors to produce the observed outcomes. The process overall was recursive, in that important elements of the public's involvement were in policy making for public involvement, thus blurring the distinction between process and outcomes and necessitating some arbitrary division of the material between the first and last of the following sections.

7.4.2 Outcomes

The substantive meaning of sustainable development

The substantive nature of sustainable development embodied in the outcomes was similar across both the LA21 structures and the funded projects. At the beginning of the initiative sustainable development was given a principally, though not exclusively, environmental interpretation. The membership and the topics for the Round Tables, with the exception of the economic sustainability group, were dominated by environmental issues. Social justice was not present as an explicit aim at all, apart from in the rhetoric of the 'LA21 declaration' which committed partners to 'putting the environment on [their] agenda' 'for the benefit of everyone, now and in the future, and not just for the ones that can afford it' (DCC, 1994e, f). This emphasis followed through into the early work of the Round Tables, whose key issues and indicator sets were almost exclusively environmental, and into the early funded projects. An exception was the ill-fated Croxdale LA21, whose initiators saw environmental projects as a way of also achieving social aims and incorporated purely social activities within the context of a sustainable development initiative. (The list in Appendix A gives a complete list of projects supported by the LA21

Partnership Project Fund. This is only indicative of the nature of 'LA21 projects' as a whole, since some of these used other funding sources.)

This generally narrow scope changed over time to embody a more holistic interpretation. Projects increasingly reflected a wider range of goals, some integrating the different aspects of sustainable development while others had a more social emphasis, embodying the notion that the pursuit of social justice was a legitimate sustainability goal in its own right. Thus in 1999 the Round Tables and Project Fund were engaged in promoting farmers' markets and access for disabled people, the Community Action Forum debated credit unions and local exchange and trading systems and the Steering Group took the council officers to task for preparing an 'environmental strategy' rather than a 'sustainable development strategy'. While this change was significant, the initiative maintained its environmental focus, as shown by the list of funded projects and the other topics considered by the Forum in 1999, which included community composting schemes, open spaces and wildlife conservation.

The Sustainable Communities Campaign had the potential to represent a further shift towards a holistic interpretation of sustainability in practice. Certainly its rhetoric presented a range of projects with a balance between 'meeting community needs', 'developing the local economy' and those with a more environmentally focused ideas, including projects which integrated the three aspects of sustainable development (DCC, 1999a).

The nature of public involvement in sustainable development

The launch in November 1994 established a LA21 in which widespread public involvement was central. In the words of the leaflet produced for the day:

Agenda 21 can only succeed if local communities take effective local action to help solve global problems...Everyone can do something positive – no organisation is too small (DCC 1994d).

From the start the initiative was thus oriented towards action by organisations and individuals to further sustainable development in practical ways. It offered a range of opportunities for different kinds of involvement, which in practice principally took the two forms of direct engagement in project work and participation in the management and policy structures of the LA21. Less significant in terms of activity were the consultations carried out to support the production of the 1997 progress review (Co. Durham LA21 Partnership, 1997) and at the *Opportunities for Change*

conference, and the involvement of an unknown number of Partners at the minimal level of receiving information about the LA21.

The projects were extremely varied in nature. They typically involved a small group of people who defined and then worked on a project which focused either on a local place or issue, such as cleaning up minewater pollution in a village stream, or on a county-wide but narrowly defined topic such as the county ornithological database. The initiators of the projects tended to be 'the converted' such as an environmental group or an interested school teacher, who were given the resources to change their behaviour in line with their existing values. The projects were also intended to be, in the words of the Assistant Director, 'good examples [that were] better than a million words' which would persuade others of the importance and possibility of sustainable development. The projects thus had a dual role in contributing to sustainability through achieving small pockets of sustainable development and through their demonstration value.

In much of the project work the public had a substantial role in defining what was to count as sustainable. The Croxdale LA21 exemplified the idea of a community-led project in which the community defined sustainable development through their choice of activities. This role was made explicit in Groundwork's programme, in which the process of communities defining their own needs and devising projects was prioritised as part of an empowering, community development process. More generally, many projects originated with ideas from members of the public and so reflected their interpretations of sustainable development. In contrast, the Sustainable Communities Campaign offered a choice from a predefined 'menu' of projects deemed by the LA21 organisers to characterise an ideal sustainable community, and so involved a diminution in the public's role in defining sustainable development.

The local authority's role in these projects was to support them through providing contacts, information and financial resources, and often to work closely with partners in devising and developing projects from an initial idea. From the perspective of the LA21 team these projects lay high on Wilcox's ladder, with the local authority 'supporting independent community interests' and sometimes 'deciding' and 'acting together' with members of the public who had a correspondingly high level of control. However, this was only true over limited geographical areas and topics, and from a broader perspective the projects can be seen fitting into a conservative approach to public involvement in sustainable

development, in which the bulk of the population were principally involved in becoming aware of issues and changing their behaviour, without any responsibility for determining what sustainable development should mean at larger scale in the county. Their local freedom to define sustainability was circumscribed by the local authority, the LA21 management structures and, in some cases, Groundwork, who set the parameters within which 'sustainable' projects could fall. The projects' position at the 'action' end of the policy-action spectrum was reinforced after the authority's near-disastrous reaction to the attempt by the young peoples' project to adopt another role and challenge policy.

In contrast, the structures set up to manage the LA21 - the Round Tables, the LA21 Steering Group and the Community Action Forum with its steering group - offered the public opportunities to be involved in a process in which non-state actors collaborated in decision making with the local authority. Each of these bodies had rather different roles in respect of achieving sustainable development and in relation to the policy making process of the LA21 and the authority as a whole.

The Round Tables played a major role in defining the content of the LA21 through their initial involvement in determining key issues and indicators and subsequently in generating and supporting projects. Following the launch they were given a considerable degree of autonomy and were ostensibly partnerships of equals in which state and public actors steered and facilitated the activities of the Partnership by 'deciding together'. They were also potentially financially independent of the local authority, since other Partners could use their own resources to support the LA21. While maintaining their primary role with respect to project work, they in practice developed in different ways, following the particular interests expressed by their members. Some became working groups in which officers from different authority departments met a few specialists from other agencies and businesses to discuss issues of mutual environmental interest. Falling attendance at several led to a greater emphasis on presentations and information sharing than on deliberation over policy. However, some became increasingly involved as consultees on policies outside the LA21, particularly the Planning and Transport Round Table under a chair who was previously a chief planner at another local authority. This policy involvement occurred through formal discussion of specific draft policies at Round Table meetings, and more continuously and less tangibly through the participation of officers from across the authority. A senior councillor noted that 'here is a process which has clearly worked well in terms of inputting, maybe, impulses to council

policies, because the different departments attend. ... This permeates in structured or unstructured ways and influences people, officers who attend them, changing their awareness of things'.

The Steering Group had a clear remit from the beginning 'as the main policy making body for the LA21 process as a whole. It appeared to function as an equal partnership to a considerable extent. One member of the LA21 team was of the opinion that the Assistant Director, who chaired the Group and was the senior local authority officer involved in the LA21 'takes a lot of notice of what that group says ...If there was a consensus that they disagreed with [him], I think that provided he was politically able to do it here...he would probably change his mind.' As with the Round Tables, the Group also broadened their involvement over time to include consultation on policy matters outside the LA21.

The explicitly community-oriented structures, the Education, Participation and Awareness Raising Round Table and its offshoot the Community Action Forum, were more exclusively focused on their roles of changing attitudes and generating public action. The former identified its key issues as 'increasing understanding of the environment' and 'encouraging people to take greater responsibility for the environment' (DCC, 1995a) and subsequently primarily involved itself in publicity and school-based environmental education. The Forum became an originator of project ideas but principally dedicated itself to disseminating and sharing information between community groups, supporting agencies, voluntary organisations and the local authority. Unlike the other Round Tables it had no formal role in policy consultation, though a steering group member commented that 'if an idea came up...and [the Community Projects Officer] said "that's a good idea"... hopefully that will be channelled through her to the planners.... There's no real formal structure for things to flow backwards and forwards, but [the LA21 team] are on the steering group and attend all the meetings. And we trust them.' The steering group itself appeared to be exclusively concerned with the management of the Forum and to be the least authority-dominated of the structures. This was partly personal, with its members expressing mutual respect and working in a very consensual way, but was also latterly reinforced by Groundwork's financial control.

However, while the LA21 structures appeared to offer the public a share in policy making this was circumscribed in several ways. Although participation was open to any interested individual, in practice fewer than half a dozen completely 'unaffiliated' people became involved, apart from those attending meetings of the

Community Action Forum. The interests and views of those outside state and commercial organisations were principally represented through organisations such as the churches and the rural community council, whose representatives explicitly adopted a 'community' stance, together with a very few local community groups. The content, format and language of the processes were recognised by the LA21 team and the large voluntary sector organisations' representatives to be off-putting for people unused to engagement in policy or with large organisations. The only unaffiliated individual on the LA21 Steering Group described his initiation: 'I just went along to this meeting at County Hall, into this room, which can be quite daunting, particularly for the first time, into this committee room with lots of official looking people in there, whereas I'd imagined it to be more like a community participation type of thing.' Despite the efforts of Groundwork and LA21 team officers to make the Community Action Forum more community-led than the other Round Tables, it appeared to be similarly daunting and failed to recruit many unaffiliated or community group members.

Although discussion and decision making within all the structures was characterised by participants as involving open debate leading to consensual decision making, this was balanced by a recognition that inequalities and constraints existed which gave some actors' views more force than others. This was partly individual, and a claimed strength of the process was that people were listened to more on the basis of personal characteristics than their organisational links. People perceived to be pursuing their own, limited agendas or who caused conflict were not taken very seriously, resulting in the exclusion of some viewpoints. Occasionally this was overt, as in one case of confrontational behaviour in a Steering Group meeting, which prompted another member to act: 'I thought about it for a split second - the only way to deal with that is to kill it up front, in front of everybody, straight away'. However, viewpoints were also excluded through self-denial, causing concern to at least one very 'community-oriented' Round Table and CAF steering group member: 'there have been occasions when I have not said things on behalf of the community because it will lead to conflict - that cannot be right. I don't feel that if I bring these things up I should be seen as a complete leper.'

However, it was also recognised that organisations which could bring their own resources to the process, such as the large utility companies, had more influence, especially as the Round Tables were not themselves executive bodies. As one utility company representative on the Steering Group put it, 'it's very difficult for the

community residents association of X, or Durham Wildlife Services, to say “well no, we ought to do this” [if] you know that the actual doing, let alone the money, will be coming from Northern Electric.’ A special case of this was the control that Groundwork exercised over the Community Action Forum and the targeted community-based projects through their management of the funding of this component of the LA21. In general, though, the influence wielded by the local authority officers was greater, who were recognised by the other participants as necessarily having ‘the whip hand’, not only because of the resources that the authority put into the LA21 but also because they were best placed to maintain the vital balance between an active LA21 and the risk of losing corporate support if the Round Tables became too critical of the council.

The balance of influence between the external partners and the officers varied between policy issues. It was at its most equal over policy for the LA21 structures themselves, and rather less so for other aspects of the LA21. The Round Tables’ and Steering Group’s role with respect to other local authority policies was purely consultative, leaving officers with complete discretion over how much weight to accord to their views. Participants felt that in general they had little impact. One interviewee from outside the authority asked rhetorically ‘what decision has ever been made in Durham on the basis of LA21 to change something the Labour majority wanted? ...I shouldn’t think that [the Leader] worries too much about it.’ Pragmatically some saw their role as simply keeping sustainability issues on the local authority’s agenda, though two members thought the Steering Group was maturing and gaining sufficient confidence to be more challenging.

Overall, the nature of all the links between the LA21 and the rest of the authority’s policy making processes were under the authority’s control. The consultation processes were never institutionalised and the opportunities for the communication of views through the presence of elected members and officers from various departments on the Round Tables created no requirement for these views to be taken into account in decision making. In general, the Assistant Director and the LA21 team exercised considerable control over the context in which the LA21 structures operated. This was particularly so in the initiative’s early stages, for example in their selection of topics and participants for the launch, both of which firmly established the environmental agenda.

These two principal forms of public involvement in the LA21 offered limited opportunities for large numbers of people to influence policy making. However, the

two consultation processes – over the LA21 progress review and *Opportunities for Change* - provided such opportunities. While the impact of the former is indeterminable, the latter contributed to broadening the scope of the LA21 through the identification of issues which were then incorporated into the Sustainable Communities Campaign. Although this was consultation and these outcomes were not forced by the public on an unwilling LA21 team, it nevertheless represents an unusually direct instance of public ideas being incorporated into policy.

Summary

Overall the Durham LA21 adopted a primarily environmental interpretation of sustainable development. This was coupled with a conservative approach to public involvement in sustainable development through its promotion of mass lay involvement in practical projects within a policy framework determined by a small number of partners working with the local authority. While over narrow ranges of issues and/or very local scales the former could embody very participative democratic forms in which the public could exercise considerable control, from a broader perspective their involvement was limited, took place late in the policy making process and was essentially oriented towards action rather than affecting policy. The LA21 structures gave those outside the authority a complementary role, genuinely sharing the task of policy making with the authority from an early stage in the process. However, this was still limited, in that very few lay people participated. Further, the scope of this ‘high-level’ involvement was confined to the LA21 itself, outside which the public’s and other partners’ role was as consultees. Although the details of these structures changed over time, the nature of public involvement in the initiative remained largely static, apart from a gradually increasing consultative aspect. In contrast there was a clear, though far from total, shift in substantive content, away from the initial narrowly environmental focus to embrace a more holistic agenda.

7.4.3 Values and goals

Introduction

Turning now to the values and goals which drove the policy making process, three groups of actors can be identified: the local authority officers principally involved in the LA21, other participants in the initiative and those within the authority who influenced its progress but were not directly involved in moving it forward. The first two of these groups are the subject of this section, while the values and goals of

the third are considered in the following section as elements of the 'context' for the policy making process.

The officers coordinating the LA21

The driving force behind the adoption, development and implementation of the LA21 was the Assistant Director for Environment and Resources – colleagues described him as 'almost evangelical about LA21 and sustainability issues', which were 'his personal campaign, crusade'. Underlying this and his previous work to create a coherent approach to the authority's environmental activities was a strongly held belief in the reality and severity of environmental problems and a very deep commitment to tackle these. For him this was '*the* most important thing - the only reason I work day and night on this agenda is because I am fearful for the future, fearful for the children's futures', while a member of the LA21 team suggested that 'you'd almost say that [he] is a Dark Green - I don't think he is fundamentally that interested in people's quality of life - he is interested in protecting the planet.' This commitment coloured his interpretation of sustainable development. Although he recognised at an early stage that the agenda being promoted after the Rio Conference had social and economic objectives, for him these always remained means to an environmental end. He consistently presented the case for LA21 in environmental terms, and resisted the extension of the initiative into tackling current social and economic issues: 'that can't be allowed to happen. ... I firmly believe in the LA21 process that we have, which still has at the heart the response to the global environmental crisis. ...Unless we hang onto that, I don't think if it is part of the community agenda it [i.e. saving the world from environmental disaster] will happen.'

This realist environmentalism was accompanied by an apparently purely instrumental approach to public involvement. Although in the initiative's early stages the Assistant Director and his Head of the Environmental Section considered and proposed a forum which would give the public considerable influence over the local authority as a whole, the former abandoned these plans without regret. It is not clear that he ever strongly supported them – at the outset he was perhaps genuinely unsure of the most appropriate way forward and allowed his junior officer's support for such a forum to dominate. In his view the important issue was to develop a process which would effectively generate action for sustainable development, and if this was not possible within the local authority then it could be done outside. More positively, he believed that the necessary magnitude of change in behaviour required

a network of people and organisations – he envisaged an ever-expanding ‘spider’s web’ structure bringing in resources and engaging people in action. This necessarily involved mass public involvement in the projects themselves, and also – given the unsupportive environment of the authority and the consequent scarcity of resources – the involvement of a committed group of like-minded people drawn from outside to steer the process.

This instrumental approach never appeared to be combined with any principled commitment to public involvement on democratic grounds. On the contrary, the Assistant Director ‘never [saw] LA21 as being a process that changed political structures - I don’t think it should’. He was opposed to using it to explicitly challenge existing policies, despite the belief that in the long term *all* local authority policies and practices would have to be based on sustainability principles as a matter of survival. This was undoubtedly partly a pragmatic response to the political realities within the authority – progress was only possible because the LA21 ‘never threatened to take the world over, or to change the way other people work’. However, it also appeared to reflect a very genuine belief in a consensual approach as the most effective way to achieve concrete results, and conflict as not just unhelpful but wrong: [LA21] ‘would diminish itself if used to oppose something’. He expected the policy making groups to share the core values of the LA21 to which they had signed up, but certainly did not naïvely believe that their views were widely shared in the population as a whole. Rather, he assumed that there were sympathetic people scattered through every community and organisation for whom a lack of information and ideas was the principal barrier to getting involved. The LA21 could link these together and support them, and the resulting projects would act as practical demonstrations of sustainable development and so ‘inspire people to believe that actually change is possible’.

There was an elitism implicit in this approach. Never doubting the rightness of his interpretation of the problem and the kind of solutions required, the Assistant Director’s ‘public’ included both a like-minded elite and a mass who could be made aware of what had to be done and would so come to adopt the ‘correct’ consensus view. Extending this consensual group was essential, since imposed, top-down policy changes would never be effective: he believed that ‘changing the world through the County Council is a hopeless task’.

Until the public launch of LA21 the policy making process was principally driven by the Assistant Director. Subsequently, however, other actors started to have an input.

The three new officers who became the LA21 team all came from environmental research or activist backgrounds and appeared to share a very similar set of values. Although initially sharing with the Assistant Director a view of LA21 as primarily environmental, over time they embraced an understanding of sustainable development which increasingly recognised the importance of integrating environmental with social and economic goals. To some extent this remained an instrumental change, driven by the recognition that imposing purely environmental policies was impossible and that meeting other needs was necessary in order to keep policy makers and the public 'on board' – yet maintaining the core, environmental motivation that 'either we'll come to a sticky end or we can change course'. However, they also expressed their commitment to social goals. As one put it, 'community-led activities kill two birds with one stone in terms of sustainable development - you have the output plus the community strengthening function as well.' Another shared the commitment but was unsure if it was appropriate: 'you can do social justice projects and say "social things are part of sustainability and therefore I'm going to do it", but sustainability isn't really about putting ramps in and making places more accessible, it's about environmental and probably economic things as well. But who cares? We just did it anyway, it was a good thing to do.'

The team shared with the Assistant Director the belief that the core of the programme should be action for sustainable development, and therefore that they should continually strive to engage more people from 'the community': 'the more people who are involved in trying to promote sustainable development at whatever level makes it more likely to happen'. The approach was avowedly top-down, with education and information sharing seen as important in creating communities 'knowledgeable about sustainability, who are more receptive to the ideas and more likely to get involved'.

However, they also clearly expressed the more normative view that public involvement is supposed to be an intrinsic part of sustainable development and LA21, and an unease that they were failing to achieve this. Although sometimes expressed in terms of increasing community 'ownership' and thus the likelihood of success of a project, it was more often seen in the simple democratic terms that public involvement was a good in itself. They felt they were not reaching some undefined 'general public' – 'we don't have genuine grass roots level involvement' – and that there was something wrong with involving small numbers of experts drawn from the community, even though they also recognised that 'the public are

everybody'. It was thought that this involvement should go beyond action. They were thus concerned that the Community Action Forum *steering group*, not just the Forum itself, should have substantial community representation on it, in order that the Forum could give the community sector a public voice. This was backed up by their commitment to the belief that 'a society can never be ...sustainable if it does not properly support and involve all sectors...[who] should all have a voice in designing their own future' (DCC, 1996d).

However, this was countered by an awareness of the tension between what people might choose and the objective of achieving sustainable development, where this was pre-defined by the team and others in the LA21 structures. The team explicitly distanced themselves from an approach which would allow communities to specify what they wanted without 'sustainability criteria', at both the large scale and the individual settlement or project level. One team member went further, though obviously uneasily, and very tentatively expressed his interest in the apparently successful approach of the Swedish state and industrial sector in making progress on environmental sustainability without a 'bottom-up' approach. Although he recognised that 'they've got a different culture to us' he wondered whether 'perhaps if the big organisations [here] did gird up their loins and start doing something it would demonstrate that it's possible and people would go along with it.'

These conflicting values appeared to be resolved pragmatically, through the recognition that what they were doing was achieving results and that it would be very difficult for them to promote more participatory approaches. One put it that '[The Round Tables] tend to be expert groups - by definition a bad thing, but when you think about it it's a good thing, because it drives action forward'. Another felt that 'it's something I personally wholeheartedly approve of, people trying to think more creatively about democracy and getting people involved, but in terms of the work we do, we would always say it was a good idea, but I'm not sure what we could do as a team to actually promote that'. At the individual project scale this approach was both prompted and justified by their experience at Croxdale, which the team attributed to a lack of time and community development skills which made them unable to give the community the support that was being demanded. 'We don't do community development work because of [Croxdale]. We do do practical partnership projects.' In these they worked with people 'who are already professionals or representing organisations' and thus were already assumed to share some of the goals of the initiative - 'it's a process of consensus ...fundamental to

the way we work.’ The tension between the value the team theoretically placed on community development work as a component of a LA21 process and the recognition that supporting it was not an appropriate function for a county council was finally solved in practice through devolving responsibility to Groundwork - an organisation with such work as its *raison d'être*.

Other actors in the LA21 process

The structures set up following the launch also brought into the policy making process a disparate group of actors from outside the authority’s Environment Section. In terms of their values and goals, these can be divided into two groups. The first included the majority of Round Table members, drawn from the authority, other state institutions, the business sector and voluntary environmental groups such as the Wildlife Trust. The second, smaller group consisted of unaffiliated members of the public and representatives of voluntary sector organisations who explicitly aligned themselves with the interests of ‘the community’, including the churches, Groundwork and the Rural Community Council.

The former came together as part of what was seen to be an environmental initiative, and this interpretation persisted within the group. As a member of the second group put it, ‘even though LA21 is supposed to about more [than environmental issues], for most people there it’s the environmental issues that matter, it’s the cold green agenda’. Thus the majority saw their role as advancing environmental goals through promoting action and change in their own and other organisations. They clearly valued the initiative and recognised their mutual dependence with the local authority in sustaining it, and so the need for consensus and respecting the authority’s position. One member expressed a common view that ‘the Steering Group has a lot of confidence in [the Assistant Director]. He gets support from us, even if we might disagree on details, we are all wanting the same thing at the end.’ Their attitude to public involvement tended to be explicitly elitist, recognising separate roles for themselves and the mass of the population. As interested experts they were rightly engaged in defining problems and solutions, whereas several characterised the public as a whole as uninterested and incapable of taking a global or strategic view of issues. At an extreme, one very active member considered that even quality of life was a matter for expert definition. As a corollary of their expert status several considered it appropriate to extend their role to include policy consultation on environmental issues beyond the LA21.

In contrast the second group believed that sustainable development was about improving quality of life, and so addressing economic, social and environmental needs to create communities which are 'vibrant, healthy and safe...respect[ing] the local and global environment and where individuals and enterprise prosper' (Groundwork, 2001). This was closely associated with a commitment to public involvement at two levels. Several in this group characterised the county council as remote and unresponsive, and believed that 'so-called ordinary people' needed a way of making their voices heard directly by policy makers – a role which was proposed for the Community Action Forum. They also shared a view of public involvement as integral to sustainable development through local projects, seeing the definition of needs and solutions by the community and their participation in implementation as essential in achieving physical improvements and empowering deprived communities and individuals. For the Groundwork staff the social and process elements were more important than the physical: 'developing sustainable communities is the goal - the process is more important - capacity building so that people can go on to do other things. If the process is right the spin-offs are greater. If the focus is the other way you get the product but less spin-offs.'

Most of the group were acutely aware of the tension inherent in this. One recognised 'the clash between the sustainability which is about local people doing things for themselves and the sustainability which is about saying that ideally we would like a particular type of food – my heart says I would tend to go for "it needs to be worked out by people on the ground" - but the tension with global issues...'. The professional community development workers from Groundwork and the DRCC were forced to address the problem, and while in practice they tended to resolve it in favour of imposing a definition of sustainability, one admitted that this was not easy – 'that's where I have a problem - when do you initiate? When do they lead?'

Although their views were largely compatible, the group differed in the relative emphasis they placed on different aspects of public involvement and the components of sustainable development. Two positions were of particular importance and interest in the policy process. As an organisation Groundwork had a community development remit and specific commitments to their funders, and were relatively uninterested in giving the community any influence over local authority policy making. One of their workers admitted that '*so many policy decisions changed - you can't quantify that - from Groundwork's perspective that's low on our list of*

priorities.’ At the other extreme was the individual activist who held the most radical views of any participant in the LA21 on both the nature of sustainable development and the role of public involvement. For him sustainable development was essentially social and the community’s definitions were paramount, overriding any expert definition of sustainability in environmental terms. Since he believed ‘that the county council or any of its parts...will go to any lengths not to have participation – it’s a power struggle basically’ achieving sustainable development required communities to organise themselves and be free to challenge local authority policies. He saw the Community Action Forum as a vehicle for this, and therefore believed strongly that it should include only community organisations.

As noted previously, there was little opportunity outside these structures for public values to be expressed directly. The *Opportunities for Change* conference, however, elicited a range of sustainability concerns far broader than ‘the environment’, including ‘loss of community spirit, loss of local employment, development on greenfield sites, decline in public transport, energy use/waste/pollution [and]vandalism/crime/drugs/other anti-social behaviour’ (DCC, 1998b). On a more *ad hoc* basis members of the public expressed their concerns through ideas for projects. While most were environmental, it was two such requests for support which prompted the work on disabled access.

Summary

In summary, this account of the values of the protagonists of the LA21 shows that there was a large degree of consensus over the basic orientation of the initiative, in particular its stress on action. Within this, however, two rather different philosophies were present. The first was that shared by the Assistant Director and many in the Round Tables, which was realist, environmental in emphasis and elitist in its view of public involvement. The second was the more holistic and participatory stance of the LA21 team and the more ‘community-oriented’ Round Table members.

7.4.4 The context for the LA21

This section describes aspects of the context for policy making for public involvement in the LA21 which had significant influences on the way in which it developed. These included the prevalent attitudes within the local authority to economic and sustainable development and to the authority’s relationship with

outside bodies and the public, the decision making structures of the authority, and broader social and economic factors in the world outside the local authority.

Values and structures within the local authority

For many years the overriding policy priority of the authority had been economic development and job creation, led by a correspondingly powerful economic development department. To the extent that environmental initiatives such as post-mining land reclamation contributed to that policy they were supported by the authority as a whole. However, sustainable development as a concept was initially viewed with suspicion, being seen as promoting environmental protection to the point where it might conflict with economic development (DCC, 1993b).

This attitude appeared to change to some extent during the late 1990s. A senior officer from the economic development department suggested that ‘once it started to dawn that sustainability wasn’t a big threat because it wasn’t just the green lobby hammering at the door, but actually economic sustainability is just as important and social sustainability, it became something at the heart of the county council’s thinking.’ More instrumentally, the Leader claimed to be actively promoting sustainability as a way of incorporating non-financial criteria into Best Value, and so protecting his traditional municipal socialist ideals. However, the rhetoric of environmental sustainability as one of four corporate objectives probably overstated its acceptance, and some senior officers and members interviewed suggested that the priority of economic development was still largely unchanged.

To the extent that there was change, it was clear that the interpretation of sustainable development adopted did not entail giving the general public a role in policy making. In particular links were not made between sustainable development and the democratisation aspect of local government modernisation. This was exemplified by the response of the officer leading the nascent community planning process to the question *how does participation fit into sustainability?* - ‘I’ve never thought about it.’

Interviewees both within and outside the authority described it – usually disparagingly – as seeing its role as a service provider, ruled through a representative democratic system dominated by the Labour Party and the mineworkers’ union. Within this system there was no tradition of sharing that role with either other organisations or the public: one officer spoke of ‘a classic local authority role - we decide, we inform, we’re the experts, the men in suits, we know best what’s best for

our communities, we'll decide behind closed doors'. As a corollary some elected members were described as seeing increased public involvement as a threat to their position as representatives – 'they are blessed by the electoral process - they are democratic, they are the proper representations of the people. Any other mechanisms, focus groups etc., are almost a subversion of that democracy'. Despite this dominant ethos, the presence of 'modernisers' was also acknowledged, though 'not yet in positions of power'. One of these, a councillor, expressed the view that 'I think participation really does have a complementary role to representative democracy'.

Within the authority this group was in a minority, but central government policies resulted in the development of new consultative structures from 1998 onwards. While considerable scepticism was expressed by several interviewees as to whether these would in fact give the public more influence, it was stressed that even to establish them represented a 'major mental breakthrough'. It clearly did not indicate a major change in values, however. Senior politicians and officers recognised that change was inevitable, in particular because of their close relationship with local MPs Blair and Armstrong (then local government minister) and the possible dissolution of the county in any future local government reorganisation if the authority did not 'modernise'. The general attitude in the authority was characterised as ranging from 'apprehensive' and 'resigned acceptance' to 'resistant' on the part of an 'old guard' of elected members.

Despite this strong representative ethos, neither members nor officers appear to have been greatly concerned that LA21 would affect the nature of local democracy. In the entire initiative explicitly democratic issues appear to have been raised only three times. In the planning stage the officer group working on LA21 dismissed any potential threat to members' position. They were more concerned with the potential unrepresentativeness of participants in a LA21 forum and the risk that the process would be vulnerable to 'exploitation' or 'conspiracy' by 'single issue groups' (DCC, 1993c). Much later it was councillors who pressed for the extension of the process to include town and parish councillors, whom they believed to be active local citizens with a legitimacy not shared by other community and voluntary sector representatives.

Members themselves did not raise the issue of threats to their own democratic status, but were very concerned with the authority's public image. The linked issues of publicity and criticism were frequently cited by interviewees as powerful influences

on decision making that were unconnected with substantive policy agendas. Initiatives and projects which brought good publicity were supported, even if their details were not fully appreciated. Conversely the authority was extremely sensitive to negative publicity, to the extent that almost any public questioning of council policy tended to be viewed as criticism by elected members.

These values and attitudes provided some of context for the development of the LA21, influencing it both directly through explicitly informing policy and political goals and indirectly as components of the authority's culture, and so shaping expectations about the acceptability of ideas and policies. They were complemented by the authority's formal decision making and control structures, which were based on a very traditional local authority model of strong service departments without a significant corporate centre. Historically there were very few interdepartmental structures below the corporate management team, and this segregation of decision making processes was reinforced by a culture of departmentalism. Within each departmental 'silo' the hierarchy had many layers – for example the officer who headed the LA21 team was separated from her Assistant Director by two tiers of management. In principle policy ideas passed upwards through departmental and corporate management teams and a joint officer-member policy group before being presented to council committees. Policy making was not necessarily 'top-down', however: both officers and members characterised the authority as 'member-supported, officer-led' and indicated that policy ideas could originate from officers at any level before being passed upwards through the formal decision making processes.

The authority itself was the only significant sub-national government structure involved in the LA21. The initiative was the most advanced in the North-East and consequently attracted little attention from the regional Government Office, which prioritised cajoling districts to start their processes. The relationship between the County and district councils was strained following an acrimonious Local Government Review. Although a county-wide 'LA21 Advisory Panel' was established (DCC, 1995b) formal co-operation was impossible and there is no indication that this body, or less formal meetings between officers, had any impact on the County's sustainability policies.

The wider context

Finally, the context in which the LA21 developed included economic forces and social values outside the local authority. These are clearly many and complex, and

the most important issues which affected the LA21 initiative as whole, such as changes in central government policy, were examined in Chapters Four and Five. However, two elements of the situation in North East England were of specific relevance to County Durham's LA21.

Firstly, the failure of several large inward investments in the late 1990s created a perception in the authority that such projects were not a reliable basis for long term economic sustainability. In consequence the economic development section re-oriented its support towards locally-based industry, thus converging with some of the ideas being promoted in the name of environmental and social sustainability by the LA21 team.

Secondly, although across British society in general there has been a rising expectation of public involvement in decision making, several interviewees perceived the local culture as one which did not encourage active involvement. This was attributed to the same history of strong Labour Party and union organisation which had produced the paternalistic ethos of the local authority. It was further suggested that the public would be unwilling to engage in local authority initiatives because of a widespread distrust which reflected not just the general malaise of local politics but the region's particular experience of past corruption. As one councillor put it, 'our communities, and I meet this when I go out for elections, have perceptions that councillors are all still like Andy Cunningham and Dan Smith'.

7.4.5 Processes

Introduction

The preceding sections of this chapter identified the values of the actors involved in the policy making process for LA21 and examined the context in which this process evolved and the nature of its outcomes. This section completes the description and analysis of the case study with a consideration of which and whose values were reflected in the outcomes and the nature of the policy making processes which brought this about.

Overall the County Durham LA21 embodied the interpretation of sustainable development held by the local authority officers who started and steered it, as an expert-defined process motivated by a principally environmental rationale, best pursued through stimulating action and establishing demonstrations of sustainability rather than through engaging the public in influencing policy. Within the initiative, however, it is possible to identify three rather different aspects, which though

continuously interlinked were distinctive in outcomes and in the values and processes involved. These - the main structures of the LA21, the changing nature of projects, and the Community Action Forum – are considered in turn below, followed by a concluding section drawing out some common elements of these LA21 policy making processes.

The main structures of the LA21

The main structures of the LA21 – that is, the Partnership, the Round Tables and the LA21 Steering Group - and their relationship with the local authority embodied the interpretation of sustainable development outlined above, which was very close to that of the Assistant Director and was shared to a certain extent by the LA21 team and many of the members of the Round Tables. It also coincided with the prevailing ethos of the authority in its elitist approach to policy making, though differed markedly in its foundation on partnerships with organisations and individuals from outside the authority for both policy making and implementation.

Two very different kinds of policy making were involved in creating and then sustaining these structures. In the first, which took place prior to the initiative's public launch, ideas generated through intense and creative discussions between the Assistant Director and another officer were then exposed to criticism as the proposals were taken through the formal decision making hierarchy. The initial idea for a LA21 programme which devised and oversaw the implementation of a broad ranging sustainable development strategy was opposed at every level on the grounds that it would interfere with existing policies. Officers were not prepared to give environmental considerations the weight demanded by the idea of LA21 as presented to them, nor were they willing to cede control over their work to the Environment Section - still less to the public. At lower levels it became clear that co-operation would not be forthcoming, while the corporate management team, dominated by the economic development priorities of the Chief Executive and other powerful department heads, demanded the revision of the proposals.

These early proposals appear never to have been considered formally by the authority's elected members, nor was there any contact concerning it between the principal officers involved and the Leader of the Council. However, several councillors attended an environmental forum meeting in a neighbouring district in early 1994 where they witnessed senior officers being verbally attacked by environmental campaigners. They were said to be 'quite appalled...they said we didn't want anything like that here...“if that's what LA21 is we don't want that”.'

Given the extreme sensitivity of the council to bad publicity this reaction provided a further and conclusive reason for abandoning the idea of a policy-oriented LA21 forum.

The officers committed to furthering LA21 were thus forced to invent alternative structures which could simultaneously advance sustainable development and be acceptable to the authority as a whole, neither threatening other policies nor likely to attract bad publicity. These requirements were met by their revised proposals for a partnership which would enable action outside the local authority, based on consensus between authority and external partners. This approach offered a solution to the foreseen problem of a continuing lack of corporate support, both practically by bringing together partners with their own resources and politically by creating a process which was, as one supportive officer put it, 'bigger than the County Council, too big to stop... We were up against it, we had to build outwards'. As a corollary the revised proposals were deliberately marginal to the authority's mainstream, made by the Assistant Director into 'just an interesting thing the environment department was doing' which could be presented as a continuation of previous, well-regarded environmental improvement work. Despite these major changes the underlying ethos of the initiative was preserved – the outcomes were a pragmatic choice of a way to maximise achievement in the face of insurmountable opposition rather than a significant compromise involving the sacrifice of any principled objective.

The new proposals passed up through the hierarchy without significant revision. However, the details of the proposed structures were removed from the committee report after their approval by corporate management but before being presented to the council, who thus formally approved only the outlines of the proposed initiative (DCC, 1994b). Shortly afterwards the public launch established these structures, thus marking the end of the first phase and opening up the possibility of a more recursive policy making process through the introduction of public involvement into policy making for public involvement.

The launch and initial development of the structures brought together a group of people connected by a shared set of values and aims. This was achieved by the authority – principally the Assistant Director – through the invitation of previous and potential partners in environmental projects and through the framing of the initiative as environmental and action-oriented at the launch and in publicity material (DCC, 1994d, e).

Thereafter the ethos and structure were to a large extent self-perpetuating. Additional members were recruited through networking and publicity and so tended to share the existing members' values, particularly given that few if any benefits *not* directly related to the substantive goals accrued to participants. Conversely, once the structures started to yield visible benefits through successfully promoting practical activities and networking there was little incentive for change. This was reinforced, albeit unconsciously, by the processes referred to in Section 7.4.2 – of self-censorship arising from the assumption of consensus and of exclusion of all but 'professionals and very, very interested laymen' by the topics and the language in which they were discussed. More consciously, broadening public involvement was resisted as there was a fear that the structures would become unwieldy and possibly attract 'eccentrics' – that is, those with strong personal agendas which might challenge the dominant ethos. The groups also exercised a degree of open self-regulation, suppressing overt internal conflict and explicitly recognising their dependence on the local authority, and so the need to respect the boundaries set by the political judgements of the local authority officers. The outcome was, in the words of one participant, 'sometimes it seems like this rather nice club - we're talking the same language, we're talking about these issues we are interested in and isn't it wonderful?'

At one level the Round Tables and Steering Group were far from powerless, given their roles as decision makers over the projects and the course of the LA21 and in generating new ideas for action. They thus became a strongly conservative force within the initiative, largely preserving its original ethos and aims. Within the confines of these they could and did innovate to a limited extent, as for example in the extension of the activities of some Round Tables to include policy consultation.

However, despite their formal role, their control over the initiative was very limited, with far more power lying with the LA21 officers through control over these groups' activities and over the wider initiative. Although decisions on Round Table agendas were formally made by their chairs working together with the team, in practice the latter had substantial influence through deciding what issues to put forward for consideration. Despite the presumption of consensual decision making, the officers were able to impose their will in arguments within meetings – for example, in ensuring the inclusion of a social indicator, 'crowbarred in' by a team member against a Round Table's wishes, and in excluding proposed indicators that were implicitly critical of the authority. Finally, much of the impact of these meetings

depended on subsequent action by the officers, who thus had significant control over which items were taken further.

More generally the team controlled much of the information flow within the policy making process. This role lay at the core of the initiative's success in enabling the development of projects, but much of it necessarily took place outside the purview of the Round Tables, whose lack of control over the process was reflected in one team member's ironic description of them as 'those key elements of our decision making process'. As the only members common to all the structures and the only full time workers dedicated to the initiative, the team's day-to-day work was a continuous process of generating new ideas and assisting partners to bring their ideas to fruition. This implementation necessarily involved policy making 'on the hoof', and so controlling the development of the process. One of them enthused over 'the practical implementation, the partnerships, the empowering, the facilitating, the creating of partnerships, kick starting, finding the germ of the idea - someone else has the idea, it's just a day dream for them, we have the vision to say that one can be done - that one is stupid - people ring us up I've got this wonderful idea - we try to fob them off - it's like an instinct, you know which one to run with. That's our skill.'

This continuous development work was carried out largely without its details being known by the remainder of the local authority, which was perceived by the LA21 officers as philosophically hostile and structurally constraining to the creative approach they had adopted. They consciously shielded their work from any more than minimal involvement in the authority's formal decision making processes, with most policy decisions being made within the team itself and by the team and the Assistant Director, omitting the intervening levels of management. Making a virtue of the initiative's institutional and physical location – 'run out of the back end of an unimportant department...literally stuck on the top floor beyond the lifts and the tea trolley' – the officers successfully isolated the initiative and created a 'bubble' within which they were 'a law unto ourselves, developing in whatever directions we think appropriate'. An important aspect of this was the ability to judge how far the bubble could be expanded without coming into potentially damaging contact with hostile mainstream policy making processes. In their own assessment they became 'quite politically astute in knowing what we need to report and what we don't, and where it's a good thing to report it' in order to garner support for the initiative.

These processes of isolation and control enabled the local authority officers to steer the development and activities of the main LA21 structures to reflect their values. However, as noted above (Section 7.4.3) these were not completely shared, and the following section describes how the differences between the team and the Assistant Director were worked out in the policy process.

The changing nature of projects

The first of these differences was over how holistically sustainable development should be interpreted. Despite the Assistant Director's misgivings, the team succeeded over time in having their more holistic interpretation reflected in the types of activities carried out under the initiative. To some extent this was achieved through further isolating the decision making process, so that the Assistant Director was put under pressure to approve initiatives that had already been started and was only made aware after the event of what one team member described as 'lots of other ideas, smaller projects, which [the Assistant Director] has nothing to do with'.

Where decision making was necessarily shared different strategies were adopted. On occasion team views were forced on the Round Tables using the weight of their official position. Persuasion was the preferred method, which they supported by their awareness of how sustainable development was being interpreted elsewhere, derived from guidance notes from the LGMB and other written material, conferences and informal personal contacts. They were thus able to argue that their holistic interpretation was the generally accepted, 'correct' one: 'I knew if we published a set of indicators without social and economic issues in it people would question it - outside people, like the LGMB - "you've done all right, but what about the rest of it?"' This was locally reinforced by the holistic definition of sustainability implicit in the views of the participants in the *Opportunities for Change* conference. Such arguments were usually successful in that the team's wishes were accepted. However, this does not appear to have been accompanied by changes in the values of the other actors, including the Assistant Director. His acceptance of the arguments for taking a holistic approach was reluctant and pragmatic, motivated by the need to avoid criticism and keep more holistically-oriented partners engaged.

In contrast to their success in broadening the scope of projects, the failure of the team's two attempts to develop projects which were more community-driven resulted from conflicts with other actors, rather than inability to overcome resistance within the LA21 policy making process. In the case of Croxdale these actors were

the community activists themselves, with the resulting acrimony leading to the breakdown in communication and the end of the project as part of the LA21. The outcome for the LA21 was that the team thereafter avoided similar projects – a substantial change in approach but one that was a voluntary response to the experience. In contrast, the young people's transport research brought the LA21 into conflict with the Leader of the council. This was probably the only occasion, following the initial planning phase, when the ever-present constraints imposed by the local authority were manifested directly rather than being treated as perceived threats. Perhaps inevitably the LA21 team lost and were forced to withdraw their support from the work, thus clearly marking a boundary for the safe expansion of their independent policy making bubble.

The Community Action Forum

More progress was made in developing the structures of the LA21 to encourage more community involvement. The establishment of the separate Community Action Forum reflected a compromise between the majority of the Round Table members, who saw increased involvement as unnecessary and potentially destructive, and the LA21 team and the Assistant Director, together with a few members of the Round Tables. Within this latter group there was a considerable range of instrumental and principled reasons for increasing public involvement and the development of the forum consequently saw more conflict than other elements of the LA21. An initial lack of clarity over whether it should be an independent voice for the community or a mechanism for linking community and other partners together to facilitate action persisted through to the Forum's launch, where the ideas of both the community activists and the local authority officers were put forward and the purpose of a forum debated. The outcome was exactly as desired by the officers, who had decided in advance their objectives for the event (DCC, 1996e). Unfortunately the mechanisms by which they achieved this went unrecorded.

Despite this setback, the most radical member of the group nevertheless continued to pursue his attempts to steer the Forum towards providing an independent voice for the community. However, without support and facing increasing opposition from both local authority officers and other community-based members he ultimately felt forced to leave. 'I came out because I felt betrayed...I came along to one particular meeting and I found that two of the people there, who are not linked to one group, separate individuals, were more or less - well they were making it quite obvious that my presence wasn't welcome.' This left the LA21 team, one remaining unaffiliated

member of the public and representatives from Groundwork and other community-oriented non-governmental organisations to form another very self-contained policy making group, which developed the activities of the Forum in isolation from the remainder of the LA21 structures. They worked in a very consensual way, bound together by a sense of shared values, mutual liking and trust.

Within this partnership of near-equals the Groundwork officers had a special relationship with the local authority officers, created by their shared responsibility for providing financial resources. The joint bid to the National Lottery to sustain the flagging Forum was drawn up with little involvement of either the Assistant Director or the remainder of the group – to the impotent irritation of some of the latter. The terms of the bid and subsequent developments suggest that Groundwork was largely able to control the process. Groundwork's objective of capacity building through environmental projects was reflected in the project's stated aim of 'enhanc[ing] the social life of the community by bringing people together for a collective goal', in contrast to local authority's emphasis on environmental sustainability as the paramount aim, and the Forum finally lost any policy-influencing role. The third self-contained policy making group that evolved within the LA21 was thus wholly within Groundwork, whose staff claimed that the targeted projects were entirely under their control and who debated the future of the Forum without consulting the local authority.

Summary

This section started with the observation that overall the LA21 reflected the values and goals of the principal local authority officers involved. The salient common aspect of the processes described is the extent to which this was achieved by the control exercised by this group, despite both the ostensible sharing of responsibility for the LA21 with a wide partnership and their location within a local authority hierarchy. Several common patterns emerged.

Firstly, much policy making occurred through discussion within small groups, the outcomes of which were often simply enacted – policy and implementation were tightly bound together, minimising the opportunity for other actors to play a role. Where these groups were officers – the LA21 team, with or without the Assistant Director – this gave them direct control. However, there were also situations in which other actors were necessarily involved, either through membership of the group, or because they had to formally approve the proposed policies. These were less predictable and consequently prompted the use of other control mechanisms.

With respect to working with partners from outside the authority the officers exercised considerable indirect influence over decision making. This was done through a succession of events and publicity and strategic documents which defined the nature of the initiative, and concurrently through the team's continuous maintenance and support roles. Within this context the groups typically worked in a very open way, in which debate led to collectively agreed positions. However, the process by which they came together – either by invitation or voluntarily as a response to publicity framed by the officers – and the explicit ethos of consensual decision making tended to create groups of like-minded people, who found reaching mutually acceptable decisions relatively easy. Even where consensus was incomplete, dissent tended to be suppressed in order to further the commonly agreed LA21 aim of generating action for sustainable development. The shared values and goals, reinforced by the initiative's success, also tended to make the groups both self-perpetuating and self-regulating, thus reducing the necessity of overt interference by the local authority officers. However, the officers were also able to exercise direct control over the various partnership groups due to their structural position, which was recognised to give them both the power to withdraw support and the knowledge of how to maintain the support or tolerance of the authority as a whole. The Groundwork staff were the exception to this, being institutionally and financially independent of the authority, and so able to engage with the LA21 officers as equals.

These various direct and indirect mechanisms for controlling, or at least strongly influencing, the internal processes of the initiative were complemented by the officers' strategies to maintain control despite their relationship with the rest of the authority. These were principally aimed at isolating the initiative as far as possible by avoiding activities which would attract the disapproval of senior officers or politicians and by making decisions outside the authority's formal processes. Information flows were tightly controlled, so that the isolation was broken by good publicity rather than bad. This clearly did not mean that the initiative operated outside the constraints of its local authority context. On the contrary, these constraints were ever present and influenced the entire structure of the initiative from an early stage. Following the early, conflictive meetings they did so indirectly, however, as the values of the authority were brought into the initiative's decision making principally through the officers' perceptions and suppositions. The one striking exception, which reinforced the LA21 officers' approach, was the conflict which arose over the young people's public transport research.

The importance of these control mechanisms and the relative strength of the LA21 in regard to ‘internal’ and ‘external’ challenges can be illustrated by considering the four ‘crises’ which arose. Figure 7.2 summarises these occasions on which the LA21 was threatened by dissenting views and how internal challenges were managed by limiting public engagement with the process, while conflicts with more powerful actors in the authority were not manageable and forced changes to the LA21.

Arena of conflict	‘Opponents’ of the LA21	Outcome
Initial plans for a policy-oriented forum	Senior officers and councillors	LA21 initiators forced to rethink their approach
Croxdale LA21	Village activists	LA21 team withdrew; subsequent work did not include holistic community development projects but engaged with like-minded members of the public/groups on single-issue projects
CAF Steering Group	Radical proponent of community self-organisation on CAF Steering Group	Exclusion of dissenting voice and maintenance of consensual partnership
Young People and Public Transport project	Leader of the Council	Near-disastrous conflict: LA21 team forced to withdraw support from project in order to safeguard continuation of LA21 as a whole project

Figure 7.2: Four crises in the County Durham LA21

7.5 Conclusion

The County Durham LA21 was first and foremost a programme of supporting action and behaviour change in order to make tangible progress towards sustainability. It started as an essentially environmental initiative, and while it became more holistic it never lost that initial emphasis, except in small pockets of project work. Involvement of people from outside the authority lay at its heart, either as part of a relatively small policy making group or through taking part in practical activities to further sustainable development. These roles were complementary, between them

spanning the range of types of public involvement set out in Agenda 21, and their division between the two groups marks the initiative as one which took an essentially conservative and elitist approach to public involvement. While in principle both groups were open to lay participants, in practice the steering groups involved very few unaffiliated members of the public or representatives from community-based organisations.

Its development was clearly very driven by the values of those involved, in particular those of its initiator, the Assistant Director of Environment. This incorporated an environmental and realist interpretation of sustainable development based on a strong perception of environmental crisis, a complementary view that sustainability should be expert-defined and a corollary focus on promoting public involvement in action rather than policy making. He successfully adopted a pragmatic approach, developing structures which both furthered his goals and was well-adapted to the institutional context. He brought together a group of like-minded people to steer the initiative – both officers he recruited and voluntary participants – between whom there was a general agreement over the initiative's core purpose and characteristics. Policy making was consequently largely consensual, drawing on both shared values and a willingness to submerge most value differences in order to support an initiative perceived to be generally worthwhile. This allowed some changes to take place without disruption, broadening the scope of the initiative, increasing the involvement of the participants in policy consultation and developing new, more community-oriented structures. Issues of democratic principle hardly arose, since involving the public in policy making at the scale of the authority was not seriously considered after the initial planning stage. However, for some of those involved an in-principle belief in community involvement in defining needs and quality of life coexisted uneasily with their realist environmentalist views.

At the same time this approach matched the constraints faced by the initiative. The LA21's status was precarious as a result of environmental issues being a low priority for most of the authority, the potential that a sustainability agenda had to threaten the dominant policy priorities and associated institutional power blocs within the authority and the institutional marginality of the Environment Department as a whole and the LA21 team within it. Faced also with a general ethos that resisted the idea of community involvement in policy making, a project-based and award

winning initiative in partnership with outside organisations and groups was safe and offered the opportunity to make progress on sustainability.

The stability and productivity of the initiative in such a potentially hostile setting required not only design but continuous management. Following the initial phase in which the unavoidable interaction between the protagonists and the local authority imposed the latter's ethos on the design of the initiative it was successfully isolated from further direct intervention. However, the necessary involvement of actors from outside the authority in steering the initiative also carried the risk that new and conflicting values and goals would be introduced. This risk was largely defused through managing this aspect of public involvement. Despite its apparent centrality, its scope was in fact limited to policy making for only a part of the initiative. It was heavily influenced by the repeated framing of the initiative by the local authority officers and the assembly of a like-minded group which stabilised and perpetuated the initiative's ethos, and was controlled by both direct interventions and by the continuous indirect management of the issues that these 'outsiders' considered and the action that resulted. Meanwhile many decisions about the initiative were being made by the local authority officers without reference to their external partners. Divergences in their values and goals caused some of the changes in the initiative – in general those who were most immediately involved in implementation and maintenance of the process saw their values embodied in the outcomes.

This was an initiative which was very successful in realising the aims of its protagonists, and particularly its initiator, who to a considerable extent successfully minimised the external influences on the policy making process, bringing it close to the idealised, 'naïve' model of Figure 6.2 (page 105). However, it clearly was not a radical initiative in the sense of either striving for or achieving transformation of governance. This final section summarises what happened to radicalism within the County Durham LA21, and how the tensions identified in the literature review within and between the ideas of sustainable development and public involvement were negotiated in the process.

To a great extent political radicalism simply was not an issue. With one exception none of the major actors saw governance change as a relevant goal for LA21, and furthermore viewed it as dangerously unacceptable to the rest of the authority. Against such a majority view the single, isolated community activist was powerless and abandoned his attempts to achieve change through the Forum. In contrast, at a philosophical level the most radical views were held by the Assistant Director, who

desired and foresaw the ultimate transformation of society to embrace an ethic of environmental sustainability. It was this view which, strongly tempered by pragmatism, underlay and drove the initiative as a whole.

It was also the dominance of this realist environmentalism and its complementary elitist and instrumental approach to public involvement which allowed the practical resolution of most of the theoretical tensions. The key was the approach taken towards the need for consensus. It was recognised that a consensus did exist over the need for sustainable development, but that it was far from universal – the aim was thus to create, sustain and expand a consensual group. Working with those committed to the limited, environmental interpretation of sustainability largely overcame the tension between realism and the possible subjectivism of ‘quality of life’ interpretations, though the need for more public involvement persisted as a nagging matter of principle for the more community-oriented actors. Agenda 21’s wide range of roles envisaged for the public were all encompassed within the initiative, but by segregating these between the elite steering group and the wider population, and by limiting the scale and scope of public influence, the potential conflicts between the roles were avoided. In particular, the issue of how to accommodate mass public involvement in policy making was simply eliminated.

The proponents of LA21 in County Durham thus managed to create an initiative that was stable, coherent and successful. It was not, however, what was envisaged in Agenda 21 itself – a programme of ‘real social partnership’ involving ‘broad public participation in decision-making’ leading to the development of a local action plan for sustainable development incorporating the views of the entire community (UNCED, 1992: §23, §28).

Chapter 8 Public involvement in LA21 in St Edmundsbury

It isn't all about green fields and good stuff.

Senior councillor, St Edmundsbury Borough Council

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the second case study, the LA21 process in the borough of St Edmundsbury. This was chosen as an example of the holistic approach to public involvement in LA21 on the basis of an apparent orientation towards substantial public involvement in policy making within St Edmundsbury Borough Council as a whole and the significant status given to LA21 in the corporate planning process. It was thus a very different initiative from the first case study.

It also took place in a very different political and policy context. St Edmundsbury is a medium-sized district in the county of Suffolk. Overall it is prosperous, though there are social and economic contrasts between the rural areas, the market town of Bury St Edmunds and the manufacturing town of Haverhill. The borough is increasingly affected by the rapid growth of the Cambridge economy, which brings with it the possibility of local economic development but also threats to the environment, local communities and the general character of the district from increased demand for housing and transport. The local authority is thus under increasing pressure to manage growth in environmentally and socially sustainable ways. Until the early 1990s it was under Conservative control, largely officer-run, generally apolitical and resistant to change. Since that time it has seen changes in leadership and party control which have brought with them substantial shifts in its approach to local governance and its development into an authority which aimed to be more responsive to its citizens and take an integrated approach to policy making.

The LA21 played an important though somewhat indirect role in these changes. As an independent initiative it lasted only three years, its development and demise being shaped by its interaction and conflict with other policies. Of particular importance was the parallel development of a corporate public involvement policy with which the LA21 ultimately merged, leading to its reincarnation in the authority's overarching Community Plan. In contrast to County Durham the St Edmundsbury LA21 evolved within a very dynamic policy environment and, while this chapter

focuses primarily on the LA21, the corporate process is considered alongside it rather than merely as part of the context.

The chapter follows a similar structure to the preceding one. An introduction to the principal actors in the process and their institutional relationships is followed by a brief narrative synopsis of the LA21 and corporate public involvement initiatives. The bulk of the chapter is analytical, looking in turn at the outcomes of the processes, the values and goals of the actors and aspects of the policy context which influenced the outcomes. The penultimate section describes how these elements came together and the processes by which certain actors achieved their aims, and concludes with a discussion of the more general research questions – the issues of radical change and the tensions between sustainable development's substantive goals, public involvement and the representative basis for local government.

8.2 Structures and principal actors

Policy making for public involvement in LA21 took place entirely within the local authority, with a notable lack of involvement of members of the public or people from external organisations. The principal actors were a LA21 team of three officers, led by the Assistant Director of Environmental Health from the Department of Environmental Health and Housing. His colleagues were the Environmental Management Officer from his own section and a junior planner from the Department of Planning and Transportation. During the development of the LA21 the latter temporarily became the authority's Environmental Planning Officer – the first and only dedicated LA21 post within the authority. These three were also key members of a cross-departmental working group, the LA21 Officer Group, which brought them together with officers from across the authority who had interests in the field and with those who had administrative and financial responsibilities. The group was collectively responsible for developing the LA21 under the chairmanship of the Assistant Director of Environmental Health.

Outside this group the corporate policy unit and the Assistant Chief Executive were the most involved in the LA21 process. They engaged with it both as part of their overall strategic responsibility for the development of policy within the local authority and through their specific remit to develop and coordinate a corporate approach to community involvement. In the latter role they were supported by a second cross-departmental group, the Community First Officer Group. There was considerable overlap of membership between the two officer groups, including the

Environmental Planning Officer who represented both the LA21 initiative and the Planning Department in the Community First Group. The ending of the independent LA21 was marked by the merging of these two groups into the Community 21 Officer Group, charged with developing the Community Plan.

The LA21 team reported formally to the council's Policy and Resources Committee. In practice a few elected members also became closely involved in the LA21, in particular the Chair of the Environmental Health and Housing Committee from 1995 to 1999, who was also the Deputy Leader of the council. Over the same period the Leader worked closely with the Assistant Chief Executive on the development of corporate public involvement policy and was an important player in the process which led to the merging of this with the LA21.

8.3 The story of the LA21

8.3.1 Establishing the LA21: 1992-1996

Until the early 1990s St Edmundsbury Borough Council had no explicitly environmental policies, apart from traditional functions such as planning and environmental health through which it managed and regulated the local environment. A change in political leadership within the ruling Conservative group in 1991 was followed by officers scattered across several departments starting a number of uncoordinated initiatives involving the public, such as promoting recycling and a cycling forum. The first corporate strategic action was a formal response to the EC *Fifth Environmental Action Programme* (CEC, 1992), drafted by the Assistant Director for Environmental Health. This had no policy implications and a two year hiatus followed. In late 1994 the directors of the two departments most involved in environmental activities agreed that the authority should develop a LA21, and together with the Assistant Director drew up plans for the structure of a three person team and supporting Officer Group described above.

These proposals were put to the corporate management team and the authority's new (and first ever) Labour council in mid-1995. At this point they met opposition on financial and rather vague political grounds from the new Leader and the Director of Finance. This was overcome, however, and in September 1995 the council formally adopted 'the principles of Agenda 21', agreed to action to facilitate the development of a LA21 strategy by the end of 1996 (SEBC, 1995a) but rejected the officers' request for a dedicated budget for the initiative. The proposed 'strategy development programme' envisaged the internal preparation of a draft, a three

month public consultation process and a final Strategy document to meet the Rio-imposed deadline of producing a LA21 by the end of 1996. The new LA21 Officer Group was established, with terms of reference to develop and implement LA21, 'co-ordinate LA21 activities in relation to education, awareness raising, consultation and partnership in the community, under the direction of the Management Team [of departmental heads, the chief executive and his assistant]', develop an environmental management system and advise on sustainable development within the authority (SEBC, 1996a).

Over the same period a corporate approach to public involvement was developed. Following the leadership change in 1991 an Assistant Chief Executive was appointed to lead the development of corporate planning on all issues, including the authority's interactions with its public. This resulted in a citizen's charter and strengthened links with voluntary and community sector groups, going beyond existing grant provision to include consultation and moves towards user involvement in service planning. Following Labour's surprise electoral victory in 1995 a more thoroughgoing approach was proposed by the Chief Executive's Office. This Community Involvement Strategy, which committed the authority to being more responsive, consult more and engage the public in deliberation over policy, was formally adopted at the same time as LA21 and the Community First Officer Group was established to develop and implement the strategy (SEBC, 1995b). Chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive, one of its principal functions was to co-ordinate all the authority's public involvement initiatives in order to prevent confusion and 'consultation fatigue'.

8.3.2 The development of the LA21: 1996-1998

The LA21 programme started in early 1996 with two components: the development of the LA21 Strategy and activities intended to raise awareness amongst the general public of LA21 and to encourage and support them to take action to further sustainable development. The Strategy was envisaged as an all-encompassing document to guide local authority and public action on sustainable development. Within the LA21 Officer Group the first proposals discussed were for a Strategy in which the priority issues and action plans would be 'dictated' by decisions taken at a 'Community Conference' open to all interested groups or members of the public (SEBC, 1996c). This idea was rapidly watered down and superseded by a decision to precede a full public conference by a smaller event to 'inform and seek future direction' from parish councils, businesses and community organisations. This

event, the first 'community workshop', took place in Bury St Edmunds in July 1996. It was the first and last formal public involvement in preparing a free-standing LA21 Strategy - the larger public conference never took place. In December 1996 a second workshop in the borough's second urban centre, Haverhill, focused on encouraging public action through 'developing a self-help guide of environmental management that can save you money' (SEBC, 1996d) and notably lacked any strategic planning function.

Such planning had, however, been taking place within the authority in parallel with the community engagement. During 1996 the leader of the LA21 team developed a draft 'Workplan' for the LA21 Officer Group. Following contributions from the other Group members this was approved by the council and published as *Our Future Now: Targets* (SEBC, 1996e), shortly *before* the second community workshop took place. The team leader described this document as a 'map to LA21 within the council' which listed departments' current and future activities in the fields of the environment and public involvement, without constraining them within a coordinated LA21 programme. However, although it was not initially presented as such, this document became the *de facto* LA21 strategy, submitted to the LGMB to satisfy the Agenda 21 deadline and used as a guide for the authority's LA21 work for the following year.

Meanwhile the LA21 was being viewed with growing disquiet by those developing the corporate public involvement work. The ever-present possibility of duplication was heightened by increasing engagement with the national Labour Party's modernisation agenda, and soon after the general election of 1997 the council were making policy in explicit anticipation of a 'Democracy Bill' which would impose a statutory duty to prepare 'comprehensive community plans' (SEBC, 1997). The potential confusion between such a plan and a holistic, community-based LA21 became the focus of policy discussions between the LA21 team leader and the Assistant Chief Executive (as the Officer Group chairs), other senior officers and leading councillors. The outcome was a proposal for a single Plan with 'LA21 as an overarching principle' (SEBC, 1998a) and the merger of the two Officer Groups. This took place in mid-1998, despite opposition from the LA21 Group.

Concurrently with these strategic planning processes the authority was also developing its external LA21 activities, aimed at raising awareness of the need for sustainable development and supporting actions proposed by the public. The former included displays at local shows and schools and presentations to community groups

– occasions which until the demise of the officer group were also used to gather ideas from the public about what the authority should do about sustainable development. Those involved in this work were the LA21 team together with some members of the LA21 Officer Group and other officers, several of whom had pre-existing programmes promoting environmental sustainability and/or public involvement and had initially been openly hostile to the LA21. The first community workshop also stimulated a distinct programme of work with the private sector – initially a project to assist employees to monitor and change the environmental impact of their daily lives and subsequently a permanent ‘Green Business Forum’. This was developed during 1997 to bring together private sector companies and the local authority, providing an opportunity for ‘increased profits, closer liaison with environmental regulators and the sharing of good practice’ (SEBC, 1998b).

The LA21 Officer Group also decided that practical progress towards sustainability could be supported through a small grants scheme. Local authority funds were made available for two years (1997-9) through a programme administered by the Environmental Planning Officer, during which time sixty-seven projects were supported (see Appendix B). This officer also became involved in community development work, assisting groups to access other funds, supporting those insufficiently organised or confident to apply for funding and lending her public involvement expertise to other departments engaged in community projects. Following the disbanding of the officer group she continued this work and the awareness raising events autonomously until she was withdrawn from the LA21 team and reassigned to her planning role in May 1999. Apart from the Green Business Forum external LA21 activity then ceased.

8.3.3 The LA21 re-born – St Edmundsbury’s Community Plan: 1998-2000

Thus by the middle of 1998 the LA21 as an independent and coherent policy initiative had come to an end and its various components had been separated and were being taken forward in different ways. Community action for sustainability continued without strategic guidance, internal environmental issues were the remit of a new informal group of officers and public involvement in strategic sustainable development planning had been subsumed into the mainstream of corporate policy making.

This had become focused on the production of a single ‘Community Plan at strategic level’ (SEBC, 1998c), the structure of which was determined during the meetings

concerned with the conflict between community planning and LA21 and was further refined in Management Team discussions in the spring of 1998. The Plan was to consist of an 'overall vision' supported by six separate strategies encompassing the authority's work. Developing this was the remit of the new Community 21 Officer Group, chaired by the Assistant Chief Executive, which also inherited general corporate responsibility for public involvement from the Community First Officer Group.

At the outset there was an explicitly expressed commitment to public involvement in compiling the Plan, the initial proposal being to invite 'all concerned groups and individuals to put forward ideas and suggestions, which will then be discussed at a community conference relating to each of the six strategies. Draft strategies will be formulated following each conference, and sent out for public consultation' (SEBC, 1997). In the event a draft plan was drawn up internally, consisting of a new vision statement and environmental strategy and revisions of existing documents in the other strategic areas. Following the election of a Conservative administration in May 1999 the public were consulted on this draft at four events, each consisting of six workshops dealing separately with the individual strategies. The Plan was approved by the Council at the end of the year and published in March 2000 as *St Edmundsbury Community Plan incorporating Best Value Performance Plan and Local Agenda 21 Strategy* (SEBC, 2000). After its publication and dissemination to every household in the borough there was a pause in the sustainable development policy making process, which coincided with the fieldwork for this research. The senior officers involved were unsure how to take the idea of LA21 forward, if at all, and shortly afterwards the Assistant Chief Executive left the authority.

8.3.4 Summary

Overall, the St Edmundsbury LA21 was a short-lived policy initiative. Introduced as a response to the international environmental and sustainable development initiatives and designed to develop as prescribed by the LGMB, its attempts to generate substantial public involvement in local authority policy making were successively reduced in scale, rendered largely ineffective and finally terminated when the LA21 as a whole came into conflict with other corporate policies. These problems were resolved through dividing the initiative up and incorporating its sustainable development policy aspects into an all-embracing Community Plan, substantially ahead of its time in adopting the approach later stipulated by the Local Government Act of 2000. However, like the LA21 the development of the Plan was less

participatory than initially proposed. Support for community activities under LA21 was longer lived, though this too had largely come to an end by 1999. The St Edmundsbury LA21 thus stands in stark contrast to that in County Durham. Although a short lived initiative in an authority engaged in promoting sustainable development and public involvement on many fronts, it was one that ultimately became a major component of the authority's overarching policy approach.

Figure 8.1 provides a summary description of the initiative.

Year	LA21 policy making	Politics and corporate policy making
1991		Change in leadership of ruling Conservative group
1992		Assistant Chief Executive appointed
1993	Formal response to EC 5 th Action Plan – no action resulted	
1994		
1995	Spring: Officers reconsidered response to external "environmental" agenda September: LA21 formally adopted	May: Labour council elected September: Corporate Community Involvement Strategy formally adopted
1996	February: LA21 Officer Group convened July: First community workshop October: <i>Targets</i> published. LA21 team leader formally expressed first concerns about integration and impact of LA21 December: Second community workshop	February: Community First Officer Group convened
1997	Widespread concern over confusion between LA21 and corporate consultation initiatives Discussions over proposed merger of LA21 with corporate initiatives	
1998	Officer Groups merged Community Planning process started	
1999	May: Environmental Planning Officer withdrawn from LA21 and then resigns	May: Conservative council elected
	Autumn: Community Plan consultation	
2000	January: Community Plan/LA21 published	
		April: Leadership change within Conservative group Summer: Assistant Chief Executive left authority

Figure 8.1: The LA21 in St Edmundsbury

8.4 Analysis

8.4.1 Introduction

As in Chapter Seven, this section builds on the preceding brief narrative description with an analytic investigation of the policy making processes involved in the LA21. It follows the same structure, examining in turn the outcomes, the values and goals of the actors, contextual factors and the processes which brought these together. However, this case was very different, presenting different problems for analysis. The absence of any public role in determining the extent of public involvement in policy making enables a clearer distinction between outcomes and process, since the latter took place entirely within the authority. However, the distinction is blurred by the continually changing nature of the initiative and others with which it interacted and is made more complex still by the greater level of interaction and the involvement of more actors with distinctive policy and institutional goals. Consequently corporate and other public involvement and sustainable development processes are considered alongside the LA21, with a corresponding reduction in the scope of the section on 'contextual factors'.

8.4.2 Outcomes

The substantive meaning of sustainable development

The outcomes and language of the LA21 embody three different interpretations of sustainable development which remained constant throughout the initiative's independent lifetime. Firstly, the structures and the policy papers have a clear environmental focus, giving leadership of the initiative to the two departments responsible for most of the authority's environmental activities and discussing 'a local authority's LA21 actions' in terms of effects on the environment (SEBC, 1995a). However, both structures and language make sustainable development relevant to all sections of the authority. It was to be a new approach, coordinated by the cross-department officer group, across ten 'corporate environmental policy areas' which included economic development and 'equal access to opportunities, resources and services' (SEBC, 1995a, 1996f). Sustainable development was thus seen as having a holistic scope, but to be primarily about injecting environmental considerations into policy making – the concern for equity was a common, independent aspect of all policy initiatives undertaken by the Labour administration. In practice, the direct outcomes of the LA21 itself were negligible in these policy areas, and interpretations of sustainable development and approaches to

environmental issues varied between departments, as discussed below in the subsection 'Sustainable development and public involvement elsewhere in the authority' (page 174).

Two further conceptions of sustainable development were instantiated in the public involvement carried on as part of LA21. The awareness raising and private sector programmes were focused on environmental sustainability, based on a realist appreciation of known environmental problems and promoting pre-defined ways of tackling these through cutting consumption, recycling waste and so on. In contrast, both the policy-oriented consultations and funded projects embodied a holistic view of sustainable development as improving quality of life, with a corresponding subjective approach to defining its meaning. Participants at the first community workshop were invited to identify their principal concerns about 'where they live, work and play' and 'life today' and to suggest how these should be addressed and who should be involved (SEBC, 1996g). An 'aide memoire' given to all the participants prompted them further to think about the meanings of phrases such as 'community participation' and 'quality of life' (SEBC, 1996h). However, the concerns identified were largely environmental in a narrow sense, although the discussion did broaden out to include crime and housing issues. Later sessions with schools and community groups included long-term 'visioning' and explorations of the links between major issues such as poverty, famine and pollution.

The LA21 project fund had a similar approach, with a minimal emphasis on pre-defined substantive sustainability criteria. Projects supported ranged from the narrowly environmental (for example, developing community gardens) to more social activities such as producing parish plans and local histories as well as projects aimed at economic and social regeneration such as information technology support centres. The LA21 team leader could only recall a single project that fell outside their funding criteria: 'Someone wanted a sound system though we didn't issue that in the end!' (See Appendix B for a list of the projects supported in 1998/9.)

The nature of public involvement

a) The LA21

From the beginning there was a sharp contrast between the rhetoric of public involvement and the provision made for it, and so in the actual outcomes. Drawing explicitly on the LGMB's 'six steps' (LGMB, 1994b) the former envisaged the public contributing to LA21 by

- having an input through ‘democratic and co-operative processes’ into the authority’s LA21 Strategy;
- working in partnership with the local authority, amongst others; and
- becoming aware of the importance of environmental issues and taking action as individuals and groups (SEBC, 1995a).

The first of these was given considerable emphasis in the ‘Strategy Development Programme’, with proposals for ‘securing public consultation and participation’ through existing groups, ‘developing further links with agencies, pressure groups and the business community to facilitate the development of the LA21 Strategy’ and, if necessary, establishing new groups to further this process (SEBC, 1995c). The public was thus expected to engage early in the policy process in a very broad ranging way, potentially influencing all the authority’s policies. The nature of this intended influence is generally unclear, however, being vaguely described as ‘involvement’, ‘participation’ and ‘consultation’, although one proposal was minuted that the Strategy should be ‘dictated’ by the public’s views (SEBC, 1996c).

However, no structures were established as formal elements of the initiative which would enable public involvement or determine its status in relation to other parts of the policy making process. In practice such involvement in policy making took place in a limited way, principally at the first of the community workshops and then through the *ad hoc* and sporadic consultation which continued through the lifetime of the independent LA21 process.

As described above, the workshop was both holistic in scope and participatory in approach, purportedly giving the participants complete freedom in defining sustainable development and suggesting appropriate policies. However, it was almost entirely decoupled from wider policy making processes. As only one part of a larger process of developing the LA21, including the proposed public conference, it was explicitly consultative rather than binding. The participants were assured that their views would ‘help us focus strategy’, and in practice the team leader stated that the *Targets* document was ‘advised by the community information we got back ... we produced the document with that in mind’. Moreover, this policy making process was itself ineffective, since the *Targets* document had no prescriptive force and allowed departmental initiatives to continue and develop without interference. The public’s influence through the first workshop was thus extremely limited.

The second workshop was irrelevant to the policy making process, and constituted a shift away from public involvement in policy towards promoting participation through personal and organisational action for sustainability. While the *ad hoc* consultation at public events was intended to influence local authority actions, it was almost equally ineffective. There was neither a structure through which the public's general visions of the future could be channelled into local authority policy processes, nor any specific process for them to influence. Specific concerns expressed by the public could influence the authority through the LA21 Officer Group, whose members could take issues back to their individual departments. Their response was entirely discretionary and was also constrained by existing policies and the fixed timetables for their review, though one group member believed that 'the outputs of the specifics in part produced levers to encourage change in policy mid-term' and that they would be 'borne in mind' when policies were revised.

As in County Durham the work aimed at supporting public action yielded more tangible outcomes and encompassed a similar range of public and local authority roles. The latter acted to 'support independent community interests' (Wilcox, 1994) through the project fund, enabling community groups to give concrete meaning to sustainable development and giving them substantial control over planning and implementation, albeit over limited geographical scales and ranges of issues. This aspect of the initiative was developed and supported by the Environmental Planning Officer's capacity building work through which groups were assisted to develop projects and gain access to funds, some of which was targeted to specific disadvantaged sections of the community such as women receiving benefits. The Green Business Forum, while on the boundaries of what is normally considered to be 'public involvement', was another instance of a group of non-state actors being supported by the authority and working with them as partners on projects. Like the other projects, this initiative had no policy impact beyond the scope of the Forum's own activities.

In contrast the awareness raising and educational work cast the council officers in the role of experts who defined the nature of the problems addressed by sustainable development and what form the solutions should take. The complementary public role was to act in accordance with these prescriptions, taking on responsibility for developing more sustainable lifestyles with practical support from the authority.

b) Corporate public involvement policy

The corporate community involvement strategy adopted by the authority gave a very broad interpretation to their responsibility to encourage public involvement, defining three areas of responsiveness to comments, suggestions and complaints, facilitating wider access to consultation on services and policies, and encouraging public involvement in deliberative processes both around major policy issues and through sustained partnerships devoted to specific policy issues (SEBC, 1995b, 1996b). In practice systems were established to encourage suggestions and complaints from the public and to extend and systematise consultation through registers of individuals and groups to be routinely consulted in each policy field. The third area, of advancing policy deliberation, does not appear to have been greatly developed prior to the Community Plan process. In practice corporate public involvement was relatively insignificant compared with the initiatives of separate service departments.

Institutional characteristics of the LA21 initiative

As with public involvement, the initial descriptions of the institutional role of the LA21 and that which it played in practice were substantially different. The key policy documents and early officer group discussions recognised the extent of existing policies and programmes incorporating both sustainable development and public involvement, and clearly established that the LA21 should take on a coordinating role and only initiate new activities 'where essential' (SEBC, 1995c, 1996a). The Officer Group embodied this approach, with a role not only of enabling the LA21 but also, equally, of regulating it.

However, in practice the LA21 failed to coordinate existing work. As alluded to above, the apparently strategic *Targets* document simply collated current and future actions across the authority which were judged to contribute to some aspect of sustainable development. It neither represented binding commitments by the separate departments nor did it establish a mechanism to enable coordination, still less for enforcing it. In practice it acted as a loose guide to action by those who were committed to its principles. Moreover, the initiative very visibly developed new activities to engage with the public.

The Community Plan

The final stage in the LA21 policy making process was the production of the Community Plan. This document contained vague and contradictory interpretations of sustainable development. At the most general level this was presented as a

holistic and integrating principle, an overarching goal of the authority requiring 'the full integration of actions to address the economic, social and environmental issues of the Borough' (SEBC, 2000: 5). This was reflected in the six supporting strategies (Housing, Community Safety, Economic Development, Health, Leisure and Environment) each of which incorporated economic, social and environmental aims appropriate to its policy area. However, within the 'overall vision' document sustainable development was given little explicit emphasis, LA21 received only a single mention and the borough's Mission Statement used the same, narrower interpretation of sustainability as the 1995 Plan: 'This Council aims to serve the people of St Edmundsbury by maintaining and enhancing their quality of life through democratic, cost effective and environmentally sustainable means' (SEBC, 1996b, 2000).

The new Community Plan emphasised the involvement of the public with the work of the local authority, claiming organisational principles including 'provid[ing] a democratic platform for the expression of community interest' and 'inform[ing] local people of their rights and responsibilities and encourag[ing] them to participate in the democratic process of local government' (SEBC, 2000: 5). Thus it committed the authority to the Agenda 21 ideal of substantial public involvement, but without explicitly linking this to the concept of sustainable development.

The public's involvement in the Plan's production was also a policy outcome. It was limited to consultation through the four public workshops and the Plan's circulation to those on the corporate consultation register. While the former gave interested members of the public an opportunity to engage in debate with the authority, for any individual this was limited to a single strategy and to topic areas pre-determined by officers. It did not cover the links between strategies or the overall values of the Plan. The final document claimed to bring the views of local people together with the activities of the statutory agencies, without indicating the extent to which it reflected those views. The public's role was clearly limited to consultation, but was not entirely ineffective: social inclusion was added to the aims of the community safety strategy in response to public input.

Sustainable development and public involvement elsewhere in the authority

An important and distinctive aspect of the policy making process for LA21 in St Edmundsbury was its interaction with a range of other initiatives which could be characterised as promoting sustainable development and incorporated different forms of public involvement. Many of the officers involved in these were members

of the LA21 and Community First officer groups, and while these programmes were not strictly outcomes of the LA21 initiative the following brief descriptions provide necessary contextual information for the subsequent discussion of actors' values.

Waste management: From 1992 onwards the Recycling and Waste Manager initiated programmes involving the public in sustainable waste management, characterised by extensive consultation and awareness raising and promotional work.

Home energy: The Housing Section actively embraced its responsibilities under the Home Energy Conservation Act (1995), and was also involved in a 'pet' project of the Director of Housing to develop environmentally and economically beneficial hemp-built homes.

Tenant involvement: The Housing Section also had a long standing tenant participation programme, through which tenants were consulted on both neighbourhood housing issues and authority-wide housing policy.

Planning and village appraisals: In addition to the Planning Section's statutory responsibilities to promote sustainable development and consult the public it was also responsible for a programme of participatory village appraisals.

Environmental Health: The Environmental Health Section pursued a very broad interpretation of the 'new health agenda', including participatory neighbourhood initiatives, establishing a credit union, and a campaign on 'sun safety'.

Leisure Services: The Leisure Services Department produced a sustainable tourism strategy in 1992, largely as a response to issues brought up through public consultation, and increasingly relied on consultation and market research to guide its strategic planning.

Summary

The St Edmundsbury LA21 developed in two parts with distinctively different outcomes. The first was aimed at strategic sustainable development planning but rapidly encountered problems and was abandoned. Its limited outcomes encompassed two interpretations of sustainable development, with policy rhetoric and the established structures focusing on raising the importance of environmental considerations across the authority, whereas the policy-oriented public involvement was very holistic in scope. The public involvement process itself was extremely limited, and although presented as consultation its influence was circumscribed by disconnection from any effective policy making process – this was public *involvement* without significant *policy engagement*. The second part of the initiative,

the external programme for engaging the public in action for sustainable development, also embodied two interpretations of sustainable development. Awareness-raising and educational work was strongly environmental, based on a realist understanding of environmental problems and associated with a complementary role for the public of learning from the local authority's experts and engaging with their practical initiatives. Simultaneously the funded projects embodied a very holistic interpretation, with an inherently subjective basis and consequent public role of defining the substantive content of 'sustainable development'.

Public involvement in the revival of strategic sustainable development planning through the Community Plan process was also limited to consultation, late in the process, and was largely ineffective. The Plan itself presented an inconsistent explicit approach to sustainable development, which tended towards an environmental sustainability interpretation without a public involvement component. Overall, however, it presented an integrated approach to policy making and a very strong commitment to public involvement, and so implicitly represented a commitment to a very holistic and participatory form of sustainable development.

8.4.3 Values and Goals

Introduction

This section describes the values and goals of three groups of actors in the policy making processes affecting public involvement in LA21. The groups are defined by their institutional positions as the LA21 team and its elected supporters, councillors and officers at the corporate centre and officers from other service departments. This division reflects the parts they played in the process, since members of each group had common interests in relation to the LA21 as an initiative. Consequently, and in contrast to the first case study, these institutional interests and goals are considered alongside the actors' more principled values relating to sustainable development and public involvement.

The LA21 team and its elected supporters

The LA21 arose as an institutional response to an external policy initiative, and senior officers delegated responsibility for it to those they thought would be competent and interested. At the outset the team leader had no principled commitment to the idea: he 'couldn't see the point' since LA21 appeared to be simply what local authorities were doing already, but after a while 'the penny

dropped' that sustainable development 'was all we were doing and more'. He was subsequently strongly committed to a very holistic understanding of sustainable development, a position he shared with his colleagues in the team. In their words 'I personally view LA21 as something far wider than the environment' and 'I've tended to take environment in its broadest sense – it's how you live...it should also be about social exclusion, about job opportunities'. Following the 1995 election they were successful in persuading several councillors to share this conception, including the Chair of the Environmental Health & Housing Committee. For her sustainable development became *the* overarching value to which the local authority should aspire, incorporating a concern for the future and creating 'a better community' – rooted in environmental concerns but not just 'about green fields and good stuff'.

However, the two approaches visible in the initiative's outcomes were mirrored by a lack of clarity in the views of the team. While they emphasised their holistic understanding by contrasting it with the characterisation of LA21 'as purely green' by others within the authority and the general public, their implementation of sustainable development in practice tended towards promoting environmental concerns. An officer outside the team noted that 'what I have seen [in the authority's LA21 is that] the opening part of a sentence is the general embracing process, but the concluding part of the sentence always defaults to environmental matters', and the team themselves recognised that they were constrained in their understanding by their own backgrounds in various environmental disciplines.

Central to the team's and the committee chair's understanding of sustainable development was public involvement – one described LA21 as 'embod[ying] the spirit of social, economic and environment, equity, the process of involving people and consulting people'. Public involvement appeared to be given a higher priority than concerns with substantive outcomes, as in the frequently-used phrase 'the LA21 style of working' to mean extensive public consultation and a general tendency to talk of sustainability in terms of democratic process. All interpreted public involvement broadly, seeing value in public roles across the range from responsibility for personal action to involvement in authority policy making, but differed to some extent over priorities and interpretation. The main difference was over the desirable level of public influence over policy making. The team leader and committee chair were both committed to taking consultation very seriously and specifically to canvassing enough views to be able to claim that the LA21 was

'community-based'. However, they clearly believed in the primacy of a technocratic and representative system. The two junior members of the team saw more public influence, perhaps even control, as the ideal, one suggesting that 'in an ideal world we would throw [the Community Plan] out and say "OK, man on the street, you write it".'

At the action end of the spectrum, all of the initiatives' protagonists and the Labour chair's Conservative successor saw assisting community groups to define their needs and implement projects as an important component of a sustainable development programme, on grounds varying from empowerment of disadvantaged groups to reducing the public's emotional and financial dependence on the state. They also concurrently held the view that education on environmental issues was essential in order to stimulate public action, but were divided over the conceptual tensions between supporting subjective public definitions of sustainability and a realist appreciation of environmental problems requiring technical solutions. The team members from Environmental Health distinguished a general, holistic and subjective notion of 'sustainable development' from 'environmental sustainability', which 'ha[s] to be dictated... driven by some scientific reason and objectivity'. In contrast the Environmental Planning Officer believed that officers' views should not be imposed and that through dialogue and the provision of information people would freely make choices that lead to sustainability. She did, however, recognise that this view was both optimistic and flawed by the inevitability that facilitators would influence any participatory process.

Consultation could also play a more instrumental role. The team became extremely frustrated by their limited influence over environmental aspects of local authority policies and felt that the public's views could be used as 'a way of getting change' where they as officers were insufficiently persuasive.

From the beginning institutional considerations played a part in the initiative. The managerially awkward structure of the LA21 team, spanning two departments, arose as a compromise between two Directors seeking to have a role in the new initiative yet to avoid interdepartmental strife and to strengthen their position in the face of opposition from other senior officers. Once established, the team had a clear institutional objective of making the LA21 effective in influencing other policies. To this end they promoted awareness of the initiative, both outside and within the authority, including developing a 'brand' with a name – *Our Future Now* - and a logo. At the same time, without either the mandate or the desire to take over the

entire authority, they saw their role as one of coordinating activities and encouraging change. They acknowledged the potential for others to misunderstand this role and the damage this could inflict on the LA21. The team leader was consequently moved to send a formal plea to the Management Team to enable more communication between the LA21 and the rest of the authority, both to increase the former's influence and to reduce the extent to which it was seen as a threat by other departments (SEBC, 1996f).

Other actors in the LA21 process I - the centre

A few actors in the corporate centre were closely involved in policy making for the LA21. On the officer side the principal players were the Assistant Chief Executive and, to a lesser extent, the head of the Corporate Policy Unit. Prior to the start of the LA21 they showed little interest in sustainable development, and their understanding of it was as an environmental concept without relevance or implications for the authority as a whole. This changed substantially over the duration of the LA21. By the late 1990s sustainable development was still being seen as primarily concerned with the environment, but to embody a value which should inform all the authority's work – these officers appeared to take very seriously the authority's mission statement's commitment to 'environmental sustainability' (SEBC, 1996b). For them sustainable development *per se* was not a holistic concept, but stood alongside the distinct and at least as important principles of equity and democracy.

The Assistant Chief Executive's principal concern was with public involvement, both professionally and philosophically. It is clear from the interviews and his publications (Tam, 1993, 1998) that his work in local authorities was motivated by a strong and consciously elaborated communitarianism which included a commitment to deliberative democracy. His long term goal was a local state in which there was continuous and widespread public involvement in decision making through a dialogic process with the local authority, by which the public could both challenge expert knowledge and inject their interpretations and moral judgements into the process. This was not to be 'blind populism' but constrained by the recognition of non-negotiable principles, which by 1998 included environmental sustainability (Tam, 1998). His approach to developing such a state was pragmatic, making piecemeal reforms which respected political and social constraints but seeing each step as conceptually linked parts of an overall, very long-term strategy.

The Assistant Chief Executive's commitment to public involvement – though not the underlying philosophy – was shared to varying degrees by the authority's political

leadership from 1991 onwards. For the LA21 the most important player was the Labour Leader from 1995 to 1999. He had little or no interest in sustainable development, but was clearly committed to increasing public involvement in policy making as part of the modernisation of the authority. His overall goal was a responsive, enabling authority, which he linked closely to a procedural aim of developing a participatory community planning process. This agenda, driven by strong political values, had clear institutional implications: the envisaged single overarching Plan in turn implied a single, coherent public involvement process and integrated policy making within the authority.

Integration in policy making had been the second cardinal value of the corporate centre since 1991. Under the Assistant Chief Executive's leadership they promoted a strategic and interdepartmental approach across all issues, with the ultimate aim that 'eventually there would be lots of corporate teams doing different issues, rather than departmental heads', with each team headed by an appropriate lead department. To further this approach they also had a subsidiary goal of balancing the relative strengths of the authority's departments. One such interdepartmental issue was 'the environment', and for the corporate centre the principal functions of the LA21 initiative were to be the vehicle for integrated environmental policy making and to counterbalance the dominance of the Department of Technical Services by enhancing Environmental Health's role*.

Other actors in the LA21 process II - the service departments

The third set of actors in the LA21 process were the active members of the LA21 and Community First Officer Groups based in the service departments, all of whom were overtly and strongly committed to both sustainable development and engaging the public in their work. They tended towards more environmental interpretations of sustainable development than the LA21 team and to value more circumscribed public engagement within terms set by themselves, justified by their expert knowledge of sustainability and the authority's policies and services. There were, however, significant differences between them over the relationships between social,

* During the initial planning stages of the LA21 Environmental Health was a separate, small department, and Planning was part of the large Department of Technical Services. Subsequent restructuring created three more or less equal departments which shared the authority's environmental responsibilities between them: Environmental Health & Housing, Construction Services & Works and Planning & Transportation.

economic, environmental and democratic issues, and so of the appropriate nature of a LA21, which to some extent reflected their professional fields.

For the Recycling and Waste Manager the public were the main actors in delivering sustainability in practice. The authority's role was therefore to decide what was sustainable, and then work with the public to devise ways to enable them to act: 'it's all about...public education, of the whole public - explaining why they should do things, and how they can do it, and how easy you can make it for them.' Likewise the planning officers saw sustainability as central to their work, which imposed limitations on the public's input to policy making. In their words, '[sustainable development is] the underlying foundation of what we do...so [in appraisals] we impose certain questions that we think are necessary...It is a facilitation role' and 'I think it is something that we are trying to sell to the population...it's the planners' vision'. For Leisure Services sustainability and public involvement were entirely separate. The former was a priority which emerged through officers balancing competing public demands for economic development and environmental protection while the latter – in the form of market research and user involvement in management – was essential for planning and maintaining popular services, both on principled public service grounds and in order to preserve the department's existence.

In contrast, there were also officers within the Environmental Health department who positioned themselves in the opposite relationship to the LA21, viewing the initiative as overly environmental in emphasis. They adopted an approach to community health which embraced an integrated, holistic definition of sustainable development coupled with an emphasis on eliciting and meeting the public's needs, focusing particularly on raising the quality of life of disadvantaged communities.

Importantly, none of these officers valued the highly influential public involvement in policy making across the entirety of the authority's work which was envisaged by the team at the outset of the LA21. In consequence their attitudes towards public involvement in principle and as it related to their own work contrasted with their attitudes towards the LA21 and planned public involvement within it. Exactly because of their commitment to similar but differing values they wished to sustain their pre-existing policies and programmes, both in order to make progress in accordance with those values and on institutional grounds – these initiatives were under their control and were important elements of their work. Many therefore saw the early LA21 as unnecessary and a potential threat: one officer scoffed 'when

you've got a team who have been working along these lines and you suddenly get "LA21!", we think "that's the way we work, it's not new".' Another reported 'one meeting where [a member of the LA21 team] more or less said that anything involving the community should be done by or through the LA21. It didn't go down hugely well.'

This attitude, which was common across the service departments, changed as the emphasis of the LA21 shifted – the result of a process of opposition and conflict described below (Section 8.4.5). Some of the same officers became very supportive of the awareness-raising and action-oriented public involvement components of the LA21, seeing them as complementary to their own sustainable development initiatives in fields such as recycling and 'sun safety'. More generally this aspect of the initiative was viewed by some officers as helpful in changing attitudes within the authority. One who had initially been hostile commented that 'there was so much work that [members of the LA21 Officer Group] did in going out and working in the community...people began to realise that you can do things without totally losing control and that the information that comes back can actually be used....It was legitimising a lot of the stuff we wanted to do.'

Finally, there was a very specific institutional, non-substantive issue which affected the Planning Section's attitude to the LA21 and had a significant impact on the public involvement programme. While they were committed to sustainable development and to the concept of a local Agenda 21, throughout the initiative there was opposition to the LA21 from this department. This stemmed from historic animosity towards the Environmental Health Section and the perceived loss of a planning officer to the initiative during a period of staff shortages and increasing work loads. This was further exacerbated by the contrasting approaches to public involvement of the Environmental Planning Officer and the other planners.

Summary

In summary, most of those directly involved in policy making for the LA21 shared a general commitment to sustainable development and public involvement. However, there was clearly a potentially conflicting range of interpretations present, particularly over the appropriate influence of the public over policy making in the local authority as a whole. Moreover, almost regardless of the degree of agreement over substantive values, the pre-existence and parallel development of other programmes raised the possibility of conflicting institutional goals, leading to the perverse situation of the LA21 being opposed in order to protect sustainable

development and public involvement initiatives from the LA21's perceived limitations.

Absent from the above account are the values and goals of the public. In sharp contrast to the first case study, there was no public involvement in policy making for public involvement, apart from occasional expressions of dissatisfaction with the authority's practice.

8.4.4 The context for the LA21

As an authority which actively pursued other initiatives in the fields of sustainable development and public involvement, St Edmundsbury Borough Council provided a very different environment from Durham County Council for the development of LA21. This section describes the prevalent attitudes towards development and the relationship of the authority with its citizens and considers the formal and informal structures within which policy making took place, including the dominant institutional values. It concludes with a brief look at how the authority's policy making was linked to other tiers of government and wider social pressures.

Values and structures within the authority

Across the authority there was sympathy for the notion that economic development and environmental protection were equally important. A number of factors underlay this, pre-eminently the area's relative wealth and thus the absence of the 'jobs at any cost' argument that was dominant in County Durham. This was reinforced by a strong preservationist culture which valued the urban and the rural environments of the borough as important to the residents' quality of life, and by the recognition that these were important for attracting industrial development and supporting the tourist industry. During the duration of the LA21 this ethos remained unchallenged by the incipient pressures of rapid industrial growth and high housing demand. Managing development was generally seen as a feasible balance between economic and environmental considerations rather than a process of making difficult trade-offs.

Historically the authority's Planning Section had been strong, in contrast to the new, small and institutionally weak Economic Development Section. Coming under the Assistant Chief Executive, the latter was controlled by a powerful officer with a commitment to balanced and strategic policy making, rather than having an independent voice at corporate management level. Moreover, the authority's single economic development officer also took a balanced view, subscribing to the need to

manage growth and viewing his role as one of championing investment in a dynamic tension with legitimate constraints imposed by the planners.

This ethos amongst the officers was largely shared by the elected members. Following the departure in 1991 of an autocratic leader resistant to virtually any innovation it also became possible for officers to develop explicitly environmental initiatives and be confident of member support. The Labour administration of 1995-9 actively encouraged such changes since, in the words of the Deputy Leader, they recognised that 'from a political point of view it was A Good Thing... for the Labour administration to be looking at these [green] issues'.

Equally widespread, and perhaps even stronger, was a commitment to public involvement in policy making which permeated the authority. All those interviewed subscribed to this in some form, typical comments being that 'as a local authority we have a responsibility to ensure that anyone who wishes to have an involvement in determining the services they receive, which impact on their quality of life, has the involvement that they want' and more succinctly 'we are ...in the ball game that if we do something we will consult on it - I think you can take that as read'. Amongst the officers this was fairly long standing, in some departments pre-dating the general opening out of the authority after the 1991 leadership change, and for many was an aspect of the authority which was taken for granted but had unclear origins. It was certainly reinforced and developed under the Assistant Chief Executive's influence, and by the late 1990s public involvement was only opposed by a small and diminishing minority of officers.

Underlying this commitment were a number of rationales, many espoused simultaneously by single individuals, and which appear to have coexisted peacefully within the authority. The most prevalent was instrumental: that engagement with the public would enable a better service to be provided. While this was important for financial reasons, for most officers it was simply part of 'doing a good job', with the instrumental rationale inseparable from an explicit public service ethos. A few officers also held that it was the people's democratic right to be consulted - particularly (though not exclusively) on the grounds that it was their money that was being spent by the authority.

These rationales generally supported consultation rather than higher levels of public involvement. A few officers explicitly put this in the context of strengthening the representative democratic process by providing councillors with more information but not derogating from their role as decision makers. However, a minority went

further and espoused the view that the public should be directly involved in the authority's decision making and in local management over limited issues and areas, although no others expressed the extreme views embodied in the Assistant Chief Executive's long-term communitarian vision.

The development of this general ethos was clearly influenced by the changes in the authority's political leadership and the advent of the Labour administration. As with environmental initiatives, the change in the Conservative leadership in 1991 heralded a general opening up of the authority and the beginning of a move away from almost purely representative democratic processes. Following the 1995 election public involvement became a central tenet of the authority, actively promoted by Labour councillors. In the words of the Deputy Leader 'consultation was our biggest single tool to apply to whatever we did, to open up, not just accountability, but to actively go out to think and create new ways to engage the community in what the council was doing, to regenerate interest in the council, to turn things around.' Innovation was, however, balanced by a political need for financial prudence as the borough's first Labour council – the same member recalled that 'we didn't hand out any ammunition for being shot down ...so that they could say 'look they come in, all these loony ideas, spending money for the sake of it'. The reversion to Conservative control in 1999 changed the climate for public involvement. Officers perceived the new administration, and its leader in particular, to be hostile, though with significant exceptions which included the new Chairman [sic] and vice-Chairmen of the Environmental Health and Housing Committee.

This election also marked a change in the extent of direct member involvement in policy making. Under all the Conservative administrations councillors tended to distance themselves, setting a policy framework and ethos within which officers worked, whereas during the period of Labour control ruling group councillors engaged regularly and directly with officers in policy making. The involvement of the Labour Chair of Environmental Health and Housing in the LA21 was typical of this administration, in that she both publicly promoted the initiative and had considerable informal, day-to-day contact with the LA21 team. In contrast, her successor explicitly expected to rely on her officers to guide her and generate policy.

In addition to the ethos and values espoused within the authority, its formal decision making and control structures were significant contextual factors in shaping the LA21. Although it maintained a traditional structure of service committees and departments a number of reforms were made after 1991 to break down

interdepartmental barriers and encourage a corporate and strategic approach to policy making. The first was the institution of a relatively strong corporate centre managed by the Assistant Chief Executive, initially with responsibility for developing a coherent and strategic approach to policy making, and then increasingly for 'modernisation' and 'democratic services' (St Edmundsbury Borough Council, 2000). Two specific structures were also introduced throughout the authority to enable cross-departmental working and limit the ability of departments to work in isolation. Officer groups were established for many initiatives, not as steering groups with an overseeing role over the lead officers but as structures through which ideas could be generated and disseminated and responsibility dispersed. In addition, all draft committee papers were assessed by cross-departmental groups of senior officers, thus further reducing the ability of any single department to pursue its own independent agenda.

There was also an informal policy of reducing hierarchical rigidity through devolving policy development and decision making downwards and encouraging open communication between levels. This had the potential to work against the interdepartmental structures, as in some departments – including Environmental Health and Housing - relatively junior officers were able to develop policy, ostensibly within guidelines and under the oversight of the managers but in some cases with a great deal of autonomy. As one officer engaged in innovative public involvement exercises put it: 'there are opportunities to do a lot of stuff by stealth...If you are careful with the information you give out about what you do, that you pass up the ladder, and shout about the bits where you have been successful...then you can get on with it.'

In parallel with these official initiatives to change the authority's policy making processes, attitudes to working practices were a significant aspect of the local culture. On the one hand joint but non-hierarchical working was widely viewed as desirable, with a corresponding deprecation of departmentalism in the senses of isolationism and competition between departments. On the other, even the most self-consciously corporate players valued their departmental autonomy when they felt that their control over their own programmes was threatened by either the centre or by other department-based initiatives. In general such threats appeared to have been successfully resisted and interdepartmental working was far from universal across the authority.

As in County Durham and for similar reasons, St Edmundsbury's LA21 process appears to have been very little influenced by other sub-central tiers of government. Regional Government Office involvement was minimal, since as a locally recognised leader on LA21 the Borough was not a priority for the regional sustainable development unit. Furthermore, the nascent regional sustainable development strategy process was unconnected with the constituent local authorities' own processes. A county-wide LA21 officer group provided a useful forum for discussions but had no policy function – as in the north-east the Local Government Review had damaged county-district relationships to the point that, according to one officer, 'not working with the county was the preferred option'.

The wider context

St Edmundsbury's relationship with the national policy context was very different from that of County Durham. Yet another aspect of the change in ethos of the authority after 1991 was a general responsiveness to central government initiatives. Particularly in policy areas related to the authority's engagement with the public they were not only very early adopters but to have developed policies further than the official guidance. It would appear that central government directives both supported some officers in implementing their own, more progressive agendas, and also to some extent hampered them through tightly prescriptive guidance on, for example, consultation for Best Value.

The authority was similarly responsive to trends in social attitudes, in particular rising public interest in public involvement and environmental issues. The former was perhaps particularly strong locally due to the actions of the authority itself, which some officers saw as having promoted public consultation to the point where it was now expected. The authority was also unusual in having a senior officer who was simultaneously driving internal policy and playing a deliberate role in shaping these broader trends through his publications and involvement in national and international communitarian networks.

8.4.5 Processes

Introduction

This final section provides a description and analysis of the processes by which actors' values and goals were brought together, and how these interacted to produce the observed outcomes of the LA21. These outcomes were less clear cut than in County Durham, as they included transient stages in a process of policy and

institutional development as well as relatively permanent structures. Four can be identified:

- the formal LA21 structures of team and Officer Group, based in environmental departments but spanning the entire authority;
- a short-lived and unsuccessful attempt to develop a holistic, strategic policy making process with a high level of public involvement;
- a successful and longer-lived programme of supporting public action for sustainable development, with separate awareness-raising and project supporting components;

and

- a Community Plan which appeared to embrace both holistic sustainable development and substantial public involvement in the work of the authority.

These developed through four interlinked policy processes around which this section is structured – the establishment of the LA21 and its initial proposed programme, two conflictive processes in which it interacted with other service departments and the corporate centre, and the community planning process which overlapped with and developed from the last of these.

Establishing the LA21

The structures and initial proposed programme for the LA21 embodied a number of interpretations of sustainable development. Its institutional location and key policy documents suggested an initiative primarily concerned with environmental aspects of the entire authority's actions, while the provisions for public involvement incorporated both a holistic and subjective interpretation and an environmental and realist one. A similarly broad range of public involvement was envisaged, from responding to education with personal behaviour change and promoting local sustainable development projects to engaging with the authority in drawing up a LA21 Strategy.

This breadth of potentially conflicting interpretations was the outcome of a planning process which brought together the two Directors of the authority's principal environmental departments, the Assistant Director for Environmental Health and his junior colleagues within the team and the Assistant Chief Executive. The process began as a series of informal and open discussions, with little or no conflict, through which these officers worked out what they considered to be an appropriate way to

respond to the need to develop a LA21. A dominant aspect of these discussions was that they were responding to an external policy imperative, of which they initially had little understanding. Consequently they were open to guidance, which they were then receiving in the form of the series of documents from the LGMB. Already present within the authority, particularly within the two departments principally involved, there was a presumption in favour of public consultation in policy making and of interdepartmental working. This ethos was matched in the guidance, and made the deliberate following of the LGMB's 'step by step' guide (1994b) a natural approach to planning the aims and structures of their initiative. Thus this document's environmental focus, emphasis on incorporating existing work, broad approach to the scope of LA21 within an authority and similarly broad interpretation of public involvement were all replicated. Also replicated were the guide's lack of clarity over how these elements were to fit together and its commitment to public involvement in strategy development without making clear the links to the main stream of the authority's policy making processes.

The absence of clear pre-existing substantive policy agendas amongst the senior officers contributed to the lack of conflict within this process and allowed institutional considerations to be very influential. The structures adopted reflected both a compromise between the leading departments' claims and the goals of the strongest single agenda – the Assistant Chief Executive's push for strategic planning, interdepartmental working and balance between departments.

The approach was sufficiently broad to incorporate the initial proposals for a very high level of public control over the LA21 Strategy itself. Though supported by the team, and by their sympathetic committee Chair, these bore the stamp of the more radical, junior officers, in particular of the Environmental Planning Officer who drew up the programme for the first community workshop.

Before implementation began the officers' proposals had to be approved by the formal structures of the authority's management team and council. At this stage there was no clearly articulated, principled objection, as the initiative fitted both the ethos of the officer group and the newly elected council. There was opposition, however. The new Leader and the Director of Finance were sceptical of the necessity of such an unfamiliar initiative, seeing it as a potentially embarrassing waste of money. In the face of support for the LA21 from other leading members, several departmental Directors and the Assistant Chief Executive a compromise was

reached whereby the initiative was to go ahead but without dedicated financial resources or new staff.

Opposition was also expressed by another service department head in the management team on the grounds that the initiative duplicated existing approaches to public involvement and sustainable development. Although ineffective in stopping the LA21, these concerns were shared by the Assistant Chief Executive, who at the inception of the LA21 Officer Group made it clear that part of its role was to ensure that duplication and confusion were avoided.

Thus from the start the initiative incorporated potentially contradictory approaches, was the product of compromise, and was viewed with ambivalence by powerful actors who supported it with scepticism and misgivings. Even within the LA21 team a range of viewpoints existed, but there was sufficient agreement, respect for different approaches and scope to develop them within the proposed initiative that they were able to work consensually. Decisions were typically a result of open and equal discussion, despite the distance between team members in the authority's hierarchy. However, as implementation started the presence of different views elsewhere in the authority on what a LA21 initiative should be and do became explicit and two rather different conflicts arose.

Conflict with the service departments

The first conflict took place in the two officer groups concerned with LA21 and corporate community issues. The team had an initial objective of developing a strategic and highly participative LA21 as the principal policy vehicle for sustainable development in the authority. This was successfully opposed by officers from other service departments, who were resistant to the idea of the LA21 taking over sustainable development and public involvement initiatives run by other sections of the authority. As described above (Section 8.4.3) this rested on closely intertwined substantive and institutional arguments – officers were simultaneously defending both their particular approaches and their own and their departments' roles in controlling programmes. Both officer groups provided arenas for pursuing these arguments. The LA21 Group gave opportunities to influence the initiative directly, while in the Community First Group those who had distanced themselves from the LA21 voiced their disquiet and opposition to its perceived mutation into a general community involvement programme.

In the face of such opposition the LA21 team were forced to modify their plans. They were without authority and therefore reliant on the voluntary cooperation of other sections to achieve their goals, while the officer group structure made it impossible for them to escape and create an independent policy process. In consequence the public involvement process was transformed - although holistic in scope it was brief, limited to invited participants rather than the general public, consultative in intent and disconnected in practice from effective policy making. Moreover, the intended strategy became simply a collation of activities, unconnected except through departments' voluntarily placing them under the name of the LA21 to indicate their role in the authority's pursuit of sustainable development.

Many of these activities comprised the external, public-supporting component of the LA21. The process by which this was developed was very different from that described above. Although it also took place principally within the LA21 officer group and involved many of the same actors, it was characterised by cooperation, mutual support and lack of conflict. Whereas initially the threat posed by LA21 highlighted differences in substantive interpretations, once this had been defused many officers saw that their conceptions overlapped sufficiently to find mutual benefit in working together to advance sustainable practices amongst the public. In the words of a previously vociferous opponent 'everybody got together - it was very positive, much more collective and broadened the information available to the public'. The process was self-reinforcing, as the experience of working together, often away from the routine of the office, ironed out both mistrust and lingering aversions to interdepartmental working. The result was an active programme of events which not only continued until the formal dissolution of the LA21 but was subsequently restarted by the participants working together as an informal group. Some departments, however, persisted in their belief that their approaches to sustainable development or public involvement were incompatible with, and superior to, the LA21 and continued to work in isolation.

Events which brought favourable publicity and supported community groups were broadly favoured by the rest of the authority, and the LA21 Officer Group and team were largely allowed to develop the external programme autonomously provided that they remained within the broad remit of formally approved policy. In practice this was a minimal constraint, since activities already taking place or foreseen prior to the *Targets* document were written into it and other ideas were then developed within its very loose framework. Overall, policy making in this area followed the

pattern described by the Assistant Director: 'it was a question of bright ideas and we tried to run with them.'

The concurrent planning processes for the development of the funded project work and the Green Business Forum were even more isolated, being the preserve of the LA21 team. These initiatives bore the stamp of the officers principally involved, with the Forum reflecting the environmental management backgrounds of the Assistant Director and the Environmental Management Officer and the project work showing the influence of the community development interests of the Environmental Planning Officer. The latter became even less directed following the demise of the LA21, which left her virtually independent of any controlling structures, despite her junior rank: 'I only had occasional meetings with the Assistant Director...I had the budget, I spent the budget'.

The abrupt end of this independent work resulted from the sudden intrusion of the Planning Section's needs and attitudes to the LA21. As noted above (Section 8.4.3) historical interdepartmental tensions had been exacerbated by the perceived 'loss' of the Environmental Planning Officer to Environmental Health under the LA21. Although still part of the Planning Section her colleagues felt that she 'wasn't appearing to achieve a terrible lot...for the [planning] department' and when the need arose for a planner with both sustainability and public involvement expertise to work on the Local Plan Review her line manager asserted his formal authority and withdrew her from the LA21. She resigned shortly afterwards, thus removing from the authority the most overtly radical proponent of extensive community involvement in policy making, community development as part of LA21 and a holistic interpretation of sustainable development.

Conflict with the centre

By this time LA21 as an independent strategic activity had ended, following the conflict with corporate public involvement policy making in general and the Community Plan process in particular. Despite misgivings from the beginning about the possibility of such a conflict, from the corporate centre's perspective there was no necessary incompatibility between their approach and a new environmental initiative involving substantial engagement with the public - departments such as Housing and Leisure Services already had similar programmes. However, the apparent development of the LA21 into an initiative that was holistic in scope and intended to give the public a substantial level of influence over all aspects of the authority's activities was a different matter.

The earliest expressions of concern came from within the Community First Officer Group, whose meetings provided an arena for the expression of discontent and occasional conflicts over the boundaries between the two Officer Group's remits. Although they contributed to curbing the LA21's strategic influence, they had no authority to stop the development of its *ad hoc* consultation with the public. However, by the initiative's second year misgivings were becoming more widespread. Senior officers were expressing concern over potential interference in their departments' activities, and leading members were expressing confusion. The tension was heightened as the idea of a single Community Plan became more important to the Leader and the Assistant Chief Executive and it appeared that two initiatives were developing which were operationally similar but had different underlying philosophies – one communitarian, the other environmental. In the Assistant Chief Executive's words 'LA21 is coming out as a community based process, getting people involved to map out the future they want, now...Are we heading towards a twin track parallel process, which is nonsense for any organisation, particularly one which aspires towards corporate planning?' Further, an environmental department was not obviously an appropriate base for such an initiative, and conversely the LA21's original function of providing a corporate environmental approach was being lost. The Assistant Chief Executive again: 'the one group which we thought we set up to deal with it was running away from it'.

From their different viewpoint the LA21 group, and in particular the team leader, were addressing the same issue. The lack of connection between the LA21 and the authority's policy processes, which the Assistant Director had recognised but not acted upon at the outset of the LA21, was causing him to review the initiative as a whole and question the utility of continuing to 'bang [his] head against the brick wall of the corporacy'.

These concerns came to a head in the second half of 1997, when the Assistant Chief Executive spelled out explicitly in a report to the council that the LA21 was in danger of putting the borough in the position of having 'to reconcile two distinct sets of community-based action plans' and recommended that the 'LA21 community involvement initiatives be integrated into the process of producing a single community plan for the Borough' (SEBC, 1997).

At this point the appropriate formal policy making processes for taking this forward would have involved the full management team and the two officer groups, and almost certainly been conflictive. Instead, the circle of those involved in policy

making was collapsed to the two officers leading the initiatives, who brought in the Leader and his Deputy and the directors of the LA21 departments as necessary. The ensuing discussions were constructive, framed by a shared determination to solve the problems and generally characterised by intense argument coupled with a willingness to see different sides to the issues – an approach that was greatly assisted by the good personal relationships between those involved. The two leading officers quickly agreed that LA21 and community planning had to be merged. The Assistant Director recognised that there were too many separate initiatives around which needed to be merged if they were to be effective, while the Assistant Chief Executive's assessment of sustainable development had changed. He now recognised that not only was it an increasingly important policy priority of central government, but also had accepted it as a core element of a good, communitarian society (Tam, 1998). It took some time before those involved in the LA21 recognised this change: the Assistant Chief Executive had to explain repeatedly that he didn't 'want to force LA21 into this pigeon hole of being a green thing' but 'want[ed] all those who believe in LA21 to work through the corporate process'.

Once it was agreed that the necessary outcome was a single participatory planning process which incorporated a sustainability ethic the problem became the institutional one of finding the best policy vehicle. The principal argument became over the positioning of sustainable development in the overall plan - whether it should be one of several core principles or whether it should be *the* over-riding principle, making the LA21 an 'umbrella' within which the Community Plan and its associated strategies would sit. This dispute was underlain by persisting differences in interpretation of 'sustainable development'. For LA21's proponents it was holistic, while the Assistant Chief Executive still viewed it as essentially environmental - he saw most of the other components of the holistic interpretation as having equal conceptual and ethical status independent of environmental sustainability. The exception was the long term and global perspective, which the former group feared would be lost in a Community Plan, particularly if this were oriented towards short-term service delivery issues and dominated by Best Value's financial aspects. Their case was backed by the more parochial arguments that the LA21 programme was unlike the corporate approach to consultation in being widely recognised, action oriented and productive and should therefore not be abandoned, alongside a frankly departmentalist reluctance to cede control of the initiative.

The dispute was resolved not through rational argument over matters of principle but by *force majeure* on institutional grounds. The Assistant Director paraphrased the Leader as saying 'I just want one [plan], and as I'm leader of the council and into community planning, I'll have the Community Plan' - at that point the Assistant Director 'lay down and let [them] get on with it'. For the LA21 'side' it was an imperfect but acceptable outcome with which they concurred. The decision was then taken back to the officer groups, which had up to this point been excluded from the policy making process. Although an immediate implication was the merger of the two groups, their resistance was useless in the face of agreement between senior councillors, departmental heads and the groups' own chairs and the LA21 was terminated as an independent, policy-oriented initiative in the middle of 1998.

The Community Plan

Part of the agreement was that 'LA21' was not abandoned altogether, but would be incorporated into the Community Plan. This final section consequently considers the community planning process as a kind of coda to the independent LA21. Planning the development of the Plan started in the same informal policy discussions which ended the LA21. The initial proposals for substantial public involvement embodied its intended role as a major step forward for the Labour administration's objectives of involving the community and developing a more responsive authority and the Assistant Chief Executive's complementary agenda of transforming local democracy. As with the LA21 this ideal was not realised in practice, and although the rhetoric of the final document reflects its designers' intentions its production was a traditional process of internal drafting followed by rather ineffectual public consultation.

This principally occurred as the result of contingent structural factors rather than dissent from other actors in the process. Firstly, the eighteen months available for developing the Plan was deemed inadequate for a fully participative process. By committing themselves to producing a single strategic document the authority were forced to meet the central government deadline of April 2000 for Best Value Service Plans, and consequently to having a draft prepared for the December 1999 round of council meetings. Secondly, Best Value's statutory status and relative clarity meant that it tended to dominate the process, further reducing the time available to work on other aspects of the Plan. Thirdly, rather than developing the six supporting strategies from scratch, the process incorporated five existing sectoral plans. Three of these were statutory requirements and had inflexible consultation and production

timetables and the others were at various stages of revision. Only the environmental strategy was entirely new but because of the shortage of time this too was drafted internally by the informal environmental officer group.

The final constraint came from the electoral process. As plans to consult on the draft were maturing the authority was approaching local elections, at which it was widely expected that the Conservatives would regain control. Such a new administration would legitimately expect to have an input into the new corporate plan. The proposed public workshops were consequently delayed until after the election, which brought them very close to the December deadline, while the preparation of draft strategies continued uninterrupted within the authority, further reducing the potential for public influence. The Conservatives duly won the election and quickly signalled their aversion to widespread public involvement. This prompted the final reduction in public involvement in the Plan to the limited consultation described above (Section 8.4.2). This compromise between ideals and practical and political influences was viewed by none of the main actors as perfect, but by some as a 'first try' from which to develop more participatory Plans in future.

Summary

In sharp contrast to the first case study, the salient characteristic of the LA21 initiative in St Edmundsbury was that its proponents failed to achieve their aims, either in the LA21 itself or in its successor, the Community Plan. Two principal aspects of the policy making processes came together to produce this apparently paradoxical outcome in an authority which overall was sympathetic to the ideals of both sustainable development and public involvement.

Firstly, at a strategic level policy making necessarily involved not only the LA21's proponents but also officers from across the authority. An interactive process was built in through the officer group structure and reinforced by the more general culture of encouraging interdepartmental working. While intended to facilitate the development of LA21 as a cross-departmental initiative this also acted as a control mechanism which prevented the LA21 team from developing the initiative independently and brought them into constant contact with other policy fields. Other officers were thus provoked into defending their own work and provided with an arena in which to do so. Secondly, the LA21 was institutionally weak, being a new initiative based in service departments that did not have dominant positions in the authority. When conflict arose the combination of being unable to impose their will and their consequent reliance on voluntary cooperation resulted in the LA21

team's defeat at the hands of both the other service departments and the corporate centre.

Where the actors' goals were not in conflict – in practice once institutional tensions had been resolved – the same structures facilitated joint working. The resulting successful 'external LA21' showed a contrasting characteristic of the authority's management processes and style, which allowed officers working within a general policy framework and the ethos of the administration to develop initiatives with little direct control provided that they did not impinge on other policy areas. At the extreme this allowed an officer to work alone, combining policy making and implementation. Thus policy making for the independent LA21 was marked by a clear distinction between the protagonists' inability to control the process where it dealt with strategic issues and their ability to lead the programme of practical action by the public.

The Community Plan process was very different, even though its outcomes in terms of public involvement were rather similar. The constraints on this arose not from conflict facilitated by the policy making structures, but rather from contingent practical problems with the process which were to some extent self-imposed by the officers in charge.

8.5 Conclusion

From this chapter a rather paradoxical picture emerges. St Edmundsbury's LA21 appeared to have the potential to be a model initiative, embodying Agenda 21's vision of a holistic approach to sustainable development coupled with a high level of public involvement across all the levels from controlling policy to taking individual action. Furthermore, the Borough Council should have been a conducive environment for such an approach to LA21 as it was concurrently engaged in other sustainable development initiatives and had both policies and a general culture which supported public involvement in policy making. It was also developing other characteristics of an 'enabling council', favouring interdepartmental strategic planning and working practices and generally fostering a progressive attitude and public service ethos.

In practice, however, the LA21 was short lived and failed to achieve this apparent potential. Its policy making component rapidly ran into problems within the authority, and was successively reduced to limited consultation, marginalised and disconnected from the mainstream of the authority's workings, and then abandoned.

In contrast the initiative developed a successful external programme, supporting public involvement in action. The components of this work had widely varying conceptual bases, divided between the environmentally focused, expert-defined awareness raising approach and a community support programme which gave the public a substantial role in both defining and controlling sustainable development at a local scale.

The initiative was not, however, entirely ineffective, nor did it cease altogether. The independent phase was important in influencing attitudes within the authority, in particular that of the corporate centre towards sustainable development and more generally demonstrating the feasibility and utility of innovative approaches to public involvement. The Community Plan and its supporting strategies to some extent at least incorporated the values as well as the name of LA21.

Given the values prevalent in the authority, the fate of the independent LA21 did not appear to meet the substantive goals of any of the principal actors. Although there were differences of interpretation – particularly between a widely held environmental and expert-led approach and a more holistic and subjectivist interpretation – this was not the principal factor in the development of the process. The problem for the LA21 was that these widely shared values were already being acted on, and the result of attempting to insert a new initiative as *the* vehicle for participatory sustainable development into such a crowded policy environment was conflict. Opposition arose not because LA21 threatened a revolutionary incursion of democracy and sustainability but because actors wished to defend their own sustainability and public involvement policies and their institutional roles in delivering these.

Thus institutional issues were very important in the policy process. In particular the marginalisation of the strategic LA21 met the institutional goals of all except the LA21 team, allowing them to pursue their own initiatives unchecked, including the development of community planning without the confusion of a parallel planning process. Conversely, the external programme had no negative institutional aspects, which allowed officers with shared values to work together – the differences between them being accommodated within the range of external activities, rather than causing conflict. In contrast again, the Community Plan to a limited extent met both the substantive and the institutional goals of all the actors, including the initiators of the LA21 and the corporate centre, though this achievement was

somewhat compromised by the drop in support for public involvement after Labour lost control.

That the goals of actors from outside the immediate LA21 team had such an influence on the process is attributable to the nature of the authority's policy making processes. The structures and assumptions of interdepartmental working gave other actors a legitimate stake in the LA21 and provided the arenas in which disparate values and goals were brought into contact. The inescapability of these interactions and the initiative's institutional weakness resulted in its demise.

As envisaged when this case study was selected, it did embody a very different approach to that of County Durham. The LA21 was initiated with clearly radical aims, both to make sustainable development a policy priority of the authority and to give the public substantial influence in the process. These were not realised, since even in such a progressive authority their implications for existing policies and the envisaged public influence were too great. Thus the most explicitly radical officers were thwarted, but what transpired was part of the even more transformative but pragmatic and long term strategy of a powerful senior officer – which he was then unable to take further within this authority. However, the changes that had taken place were in themselves fairly substantial, certainly representing another step in the 'modernisation' of the authority if not the 'revolutionary' change in governance envisaged by some proponents of LA21.

It finally remains to consider how in the course of these processes policy makers addressed the conceptual problems identified in the literature review chapters. The most important of these was the tension between public involvement in sustainability planning and a realist understanding of sustainability. This was a substantive ground of conflict, intimately linked with the institutional problems and resolved in favour of realism. It remained, however, in the community-based work, which was ostensibly holistic and allowed more subjective definitions of sustainability yet was reluctantly and consciously constrained by the officer's conception of what sustainable development could encompass.

The potential problems with the conflicting rationales for the broad scope of public involvement enjoined by Agenda 21 and between increasing public involvement and representative local democracy did not materialise. The approach adopted, following the LGMB guidance, largely fitted the ethos of an authority in which both officers and members saw public involvement as an important aspect of improving the representative system. Problems arose, however, in following the LGMB's

prescribed strategy of setting up parallel and disconnected public involvement and strategy development processes. The final possible problem, of the need for consensus as a basis for developing a local Agenda 21, was never faced - public involvement in strategy development had been stopped by the internal problems of the initiative before the issue arose of reconciling disparate public views.

Overall, then, in St Edmundsbury the LA21 failed to realise the vision of Agenda 21. In a philosophically sympathetic authority the failure largely resulted from the inappropriateness of LA21 as a policy vehicle for furthering sustainable development and public involvement. As a new and department-based process it was unable to establish its strategic role in an already crowded policy environment and was confined to promoting and supporting public action. However, the values it embodied were subsequently incorporated in the mainstream of corporate policy making - probably a more appropriate institutional framework for advancing sustainable development.

Chapter 9 Policy making for public involvement in Local Agenda 21: analysis and explanation

9.1 Introduction

This research set out to investigate how and why LA21 did not result in radical changes to local governance in England and to develop an understanding of what happened instead. Chapters Seven and Eight set out the findings of studies of two individual, unique LA21 initiatives, describing very different policy making processes which evolved in contrasting settings, and so provided answers to some of the research questions for these specific cases. This chapter and the next draw on this material to address the more general purposes of the research of advancing understanding of LA21 as a national initiative and of the concepts which underlay it. This chapter starts by comparing the case studies with the current understandings of LA21 reviewed in Chapter Five, and suggests ways in which the findings both support and challenge those understandings. This is followed by an analysis of the extent to which these findings can be generalised to apply to other authorities' LA21s and so to suggest reasons why as a national initiative it failed to achieve its purportedly radical potential. The chapter concludes with some reflections on lessons that this analysis has for central government's policy of using the community planning process to integrate sustainable development and local government democratisation. The conceptual relationships and tensions between public involvement and sustainable development are considered in Chapter Ten.

9.2 Explaining the case study findings

9.2.1 The case studies and current understanding of LA21

The literature reviewed in Chapter Five presented an exposition of LA21 as it was originally framed and a number of different analyses of what happened to the initiative in practice. The former was conceptually very straightforward. LA21 was to develop the programme outlined in Agenda 21 through a rational and participatory planning process in which local government and local citizens would come together to define common goals and devise mutually acceptable policies for achieving these. Recognising that executing such policies could not be solely the responsibility of local government, this process was to be supported by other forms of public involvement across the policy-action spectrum, including personal behaviour change and collective action which would be stimulated and supported by

state-organised education and awareness raising programmes. Any serious engagement with this agenda implied changes to existing purposes and methods of policy making, on a continuum which theoretically extended to substantial, 'radical', shifts towards integrating environmental and social aims into all policies and towards participatory forms of local democracy.

It is generally recognised that this vision has not been realised: local government planning as a whole is not dominated by overarching sustainable development plans drawn up through markedly participatory practices! The actual outcomes of LA21 initiatives have been extremely varied, but have certainly included substantial numbers of people being engaged in public involvement across the entire range from action to having a say in local sustainability policy making. Despite the difficulties of generalising across this variation, commentators have claimed that:

- the initiative as a whole fell into two stages, of initial growth followed by a plateau in activity, with a possible third phase marked by authorities either maintaining isolated LA21s or breaking them up and subsuming their components into other processes;
- there was an overall shift from an environmental to a more holistic emphasis;
- there was an overall shift from substantive environmental concerns towards a focus on public involvement in governance and some success in bringing together state and public actors; and
- there was a range of outcomes from marginalisation of LA21 to complete integration of its methods and substantive goals into local authorities' policy making.

As to why this variation occurred and few if any authorities underwent radical change as a result of LA21, the following mutually incompatible arguments emerge from the literature:

- LA21 was worthwhile and conceptually coherent but hampered in practice by lack of political support and resources, in part due to opposition to its emphasis on participatory governance by upholders of the traditional representative and technocratic system;
- LA21 rested on flawed assumptions about public involvement - its inability to engage the general public or many community activists was due to widespread distrust of the state heightened by instances of apparent manipulation of public

involvement in LA21, and/or fundamental differences between state and community actors over its purpose resulting from different interpretations of the key concepts of 'sustainable development', 'community' and 'participation' and/or the perceived balance of costs and benefits of involvement;

- no democratic process could have successfully challenged the dominance of economic interests in policy making.

While the findings from the present case studies cannot prove or disprove any of these generalisations about LA21, they can, however, support or challenge their general applicability and plausibility. The following paragraphs therefore examine the findings' relationships with each of the above characterisations and explanations.

Both cases clearly support the overall analysis that LA21 failed to achieve a 'revolutionary transformation' to more participatory local governance. Further, neither succeeded in bringing about the other transformations implied by Agenda 21 of reorienting their local authorities towards sustainable development or the corollary of integrating the policy making processes to bring together previously separate economic, social and environmental fields.

However, in both cases the situation appears to be rather more complex than simple 'failure'. St Edmundsbury made some progress on all of the above fronts through its LA21 and other parallel initiatives. Intriguingly these were stalled by contingent political events, raising the possibility that substantial progress towards more participatory governance could have been made over time. Although the County Durham LA21 was clearly not aimed directly at transforming governance it was widely recognised as exemplary, receiving plaudits for its success and in particular its engagement of the public (Co. Durham LA21 Partnership, 2001). This suggests that although the normative importance attached by many commentators to the policy and democratic aspects of LA21 leads them to use these as the criteria of 'success', such analyses do not necessarily reflect the values of practitioners nor allow an appreciation of progress made towards sustainability through supporting public action. Further, although in both cases the LA21 itself failed to achieve radical change, their indirect influences may have been more constructive. Certainly St Edmundsbury's Community Plan was only possible because of the 'failed' LA21, and in County Durham the long term effects of the LA21's partnership approach and demonstration projects are incalculable.

Across the two authorities it is only the policy-oriented aspects that fit the characterisation of a staged development of the initiative. Thus St Edmundsbury's LA21 had a 'two stage' history, passing very rapidly through a period of establishing structures to advance the initiative and enthusiastic promotion into a phase in which the purpose of the initiative was called into question and progress slowed almost to a halt. It then entered a third stage in which its components were separated and partially incorporated into the authority's modernisation process – and so perhaps it finally fell into Church and Young's (2000) fourth (and highest?) category of authorities in which LA21 principles are adopted throughout and an initiative loses its separate identity. In contrast the external, public action initiatives developed along trajectories established at the outset - County Durham's first, expansionary stage never ended, while St Edmundsbury's was terminated for contingent, institutional reasons.

There is some evidence that the cases followed the pattern of developing a more holistic interpretation of sustainable development over time. This was certainly so within the LA21 in County Durham, where individuals' changing understanding, the impact of external guidance and – to a limited extent – public involvement all contributed to a broadening of activities to encompass social and economic projects. The St Edmundsbury initiative was more holistic from the outset, though its perceived broadening was an important element in its conflict with the corporate centre. Outside the LA21s themselves there were parallel changes in the understanding of sustainable development elsewhere within the authorities. These had the contrasting results of reducing hostility towards the initiative in Durham and decreasing corporate support in St Edmundsbury.

However, in neither authority was there a parallel development of ideas about public involvement. The rationales and approaches taken to public involvement stayed very different and very static throughout in both, suggesting strongly that ideas about the substantive aims of sustainable development and the role of the people in achieving it are not as closely linked as many commentators have suggested. (This issue is explored further in Section 10.2.2.)

Turning now to the explanations proposed in the literature, the two cases differ in the extent to which they support the idea that an LGMB-style initiative was seen as worthwhile but foundered due to lack of support. This was partially true in St Edmundsbury, where the initiators explicitly attempted to follow the LGMB guidance but were not strongly supported by the rest of the authority. It would

appear, however, that lack of support was not fundamental to the LA21's development and demise – more explicit opposition was more significant. It is probably true that with more support, things would have turned out differently, but that would have implied such a different policy context that this is not a helpful explanation. The lack of support is better seen as a symptom and mechanism of opposition rather than as a significant causal factor. In County Durham the authority's support was never sought for such an approach, since it was rejected by the initiative's proponents in favour of one drawing on a very different interpretation of the purpose and appropriate nature of a LA21. Rather surprisingly explicit opposition to the initiative on democratic grounds was largely absent from both policy making processes. After the very early suppression of the idea of a forum in County Durham the LA21 did not pose any challenges to the representative system – it simply was not that kind of initiative – while in St Edmundsbury the participatory aspects of LA21 were part of its attraction for the ruling party group and many officers.

The arguments that suggest that LA21 was based on flawed assumptions about the public's willingness to engage appear to have some validity. In both authorities the LA21 teams took the Agenda 21 injunction to involve the public very seriously, yet both initiatives had problems with engaging them in what the officers considered to be sufficient numbers and were marked by a continual tension between what they felt that they ought to be doing in terms of public involvement and their actual practice. However, the situation was again more complex than suggested by the critiques of Macnaghten *et al.* (1995). Rather than adopting a somewhat naïve view of a homogeneous 'public' those involved in the initiative recognised that different approaches were appropriate for different groups of people, depending on the extent to which they were already sympathetic to the idea of sustainable development and likely to engage with local authority initiatives. This led to a selective approach coupled with the uncomfortable recognition that many people were still not engaged and so to the continual urge to reach out to involve more. Both cases were underlain by an assumption that ultimately sufficient numbers *could* be brought into the process, and so perhaps were vulnerable to the Macnaghten and rational choice critiques (Rydin and Pennington, 2000), but at least some of the proponents saw the initiatives as having a developmental function which could in principle overcome the problems of lack of trust and perceived irrelevance.

Church and Young's reference to manipulation of public involvement (2000: 10) identifies a very important issue. However, their suggestion that such manipulation results in conflict and low levels of public involvement was not borne out in the cases studied. The reverse was true in that the process of managing and sustaining a consensual process through excluding difficult issues and avoiding policy engagement was an essential part of maintaining the stability and productivity of the initiative. The wider issue of how and why public involvement is controlled by policy makers is discussed in the following chapter as an important element of the relationship between public involvement and sustainable development, and of public involvement in local government policy making more generally.

The most general arguments about the infeasibility of LA21 on the grounds of its incompatibility with dominant economic and political structures were largely untested by the case studies. In County Durham the early opposition by senior officers defending the authority's economic development policies was one factor in the shaping of the initiative, which thereafter posed little or no challenge to the established order. This could be seen as an example of Stoker's thesis that dominant interests do not have to act directly in order to achieve their ends (1991). In this case the state acted briefly on their behalf and thereafter the situation was maintained by the established way of doing things and actors' perceptions of what was possible. In St Edmundsbury this issue simply did not arise - the LA21 did not challenge producer interests. Through the Green Business Forum it assisted private enterprises to respond profitably to environmental issues, and the authority's commitment to sustainability remained untested by conflicts between environmental protection and economic development.

Overall the two case studies support the general perception that LA21 did not follow the course anticipated by Agenda 21, but only partially fit the characterisations and explanations of what did happen in practice which are present in the literature. Furthermore, these - as expected - do not provide analyses which capture the key issues uncovered in the case studies. Their arguments are largely 'external' in the sense that they focus on the relationship between the state and the public, or treat local authorities as rather static contexts within which LA21 had to act and with which it had to contend. However, the case studies show that there are more complex 'internal' reasons for the observed outcomes, which can provide a more coherent causal analysis, linking policy outcomes to the interaction of policy drivers and dynamic and complex policy environments.

9.2.2 New ideas from the case studies

This very different kind of explanation derives from research which looked specifically at the policy making processes which 'lie behind' any public involvement process. Although this is an area not well covered in published research – perhaps surprisingly analyses of LA21 have not previously approached it as 'a local authority policy initiative' - the known characteristics of local authorities and policy making in general and the essentially complex nature of the key concepts involved suggested that these factors were likely to be important in explaining outcomes. This section therefore sets out an explanatory analysis of the processes in the case studies as a preliminary to generalising these results to the LA21 initiative as a whole. It looks in turn at the role of ideas as policy drivers, the impact of the contexts for the policy making processes and the nature of the interactions that made up the processes.

Actors' goals as policy drivers

The starting point is that ideas matter – the beliefs and goals of the principal policy actors had a significant impact on the development of the policy making process and on its outcomes. However, it is also apparent that despite what was anticipated by Agenda 21, and appears to be assumed by most commentators, policy actors subscribed to a number of different interpretations of the key concepts and each considered their own to be legitimate. The literature review supports the possibility of this, showing that the notions of sustainable development and public involvement are ambiguous, raising the possibility of contestation over the 'correct' interpretations to be used as guides for policy making.

The case studies showed that actors interpreted the substantive goals of sustainable development in the following ways:

- the solving of a broad range of environmental problems;
- the prioritisation of solving global environmental problems, with economic and social progress instrumentally important to achieve that aim;
- the mutually supportive combining of environmental amelioration and protection with economic growth (i.e. 'ecological modernisation');
- the pursuit of holistic 'win-win-win' development and trade-offs between economic, social and environmental goals where these are mutually antagonistic;

- the pursuit of combined social and economic goals in the name of ‘social sustainability’; and
- the strategic use of environmental considerations to defend policies for social justice.

None of these can be identified as a dominant interpretation. Not only were the two cases very different, with policy makers in County Durham tending towards more environmental interpretations and most of those in St Edmundsbury adopting a more holistic approach, but most of these positions were subscribed to by some actors within each authority.

Similarly what were seen as appropriate roles for the public and the state in achieving sustainable development ranged across the entire spectrum identified in Chapter Four. There were very different emphases between the cases, however, with actors *in general* adopting positions in County Durham corresponding to the ‘conservative’ position identified in the Conclusion to Chapter Four and in St Edmundsbury to the ‘normative participation’ position. As with the substantive content of sustainable development there were, however, significant differences within each initiative. More uniform was the realist view of the environmental problems that sustainable development was intended to address. This underlay most actors’ positions, together with a concomitant belief that experts should – or had already – defined both problems and appropriate solutions. For some actors this was supported by an explicitly elitist view of the general public: that they were in general apathetic and only willing to become involved in issues of immediate importance to them, and conversely that those who did get involved were either useful experts with an interest in helping the progress of achieving sustainable development or awkward people in pursuit of a single issue of personal interest. Others, however, held a more egalitarian view with an associated belief in the desirability of public involvement, which in some cases was in uneasy tension with their realist environmental position. Some resolved this by a conceptual sleight of hand, separating out the concept of ‘sustainable development’, roughly meaning environmentally sensitive improvement in quality of life, from a more objectively defined ‘environmental sustainability’. Knowledge of the latter would ideally inform decisions about the former.

Despite the range in views on public involvement, and in particular on the extent to which the public should have a say in policy making, there was nevertheless a dominant interpretation embodied in the outcomes which prioritised action, limited public involvement in local authority policy making to consultation, but gave

substantial autonomy to individuals and groups to define finite problems or initiatives and manage these with local authority support. These were of strictly limited extent in terms of spatial scale or issue scope or both, while the decisions on what to support lay with an expert group and ultimately with the elected council members. They thus represented the devolution of control on a tightly constrained basis, a point that will be returned to in the following chapter (Sections 10.2.3 and 10.3.3).

The literature review indicated that within local authority policy making processes there were grounds for expecting different views to be present over the appropriate nature of public involvement at a more general level, independently of the issue of sustainable development. This was borne out in practice, but in ways that were not expected. As noted above, explicit opposition to public involvement in policy making through LA21 on the grounds of the primacy of the representative democratic system did not arise, even in the traditional setting of Durham County Council. Instead, a general attitude to involvement was an important aspect of the culture within each authority, forming part of the framework for acceptable and expected behaviour patterns into which the LA21 fitted. As with the other conceptual elements of the process this does not mean that actors' views were uniform, but rather that there was a clearly dominant set of values present which formed an implicit yet ever-present component of the policy making process.

Parallels between the concepts and structures reviewed in Chapters Two to Five suggested that actors' beliefs and values in these different fields might be correlated with each other. Much of the literature identifies a 'strong' sustainable development position which associates holistic policy making with high levels of public involvement, and one would thus expect that such positions would be found alongside more general support for participatory democracy. Further, such values might be expected to be sympathetically received within an authority which had embraced the 'community enabling' reform agenda. The converse would also be true – that environmental interpretations of sustainable development would be mutually supported by less participatory approaches to policy making, and so more likely to be found within traditional authorities or those taking a more 'market enabling' approach to reform. In practice such straightforward associations were not found. In particular holistic interpretations of sustainable development were associated with a wide range of views on public involvement in sustainable development and in policy making more generally, and the most committed

environmentalists interviewed were elitist and opposed to widespread public involvement. The authority types were quite well correlated with approaches to sustainable development as a principle, though because of the impact of institutional factors they were not good predictors of the success of LA21.

This last point was an important finding. While it was apparent that the various interpretations of substantive issues within the LA21 were important in shaping policy processes and outcomes, other goals of policy actors were of equal or greater importance. Proponents and supporters of the LA21s made strategic decisions in order to protect and advance the initiatives themselves as separate entities, while conversely the initiatives were also used to advance other, independent institutional goals. Opposition to the introduction and expansion of LA21 arose as officers acted to defend pre-existing policies and initiatives from interference, even where they were philosophically sympathetic to the values of sustainable development and increasing public involvement. Thus institutional and substantive goals were often inseparable, with the promotion of particular policy aims being closely associated with the defence of individual and departmental autonomy. There were also less frequent cases of naked institutional rivalry, in which issues such as staffing levels dictated action detrimental to the LA21.

Taken together these observations suggest strongly that there is no *a priori* reason to assume that the Agenda 21 or LGMB goals will be dominant in the LA21 policy making process – nor even that substantive goals will take priority over institutional issues in determining policy outcomes. A corollary of this is that the form of a policy vehicle can be as important a factor in its success as the acceptability or otherwise of its content.

Further, the existence of such a range of potential goals, and so the probability that actors will hold unique combinations of substantive and institutional goals, means that individual people matter to the policy making process. While recognising the force of March and Olsen's comment that 'because they are dedicated to the possibility of wilful action, participants shape interpretations of history to emphasise the role of intention' (1989: 40) in both case studies individuals with strongly held values were widely credited with having had a very substantial impact on the course of events. In particular each authority possessed a senior, philosophically inclined and strategically adept officer for whom LA21 was a policy vehicle which could be used to further long-term goals of radical change. That the outcomes did not exactly match these goals does not mean that they were unsuccessful, but rather reflects

necessary pragmatic adjustments made without sacrificing the more distant objectives.

One significant aspect of this in the case study authorities was that there was only one major policy actor – St Edmundsbury's Assistant Chief Executive – who was primarily and explicitly concerned with democratising local government. Although many others were very committed to high levels of public involvement this was linked to achieving sustainable development, either through affecting authority policies or, more usually, through local community based projects. Thus in both authorities LA21 was being driven by people who did not subscribe to one of Agenda 21's and the LGMB's principal process goals.

As in the case study chapters, the preceding discussion has inevitably introduced elements of the nature and impact of the local authorities' cultures, since this aspect of the context for the policy making process is to some extent constituted by the belief systems of policy actors, and consequently is not clearly demarcated from the process under consideration. The following section continues this discussion by examining this and more unambiguously contextual elements of the policy making processes.

The influence of context

It was apparent that the context in which the actors' ideas interact with each other played a crucial role in influencing the outcomes of the policy making process. This rather vague concept of 'context' is used here to cover a wide range of different kinds of structures – the formal structures of government, the informal structures and more diffuse generally accepted 'rules of behaviour' which constitute a local culture, and the more concrete policy agendas and ideas in circulation within the authority and beyond which influence the specific policy making process under consideration.

Firstly the formal structures affected the distribution of resources which actors could bring to bear in policy making interactions. Of these resources the power associated with position in the authority was perhaps the most important, with senior officers and members able to impose their decisions by virtue of their position and consequent legitimate authority, and departments able to resist control by the LA21 through their formal independence in the management structure. The situation was more complex where external, non-authority partners were involved, who brought different kinds of resources to the process. While authority staff maintained considerable control as a result of being part of the parent institution, with the

theoretical power to terminate the entire initiative, and through the time and information that they contributed, other partners' influence appeared proportionate to their financial contribution. This gave large organisations and the private sector considerably more weight in decision making than small community groups and non-affiliated members of the public.

Formal institutional structures allied with informal working practices were also important in controlling the occurrence and nature of interactions in the process, with contrasting impacts on the outcomes in the two cases. The limited intra-authority communication in County Durham allowed the LA21 to establish its own structures, so enabling progress to be made through facilitating interaction between partners and isolating the initiative from external interference. In St Edmundsbury the structures promoted interdepartmental working and so facilitated both the loss of control of the LA21 by its initiators and – as in Durham – very productive external work, bringing together the resources of many different actors and departments. In both authorities the lack of structures to link the LA21 to the authority as a whole precluded significant influence on general policy making by the public.

Far harder to pin down in their working, but with clearly visible impacts, were the shared aspects of actors' belief systems which determined what were considered to be expected working practices and acceptable substantive policy agendas. These cultural aspects act as diffuse controls over resource distribution and the nature of interactions, and tend to be inertial in their effects (March and Olsen, 1989). They were perhaps most clearly visible in the way that the initiatives were established and in the prevailing attitudes to sustainable development and public involvement. The creation of LA21 programmes as departmental initiatives in both authorities appeared to have been strongly influenced by customary modes of approaching new policy areas, since this 'obvious' structure was not necessarily the most instrumentally appropriate for delivering a strategic approach to sustainable development – a lesson learned through painful experience in St Edmundsbury.

The authorities were each distinguished by their dominant ethos, which was reflected in the views of many of the principal policy actors (and was described in that context above) but was also more general throughout the authorities. The origins of such different ethoses are unclear, but would seem to stem from the complex history of each authority, including their politics. While to some extent they conform to the generalisations about party political attitudes to public involvement noted in Chapter Five (Leach and Wingfield, 1999) there is clearly

more to the situation, as evidenced by the stamp that individual ruling party leaders could put on the authority's approach and by the way that the dominant culture supporting public involvement amongst the officers in St Edmundsbury was able to develop and persist despite political change. Individuals clearly had a role to play in developing and maintaining this culture, but their selection or self-selection was reciprocally related to the existing culture – while the environment favourable to public involvement in St Edmundsbury was partly the Assistant Chief Executive's creation he was recruited by others to do that job.

At a very general level the inertial effect of established local cultures is likely to be manifested in a resistance to change *per se*, and this was perhaps another element alongside the complex mix of defending institutional and substantive goals which explains officers' resistance to the policy aspects of the LA21s. This was exacerbated by the contrast between LA21 and more traditional local authority ways of working, which was reinforced by the attitudes of some of the individual LA21 team members. Several consciously distinguished themselves from the dominant culture – reflecting, for instance, backgrounds as environmental campaigners – and were seen by themselves and others as 'campaigners within their own organisations'. This counter-cultural aspect of the initiatives had a predictably varied impact, being productive in reaching out beyond the traditional confines of the authorities' contacts with 'the public' but also arousing hostility within.

The mechanisms by which the broader aspects of the context beyond the authority had an impact are even harder to determine, though they were apparently significant. In both authorities LA21 was part of broader responses to currents in society which were paying greater attention to environmental and sustainability issues, and – to a lesser extent in County Durham – requiring greater public involvement in governance. More tangible was the impact of central government policies and national local authority guidance, both directly in driving policies and more diffusely in influencing the local context in which the LA21s developed through affecting the ideas which were in good currency amongst senior policy makers and others. In particular the increasing emphasis on sustainable development in central government policy documents, especially after the 1997 general election, was frequently cited as important in changing attitudes in both authorities.

This last point highlights an important aspect of these contextual factors. None of them was static, and all but the broadest social and policy environment were

influenced by the LA21 initiatives themselves through the complex, reciprocal interactions which were both driven by and affected actors' belief systems.

Interactions in the policy making process

Given the multiplicity of policy goals it is clear that the process of reaching outcomes was more like the characterisation provided by Barrett and Hill (1984) than the rational, linear process of text books and myth, and involved interactions between the actors through which they tried to advance their goals. As expected on the basis of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two these interactions were of many kinds. Of particular note was the relative unimportance of rational debate and collective learning except within very tightly constrained limits, despite their prioritisation in recent literature. They were prevalent within the LA21 teams and other small groups of policy makers with already broadly shared value systems, where debate was typically over tactical decisions on how to advance the initiative rather than matters of principle*. These limited consensual decision making processes were embedded in webs of policy interactions characterised more by conflict and compromise between different positions. Their outcomes were very largely dependent on the resources that actors could bring to bear, particularly in terms of their formal institutional power. Thus disputes were settled through direct imposition of a 'solution' and through the threat of non-cooperation by departments over which the LA21 had no jurisdiction.

However, such outcomes could also be avoided in ways which lead to a distinction between two aspects of the control of policy making processes – the separate issues of who prevails in interactions and who controls the nature of those interactions. Crucially for the LA21 teams the likelihood of losing arguments could be compensated for to some extent by managing the process in order to avoid damaging interactions. This involved a combination of isolating LA21 from interaction with other policy making processes and management of the initiative to minimise the amount of interaction within it between competing goals.

Different approaches were applicable in different settings. Thus in County Durham the officers deliberately isolated their decision making from more powerful actors and policy agendas through information management, avoiding controversial issues

* Such major changes in beliefs that did occur were not directly the result of interactions *within* the processes, but arose from the combined and prolonged effects of exposure to different views from both within and outside the authorities.

and focusing on achieving 'good works' which would only draw positive publicity for the authority as a whole. This was an important factor in the stability of the process – an example of a situation where unequal power relationships result in stasis rather than conflict (c.f. Flyvbjerg, 2001). Complementary to this was their control of decision making within the LA21 itself, particularly through framing the content and aims of the entire process, detailed management of agendas and processes and, perhaps most importantly for the stability of the process, the assembly of a group of actors with common goals. These observations also suggest that policy networks do influence the policy making process as suggested by Smith (1993) and Rydin (1997), in that they affected how decisions were made and what resources could be brought to bear in the pursuit of shared goals, and also that they tended to be conservative. Furthermore these effects were mutually reinforcing, since it was the resources and consequent productivity which gave the networks their stability.

Policy structures of other kinds, such as local authority decision making procedures and formal hierarchies, could bring conflict as well as resources. This was clearly the case in St Edmundsbury, where the initiators of the LA21 lost control of the process. Not only were they relatively weak when conflict arose, but the structures were beyond their control and forced them into interactions of which the outcomes depended on the attitudes of the other actors involved and whether they wished to hamper or cooperate with the LA21. The rather brutal political conclusion of this is that engaging in interactive policy making was something to be avoided by weak players in the process – and the LA21s were institutionally weak, being both new and under-resourced.

9.2.3 Explanations of the case study findings

The principal, most general conclusion from the above discussion is that like other local authority policy making, public involvement in LA21 can usefully be seen as the result of interactions between the divergent beliefs and goals of large numbers of policy actors. This immediately raises the problem of complexity (Barrett and Hill, 1984: 221). In any given case the policy making system is complex and open, and so it is not to be expected that empirical research can either develop a complete description of it, nor that any description would enable the policy outcomes to be 'read off' given knowledge of the aims of the principal policy actors. However, some features can be identified in the two case studies which lead to a more structured understanding of these processes.

Firstly there were common substantive aspects. Across the two authorities a great range of ideas was present, reflecting widely varying interpretations of the key concepts and drawing on equally varied underlying political and ethical rationales. These differed in emphasis between the authorities and thus the 'inputs' into the policy making processes, the substantive policy goals, were different in each. Common to both, however, was the minimal presence of a radical participative sustainable development agenda and its exclusion from having any significant impact on the process. Even for the less radical actors there was a tension between the normative emphasis on high levels of public involvement and their understanding of the environmental aspects of sustainable development – a tension which tended to strengthen the case for a more conservative, realist approach and the reduction in public involvement in policy making. Furthermore, largely missing in both authorities was an explicit aim of democratising local government *through LA21*, thus reducing from the outset the likelihood that either authority would be transformed by the initiative.

Secondly the relationship between these policy goals and the outcomes was very different. It is helpful to consider the fate of three processes: the externally oriented LA21 in County Durham, the attempts in St Edmundsbury to give the public a say in local authority policy making and the external aspects of the same initiative. What emerges is that the outcomes are determined by the compatibility of policy goals and context. For the proponents the process was one of trying to find and then sustain this 'fit' – a process of 'second guessing' the likely responses of other actors, learning from experience and adapting approaches in order to find workable policy goals and strategies which would maximise the realisation of their own values. Consequently to a considerable extent the relationship of the outcomes to proponents' goals was determined by their ability to control the policy making process.

Thus, where the goals and the context were complementary and the process could be managed effectively, the initiators' goals were reflected in the outcomes, as was the case in County Durham despite the apparent hostility of the authority to many of the ideas incorporated within LA21. In contrast, the policy aspects of the St Edmundsbury LA21 were unsuccessful. Although there was an apparent fit between context and the substantive ideas embodied in the initiative, other, more institutional, goals defeated the initiative in its original form. However, once these institutional problems had been solved by the restructuring of the LA21 it appeared that the

original substantive goals – of promoting holistic and participatory sustainable development – could be met, only to be blocked once more as changes in the context made it less favourable to public involvement.

This analysis is supported by the very different fate of the external part of the St Edmundsbury initiative. This was similar in many ways to that in Durham in terms of its substantive aims, and as such did not encounter the institutional conflicts which marked the other part of the initiative. In an authority which in principle was oriented towards public involvement and took environmental issues seriously the same officers who defeated LA21's policy-control aspirations were enthusiastic participants in external work – context and goals were complementary and the LA21 was able to achieve this component of its aims.

Thus overall the case studies suggest that further reasons for the 'failure' of LA21 can be added to those found in the literature:

- at least some of those driving the initiative interpreted its purpose differently from most commentators, the LGMB and, arguably, the text of Agenda 21;
- further, within local authorities policy proposals based on these interpretations could be challenged by those whose interpretations of key concepts differed, or whose preferred policies or institutional position were challenged by the proposed LA21;
- 'success' therefore depended on a 'fit' between the LA21 and the policy and institutional context into which it was introduced.

These two studies also suggest that existing explanations of the outcomes of LA21 processes are partial and over-simplified. They challenge both the idea that LA21 as conceived by the LGMB was generally viewed as worthwhile, but was under-supported, and that local authorities made a naïve assumption that the public would willingly engage with them. The notion of 'failure' is also called into question, since the criteria of success appear to differ markedly between actors. Clearly two case studies do not disprove these explanations, but they do challenge previous generalisations. The questions now arise of whether these findings can be the basis for new generalisations or are there grounds for believing that they are unique to these authorities?

9.3 Generalising from the case studies

This section therefore aims to generalise from the case studies: to suggest the extent to which the findings about these individual initiatives might be applicable elsewhere and so to open the possibility of making tentative predictions about policy process outcomes and stating generalisations about causal processes across the entire LA21 initiative. The final section extends these further to suggest some implications for community planning as the statutory central government initiative which is superseding LA21 in integrating public involvement and sustainable development in local government policy making.

9.3.1 The general nature of LA21 processes

Looking first at the component elements of LA21 public involvement policy making processes, the case studies amply bear out the initial hunch that prompted and structured the research – that the unpredictable and varied outcomes of LA21 were to be explained at least in part by the multiple possible meanings of all the key concepts involved and the development of policy in the complex environments of local authorities. It seems very plausible that this will be true for all LA21 initiatives that were based in English local authorities. Stewart (2000) emphasises that authorities have many features in common, and thus the assumption of common kinds of processes is likely to hold good, yet each is unique, so the introduction of any apparently unitary policy initiative is likely to give rise to varied outcomes. The possible presence of very different interpretations of sustainable development and of the appropriate role of the public arises from the nature of the concepts and the general history of local government, and thus is also likely to be common across all authorities – there is no reason to suppose that Durham County Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council are a unique pair of authorities in this respect.

It is therefore possible to generalise with confidence that even before LA21 public involvement strategies resulted in contact between state and public different local authorities might well have developed different approaches. Important factors in determining these would be:

- the ideas of the initiators and how these interacted with those of others in the policy process, both within the local authority and (sometimes) in external networks - whether their ideas were supported, opposed, or supported but incurred institutional opposition;

- the resources that the LA21 proponents could bring to these interactions in terms of institutional authority, political influence, material resources and so on;
- the nature of the interactions themselves: whether they were largely argumentative or dominated by hierarchical decision making, and the extent to which they were avoidable and so allowed actors autonomy and freedom from interference.

Finally the context would have been important, in particular the general acceptability within the authority of LA21 ideas and ways of working – as interpreted by the initiators – and the widely shared national policy and broader social contexts.

In itself, this very general conclusion suggests that a uniform outcome to the LA21 initiative was not to be expected, and so that the aim of Agenda 21 to implement a particular kind of sustainable development through local authorities was over-ambitious, perhaps even irrational, given the reality of local government policy making processes. Equally, however, there is nothing in the situation as described which *a priori* precludes the possibility of progress towards the goals of Agenda 21 if the various elements come together favourably. However, in neither case, nor apparently in the country as a whole, was such progress made to any substantial extent. The following paragraphs suggest elements within the ideas, interactions and contexts found in the case studies which are plausibly common to many authorities and which tended to mitigate against the transformative potential of LA21.

Firstly the range of possible interpretations of sustainable development itself was likely to recur, and thus the possibility – as in County Durham - that the various radical or reforming agendas were not even introduced into the LA21 process. As noted above, the importance of ideas in shaping the initiative – particularly given its strongly normative, even ethical, basis, and its newness and unfamiliarity to many within local authorities – meant that individuals' belief systems were particularly influential. It seems to be the case that within the initiative as a whole many of those recruited as LA21 coordinators were principally environmentalists, or at least came from a background of environmental activism, and were therefore not necessarily politically committed to public involvement other than direct participation in environmental projects. Where those involved were so committed this could take a number of forms, and it is possible that in general they were oriented more towards community development approaches and the involvement of people in local projects, rather than the institutionally far more complex and difficult process of re-orienting and restructuring local authorities. It seems likely that this was very much a

minority interest, particularly as the more radical the proposals for institutional change the more likely was serious opposition, thus making such approaches less likely to succeed and therefore less attractive as policy propositions for the relatively junior staff typically assigned to LA21.

Furthermore, there are two aspects of the more participative approaches to LA21 which are apparently incoherent. These created problems for some actors in the case studies and would appear to be general, conceptual problems. Firstly, all those in favour of high levels of public involvement found difficulties reconciling their realist appreciation of environmental problems with empowering the public. Given that proponents of LA21 in any authority are likely to be promoting environmental issues – either because of their previous background or, often, as part of their general responsibilities within their local authority – this problem is likely to be widespread. This tension weakens arguments for participative sustainable development, and is likely to lead to an acceptance of reduced levels of public involvement as a compromise to ensure an acceptable level of environmental sustainability, *as defined by the policy makers*. In practical terms this is likely to mean imposing limitations on the geographical scale and/or the substantive scope of initiatives that will be supported under the LA21s, with social and economic sustainability work reduced to marginal activities. This is not necessarily an issue over which conflict will occur: in the case studies it was a problem faced and resolved by like-minded field-level staff as part of their individual and collective practice.

This inherent problem was made more acute by the LGMB's guidance (LGMB, 1994b), which perpetuated the ambiguity present in Agenda 21 over the role of the public (see Section 4.4.2). An authority following the LGMB's 'steps' and adopting the 'normative public involvement' approach would be engaged internally in policy making for sustainability and externally in raising awareness of the need for change amongst the public. In this situation, exemplified by St Edmundsbury, it is not clear where a parallel programme of policy-oriented consultation or higher levels of public involvement could fit into the processes of the authority as a whole – still less what the role of such a programme would be if the steps were followed sequentially, starting with internal policy matters.

Thus at this level of the 'inputs' into the policy making process – the ideas and beliefs held by the principal actors – it is clear that the Agenda 21 aims were not only just one of the possible starting points for a LA21, but one that was not necessarily prevalent amongst practitioners and is weakened by internal

inconsistencies. Conversely, however, a more conservative position, with a more complete reliance on a realist conception of environmental problems, could provide the basis for a more coherent programme of internal policy making and public involvement which was potentially very extensive in terms of numbers involved and range of activities they were involved in, but limited in its engagement with policy making.

Adopting such a conservative approach was assisted by the distinction made in the guidance between the general public and organised groups, to be engaged respectively through awareness raising, education and ill-defined 'consultation and involvement' on the one hand and through partnership arrangements on the other. This was reinforced by the emphasis in Agenda 21 on engaging with all groups in society and gave local authorities great latitude to engage with different people in different ways. In particular the 'business community' and environmental activists appear to have often been disaggregated from the 'general public' (Scott, 1999; Sharp, 1999), and a core element of the 'conservative' approach to LA21 was this segmentation of the public and engagement of an expert elite on different terms from the mass of lay people. Such an approach allowed progress to be made on all the enjoined steps, but rather than giving all groups 'broad participation in decision-making' different kinds of people and groups could be given more or less influence over policy over different scales and issues. This allowed visible and productive public involvement alongside the protection of the local authority's core policy making from significant public influence.

Although many practitioners were aware of a normative pressure to involve more people, in practice there appeared to be sufficient that could be done on projects which were accepted by both state and some citizens as promoting environmental sustainability and/or improved quality of life to absorb the resources available. In consequence addressing and understanding the problem of the non-engagement of other citizens was unnecessary. This approach is thus coherent at a pragmatic level, even if it does suffer from the internal conceptual problems arising from grasping a single horn of Chapter Four's dilemma and ignoring the possibility that sustainability and quality of life are essentially subjective and public involvement in policy making is therefore essential. Section 10.2.3 below returns to the question of whether a resolution at a conceptual level is possible, or whether the tensions are insuperable – the point here is that in practice the realist horn is less troubling than the subjectivist one.

Turning now to the interactions of the policy making process itself, the complexity suggested by the policy and local government literature and found in the case studies seems likely to be a general phenomenon – there is nothing special about the cases which suggests that other initiatives would proceed smoothly from values to action through a simple rational or purely argumentative process. The cases studied were very different from each other, which suggests that every case would be unique. However, they are also perhaps extreme examples of two kinds of process, about which general lessons can be drawn. County Durham gives empirical support to the logical argument that if interaction was minimised then so also would be the ability of other policy makers to interfere directly with the LA21 – and the influence of the LA21 on other policy making. Such processes would therefore support the attainment of the initiators' aims but not of holistic public influence on policy making. While this reinforces the widely held perception that disconnection of LA21s from mainstream processes was a problem it also suggests that it was potentially a key to success, albeit of a certain kind.

Further, this lack of interaction was to some extent manageable, using different techniques in relation to local authority hierarchies and broader policy networks. In engagement with the former the aim was protection from challenge, through the restriction of information flows and preventing overtly conflictive issues from becoming public. In relation to the latter the aim was the management of inputs – where the network included members of the public this was essentially a case of managing a public involvement process to encourage consensual and creative partnership working and control dissent. Because of the inherent normative emphasis on openness in a purportedly democratic process, such management would tend to take place outside the actual interactions with the public, through the processes of defining the initiatives' aims and objectives, managing the process to adhere to these and excluding dissonant views and dissident individuals.

Such management was only partially under actors' control, being constrained by the formal and informal structures which determine the form of policy making interactions. Again this seems plausibly general in its application: that where structures encouraged interaction, control by a few actors would be more difficult and a wider range of factors would come into play to determine the outcomes of interactions. Of particular importance would be the specific views held by policy actors and their power in relation to each other and the proponents of LA21, though in each case these would combine in contingent and almost infinitely variable ways.

While it might be expected that the LA21 would be successful where the proponents are relatively senior and their views are supported elsewhere in the authority, the experience of St Edmundsbury shows that this is not necessarily the case. An institutional 'fit' is also needed, and this case also suggests that this is easier to achieve over public involvement in action rather than in policy making, since the latter involves changes in the control of policies while the former is merely directed towards popular collective achievement. However, if such a fit with other actors' institutional needs is found, then progress can also be made on public involvement in policy making.

Some general conclusions about the impact of the local context have already been drawn above, since one important aspect of this context is the structures and types of interactions which are dominant in an authority and other policy making networks. Sustaining and influencing these is the broader culture which constrains what is acceptable, and so what kinds of interactions and initiatives might be attempted – limiting possibilities within the policy making process without necessarily involving interactions between actors. The cases show very different examples of this, again emphasising the pervasiveness but unpredictable nature of the interactions of context with policy drivers. As with the more overt interactions between actors, success for the initiators' was clearly related to the complementarity between their goals and the context in which they worked. It should be noted, however, that this context need not be supportive – in County Durham success was achieved through a design which met the needs of a hostile context.

The near absence of radical views on public involvement amongst the officers involved can also plausibly be attributed to the culture dominating virtually all local authorities, which is very strongly based on the principle of representative democracy. For most local authority officers a change in this is perhaps inconceivable, leading to all but a small minority limiting their ambitions (if any) to reforms which involve supplementing and supporting the basic representative system with public consultation and limited amounts of power sharing and devolution. Given this, outside a few notably radical authorities – particularly those dominated by the urban Left and mavericks such as Tower Hamlets – it would seem unlikely that a relatively minor initiative like LA21 could effect major political and policy changes, and conversely probable that where individual actors espoused radical views these would be suppressed.

To some extent the external context for policy making is shared by all authorities, though again its impact varies depending on contingent relationships with internal and historical factors. In particular, central government and national local authority association guidance applies uniformly, yet clearly in the case studies, and so plausibly elsewhere, it had a range of impacts, some of which were common to both while others differed widely. Thus where, for instance, a strong policy direction already exists or the local authority's culture is one of embracing new ideas the extent of influence of the same external policy changes can be expected to be very different.

However, some factors can be expected to have generally the same impact. One example which arose in both case studies was the effect of the two tier authority structure. From the literature review it appeared that effective sustainability planning would require coordination between tiers, but that there were both permanent institutional factors and specific historical reasons relating to the Local Government Review which might work against such coordination. In practice both case studies bore this out – despite their great differences, hostility between senior officers and members at district and county level arising from the Review was common to both and inhibited any formal joint working on sustainability planning through LA21. This is likely to have been general in two tiered areas, at least where the Review was acrimonious. In contrast the relationship between the case study authorities and the regional Government Offices was less likely to be the norm: both were regionally acknowledged leaders, and in their regions, and probably others, the regional sustainable development unit focused their attention on stimulating less active authorities.

Similarly the changes in the general social environment for local authority policy making have been broadly the same across the country, though again their impact differed between the cases and is likely to have done so across LA21s in general. Local variations also exist which are part of, and will shape, the internal culture – in, for example, attitudes to public involvement. No generalisations are possible, beyond acknowledging that such broad social currents do have an impact, and are largely – though not completely – beyond local government influence. Equally little can be said of the relationship between macro-economic structures and LA21 on the basis of these cases. This is tantalising. The arguments that the overriding force of economic interests may preclude either any progress towards sustainable development, or at least will reduce the allowable extent of public involvement in

policy making, were not borne out directly – yet the outcomes are exactly what such arguments predict. The unsatisfactory conclusion has to be that research of this kind may not effectively generate the kind of information which would support or refute such arguments.

9.3.2 Was LA21 doomed to fail?

The preceding section suggests that many of the mechanisms and contextual factors which were observable in the case studies may have been general characteristics of LA21 processes. However, while some may have been more commonly found than others, there appear to be good grounds for concluding that outcomes were the result of a largely contingent coming together of the factors and so cannot be ‘read off’ simply from any of policy ‘inputs’, the nature of the policy making process or contextual factors alone. Yet the cases are also consistent with the national pattern that the range of outcomes did not include the production of plans for local sustainable development through widespread consultation which represented a consensus view of all citizens - in other words, the aims of Agenda 21 were not met. This section sets out a tentative suggestion as to why this was the case.

In order for the specific aims of Agenda 21 to have a chance of being realised in the outcomes a combination of favourable factors have to come together. The initiators of the LA21 must share these aims, the interactions which are possible within and outside the local authority must allow them to have the appropriate influence and control over the process, and the process must take place in a context in which the implications and methods of the LA21 are acceptable. Each of these is a necessary condition in its own right, as is their conjunction, yet the preceding sections have shown that they are all relatively unlikely – in consequence the Agenda 21 aims are unlikely to be met. Conversely there are other aims and structures which are both more likely and are also compatible with each other: one salient example being the combination of a realist approach to environmental problems, an elitist view of human nature and a traditional local authority, which together could be conducive to a successful LA21, but not one that met the Agenda 21 aims. Many other possible combinations exist – hence the immense variation in LA21s seen across the country.

Further, promoting the aims apparently embodied in Agenda 21 would face their internal incoherence and the resulting lack of clarity about how such aims should be advanced in practice, and in particular the recurring problem of the tension between the ultimately realist basis for ‘the green case’ and a normative participatory agenda.

There are therefore considerable pressures towards interpretations of sustainable development and public involvement of which the implementation is less problematic, more familiar and likely to be more productive.

Thus there is a question as to whether the LA21 initiative as a whole was in some way ill-founded. The following chapter addresses the more conceptual aspects of this issue and the possible theoretical incoherence of the idea of participatory sustainable development. The remaining paragraphs of this chapter focus on the policy level and the question *if sustainable development is assumed to be a feasible policy goal, was LA21 an appropriate policy vehicle?* and consider the implications of this for the statutory introduction of sustainability planning as part of the current modernisation of local government.

The implication of this research is that the LA21 initiative was not an appropriate policy vehicle for achieving the stated aims of Agenda 21. In order to succeed it needed a combination of factors which were not generally present in UK local authorities. This problem was reinforced by the introduction of LA21 as 'an initiative'. This had the institutional consequences that it was but one initiative among (too) many and was usually the responsibility of a limited number of departments and individuals to drive it forward, and so susceptible to the effects of their institutional positions and idiosyncratic understandings. The local LA21's interpretation of sustainable development was consequently in competition with other policies and programmes, rather than sustainable development being established as the guiding principle for all of an authority's activities.

A compounding problem was the presentation in guidance of a very varied set of procedures which would combine in LA21, embodying a correspondingly wide range of positions on sustainable development and public involvement. The resulting incoherence of the whole prompted practitioners to choose amongst the approaches, with a tendency to select the more familiar and apparently feasible, and thus not those which would challenge the fundamental workings of their authority in the way perhaps envisaged by the LGMB.

This is not to deny the possibility of pragmatic approaches which might reconcile at least some of these tensions. The comprehensive solution proposed by Tam (1993, 1998) and perhaps envisaged by Jacobs as 'environmental democracy' (1991, 1995) involves a long term development of public involvement in policy making through building processes enabling dialogue between local authority and citizens, within the constraint of sustainable development as a principle with which all policy making

must conform. While the existence of such a principle would be non-negotiable, its operational definition would itself be a matter for dialogue between experts and the public. The aim of such a process is a transformation not just of local democracy, but of society as whole to conform to a more communitarian ethic. This is probably a coherent vision of a means to implement sustainable development, though clearly immensely difficult to achieve in practice, and it is clearly not to be achieved through a single, departmentally-based initiative.

LA21 was thus the wrong policy vehicle for the kind of change required – the changes in both substantive policy goals and policy making processes were so great that a long term and wide-ranging approach was essential. This was what was envisaged in Agenda 21 but was not how LA21 was introduced in practice to English local authorities. Given this, some of the criticism of the County Durham initiative implicit in the above is misplaced. Starting from LA21 as presented to local authorities, the authority not only adopted a legitimate approach which was appropriate to the local context, but was perhaps the most productive approach possible within the constraint of LA21 as an independent initiative. If such a process was an inappropriate vehicle for engaging with the population as a whole to draw together a local sustainable development plan, then using it to engage the public in action for sustainability was rational and productive, particularly as part of a long term strategy for increasing the acceptability of sustainable development as an overriding policy objective. The principal failure in County Durham's LA21 was thus perhaps its inability to influence the mainstream policy making of the authority, rather than its deliberate non-involvement of the general public in such an attempt.

9.3.3 Implications for sustainable development through local government modernisation

The implication of this argument is that a more appropriate way to address sustainable development in a local authority is through introducing it as an overarching principle, implemented through a coherent, unitary planning process and with compatible structures developed to enable public involvement. Although trying to introduce such a system from LA21's Portacabin would be unlikely to succeed, a process based in a local authority's corporate centre with statutory weight is plausibly a better approach. It is certainly possible to interpret central government's proposals for community strategies in exactly this way. The Local Government Act (2000), its accompanying guidance (DETR, 2001; LGA, 2000) and some subsequent policy documents (DTLR, 2001a) propose that the strategies

should be unifying documents situated 'above' all other strategic planning documents, and should not only contribute to increasing local economic, social and environmental well-being but also to national sustainable development policies and targets. Furthermore they should be drawn up through extensive consultation and directed by a 'local strategic partnership' including community representatives. These proposals closely replicate the early prescriptions for LA21, but with the essential difference that community planning is a statutory duty and the strategies are a fundamental component of a major central government programme.

Interpreted in this way, the new strategies would appear to overcome many of the problems described above, in particular through defining sustainable development in a holistic and integrated fashion, insisting on public involvement and changing the context within which such planning would be conducted. There are signs from the case studies that some of this change is taking place. However, it is also possible, maybe probable, that many of the factors which influenced the development of LA21 will recur, both because there are shared conceptual issues and because the strategies are to be developed through many of the same institutions and processes (Connelly and Sharp, 2000).

Within the guidance there is clearly scope for local discretion and interpretations of 'sustainable development' and the appropriate nature of public involvement in the community planning process. Even though extensive public involvement is mandatory, the possibility of management exists. While it may be less easy to limit the forms of public involvement, it is correspondingly more likely to be controlled in other ways, involving the methods demonstrated in the County Durham case study. However, limitations on public involvement may also emerge less deliberately, given the lack of knowledge over how to carry out a participatory planning process at local authority level. Although there was local learning, the LA21 initiative as a whole did not develop this knowledge - a failure which suggests that such a process is at best difficult, at worst impossible. Despite this, and the arguments of those such as Burns *et al.* (1994) that democratisation necessitates decentralisation, the community planning process shares with Agenda 21 the assumption that large scale participative policy planning is feasible. If this proves not to be the case then there will inevitably be limitations on the public's role.

The recurrence of some of the characteristics of LA21 are made more likely by the near certainty that the structures and cultures of the local authorities and other state bodies involved in community planning will not change overnight, nor will their

attachment to existing policies or involvement in interdepartmental and inter-institutional contests. This is not to say that – as with developing methods for interaction with the public – these changes cannot be made over time, but that initially at least community strategies are unlikely to embody the aims of Agenda 21.

A final point. Within the case studies and most other authorities LA21 was marginal to the policy making mainstream, and in particular to their economic development policies and their relationship with producer interests. If community strategies develop as the government proposes this situation will inevitably change, as both the wishes of the public and environmental sustainability considerations will come to bear on all of an authority's policy making. It will be at that point that the questions surrounding the economic and political feasibility of local economic and sustainability policy making and the nature of the interactions between macro-economic structures and local government processes will begin to be answered.

9.4 Conclusions

Overall the case studies contribute a number of new insights which further understanding of the LA21 initiative in England as a whole. They clearly support the general perception that LA21 'failed' in the sense that the transformative goals apparently inherent in Agenda 21 and the ambitions of many proponents of the initiative were not met. However, they imply that the previously proposed explanations for this are perhaps simplistic, and certainly only partial. The above analysis provides a complementary and very different alternative explanation in terms of the internal policy making processes of local authorities which lay behind the adoption and development of particular public involvement programmes.

In both cases these programmes – or the lack thereof - were the result of the complex intertwining of values, interactions and context through interactive and sometimes conflictive policy processes. The values of the principal actors, including those driving the initiative, embodied interpretations of sustainable development and the role of the public in achieving it which differed substantially from those implicit in Agenda 21 and differed substantially from each other within a single initiative. In addition, other goals were present in the policy making processes, directed not only by other substantive policy agendas but also, and sometimes more importantly, by institutional rationales – in particular the defence of existing programmes against interference by the new initiative.

The values of the initiative's proponents did have an influence on outcomes, but only to the extent that actions based on them could survive, or be isolated from, challenges from the substantive or institutional policy preferences of more powerful actors. The likelihood of this, the extent to which interaction was enabled or avoidable, and the power of those involved in the interactions were all influenced by the more general context of the authorities within which the processes were based, aspects of which were themselves influenced by policies and policy preferences in the wider world beyond the case study areas.

Thus in County Durham the values of the actors driving the initiative were compatible with the constraints imposed by the local authority and the LA21 was established in a way that allowed its initiators to maintain control over it through management of the process and isolating it from possible challenges, including sustaining its irrelevance to mainstream authority policy agendas. In contrast St Edmundsbury's LA21 failed to meet its initiators' aims of achieving substantial public involvement in policy making for sustainable development, despite taking place in an authority sympathetic to the substantive aims of public involvement and sustainable development. Policy making for LA21 was deeply engaged in wider policy making processes and was consequently exposed to competing and conflicting institutional agendas. Only when these were resolved was the initiative able to achieve limited success. In parallel, however, the same environment was very conducive to successful interdepartmental working to support public action.

The outcomes were thus very strongly affected by the 'fit' that could be found between the aims of the LA21 teams and the policy and institutional context into which the initiative was introduced. 'Success', in the sense of the LA21 reflecting its proponents' aims, depended on their finding such a fit and being in a position to control the policy making process in order to maintain its stability and productivity – in practice this entailed isolating it from more powerful actors' and controlling its internal workings to minimise disruptive influences.

These explanations of the processes studied appear to be potentially very general in their application. While clearly each case is unique, it seems very likely that similar kinds of processes were involved in most, if not all, LA21s across the country. This analysis thus provides an explanation for the variability in LA21 public involvement processes. Further, it also suggests that very specific and rather unlikely combinations of process elements were necessary if the spirit of Agenda 21 was to be reflected in the outcomes, and that a conservative and environmentally realist

approach was likely to be more attractive to local authority officers, even though it carries within it some conceptual problems.

This analysis also raises the issue of whether the LA21 initiative as it was developed in England, particularly by the LGMB, was an appropriate approach to the challenge of reorienting local authority policy making towards more sustainable ends and more participatory processes. The implications of the arguments put forward here are that it was not. A more appropriate policy vehicle would be wide-ranging and longer-term programmes of policy and cultural change, driven by local authorities' corporate centres and working towards incorporating sustainability and public involvement into all an authority's policies with a complementary process of developing the trust, interest and capacity of the general public. Some elements of this are arguably present in the rhetoric of the current community planning initiative, which may offer a better chance than LA21 for incorporating changing local governance and 'mainstreaming' sustainable development. However, like LA21 such a programme rests on the assumption that the basic concept of widespread public involvement in sustainable development policy making is coherent – an issue which is returned to in the following chapter.

Chapter 10 Sustainable development and public involvement: reflections on theory

10.1 Introduction

This research was premised on the idea that understanding of the outcomes of the LA21 initiative could be improved through explanations in terms of the working out of complex ideas in complex policy making environments. The empirical research bore out the initial hunch that varying interpretations of sustainable development and public involvement would interact and conflict with each other and with other substantive and institutional goals, and that the outcomes would depend on the values put in to the process, policy interactions and on the power of actors to promote their goals. The main finding of the preceding chapters was that LA21's failure to achieve a radical transformation of governance was predictable but not inevitable, since possible but relatively unlikely combinations of circumstances existed within local authorities which would have enabled the initiative to deliver the outcomes envisaged by Agenda 21. Moreover, it was suggested that at least some of the problems faced by the initiative were because it was an inappropriate policy vehicle for achieving such a transformation, and that approaches could be adopted which are more likely to succeed.

However, the literature reviewed in the early chapters and the empirical findings suggest both that there are also theoretical reasons for expecting these outcomes and that weaknesses exist in the theoretical frameworks which made them inadequate for the task of describing the positions and processes found in practice. This chapter therefore explores four specific issues: characterisations of the substantive content of sustainable development, the links between different substantive interpretations and the role of 'the public' in achieving sustainable development, the coherency of the concept of participatory sustainable development and the more general problem of analysing public involvement and its engagement with policy making processes. Having put forward proposals for more practically adequate analytical frameworks for the first two of these, the argument is made that Agenda 21's conception *is* incoherent and an alternative conceptualisation of sustainable development and the public's role is suggested. Finally a more complex and contextualised analysis of public involvement is presented, which raises important normative issues connected with democracy in the modern world which are, however, beyond the scope of this thesis.

10.2 Analyses of sustainable development

10.2.1 The substantive content of 'sustainable development'

Sustainable development was introduced in Chapter Four as a 'contested concept', with an agreed core meaning but ambiguous in the sense that its practical implications can be interpreted in a number of distinct, mutually incompatible and antagonistic ways. It was suggested that existing classifications of these interpretations conflate too many different aspects of sustainable development into binary pairs of possible positions, and so both conceal a number of theoretical and normative assumptions and also weaken their analytical usefulness. Consequently for the purposes of the field investigation the different components were kept separate, treating as theoretically distinct and independent the outcomes and actors' beliefs relating to environmental, social and economic issues and the appropriate roles of state and citizens. This approach demonstrated its utility in practice, as the case studies revealed a wide range of interpretations of the substantive goals to be pursued under the rubric of 'sustainable development', including the prioritisation of solving environmental problems, environmentally sustainable economic growth and social justice as well as the pursuit of policies which would achieve gains in all three sectors. These goals do not fit easily into the binary models which associate strong environmental commitment with holistic interpretations of sustainable development – in particular such commitment was found in practice to be a third position, often in tension with more holistic interpretations. Further, the association of such 'strong' sustainable development positions with a preference for participatory democracy in some form did not hold – there were proponents of both environmental and more holistic interpretations who were opposed to widespread public involvement in policy making.

The issue addressed here is therefore whether a more adequate analytic framework can be constructed in order to categorise different interpretations and draw out the conceptual relationships between them. The starting point is the suggestion made in Chapter Four that a more helpful guide to the nature of sustainable development is provided by the model of three overlapping circles frequently found in introductions to sustainable development. This provides a readily comprehensible diagrammatic suggestion of how sustainable development relates to other, more familiar political and social concepts (see Figure 4.1 p. 60.) Sustainable development is represented occupying the overlapping centre between social, economic and environmental

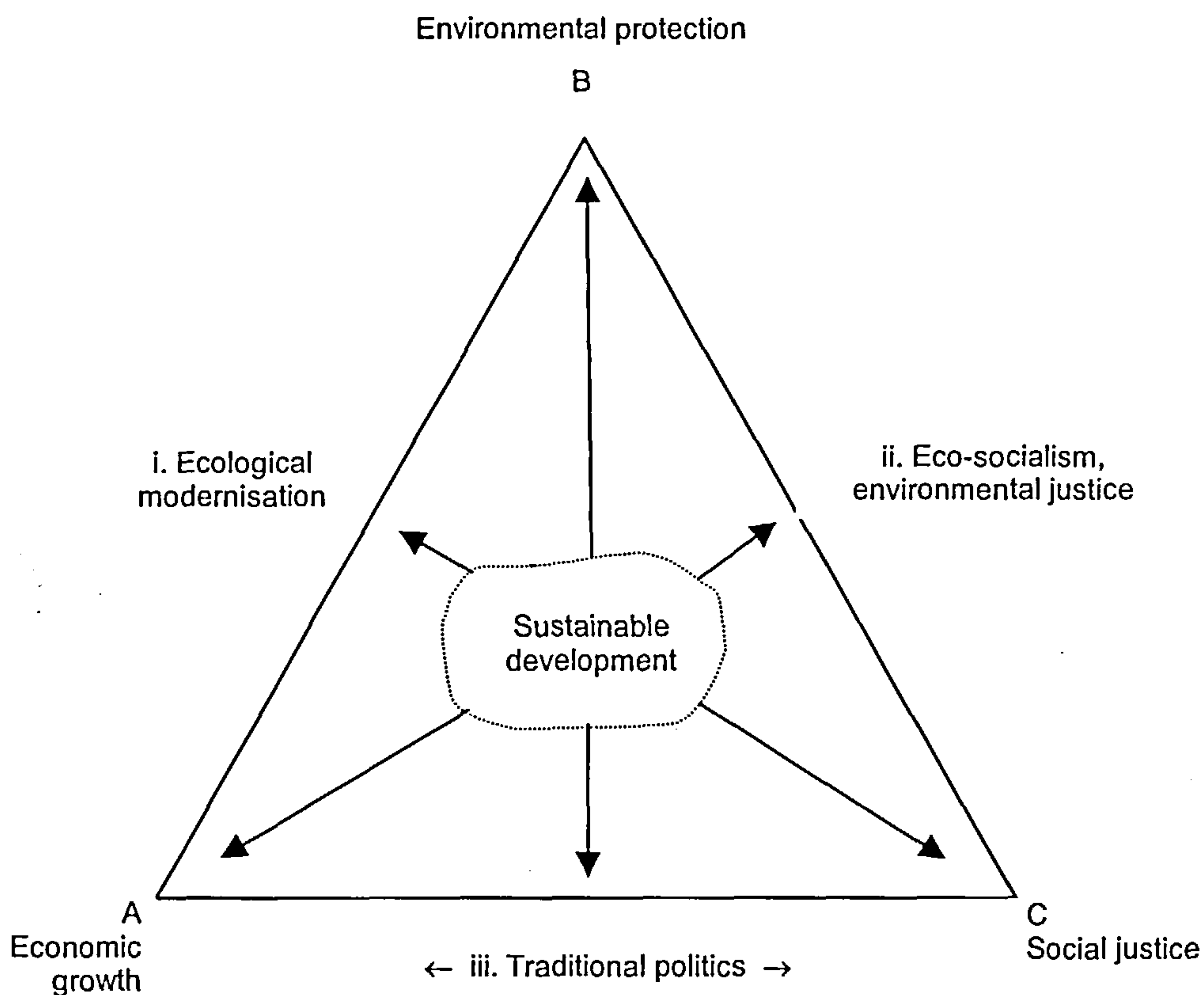


Figure 10.1: The field of solutions to the environment and development problem.

priorities, suggesting that it integrates the three areas of concern, and is related to but distinct from other positions which integrate only two of the three.

While this is a useful starting point, the three circles carry an unhelpful implication of distinctive, definable fields. For analytic, as opposed to heuristic, purposes a better approach is to transform the diagram into a continuous surface – a continuum of positions within which it is possible to map the whole range of solutions to Lafferty’s ‘environment and development problem’ (Lafferty, 1996: 187). Points in this field represent desired or accomplished policy goals, located and defined by their positions relative to axes linking three polar points, as in Figure 10.1.

These points represent extreme viewpoints which prioritise economic growth with no concern for equity or environmental costs (A), environmental protection at any economic and social cost (B) and social justice with no concern for economic growth or for the environment (C). Between these extremes lie axes which represent balances between them and which can be identified with familiar fields of debate. Thus the axis between points A and C describes positions in the traditional political debate between the priorities of growth and equity; the A-B axis is concerned with the relative priorities of the environment and economic growth, and thus corresponds

to positions on *environmental* sustainability (c.f. Dobson 1996a); while the B-C axis represents positions in the area of debate between environmental and equity goals.

As in Figure 4.1, sustainable development occupies the centre of the field, corresponding to its agreed, 'first level' uncontested meaning as a new policy trajectory incorporating some balance of economic, environmental and social priorities. It thus gives greater priority to the environment than previously dominant policy agendas, and occupies a roughly central position in the more traditional political arguments between equity and economic growth. Positions in this central area identify the pursuit of all three priorities in an integrated way, but without pre-defining the way that accommodation is reached between the different goals. The distinction often made between making compromises between the different priorities and achieving synergistic, win-win(-win) solutions seems unhelpful – in practice those promoting sustainable development tended to pursue both kinds of solutions, recognising that in different situations one or the other approach was more feasible or appropriate.

Sustainable development is clearly not represented by a single point at the centre of the field. Such a position, a 'true sustainable development', is undefinable, since it would be impossible to demonstrate that economic, social and environmental goals were all given 'equal weight'. More importantly, however, the concept is ambiguous, and so is represented by a vaguely defined area which includes the centre. Within this area there is scope for a range of positions corresponding to interpretations of sustainable development which attribute relatively more weight to any of the three poles, or to combinations of these. There is clearly a definitional question as to what range of positions is to be counted as being part of the concept, and which solutions to the 'environment and development problem' are 'unsustainable' and so lie outside the boundary. Since the concept is contested, different actors will identify different positions or areas as defining 'real' sustainable development and legitimately challenge others' definitions. However, contiguous and continuous with these positions are those which would not be claimed as sustainable development even by their proponents. The following paragraphs suggest how recognisable positions might fall along the six symmetry axes of Figure 10.1, moving in each case progressively away from the centre from interpretations of sustainable development to positions which are opposed to the concept.

Towards corner A are interpretations that prioritise economic growth as a goal, identify economic opportunities in environmental protection and recognise that

growth may require the consideration of both equity and environmental protection. Such views were rarely expressed in the case studies, though the regional utility companies' corporate interest in sustainable development unsurprisingly corresponds to this position, which is characteristic of recent developments in corporate philosophy. Closer to this corner are positions outside the boundary of sustainable development, whose proponents would oppose the concept altogether on the grounds that considerations of equity and the environment were inimical to economic progress.

Towards corner B are versions of sustainable development motivated ultimately by the need to protect 'nature' but recognising that meeting human needs and economic growth are instrumentally necessary to achieve that goal. The complementary 'external' positions are those of 'deep Greens' who reject sustainable development as too great a compromise, seeing development as intrinsically incompatible with the protection of nature, and espouse a biocentric ethic prioritising the natural world over considerations of human equity. Several members of the LA21 team in County Durham subscribed to views which lay along this axis, with the Assistant Director of Environment being furthest out towards the boundary with anti-sustainable development views.

Towards corner C are found positions which prioritise equity, have the primary motivation of achieving social justice but recognise the importance of environmental protection as well as economic redistribution in achieving this, given that there are environmental aspects to inequity. More extreme views in this direction would lie outside the realm of sustainable development, taking traditional left-wing positions on the A-C axis and very instrumental and anthropocentric views of humanity's relationship to nature.

The 'midway' positions are also of interest. Away from corner C equity is progressively less stressed and the goals for sustainable development are seen as achieving synergies and acceptable trade-offs between economic growth and environmental protection – as for example in the reclamation of post-industrial wasteland in County Durham and the preservation of St Edmundsbury's rural character as ways of attracting industrial investment. This is the understanding of sustainable development as 'ecological modernisation', which Hajer (1995) claims has become the dominant interpretation in central government policy making. However, this was not so in the case studies, where it was present but overshadowed by more holistic or environment-oriented interpretations and policies, reflecting both

individual actors' backgrounds and perhaps the relative lack of engagement of LA21 with economic issues. The tension between supporters and critics of 'ecological modernisation' illustrates the contested nature of sustainable development. It is clearly a less holistic interpretation than some, and while it is viewed by its proponents as constituting 'sustainable development', critics such as Lélé (1991) consider it to lie outside the acceptable boundaries of usage of the term and oppose what they see as its appropriation in this way.

Many such critics are opponents of traditional development who occupy positions on a line leading away from corner A, emphasising the links between equity and environmental protection and the need to restrain economic growth. More extreme positions in this direction reject the notion of growth altogether and see desirable futures in a much simpler, less industrialised society based on a blend of Left and Green politics. Such views were present amongst the most radical proponents of sustainable development in St Edmundsbury but were eliminated during the policy making process.

Finally, positions moving away from the B corner progressively de-emphasise the importance of environmental considerations and represent moves towards a more traditional politics in which the major issues are the balance between growth and equity and environmental concerns are only peripheral. 'Old fashioned' social democrats would lie on this axis.

To summarise, the concept of sustainable development is seen here as referring to a range of solutions to the issue of how to reconcile the potentially conflicting goals of economic growth, social justice and protection of the environment. Different interpretations of the concept involve different relative prioritisations of goals between these three fields, and disagreement between proponents of different positions as to which is 'really' sustainable development. From this perspective there is no unitary meaning of 'sustainable development' but rather a range of possible meanings, any of which could be subscribed to by actors in the policy-making process, giving rise to different local interpretations of the concept in rhetoric and in practice which may be contested by policy actors.

Presenting the concept as part of a continuous field seems to be a step forward, as it shows how it encompasses a range of positions which are related in a continuum with other political positions which define preferred solutions to the overall problem of reconciling economic, social and environmental aims. The previous characterisations of interpretations of sustainable development into opposing pairs of

'weak' ecological modernisation and 'strong' 'ecological social democracy' positions only capture some of this potential range, and can be seen as partitioning the entire field in two along a line that runs through corner B. However, the field on either side of this line embraces a range of very different positions on the relative importance of environmental protection, and this division obscures the position of those with strong environmental views but no particular attraction to social justice goals.

By locating sustainable development within the wider field of solutions to the environmental and development problem it also appears that there are legitimate positions from which the concept can be critiqued, and that these form a continuum with positions lying in the disputed 'boundary' regions of the concept and through them to the accepted core meaning. At a political level these external positions can be expected to be potential sources of opposition to policies which pursue sustainability goals.

Despite its strengths in enabling a wide range of positions to be identified and placed relative to one another, this model is clearly still imperfect. It inevitably suffers from the impossibility of defining a precise position in the field for any particular standpoint, and also from the complexity and possible conflicts obscured within the rather crude categorisation of 'environmental' or 'social' goals. Further it is not clear that it can handle the description of holistic but non-integrated approaches to sustainable development, in which social, economic and environmental goals are all pursued in isolation from each other. The UK central government approach is an example of this, with its rhetoric of integration but lack of linkage in the operational definitions implicit in the indicators (Levett, 1999), and would be difficult to represent by a position in the field of Figure 10.1.

The other aspect which is missing from this characterisation is the roles which are to be played by state and public in achieving sustainable development. This is not, however, a failing, but reflects the conceptual and logical distinctness of this issue. To extend the geometrical analogy, positions of public involvement appear to lie on an axis perpendicular to the plane of Figure 10.1 – a claim which is explored in the following section.

10.2.2 Public involvement and characterisations of sustainable development

Two principal areas of concern about the relationship between public involvement and sustainable development were raised by the literature review and the field work.

The first of these was whether the existing characterisations of sustainable development accurately portray the linkages between substantive goals and process aspects. From the literature review emerged another binary classification alongside the distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' sustainable development. Public involvement in sustainable development was described as taking one of two forms, principally distinguished by their positions on the policy-action spectrum. One of these is 'conservative', giving the public an instrumental role in achieving sustainable development and the state the responsibility for deciding the goals and policies to be followed, while the other is 'radical', giving responsibility to the public for both defining what would constitute sustainable development and devising appropriate policies to achieve it. Agenda 21 enjoins a mixture of both of these, so providing three possible approaches. Here, however, it is the purported linkages between the two positions on either side of Jacob's 'faultline' (1995) and the other, substantive, components of sustainable development which is the issue. Underlying the two positions are groups of mutually supportive rationales, respectively a realist environmental epistemology with an elitist view of humanity and thus of appropriate political forms, opposed by a less coherent collection of arguments for public involvement based on the subjective nature of the goals of sustainable development and an ethical and political commitment to public involvement as a good in itself.

Many authors have claimed that the distinctions between positions on the substantive content of sustainable development and on public involvement are closely associated with one another, either intrinsically or contingently. It is, however, clear from the case studies that the proposed alignment within the concept of 'strong sustainability' between environmental concerns and support for participatory democracy is more of a political aspiration than a reflection of any necessary connection. In particular there were clear examples of individuals holding apparently coherent 'strong Green' but anti-participatory views, and realist understandings of environmental and other issues were prevalent throughout as a component of the dominant, 'common-sense' world-view.

It is this realism and the associated definition of problems and solutions by policy makers which mitigates against widespread public involvement in policy making. Positions which prioritise economic growth, environmental protection and the various ways of balancing these or finding mutual support between them have little place for public involvement in policy making. The more environmentally-oriented positions can accommodate the involvement of members of the public with

particular environmental expertise, but the general public as a mass are likely to interfere with both these agendas and their hybrid, ecological modernisation. The causal linkages here are complex and reciprocal, since prior commitment to these policies would suggest a need to restrict public involvement, and at the same time the tendency for public involvement to broaden the scope of problems addressed would lead policy makers wishing to restrict public involvement in broad social and economic issues to define sustainable development in narrowly environmental terms.

However, such views are not confined to environmentalists and proponents of economic growth: as an aspect of the common-sense view of the world they can also be associated with strong commitments to social and environmental equity. This is clearly reflected in the traditional municipal socialism at the roots of Durham County Council's local culture, and the more contemporary approach of a Fabian pamphlet (Jacobs, 1999) which actively promotes a version of 'environmental modernisation' with a manifest concern for equity alongside environmental protection and economic growth, but without any reference to widespread public involvement in decision making. In general it would seem that any strongly ends-oriented approach to sustainable development, as in any other policy field, is likely to be antipathetic to high levels of public involvement. There appears to be no logical reason why realism and elitism, and thus managerialism and conservative public involvement, should not be compatible with *any* position on the substantive nature of sustainable development, and not only with 'weak' interpretations.

The important aspect here is who is involved in defining problems and policies, rather than the substantive content of the issue. The corollary of this is that there are *some* associations between views on public involvement and sustainable development. In particular there is a close link between the holistic interpretation of sustainable development which sees it as aiming to improve 'quality of life' and a subjective approach to problem definition, based on the premise that only the individual or community can define what would constitute such improvement. This position almost requires that the people in general should be involved in policy making for sustainability – an approach exemplified in the initial plans for the St Edmundsbury LA21, and arguably in the support given by both case study authorities to community based projects. The relationship between public involvement and definition of sustainable development appears to be reciprocal, in that when given the opportunity the public will tend to express desires and needs

which cover a wide and interlinked range of environmental, social and economic issues, rather than confining themselves to a narrowly environmental agenda.

The above argument does not mean that strong associations do not exist, creating the 'faultline' between two opposed positions which combine prioritising economic growth with conservative public involvement and prioritising equity with radical public involvement. However, these associations are contingent rather than necessary, resting on political and historical rather than logical grounds. There are traditional links between concerns for equity and demands for increased popular participation, and by extension interpretations of sustainable development which prioritise equity alongside environmental concerns tend to have a corresponding interest in promoting public involvement and more participatory democracy. That such a faultline is identified by Jacobs (1995) and Dobson (1996a), and the less perceptive bundling together of 'strong' sustainable development and participatory democracy of others, seem to arise from the extent to which the substantive content of the sustainable development idea is seen as posing a challenge to the capitalist status quo, and whether such a challenge is desirable. On the 'conservative' side of this line lie positions which recognise the challenge to specific aspects of the current economic and political system, but see the appropriate response as changing these practices without altering the basic framework. This is sustainable development as ecological modernisation and is essentially anti-public involvement. On the radical side lie a range of positions which see environmental issues as a reason and/or a pretext for challenging the political and economic status quo and public involvement as a method for doing this – it thus brings together a rather disparate mix of Left and environmentalist perspectives.

This distinction is plausibly related to the historical development of the concept of sustainable development reviewed briefly in Section 4.3.1. This suggested that although it is now treated as a single, albeit ambiguous and contested, concept, it developed from two very different backgrounds. While these shared a realist appreciation of environmental problems they had opposing political aims – one supporting the political and economic status quo and the other opposed to it. Despite the concept's hegemony (Lafferty, 1996) the underlying political dichotomy remains. It is perhaps unsurprising that despite the dominance of the Brundtland definition the two distinctive trends of thinking should have continued and resurfaced as differing interpretations of what sustainable development means in operational terms. The latitude within the definition for alternative interpretations

gives groups with differing interests the opportunity to interpret the concept to suit their own needs, and in particular so that operationalising it does not challenge those interests.

Overall it seems that all substantive perspectives on sustainable development are compatible with conservative approaches to public involvement. The source of tension is the epistemological approach taken, which is logically independent of the substantive perspective, and the risk of incompatibility between policy makers' realism and public views on sustainable development. Thus as suggested in the preceding section public involvement does not have a place in the classification of the goals of sustainable development – the 'public involvement axis' is perpendicular to the plane of the solutions to the environmental and development problem. However, in consequence the independent 'external' political rationales for encouraging or limiting public involvement can either support or conflict with actors' approaches to sustainable development. In particular those who are politically sympathetic to promoting equity are likely to also be proponents of substantial public involvement, but find that this creates tensions with a realist understanding of environmental problems and so of the goals of sustainable development.

10.2.3 Is a coherent position on public involvement in sustainable development possible?

The concluding point above raises the issue of whether a realist understanding of environmental problems is an inescapable foundation for sustainable development, and so whether the vision of widespread, highly participatory public involvement in sustainable development policy making laid out in Agenda 21 is coherent. If it is not, then there is the further question of whether a more coherent conceptualisation of the relationship can be developed.

It was apparent from the material reviewed in Chapter Four that public involvement is necessary for achieving sustainable development for a wide range of instrumental, political and ethical reasons. A strong version of this belief lies at the heart of Agenda 21 - that effective and influential public involvement at every level is essential in order to achieve sustainable development, so leading to the stipulation of the need for LA21s to be drawn up by local authorities together with their populations. There are, however, two interlinked problems with this belief. Firstly, the conclusion of Chapter Four suggested that it was internally inconsistent and rendered unstable by a dilemma, the horns of which were that a realist understanding

of environmental problems implies an expert definition of problems and solutions, and so mitigates against public involvement in policy making, while the necessarily value-laden nature of all policy choices for pursuing sustainability provided a range of reasons for maximising lay public involvement. Secondly, the discussion in Chapter Three suggested that for the state to support such a process of achieving radical policy changes through influential mass public involvement was unusual and risky, given public involvement's potential for being conflictive and opening up challenges to state policies and the stability of the state itself.

The solution to these problems implicit in Agenda 21 and subsequent guidance and commentary on developing LA21 is to ignore the essentially contested nature of the concept of sustainable development. Instead, working from the premise of the existence of an extremely serious, real and global environmental threat the assumption is made that a consensus exists on the need for sustainable development and that it can be achieved over the definition and operationalisation of that overarching objective. Since we are all in the same boat we have an overriding interest in common to which all other interests will be voluntarily subordinated, leading to the possibility of uncoerced consensus on policy decisions. The assumption is thus that the consensual planning processes involving the entire community and the local state envisaged for drawing up LA21s are necessary, desirable and feasible.

However, developing and maintaining consensus on such a scale seems inherently implausible, whatever approach to public involvement is taken. Any participatory approach will encounter a range of interests and viewpoints which, even if their proponents are agreed over an ultimate aim of 'sustainable development', are likely to be in conflict over appropriate policy choices and the distribution of the inevitable costs involved. In such a situation any agreed outcome is likely to be more the result of compromise than consensus. Conversely, purportedly consensual positions developed through the more 'conservative' approach of expert input and public consultation are vulnerable to the arguments against expert definitions of sustainable development outlined above, and so to dissent and disengagement by the public in the way described by Macnaghten and his colleagues (Macnaghten *et al.*, 1995).

This weakness in the Agenda 21 approach was reflected in the practice of the actors in the cases studied, whether or not they explicitly appreciated the problem and had deliberately set out to find alternative approaches to public involvement in sustainable development. It was suggested in Chapter Nine that in the face of the

pressure to involve as many people as possible in LA21, the further issue of whether that involvement should include defining the meaning of sustainable development and actors' almost universal adherence to a belief in objectively sustainable courses of action they found solutions which 'worked' in the sense that they allowed action to be taken. However, rather than falling neatly into any of the three approaches set out in Chapter Four (that is, attempting to implement the 'normative participation' of Agenda 21, or engaging the public in either a 'conservative' or 'radical' way) their practice incorporated an apparently chaotic mixture of traditional 'top-down' policy making, policy networks which included members of the public, consultation, education, enabling behaviour change and supporting community-led projects. It thus embraced most if not all of the normative participation enjoined by Agenda 21, but was ultimately realist in approach and conservative in overall impact.

This was clearly a successful pragmatic response to the situation in which LA21 policy makers found themselves. However, the issue addressed here is whether this success was despite Agenda 21's incoherency or if it could be supported by another theoretical rationale. To restate the argument: public involvement is necessary for sustainable development, yet this appears to lead to an uncomfortable choice for policy makers between accepting a subjectivist approach to sustainable development in which the public define its meaning, or recognising that public involvement may not lead to 'objectively sustainable' policies, with the implication that such involvement must therefore be curtailed, thus undermining the likelihood of policy implementation. The first of these alternatives is untenable – it is the imposition of environmental limitations on policy choices which is the characteristic that distinguishes sustainable development from the traditionally open-ended pursuit of economic and social progress. The second alternative is clearly unstable, in that it runs counter to the recognised necessity of public involvement.

One solution to this problem is that of Agenda 21: to assume the existence of widespread consensus, and so the alignment of the outcomes of public involvement with the objective requirements of sustainable development, as determined by policy makers. If this is rejected on grounds of its implausibility and empirical falsity then there appear to be two alternative ways forward. One is to accept that consensus is necessary but impossible, and therefore to abandon sustainable development as a concept and policy objective. This leads to any of the positions outside the conceptual boundaries of sustainable development described above in Section 10.2.1, which prioritise the pursuit of environmental, social or economic goals either

independently or in uneasy, temporary and instrumental associations while accepting that there are fundamental antagonisms between them. This was not a view subscribed to by any of those interviewed in the case studies, though it was attributed by interviewees to those opposed to sustainable development on economic grounds.

The third way forward is to abandon the assumption that widespread consensus is a necessary underpinning for sustainable development but recognise that public support and public involvement are necessary. Taking this approach means finding an alternative solution to the two problems 'solved' by the consensus assumption, of the potentially unsustainable outcomes and destabilising impacts of public involvement. The suggestion emerging from this research is that this is done through policy makers managing – or attempting to manage - public involvement in complex and sophisticated ways that do not readily fit with existing models of democratic policy making. Their overall aim is one of making progress in a broad policy field whose trajectory is defined by themselves, but they recognise that within this there are many possible component policies and many different actual and possible groups within 'the public' who will have varying attitudes and interests with respect to the individual policies. Managing public involvement is thus a process of establishing a range of different kinds of involvement for these different policies, which can span the range from local control to providing tacit support.

Figure 10.2 contains a summary of the preceding argument.

<p>Sustainable development needs public involvement - therefore</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">either allow public involvement to define sustainable development – unacceptable if a realistor face the danger that public involvement will not yield (realist environmental) sustainable development. <p>Solutions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">either a consensus exists over the problem and solutions (implausible)or abandon realist sustainable developmentor make sure that public involvement does in practice yield environmental realist sustainable development – rather than assuming consensus, create limited consensus and non-dissent through a political process of controlling public involvement, balancing coercion and legitimacy etc. etc.
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Figure 10.2: Summary of the argument for a political approach to public involvement in sustainable development

Within this process consensus plays an important role in facilitating progress on both policy making and action, but is necessarily limited. This limitation can take a number of forms. Constraints can be placed on the views which are introduced to the policy making process, either by controlling the participants or directly restricting the decision making agenda, resulting in consensual processes at the policy level which consist of people with similar views to the process managers concerning themselves with a relatively limited range of issues. Alternatively decision making can be devolved to small, internally consensual groups working in a limited geographical area and/or with a narrow range of interests.

In policy areas where such agreement does not exist then the appropriate forms of public involvement are those which enable policy makers to keep decision making power. This clearly includes consultation, but also the lowest levels of public 'involvement', in which the public are informed of policy decisions which are imposed on them. While ultimately it is clear that within a democracy policy makers have to ensure they have public support for their position, in practice within the existing representative democratic system such positive support for individual policy decisions is unnecessary. Rather than seeking widespread consensus it is sufficient for policy makers to ensure there is a widespread absence of explicit dissent, either direct or expressed through the ballot box.

Broadening the extent of consensus and minimising dissent are complementary strategies to enable progress on sustainability policies with potentially significant impacts on many aspects of people's lives, and achieving this can be seen as the principal aim of the awareness-raising and educational elements of many LA21s. Such programmes implicitly recognise the circularity of the arguments that people will freely and democratically choose environmentally sustainable policies, and break the circle by attempting to align the public's values with policy makers' to the point at which they will start to make such choices.

This dynamic aspect of the process of managing public involvement is fundamental. Viewed in terms of the values of the policy makers, and if realised as a static approach to involving people in sustainable development, the above can be seen as simply a more sophisticated version of the conservative position, and therefore vulnerable to the problem of lack of engagement by the public and so a failure of legitimacy. What is proposed instead is not that a logical resolution to the dilemma is feasible, but that a dynamic and managed process is capable of embracing the inherent tensions and curbing their potential to prevent progress towards sustainable

development. In this conception policy making for sustainable development is not a unitary process, but consists of different components which incorporate realist or subjectivist approaches to varying extents, though underlain ultimately by a realist conception of the problems that sustainable development is intended to address. It is thus a political process, in which public involvement is used and managed as one element of policy making, through the control of participants, issues addressed and the level of impact of public involvement on policy decisions. These different components can be 'traded off' against each other – for example by allowing a high degree of freedom and influence to people known to share the policy makers' values. This point will be elaborated in Section 10.3.3 below as a general characteristic of public involvement in policy making.

Within such a general characterisation there is scope for a great deal of variation in the balance between the different components, reflecting different underlying philosophies. One, perhaps prevalent in practice, could be characterised as a managerial approach strongly influenced by policy makers' expert definitions of sustainability and in which public involvement is very closely limited and manipulated. Different aspects of this approach were seen in practice in both the cases studied, with the County Durham LA21 dominated by a process of manufacturing productive but limited consensus and St Edmundsbury's by the marginalisation of policy-oriented public involvement in favour of education and awareness raising combined with internal, non-participative policy making for sustainable development.

A theoretical alternative found in the literature is that advocated by Paehlke (1996) and Jacobs (1995) in which expert-informed but open debate within civil society and between civil society and the state is the ground for decision making for sustainable development (see Section 4.4.2). This entails the state genuinely opening up decision making processes to debate, rather than closely managing them. There is little evidence of this approach in practice, though Tam claimed to be laying the foundations for it through the various strands of St Edmundsbury's public involvement strategy, including the LA21.

This characterisation of the processes studied and the argument that it is entailed by inherent conceptual problems seem grossly at odds with the ideals of the creators of Agenda 21 and the initiators of LA21 in the UK. The implication is that LA21 was not only an inappropriate policy vehicle to realise such ideals but that the vision in Agenda 21 of sustainability planning through widespread consensus was itself

incoherent, being undermined by a tension between environmental sustainability and effective public involvement which is only resolvable through the untenable assumption of consensus. The question then arises as to whether there is an alternative, coherent conception of the role of public involvement in achieving sustainable development. The answer is a very qualified 'yes'. While not logically coherent, managing public involvement as part of a complex policy and political process provides a practically feasible approach to sustainable development for a local authority, in which the conceptual problems of any unitary, static position are avoided through fragmentation and continual change. This itself is a far from unitary position, and such processes can range from the very state-centred one which dominates practice and the more idealistic 'ecological social democracy' envisaged by Jacobs.

10.2.4 Conclusion

This section set out to address problems with existing analyses of the substantive content of sustainable development and the role of public involvement in achieving it and the further problem of the apparent incoherence of the concept of participatory sustainable development. The progress made on each of these fronts has developed ideas which are brought together in these final paragraphs to suggest a more realistic, practically adequate way of conceptualising sustainable development than that implicit in Agenda 21.

The model of a continuous 'field' of solutions to the environment and development problem, with approaches to public involvement lying on a logically independent axis perpendicular to the field, appears to be a fruitful development for two reasons. Firstly it avoids the conflation characteristic of earlier work and thus allows a more discriminating analysis of the interpretations of sustainable development found in practice. Secondly it situates sustainable development in the broader field of possible solutions, allowing it to be seen in relation to the 'non-sustainable' alternatives. Further, if the field is seen as not just the set of solutions to the 'problem', but as the *desired* solutions, it becomes a field of conflicting political standpoints. On the one hand this reflects sustainable development's status as one contestant among several – despite the assumptions and the rhetoric of Agenda 21 there is not a universal consensus over the need for sustainable development. It rather is a position – or a set of positions – which brings both a heightened emphasis on environmental considerations to traditional political conflicts between equity and economic development and an ideological commitment to the feasibility of

environmentally sustainable and socially just economic growth. On the other hand 'sustainable development' does denote a *range* of positions in the field, reflecting the ambiguous and contested nature of the concept. Thus under the 'umbrella' of 'sustainable development' incompatible and competing viewpoints exist, and conflicts will occur not only between 'sustainable' and 'unsustainable' positions but within the 'boundary' of the concept. This situation is made more complex by the hegemonic status of the rhetoric of sustainable development, which results in the use of its terminology to advance less holistic and balanced solutions to the environment and development problem.

This analysis fits very well with the other developments made in this section. It was established that the appropriate nature of public involvement in sustainable development was a separate, almost independent issue from the interpretations of its substantive content – the associations between positions on these had more to do with political standpoint than any internal logic. However, it was also suggested that a real problem exists with reconciling public involvement in policy making with the apparently inescapable realist grounding to the notion of environmentally sustainable development. Agenda 21's attempted solution is untenably unrealistic, yet if widespread consensus is abandoned as an assumption no conceptual reconciliation appears possible. Pragmatically, however, the dilemma is resolvable through managing the tension in a dynamic, fragmented political process, and in particular by prioritising consensual processes limited in their participants and scope.

This approach is consistent with the status of sustainable development as a grouping of competing possible policy trajectories. From this perspective the role played by public involvement is central, but is not that defined in the non-conflictual policy process envisaged in the rhetoric of Agenda 21 and the LGMB. Sustainable development should not be seen as a clearly definable policy objective which will be agreed and then achieved through following a strategy laid down in a document such as a LA21, but as a concept which will be both a subject and a tool in a political contest to promote various combinations of environmental sustainability, social justice and economic development. In a democracy public involvement will be an intrinsic part of such a contest, since the contesting policy actors will include members of the public. Part of its role will be to enable the expression of sections of the population's wishes with respect to the appropriate balance between social, environmental and economic aims. At the same time, however, public involvement

is also a tool through which other, 'non-public' policy actors can promote their own substantive policy goals. In consequence the evolution of public involvement in sustainable development will reflect the ability of actors both within the state and other sectors, including the public, to manage the process to achieve their potentially very different and conflicting goals.

10.3 Public involvement and policy making

10.3.1 Introduction

The preceding section set out the argument that due to an inherent tension between the pursuit of the substantive goals of sustainable development and the inclusion of effective and wide-ranging public involvement in policy making, such involvement in LA21 was necessarily and deliberately constrained. Those actors able to influence the design and execution of public involvement processes managed them through imposing limitations on a number of their characteristics. However, the case studies showed that many of the reasons for such management were not related specifically to the internal problems of the concept of sustainable development. Although highlighted by the unusual demands of a consensual programme for radical change, they resulted from actors' concerns with the way that public involvement could affect policy making and institutional structures across their authorities. This suggests that at least some features of the processes observed may be typical of public involvement processes more generally.

This raises a political and a theoretical problem. This description of how public involvement is conducted appears to be at odds not only with the spirit of Agenda 21 but also with general democratic principles – it seems 'wrong' for the expression of public views to be consciously limited and manipulated in these ways. However, it is not readily analysable in the terms of either normative or analytic theories of democracy and public involvement. For example, the expected tension between encouraging public involvement and the representative democratic foundation of local government was present, albeit largely implicitly, but that simple dichotomy fails to capture the complexity of the role of public involvement in local governance. With its portrayal of very differentiated processes in which sections of the public engage in different ways with complex policy making processes the description is more consistent with analyses found in the literature on policy making, but these in general are curiously unconcerned with democratic issues.

The observations from the case studies thus reinforce the conclusions of Chapter Three, which suggested that current analyses and theories of public involvement were in general over-simple and poorly articulated with theoretical approaches to policy making. That chapter did, however, also identify a small and rather disparate body of writing which appeared to provide more detailed and realistic analyses of public involvement and to indicate possible directions for theoretical development. This section therefore addresses the issue of how to conceptualise the role of public involvement in policy making. Following a brief assessment of the material reviewed in Chapter Three in the light of the case studies, it suggests ways in which this material can be developed to provide a more detailed and explanatory understanding of how public involvement interacts with the policy making processes in which it is embedded. The final paragraphs return to the issue of how public involvement relates to the democratic ideals which purportedly both justify it and underpin the system of local governance.

10.3.2 Existing models of public involvement

The first type of analysis of public involvement considered in Chapter Three was that of Arnstein's Ladder and its derivatives. The point was made there that the simplifications inherent in the model potentially reduced its utility as an analytical tool or normative guide – in particular that the simple division of the actors into citizens and a combined state-business sector may obscure how power sharing through public involvement relates to other political and power structures. Further, as Arnstein herself accepted, although Ladder-based models provide a fundamental insight into the nature of public involvement they do not provide an explanatory mechanism which would aid understanding of how and why public involvement takes specific forms.

In the light of the case studies these criticisms appear to be well-founded. Although the basic insight that the various activities that pass as 'participation' or 'public involvement' are characterised by different distributions of power is clearly essential to understanding their nature, for a ladder to be analytically useful it must be possible to identify the 'rung' which any given participatory exercise or process occupies. In practice it is impossible to do this unambiguously. For example, analyses of the 'level of participation' of a local authority-funded community environmental project plausibly range from placing 'the community' at the top of the ladder, through varying degrees of joint decision making and consultation of other groups in determining the nature of the project to 'manipulation' of the community

to meet the aims of the authority as reflected in the constraints it places on its funding (Sharp and Connelly, 2002). The problem arises from the inadequacy of the binary state: citizen analysis when in practice most public involvement takes place in a setting involving many groups on both sides of this putative divide. Between these groups there is a complex web of power relations, in which they have different levels of power in respect of different issues and areas and in which 'control' involves both command of resources and influence over decision making. Further, it was abundantly clear from the case studies that what happened, including the 'level of control' accorded to the public, was related to how a given public involvement process concerned with particular issues fitted into a context of other policy making processes – a level of analysis which ladder-based models cannot provide.

It is some of these complexities which were unpacked by Alterman (1982), Thomas (1996) and Burns *et al.* (1994). The first of these further claimed that the variables are contestable by the participants in pursuit of their goals. This was clearly borne out by the case studies, which revealed actors engaged in conscious design of public involvement to further their goals and that they sometimes – but not inevitably or continuously – came into conflict with other actors in the process. In terms of positive outcomes these goals included:

- generating action which would progress sustainable development;
- changing the authorities' policies either so that they reflected the wishes of the public or to advance a policy agenda of particular officers; and
- to increase the involvement of people in governance as a matter of democratic principle.

Some actors also had negative 'goals' for the public involvement processes – that they should not affect existing policies or individual or departmental interests.

Thus the nature of public involvement was not in general a neutral issue over which the process designers had unchallenged control – it was not a matter of choosing 'horses for courses' as suggested by Wilcox (1994). It was a more political process, in which participants and designers had interests over which they were prepared to argue and whose outcomes were often the result of compromise or imposition rather than a consensual distribution of decision making authority.

As suggested by these authors, this process design and management could be characterised in terms of a number of 'variables' – linked but separable characteristics of public involvement processes. Thus in the two initiatives the

geographical scale of the public's involvement ranged from small neighbourhoods and villages to entire local authority areas, while the **types of issues** that they considered varied enormously from single issues such as preparation of bird species records to open-ended visioning about improved quality of life. Of particular importance were the differences in the scope of public involvement in terms of its intended **engagement with policy making**: while much of it was more oriented towards action (or very local policy making) the St Edmundsbury workshops and some of the work of the County Durham Round Tables were intended to influence the local authorities' policies. The **timing** of the public's intervention likewise varied, from initiating projects to being consulted in St Edmundsbury on a sustainable development programme that was already well advanced within the authority. The **participants** were of very different kinds in different parts of these public involvement processes. The 'public' who were involved – or who were the desired participants - were sometimes the entire population, elsewhere were targeted groups, and in other cases again self-selected groups of interested and purportedly expert individuals. They clearly came from different backgrounds and had widely differing concerns and interests, their expectations of the process and their ability to engage with it were equally varied, and beyond the characteristic of being from non-state groups they had little or nothing in common. This differentiation, and the differences in the forms of their engagement, was central to the way that public involvement was managed. This clearly created tensions within the processes, as it led to distinctions being made between those who were involved and 'the general public', and so to continual dissatisfaction at not having reached the latter group. Finally the **level** of the involvement, in the sense of the impact it could have, varied between complete community control of local projects carried out with local authority funding, through the joint working and decision making which characterised much of the County Durham initiative, to consultation and receiving information from the authorities.

The problem with this analytical approach is that recognising the complexity of such processes has the apparent price of losing the conceptual organising power and considerable normative force of the Ladder, leaving in its place a mass of accurate but unstructured detail. However, the case studies suggested very strongly that the different characteristics of the processes were in fact inter-related, being the outcomes of deliberate management. This echoes Forester's suggestion that public involvement is consciously and predictably managed through the direction and distortion of communication by those with power over the process (Forester, 1989,

1993). As noted in Chapter Three, while his approach is limited by its exclusive focus on communication, analogous reasoning suggests that the relationships between process characteristics may be explicable and predictable. The following sections put forward, albeit tentatively, some suggestions for general patterns that may arise.

Prior to that, it is noted that the case studies also support the general criticisms of analyses of public involvement which focus their attention on and give normative priority to deliberative engagement. Not only was such engagement relatively unusual but the analysis presented here suggested that where it did occur – notably in the structures of County Durham’s LA21 – it was tightly controlled and the public’s influence, or potential for influence, was very limited. Without an examination of the context and surrounding policy making, however, these public involvement processes in themselves appear to meet the normative criteria of equality, openness, mutual trust and so forth. This is not to deny the potential such processes have for engaging the public and giving them a voice in policy making, but it is clear that while perhaps necessary, these process norms are far from sufficient to ensure effective public involvement.

10.3.3 The management of public involvement

It was argued above that detailed analysis of public involvement processes in terms of a number of distinct characteristics is a productive step forward. It was also suggested that linking this to a conceptualisation of the policy making process for public involvement as one of management, motivated by the goals of the actors, should enable explanation and possibly also prediction of process outcomes. However, it seems extremely unlikely that the detailed nature of such management can be read off *a priori*. In any given case there will be too many potential, often unknown, competing goals and contextual issues for substantial predictions to be made of the kind of participatory process that will be adopted, particularly given their dynamic nature. This ignorance may well be as prevalent for participants as it is for analysts, and successful management thus involves second guessing the views of the public and other policy makers in order to make strategically appropriate interventions in policy making processes. However, it does seem possible to identify certain general patterns which, together with the case-specific identification of structures which give different groups and individuals varying levels of influence over a public involvement programme, can explain and suggest likely outcomes.

Two different sets of patterns can be identified. Firstly, each of the variables has a predictable kind of impact on the process outcomes. Thus for instance it would seem that early involvement opens greater possibilities for influencing a process, and the potential impact of involvement of the entire local population is greater than that of a small number confined to a single locality. In general, therefore, we would expect to find that a commitment to democratic involvement in local authority policy making would be reflected in an 'opening up' of the process across all the variables – the kind of extended, broad-ranging, inclusive and influential involvement envisaged by Agenda 21. The contrasting position would be to limit some or all of these factors in order to promote or protect particular policy agendas, which might include the substantive goals of sustainable development. This is, of course, what is found in practice – that public involvement tends towards the local, to involve limited subsets of the population, to take place late in policy making processes, involve issues which are either marginal to or compatible with the mainstream of the local authority and to be consultative rather than binding. These latter generalisations do not, however, necessarily hold, since the relationship between substantive policy issues and the possible outcomes of public involvement is very issue- and context-dependent. So, for example, large scale public involvement may not be threatening to some agendas being pursued within an authority – as for instance in St Edmundsbury where widespread consultation was continued in order to support the LA21 team's position within the authority and their attempts to influence other departments' policies.

What does appear to be generally true is that the different variables are interdependent, and it is their combination that has an impact on the nature of the outcomes. Consequently management and limitation of impacts can be carried out through 'trading off' openness in one aspect with tighter control in another. It would also seem that *a priori* one can expect certain kinds of public involvement to have greater potential to challenge the status quo, for instance because they involve early participation or a broad range of issues. Similarly some processes are less predictable than others, often because of the methods selected or because the views of participants are not known in advance. Thus those who have interests in maintaining the status quo, or in pursuing particular substantive agendas, may well put an emphasis on less challenging and more predictable processes respectively.

There are also patterns observable in the processes which constitute and surround public involvement. Drawing on Lukes's conceptualisation outlined in Section 2.4,

policy making for public involvement can be seen as involving opportunities for the exercise of power at three levels (Lukes, 1974). The most obvious of these is that of the actual public engagement itself, which will be characterised by actors having more or less defined power relationships with each other and being able to achieve their ends to variable extents depending on those relationships. Such processes can range from the very well-defined, such as a consultation in which it is clear to all participants that the consulting body is merely being advised by the public and is not bound to act upon their views, to far less clear-cut situations where partners in a process are ostensibly equal but their voices carry differing weights in the decision making process. This reflects their ability to exercise power outside the immediate public process at the 'second level', characterised by control of the agendas which the public is able to discuss and of the action which is taken as a result of decisions. A crucial aspect of this level is therefore control over the linkage between an involvement process and policy making, since it is here that it is possible for actors to either ensure a significant level of impact of the public's views or, alternatively, to disconnect an apparently participatory process from actual policy decisions. Lukes's third level – that of very diffuse control through the hegemony of ideas – is beyond the control of policy actors in a particular process and constitutes an important structural constraint, as shown in the influence of changing conceptions of sustainable development on the two processes studied. However, at a slightly 'lower' level one can identify a local process through which a whole initiative is defined. This involves the conscious shaping by actors in the process of conceptual understanding, values and norms within the policy making process and the organisations in which it takes place – a process by which a set of ideas and values can become *locally* hegemonic. Such a process was prominent in County Durham, where on several occasions sustainable development and the nature of the public involvement process were explicitly and deliberately defined by powerful actors in order to shape the expectations and actions of those newly entering the process.

The possibility of control at different levels reduces the possibility of predicting how actors will in fact attempt to control a process in any given situation. What did emerge from the case studies, however, and is plausibly a general phenomenon, is a process of 'trading off' between control at different levels in a way analogous to the management of the variables described above. As an example, in County Durham the Round Tables and steering groups were apparently genuinely collaborative – there were power imbalances present but they were not overwhelming. However, this 'lack of control' by the authority over the process was compensated for both by

their control over the issues and impacts on the authority of the LA21 process and by the general framing of the initiative to be oriented away from impacts on the authority. In contrast, the LA21 in St Edmundsbury took place in a culture which encouraged public involvement in policy making and where sustainable development was framed in holistic, quality of life terms. The potential challenge posed by such 'third level' openness was, however, negated at the first and second levels through limiting public involvement to consultation and decoupling it from the policy making processes of the authority. Thus very different patterns of control by dominant actors took place in the two cases, but both illustrate a process by which openness at one level was compensated for by tighter control at another – and conversely suggest that influential public involvement would require public control at every level.

To summarise: as suggested by some of the literature public involvement processes are indeed complex, but some order is imposed by the way that actors attempt to manage them in order to promote particular aims, one of which is increasing democratic involvement of the public in governance. Such management is inevitable - it is not the case that some actors distort and manipulate the process, while others work to correct such distortions (*pace* Forester, 1993). The pursuit of all possible goals involves attempts to manage the system, either through control of the involvement process characteristics or through controlling decision making at a number of different levels.

Due to the complexity of the general nature of public involvement and policy making processes and the enormous contingent variability in the contexts of specific processes the possibility of *a priori* prediction seems slight. In a given situation it may well be possible to have knowledge of actors' goals and of the structures which give different groups and individuals varying levels of influence on a public involvement programme, and so give an indication of who is likely to prevail. The difficulty arises in predicting the mechanism by which this will be achieved. However, the suggestion made here is that beyond obvious generalisations about certain forms of public involvement having more or less potential to challenge existing policies, trade-offs are observable in which openness in some aspects can and will be compensated for by limitations imposed elsewhere in the complex processes in public involvement is embedded.

10.3.4 Managed public involvement and democracy

This conception of public involvement as a subject for policy making, and particularly of its impact on policy making as one of many variables open to management in order to promote actors' goals, seems a long way from theorising which privileges public involvement as a key aspect of the rightful control of society by its citizens. This final section therefore considers briefly how this conception fits into the normative models of democracy reviewed in Chapter Three.

Public involvement as characterised here is consistent with neither the ideal forms of representative democracy nor any of the various formulations of participatory democracy. Instead, it is characteristic of the hybrid centre ground, in which the local governance system based on the principle of representative democracy is augmented by many different structures and processes by which the public can interact with, influence and sometimes share control with decision makers, both elected and unelected. In this 'shared power world' (Bryson and Crosby, 1992) the democratic relationship between state and citizens is very complex, in particular in the uneven level of involvement of different individuals and sectors of the population.

One aspect of this is that there will almost necessarily be limitations on the numbers of those engaged in any 'public involvement process' beyond the universal franchise. This was clearly perceived as a problem by some actors in the case studies, who felt pushed to engage with as many people as possible because that would produce a representative, and therefore legitimate, expression of the views of 'the public'. Yet reaching the entire population is practically impossible. Any process therefore involves selection, either by its designers or through self-selection by participants. Given that 'the public' is not a homogeneous group, such selection almost inevitably also produces bias, with interests differentially represented in the policy making process. From some perspectives this is clearly problematic: it challenges both the liberal democratic concern with equality in the political process and positions which hold that an effective presence in the process is essential to protect substantive interests and that some groups are systematically under-represented and therefore disadvantaged. However, its inevitability suggests that without necessarily abandoning the political and ethical commitment to equity, it may well be necessary to reconsider traditional and previously sacrosanct standards and systems of democratic involvement (c.f. Abram and Vike, 2001). This issue

cannot be explored further here, but is noted as an important area for further theoretical development.

In the present context public involvement of this kind can be justified by many different arguments and used to support many, very disparate, visions of a democratic society. At one end of the range are positions which could use managed public involvement to contain conflict and so promote social stability, while expanding the elite involved in decision making to include new elements drawn from the 'expert public' in order to improve decision making and the provision of services to the mass of the population. At the other extreme it can be managed to change policies and provide genuine opportunities for traditionally excluded groups to influence the decision making process. What is extremely unlikely to be achieved by such managed public involvement is radical political change. The potential challenge posed by public involvement to the state suggests strongly that given the opportunity and power to control it state actors will ensure that public involvement supports or augments the representative democratic system rather than supplants it. This parallels the argument made in the previous chapter. There the issue was that if the consensus necessary for achieving sustainable development could not be assumed, then public involvement had to be managed to create it or a semblance of it. The argument here is broader – that over and above the demands of sustainable development political stability requires that public involvement be managed for apparent consensus and sufficient non-dissent (c.f. Mann. 1970).

In practice, however, it seems likely – and is borne out by the cases studied – that because the level of public involvement is both conditional and contested the outcomes are likely to be managed to support existing power structures, with outcomes typically towards the conservative end of the range. More positively, however, even in this context it seems that involvement of this kind does provide mechanisms by which policies can be influenced by those not normally engaged – though with the proviso that given the heterogeneous nature of 'the public', the fragmented nature of their engagement will probably tend to reinforce inequalities between groups both in terms of their access and consequently in material outcomes. Such influence can come about partly because however conditional and limited it is, public involvement does provide an opportunity for the public's voices to be heard in the governance process, and in a society based on democratic norms such voices carry some weight. Moreover, as argued in the different context of research influences on policy making by Innes (1990), it seems plausible that public influence

is not just a direct process of changing present decisions, but is also indirect through changing the issues and terms of debate amongst policy makers. Finally, public involvement in the policy making process opens up the possibility for the public to contest and change the nature of their own participation and so increase their effectiveness – once they are involved they can (sometimes) become actors in the policy making processes which control public involvement.

10.4 Conclusion

This research set out with the rather practical aim of reaching a better understanding of an apparently failed policy initiative. This chapter however, used insights from the empirical studies to address a number of areas of theoretical difficulty. In each some progress was made, though in none is it suggested that this chapter represents ‘the final word’. It rather sets out some first steps in theoretical development which provide pointers along potentially fruitful avenues for future work.

One aspect of this was the development of improved characterisations of sustainable development, principally through separating out previously conflated elements of the concept. In particular it established the logical independence of its substantive and public involvement elements, while recognising the presence of strong political and historical associations between them.

Secondly it reinforced the conclusion of the preceding chapter that LA21 was unlikely to succeed on pragmatic grounds with the conceptual argument that the assumption of consensus which underpins Agenda 21 was unwarranted, and that LA21 was therefore unable to proceed in the way envisaged by Agenda 21 and the guidance provided to local authorities. It was suggested that this also left an irresolvable and destructive tension within the concept of participatory sustainable development. The necessity of overcoming this tension - in practice if not in theory – came together with the contested nature of the concept to produce a more political conceptualisation of sustainable development. This sees it as a political agenda, to be advanced through complex and conflictive policy making processes in the same manner as other, more traditional political goals. Public involvement is an integral part of this process, with a dual role as both a channel for public influence on policy making and as tool managed by policy makers to advance their own goals.

It was also suggested that many of the arguments which led to these conclusions were not specific to the issue of sustainable development. In particular, while sustainable development provides a powerful rationale for widespread consensus,

the same consensus assumption underlies the stability of the state – and if it is not present then it has to be manufactured. Public involvement's potential to both support and challenge the policies and political stability of the state goes beyond the field of sustainable development, and it was therefore suggested that in general public involvement will be managed in the pursuit of political and substantive aims – while at the same time presenting real possibilities for popular influence on policy making. How this situation should be assessed normatively is another issue, for which existing theories of democracy seem ill-suited. Whether or not it represents an advance in 'democracy', such public involvement processes are a salient characteristic of the observable shift in governance towards a complex, unstructured and fragmented 'middle ground' which combines elements of representative and participatory democracy. The above analysis is put forward as an attempt at a normatively agnostic but practically adequate analysis of such processes.

Finally, it would seem possible that because of the specific conceptual problems of public involvement in sustainable development and the pragmatic nature of their proposed resolution, it is in such ill-defined governance processes that policy making for sustainable development is most feasible. If so, then the advancement of any particular interpretation of sustainable development will not take place through the establishment of a static set of policies and processes but through a dynamic and contested process in which public involvement will have a central role.

Chapter 11 Conclusions and reflections

11.1 Introduction

In the early 1990s Local Agenda 21 appeared to offer an opportunity for radical changes in UK local governance. The rhetoric of Agenda 21 and the guidance to local authorities which followed suggested that through the development of local sustainable development strategies local democracy could be revived and become more participatory. However, this promise was largely unfulfilled, prompting the closely linked questions *why was this the case?* and *what happened instead?* This research set out to explore this issue, and in this final chapter the results are drawn together to summarise the analysis and partial explanation of the outcomes of the LA21 initiative in England.

The nature of the research was directed by the premise that key factors in explaining the 'failure' of LA21 were the ambiguity inherent in the basic concepts and the complexity of the institutional context in which it was being implemented, since both opened up manifold opportunities for the rather narrow agenda for radical change to be deflected or suppressed. It thus took a different approach from previously published research which had identified a number of factors which prevented LA21 from achieving Agenda 21's transformative aims, ranging from political opposition to fundamental flaws in the local authority approach to public involvement. In general, however, this material largely failed to provide an adequate account either of how such factors operated or of the nature and structure of the observed variability in outcomes. The principal objective of this research was therefore to provide a fuller understanding and explanation of the democratic aspects of the LA21 initiative by investigating the mechanisms by which it was developed – that is, the policy making processes within local authorities. It was principally concerned with the questions:

How did local authority policy processes shape the nature of public involvement in Local Agenda 21?

In particular, what happened within local authorities to subvert the radical aims apparently embodied in Agenda 21?

The results of this enquiry are presented in this chapter at several levels of generality. The most specific, and therefore most certain, are the analyses of the two specific policy making processes for public involvement in LA21 which formed the

empirical basis of the work. At a more general level it is suggested that similar processes took place in other local authorities and therefore that these specific conclusions also provide partial explanations for the outcome of the English LA21 initiative as a whole. This analysis also provides the basis for some speculation about the integration of sustainable development into the mainstream of policy making through the local government modernisation process. At the most abstract level are the developments of the theoretical understanding of sustainable development, public involvement and their interrelationship which were enabled by the empirical research.

The next section sets out these conclusions from the research. This is followed by reflections on the overall approach adopted in the research, considering whether its conception of the policy making process, the critical realist underpinning of this and methodology used were appropriate and effective. In the light of these conclusions and reflections some suggestions are then made identifying areas for further research. The chapter concludes with a re-evaluation of the motivation and purpose of the research.

11.2 The conclusions from the research

The stories of the two case studies demonstrated clearly the influence of the policy making processes on the nature of the public involvement in their respective LA21 initiatives. In each case different aspects of these processes were influential.

The County Durham LA21 established a stable and productive programme of public action and behaviour change, with the public involved both at that level and in much smaller numbers in policy making for the initiative as a whole. It was determinedly not about public involvement in policy making more widely and so made no contribution to meeting the radical goals of Agenda 21. This outcome arose from the values and goals of the initiating officer and the team he gathered around him and the compatibility of the approach with the context – a local authority with an ethos and policies which were hostile to both increased consideration of environmental issues and to public involvement in policy making. The processes by which the programme was developed were essential to its success, as it survived and prospered through the management of the public's involvement and of the process as a whole in order to minimise disruption. Internal challenges were excluded or suppressed, while potentially damaging contact with other policy processes was carefully controlled and avoided.

For very different reasons St Edmundsbury's LA21 also failed to engage the public at large in the authority's policy making processes. This was despite adopting an approach closely modelled on the LGMB's guidance, drawing on a fairly radical interpretation of Agenda 21, and the authority as a whole being supportive of both sustainable development and public involvement initiatives. In this case the dominant arguments in the policy making process were institutional, as other actors within the authority took steps to protect their own policies and programmes from control by either the public or the LA21 team. The interdepartmental and communicative nature of policy making in the authority made it impossible for the team to avoid the subsequent conflicts, and their weakness as the proponents of a new and poorly integrated initiative competing in a crowded policy environment ensured their defeat. LA21 as a separate initiative was an inappropriate policy vehicle for policies which were generally viewed sympathetically within the authority and its reincarnation as a component of the Community Plan marked the resolution of many of the institutional conflicts and the possibility of integrating Agenda 21's goals into the authority's mainstream policy making.

While the details of each case study are clearly unique, there are good reasons for supposing that many of the characteristics of these policy processes would have been shared by other LA21 initiatives. The following general but necessarily tentative conclusions can therefore be drawn.

- A: The substantive beliefs and goals of policy actors made a difference to policy outcomes, and the existence of many legitimate but competing interpretations of the key concepts of sustainable development and public involvement was partially responsible for the range in outcomes observable in the LA21 initiative as a whole. In particular, the participatory and holistic conception of LA21 was only one of many possible interpretations, and where other interpretations were dominant different outcomes ensued. While in some cases these were successful in their own terms they did not represent progress on the 'new environmental agenda'.
- B: The local government context was extremely important, in that LA21 initiatives evolved in environments with pre-existing policies and local cultures which affected both their acceptability and determined the nature of the policy processes through which they were developed. This meant that the values and goals of an initiative's proponents were not necessarily reflected in the outcomes, since in the course of the policy making process other actors' values

and other policy agendas and institutional issues could become dominant. Again, it was the participatory and holistic approaches to LA21 which posed significant threats and were suppressed in order to further both substantive and institutional agendas within local authorities. This was the case even in apparently propitious circumstances, where ambitious LA21 initiatives could still be thwarted if they threatened the position of others promoting sustainable development and public involvement within the authority.

C: The nature of the policy making process for the LA21 was of great importance, as was the extent to which the proponents of LA21 could maintain control over it. Where such processes could be controlled and protected the values of the LA21's proponents were more likely to be realised than where they were unavoidably involved in interactive policy making within the authority. The feasibility of such control appears to have been strongly influenced by authorities' local cultures and explicit policies concerned with breaking down departmentalism. A perverse consequence was perhaps that authorities which engaged in the kind of integrated policy making necessary for advancing sustainable development were also those where LA21 was exposed to the greatest conflict with other initiatives.

These three generalisations about LA21 policy making processes can be drawn together to suggest that it was unlikely that any given initiative would achieve the aims of Agenda 21. Although the possibility is not ruled out by the workings of policy making processes, such an outcome required a combination of the following conditions:

- that the proponents of the LA21 espoused the participatory and holistic interpretation;
- that the interactions possible within and outside the local authority allowed them to maintain influence and control over the process; and
- that the process took place in a context in which the policy implications and methods of the LA21 were acceptable.

Each of these conditions was relatively unlikely, and their coincidence in a single authority even less so. Arguments for very radical changes in governance were unusual, not proposed by senior actors within local government, and were excluded from the policy making process where they arose. LA21 was principally an

initiative managed by the local state, for which radical governance change was not an acceptable objective.

These rather negative conclusions do not imply that realising the aims embodied in Agenda 21 was impossible in individual cases. However, they do imply that it should not have been unexpected that the initiative as a whole failed to deliver radical change and go some way to explain the variation in outcomes.

The above conclusions suggest that this failure was the result of contingent factors, which raises the question as to whether these could be overcome. From this perspective it seems that the nature of LA21 *as an initiative* was the problem – that it was an inappropriate policy vehicle for instituting the kind of policy and governance changes required for participatory and sustainable development. These specific failings could be remedied by an approach which placed public involvement and sustainable development at the centre of an authority's policy making, both in terms of priority and institutional structures. While this was unlikely to happen through LA21, with its lowly status as a non-statutory and under-supported initiative, such an approach is one legitimate interpretation of central government's current legislation and guidance on local government modernisation. Under this, community strategies could adopt the objectives of Agenda 21 and its thoroughgoing approach to public involvement, but with the stark differences from LA21 of having statutory force and formal status as the topmost level in an authority's hierarchy of strategies and plans. There is clearly no guarantee that this will happen, however. Exactly as with LA21 the initiation of these new processes as the result of central government directives will almost certainly lead to an immense variation in outcomes, with many of the same factors likely to play significant roles – the pre-existence of other policy agendas, institutional objectives and norms, and the possibility of multiple interpretations of both sustainable development and public involvement.

The above argument rests on the contingent nature of LA21's failure and so on the possibility that another approach might be successful in reaching the same objectives. However, the analysis of the literature and the case studies also led to conclusions which pose major conceptual challenges to the very possibility of radical changes in the form envisaged by Agenda 21 and suggest that the outcomes of LA21 were the result of attempts to implement the impossible.

Exploration of both principal concepts – of sustainable development and public involvement – showed the need for a rethinking of existing characterisations and underlying assumptions. For both this resulted in the production of analyses which

are claimed to be more practically adequate than much previous work in these fields, principally through their recognition of complexity, less normative stance and greater awareness of the influence of power on policy making processes.

A. The incoherence of participatory sustainable development

Firstly, the notion of achieving sustainable development through a highly participative, consensual and apolitical policy agenda seems incoherent. Some degree of environmental realism appears to be inevitable in order to give substance to the environmental protection aspects of the concept. Agenda 21's assumption that this is compatible with high levels of public involvement because of the existence or possibility of widespread consensus over the nature of environmental threats and appropriate responses seems extremely implausible. If this assumption is dropped, however, there is an inescapable conceptual tension between the necessary imposition of 'objective' environmental limits to policies and the democratic principle and instrumental requirement for public involvement.

The pragmatic resolution of this tension can be achieved through a political process of managing policy making and public involvement, in order to create areas of limited consensus, minimise active dissent and advance different component policies for sustainable development in different ways with the support of different sections of the population. Conceptually this gives 'sustainable development' a dual role. As a normative concept it acts as a strategic label under and through which a particular preferred solution to the 'environment and development problem' can be pursued. However, many legitimate interpretations of the meaning of 'sustainable development' are possible, and it is therefore also an analytic envelope which encompasses this set of incompatible positions. Policy making for sustainable development is consequently an arena in which traditional tensions between economic development and social justice and 'new' political struggles between these and 'the environment' are debated and solutions adopted.

B. Complex, managed public involvement

Secondly, the simple policy processes presupposed by the idea of developing a sustainable development strategy through a consensual process and then implementing it do not exist. Public involvement engages with far more complex structures and processes of local governance than this model envisages. It is itself complex, in that any particular instance of 'public involvement' can be characterised by many different attributes, including its position on a spectrum from policy making to action as well as the nature of participants, scope of issues addressed and

so on. This complexity provides a suite of elements which can be managed in order to influence the level of the public's influence on policy making processes. Further, the broader policy making within which public involvement processes are embedded provides further scope for actors to control them and their impact. This complexity and the multitude of ways in which public involvement can be managed make prediction difficult. Two general conclusions were drawn about such processes, which identify mechanisms by which those with most power may attempt to control or manage public involvement. Firstly, the various characteristics of public involvement have predictable kinds of impact on the process outcomes. Secondly the overall impact of public involvement depends on the combination of these 'variables' and of actors' attempts to control at different 'levels' in the process, so the management and limitation of public influence can be carried out through 'trading off' openness in one aspect with tighter control in another.

This conclusion may appear somewhat disturbing. A conception of public involvement as a process which can and will be managed to further policy makers' agendas does not fit well with either prevalent, idealised notions of participatory democracy or the simplicity of a purely representative democratic system. However, it does seem to be a realistic characterisation of public involvement as currently practiced within the local democratic system, which suggests that there is a need to develop democratic theorising to provide normative criteria for assessing such processes. Moreover, such a conceptualisation does not deny the possibility of public influence on policy making, and so of some form of 'democratic process'. The public are present not simply as subjects of policy making but as actors, with the opportunity to further both their substantive agendas and also to change the rules of their own engagement – to engage in the processes of policy making for public involvement.

These conclusions share a similar conception of policy making and governance which would provide a possible environment for participatory sustainable development. One proposes a fragmented combination of enabling public influence and action and imposing policy choices in order to further an ill-defined sustainable development agenda. The other envisages public involvement taking place in an equally ill-defined hybrid of participatory democracy and the existing representative democratic system. These seem very compatible, and provide the opportunity for the pragmatic (if not intellectually satisfying) resolution of the conceptual problems through a process which is necessarily dynamic, complex and conflictive.

Interestingly current shifts in patterns of governance, particularly as enjoined by the modernisation agenda, appear to be creating the possibility of exactly this kind of environment, and so the opportunity for the public to engage with policy making in advancing sustainable development (Connelly, 2002; Connelly and Sharp, 2000).

11.3 Reflections on the research

This research adopted an approach to studying public involvement in LA21 which privileged one aspect – the policy making processes through which public involvement was developed and managed. The preceding section drew together conclusions from this, demonstrating the validity of this focus as a way of generating useful and generalisable explanations of the initiative. This further suggests that the overall approach adopted was appropriate to the subject matter. This section examines this claim in more detail, looking in turn at the conception of the policy making process, the critical realist philosophy which underpinned the research and the methodology used.

The particular characterisation of the policy making process adopted at the outset had the apparent advantage of an eclectic approach to possible explanatory factors, although this was potentially countered by a consequent problem of complexity and lack of structure. However, in practice this characterisation was appropriate to the empirical research – it served well both as a guide to the complex situation in the field and as a practically adequate framework for describing what was found there. Thus it was apparent that actors with different goals based in differing belief systems could be identified and that these goals spanned the substantive, the institutional and the personal. It was equally clear that these goals did not translate simply into policy outcomes but that their interaction with each other and with a number of different aspects of ‘the context’ was crucially important. Formal structures within the local authorities influenced the interactions that could take place and the resources that actors could bring to these. In particular these formal structures played a role in determining whether interaction took place at all, and thus in controlling the extent of conflict that took place within the policy making process. Informal structures, including norms of behaviour, likewise played significant roles in determining what could or could not be attempted by actors, and thus their ability to achieve their aims. The ‘context’ also refers to a set of external factors – policies and social currents – which were seen to influence the actors’ goals and some aspects of the

internal context and so to have important impacts on how the policy making processes evolved.

Elements of all the more detailed theories and characterisations of policy making were applicable in some degree in the analysis of the studied processes. The eclecticism of the approach thus appears to have been justified – no single theory provided a complete explanation, yet each contributed to a richness of understanding. Some structure was given to this complexity by the very simple schema drawn up in Chapter Six (Figure 6.1), but it would seem appropriate and useful to develop this further into a more coherent, potentially explanatory model. The structure of Sabatier's 'advocacy coalition framework' (1987, 1998 etc.) discussed in Section 2.2.3 might well be a fruitful starting point, but would have to be modified substantially to reflect the structures of British local authorities, the importance of non-substantive goals and the communicative dimensions of policy making.

Following the same argument, Chapter Two outlined the strengths of critical realism as a basis for policy studies which purportedly reconciles the tensions between more dominant research paradigms and at the same time allows the use of language and concepts which are shared by policy actors, including causal explanations. This research adopted the basic tenets of the critical realist approach, relying on its model of human agency, causal powers and the existence of constructed, mutable but real social structures. Again, this conceptual framework appeared to be applicable to the research, when used to inform the work rather than force an investigation of well-defined causal mechanisms and specific patterns of mechanism, context and outcome (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). For processes as complex as those studied such clear causal systems are not to be expected, but the approach does enable a schema to be set out of the areas to be examined by research (as in Figure 6.1). In itself such a schema is not an explanatory or predictive model but it provides a framework within which explanatory mechanisms can be explored which, by their nature, are peculiar to particular contexts. Generalisation and prediction can then follow where belief systems and contextual factors are judged to be sufficiently similar and their interactions are well enough understood that findings can be extrapolated between individual policy processes.

A problem inherent to the realist understanding of causality, noted already in Section 2.3, is the apparently arbitrary separation of 'mechanism' from 'context'. This was evident in some of the analyses in Chapter Seven and Eight, where it was difficult to

establish a clear distinction between process and context since much of the latter is mediated through mechanisms of exactly the same kind as those being studied in the policy making process. This does not, however, appear to be a serious problem, as the realist approach does not postulate a clear-cut ontological difference between mechanisms and structures. For the purposes of understanding any particular policy process other policy making and human interactions act as structural factors, forming the context within which the studied process occurs - the distinction is a necessary analytical device (Outhwaite, 1987).

The methodological reliance on interviews and the testimony of policy actors raised three concerns over the validity of the findings. Firstly, these almost inevitably emphasised the contribution of individuals and their belief systems to the policy process, to the detriment of explanations in terms of broader structures, as predicted by March and Olsen (1989: 40). While it was possible to use such testimony to investigate some aspects of the impacts of the policy 'context', particularly where this could be seen as being constituted by specific actions or identifiable objects or structures, other aspects were less amenable to study. As noted in Section 9.3.1 it was frustratingly difficult to determine the impact of the less tangible macro-scale structures and so the feasibility of sustainable development through an initiative such as LA21 in the face of 'economic forces'. Investigating such issues would probably require a different approach to research.

The second issue is that of the extent to which actors' testimony was a reliable source of information. Little can be added here to the discussion in Section 6.4.3 which concluded that while cross-checking between sources and checking arguments and interpretations with principal actors could assist the development of an accurate analysis and narrative, this ultimately relied on the researcher's skill and judgement. While this was certainly felt to be possible, such an approach also perhaps had the effect of encouraging the production of a narrative which was *too* coherent - it is possible that some outcomes were the effect more of coincidence and rule following than the interaction of the rational pursuit of goals based on well-thought-out philosophical positions!

Finally, there was the issue of the impact of the researcher on the processes themselves. While to some extent this was incalculable, examples of clear effects of the research process on policy making were noted. (For example, a discussion between two officers which was directly prompted by a question about the non-occurrence of such a discussion.) Such effects were unavoidable, given the nature of

the research process. Further, the depth and purported honesty of actors' testimony were directly related to the extent to which researcher and researched worked together – validity of reporting and researcher impact were thus intimately linked. Given this, the issue became more ethical than methodological, a matter of attempting to assess and influence the nature of the impact. Possibly the most significant was to encourage policy makers to be more reflective, which was perhaps a desirable effect.

11.4 Further research

These conclusions and reflections suggest the need for further research in a number of fields. They were derived from two detailed case studies and a number of partial reviews of LA21, and so are necessarily tentative. Given the adoption of many of the elements of LA21 by the community planning process and the political significance and potentially far greater impact of the new approach there is an urgent need for a relatively neutral review of the initiative's overall contribution to both sustainability and governance change. Like this research, in order to generate useful, transferable findings this should focus not just on outcomes but also on the processes which lay behind these, and compare the outcomes with the aims of those who initiated and influenced the process. This review process should be iterative, with future research to analyse and evaluate how public involvement and sustainable development fare as the local government modernisation agenda evolves.

More broadly, this research examined only one aspect of how the public engages with the state in a shared power world. Since it suggested that this engagement does not fit easily with the way public involvement is usually conceptualised, and particularly with normative democratic arguments, there is a need to look at how the public in fact engages in other contexts in order to test the ideas put forward here. One outcome of such work would be a more developed and robust analytical framework for characterising public involvement and its interaction with policy making in local governance. At the same time there is a need for development of a normative theory of public involvement which is appropriate to this analysis, in order to provide criteria by which to assess the quality and value of public involvement in policy making.

More broadly still, this in turn implies a need for a better understanding of how policy making in local government works. As suggested in the preceding section, the approach adopted here appears to offer a basis for such work, particularly

through its maintenance of the notions of causality and explanatory power within a framework which explicitly embraces the constructed nature of social reality. One aspect of such development would be the elaboration of the schema 'mapping out' the components and interactions within local government policy making processes, drawing on Sabatier's work. However, within the framework established by such a schema there is also a need for research adopting different approaches to improve understanding of specific aspects of the processes. While a full exposition of such a research programme is beyond the scope of this discussion, two fruitful lines of investigation would perhaps be the use of discourse analysis to investigate how the ideas of sustainable development and public involvement are constructed and used in policy making, and further analysis of the impact of institutional frameworks on the development of public involvement and the possibility of integrated policy making for sustainable development.

11.5 Research, policy making and the researcher

The research presented here has allowed some general conclusions to be drawn about both a specific policy initiative and about the concepts which underpinned it. However, some of these conclusions apparently undermine the rationale for the initiative and so bring into question the motivation for the research. This final section addresses this problem.

The motivation for this work was originally to support the 'new environmental agenda' – the pursuit of the combination of holistic sustainable development and participatory democracy which was intended to transform local government. Its initial, intended aim was therefore to explore how and why LA21 had failed to achieve this, focusing on 'barriers to public involvement' erected by local authority policy making processes, and so to suggest ways that policy making could be improved in order to make more progress in future.

However, the conclusions of the research strongly suggest that the agenda itself is incoherent – that the pursuit of such a change in policy through an initiative such as LA21 was not only unlikely to succeed but was not feasible in principle. This raises some challenging questions for the research as initially conceptualised. *Can one blame 'failure' on barriers raised against public involvement if the initiative was itself impossible? Did it in fact fail? If it could not have succeeded in realising the objectives of Agenda 21, does it make sense to consider it a failure, or should some other criteria be used?* Most existing analyses of LA21 are normative, working with

specific definitions of sustainable development and public involvement which determine acceptable objectives and criteria for assessing 'success'. These analyses are dominated by holistic and participative democratic interpretations, and so underestimate progress made towards sustainability and through public involvement defined in other ways.

Perhaps most serious is the question of whether promoting an incoherent policy agenda is worthwhile, and whether to do so would constitute 'better policy making'. Further, given the tension between democratic norms and environmental sustainability, *what is the ethical way for a researcher who believes in both to act?*

The response to these questions was that as the tensions and incoherence embedded within Agenda 21 became more apparent the tenor of the research was altered. It became less normative and focused more on the questions of *what happened and why?* rather than *what went wrong?* The investigation became one of management and necessary limitations on public involvement rather than of the value-laden concept of 'barriers'. At the same time it became open to the idea that the initiative rather than the context was the cause of 'the problem'. However, such a change in turn calls into question the role of the researcher, particularly as one possible outcome from the research conclusions would be to strengthen the case for opposing both public involvement and sustainable development.

The proposal made above (Section 10.2.4) which resolves the tension through dropping the assumption of consensus from conceptions of sustainable development points to an acceptable way forward for research and the researcher. If sustainable development is not to be achieved in a consensual way, but its meaning and realisation are to be essentially contested and political issues, then as an individual with the democratic right to be a political actor the researcher has a legitimate role to play in advancing environmental sustainability, social justice and more responsive government in the face of forces which oppose all of these. In a turbulent, dynamic and fragmented policy making process there is no need to prioritise one of these over the others on a permanent and principled basis. It is consistent with the analysis presented here that elements of each can be pursued simultaneously, sometimes in a mutually supportive way and at others requiring that the tensions between them are recognised and temporary prioritisations made.

For the researcher, playing some role in the policy making process is inescapable. The process and outputs of research are neither completely separated from the studied process nor neutral in their impacts. There is thus a need for conscious

engagement and so the principled and deliberate use of research. The specific role that the researcher on policy can play in political policy making processes is to explore how they work in practice rather than normative theory and myth, and how the public does and can engage with them in order to provide guidance for more effective ways of advancing substantive agendas. In the words of Antonio Gramsci

...such analyses cannot and must not be ends in themselves (unless the intention is merely to write a chapter of past history) but acquire significance only if they serve to justify a particular practical activity or initiative of will. They reveal the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can most fruitfully be applied; they suggest immediate tactical operations... (Gramsci, 1971: 185).

Acronyms

DCC	Durham County Council
DETR	Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (UK central government)
DoE	Department of the Environment (UK central government)
DRCC	Durham Rural Community Council
DTLR	Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (UK central government)
ICLEI	International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives
IDeA	Improvement and Development Agency
LA21	Local Agenda 21
LGA	Local Government Association
LGMB	Local Government Management Board
LGTB	Local Government Training Board
SEBC	St Edmundsbury Borough Council
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development

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Appendix A: Projects funded by Co. Durham LA21 Partnership Fund (February 1996-October 1999)

		Principal objective(s)*		
		Environmental	Social	Economic
1996	Sustainable Woodlands project	●		
	National Youth Participation project		●	
	Wood Residue Heating project	●		
	Croxdale Community LA21 Group	●	●	
	School Wind Turbine	●		
	Ornithological Database	●		
	Biodiversity Action Plan	●		
	Wood Residue Heating project	●		
1997	Wetland for Minewater Pollution project	●		
	School/Community Wildlife Area	●		
	Regional Butterfly Conservation Action Plan	●		
	Biodiesel project	●		
	Co. Durham Youth Participation project		●	
	Baha'i World Citizenship Competition		●	
1998	LA21 Partnership Sustainability training	●	●	●
	Scrap Bank	●		●
	Eco-schools conference	●		
	Breeding Bird Atlas	●		
	Cycling exhibition	●		
	Town and Parish Council Environmental Audit	●		
	Walk to School campaign	●	●	
1999	Sustainable Regeneration pilot projects	●	●	●
	Young People and Public Transport project	●	●	
	Credit Union		●	●
	Promoting employment in the environmental sector	●	●	●
	'Clean and Green' Vehicle seminar		●	
	Solar Water Heating project	●		
	Local Food Economy seminar	●	●	●

*Note: categorisation of 'principal objective' not in the original list but added by the author

Appendix B: Projects funded by St Edmundsbury Borough Council LA21 (1998-1999)

History/heritage*:

a) Direct support from 'Our Future Now' fund:

- creation of circular walk
- local history exhibition and pamphlet
- production of parish map
- remembrance project creating mural and commemorative book
- survey of local buildings and exhibition

b) Supported through funds drawn by LA21 team from other sources:

- ancient building restoration (2)*
- church lighting*
- creation of interpretative sign*
- local history book*
- parish signs (2)*
- war memorial renovation*

Social

a) Direct support from 'Our Future Now' fund:

- computer network servicing a cluster of villages
- mediation training for women's group
- production of guide for Age Concern volunteers providing services for elderly people in rural areas

b) Supported through funds drawn by LA21 team from other sources:

- equipment for two arthritis sufferers' support organisations*
- office equipment for Alzheimer's Disease Society*
- publicity costs for day care provision for people with disabilities*
- publicity for drug support project*
- recruitment video for Special Constabulary*

Transport

Supported through funds drawn by LA21 team from other sources:

- footway along major road*
- rural transport service*

Educational

a) Direct support from 'Our Future Now' fund:

- buffet as part of school 'village studies' event
- organic garden for college students with disabilities
- school garden including wildlife and sensory elements for disabled pupils
- wildlife area in 'outdoor classroom'
- woodchip path in school nature reserve

b) Supported through funds drawn by LA21 team from other sources:

Repair to pre-school building

Shade pergola in school garden (2)

Environmental projects

a) Direct support from 'Our Future Now' fund:

creation of 'nectar rich area' and mosaics

hedgerow planting event

planting of remembrance garden

purchase of art and craft materials for Wildlife Watch club

tree planting at Scout & Guide HQ

village community wildlife area

b) Supported through funds drawn by LA21 team from other sources:

renovation of village pond

vehicle trailer for conservation volunteers

village garden

wildlife area in cemetery extension

*Note: Categorisation in original list provided by St Edmundsbury Borough Council