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**Learning from the Case:**  
*A Grounded Account of Best Value Practice  
from within Easington District Council*

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

**School of Applied Social Science**

**Durham University**

**2012/13**

**Abstract:**

The thesis provides a grounded account of Best Value (BV) practice from within the setting of Easington District Council (1974-2009); formally recognised as an ‘excellent’ local authority by the Audit Commission in a Comprehensive Performance Assessment completed in 2003.

Introduced by the Local Government Act 1999, BV replaced the previous Conservative regime of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT). A regime which was criticised as relegating the import of quality in favour of a robust emphasis on the financial cost of local public service delivery. In contrast, conceived by the newly elected Labour government in May 1997, BV was intended to ensure “*continuous improvement in both the quality and cost of services*”. Initially at the forefront of New Labour’s improvement and modernisation agenda for local government, the ‘test’ of BV was intended to “*be the hallmark of the modern council*” (DETR 1998: 64).

Informed by personal experience, the aim of the thesis is to acknowledge the human accomplishment of BV as a collaborative process as achieved through the culturally evolved meaning making frames enacted by both elected members and paid employees working in the context of a local authority setting. The thesis provides a description of the local authority as situated in place and of that placedness as providing a bounded sense of reality determining the interpretation and implementation of national policy frameworks – specifically, BV.

Achieved by way of combination of an analysis of local authority documents, observational methods and semi-structured interviews the thesis examines the complexity of the contemporary local authority organisational form and presents an argument for a more nuanced approach in appreciating the interactions which inform the *underlying* accomplishment of specific performance outcomes by the local authority.

## **Preface:**

Warning! Caution! Alert! Read me...

We are not just one person, we are many peoples. Most of the time I consider myself a girl, at other times, I am a woman. Having successfully resisted the shackles of 'wife' I am a life-partner, lover, friend, companion sometimes adversary, at other times menace (latterly, I fear, I have fulfilled the role of the proverbial albatross) – to my house-mate, fellow dog-owner and significant 'other'. If my dog was to maul a child, in the eyes of the law I would become a 'dog-owner'. However, the furry creature, currently contentedly at my feet, does not (in his own doggy-consciousness) consider himself to be a possession owned by me. At 5pm he will become a nuisance as he pesters to go out and have his chief 'ball-thrower' entertain. Yes, at times I am 'ball-thrower' too.

The act of writing imposes a schizophrenic experience. I am me but I am not me. These are my words. Correction: these are not my words. These words and their meaning, I share in common with others: the *langue*, the *parole*. Ours is an existential riddle. Contained within the pages of this binding, are the words I have chosen, selected, to express my inner thoughts and convey my meaning. As I type, these thoughts are represented on the page as black ink against a white background. I am physically absent. My voice is silent. Yet, an impression is conveyed. A mark is made and a trace of self is transacted.

***Aware of my (possibly and perhaps) unconventional self I think it necessary to preface the words of this text – I think it necessary to provide some context to my meaning...***

Following a number of years of personal struggle I have come to accept that I am an 'odd-bod'. Frequently, this is a revelation which surprises. I do not claim the wisdom of Confucius, but a fish cannot swim through air and a bird can not fly through water. Reading Dennis Wrong's *The Over-socialised Conception of Man* (1961) in which he argues that human beings should be seen as social without being entirely socialised

(i.e. that there is inevitably tension had between individual human nature, suspended amidst the requirements of the wider human civilisation): I see myself. The oil contained within my pores stubbornly refuses to dissolve and be rendered soluble within the waters of the academy. I am attracted to organisations and I am intrigued by their constitution. But (alas!), I find that I am not, naturally, *of* the organisation.

The thesis has taken an age to complete. “*When will it be done?*” “*Are you nearly finished yet?*” Dander-blast! Bush-twaddle! The well meant inquiries of others! The PhD has been my own personal odyssey, at times a Greek Tragedy. No doubt to the casual observer, a great comic farce. The following information is stated for the benefit of the reader: during the third year of the thesis (unbeknown to me at the time) I edged into depression... Depression: the malaise of modernity. In this ‘brave new world’ (from which many of us can be found running scared) the dream of Aldous Huxley’s *Soma* has been realised many times over by the pharmaceutical giants. I have my own ‘magic beans’ but I have yet to find a beanstalk growing at my window. I should qualify, the experience of depression was only in part connected to the completion of the thesis.

Even though I am now quite recovered, I continue in my struggle to comprehend the medical diagnosis of ‘depression’. Whether as ‘victim’ or sociologist, I recoil from the label and stubbornly resist the pronouncements of experts. Unlike Churchill I have no ‘black-dog’. My dog is an impatient fur-ball, of mixed parentage, without ‘papers’ and purchased for the measly sum of £80 from above an off-license in Hartlepool (much to his own chagrin and delusions of grandeur). I cheerfully refer to this past episode as that time when I went a bit ‘fruit-loop’. When at its worse, I can clearly recall the acute physicality of the experience. Life stopped, because at that point I could not go on. My study at home, in which I now sit and type, amongst a rainforest of stray papers and a battalion of books, was mothballed. The thesis languished. I did not work. I did not write. Instead, I walked. I chopped wood. I counted stitches. Slowly I got better and in time I reached the decision that I would continue...

It is not my intention to define myself in terms of ‘the depression’. I am a ‘Charlotte’. I tend to find that people who have known ‘Charlottes’ agree that we are a breed apart.

The name inculcates personality. Unfortunately, there are Charlottes who prove my thesis wrong, but I generally think them as undeserving of their great title! (I jest you know, I hope that that is clear.) Yes, I have experienced ‘depression’ but I am *not* a depressive. Ardently, I consider myself a person of a most cheery disposition. Unexpectedly, the experience had imparted something – insight perhaps. Certainly my perspective became changed. Significantly, I recognised the thesis as having been informed by the experience. It is difficult to quantify to what extent, but even today the experience continues to resonate.

When I had suspended my studies, I retreated. Although social, I declined to socialise. Temporarily freed from the seeming coercion of the perpetual motion of socialisation I began recognise anew the mechanisms in which I had previously been suspended. Bauman (1990) writes that the task of the Sociologist is to ‘*defamiliarise the familiar*’. For a time, in my morose state, I was locked out. It was a choice I made. In that time I became differently acclimatised. It was as though I was on the outside looking in. Now, when once I was outside, I stand from inside looking under. The thesis does not comply with the codes of convention. There are no big *ANSWERS* contained within this tome but I do consider that over time my findings have crystallised. As much as this has been a process of serious intellectual inquiry, it has also been journey of self revelation. I hope the contents of the thesis prove interesting to the reader.

In conclusion, I realise that the University might easily have not made the allowances it did to enable my completion of the thesis. I thank all those involved in its completion for their understanding and support – it is comforting to learn of the kindness of ‘bureaucrats’.

*And now, of the road ahead?*

*I am philosophical. A journey is full of so many more exciting possibilities than a predestined route of travel.*

- ♥ Firstly, sincere, heartfelt thanks to Michael Baker. [*This man deserves a medal!!*] In the time since this thesis was began he has aged considerably.
  
- ♥ Many thanks to Helen Charnley.  
Helen joined in with the thesis mid-way through completion and saw it through to the end, with a grace and determination which has aided wellbeing.
  
- ♥ Thanks also to Ian Roberts.  
Ian provided expert guidance in the early stages of the research and greatly encouraged a sociological frame of inquiry.
  
- ♥ Many thanks to all the people at EDC who so generously participated in the research and, as the saying goes, '*made it possible*'.
  
- ♥ Others of you have observed anxiously at the sidelines, impatient for an 'end'.  
Thank you for your perseverance, I look forward catching up with you...



**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

|                                   |             |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Abstract</b>                   | <b>i</b>    |
| <b>Preface</b>                    | <b>ii</b>   |
| <b>A Personal Note of Thanks</b>  | <b>v</b>    |
| <b>Table of Contents</b>          | <b>vi</b>   |
| <b>List of Tables and Figures</b> | <b>xiii</b> |
| <b>List of Appendices</b>         | <b>xvi</b>  |
| <b>List of Abbreviations</b>      | <b>xvii</b> |

**CHAPTER ONE**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1.1. Introduction: Overview</b>  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>1.2. The role of personal experience as motivating interest in the research area</b> | <b>2</b>  |
| 1.2.1. Introducing Best Value .....   | 2         |
| 1.2.2. The experience of BV .....   | 3         |
| 1.2.3. Seeing the course of history through the eyes of another .....                   | 4         |
| 1.2.4. Actual change .....  | 6         |
| <b>1.3. Informing the Case <i>for</i> the Research</b>                                  | <b>8</b>  |
| 1.3.1. Recognising informal mechanisms within the authority .....                       | 10        |
| 1.3.2. A cast of thousands.....   | 11        |
| <b>1.4. Underlying Aims of the Research</b>   | <b>15</b> |
| 1.4.1. A learning experience .....  | 15        |
| <b>1.5. Structure of the Thesis</b>   | <b>17</b> |

**CHAPTER TWO:**

**Introducing Best Value – An outline of the formal policy area**

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>2.1. Introduction</b>                         | <b>19</b> |
| <b>2.2. Understanding Best Value</b>             | <b>20</b> |
| 2.2.1. The Twelve Principles of Best Value ..... | 20        |
| 2.2.2. The Local Government Act 1999 .....       | 23        |
| 2.2.3a. Best Value Performance Indicators .....  | 24        |
| 2.2.3b. Best Value Performance Reviews.....      | 27        |

---

|             |  |           |
|-------------|--|-----------|
| 2.2.3c.     | Best Value Performance Plans.....  | 29        |
| 2.2.3d.     | Best Value Inspections .....   | 31        |
| 2.2.3e.     | Government Intervention .....  | 33        |
| 2.2.4.      | Overview of the Initial Best Value Framework .....   | 34        |
| <b>2.3.</b> | <b>2.3. The Wider Context Informing the Development of BV</b>                              | <b>36</b> |
| 2.3.1.      | The Legacy of CCT .....  | 36        |
| 2.3.2.      | Best Value – <i>Make Do and Extend?</i> .....  | 38        |
| 2.3.3.      | Introducing the Audit Commission .....   | 40        |
| 2.3.4.      | Local Government Reform: The Major Years (1990-97) .....                                   | 42        |
| 2.3.4a.     | Total Quality Management (TQM) .....   | 43        |
| 2.3.4b.     | The Citizen’s Charter .....  | 45        |
| 2.3.5.      | The New Labour Conversion .....  | 45        |
| 2.3.5a.     | Labour’s ‘Local Government Problem’ .....  | 45        |
| 2.3.5b.     | ‘New’ Labour .....   | 46        |
| 2.3.5c.     | The Third Way .....  | 46        |
| <b>2.4.</b> | <b>New Public Management Theories: The Golden Thread in the<br/>Best Value Haystack</b>    | <b>49</b> |
| 2.4.1.      | The New Public Management .....  | 49        |
| 2.4.2.      | Best Value and the New Performance Management .....  | 51        |
| 2.4.3.      | Understanding ‘Governance’ .....   | 54        |
| 2.4.4.      | New Public Management & Governance – <i>A Fusion?</i> .....                                | 55        |
| 2.4.5.      | Best Value – <i>A Less Mechanistic Control Orientated New Public<br/>Management?</i> ..... | 56        |
| <b>2.5.</b> | <b>Beyond BV: the wider performance framework of local<br/>government</b>                  | <b>58</b> |
| 2.5.1.      | Beacon Council Scheme .....  | 58        |
| 2.5.2.      | Local Public Service Agreements .....  | 60        |
| 2.5.3.      | Comprehensive Performance Assessment: <i>Best Value Mark II?</i> .....                     | 61        |
| 2.5.3a.     | Comprehensive Performance Assessment: Outline of the Process ....                          | 64        |
| 2.5.3b.     | A Lukewarm Reception .....   | 67        |
| 2.5.3c.     | Comprehensive Performance Assessment Revamped .....  | 71        |
| 2.5.4.      | Remember Best Value Performance Indicators .....   | 72        |
| 2.5.5.      | Farewell Comprehensive Performance Assessment .....  | 73        |

---

|             |                   |    |
|-------------|-------------------|----|
| <b>2.6.</b> | <b>Conclusion</b> | 75 |
|-------------|-------------------|----|

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Locating Easington District Council within the Institutional Setting of  
Local Government**

|             |   |     |
|-------------|---|-----|
| <b>3.1.</b> | <b>Introduction</b>   | 79  |
| <b>3.2.</b> | <b>Understanding Local Government</b>   | 81  |
| 3.2.1       | ‘A form of geographical and political decentralisation’ .....                           | 83  |
| 3.2.2       | ‘Directly elected councils’ .....   | 86  |
| 3.2.2.      | ‘Created by and subordinate to Parliament’: central-local<br>government relations ..... | 89  |
| 3.2.4.      | ‘Partial autonomy’ .....  | 98  |
| 3.2.5.      | ‘To provide a wide variety of services... through various and<br>indirect means’ .....  | 107 |
| 3.2.6.      | ‘Funded in part by local taxation’ .....  | 114 |
| <b>3.3.</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>   |     |

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Researching Best Value at Easington District Council**

|             |  |     |
|-------------|--|-----|
| <b>4.1.</b> | <b>Introduction: Overview of the Research</b>                              | 116 |
| 4.1.1.      | <i>Very Briefly</i> , The Problem of Knowledge .....                       | 117 |
| 4.1.2.      | Historical Sociology .....   | 118 |
| <b>4.2.</b> | <b>Knowing</b>   | 120 |
| 4.2.1.      | Some ( <i>Very Basic</i> ) Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions ... | 120 |
| <b>4.3.</b> | <b>Finding Ground</b>  | 125 |
| 4.3.1.      | On Stony Ground .....  | 128 |
| 4.3.2.      | The Use of Metaphor .....  | 130 |
| <b>4.4.</b> | <b>Focusing on the case</b>  | 132 |
| 4.4.1.      | Case Study Research .....  | 132 |
| 4.4.2.      | Selecting An Appropriate Case .....  | 134 |
| 4.4.3.      | Gaining Access .....   | 136 |
| 4.4.4.      | The Process of Gaining Ongoing Access in the Field .....                   | 137 |
| 4.4.5.      | Developing a Role .....  | 139 |

|             |  |     |
|-------------|--|-----|
| 4.4.6       | On Identifying the Case .....  | 140 |
| <b>4.5.</b> | <b>Research Methods</b>  | 142 |
| 4.5.1.      | Testing the Water .....  | 142 |
| 4.5.2.      | Qualitative Analysis of Best Value Performance Plans .....           | 142 |
| 4.5.3.      | Shadowing/Non-Participant Observation .....                          | 145 |
| 4.5.4       | Semi-Structured Interviews .....                                     | 147 |
| <b>4.6.</b> | <b>A ‘responsible’ knowledge, outlining the need for reflexivity</b> | 151 |
| 4.6.1.      | A ‘Responsible’ Knowledge .....                                      | 151 |
| 4.6.2.      | Reflexivity: Knowing Knowledge .....                                 | 152 |
| 4.6.3.      | What About the Theory? .....   | 154 |

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Understanding Easington District: the Place

|             |   |     |
|-------------|---|-----|
| <b>5.1.</b> | <b>Introduction</b>   | 158 |
| <b>5.2.</b> | <b>Situating Easington the Place</b>                              | 160 |
| <b>5.3.</b> | <b>Mining the Present</b>   | 161 |
| 5.3.1.      | Out with the Old, in with the New? .....                          | 163 |
| <b>5.4.</b> | <b>Easington Now: 2007</b>  | 166 |
| 5.4.1.      | Social and economic context .....                                 | 166 |
| 5.4.1a.     | <i>Population and Demographics</i> .....                          | 167 |
| 5.4.1b.     | <i>Economy and Employment</i> .....                               | 168 |
| 5.4.1c.     | <i>Education and Qualifications</i> .....                         | 171 |
| 5.4.1d.     | <i>Health &amp; Mortality</i> .....                               | 172 |
| 5.4.1e.     | <i>Deprivation &amp; Poverty</i> .....                            | 174 |
| 5.4.2.      | Deprivation: A Golden Goose? .....                                | 175 |
| <b>5.5.</b> | <b>A Sense of Place</b>   | 178 |
| 5.5.1.      | Into Space .....  | 179 |
| <b>5.6.</b> | <b>Easington in County Durham – the Unique Character of Place</b> | 181 |
| 5.6.1.      | Rural or Urban? .....   | 181 |
| 5.6.2.      | <i>A Paternalistic County Palatine</i> .....                      | 183 |
| 5.6.3.      | Images from around the District .....                             | 189 |
|             | <i>Easington Village</i> .....                                    | 189 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Easington Colliery</i> .....  | 189 |
| <i>Easington Colliery – Memories of an industry now gone</i> .....           | 190 |
| <i>Blackhall Colliery</i> .....  | 191 |
| <i>Castle Eden Dene</i> .....  | 191 |
| <b>5.7. 5.7. Realising Place</b>   | 192 |
| 5.7.1. History as Habitus .....  | 193 |
| 5.7.2. Making the District ‘Great’ .....                                     | 195 |
| 5.7.3. Re-Imagining Murton and Seaham .....                                  | 197 |
| <i>Images: Dalton Park Nr. Murton</i> .....                                  | 202 |
| <i>Images: Byron Place and the East Shore Village, Seaham</i> .....          | 202 |
| <i>Images: Seaham: Turning the Tide</i> .....                                | 203 |
| <b>5.8. 5.8. Possible Implications for the Lived Reality of Social Space</b> | 205 |
| 5.8.1. The Displacement of Place .....                                       | 205 |
| 5.8.2. Space: ‘Social Space’ and ‘Place’ .....                               | 205 |
| 5.8.3. Out of Place .....  | 208 |
| 5.8.4. Disruption of Placedness .....  | 209 |
| <b>5.9. Conclusion</b>   | 213 |

## CHAPTER SIX

### Understanding Easington District Council: *The Organisation*

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>6.1. Introduction</b>  | 215 |
| <b>6.2. EDC: the formal organisation (1974-2009)</b>              | 216 |
| 6.2.1. Political Structure .....                                  | 216 |
| 6.2.2. Administrative Structure .....                             | 217 |
| 6.2.3. Formal Aims and Objectives of EDC .....                    | 219 |
| 6.2.3a. <i>Spotlight: formal organisational aims of EDC</i> ..... | 220 |
| 6.2.3b. <i>Spotlight: formal community aims of EDC</i> .....      | 222 |
| 6.2.4. Ill-defined parameters .....                               | 222 |
| <b>6.3. Conveying a ‘Sense’ of EDC</b>                            | 227 |
| 6.3.1. The Main Building .....                                    | 229 |
| 6.3.2. The Council Chamber .....                                  | 233 |
| 6.3.3. The New Modernity of the Corporate Development Unit .....  | 235 |
| 6.3.4. The Chief Executive’s Office .....                         | 239 |

|             |  |     |
|-------------|--|-----|
| 6.3.5.      | Elsewhere: Building 5 – The Benefits Section ..... | 240 |
| 6.3.6.      | Elsewhere: Building 6 – The Contact Centre .....   | 244 |
| <b>6.4.</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>                                  | 248 |

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Understanding Change at Easington District Council

|             |  |     |
|-------------|--|-----|
| <b>7.1.</b> | <b>Introduction</b>  | 251 |
| 7.1.1.      | Cultural strands .....   | 252 |
| 7.1.2.      | A narrative analysis .....                                       | 254 |
| 7.1.3.      | Briefly, a consideration of the ‘truth’ of events .....          | 255 |
| <b>7.2.</b> | <b>Organisational Development</b>                                | 257 |
| 7.2.1.      | The beginning of something new .....                             | 257 |
| 7.2.2.      | A progressive commitment .....                                   | 257 |
| 7.2.3.      | Fully Integrated Organisational Development (FIOD) .....         | 260 |
| 7.2.3a.     | <i>Spotlight: FIOD</i> .....                                     | 273 |
| <b>7.3.</b> | <b>Informing of the context of change at EDC</b>                 | 276 |
| 7.3.1.      | Bad Old Times .....  | 276 |
| 7.3.2.      | An obliging organisation .....                                   | 277 |
| 7.3.3.      | Appearances matter .....   | 279 |
| 7.3.4.      | Progressive ‘efficient’ change .....                             | 280 |
| 7.4.5.      | Surviving change .....   | 283 |
| <b>7.4.</b> | <b>Best Value at EDC</b>   | 284 |
| 7.4.1.      | An ‘excellent’ local authority .....                             | 284 |
| 7.4.2.      | Working at an ‘excellent’ local authority .....                  | 284 |
| 7.4.3.      | Understandings of BV .....                                       | 286 |
| 7.4.4.      | A minimal impact? .....  | 291 |
| 7.4.5.      | The challenge of ‘continuous improvement’ .....                  | 293 |
| 7.4.6.      | BV as imposing change .....                                      | 294 |
| 7.4.7.      | Introducing ‘Brenda’ and ‘Eric’: devotees of BV and change ..... | 298 |
| 7.4.8.      | Extraordinary people .....                                       | 302 |
| <b>7.5.</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>  | 307 |

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Conclusion: Learning from the case

|                         |  |         |
|-------------------------|--|---------|
| <b>8.1.</b>             | <b>Introduction: A retrospective look forward...</b>   | 309     |
| <b>8.2.</b>             | <b>The Research as Excavating ‘Culture’</b>  | 311     |
| 8.2.1.                  | EDC: An organisation <i>within</i> culture .....   | 312     |
| 8.2.2.                  | The modernisation of local government as being within ‘culture’ .....                              | 315     |
| 8.2.3.                  | Culture: a tricky concept .....  | 316     |
| 8.2.4.                  | Connecting local government improvement and generic<br>managerialist principles of ‘culture’ ..... | 317     |
| <b>8.3.</b>             | <b>‘Gathering’: The Accomplishment of BV at EDC</b>  | 320     |
| 8.3.1.                  | Questions, questions .....   | 320     |
| 8.3.2.                  | An appreciation of the fortuitous timing of events .....   | 320     |
| 8.3.3.                  | Issues arising from the research: accepting the unexpected .....                                   | 324     |
| <b>8.4.</b>             | <b>The Contribution of the Research</b>  | 329     |
| 8.4.1.                  | The case <i>for</i> completion of the final research: realising<br>‘performance’ .....             | 329     |
| 8.4.2.                  | Learning from the case .....   | 331     |
| 8.4.3.                  | Consideration of the ‘final’ contribution .....  | 335     |
| <br><b>Bibliography</b> |  | <br>366 |

## **List of tables and figures:**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **Introduction**

|           |  |   |
|-----------|--|---|
| Table 1.1 | Summary of local government employees in England & Wales | 8 |
|-----------|--|---|

### **CHAPTER TWO**

#### **Introducing Best Value – An outline of the formal policy area**

|             |  |    |
|-------------|--|----|
| Figure 2.1  | The Twelve Principles of Best Value  | 21 |
| Figure 2.2  | New Labour's Vision of the 'Modern Council'  | 23 |
| Table 2.3   | Best Value Performance Indicators – Dimension of Performance Measured                                      | 26 |
| Figure 2.4  | Outline of a Local Authority's Document Planning Process   | 31 |
| Table 2.5   | The 3Cs become the 4Cs, the 3Es become the 5Es   | 38 |
| Figure 2.6  | Unravelling the Influences of Local Government Reform 1980 onwards   | 49 |
| Table 2.7.  | The doctrinal components of the New Performance Management Paradigm as Applied to the Best Value Framework | 52 |
| Table 2.8   | The Differing Emphases of 'Government' and 'Governance'  | 54 |
| Table 2.9   | Understanding Best Value as: New Public Management and Community Local Governance Fusion                   | 55 |
| Figure 2.10 | Audit Commission: The Strengths and Weakness of EDC (CPA 2003)   | 65 |
| Table 2.11  | Key Features of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Comprehensive Area Assessment Frameworks      | 73 |

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **Locating Easington District Council within the Institutional Setting of**

#### **Local Government**

|            |   |     |
|------------|---|-----|
| Figure 3.1 | Tony Byrne: ' <i>What local government is...</i> '                  | 82  |
| Figure 3.2 | Geographical divisions of local government                          | 83  |
| Figure 3.3 | Service Provision by Tier   | 85  |
| Figure 3.4 | Central-local governance arrangements                               | 91  |
| Table 3.5  | Central-local government divisions:                                 | 92  |
| Figure 3.6 | Institutions located in partnership activity, post-1997             | 101 |
| Figure 3.7 | The Layered Organisation  | 103 |
| Figure 3.8 | Local Government Finance: an illustration                           | 110 |
| Figure 3.9 | 'Carrot & Semtex: New Labour's agenda for British Local Government' | 112 |



**CHAPTER FOUR****Researching Best Value at Easington District Council**

|            |  |     |
|------------|--|-----|
| Figure 4.1 | The practice of social research as: ' <i>groping about in the dark</i> ' | 116 |
| Figure 4.2 | Outline of Giddens' Theory of Structuration                              | 121 |
| Table 4.3  | Modes of Theorising Structure and Agency                                 | 121 |
| Figure 4.4 | The 'Conditional Matrix' – A Possible Framework for Exploring Context    | 126 |
| Figure 4.5 | Contrasting Two Approaches to the Completion of the Final Thesis         | 128 |
| Table 4.6  | Interview Sample: position occupied, department and gender               | 147 |

**CHAPTER FIVE****Understanding Easington the Place**

|            |   |     |
|------------|---|-----|
| Figure 5.1 | Map of the Easington District   | 160 |
| Figure 5.2 | Newly Constructed Industrial Units (advertised for let) at Peterlee           | 164 |
| Figure 5.3 | Deprivation Map   | 174 |
| Figure 5.4 | Easington District – Outline of a Narrative                                   | 176 |
| Figure 5.5 | Ambition into a Reality   | 196 |
| Table 5.6  | Recorded Population of Murton (1831-51)                                       | 198 |
| Figure 5.7 | Murton Colliery ( <i>as was</i> )   | 199 |
| Figure 5.8 | Understandings of the Possible Differences Between 'Social Space' and 'Place' | 208 |
| Figure 5.9 | New homes in the district – 'the Marlborough'                                 | 210 |

**CHAPTER SIX****Understanding Easington District Council: *The Organisation***

|             |   |     |
|-------------|---|-----|
| Figure 6.1  | Political Structure of EDC  | 217 |
| Figure 6.2  | Departmental Structure of EDC   | 218 |
| Figure 6.3  | Hierarchical decision-making structure of EDC (paid service):         | 218 |
| Table 6.4   | Corporate Aims and Objectives of EDC                                  | 219 |
| Figure 6.5  | Organisational and Community Aims of EDC                              | 220 |
| Table 6.6   | Corporate Health BVPIs: (effective 2005-06)                           | 220 |
| Figure 6.7  | Dictionary Definition: 'people'                                       | 222 |
| Table 6.8   | Whose aims?   | 223 |
| Figure 6.9  | The assumed linear progression towards social and economic prosperity | 224 |
| Figure 6.10 | Location Map of EDC   | 227 |
| Figure 6.11 | EDC Site Complex (at the time of the research)                        | 228 |
| Figure 6.12 | Building Ten: EDC 'Main Building'                                     | 229 |
| Figure 6.13 | (Approximate) Sketch of the Council Chamber:                          | 235 |
| Figure 6.14 | (Approximate) Sketch of CDU Corridor:                                 | 236 |

|             |  |     |
|-------------|--|-----|
| Figure 6.15 | (Approximate) Sketch of CDU:                 | 239 |
| Figure 6.16 | (Approximate) Sketch of the Benefits Section | 242 |
| Figure 6.17 | The Contact Centre                           | 246 |

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Understanding Change at Easington District Council

|             |   |     |
|-------------|---|-----|
| Figure 7.1  | Description of a strand                                     | 252 |
| Figure 7.2  | Description of a tapestry                                   | 253 |
| Figure 7.3  | The coming together of narrative strands                    | 255 |
| Figure 7.4  | The Tripartite Agreement                                    | 258 |
| Figure 7.5  | FIOD – a hierarchical project management planning framework | 261 |
| Figure 7.6  | FIOD Project Launch Document                                | 262 |
| Figure 7.7  | FIOD Objective Planning Sheet                               | 263 |
| Figure 7.8  | FIOD Risk Assessment  | 264 |
| Figure 7.9  | STORM – Strategic Operational Risk Management Methodology   | 265 |
| Figure 7.10 | FIOD Roadmap Plan   | 266 |
| Figure 7.11 | SMART Objectives  | 267 |
| Figure 7.12 | FIOD Strategic Progress Chart                               | 268 |
| Figure 7.13 | FIOD Critical Action Planning Sheet                         | 269 |
| Figure 7.14 | FIOD Critical Action Control Sheet                          | 270 |
| Figure 7.15 | FIOD Project Close Out                                      | 271 |
| Figure 7.16 | Overview of FIOD  | 272 |
| Figure 7.17 | Summary of Weber’s Protestant Ethic                         | 290 |
| Figure 7.18 | Floor plan sketch of benefit section post-room              | 295 |
| Figure 7.19 | Outturns achieved for BVPI 78a                              | 297 |

## CHAPTER EIGHT

|            |  |     |
|------------|--|-----|
| Figure 8.1 | Summarising EDC ‘the organisation’   | 313 |
| Figure 8.2 | IDeA representation of organisational culture – ‘The Cultural Changing Room’ | 318 |
| Figure 8.3 | Linking context to outcomes – Best Value at Easington District Council       | 324 |
| Figure 8.4 | The relevance of the research in light of the argument presented above...?   | 327 |

**List of Appendices:**

***Appendix 1:***

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Indigenous Culture within Place as an Identity Forming Narrative |     |
| Strand of the Organisation .....                                 | 336 |

***Appendix 2:***

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Identifying ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Cultural Strands within EDC ..... | 347 |
|---|-----|

***Appendix 3:***

|                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| My time as a Benefits Assessor ..... | 350 |
|--------------------------------------|-----|

***Appendix 4:***

|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Letter Requesting Access ..... | 358 |
|--------------------------------|-----|

***Appendix 5:***

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Handout Provided to Potential Participants ..... | 360 |
|--|-----|

***Appendix 6:***

|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Hourly Observation Sheet ..... | 361 |
|--------------------------------|-----|

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b><i>Appendix 7a:</i></b> Interview Contextual Information ..... | 363 |
|---|-----|

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b><i>Appendix 7b:</i></b> Interview Questions ..... | 364 |
|--|-----|

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|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| <b>3 Es</b>     | Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness             |
| <b>4 Cs</b>     | Challenge, Compare, Compete, Cost                 |
| <b>AC</b>       | Audit Commission                                  |
| <b>ACE</b>      | Assistant Chief Executive                         |
| <b>BV</b>       | Best Value  |
| <b>BVIS</b>     | Best Value Inspection Service                     |
| <b>BVPI</b>     | Best Value Performance Indicator                  |
| <b>BVPM</b>     | Best Value Performance Management                 |
| <b>BVPP</b>     | Best Value Performance Plan                       |
| <b>BVR</b>      | Best Value Review                                 |
| <b>CAA</b>      | Comprehensive Area Agreement                      |
| <b>CC</b>       | Citizen's Charter                                 |
| <b>CCT</b>      | Compulsory Competitive Tendering                  |
| <b>CDU</b>      | Corporate Development Unit                        |
| <b>CEO</b>      | Chief Executive Officer                           |
| <b>CLG</b>      | Community Local Governance                        |
| <b>CPA</b>      | Comprehensive Performance Agreement               |
| <b>DCC</b>      | Durham County Council                             |
| <b>DETR</b>     | Department for Environment, Transport and Regions |
| <b>EDC</b>      | Easington District Council                        |
| <b>EDH</b>      | East Durham Homes                                 |
| <b>FIOD</b>     | Fully Integrated Organisation Development         |
| <b>GONE</b>     | Government Office North East                      |
| <b>GT</b>       | Grounded Theory                                   |
| <b>IDeA</b>     | Improvement and Development Agency                |
| <b>LAA</b>      | Local Area Agreements                             |
| <b>LEA</b>      | Local Education Authority                         |
| <b>LPSA</b>     | Local Public Service Agreements                   |
| <b>(ED) LSP</b> | (East Durham) Local Strategic Partnership         |
| <b>MSU</b>      | Management Support Unit                           |
| <b>NPM</b>      | New Public Management                             |
| <b>NNDR</b>     | National Non-Domestic Rates                       |

|              |                                       |
|--------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>NRF</b>   | Neighbourhood Renewal Fund            |
| <b>PWA</b>   | Peter Wrights Associates              |
| <b>RSG</b>   | Revenues Support Grant                |
| <b>STORM</b> | Strategic Operational Risk Management |
| <b>TDC</b>   | Primary Care Trust                    |
| <b>TQM</b>   | Teesdale District Council             |
| <b>WVDC</b>  | Total Quality Management              |
|              | Wear Valley District Council          |

## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### 1.1. Overview:

Originally, the conceived purpose of the research was to provide a grounded account of Best Value (BV) practice from within the setting of a local authority. Initial interest in the research area of BV was informed by personal experience working as a Benefits Assessor at Wear Valley District Council (see appendix 3). Here I witnessed firsthand, as an employee, the implementation of BV within the context of a local authority operating environment. Briefly, I reflect the implications of this experience in framing the original motivation of the research. Moving on I outline the case *for* the research. As an institution overseeing key aspects of social life whilst local government fulfils many mundane functions, many of these functions are nonetheless necessary. Additionally, as a major employer, local government informs an experience of working life for a significant proportion of the population. Having established the case for the research, I then move on to outline the initial aims informing completion of the research. Finally, the chapter is drawn to a close in providing an outline of the work ahead.

---

## 1.2. The role of personal experience as motivating interest in the research area:

### 1.2.1. Introducing Best Value:

Introduced by the Local Government Act 1999, BV required local authorities to:

...make improvements to secure continuous improvement in the way their functions are exercised, having a regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (DETR 1999 para.4).

The framework composed a centrepiece of the then government's attempt to modernise local government (Martin 2000). A complex mix of 'make do and extend' (see Chapter Two), unlike the previous regime of Compulsory Competitive Tendering, the principle of BV applied to the exercise of *all* local government functions. Whilst BV placed less emphasis on market-testing and contracting out the provision of local services – arguably, placing greater stress on the implicit *values* maintained of local public service delivery (Miller 2005) – the framework encouraged within local government increasing formation of partnerships across the public, private and voluntary sectors. In addition the framework gave fresh impetus to elements of the 'audit society' (Powers 1997) as initially developed by previous Conservative administrations (Martin 2000). BV placed an emphasis on performance indicators, processes of audit and external inspection (Martin 2004; Stoker 2004; Boyne et al 2005). The flow of initiatives from government at this time was dizzying and very quickly BV as the framework was becoming established, it was seemingly overtaken by the Comprehensive Performance Framework – initially proposed in the 'Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services' document (DETR 2001). It was the CPA framework which eventually saw the Audit Commission come to categorise local authorities as: excellent, good, fair, weak, poor; as based on an assessment of overall service performance. Wilson & Game (2006: 369-371) indicate CPA as '*BV Mark II*', on the basis that: "*CPA did not replace BV, but rather incorporated it.*"

### 1.2.2. The experience of BV:

In 2001, occupying the position of Benefits Assessor (a scale 4 appointment), at Wear Valley District Council, I gained a mixed impression of BV. For a long time BV was something in the background. At first I found BV did not directly impact upon me or my work.

Quite by chance, at the time BV was being implemented at the authority, a new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was appointed. He brought with him an impetus, of which BV became the driving force. At the time, consensus among staff was that he was 'here to make an impact'. A short time afterwards a new Management Support Unit (MSU) became established. New faces began to appear, mostly men in suits. These new 'managers' were a breed apart from the old-school technical officer, an individual that had gradually rose to prominence through a seemingly 'natural' career progression. New posts were advertised, including words such as: 'performance', 'strategy' and 'corporate' in their title. Amongst staff there were mutterings and frank expressions of incredulity at the advertised rates of pay offered as an enticement to these newly created positions.

The MSU, established in its infancy, soon began to hold meetings. Over a number of consecutive days the entire workforce of the authority (approximately five-hundred strong) was called in smaller groups to attend a general presentation which introduced the requirements of BV. We were introduced to the 'balanced scorecard' and told to expect an inspection by the Audit Commission. We learned that the services would be 'rated' by government. Many were baffled. Some feared the possibility of 'special measures'. Others (*having seen it all before!*) shrugged. Collectively, we did not expect BV would amount to much and sought to dismiss much of the fuss created as hot-air.

However, this was not to be. The fuss did not die down. Every member of staff was required to complete an NVQ in 'Customer Care'. Many regarded the development as an expensive joke: *We were not selling shoes in a shop – we didn't have 'customers'!* The authority would partake in an 'Investors in People' scheme. More meetings were convened. In the Benefits Section a growing number of BV performance indicators



were decreed – seemingly to vex the innocent. Time was dedicated to the task of puzzling out exactly the precise object of measurement. To start it was something of a game, until performance indicators became utilised as a cosh. An internal magazine made an appearance, stapled to our payslips; the CEO had his own column! A suggestion scheme was initiated...

It began to dawn that this thing called ‘BV’ was not a one-off gimmick. A common sentiment at the time was that a private sector business model was being imposed upon the authority. But WVDC was a local authority, we were employed as public servants – we were not the instruments of profit. Others felt the authority needed to ‘move-with-the-times’. That if it was ‘sink-or-swim’ in business why should the same principle not apply to local government.

### 1.2.3. Seeing the course of history through the eyes of another:

At the time of my employment as a Benefits Assessor I was new to work, the authority and the local area. In my position as newcomer, I saw WVDC as a community within a community. Older employees (mainly aged 40years+) had seemingly entered the employ of the authority as a cohort. Many were drawn from the immediate local area and had lived and worked within the administrative boundary of the authority for a significant portion of their lives. As youths they had attended school and socialised together. Although younger employees were discernibly less of a cohort, friendships were nonetheless formed and workmates chose to socialise together outside work. In the scattered settlements of the district colleagues lived as neighbours, young progeny attended school together and lifts to and from work were shared. These are the unexceptional, unremarkable features of everyday life but it is through such practices that lives and experiences become interwoven.

Within the context of local government, local authorities administer geographical boundaries. Lowndes (1999) observes:

Objective characteristics of a locality, its social and economic character, its geography, its demography and settlement patterns – place particular demands

(and opportunities) upon a local authority; so too did ‘subjective’\* elements of the local environment, like political and civic traditions, local conventions and the culture of different communities. Locally-specific ‘ways of doing things’ were sometimes formally articulated and vigorously promoted as part of the local authorities identity and heritage; sometimes they impacted subtly and informally on the perceptions of what was possible and impossible, desirable and undesirable. (Cited in Stewart 2000:6-7)

For those who live and work within a district authority, proximity provides the potential for private and work life to become intricately interwoven. A Housing Officer might unintentionally meet with a tenant whilst travelling on the bus to and from work; a council tax inspector may stumble into a neighbour’s place of work when carrying out an inspection of the rateable value of a commercial property; a member of the public might arrive at the authority to lodge a complaint only to become reacquainted with a former acquaintance.

In an area of low population growth, where more people tend to move out rather than actively resettle<sup>†</sup>, those who speak without a local accent are noticed. At WVDC I was fortunate through my defacto mother-in-law (local, born and bred) to have an ‘in’ which enabled early acceptance into the informal social groupings of the authority – a fortunate connection which eased my transition into working life and provided an insight into the history of the authority and sensitised me to the changes introduced by BV to a greater extent than might otherwise have been expected.

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\* During the research I became particularly motivated to explore such ‘subjective elements’ as an overlooked of the inter-subjective experience constituting local authority practice.

<sup>†</sup>*Snap-shot example: Easington District*

- Population estimates produced for mid-2006, by the Registrar General put the total population of Easington District at 94,000. With low economic prosperity and an increasingly ageing population, forecasts predict a declining future trend in population:

**Population Projections**

|      | <b>Males</b> | <b>Females</b> | <b>Persons</b> |
|------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| 2016 | 43,500       | 46,000         | 89,500         |
| 2026 | 42,300       | 45,000         | 87,400         |

Source: 2004-based English sub-national population projections, Office for National Statistics, updated December 2006

(Information taken from GONE 2007: 5)

#### 1.2.4. Actual change:

Whilst WVDC had to a degree been ruffled by the experience of CCT and the ill-advised Council Tax, it had not been substantially altered. General awareness of the need to maintain tighter fiscal controls had been alerted, it was perhaps this factor which had exacerbating the extent of alarm expressed by the rank-and-file at salaries offered to new recruits. Similarly, concerns were expressed at the likely cost incurred by the NVQs endeavour. The most shocking development in the recent history had been the election of Liberal councillors – as a traditional Labour stronghold at one time such a development would have been unimagined. In common with other places of work, there had been other notable changes in the authority. For example, the retirement of key personnel had seen a loosening of patriarchal ties of control within authority – at that time many senior Directors were *younger* in years than the army of long-serving employees but in the hierarchy of the authority they occupied senior positions.

Always to a degree there is change: the turnover of personnel, new elected members, new legislation and revised guidance issued by government. When I first began my employment at WVDC in 2000, the New Public Management (NPM – Hood 1991; Osborne & Gaebler 1992; Ferlie et al 2002) and ideas of ‘governance’ (Rhodes 1997) – *terms and concepts prominent within the literature and indicated as transforming local government* – were little evidenced. Notions of the NPM and governance did not feature in the common shared perceptions of employees, especially office-based, non-professionally trained frontline workers. However, there was a general grasp of the blunt argument generally associated with the new principles of ‘government’ (Farnham & Horton 1996; Elcock 1996):

- ***Private sector*** = good, efficient, value for money
- ***Public sector/local government*** = bad, inefficient, spendthrift of government subsidy and local taxes.

This allowed some to accept the desirability of the new managerially informed initiatives of the authority – *why shouldn't the authority offer value for money? After all we were all required to pay the council tax charge.* However, despite a tacit acknowledgement the utility of the generic ‘manager’ was not widely recognised.

Directors of service were expected to be equipped with a detailed technical knowledge and years of expertise. Although senior officers occupying management positions were frequently condemned as unable to 'manage', the idea of a MSU created a stir. Some at the front-line found it difficult to conceive the practical benefit of the 'general manager' and such personnel were judged as ill-prepared to deal adequately with the specific challenges of administration/service delivery.

### 1.3. Informing the Case *for* the Research:

From Bins, to the certification of deaths, births and marriages local government informs all aspects of social life. Employing a vast number of people, the local government workforce is diverse:

It covers over 500 different occupational areas and more than 3,000 job titles which means that many employees are *not* based in offices, or even indoors, do not have their lives governed by meetings, and would not remotely conceive of themselves as bureaucrats. (Wilson & Game 2006: 277)

The ONS estimates that for the period August to October 2010 the number of people actively engaged in employment in England and Wales was 25.88 million. Research from the *Local Government Group* estimates the 2010 total headcount of local government employees in England and Wales as 2.24 million –eight percent of the national workforce.

**Table 1.1: Summary of local government employees in England & Wales**

|                                 | Headcount | Full-time equivalent |
|---------------------------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Teachers                        | 509,955   | 458,067              |
| School Support Staff            | 544,896   | 371,453              |
| Social Care Staff               | 280,327   | 220,298              |
| Recreational and Sport Staff    | 66,690    | 46,460               |
| Libraries and Archives Staff    | 34,480    | 23,460               |
| Planning and Development Staff  | 26,830    | 18,670               |
| Environmental Health Staff      | 17,930    | 15,900               |
| Culture and Heritage Staff      | 15,760    | 10,980               |
| Trading Standards Staff         | 5,830     | 3,860                |
| Other Staff                     | 741,702   | 403,852              |
| Total Local Government Employed | 2,244,400 | 1,573,000            |

*Source: Local Government Workforce Analysis of Job Rates produced by Local Government Group 2010: 2*

Within the established literature there is arguably little which documents the actual experience of working life in the local authority – although Van Hulst (2007) provides a (somewhat rare) rich and compelling account of the inside machinations and meaning-making processes observed of two Dutch municipalities. The work of Lipsky (1980) identifies the ‘*street-level bureaucrat*’ who exercises discretion through the active ongoing interpretation of national policy frameworks. However, the label is arguably restricted to include only a highly trained professional class of workers:

Public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work...  
[typically they] are teachers, police officers and other law enforcement personnel, social workers, judges, public lawyers and other court officers, health workers and many other public employees who grant government programs and provide services within them. (pp.3)

Individual accounts documenting the experience of working in local government are heavily concentrated in distinct areas of professional expertise. For example: Policing (see Holdaway (1983) *Inside the British Police Force: A Force at Work*); Social Work (see Jones (2001) *Voices From the Front Line: State Social Workers and New Labour*). Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) in *Cops, Teachers and Counsellors: Stories from the Front Line of Public Service* provide an account which emphasises the ‘street smarts’ of American public service workers (Durose: 2009). Such accounts focus on those “*who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work*” and provide limited insight into the non-professionally trained class of office worker who, arguably, exercises less discretion. Durose (2009) provides an account of local government health improvement and community development workers attempting to balance the demands of national policy constraints within immediate locales, working at the frontline in the neighbourhood management arrangements in Salford. She develops the category of ‘civic entrepreneurialism’ to describe frontline workers as:

...‘situated agents’ using their ‘readings’ and ‘local knowledge’ to act entrepreneurially in order to both deliver policy and build networks and relationships with the community. (pp.36)

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Again, focus is maintained on those *able* to exercise considerable discretion in the execution of their work. Additionally the article somewhat overlooks the generalised setting of the local authority, in favour of a focus on the neighbourhood office. Further, the author concentrates consideration providing a wider assessment of the New Labour policy of ‘community governance’ through an exploration of the accomplishment of national policy frameworks in the context of the disaggregated neighbourhood office. Whilst providing a valuable insight outlining the application of ‘local knowledge’, specifically in strategies developed by front-line officers charged with implementation of national policy frameworks working within the setting of the neighbourhood office, I feel that description of such actions as indicating evidence of the practice of ‘civic entrepreneurship’ colonises the experiences and processes engaged by workers within the rhetorical frames of the academy and potentially overlooking deeper localised context bound structures informing of such approaches.

#### 1.3.1. Recognising informal mechanisms within the authority:

Arguably, CCT and later BV exerted a disproportionate and unfair impact on non-professional workers at the lower end of the occupational pay-scale within local government:

...despite the language of partnership and involvement [BV] employs, its effect on local government labour processes is essentially to build on the general trend to intensification, degradation and insecurity that is characterised by CCT. (Gill-McLure and Seifert 2008: 94)

At WVDC, following the formal implementation of BV the operations of the canteen were put out to tender and a locally based private-sector catering company won the contract. The hourly paid cook and her assistant, who had worked at the authority for more than twenty years continued to do but they were no longer directly employed by the authority. Change came swiftly. The cook was demoted to catering assistant – as all meals were prepared off-site and transported in to be reheated. In a further effort to reduce costs the opening hours of the canteen were shortened. The direct human consequences are obvious: two employees occupying a lower economic position within the authority had their hours reduced and as a result their final weekly incomes

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decreased. Arguably, the changes imposed resulted in an injustice to the individuals concerned.

Interestingly, this change came to significantly alter the social fabric of the organisation. Over the years the canteen had emerged as an informal and unobtrusive element enabling social interaction within the authority. Open daily from 10am to 3pm key personnel were drawn from across the authority, councillors too. Whilst waiting to be served food (produced on site) individuals would interact informally becoming to know one another, sometimes sharing the detail of a particular case/incidence of mutual interest. This contributed to a sense of cohesion within a diverse, professionally and spatially fragmented organisation. Once the opening hours of the canteen were reduced opportunity for this interaction dissipated, to certain degree undermining cohesion within the authority.

My purpose in drawing on the insight gained as an employee is to represent aspects of the lived experience of working within a local authority setting, at the micro-level of everyday interaction. My aim is to promote an alternative, interpretative reading of the local government improvement modernisation agenda pursued by the Labour government 1997-2010, in contrast to the more widely documented macro-global trends of the New Public Management (NPM) and governance arrangements as transforming practice within the sector.

### 1.3.2. A cast of thousands...

The achievement of a national infrastructure of state and public policy involves a 'cast of thousands':

Cecil B De Mille famously added a 'cast of thousands' to his 1956 version of the film *The Ten Commandments*. He produced glorious spectacles but they did not, and could not, change the essential nature of the story. Why should it matter that policy is made with a civil service cast of thousands. Is it possible that the civil service we are interested in should be simply viewed as extras, with at best the odd walk on part here and there? (Said & Jenkins 2003:3)



---

The words ‘civil servant’ and ‘policy’ could easily be substituted for ‘local government’ and ‘local public service provision’. Within local government there is an inconvenient lower-middle core of staff. These can be identified as the non-professionally trained employees who variously occupy roles at the frontline, or have duties for fulfilling back-office functions. These employees typically meet with the public, answer the phones, tick the boxes, stamp the forms; The people who are required to fulfil certain mundane functions with minimum opportunity to exercise meaningful discretion as they are directly answerable to the line management for their actions. Generally overlooked, with attention directed at those occupying more senior roles within the authority (Wilson 2005a) or else those occupying much less senior, manual positions (Gill-McLure & Seifert 2008), their contribution is typically undocumented. There is, it seems, difficulty in recognising the contribution made by those not readily labelled or lacking a more easily definable professional status:

...not everybody who works in bureaucratic organisations is a bureaucrat. As administrators, bureaucrats have to be distinguished from ‘chiefs’ above and ‘front line workers’ below. (Beetham 1987:12)

As a Benefit Assessor I do not consider that I was not a ‘street-level bureaucrat. My opportunity to subvert the rules was limited. Section supervisors would check up to 10% of all work completed. And the system generally picked up any overpayments made and these were pursued separately. In a limited number of circumstances I had opportunity to exercise discretion in consideration of ‘exceptional circumstances’ however procedure required that such actions were sanctioned first by superiors. I was a functionary of the system, my role to assess entitlement to Housing and Council Tax Benefit and handle incoming queries received in relation to the administration of entitlement. As a direct service provider at the frontline I, and others, played an instrumental role in achieving targets set by BV –the outcome of our labours frequently informing the overall achievement of BV by the authority.

Consider actual performance indicators implemented by the BV framework. For example: *BV78a ‘average time taken to process new claims’ without my knowledge of what days to enter into the system when prompted, how could the authority achieve the set performance standard? Further, how could the authority aim to achieve a*

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*reduction in the average number of days taken to process new claims without my co-operation, or indeed the co-operation of support clerical staff responsible for sorting post, matching information received to claims and distributing work to assessors? The accomplishment of specified performance outcomes was frequently a collective effort by the section. Additionally, performance indicators did not exist in isolation. To illustrate: the outcome achieved for BV78a impacted directly upon BV9 'percent of Council Tax collected' and BV66a 'proportion of rent collected as a percent of rent due'. Under BV the effectiveness of one section very often determined the effectiveness of another.*

Although the local authority was characterised by distinct diverse fields of operations, the depiction of so called 'silo working' is a blunt caricature. The administration of benefit entitlement, council tax collection and housing provision provides a good example of the lateral working which typically takes place across administrative divisions within an authority. This is not an exclusive example, for example BV8 'percentage of invoices paid by the authority within 30 days' required the co-operation of all departments receiving invoices, it was not the exclusive responsibility of internal accounts. An argument could be made that BV demanded functions within the authority to become increasingly centralised, incorporated as one. However this had always been the requirement, the effect of BV was to *formalise* that requirement.

It is my contention that we lack a completeness of who, what and how the processes of local government are accomplished daily, particularly at the micro-level of the conglomerate of individuals constituting the local authority:

Social theory has a tendency to take its objects of study as given, seeing them as natural entities of some kind. Individuals, organisations, states and other basis social units seem to be there, waiting for the social scientist to study them (Strang & Meyer 1993). Alternatively, however, phenomena such as these can be regarded as highly problematic: why, we might ask, do people believe in them; what meanings do they assume in various social settings; and under what circumstances do they become perceived as real and important aspects of reality? In other words, we can ask questions about the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Social theorists' constructions may not

always coincide with those of other people; what the theorist sees as a certain type of entity may be interpreted differently by the practitioner. (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000: 721)

#### 1.4. Underlying Aims of the Research:

Within the sociology of work and employment there is a rich ethnographic research tradition which explores the hidden realities of the workplace, the structure of employment relations and the experience of working life from the perspective of the worker (Taylor et al 2009). It is a mixed tradition which extends the divide between academic research and journalistic investigation. Roy's classic study, *Banana Time* (1959), casts a light on the daily jinx of workers keen to escape the monotony of the factory life. In *Working for Ford* Beynon (1973) provides a rich account of the role of shop stewards in the Ford motor-plant at Halewood, Liverpool. Through the voice of the worker the study paints a grim portrait of working life, of a forced mindless subservience to the production line – '*a line which never stops*'. In a different vein, Stud Terkel in *Working* (1974) provides a colourful array of diverse first-hand accounts concerning working life, from men and women working in different sectors across America. The rich detail and immediacy of these accounts provides insights from which we are ordinarily precluded. Additionally there is a burgeoning literature led by Bevir & Rhodes (2003) which from an interpretivist stance seeks to provide an alternative 'decentred' account of recent trends governing modernisation of government:

...moving from the general to the specific, from the institutional to the individual level... (Bevir & Rhodes 2001: 3)

The thesis is an attempt to construct an alternative understanding of the practice of BV. From a reading of the observed practice and accounts of those working within a local authority and the thesis provides a decentred account recognising the collaborative accomplishment of BV through shared processes of meaning making within the localised setting of a district council. At EDC, BV did not just *happen* – it was accomplished by thinking and feeling individuals sharing a sense of connection.

##### 1.4.1. A learning experience:

So often in social research we are met with the problem of the inadequacy of description. Throughout the process of writing I have endeavoured to ensure selection of the '*right*' choice of word, the correct arrangement of a sentence. Great care has

been taken, in the selection of curious shapes and characters, to express the exact intended meaning of my prose and yet still I wrangle. Perhaps, we are limited by our insistence on ‘knowing’:

...as a theme that runs through everything, we should certainly be asking ourselves whether ‘knowing’ is the metaphor that we need. Whether or when. Perhaps the academy needs to think of other metaphors for its activities – or imagine other activities. (Law 2004: 3)

Throughout, it has felt quite unnatural to conceive of this thesis as my ‘contribution to knowledge’ – possibly, because that is to think of this project as finished. For various reasons, it has taken a long time to complete the thesis. Consequently it has proven difficult for me to imagine the finished product: typed and bound. The practice of BV at EDC (despite the invisible assimilation of the once strange and new principles of BV into the ether of local government, and the now defunct EDC) continues to be a matter of ongoing concern, for me at least. The word ‘knowledge’ seems to impose a false sense of rigidity: *Is there any sense in my becoming to know, even though the object of the study has all but disappeared? What can be gained from the research? Once this thesis has been completed, will that be an end?* Answer to these questions will be revealed during the course of the thesis. This has been a learning process. The thesis is evidence of my learning. As I write, I am continuing to learn. And yet, still there is more to be learned.

### 1.5. Structure of the Thesis:

❖ *Chapter Two: Introducing Best Value – An outline of the formal policy area*

The chapter provide an overview of the BV framework and establishes the formal context in which to view the main presentation of research findings in Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight. The chapter also traces the origins of BV through a discussion of the earlier Conservative regime of CCT and wider global-macro trend of the NPM. It is argued NPM theories inform the transition from Old Labour to New Labour and shaped the course of local government improvement and modernisation agenda.

❖ *Chapter Three: Locating Easington District Council within the Institutional Setting of Local Government*

The chapter asks the question: ‘What is local government?’ and through this discussion situates EDC as a district council contained within a national framework of government. Additionally, through an exploration of EDC’s role as a localised statutory authority the chapter indicates the complexity of contemporary local governance arrangements.

❖ *Chapter Four: Researching Best Value at Easington District Council*

Otherwise ‘Methodology’. Through an introduction of the problem of knowledge, the chapter outlines the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the conduct of the research. Moving on, the chapter outlines the methodological approach of the research, outlining the research process and providing a reflexive account of research practice.

❖ *Chapter Five: Understanding Easington District – the Place*

During the course of the research it became apparent that Easington ‘the place’ (the geographical area identified as constituting the ‘district’) was of immense importance, particularly in terms of a conceived shared social and cultural heritage relating to place, informing of both a sense of identity and purpose in the authority. The chapter explores the past and present contextualising the accomplishment of BV at EDC as related to geographical space.

❖ *Chapter Six: Understanding Easington District Council – the Organisation*

Finally, after carefully laying the foundation in earlier chapters of the thesis, we arrive at consideration of EDC, the organisation. Organised in two parts, achieved through an overview of the political and administrative structures and discussion of the stated aims and objectives of the authority the chapter first describes formal aspects of EDC the organisation. Moving on, through an impressionistic (Van Maanen 1988) reading of lived space (Lefebvre 1993), providing a thick description (Geertz 1973) of physical special manifestations within the authority I provide an ‘inside view’ variously unpicking cultural strands identified as ‘old’ and ‘new’ interacted in the incomplete tapestry of the organisation.

❖ *Chapter Seven: Understanding Change at Easington District Council*

BV was a one of a number of significant changes instituted at EDC in the period 1997-2005. The chapter provides an overview of the process of change implemented at the authority outlining the positive acceptance of the need for change both within the district (in terms of socio-economic regeneration) and the authority (in terms of a defined programme of organisational renewal) as enabling a process of change. The chapter discusses the ongoing process of change as facilitating acceptance of the principles of BV and draws on the meaning-making processes variously engaged and interacted at an individual and collective level as a reality informing of the more general abstract process of change within the authority. The underlying argument of the chapter is for a more nuanced understanding of processes of change within local authorities.

❖ *Chapter Eight: Conclusion – Learning from the Case*

The final chapter draws the contents of the thesis to a close. Organised in three parts the chapter outlines the contents of the thesis as ‘excavating’ culture, provides final consideration of the accomplishment of BV at EDC and in close reflexively considers the design of the research and the contribution made to knowledge.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Introducing Best Value – An outline of the formal policy area**

#### **2.1. Introduction:**

Although the term ‘best value’ (BV) has all but disappeared from the lexicon of English local government (IDeA); BV was initially at the core of the New Labour government’s attempt to modernise and improve local government (Martin 2000). The chapter provides a description of the formal framework of BV and includes a retrospective analysis of the policy course pursued by successive government 1979 to 2010 in terms of the modernisation agenda of local government; the time period specifies allows consideration of the earlier Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) regime and the influence exerted of the New Public Management (NPM) theories, up to the electoral defeat of Labour in May 2010. As the study takes the form of a case-study of the BV practice of Easington District Council (EDC) – a former district council in the two-tier system of local government in England, discussion of the framework has been specifically adapted accordingly.

The chapter begins with a description and retrospective analysis of the formal policy framework of BV. In the next section, I consider the wider context which informed development of the framework, including a consideration of the earlier regime of CCT and the modernisation of the Labour Party which led to an acceptance of the palatability of private sector involvement in the provision of public services. In an attempt to make sense of the course of public sector modernisation pursued by successive governments since 1979, I examine the contribution of NPM theories outlining these theories as influencing continuity. Under the leadership of Tony Blair in particular, Labour gained a reputation for the frenzied introduction of new initiatives, in the final part of the chapter I outline the wider framework of performance management in local government including a consideration of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), the framework which subsequently came to replace BV and also, significantly, provided the means by which EDC was formally recognised as an ‘excellent’ local authority.



## 2.2. Understanding Best Value

When in operation, BV was both complex and evolving (Boyne 1999) and in addition, elusive. At the start of fieldwork, I was advised by a number of senior offices against direct usage of the term, particularly amongst more junior officers and frontline personnel. It was suggested that such language might confuse and potentially alienate would-be participants. At the time of the research, the Department for Communities and Local Government (2005) described BV as providing:

...the statutory basis upon which councils plan, review and manage their performance in order to deliver continuous improvement in all services and to meet the needs and expectations of service users.

The Guardian (2002) newspaper provided a more accessible explanation of BV, outlining:

Introduced in 2000, best value is a government regime aimed at improving the quality of local government services. It was introduced by the Labour government as a replacement for the compulsory competitive tendering regime, which was widely resented by local government. It is administered by the Audit Commission which carries out regular best value inspections on council services, from waste disposal to corporate strategy. A separate housing inspectorate within the commission deals with the council's housing services.

Neither of the descriptions provided, capture the complexity of BV. *So, exactly what are we to understand by the term 'best value'?*

### 2.2.1. The Twelve Principles of Best Value

Details of the new BV framework were first published in the 'Twelve Principles of Best Value' (DETR 1997) following the landslide election of the Blair Labour government:

**Figure 2.1: The Twelve Principles of BV:**

1. The duty of Best Value is one that local authorities will owe to local people, both as taxpayers and the customers of local authority services. Performance plans should support the process of local accountability to the electorate.
2. Achieving Best Value is not just about economy and efficiency, but also about effectiveness and the quality of local services – the setting of targets and performance against these should therefore underpin the new regime.
3. The duty will apply to a wider range of services than those covered by CCT.
4. There is no presumption that services must be privatised, and once the regime is in place there will be no compulsion for councils to put their services out to tender, but there is no reason why services should be delivered directly if other more efficient means are available. What matters is what works.
5. Competition will continue to be an important management tool, a test of Best Value and an important feature in performance plans. But it will not be the only management tool and is not in itself enough to demonstrate that Best Value is being achieved.
6. Central government will continue to set the basic framework for service provision, which will in some areas as now include national standards.
7. Detailed local targets should have regard to any national targets, and specified indicators to support comparisons between authorities.
8. Both national and local targets should be built on the performance information that is in any case needed by good managers.
9. Audit processes should confirm the integrity and comparability of performance information.
10. Auditors will report publicly on whether Best Value has been achieved, and should contribute constructively to plans for remedial action. This will include agreeing measurable targets for improvement and reporting on progress against an agreed plan.
11. There should be provision for intervention at the direction of the Secretary of State on the advice of the Audit Commission when an authority has failed to deliver Best Value.
12. The form of intervention should be appropriate to the nature of failure.

(DETR 1997)

Key features included:

- An increased need for local government to demonstrate its accountability to the electorate;
- Widespread application of national targets, to be used to indicate the quality of local service provision against a criteria of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (otherwise the ‘3Es’ – first introduced by the earlier Conservative regime of CCT);
- Introduction of local targets within the scope of the national framework to enable comparison between authorities;
- Relaxation of the prescriptive requirement of CCT, which allowed for a voluntary – as opposed to compulsory, tendering process;
- The threat of intervention should the authority fail to BV.

It was the Labour ambition of improving public service provision and vision of achieving a ‘modern local government’ which drove the initial development of BV:

A modern council – or authority – which puts people first will seek to provide services which bear comparison with the best. Not just with the best that other authorities provide but with the best that is on offer from both public and private sectors. Continuous improvement in both quality and cost of services will therefore be the hallmark of the modern council, and the test of best value.

(DETR 1998: 64)

For the sake of the argument going forward, based on the passage above, in the word-box below I have highlighted the key priorities of the then government in terms of the modernisation and improvement agenda of local government:

Figure 2.2: New Labour's vision of the 'modern council'



*Illustration: by the author*

Enthused by the project of modernisation, the DETR published in rapid succession a total of seven papers which addressed the modernisation of local government, including: *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People*; *Modernising Local Government: Local Democracy and Community Leadership*; *Modernising Local Government: Improving Service Through Best Value*.

### 2.2.2. The Local Government Act 1999:

The local Government Act 1999 required local authorities to:

Make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the ways in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. (Part I Section 3)

Retaining the methodology of the 3Cs (as established by CCT) the Act required local authorities to:

- *Challenge* – why and how the services is being provided
- *Compare* – themselves to other service providers across a range of indicators taking into account the views of both service users and potential suppliers
- *Compete* – consider ‘fair competition’ as a means of ‘*securing efficient and effective services*’ (DETR 1999: paragraph 16)

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Working on a principle of ‘make do and extend’ – what was to become a characteristic feature of the central government design of BV, the Act introduced a fourth ‘C’:

- *Consult* – with local people and all relevant stakeholders; defined as those “appearing... to have an interest in any area within which the authority carries out its functions” (Part I Section 3, subsection 2d)

Further key features (explored in greater detail below) of the Act included the introduction of:

- Performance Standards
- Best Value Reviews
- Best Value Performance Plans
- Best Value Inspections
- Intervention by the Secretary of State to assume control of the day-to-day functions of the local authority

#### 2.2.3a. Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs):

Performance indicators were first systematically introduced to local government in the early 1980s through the Financial Management Initiative and the Next Steps programme (Travers 2007: 66-7). The initiatives were directed at government gaining greater fiscal control over the public sector and devolving responsibility from the centre to semi-autonomous agencies (ibid). However, New Labour’s commitment to improving the level of public service provision (thus, ensuring the principle of ‘best value’) led to an explosion in the application and number of performance indicators. Intended to bring about a ‘measured improvement’ in the overall quality and efficiency of local public service provision, the *Modern Local Government – In Touch with the People* paper set out:

The government will require that as a minimum local authorities set:

- Quality targets over five years that, as a minimum, are consistent with the performance of the top 25% of all authorities at the time targets are set;
- Cost and efficiency targets over five years that, as a minimum, are consistent with the performance of the top 25% of authorities in the region at the time targets are set; - *and*
- Annual targets that are demonstrably consistent with the five year targets.

This framework of targets will put most pressure in those authorities who are currently performing poorly on both quality and the efficiency with which they deliver services. However, it is likely to exert pressure on nearly all local authorities because very few score very highly on both aspects of performance at the same time. (DETR 1998: paragraph 7.14)

The measures outlined general government concerns of the efficiency and quality achieved by local government in terms of service delivery. The Audit Commission, the agency then charged with ensuring quality public service provision and value for money across government departments, identified the following dimensions of ‘performance’:

- *Economy*: related to costs and inputs and with minimising the cost of resources involved in producing a given standard of service
- *Efficiency*: the relationship between inputs and outputs and producing the maximum output for a given input
- *Effectiveness*: the relationship between intended and actual outputs; otherwise ‘outputs and outcomes’ (adapted from Wilson & Game 2006: 362)

The ‘3Es’ (originally devised by Conservative policymakers) were extended under BV to include a fourth ‘E’:

- *Equity*: a measure of the fairness of resource distribution in a given population, based on the needs of the population rather than the individual (Wilson & Game 2006: 362)

Taken from Wilson & Game the table below provides an example of performance indicators and the particular dimension of performance measured:

Table 2.3: BVPIs – Dimension of performance being measured

| <b>Corporate Health</b>                |   | <b>Relevant Es</b>          |
|--|---|-----------------------------|
| BV 9                                   | Percentage of council tax collected in financial year   | Effectiveness               |
| BV 11b                                 | Percentage of top paid 5% of Council staff from black and minority ethnic communities               | Equity                      |
| <b>Education</b>                       |   |                             |
| BV 33                                  | Youth service expenditure per head of population in youth service target age group                  | Economy                     |
| BV 38                                  | Percentage of 15 year olds in LEA schools achieving 5 or more GCSEs at A* to C or equivalent        | Effectiveness               |
| <b>Housing and council tax benefit</b> |   |                             |
| BV 76a                                 | Number of effective visits to claimants for fraud detection purposes, per 1000 caseload             | Efficiency                  |
| BV 78a                                 | Average number of days to process new housing benefit claims  | Efficiency<br>Effectiveness |
| BV 79a                                 | Percentage of randomly sampled cases in which calculation of housing benefit is found to be correct | Efficiency<br>Effectiveness |

Source: Wilson & Game 2006:362-363

BVPIs were subject to a process of annual review by the government. In 2000 there was a total of 104 ‘service delivery indicators’ and 18 ‘corporate health’ indicators. Whereas ‘service delivery indicators’ were designed according to the criteria outlined above, ‘corporate health’ indicators were intended by government to: “*provide a snapshot of how well the authority is performing overall*” (DETR 1999:12). The indicators variously incorporated a concern for the following key areas:

- Planning and measuring performance (in relation to sustainability and racial equality)
- Customer and the community (e.g. percentage of complaints satisfied in the handling of complaints; electoral turnout)
- Management of resources (e.g. the proportion of council tax collected)
- Staff development (e.g. number of working days lost to sickness absence)
- Partnership working (as indicated by the percentage of partnerships following good practice guidelines) (Boyne 2000:8)

The idea of ‘corporate health’ is premised upon the notion of the local authority as a fairly homogenised single entity possessed of a physicality which is capable of being diagnosed and then (I presume) variously cured/healed. There are a number of problems associated with the use of performance indicators. Philosophically, the concept of measurement is problematic. Measurement involves an isomorphic process of assigning numerals to systems to represent particular properties, entailing a one-to-

one relationship between the characteristics of the number system employed and the various quantities of the property to be measured. Additionally, the process of measurement requires an attempt to reflect a direct correspondence of the characteristics of the numbers assigned and the quantities recognised (Cicourel 1964: 10). There is also concern to be had regarding the properties of measurement, otherwise known as ‘variables’; specifically the ontological status of variables which as Byrne (2002) observes, “... *variables don’t exist. They are not real...*” (pp.31). Variables are constructions of the properties being measured (Togerson cited in Cicourel 1964:10). The underlying problem with the problem of measurement is that it is a process which relies upon the employment of convention and consequently all measurement is measurement by fiat (Cicourel 1964). With regards to BVPIs the question this leaves is: *to what extent are BVPIs an accurate and valid measure of the continuous improvement of service outputs achieved by local authorities?*

Added to these philosophical concerns, Travers (2007:88) identifies two frequent problems associated with the use of performance indicators:

- i. The political directive to satisfy certain performance indicators may lead to other aspects of the service (‘performance’) being neglected;
- ii. In a national exercise, we cannot be certain that we are truly comparing like with like.

#### 2.2.3b. Best Value Reviews (BVRs):

BV required all local authorities to undertake a ‘fundamental performance review’ of all services within a five year period. The purpose of review was: “*to ensure that continuous improvements to all services are made*” (DETR 1998: 6). Local authorities were expected to make:

...early inroad into areas of significant weakness... reviewing those services quickly and effectively...addressing some of the stronger areas of performance early, so that the lessons of success can be spread quickly (DETR 1998: 7.18)

Each review was required to incorporate consideration of the 4C’s:

- Challenge
- Compare



- Compete
- Consult (please refer to description in section 2.2.2)

Typical BVR questions included:

- *What* does the service do now?
- *How well* does it do in comparison with others?
- *Could* the benefits of the service be obtained in some other way?
- *Could* some other organisation provide it better and/or cheaper?
- *Can* we do the job better (and by how much)?
- *Can* we make customers happier (and by how much)?
- *How* can we get the same benefits to the people while spending less?
- *Should* we be providing the service at all? (Wilson & Game 2006: 365)

Guidance produced by government advised officers conducting BVRs to:

- take a sufficiently long-term perspective;
- involve elected members;
- seek advice from outside the authority;
- involve those currently delivering services;
- question existing commitments;
- engage with users and potential users of services;
- address equity considerations;
- give effect to the principles of sustainable development. (*Circular 10/99 Local Government Act 1999: Part One Best Value 1999* paragraph 17)

Further, BVRs had also to consider '*the best value option for future service delivery*' which included consideration of the following options:

- cessation of the service, in whole or in part;
- creation of public-private partnerships, through strategic contract/joint venture company for example;
- transfer or externalisation of the service to another provider;
- market-testing of all or part of the service;
- restructuring or repositioning of the in-house service;

- renegotiation of existing arrangements with current providers where this is permissible;
- joint commissioning or delivery of the service. (*Circular 10/99 Local Government Act 1999: Part One Best Value 1999* paragraph 44)

Primarily service reviews focused on *who* delivered the service provided, rather than on *how* the service ought to be delivered. At the time, Stewart (2003: 127) expressed concern that this would lead to criteria of efficiency (e.g. economic cost) being given emphasis over criteria of effectiveness (e.g. quality).

### 2.2.3c. Best Value Performance Plans (BVPPs):

Under BV, BVPPs were intended as the principle means by which local authorities were held to account for quality and efficiency of their services. BVPPs were also used as the means by which the local authority summarised its corporate objectives, communicating these to the public. Guidance set out by government required inclusion of the following:

- summary of objectives;
- summary of current performance;
- comparison with performance achieved in previous financial year;
- summary of approach to efficiency improvement;
- key results of BVRs completed;
- performance targets for future years (referencing both local and national performance indicators);
- plan of action of how targets are to be achieved;
- response to audit/inspection reports;
- consultation statement;
- financial summary. (*Circular 10/99 Local Government Act 1999: Part One Best Value 1999* paragraph 54)

BVPPs subject to review by the Audit Commission were checked to ensure that:

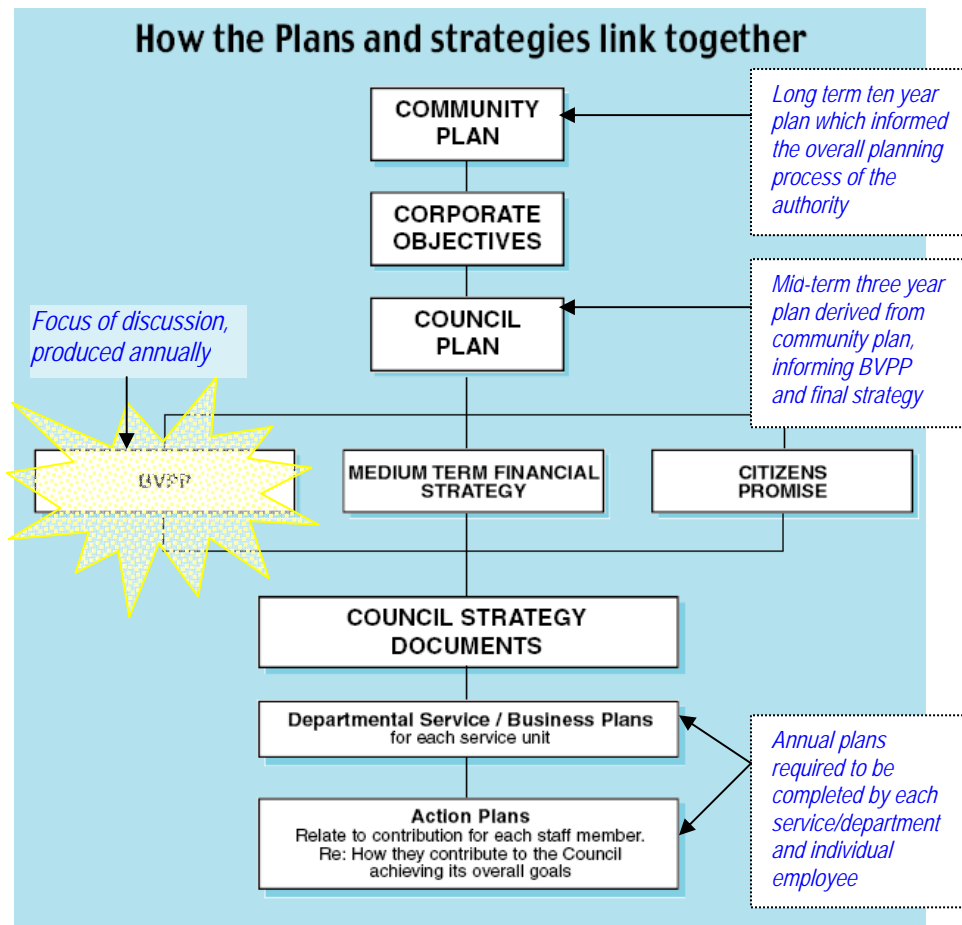
- plans met statutory requirements;
- information presented was accurate;
- targets were realistic and achievable.

Additionally, the Audit Commission maintained responsibility for:

- certifying the plan had been properly audited;
- provision of a statement that the plan met statutory requirements;

Where a plan was judged not to have complied with the statutory requirements laid out by government, the auditor was required to recommend amendments to the plan and/or address the arrangements of the local authority in relation to the production of BVPPs. Initially, in line with the ‘consult’ element of BV, original guidance produced by government required a BVPP to be received by each household in the district. Often local authorities produced large, complex and ultimately expensive BVPPs containing a vast amount of detailed information – much of which was inaccessible to the public. In time the guidance allowed for production of a least dense BVPP Summary, generally sent to households along with annual council tax billing notices. A full unabridged hardcopy BVPP was made available to elected members, senior managers/officers and key partners; with a copy available to view and download on the council website. The BVPP was one in a series of planning documents required of the local authority. Hierarchically ordered, statutory required documents were required to be integrated into an overall planning process whereby the local authority outlined in specific detail (down to the level of the individual employee) how it intended to achieve the main priorities and objectives of its 10 year Community Plan:

Figure 2.4: Outline of a local authority document planning process (with additional notes by the author)



(Source: Wear Valley District Council Best Value Performance Plan 2006-07: 9)

So extensive were the planning arrangements for local government at the time, Boyne (1999: 6) commented:

Local authorities can be described as facing a ‘planning implosion’: they may be in danger of collapsing in on themselves under the weight of the planning processes.

#### 2.2.3d. Best Value Inspections:

The Local Government Act 1999 created the Best Value Inspection Service (BVIS) as part of the Audit Commission. The BVIS carried out reviews of performance management measures, BVPPs and BVRs. Unlike previous inspectorates which had their operations limited to an aspect of local authority service provision (for example: Social Services Inspectorate/Office for Standards in Education) the BVIS had access to inspect the full range of services provided by the local authority.

The main aims of the BVIS were to:

- enable the public to see whether best value had been achieved;
- enable the local authority to see how well it was doing;
- enable the government to see how well its policies were working;
- identify failing services and take action where required;
- identify and disseminate best practice.

Assessment of each authority was based on two criteria:

- i. *How good are the services?*  
3 stars – excellent; 2 stars – good; 1 star – fair; 0 stars – poor
- ii. *Will the service improve in the way required by BV?*  
'Yes'; 'probably'; 'unlikely'; 'no'.

Initially, the BVIS undertook inspection of individual service functions and results were published two weeks afterwards. Later, under CPA an entire inspection of local authority functions was carried out and the BVIS provided a single judgement of the overall performance of the authority.

Ironically, the process of inspection undermined BV's stated aim of improving fiscal practice within the public sector. The Institute for Public Policy Research estimated the cost of the inspection process in 2000/01 alone as being £600million; this figure does not include the cost of inspection as incurred by the local authority – a cost recognised as "*considerable*" (Stoker 2004: 95). Contemporaneously, Boyne (2000: 11) questioned the unanimity of BVIS judgements:

...if BV is still, as originally defined 'a duty that is owed to local people', common standards may not be appropriate: different people in different places are likely to place varying demands on their authorities and to have different priorities. Thus a standard of service that is deemed magnificent in Manchester could be deemed mediocre in Murton.

Stewart (2003: 256) also notes shortcomings of the process:

- There is no one right approach;

- A deviation from accepted practice may represent better practice that is to be welcomed, rather than condemned;
- There will always be reasons why an authority acts in a certain way and the inspector must gain understanding of those reasons;
- The inspector is likely to learn more from the inspection than the authority;
- A degree of humility is better than an assumed authority in the inspector;
- Inspectoral failure is always a possibility.

Additionally suggesting:

The process of inspection should itself be subject to inspection – with inspectors drawn from the ranks of the inspected. (pp. 256)

2.2.3e. Government Intervention:

Although the Local Government Act 1999, provided powers to the Secretary of State to assume control of the day-to-day functions exercised by the authority in cases where an authority was deemed as ‘failing to comply’ with the requirements of BV, in practice such action was usually reserved in only the worst instance of non-compliance, for example: “*where community safety was a significant issue, or where an authority had persistently failed to secure best value*” (DETR 1998 paragraph: 6.3). Further, the government identified between ‘failures of substance’ and ‘failures of process’.

‘Failures of substance’ included:

- persistently high unit costs not explained in terms of quality or local need;
- deterioration in service standards against specified targets;
- failure to improve in relation to the performance of other councils;
- failure to achieve local targets of performance;
- failure to meet specified national performance standards. (DETR 1998 paragraph: 5.17)

‘Failures of process’ included:

- failure to consult, or respond to consultation;
- failure to review an area of under-performance;

- failure to complete a review of all service provision within a five year cycle;
- unreasonable neglect of alternative options of service provision during BVR;
- failure to set sufficiently demanding standards (DETR 1998 paragraph: 5.18)

In most cases those judged as ‘failing to comply’ were placed under the supervision of the Audit Commission, only in the most serious instances did the government intervene directly and often this could result in other difficulties:

In September 2001, the DTLR Secretary of State, Stephen Byers, used for the first time new powers under the Local Government Act 1999 to intervene in Hackney in order to ‘protect and improve the key services and ensure the council tackles its budget deficit’. For a time the whole hapless – though since recovered – London borough was in effect run from Whitehall, with no fewer than five central government departments issuing ‘Directions’ detailing required service improvements in education, social services, waste management and housing benefits, plus action to establish a new system of financial management. (Wilson & Game 2006: 165-66)

#### 2.2.4. Overview of the initial framework:

Possibly, the outline provided here has created an impression of the introduction of the BV framework as orderly and unproblematic. This was not so. Following an election pledge to rid local government of CCT, eighteen months following publication of the Twelve Principles of BV (see figure 2.1) local government still awaited the fully formulated framework. In late October 1998, the *Local Government Chronicle* complained:

...the onus remains on the government to give councils a clear steer on what Best Value is. The lack of clarity starts at the top. (13/10/98 as cited in Boyne 1999: 2)

An alternative view, that the early lack of guidance issued by government created an opportunity for local innovation:

...in the early stages at least, councils had the discretion to interpret and develop BV in their own way. The absence of detailed central guidelines

created confusion, but also generated the conditions for innovation. (Boyne 1999: 13)

Others have even suggested that the incompleteness of BV had been deliberate:

BV has been deliberately offered to local government as an uncompleted idea so that it can be developed and applied by local government itself. This means that the implementation is intentionally a fluid experience with many local variations in how BV is being defined and with that the possibility of evolving and modifying what it means as they go along. (Barlett et al 1999: 114)

The process of ‘evolving and modifying’ BV fitted within the bold pragmatism of New Labour’s “*What Works is What Matters*” which to an extent challenged conventional conception of the policy process:

Policy implies system and consistency. The action is not arbitrary or capricious: it is government by a known formula of universal application. (Colebatch 2002: 9)

The initial policy course of BV was both changeable and unpredictable. In part this may have been due to the uninformed ambition of a political party which had spent eighteen years in opposition. In an evaluation of the initial impact of BV in the thirty-eight pilot authorities it was found:

The biggest effect of BV in the pilot authorities was the change of culture which it brought. In contrast to CCT, where top politicians and officials spent much time searching for loopholes in the legislation, the absence of a tight prescriptive framework in BV has meant that efforts focused on the positive task of finding improvements – an interesting example of how an apparently vague goal can actually liberate imaginative and innovative working. (Bovaird & Halachmi 2002: 5)



### 2.3. The Wider Context Informing the Development of BV:

#### 2.3.1. The Legacy of CCT:

Thirty years on CCT continued to arouse strong feelings, one officer expressed:

...when you mention CCT people sort of quiver in their boots. ('Ruth' Interview)

The fiscal ruthlessness of CCT, which defined the most competitive bid simply in terms of the 'lowest price', had, as is demonstrated in the comment above, caused injury to the psyche of local government employees in subjecting the more human aspects of public service to the tyranny of the accountant's spreadsheet; mercilessly disregarding the qualitative in favour of the quantitative. Whilst in opposition Labour had energetically opposed CCT arguing:

[The] current framework for service delivery has proved inflexible in practice, often leading to the demoralisation of those expected to provide quality services and high staff turnover. Concentration on CCT has neglected service quality and led to uneven and uncertain efficiency gains, In short this framework has provided a poor deal for local people, for employers and employee. (cited in Stewart 2003: 122)

Earlier in the chapter I suggested in the creation of BV the Labour government adopted an approach of 'make do and *extend*' in relation to the previous policy of CCT, and there are perhaps three reasons why this was so:

- i. Partial success of CCT in making local services more efficient and economical
- ii. A perception of CCT as rigid, preventing innovation and showing bias in favour of private sector out-sourcing
- iii. The complete abolition of CCT was not an option; the government has therefore to replace the existing system by a regime which continued to emphasise the economy and efficiency of service delivery. (Rogers cited in Leach & Percy-Smith 2001: 174 – 5)

In spite of the hostility shown towards CCT and its acknowledged weaknesses, evidence had begun to emerge which revealed the possible merits of the regime –

including CCT-related annual cost savings of eight percent (Wilson & Game 2006: 356). Further, it was recognised that CCT had extended the ‘right to manage’ to local government managers which encouraged the pursuit of efficiency and the needs to cut costs (Shaw et al 1994: 241).

Whether popular or not, CCT was seen as leading to a loosening of former bureaucratic rule-bound system of control within local government, in favour of a more commercial and market oriented approach and many local authorities separated client-contractor relation to avoid possible charges of a conflict of interest (Parker 1990). More fundamentally the introduction of competition within local government transformed employment relations, unfortunately this was usually to the detriment of poorest and least powerful workers particularly women occupying low skill/part-time positions (i.e. cleaners, canteen staff) (Wilson 1999: 39). In contrast a relatively small group of senior officers went from being ‘administrators’ to ‘managers’ and benefitting personally (e.g. executive salary packages with ‘fringe benefits including cars and performance related pay, all on fixed-term contracts!) from the newly adopted commercial market-oriented approach (Parker 1990: 665). This trend was not reversed by BV, indeed many local authority Chief Executive Officers made national headlines as a result of the salaries they received – in a number of cases reported, earning more than the Prime Minister. However, there are more salient points to consider. The proliferation of tailored salary packages has conspired to undermine the role and influence exercised by the traditionally powerful public sector trade unions and again this has proved to be to the detriment of those occupying less powerful position within local government. Further, active pursuit of financial incentives offered to individuals in recognition of ‘good performance’ undermines traditional notions of service once considered central to the ethos of public sector workers.

By the time Labour came to office in 1997, CCT had transformed the landscape of local government – there was no going back. The emphasis on fiscal control CCT greatly improved general accounting practice in local government. The up-to-date continuous flow of relevant information of revenues and costs created by the introduction of CCT had enabled government far greater control of the financial

activities of local government (Parker 1990: 665); a control few governments (regardless of political persuasion) would be willing to relinquish.

### 2.3.2. BV: 'Make Do and Extend'?

Already within the discussion the tendency of BV to retain and expand upon central elements of the previous CCT, will not have gone unnoticed:

**Table 2.5: The 3Cs become the 4Cs, the 3Es become the 5Es**

|  |
|--|
| <p>1979 – 1997 Conservative Governments CCT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 3Cs: challenge, compare, compete</li> <li>➤ 3Es: economy, efficiency, effectiveness</li> </ul>   |
| <p>1997 – 2010 New Labour Government BV:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ 4Cs: challenge, compare, compete ++ <i>CONSULT</i></li> <li>➤ 5Es: economy, efficiency, effectiveness ++ <i>EQUITY, ENVIRONMENT</i></li> </ul> |

In spite of continuities between the two regimes, BV introduced a number of differences in an attempt to create an improved framework, correcting the shortcomings of the earlier regime of CCT (DETR 1997). Unlike CCT which applied to specified functions, the duty of BV applied to *all* aspects of service provision within the authority. Perhaps one of the most convincing differences between the two regimes was removal of the requirement by BV compulsorily subject specified functions of the authority to a process of competitive tendering, however view on this generally differed. Boyne (1999:7) outlines:

The tone and content of the government statements to date strongly imply that 'real competitive pressure' is largely synonymous with competitive tendering

Yet he later acknowledges that powers provided to the Secretary of State to enable consideration of the past record of an employer on issues such as promotion of equal opportunities, provision of staff training and allocation of pay scales within the formal tendering process, generally allowed for creation of a more '*level playing field*' between the public and private sector and extended protection to maintain the rights and interests of employees. Additionally, BV introduced *different* elements of competition to local government (Boyne et al 1999; Geddes and Martin 2000) including benchmarking and

---

partnership working. However, the general consensus was in BV as “*a more effective regime for outsourcing services*” (Higgins et al 2005:233).

The requirement of BV to ‘consult’ also underlines a further difference of the two regimes. However at the time of implementation, the requirement was criticised as “*rather vague*” (Geddes & Martin 2000: 383). Additionally, the process of consultation involved a number of practical difficulties, including the challenge of adequately engaging a possibly politically apathetic and unwilling public, as well as other traditionally recognised ‘hard-to-reach’ local populations (for example vulnerable or illiterate persons, marginalised socio-cultural groups e.g. immigrant groups and gay/lesbian and bi-sexual communities) (Ball et al 2002:13-14). Worryingly, as was witnessed by the research, the process was open to manipulation by officers – very often the consultation process was contrived to encourage outcomes favoured by the authority. More unsettling, was the minority of officers reported as being at the time unconvinced of the need for consultation (Ball et al 2002).

In terms of the process of ‘comparison’ the implementation of BV led to a “*burgeoning of benchmarking*” in English local government which far exceeded its earlier tentative practice (Davies 1998). As well through the BVR process a new emphasis was given to the role of ‘challenge’ in local public service provision (Davis & Wright 2001), as is exemplified by the *Changing Gear* paper (Audit Commission 2001 paragraph 39; pp.16):

The purpose of reviews is to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and come up with options for how services can be improved. Three of the four Cs (consultation, comparison and competition) can be seen as tools to help in this process, while the fourth ‘C’ (challenge) should ensure that the big policy questions are addressed early on.

Whilst it can be argued that CCT informed elements of BV, a shift in emphasis from regulation to process is perhaps the feature which marks the main difference of the two regimes (Martin 2000). The primary concern of CCT was in establishing economic regulation over local government, whereas BV variously prescribed and outlined processes by which the means of regulation was achieved. Features outlined by Ball et al (2002) which enabled central government to maintain economic and political control of local government but to “*a new level of sophistication*” (pp.15). Building on these

observations, later in the chapter I will suggest CCT introduced the core principles and values of NPM, whereas BV applied the key methodology associated with NPM theories.

### 2.3.3. Introducing the Audit Commission:

Created by the Local Government and Finance Act 1982, the Audit Commission (AC) was the brainchild of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. The main functions of the AC were to:

1. Establish a national Code of Audit Practice;
2. Execute national studies designed to promote economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of local authority and NHS services;
3. Apply national findings to the audited body to gauge local service performance. (Audit Commission 1996 cited in Shore & Wright 2000: 65-66).

A supposedly 'independent' body, the independent objectivity of the AC was questioned from the beginning:

The constitutional position of the AC is even less clear-cut than that of the National Audit Office: it is effectively a body established by, but independent of, the Executive and is accountable to the Secretary of State. (Powers 1997: 47)

The AC merged the process of audit and management, and through its creation overall control of local government came to be exercised by a single (supposedly) independent body; marking a decisive shift in the administration and control of local government processes:

The birth of this agency marked the moment when the language associated with financial accounting shifted to embrace 'monitoring performance', identifying 'best practice', improving Value For Money (VFM) and 'ensuring effectiveness of management systems'. Audit came to mean not just checking the books but scrutiny of good government, and in the process, became instrumental in the formation of policy itself. (Shore & Wright 2000: 66)

Initially responsible for the audit and examination of management practice in local government, in 1990 its remit was extended to include NHS authorities, trusts and other bodies; in 1992 it was given additional responsibility directing local authorities to publish comparative performance indicators on an annual basis; from 1996 the AC was made responsible for the joint inspection of social services – in association with the Social Services Inspectorate; in 1997 it attained responsibility for the joint inspection of Local Education Authorities – along with the Office for Standards in Education. By the mid 1990s the AC was responsible for the audit of £90 billion of public expenditure, almost 15% of GDP (Powers 1997: 47). Labour developed the AC yet further. In 1999 the government established the Best Value Inspectorate intended as an auxiliary to the AC and in 2002 the AC assumed responsibility for the Comprehensive Performance Framework of local government. In 2007 on its website, the AC claimed responsibility for the audit and inspection of 11,000 bodies in England which included spending in excess of £180 billion – representing approximately twenty percent of the then GDP! Prior to the recent announcement by Eric Pickles, the current Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, the power exercised by the AC were immense, the size of its remit vast and subsequent growth dizzying (Powers 1997; Cope & Goodship 2002; Wilson & Game 2006).

Audit is described by Powers (1997) as a “*ritual of verification*” involving a quest for confirmation that the object presented for audit can be reasonably established as reliable and true. The process first requires a degree of agreement in establishing first, the criteria to be applied in the judgement of the ‘reliable and true’; second, the type of data most likely to provide suitable evidence to enable judgement to be reached. Audit is therefore a dynamic process, which has a number of implications for practice:

The hunch behind *The Audit Society* is that the design of accounting reports, and of performance measures by which organisations can be judged, is greatly influenced by the imperative of ‘making them auditable’, and that this has much to do with the agendas of control of these organisations. It follows that many audit processes are not neutral acts of verification but actively shape the design and interpretation of ‘auditable performance’. Audit agencies, such as the UK AC, are active in shaping performance measures which enable audit and inspection. (Powers 2000: 115)

The scope of this study of EDC does not allow thorough analysis of the part played by the AC in actively shaping BV practice, local authority performance and the extent to which this potentially distorts public service provision. However, it is important to remain mindful of the largely invisible and non-accountable role played by the AC in terms of directly and indirectly shaping local authority performance – and hence, BV practice.

#### 2.3.4. Local Government Reform: the Major Years (1990-97)

Both Thatcher and Blair were such big personalities that it is sometimes easy to overlook the contribution made by the Major government in the reform of local government, yet these reforms provide an important bridge enabling understanding of the trajectory of change within local government. The 1990s saw a softening of the previous hard-edge economic approach adopted by Thatcher and her colleagues, in which Total Quality Management models (largely developed through innovations in the private sector) influenced a new blossoming in the concern to ensure quality public services met the needs and expectations of the public.

##### 2.3.4a. Total Quality Management (TQM)

First developed by American engineers and statisticians during the Second World War in an effort to maintain quality armaments, the TQM framework was more fully developed by Japanese industry. The subsequent economic success and prominence of Japanese-owned business in the West, led to the spread of TQM philosophies across the world (with the fast-food chain McDonald's amongst its leading exponents). TQM is a general philosophy and set of ideas which has 'paradigm wholeness' and composed of related concepts, belief and working practices formed by different authors coming from a range of cultural directions. In the last forty years TQM have proved enormously influential providing a means for achieving improved quality of performance in terms of both products and services, within and between different organisations (Morgan & Murgatroyd 1994: 3) In general TQM models are likely to incorporate the following elements:

- corporate planning
- an overarching corporate vision/goal
- hierarchical structure highlighting the role of senior management
- empowerment of workers with a strong emphasis on team work

- strong conception of the likely ‘customer’ prioritising their (customer) satisfaction
- benchmarking of service standards
- service guarantees
- striving towards *kaizen* (Japanese: ‘continuous improvement’)
- the formation of quality circles in response to specific problems/issues

These elements are especially prevalent in terms of the processes required by BV, as already outlined. The first major TQM policy innovation in the UK was the Citizen’s Charter (1991) – see below.

#### 2.3.4b. The Citizen’s Charter:

The launch of the ‘Citizen’s Charter’ in March 1991 marked a decisive move away from purely financial emphasis in favour of a customer-minded approach. It was an important initiative which set targets and promised league tables in relation to public service delivery for the first time in Britain (Travers 2007:90) – significantly it was designed to appeal to the public:

The public cared about far more than efficiency. Citizens wanted public services to be effective: they wanted the subways and commuter trains to run on time, the mail to arrive in one day, and their children to receive a quality education. (Osborne & Plastrik 1998: 2)

Informed by TQM principles, the premise of the Citizen’s Charter was that ‘citizens’ (i.e. residents, ratepayers, service users, clients, customers, etc.) had a right to expect a set standard of service provision from public service providers – for example, that 90% of all trains would run on time. The Citizen’s Charter ascribed responsibility to service providers, making a quasi-legal duty of the provider to fulfil its contractual obligation to the public; and ‘rights’ to citizens, in formally outlining the level of service member of the public could reasonably expect to receive from the provider. In re-labelling ‘citizens’ as ‘customers/consumers’ the Citizen’s Charter heralded a so-called ‘(public) service revolution’ outlined as:

The proclaimed commitment to put customers first, or, at least, to label them ‘customers’ and tell them they are being put first. Traditionally local authorities have had residents, tenants, clients and claimants *to* whom, rather than *for* whom, they



have provided services in the way, and to the standards, that they felt most appropriate. (Wilson & Game 2006: 357)

The Citizen's Charter promised improved quality of public service provision through:

- publication of service standards;
- a right to redress;
- formal monitoring performance, with penalties imposed for poor performance;
- tighter regulation of privatised utilities;
- competition and increased privatisation.

The Adam Smith Institute declared the Citizen's Charter:

...a revolution in thinking, because public services thought of citizens as clients, rather than as customers. In most cases no-one had ever given any thought at all as to the quality of output which could be deemed acceptable, or to improving it. (2002)

The media too became engaged, school league tables were published and findings of comparative performance tables were widely reported on by journalists (Osborne & Plastrik 1995: 8). TQM principles and notions of the citizen as 'customer/consumer' have proven to be enormously accessible in terms of the recent wider public imagination (Du Gay 1996 & 2000). Significantly one of the first projects of the newly elected Labour government in 1997 was the 'Service First' initiative, basically a re-launch of the earlier Citizen's Charter (Wilson & Game 2006: 368). Yet, despite signs of apparent success, the approach has not been without criticisms. First in terms of defining the 'customer':

The customer can be the immediate member of the public you are dealing with, the customer can be seen as being the Minister who is in charge of the organisation, the customer can be seen as Parliament representing the public as a whole. The word 'customer' is a very dangerous and difficult word to use in the context of public services. (Sir Peter Kemp cited in Du Gay 2000: 113)

Additionally, the metaphor oversimplified and distorts understandings of the operations of the public sector. Quite simply, local government involves complex transactions and logistical planning which cannot simply be returned, refunded, exchanged or arranged to suit. Thus, the Citizen's Charter and subsequent similar approaches have entailed:

...a rather narrow, consumerist concept of citizenship, in which consumerist values are substituted for democratic one. (Wilson & Game 2006: 358)

The conclusion is of the Citizen's Charter and similar approaches as largely ineffective in supporting a more meaningful process of 'citizen' participation in the broader framework of the public sector.

#### 2.3.5. The New Labour Conversion:

The 1997 Labour Manifesto stopped short of promising to abolish CCT, despite previous opposition and expectation that it would abolish the regime:

Councils should not be forced to put their services out to tender, but will be required to obtain best value. We reject the dogmatic view that services must be privatised to be of a high quality, but equally we see no reason why a service should not be delivered directly if more efficient means are available. Costs count but so does quality. (Labour Party Manifesto 1997)

#### 2.3.5a. Labour's 'local government problem':

Entwhistle & Laffin (2005:207) argue BV evolved out of Labour's 'local government problem', which was apparently twofold:

First, too closely associated with the vested interests of public sector unions and minority groups (Laffin 1989) Labour councils were easy prey to a press keen to hunt down examples of inefficiency and ideological excess...

Committed to the removal of CCT but recognising its benefits, the leadership needed a policy to replace CCT. Ideally the new policy would succeed where CCT had failed. It would reach the darkest corner of 'old Labour' authorities, it would control costs, constrain producer interests, refocus local parties on the delivery of services and provide an inspection infrastructure that could head-off embarrassing scandals. More demanding still the design brief was given to the working parties tasked with solving the leadership's local government problem.

In order to reconcile its 'local government problem' (thus becoming a serious electoral contender) *Labour was forced to modernise...*

2.3.5b. ‘New’ Labour:

The New Labour brand was first unveiled by Tony Blair in 1994. The slogan: ‘New Labour, New Britain’ ushered in a new dawn in the history of the UK Labour Party. At this time the language employed by the party expressed a pejorative view of the past, in favour of the language of renewal and reinvention:

...Blair knew that only by contrasting ‘new’ Labour with ‘old’ Labour explicitly would the public believe that Labour had changed and could be trusted. In other words, changing the name wasn’t just reflecting a change in political ideology it was also manipulating language to control public perception. (Fairclough 2000: vii)

Interestingly, much of this ‘new’ language employed was fairly consistent with the language of NPM theories. Inspired by ambition to attain the office of government, a newly drafted Clause IV was adopted:

The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more that we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many, not the few. Where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe. And where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect. (Clause IV – *Current Labour Party Constitution*)

This significantly diluted the former commitment to “*common ownership*” and the principle of maintaining public ownership of both state and industry, as drafted many years earlier by Sidney Webb. The newly revised Clause IV effectively completed the process of conversion from ‘old’ Labour to New Labour enabled an ambitious policy course based on the new ‘Third Way’ politics.

2.3.5c. The Third Way:

The Third Way stands for a modernised social democracy, passionate in its commitment to social justice and the goals of the centre-left, but flexible, innovative and forward looking in the means to achieve them. It is founded on the values that have guided progressive policies for more than a decade – democracy, liberty, justice, mutual obligation and internationalism. But it is a Third Way because it

moves decisively beyond an Old Left preoccupied by state control, high taxes and producer interests; and a New Right treating public investment, and often the very notion of society and collective endeavour, as evils to be undone. (Blair 1998: 1)

The Third Way is not a new term. Pope Pius XII called for a third way between socialism and capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1938 Harold Macmillan famously called for a 'Middle Way' outlining a centrist position in response to the domestic and international problems of the time (Halpern & Mikosz 1998). Revived in the 1990s, the Third Way gained international prominence through the politics of Blair, Clinton and Schröder. A major proponent of the approach, Giddens (2000: 50-4) has outlined Third Way Politics as:

1. Accepting the logic of 1989 and after – transcending the divide between left and right whilst developing a policy framework of radical intent;
2. Needing to constrain the 'three key areas of power – government, the economy and the communities of civil society' in the interest of promoting social solidarity and social justice;
3. Constructing a new social contract around the theme of there being 'no rights without responsibilities' and nurturing a chain of reciprocity amongst citizens in society;
4. The development of a wide-ranging supply-side policy, which seeks to reconcile economic growth mechanisms with the structural reform of the welfare state, through the cultivation of human and social capital;
5. Embracing a diversified society based upon egalitarian principles, maximising equality responsibilities' and nurturing a chain of reciprocity amongst citizens in society, maximising equality of opportunity whilst minimising inequality of outcome;
6. Accepts globalisation and global change on a local, nation and world-wide level.

The Third Way claimed to occupy the centre-ground between neo-liberalism and social democracy, transcending both these positions. Widely criticised as being a vague and evasive term (just as many have argued against BV) the reliance of the Third Way upon the stated positions of neo-liberalism and social democracy is widely believed as problematic:

A third or middle way must logically stand in relation to at least two others. What the nature of the relationship is between the elements is significant and cannot be deduced: is it a compromise, a synthesis or just a third of three, for example? (Driver & Martell 2000: 148)

Powell (2000: 53), writing on New Labour's reform of the welfare state, suggested the Third Way could be summarised in the acronym 'PAP' – 'Pragmatism and Populism':

The pragmatism element results from two main factors. First, the third way does not seem to be based on a clear ideology or a 'big idea' like the old left or the new right: the big idea is that there is no big idea... Second, the third way may be best summed up by the New Labour phrase 'what counts is what works'. There is a stress on discarding the Conservative reforms that failed, but keeping those that worked.

He continues:

In addition to pragmatism, the third way seems to be characterized by populism... Gordon Brown, commenting on welfare-to-work plans, contended that 'This is not a lurch to the right. It is the Labour party stating the values of decent hard-working people in this country'. This appeal to the politics of decency of 'ordinary' people has been used elsewhere (e.g. Mandelson and Liddle, 1996). Labour's 'ordinary person' has now joined Richard Tawney's 'Henry Dubb' and George Orwell's 'average thinking person' on the Clapham omnibus. (Powell 2000: 54)

## 2.4. New Public Management Theories: The Golden Thread in the Best Value Haystack

Widely recognised as affecting a commercial, managerialist approach more typically associated with practice found in the private sector, the NPM to an extent provides the golden thread linking: CCT and BV, the modernisation of the Labour Party, and the trend in favour of a Third Way politics shown by leading political parties and politicians in OECD countries. The illustration below is my representation of the themes so far discussed as having influenced local government reform in England from the 1980s onwards.

Figure 2.6: Unravelling the influences of Local Government Reform 1980 onwards

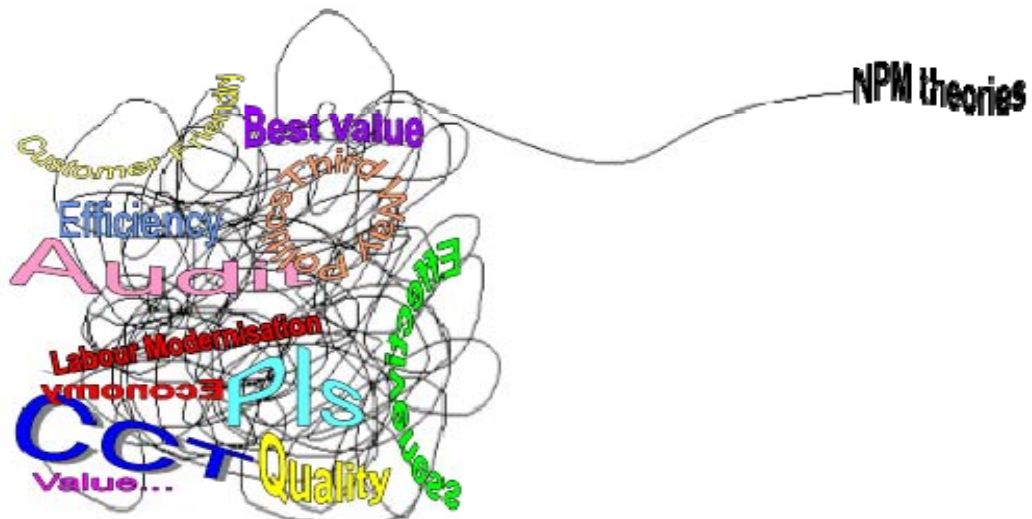


Illustration: by the author

### 2.4.1. The New Public Management:

Writing with reference to the UK experience, Hood (1991: 3) outlines the rise of NPM as linked to four administrative ‘megatrends’ in the public sector:

- i. attempts to *slow down or reverse government growth* of overt public spending and staffing;
- ii. the shift towards *privatisation and quasi-privatisation* and away from core government institutions, with renewed emphasis on ‘subsidiarity’ in service provision;

- iii. the development of *automation*, particularly in information technology, in the production and distribution of public services;
- iv. the development of an *international* agenda, increasingly focused on general issues of public management, policy design, decision styles and inter-governmental co-operation, in top of older tradition of individual country specialisms in public administration.

Building on the seven doctrinal components of NPM as outlined by Hood (1991:5), Osborne & McLaughlin (2002:9) summarise the following as indicative of the approach:

- a focus on *hands-on* and *entrepreneurial management*, as opposed to the traditional bureaucratic focus of public administration;
- explicit *standards* and *measures of performance*;
- an emphasis on *output controls*;
- the importance of the *disaggregation* and *decentralisation* of public services;
- a shift to the promotion of *competition* in the provision of public services;
- a stress on *private sector styles of management* and their superiority;
- the promotion of *discipline* and *parsimony in resource allocation*.

Finding compatibility with the monetarist values pursued by Thatcher, under the stewardship of the Conservatives the NPM principles were seized upon and came to transform the administration of local government in England during the 1980s and 90s:

The Conservatives in their eighteen years in government, in effect brought to an end a particular form of local government. A sustained drive based on financial controls and constrains; restraints of service provision; compulsory competitive tendering for key services; and new managerial reforms terminated the post-war regime of local authorities as semi-autonomous pre-eminent and large-scale service providers for the welfare state. The Conservatives blurred the boundaries of the system by creating new roles for existing non-elected agencies and new quangos alongside a complex array of partnership arrangements. (Stoker 2004: 47)

In the comment above, Stoker is noting the transition of local government from the 'welfare state' to the 'plural state' (Osborne & McLaughlin 2002). Under Labour, the pluralisation of

the state continued with NPM principles becoming even more widely applied and to a greater degree of sophistication:

It is suggested that there might be less to New Labour than meets the eye, There are elements of continuity and redirection, but previous agendas (such as bringing in more private finance) have been carried forward and even accelerated. (Ferlie & Fitzgerald 2002:341)

#### 2.4.2. BV and the NPM:

In the words of Bovaird and Halachmi (2001: 458):

BV can be seen as the latest manifestation of the portfolio of managerialist approaches which are loosely referred to as the ‘New Public Management’

Although it is accepted the same ‘NPM’ label might be used to describe widely differing practices (Denters & Rose 2005), within the literature there is a degree of consensus the seven doctrinal components as identified by Hood (1991) as indicating NPM theories generally. Accepting the description provided by Ferlie et al (2002), the table below summarises key features of the BV regime (outlined during the course of this chapter) and indicates their uniformity within understandings of NPM theories.



Table 2.7: BV as a continuation of NPM theories

| NPM Feature – as highlighted by Ferlie et al (2002: 9)  | NPM uniformity of BV  |
|---|---|
| - a focus on <i>hands-on</i> and <i>entrepreneurial management</i> as opposed to the traditional bureaucratic focus on the public administrator | > An emphasis on the role of ‘good managers’ as driving service improvement.  |
| - explicit <i>standards</i> and <i>measures of performance</i>  | > An imposed national framework of performance indicators (BVPIs), additional targets to improve local service delivery (LPIs).   |
| - an emphasis on <i>output controls</i>   | > An emphasis on outputs and outcomes, with an increased role for the AC in measuring performance.  |
| - the importance of <i>disaggregation</i> and <i>decentralisation</i> of public services  | > A requirement of the local authority to consult; greater emphasis on partnership working and ‘joined-up’ government in planning, commissioning and delivering services.   |
| - a shift to the promotion of <i>competition</i> in the provision of public services  | > Increased market-testing of all/part of service provisions, particularly through the comparative element of BV promoted the role of competition between authorities and alternative service provision by the private/voluntary sectors.   |
| - a stress on <i>private sector styles of management</i> and their superiority  | > Increased use and application of management tools traditionally associated with private sector industry (e.g. benchmarking, 360 evaluation) as a means of developing capabilities of public sector managers; increased reliance on principles of risk management.   |
| - the promotion of <i>discipline</i> and <i>parsimony</i> in <i>resource allocation</i>   | > Requirement to demonstrate a ‘continuous improvement’ promoting greater discipline of efficiency; additionally, the emphasis on long, mid and short-term planning were designed to ensure improved levels of fiscal control were practiced; finally, partnership working encouraged as a means of maximising available resources. |

*Adapted and developed by the Author*

Many of the features of the NPM shown above are similarly applicable to the practices instituted by the earlier regime of CCT which in some respects make BV appear somewhat as a straightforward continuation of CCT. In order to properly understand BV as a manifestation of the NPM we need to be aware of the subsequent evolution which took place within NPM theories. Ferlie & Geraughty (2005) distinguish between earlier 'Hard NPM' approaches and later developed 'Soft NPM' approaches. They argue 'hard' approaches are characterised by a NPM which seeks to control public sector workers through the introduction of an 'accounting logic' typically involving a rise of audit and application related performance measurement/management techniques. Specifically emphasising:

This new paradigm assumes: 1. performance identification through measurement and 2. a reward-or-punish strategy, using hard numbers and performance indicators as the basis of judgement. (Ferlie & Geraughty 2005: 431).

The authors note a human-relations private sector management practice, as influencing a softening in the original approach, which led to a shift in emphasis to user-orientation, quality improvement, organisational and individual development and learning. They observe:

Whilst this is a different management style to the more aggressive NPM model, it still moves the locus of control and decision making away from professional to a new internalised management function. The aim is to absorb professionals into more inclusive and responsive management systems. (pp.432)

'Soft' NPM approaches are deemed as a more attractive option to public sector professionals and managers keen to implement change and/or improve levels of service provision. In particular, the authors cite the 'culture of excellence' approach as popularised by Peters and Waterman (1982) and later 'high commitment' human resource models as contributing the development of this approach. In addition to adopting a softened version of NPM, BV also sought to incorporate 'community and local governance' (CLG) principles into the development of its framework. Bovaird and Halachmi (2001) arguing BV can be seen as a "*coming-together*" of these two – very different – approaches.

### 2.4.3. Understanding ‘governance’:

The concept of ‘governance’ marks a shift from traditional forms of government, to more recent processes which emphasise the need for increased flexibility and a plurality of partnerships in public service provision.

**Table 2.8: The differing emphases of ‘Government’ and ‘Governance’**

| <b>Government</b>   | <b>Governance</b>   |
|---|---|
| Concerned primarily with institutions of the state  | More about processes of governing with the involvement of non-state actors and agencies   |
| Public sector focused   | More inclusive approach to policy-making, service provision and problem-solving often involving <i>all</i> sectors and the public                       |
| Focused on structures   | More output/outcomes focused  |
| Organisations characterised as bureaucratic, based on hierarchical relations with clear lines of demarcation and accountability | More about the relationships between individuals and organisations characterised in networks and partnership arrangements; accountabilities are blurred |
| ‘Providing, directing and rowing’ (Osbourne and Gaebler 1992)   | Broader, less involved role: ‘enabling, facilitating and steering’  |

Based on: Wilson & Game (2006: 142)

Following Rhodes (1997:46) description of ‘governance’:

*A new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the new methods by which society is governed.*

In terms of the UK the term has been employed in two main ways, both of which reflect a seismic shift:

The first usage focuses on governance via a new method, exemplified in the Conservative era by the way in which the dominance of hierarchy was challenged successfully by the introduction of market mechanisms. The second, and more popular, usage focuses on governance as a changed condition. Here the Conservative era is commonly described as the period when local government (governing through a single dominant institution) gave way to local governance (governing via a multiplicity of stakeholders). (Sullivan 2004:186)

2.4.4. NPM & Governance – a fusion?

In outlining BV as merging both NPM and CLG approaches, Bovaird and Halachmi (2001) cite the following in evidence of a fusion:

**Table 2.9: Understanding BV as: NPM, CLG, NPM-CLG fusion**

| <b>BV as NPM</b>  | <b>BV as CLG</b>   | <b>BV a NPM-CLG fusion</b>   |
|---|--|--|
| Procurement strategy which seeks to ensure a mixture of in-house and external providers |  | The ‘contract culture’ within NPM has been softened within Best Value to produce a balance between use of the market and in house provision, as long as the latter can demonstrate its competitiveness   |
|   |  | The adversarial contracting relationships which characterised CCT are being replaced by BV by emphasis on working with contractors as partners, with negotiated tendering resulting in relational contractors which allow appropriate flexibility  |
|   | Concentration on community involvement in all aspects of policy planning, performance review, and in some cases even in service management | The view of citizens simply as service users and taxpayers has been replaced by the multifaceted concept of the ‘stakeholder society’ which recognises that citizens may engage with public service organisations in various capacities and at various levels, e.g. as service user, carer of service user, lobbyist in interest group on behalf of a service, worker in a service, vendor to a service, taxpayer, voter, etc. |

*Adapted from: Bovaird and Halachmi 2001*

In evaluating BV, Bovaird and Halachmi (2001) consider:

Its value lies particularly in moving away from the mechanistic ‘control oriented aspects of NPM and focusing on active engagement with external stakeholders (including local communities) and active encouragement of organisational learning (involving all internal stakeholders).

#### 2.4.5. BV – a less mechanistic control orientated NPM?

The TQM inspired customer-oriented public service provision approach adopted by the Major government, to a degree established both a softening of NPM approaches and the introduction of government by ‘governance’. However, the argument of BV as signalling a departure from ‘mechanistic control’ as extended by ‘hard’ models of the NPM is moot. Stoker (2004) outlines that in developing BV, Labour made extensive use of the ‘tools of government’ which practised an unfair and disproportionate influence effectively leading to a strong-arm situation whereby local government was forced into a position of submission over the regime. Applying a combination of ‘carrot and stick’ these measures included:

- i. the art of communication/persuasion;
- ii. financial incentive/bargaining;
- iii. threat of intervention;
- iv. invoking official/legal authority;
- v. a deliberate attempt by government to alter the culture of local government for its own desired impact;
- vi. use of financial/performance monitors and controls.

Concluding the argument, he writes:

BV implementation has seen all of these tools in operation. (Stoker 2004: 88)

Arriving at a similar conclusion, Wilson and Game (2006: 364) reflected:

...BV would prove every bit as centrally prescriptive and potentially even more interventionist. It applied, moreover, to every single service and function.  
(2006: 364)

The appeal of NPM as an aid to reform local government practice rests primarily on central government distrust and suspicion of local government. Although CCT was intended to improve the ‘economy, efficiency and effectiveness’ of local government it manifested central government distrust in the financial competency of local government. Similarly whilst the Citizen’s Charter can be read as an attempt to improve general standards of public service delivery, it can also be read as an indication of central government misgivings regarding standards of service delivery.

Likewise, BV indicated central government concern regarding the capabilities of local government:

New Labour came to power with a fairly jaundiced view of local government as prone to producer domination in the delivery of services and lacking a strong customer focus, as weak in terms of political standing and value, and as an institution not to be trusted but rather put on trial to see if it could improve. (Stoker 2004: 58)

Whether BV indicated a fusion of NPM and CLG approaches depends largely on the exclusivity of the NPM paradigm and ideas of governance. The approach maintained by BV might have been fairer in terms of determining the most suitable service provider, however the duty of compliance imposed significantly undermines arguments of BV as ‘enabling’ and ‘facilitating’ – considered key features of governance approaches. BV imposed a rigorous criteria set by government which resulted in the continued dominance of the NPM paradigm.

## 2.5. Beyond BV: the wider performance framework of local government

The government has gone beyond the BV regime as a means of improving performance in the modernisation programme. Rather than relying upon experience for both local authorities and central government to learn how to make effective use of the best value regime to improve performance, it has taken a series of further initiatives, which make the BV regime almost redundant. (Stewart 2003:141)

Throughout this study, the challenge has been to maintain focus. Rarely is the social world neatly packaged into discreet areas enabling unhindered access by the researcher. An added challenge has been in keeping track of the separate initiatives introduced by the then Labour government. Invariably analysis of BV entails consideration of the wider contemporary local government reform agenda, particularly performance measurement and performance management related innovations. In the remaining discussion, I outline the wider performance management reforms developed alongside and in addition to BV.

### 2.5.1. Beacon Council Scheme:

Introduced by the *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* white paper (DETR 1998: 4) 'Beacon Councils' were intended:

...to serve as pace-setters and centres of excellence. Councils will be able to seek beacon status for particular services, or for the council as a whole. Those councils which are in touch with local people, have strong and effective links with business, have modern management structures and deliver best value will become beacon councils. Councils with beacon status will get increased scope to act for the benefit of their local community. (DETR 1998: 4)

The scheme was intended to encourage general improvements in the standard of local services, highlighting examples of 'excellence' and dissemination of good practice. The initiative was an attempt to replace a reliance on regulation, audit and inspection through a new emphasis of organizational learning, promoting '*improvement from within*' (Rashman & Radnor 2005: 22). The scheme entailed local authorities in

making individual/joint applications for ‘beacon status’ under a number of different themes (decided by Ministers from across government) to draw attention to service areas deemed as having a direct impact on the ‘quality of life’ experienced by local people. For example, in 2007/08 beacon status was awarded for ‘elected members as community champions’ and ‘preventing and tackling anti-social behaviour’. Under the scheme, shortlisted authorities were visited by members of an Advisory Panel who decided upon the award on the following basis:

- Excellence in a beacon theme
- Good general performance, and
- Plans for effective dissemination of practice (e.g. showcase events, open days, seminars, mentoring etc.) (Wilson & Game 2006: 368)

Evaluative feedback conducted by Rashman and Hartley (2006) suggested wide support for the scheme amongst local government officers, especially in terms of providing national prominence of the authority and boosting the morale of staff (cited in Wilson & Game 2006: 369). Others however have questioned the soundness of the initiative, arguing that the scheme rests on judgements and that those judgements can be disputed:

It is misleading to single out particular authorities or their services as a special category of beacons to shine out on the unenlightened in the darkness beyond. Rather than the many learning from the few, all can learn from each other, and there is a strong tradition in local government of learning from other authorities. (Stewart 2003:142-3)

Further, this spotlight approach was seen as undermining the authority-wide improvement sought by CPA (see discussion in: 2.5.3):

...when an authority receives a Beacon Award for one of its services, morale can be boosted and motivation raised even when it has also received a disappointing CPA judgment. This type of relationship needs to be understood more carefully through understanding the roles of CPA and Beacons in encouraging and promoting building organisational capacity for effective learning and improvement. (Rashman and Radnor 2005: 25-6)



The Beacon Council scheme continued until April 2010 when it was replaced by the remarkably similar 'Local Innovation Award Scheme', however overall the approach adopted was seen as inconsistent and messy.

### 2.5.2. Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs)

Introduced in spring 2001 LPSAs required given local performance targets to be formally agreed between specific government departments and the local authority.

Touted as 'something for something' agreements cash rewards were given by government in return for achievement of local targets (Wilson & Game 2006: 373).

Others have considered LPSAs as a change of tact by the then government:

Broadly New Labour no longer thinks it can name and shame its way to service improvements... In a general way central government is buying the outcomes it desires, while local councils are to get the local ownership and freedom they need to deliver service improvement. (Stoker 2004: 97)

In contrast, Sullivan (2004: 193) considered LPSAs as reinforcing the agenda of central government and that the initiative constrained minimal expression of local interests within a set of nationally determined priorities. Arguably, more carrot than stick, LPSAs reinforced the subordination of local government and added to the bureaucratic burden of local authorities:

The first stage involves discussions in which the authority presents its strategies within which the PSA will be set. There follow negotiations expected to last about six weeks covering both targets and the proposed relaxations in the requirements of central government. The PSAs have to include about twelve performance targets, expressed as outcomes, with an emphasis on national priorities. The targets for national priorities include at least one relating to each of education, social services and transport and a measure of overall cost-effectiveness... The local targets should cover 'the main issues of substance that consultation indicates are important local concerns but which might not be sufficiently reflected in national priorities'. Authorities have to produce supporting evidence from the best value performance plans or from other plans to show that the targets are 'stretching' and beyond what would

otherwise be achieved. Achievement of the targets is monitored through the audit of performance plans. (Stewart 2003: 146)

To enable achievement of the targets set, the government made available additional resources and provided further incentive of ‘payment by results’ equivalent of up to 2.5% of the authority’s budget at the start of the PSA. The final total amount received was scaled down pro-rata for targets missed; those who achieved below 60% of their targeted improvements received no grant payment.

In my own assessment the LPSA enabled only partial localised improvement of specific outcomes rather than a generalised localised improvement for all. For example the first phase of LPSA focused on improving GCSE results. In partnership with the LEA, EDC oversaw a 10% improvement of those achieving 5 GCSEs grades A-C. However, in terms of improving the overall life chances of young people at a local level, alleviating social deprivation and ensuring economic prosperity GCSE results alone – *without* adequate investment in local further education and training provision, *without* accompanying investment in local job creation schemes – provides little in the way of a practical contribution to improved future economic prosperity. Again, to quote Stewart (2003:147):

... the problem is that a limited number of specific targets can distort the work of the authority because it can involve relative neglect of other aspects of the authority’s work and encourage separatism rather than joined-up working between services.

### 2.5.3. Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA): BV Mark II?

Introduced by the *Strong Local Leadership* white paper (DTLGR 2001), the CPA framework provided an assessment of local authority functioning as a whole – incorporating the process of audit and inspection. For our specific purposes, CPA was the mechanism by which EDC came to be formally recognised as an ‘excellent’ local authority.

Wilson and Game (2006: 370-1) outline CPA as ‘BV Mark II’ and certainly there is a sense of CPA as having incorporated and remodelled BV. Lowndes (2004:243) contends:

CPA left the operating procedures of Best Value intact, while effectively diluting its original animating idea (the emphasis on varied local institutional responses to a broad goal of service improvement). BV became just one element of the overarching CPA institution, but the layering strategy allowed its architects to save face, while also reducing the costs of designing entirely new rules. (pp. 243)

In this respect, CPA represents a further instance of the government ‘make do and extend’ approach. The first round of CPA inspection in 2003 focused exclusively on the 150 larger Unitary and County Councils; inspection of district authorities commenced later in December 2004 – arrangements outlined here refer specifically to district councils. Combining a number of techniques (including: self assessment, independent peer review and external inspection) through the process the AC allocated the local authority a category according to the level of performance exhibited, later providing an additional report in support of the judgement reached:

- **Poor Councils:** Offer inadequate services and do not have the leadership and managerial capacity or focus to improve them. Performance management is ineffective and resources are not used to their best advantage. Most poor councils are trying to make improvements to services, but lack the focus and clarity of priorities to do so effectively. Engagement with local people does not translate into positive changes or better services to the community. Without external support, the efforts that many poor councils are making to improve services for their citizens are unlikely to lead to lasting change.
- **Weak Councils:** tend to provide low standards of service and have limited ability to improve them. There are few that currently have the ability to move quickly out of the weak category. They may have one or more services that are performing reasonably well, but they do not spread this better performance from one service to another. Their priorities are unclear, do not reflect local aspirations, and are not adequately tied to resources. Developing their political and managerial ability to tackle their problems must be a top priority.

- **Fair Councils:** provide reasonable services overall, but need to deliver significant improvements to ensure that local people benefit from more consistent and reliable delivery. The performance of these councils is generally stronger than their ability to make further improvements. To become good or excellent, they need to identify the things that really matter, focus on them, and manage their performance more effectively. They need to make better use of their resources, particularly their staff, and to improve their leadership skills and managerial impact.
- **Good Councils:** Tend to have strong services overall and know where they need to make improvements. They provide effective leadership and management, have high levels of ambition, and are mostly focused on what matters to their local communities. To become excellent, they need to strengthen their ability to manage and apply resources where they are needed most, and to work more closely with partners to achieve more for their communities.
- **Excellent Councils:** Have shown overall that they deliver high quality services, especially in areas considered of national priority, such as education and social services. They have effective leadership and management arrangements and are strong in maintaining their performance. They are clear about their priorities, which are linked to local needs and aspirations. Their finances are well managed and are directed at key priorities. Excellent councils are good at achieving more for their communities through the delivery of crosscutting projects, often in partnership with others.

(Game 2006:11–13)

Local authorities rated ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ were promised ‘freedoms and flexibilities’ in reward for good performance; whilst those rated ‘weak’ or ‘poor’ faced an additional bureaucratic burden in the form of an ‘improvement plan’ and/or the possibility of intervention. Although EDC was an ‘excellent’ local authority during the research there was little evidence of it enjoying its promised ‘freedoms and flexibilities’ and its bureaucratic burden seemed far from diminished. Of those interviewed, opinion was unanimously expressed:

...nobody wants to work in a poor local authority. (‘Janet’ pilot interview)

2.5.3a. CPA: outline of the process

\*Details of the formal CPA process have been taken from: Audit Commission (2006)

*CPA – district council framework from 2006*

*i. Self-Assessment:*

The CPA process began with a self-assessment completed by the local authority; the process required the authority to provide a response in relation to four key areas further underpinned by ten themes:

1. What is the council trying to achieve?

- *Ambition*
- *Focus*
- *Prioritisation*

2. How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

- *Capacity*
- *Performance Management*

3. What has the council achieved/not achieved to date?

- *Achievement in Quality of Service*
- *Achievement in Quality of Improvement*
- *Investment*

4. In light of what has been learnt, what does the council plan to do next?

- *Learning*
- *Future Plans*

Each of the themes was awarded a score between 1 and 4 indicating:

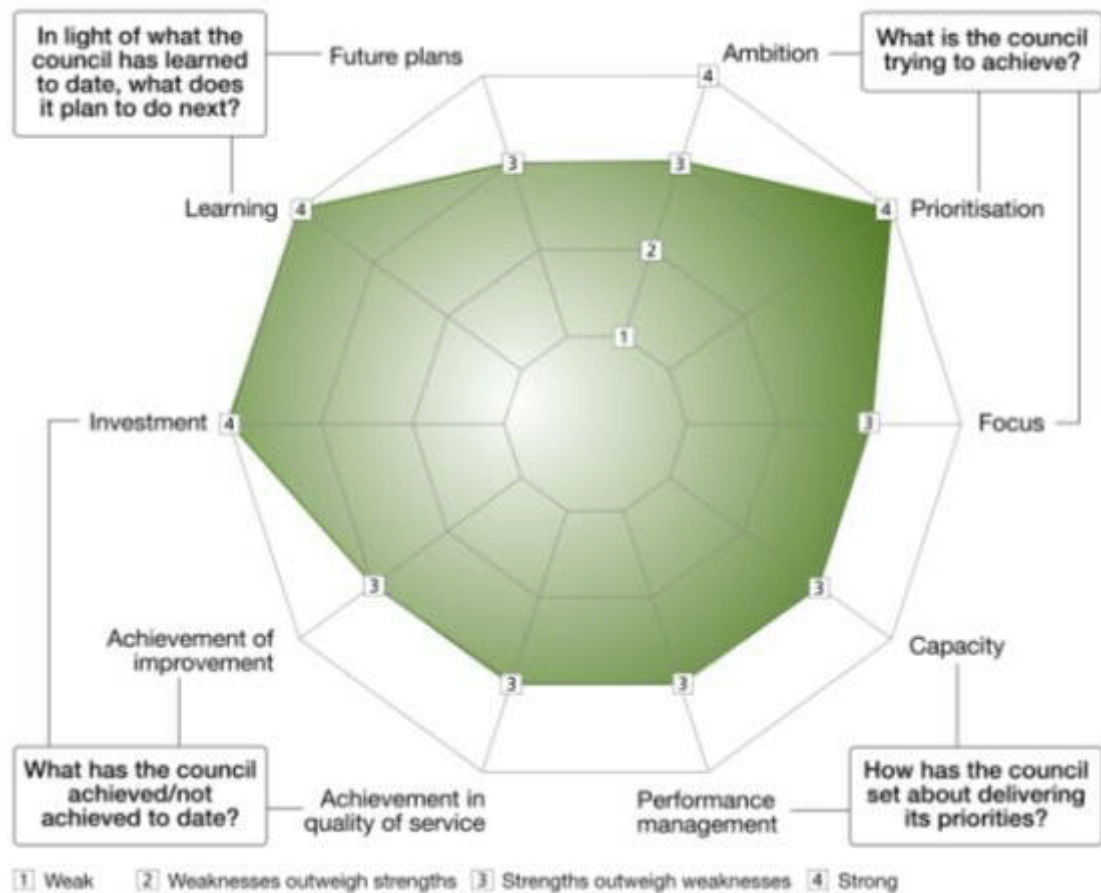
- 1 – weak;*
- 2 – weaknesses outweigh strengths;*
- 3 – strengths outweigh weaknesses;*
- 4 – strong.*

These responses were used to construct a visual representation of the authority's own perception regarding its capacity to improve service delivery; indicating the strengths

and weaknesses of the authority and highlighting those areas most in need of future improvement. An example of such a representation is shown below:

**Figure 2.10: Audit Commission: The strengths and weakness of EDC (CPA 2003)**

### Easington District Council



Source: Audit Commission CPA Inspection Report of EDC (2003)

In addition to the self-assessment, the authority was also required to complete a detailed ‘diagnostic’ report outlining how it compared in relation to issues of national importance. At the time of its inspection in 2003, EDC elected to complete an assessment of management of public open spaces and local housing.

#### ii. Peer Review:

Also referred to as a ‘dry-run’, Peer Review involved a visit to the authority by a nominated group of peers drawn from other local authorities. The analogy was of a ‘critical friend’ providing advice and suggesting improvements prior to the process of

external inspection by the AC. The group would speak with elected members and staff, making a study of the evidence put forward by the authority in its draft statement. In response to this, the group compiled a report advising of improvement to the final self-assessment submitted by the authority. Fourteen weeks in advance of on-site inspection, a copy of the Peer Review report was submitted along with a final draft version of the authority's completed self-assessment, along with the diagnostic reports produced and other key items of supporting documentation (e.g. strategy, policy, recent major reports) was sent to the AC. The authority also forwarded a list of key contacts taken from community groups and local strategic partnerships indicating possible leads in readiness of the interview process within external inspection. The AC used the information provided to plan its onsite inspection activities of the authority.

*iii. Corporate Assessment:*

Corporate Assessment (CA) was the part of the CPA process which ultimately decided the final category of performance received by the authority and was intended to provide a corporate appraisal of the overall effectiveness of the authority in terms of the capacity within the authority to deliver future service improvement. The process involved a week-long onsite inspection undertaken by a team of three/four AC inspectors.

As part of the process of inspection, inspectors were required to undertake a number of 'reality checks' designed to validate the information presented by the authority in the earlier self-assessment and peer review processes. Inspectors also reviewed performance data (BVPIs and LPIs). The CA was structured around the same four areas and ten themes addressed in the earlier self-assessment process and required inspectors to undertake one-to-one interviews with the senior management team, line managers and section heads. Additionally inspectors would speak with Council Cabinet members, key partners and members of the community (service users). Focus group sessions composed of a mix of managers, members, officers, front-line staff, partners and service users would also be held to enable the inspectors to reach a decisive conclusion regarding the effectiveness of the internal corporate systems of the

authority, providing an indication of its strengths and weaknesses enabling targeting of future resources to deliver improved outcome/outputs in the future.

Afterwards a draft report which presented the initial findings of the inspectors was sent to the authority two/three following its inspection, providing opportunity in which to allow the authority to formally challenge the decision reached by the AC prior to its award of an official CPA rating. However, in conversation I was informed by a participant that the process of challenging a decision was fraught with difficulty and required a substantial burden of further evidence to be supplied, with little real chance being perceived that the judgement would be overturned – in most instances the AC provided only a more detailed explanation outlining the reasons of its final decision. Final Inspection Reports were published four weeks after this and in response the authority produced an ‘Action Plan’ which identified areas of weakness, the Senior Management team and members tracking progress made against identified areas of weakness.

#### 2.5.3b. A lukewarm reception:

CPA is described as a “*highly controversial policy*” with local authorities initially “*sceptical*” in their response to proposals (Wilson & Game 2006: 371). Others were critical of the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, arguing that most authorities had varying standards of performance and that the single label indicating the level of performance attained reduced the inherent complexity of the authority structure and produced a much distorted view of reality (Stewart 2003: 155). Writing at the time of the proposals, Freer (2002:6) asked:

Is it really feasible to develop a system which captures and labels all of this in one or two words? (2002: 6)

Broadbent (2003) described CPA as: “*A Crock of Gold at the End of the Performance Rainbow*” arguing the need to question the validity of performance indicators in the CPA process. Critical of performance measurement systems in general, he stressed the potential for game-play and officer indifference. In terms of my own interpretation of the consequences to be had, the emphasis given to performance indicators outputs and the single-word judgement of the CPA process potentially intensified perceptions of



the need to ‘perform’ and produce a desired outcome within authorities. Possibly, in the worst instances CPA had potential to cause division within the authority colleagues feeling compelled to ‘improve’ their less well performing counterparts. Additionally, CPA made for the possibility of poor performing areas within the authority to conceive an additional (possibly unfair) burden of responsibility to improve at a faster rate so as ‘not to let the side down’. Overall Broadbent (2003:6) considers the limited influence exercised by CPA within the authority, writing:

Because the CPA is an authority-wide performance measurement system, perhaps the only set of people it can be seen to motivate directly is the overall management team.

This provides an observation which, to an extent, was supported by the findings of the research. Within EDC CPA was no more than a passing headline which bore little direct relevance to the daily working lives of front-line and back-office personnel:

*Interviewer:* When EDC got the excellent status, was it a big deal?

*Interviewee:* Why it didn’t affect us, there will have been a fuss somewhere, but basically it didn’t affect us I dunnet think. (‘Paul’ interview)

Unexpectedly and perhaps surprisingly, the CPA judgement achieved by EDC contrived to create an unusual problem:

We didn’t want to go out and publicise it [excellent rating] with a complacent attitude. We used it to put a good slant on things, to say: ‘*we have been rated as excellent but we know there is room for improvement*’. (‘Jennifer’ interview emphasis as per interviewee)

The presence of local socio-economic deprivation within the district seemed to some to contradict the finding of the AC – *how could EDC be an ‘excellent’ local authority, when locally the situation for most people in the district was far from ‘excellent’?*

Freer (2002) highlighted the general problem of communicating CPA judgements.

Designed by government to drive improvement, CPA was also intended by government as a means of encouraging greater public interest in local public service provision; in a similar way, conceivably, education and health league tables had come to exercise public attention – apparently improving levels of accountability in terms of

public service provision. However, local government is a very different beast. Many of the services it provides are geographically fixed and provide the public with limited freedoms in the exercise of choice – we can't reasonably choose who tends our parks and open spaces, our preferred refuse collector or to which authority we pay council tax to and receive services from. Simply, the public did not have the same degree of freedom available to them in which to utilise the information provided to them by CPA: *practically what could it do with the information provided?* Conversely, there was great opportunity for CPA judgements to be variously misused and abused by those in a more general position of political influence:

There are also dangers that politicians and local media will misuse CPAs to exaggerate, one way or another, the performance of authorities. Will high performers be represented as paragons of virtue, deliverers of excellence in all that they do? More ominously, will poor performers, and even coasters be represented as beyond redemption, abject failures, inadequate in all that they provide? (Freer 2002: 7)

The decisive willingness by government to intervene and assume control of the day-to-day functions executed by the authority was a distinctive feature of the original BV framework. However, given that BV assessed the performance of individual service areas/function the threat of intervention was relatively confined. In contrast, CPA which provided a single assessment of the performance of the authority as a whole, threatened total control of the authority by government. Stoker (2004) suggests the real intended purpose of CPA was enforcement, extending the extent of control exercised by government at a local level. Similarly, Wilson and Game (2006: 372) outline CPA as a peculiarly 'English' manifestation:

Ministers, assisted variously by the Audit Commission, the LGA and the IDeA, and, of course, the generally positive commitment of the local authorities themselves, have created a nationally orchestrated performance management process that is unique and unmatched in any other large-scale system of local government... imagine the governments of [Europe]... trying to run annual CPAs for their thousands of local authorities. They couldn't possibly, but much more importantly, it wouldn't occur to them to want to... it requires both the

centralist structure of local government and the centralist cast of mind. (2006: 372)

CPA was intended to drive ‘continuous improvement’ with the authority as a whole. However, in practice, the universal approach imposed by CPA made for the creation of ‘black-holes’ of poor performance within the authority. This is a finding which was demonstrated by the research particularly in understanding the poor dynamic of relations between EDC and East Durham Homes (EDH) – the Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) which established the former housing department of the authority as a ‘sister-company’ in order to oversee management of EDC owned housing stock. EDC was an ‘excellent’ local authority. In contrast, through a similar process, EDH was later judged by the AC as a ‘one star’ service with ‘unlikely prospects for improvement’. The composition of EDH as the former housing department of EDC was largely unchanged. However, within a period of a year the section in terms of key members of personnel, operating processes and procedures, policy and approaches, performance and management had gone from being considered (by association) ‘excellent’ to ‘poor’. The only actual change in essence was that the section became reconstituted as EDH. Whilst this process had inevitably created disturbance and upheaval it is inconceivable to think that at least some of the issues which plagued the poor performance of EDH did not exist in some form, to some degree prior to the process of change enacted but they had been rendered invisible by the general perceived ‘excellence’ of the authority as a whole.

The imbalance in terms of performance had combined to contribute tension in the relationship had between EDC and EDH. The AC judgement of EDH as a ‘one star’ service had prevented EDC from accessing additional government monies, made available on the condition of a set level of performance being attained by the service provider. This effectively prevented EDC from making improvements to the stock it owned, breaking a promise to tenants and creating difficulties in compliance of the ‘decent homes standard’. Senior figures within EDC were frustrated at what they perceived as a continued inability of EDH to deliver, the ‘one star’ rating of the service confirming opinion of EDH as ineffective. Whilst senior personnel at EDH resented what they perceived as an unfair expectation and continued poor treatment by EDC

which had perhaps ‘left them in the lurch’ – to an extent former colleagues felt that they had been abandoned.

2.5.3c. CPA Revamped:

As part of the ‘second round’ of CPA, in 2005, the government announced a number of significant changes to the original CPA framework. Outlined by the AC in the publication ‘*CPA: the harder test*’, the changes listed here relate to requirements of unitary authorities and county councils only (and are provided as a basis for comparison). The changes of the tougher stance CPA included:

- strengthened methodologies for assessing user-focus’
- new explicit judgement of value for money within the annual use of resources assessment;
- assessment of the councils’ achievements in relation to shared nation/local priorities;
- Annual Performance Assessments (APAs) or Joint-Area Reviews by Ofsted and the Commission for Social Care Inspection;
- Direction of Travel assessments with clear labels to indicate the progress being made in achieving improvement;
- Rule-based CPA categorisation rather than the previous largely arithmetic based model.

In 2005 three new elements of CPA were introduced which required authorities (including districts) to produce/provide:

- Use of resources assessment;
- Direction of travel statement;
- Off-site analysis of local authority service performance information by the Audit Commission;

In contrast, to the ‘harder test’ proposed for larger authorities, later proposals for district councils announced an improved, less demanding and resource-intensive CPA framework which:

- Built on the previous round of CPA would be much less intensive;

- Be affordable, both in terms of the level of central grants and fees paid by the council; and
- Include appropriate involvement of other organisations supporting improvement including the use of council peers in assessment activities. (Audit Commission 2006:9)

Additionally, the proposals outlined allowed the authorities to retain their original CPA rating without the need for external inspection – unless there was significant evidence of an improvement/deterioration of performance which would indicate a potential change in category. In addition, the process of Corporate Assessment was streamlined significantly reducing the number of themes from ten to just five (see section: 2.5.3a.i):

- i. ambition for the community;
- ii. prioritisation;
- iii. capacity;
- iv. performance management;
- v. achievement of improvement. (Audit Commission 2006: 19)

#### 2.5.4 Remember BVPIs?

The financial year 2007/08 was the last period local authorities were required to collect and collate BVPIs. In October 2007 the Communities and Local Government Department announced details of the new National Indicator Set (NIS) (<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/nationalindicators/>). This consisted of 198 national performance indicators to apply to all local authorities: single tier, county councils and district councils. And was the new means by which central government managed the performance outcomes/outputs of local government. The NIS came into effect in April 2008 and in some respects represents the final nail in the coffin of BV. A single set of performance indicators applicable to *all* local authorities confirmed the government's centralist approach to local government which sat in rather stark contrast to the initial bold and pragmatic "*what works is what matters*" principle of the original Labour government, elected in May 1997. However, in analysing the impact of BV upon the system of local government in England there is one constant which has remained throughout: performance measurement/management.

Although much has been changed, performance measurement and management is today still integral feature of English local government.

2.5.5 Farewell CPA:

In September 2008 a joint document published by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Local Government Association (LGA) announced the abolition of the CPA framework. From April 2009 CPA was to be replaced by the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) framework:

...a new approach assessing the performance of local public services in an area. CAA will look at how well councils and other local partners are delivering better outcomes and improving the quality of life for local people. (IDeA and LGA Publication 2008: 2)

The table below summarises the key differences between the two schemes:

**Table 2.11: Key features of the CPA and CAA frameworks**

| CPA  | CAA   |
|--|---|
| Assesses the council   | Assesses the way the council and local partners work together in the area   |
| Assesses the council against hundreds of standard performance indicators | Looks at performance against the 198 national performance indicators  |
| Assesses the council on the same thing in every place                    | Focuses on what matters most in each area – do you know what local people want/need, including the most vulnerable and do your priorities reflect this? |
| Focuses on how the organisation performs                                 | Focuses on what the organisation can achieve – are people’s lives getting better?   |
| Focuses on past performance  | Forward looking focus – how likely is it that the priorities for the area will be achieved?   |
| An Audit Commission assessment   | A joint inspectorate assessment   |
| Involves regular programmes of inspection                                | Reduction in programmed inspection – in future inspection will be ‘triggered’ by concerns identified through the CAA                                    |
| Characterised by an inspection event                                     | A more ongoing relationship between inspectorates and local organisations   |

(Source: IDeA & Local Government Publication (2008))

Viewed in light of earlier discussion of the argument of Bovaird and Halachmi of the BV framework as a ‘coming-together’ of NPM and CLG (see discussion in: 2.4.3), the proposals outlined in relations to the (subsequently abandoned) CAA sought to directly combine NPM and CLG approaches within a single assessment framework for all

aspects of local governance activities in England. The significance of such a move should not be overlooked as it presented a fundamental challenge to the remaining traditional structures, systems of organisation and character of administration of local government in England. Under the CAA framework the formally assessed performance of the authority would, to a large extent, have become contingent on the co-operation and positive performance of its partners. Additionally, the framework sought to practice control over the relationship dynamic of local government and its external partners – surely a further extension of the control freakery of government already practiced under both BV and CPA regimes.

As it was fate intervened. One of the first actions of the newly appointed Conservative Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles, following formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition in May 2010, was the immediate cessation of the CAA policy. Soon afterwards, Mr Pickles set his sights on the abolition of the Audit Commission; the independent nominated body which had variously conceived, designed and implemented the performance management framework of local government as instituted by successive Labour government 1997-2010 and of which BV had provided the initial foundation following the repeal of the previous CCT regime.

## 2.6. Conclusion:

In providing an outline of the formal policy and process of BV and related ‘performance management-by-measurement’ informed innovation and initiatives – including the Beacon Council scheme, LSPAs and in greater detail CPA – as instituted by the Labour government (1997-2010) under its improvement and modernisation programme for local government, the chapter has established a foundation for the work ahead and the wider context in which to appreciate the findings of the research outlined more specifically in Chapters Six and Seven of the thesis.

Providing the foundation of the work ahead, the chapter was organised into a discussion of four key areas. In the first part of the chapter I introduced the concept of BV and provided an overview of the requirements of the framework as laid out by government. In particular the initial lack of positive steer from government of what BV actually consisted and the early bold pragmatic approach of the New Labour government encapsulated in the phrase: ‘what matters is what works’ to an extent created an opportunity for innovation within local government. For local authorities to respond imaginatively and innovatively, creating circumstance for a changed culture within local government administration, in contrast to the previous regime of CCT and the old regulatory framework of the past (Boyne 1999; Barlett et al 1999; Bovaird & Halamachi 2001). Further, in much the same respect that New Labour had utilised language to suggest change, renewal and reinvention of past political ideologies (Fairclough 2000) the early language used to introduce the principle of BV deliberately emphasised the modernisation of local government – the test of ‘best value’ the quality guarantee of a ‘modern council’ (DETR 1998: 64). To an extent it is important to remember the mood of the country at that time. Swept to victory following a historic landslide election of win of 419 seats, in the general election of May 1997, in the words of the song there was a sense that: ‘*Things Can Only Get Better*’ (D:Ream). Initially, at least, BV was about things in local government getting better.

Moving on in the next part of the chapter, I analysed the subsequent development of BV within the wider context of local government reforms enacted by successive Conservative government 1979-97. In the first part of this discussion I considered the



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legacy of the previous CCT which BV replaced. It was argued that BV variously incorporated and extended the previous CCT regime, making BV a requirement of all local authority functions and to a much greater degree of sophistication. Informed by monetarist concerns, the approach of Thatcher and her government was both to reduce levels of public spending and exert greater fiscal control over that spending. It was this principle which led to the creation of the Audit Commission in 1983, merging the process of financial audit and management of local government within a single statutory, supposedly independent body. The Audit Commission was founded on the principle that it would maintain responsibility for the good management of ‘economy, efficiency and effectiveness’ of local government (Shore & Wright 2000); although the Audit Commission is currently undergoing a process of being variously dismantled by the Conservative-Liberal Coalition government, the principles of ‘economy, efficiency and effectiveness’, some thirty years on, remain at the heart of government’s policy for local government. In the second part of the discussion I outlined the contribution of the Conservative government during the Major years, 1990-97. Although during these years the government presided over a major reorganisation of local government, the content of the discussion focussed on the influence extended by TQM approaches as derived from manufacturing and private sector business practice and an outline of the Citizen’s Charter – the first TQM policy innovation in the UK. The influence of the Citizen’s Charter was to balance the previous economic imperative of Thatcher and her colleagues, with a new concern for service outcomes and outputs. This underlined an approach of service provision as a contract requirement and remodelled the citizen/service-user in the mould of consumer/customer (Du Gay 2000).

Extending the scope of the discussion further, the chapter moved on to indicate the wider geopolitical context influencing recent trends in local government trends since the late 1970s, situating the recent historical development of local government in England within the framework of NPM theories (Hood 1991; Ferlie & Fitzgerald 2002). Broadly, the transition from a strong economic determinist position of the Conservatives under Thatcher to the more outcomes/output focused approach of Major and his government indicate the transition outlined in the contents of the discussion between ‘hard’ NPM theories and ‘soft’ NPM theories (Ferlie & Geraughty 2005). Within the literature NPM theories are variously presented as ‘reinventing’ the practice

of government (e.g. Osborne & Gaebler 1982) and as giving rise to the ‘plural state’ in a transition from the post-war welfare state model (Osborne & McLaughlin 2002) whereby the practice of government becomes increasingly defined in terms of ‘governance’ (Rhodes 1997). The effect of this has been greater involvement of non-traditional elements in local public service provision, particularly in the deployment of private sector methodologies wider adoption of partnership arrangements leading to a new possible blossoming in CLG approaches. Indeed, Bovaird and Halamchi (2001) outlined BV as a coming-together of NPM and CLG approaches. (In the next chapter, Chapter Three, I consider the impact of the increasingly diffuse practice of governance on the more traditional form of the ‘local authority’.)

A remarkable feature of the BV framework is that it was introduced to local government as a revolutionary A-bomb, intended to modernise and transform the practice of local government, but in the end it appeared something of a damp-squib, quickly overtaken by a constellation of other initiatives only to be finally superseded by CPA. The legacy of BV was the principle of performance management-by-measurement which was ruthlessly instituted to apply to all aspects of local government – despite initially appearing as a sheep in wolf’s clothing. CCT was a deeply unpopular regime and very soon after it was introduced the policy encountered opposition from the then Labour opposition and local government unions/workers. Furthermore, the market-based approach of CCT was seen as directly challenging the traditional ethos of public service (Pratchett & Wingfield 1996; Brerton & Temple 1999). However, although leaving intact central components of CCT and extending its original principles yet further, there was no such opposition to BV.

In consideration of the ‘values of BV’ Miller (2005: 237) writes

...the word value does what might otherwise be regarded as an outrageously broad amount of work. On one hand it can be used almost synonymous with the word price, as in, ‘what is the value of this house or antique in today’s market?’ On the other hand, it pulls us close to the various meanings of the term value, which could be defined as everything in the world that we regard as irreducible to price and, more generally, money. So the word value seems to

insist upon the connection between things which the same word shows to be quite incompatible – which cannot be priced and that which must be.

Reflecting on the success of BV, particularly with regards to the transformation witnessed of EDC during the research, I think of the term ‘best value’ as wonderfully vague and open to a wide number of positively meaningful interpretations. Further, I think innocuous palatability of the concept of BV ensured both acceptance of the initial framework and subsequent expansion and acceptance of performance management-by-measurement principles in local government. At EDC, BV was quickly accepted and became embedded within the procedure of the authority. There are a number of reasons for this, not least willing acceptance at EDC of the need for change and organisational renewal. But I think as well, of best value as a principle which is hard to argue against. In the words of one interviewee:

BV is not difficult to understand... I think everybody is just embedded and you know what you’ve got to do. It’s part of the day to day process. (‘Theresa’ interview)

## Chapter Three

### Locating Easington District Council within the Institutional Setting of Local Government

#### 3.1. Introduction:

The aim of this chapter is to understand the organisation of Easington District Council (EDC) within the context of national governance frameworks. The initial aim of the research was to provide a grounded account of Best Value (BV) practice from within the setting of a local authority. In time the focus of the research became refined to understand how a high performing, ‘excellent’ local authority, keen on new innovations and spearheading government pilots was able to reconcile the New Public Management (NPM) agenda with what I perceived as the more traditional and parochial attitudes of those who constituted the organisation. A potential drawback of the case-study based approach is that it underplays the extent to which EDC was an organisation contained within a national framework of governance arrangements.

Building on the concept of ‘governance’ (Rhodes 1997) as introduced in the previous chapter, this chapter explores EDC as a specific organisational form: *a district council operating within a national system of democratic governance*. Local government in England largely owes its existence to decisions made at the centre. Briefly, by way of illustration: on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2009 EDC became part of the new unitary authority for County Durham, despite the proposals having been unanimously rejected by the public in a referendum organised jointly by the districts in 2007. Local government in England is highly influenced by policy formulated at the centre in Westminster. In this respect the discussion provides the wider context for understanding the implementation and practice of BV – a national policy framework formulated at the centre, within EDC – at the local level. The chapter explores the questions: *What exactly is local government? What are the institutional parameters of the local authority?* In seeking to clarify the complexities of local government, the discussion questions popularly taken-for-granted assumptions and draws attention to the unique expressions of individuality found within local government. It also indicates and analyses the effects

of the wider local government improvement and modernisation agenda (of which BV was initially a central component) as pursued by New Labour 1997-2010.

### 3.2. Understanding Local Government:

Around half the population, on their own admission, know hardly anything about local government and are confused about what little they do know... (Hill cited in Stoker 2004: 215)

Local government is a familiar feature of everyday life. We all depend, to some extent, upon local government for a range of services from refuse collection, road gritting, planning permission, public parks and municipal gardens. Non-exempted adult persons are subject to a local property charge in the form of council tax; additionally the local authority extends a social welfare function in the form of a responsibility for the administration of Housing and Council Tax Benefit entitlement. So, local government provides many vital services, meddles in our affairs, fulfils a localised social welfare function, tends to public spaces and takes our money.

But we need clarity. The terms 'local government' and 'local authority' are frequently (as in the instance above) used interchangeably. Byrne (1983:17) provides the following definition of the term 'local government':

...self-government involving the administration of public affairs in each locality by a body of representatives of the local community. Although subject to central government it possesses a considerable amount of responsibility and discretionary power.

He further outlines local government as: elected, multipurpose, local in its scale of operations, subordinated to national authority (Parliament), responsible for local self-government with local tax raising powers (Byrne 1983:17).

Figure 3.1: Tony Byrne 'What local government is...'



*Adapted by the author from definition provided by Tony Byrne*

However, the description raises more questions than it answers. The terms employed (e.g. 'community', 'power') are contested and open to multiple interpretations. In contrast, the explanation provided by Wilson & Game (2006:33) highlights the partial and more 'fuzzy' realities of local government as:

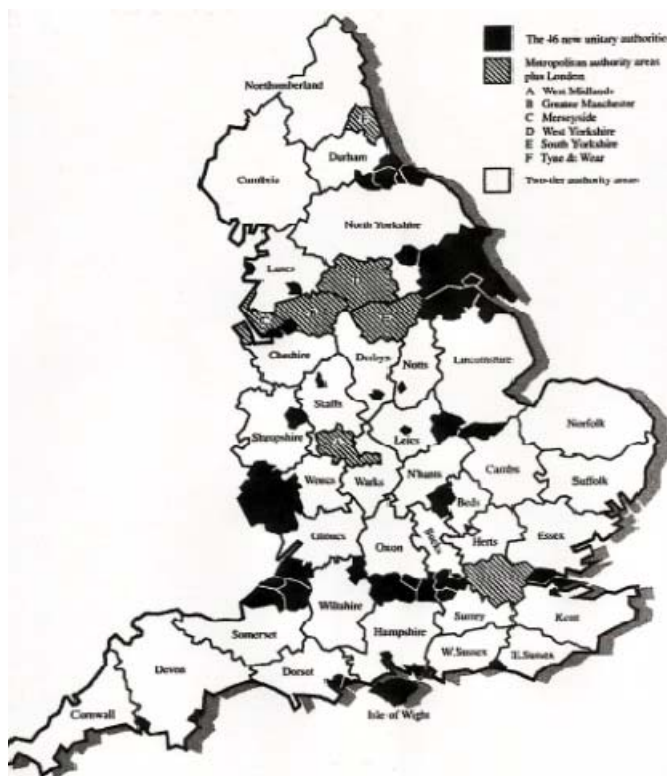
- a form of geographical and political decentralisation
- in which directly elected councils,
- created by and subordinate to Parliament,
- have partial autonomy
- to provide a wide variety of services
- through various and indirect means,
- funded in part by local taxation.

Going forward, I offer a picture of EDC as an organisation using Wilson and Game's description of the more 'fuzzy' realities of local government.

### 3.2.1. *'A form of geographical and political decentralisation':*

The map below shows the geographical divisions of local government in England, from 1998. (*Please note: the map does not indicate current divisions*)

**Figure 3.2: Geographical divisions of local government**



Source: Wilson & Game 2006: 67

Geographical divisions of local government are decided by the Boundary Committee for England, a statutory committee of the Electoral Commission that has assumed the functions of the Local Government Commission for England. It is responsible for recommendations to changes for electoral arrangements and their implementation (Stevens 2006:183). The organisation of local government in England\* takes two main forms: Unitary Authorities and Two-Tier local government (composed of County and District Councils).

\* In some areas in England there exists a third layer of local government in the form of town and parish councils; unitary authorities, county and district councils are designated as '*principal authorities*'. Town/parish councils are '*sub-principal authorities*' and as such as a discretionary layer of local government.



i. Unitary Authorities:

From the 1990s government has promoted the single unitary arrangement of local government, rather than the historically evolved two-tier system. The arrangement was seen as providing a more efficient, focused and coherent model of local government, its streamlined structure as preventing duplication of service provision and making local government (seem) more accessible to the public. Local government reorganisation has attracted much criticism and still the full implications of changes made at Durham have yet to transpire and are likely only to become apparent in the many years ahead. Regardless, the term 'unitary authority' is itself problematic:

To an extent the phrase 'unitary authority' is an illusion, focusing as it does only on the functions of local government at a particular time. It represents the belief that all those functions should be carried out by a single tier of local government, but ignores the extent to which functions previously carried out by local authorities are carried out by special-purpose boards. (Stewart 2000: 77)

ii. Two-tier local government:

Much of the framework for the current two-tier system of local government was formally established by the Local Government Act 1972 which transformed existing county boroughs, county councils, municipal boroughs, urban and rural district councils into a system of district councils, non-metropolitan county councils, metropolitan county councils and metropolitan district boroughs (Wilson & Game 2006: 58). The effect was a significant reduction in the number of local authorities in England and Wales, and a new distinction between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. In the remaining county councils areas expenditure determined the main division of the responsibility, where responsibility for the majority of expenditure (especially in terms of education and social services) was made at a county level in shire areas (Stewart 2000:75).

Although not intended to be hierarchical, the relationship between the two tiers of local government came to assume a hierarchical character. County councils, with their larger budgets and scope of operations, practising greater responsibility for the functions of local government (see figure: 3.3), came to perceive of themselves in most instances as

the continuing authority. Whilst smaller districts consisting of an amalgamation of previous authorities, with a lesser range of responsibility and powers, often experienced feelings of “*resentment against what was seen as the counties’ presumption of superiority*” (Stewart 2000:75-6).

**Figure 3.3: Service Provision by Tier**

|                          | <i>Joint Authorities</i> | <i>Metropolitan Authorities</i> | <i>London Boroughs</i> | <i>Unitary Authorities</i> | <i>County Councils</i> | <i>District Councils</i> |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Development Control      |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          |                        | ✓                        |
| Education                |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          | ✓                      |                          |
| Electoral Administration |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          |                        | ✓                        |
| Environmental Health     |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          |                        | ✓                        |
| Highways                 |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          | ✓                      |                          |
| Housing                  |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          |                        | ✓                        |
| Leisure and Recreation   |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          |                        | ✓                        |
| Passenger Transport      | ✓                        |                                 |                        | ✓                          | ✓                      |                          |
| Revenue Collection       |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          |                        | ✓                        |
| Social Services          |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          | ✓                      |                          |
| Waste Collection         |                          | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          |                        | ✓                        |
| Waste Disposal           | ✓                        | ✓                               | ✓                      | ✓                          | ✓                      |                          |

Source: Stevens 2006: 77

Wilson and Game (2006: 25-6) identify three main types of decentralisation:

- i. Administrative decentralisation or delegation: major policy is decided by central government but service delivery and routine administrative decisions are made by locally based, centrally employed civil servants;
- ii. Functional decentralisation: semi-independent agencies established to run specific services e.g. NHS
- iii. Political decentralisation/devolution: policy making responsibilities and service areas devolved to relatively autonomous and directly elected regional, provincial or local government; it is a process in which a

constitutionally superior body chooses to hand over certain powers to a constitutionally dependent body.

The power to decide policy is what distinguishes *local government* from say, *local administration*. Further, the powers invested in local government to decide local policy in specified areas provides a source of difference giving rise to a rich diversity within the overall uniformed system of local government in England (Wilson & Game 2006: 26).

### 3.2.2. 'Directly elected councils':

Whilst the terms 'local council' and 'local authority' are used interchangeably, there is an important distinction:

...the legal embodiment of the local authority: the body of *elected councillors* who have collectively determined and are ultimately responsible for the policy and actions of the authority. In recognition of this legal responsibility, councillors are often referred to as the elected *members* of the authority which distinguishes them from its paid employees, the *officers* (not 'civil servants' ...) and other administrative, professional, clerical and manual staff. (Wilson & Game 2006: 93-94)

Almost 20,000 locally elected councillors are elected by and accountable to residents of a geographically defined area, known as an 'electoral ward' (district councils) or 'divisions' (county councils/unitary authorities) (Stevens 2006:82). Encompassing a wide range of responsibilities, the 'job' of councillor is to represent, ensuring accountability to and standing as an advocate for electors, providing leadership for the community. It requires individuals to partake in the policymaking process, overseeing practice and monitoring efficiency within the authority, whilst maintaining the highest standards of their own ethical conduct (Wilson & Game 2006:260). In order to stand for election an individual must be:

- aged at least eighteen years old on the day of nomination
- a British, Commonwealth or EU citizen
- registered to vote within the authority, or at least to have lived, owned land or premises, or worked in the local authority area for the previous twelve months.

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Those working as employees of the authority holding elections, considered to be occupying ‘politically restricted’ local authority post elsewhere, subject to bankruptcy restrictions or having served a prison sentence of more than three months in the last five years are not eligible to stand for election (Stevens 2006:85).

Most councillors are elected on a party political platform and most local councils are controlled by one overall majority party, however this is by no means guaranteed. Within local government there is a rich diversity of political traditions, to an extent fuelled by greater frequency of local elections and the immediacy of ‘issue-led’ politics at the local level. The political composition of EDC is outlined in Chapter Six (see figure 6.1). Local councillors are not required to hold surgeries or to perform any additional duties related to their role. As a bare minimum they are required to sit on the full Council and Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and to attend at least one council meeting every six months. Failure to fulfil this provision (except on grounds of ill-health) can lead to an assumption of resignation, triggering a by-election. Traditionally the position of councillor has been unpaid with financial compensation received only in the form of a small annual allowance and reimbursed personal expenses, although changes introduced by Labour in 2001, as part of the wider modernisation of local government, now provide ‘executive councillors’ with a modest ‘pensionable remuneration’ – however such provision does not make these individuals the employees of the authority. Perceptions of councillors vary widely; indeed individual capabilities of councillors also vary. Research suggests the position of local councillor can make exceptional demands on the personal lives and time of individuals (Barron et al 1987), certainly during the research I gained a new appreciation of the dedication and selfless service provided by this group of people.

In its vision of the ‘modern council’ reform of the current political arrangements of local government formed an important overall component of the government’s modernisation programme:

Turnout at local elections is on average around 40 per cent and sometimes much less. There is a culture of apathy about local democracy. The evidence is that councillors – hard working and dedicated as they are – are overburdened, often unproductively, by committee meetings which focus on detailed issues

rather than concentrating on essentials. The opportunity for councillors to have a stronger voice on behalf of local communities is being missed. (DETR 1998a paragraph: 1.3)

The Local Government Act 2000 transformed the political arrangements within local government in England and heralded a decisive move away from the traditional committee structure of local councils by separating the “*making and execution*” of council decisions, from “*scrutiny*” of those decisions (Wilson & Game 2006: 102). In instances where the local population exceeded 85,000 the Act required selection of three specified models of separate executive arrangements:

- i. Mayor and cabinet executive: directly elected mayor, supported by between two and nine councillors appointed by the mayor representing the ‘cabinet’.
- ii. Leader and cabinet executive: an executive leader nominated and elected by full council, supported by between two and nine councillors either appointed by the leader or elected to the post by council.
- iii. Mayor and council manager: directly elected mayor supported by a salaried chief executive officer appointed by the council.

Non-executive members were required to sit within an ‘overview and scrutiny committee’ arrangement of a radically streamlined number of committees. Their role was to hold executive members to account and to make reports and recommendations addressed either to the executive of the authority, on any aspect of council business or matters of interest arising from within the local area (Wilson & Game 100-103).

Interestingly, the process of reform went ahead in spite of initial opposition from local government in response to proposals outlined and the earlier influential Widdicombe Committee (1986) finding little support or enthusiasm for separate executive functions (Stoker 2004: 126-7). Most local authorities, including EDC, opted for the leader and cabinet arrangement.

As well as transforming political arrangements, the Local Government Act 2000 also significantly altered the dynamic between elected members and officers employed by the authority, a relationship historically defined in terms of deference to the elected mandate and respect for the impartial advice extended by officers (Stevens 2006:100).

At EDC I encountered a senior officer who imagined himself as Sir Humphrey: the fundamentally ‘sound’ Whitehall Mandarin of the popular satirical comedy series ‘Yes Minister’ and ‘Yes Prime Minister’. The self-caricature served to contrast his assumed capabilities against elected members who he perceived as bumbling, well-intentioned, enthusiastic but ultimately politically unsophisticated – although perhaps the observation reveals more about the observer than the observed. Nevertheless, Wilson and Game argue that the changes introduced led to the development of ‘two-hatted’ officers:

With separate mayoral and cabinet executives, local government has become much more like central government, where senior civil servants’ first duty is to their minister, not to Parliament as a whole or equally to all parties. Except that local government officers are now expected to try and do both, to wear, in effect, two hats. They must *both* serve executive and non-executive members, both the policy making process and the critical scrutiny of that process, with all the potential for role conflict that entails. (2006: 115-116)

### 3.2.3. ‘Created by and subordinate to Parliament’: central-local government relations

Britain is without a written constitution and national governments – as has been seen during the course of this chapter – can variously through legislation create, abolish, restructure and amend the powers of local authorities as and when they determine and regardless of local preference (Wilson & Game 2006:158). The situation has led central government to assume a position of hierarchy in which local government is generally seen as subordinate (Stewart 2000: 91). Through the parliamentary process central government has the power to make, amend and appeal which govern; and through the Treasury central government commands overall control of the financial resources of the UK. In contrast, local government has limited law-making powers within the framework of the law as it exists and its power to initiate private bills is stultified by the practice of parliamentary convention.

Typically, there is a very specific social reality which underpins the worlds of central government and local government and even today neither of which are particularly well reconciled. As long ago as 1933 Finer wrote:

Between the higher civil servants of Whitehall and the local councillors and officers there yawns a wide black gulf. The former are recruited mainly from two or three universities, from a highly selected group without experience of business, industry or the rest of the country. The latter live out their lives, and therefore seek to live them out on the best terms possible, in Durham and Cornwall, Stockton and Devon, Manchester and Methyr, London and Lincoln. There is necessarily a gulf of *interest* as well as of knowledge... It is vitally important to secure that the affairs of a locality are cared for continuously by people whose capital joy is to be involved therein. But once this occurs their *interest* diverges from that of the central authority. Nor is that all: the truth is gleaned from life in a locally restricted area differs from that gathered from the facts of a whole nation. (cited in Stewart 2000: 91-92)

Still this tension persists, often giving rise to misunderstanding and a sense of frustration between the two parties. Frequently local government will complain that the national government does not appreciate the complexities and challenges of the local agenda. Whilst central government has at times maintained negative perception of the capabilities within local government and has been suspicious of its motivations. Even politically, where we might expect the chasm between national and local interests to be bridged by shared ideology, imbalances persist:

Experience as a local political leader carries no weight in national politics. If a leader is elected to Parliament, he or she normally resigns as leader and leaves the council\*. The ex-leaders have then to work their way up from the bottom of the parliamentary ladder. (Stewart 2000: 93)

Whereas, councillors are required to have an association within the district, in contrast it is not unusual for English constituency MPs to have no prior links with the locality they represent at a parliamentary level. This is exemplified by the practice of matching promising constituency candidates to seats considered as politically 'safe'; as can be seen in the selection of Peter Mandelson as MP for Hartlepool, or Sidney Webb for

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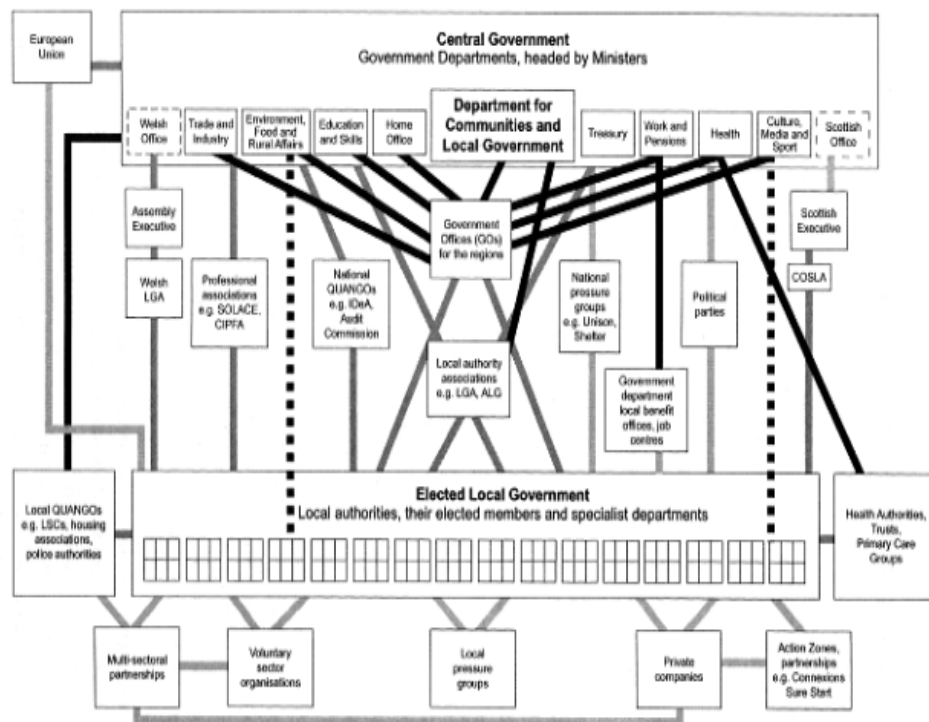
\* Herbert Morrison, a rare exception, served simultaneously as MP and local councillor (later becoming Leader) for London County Council

Seaham way back in 1922. Even in instances when local councillors are elected as MPs (for example: David Blunkett, Margaret Hodge and Eric Pickles):

...a commitment to the values of localism rarely seems to survive! Indeed the need to prove one's credentials on the national scene can often have the opposite effect. (Leach 2004: 80)

National and local politicians appear almost a breed apart. Closer inspection of the relationship between central and local government reveals a complex and muddled reality which seemingly resists purely hierarchical classification. First, whilst local government is without a constitutional basis, the UK membership to the European Union and ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Governance secures legal basis of its continuation (Stewart 2000: 91). Second the disconnectedness of central government makes for not one relationship but many, as the diagram below illustrates.

Figure 3.4: Central-local governance arrangements



Taken from Wilson & Game 2006: 173

The situation is further complicated by the increasing interpenetration of multi-level governance arranges, summed up by Stoker (2004: 193) as: “a world of institutional interdependencies.” The process suggests a flattening of formerly hierarchical



relationships with a broad consensus of endeavours focused on the attainment of common goals. The idea of multi-level governance goes beyond the traditional centre-local divide and involves a multiplicity of partners from across all sectors. The relevance of multi-level governance is that it significantly blurs traditional lines of hierarchy and complicates typical understanding of central-local government relations.

The table below summarises the divisions between central and local government:

**Table 3.5: Central-local government divisions:**

| Central government  | Local government  |
|---|---|
| - Controls legislation and delegates powers   | - Largest single employer in the UK (number of employees considerably outnumbered civil servants)                           |
| - Controls local government finance through allocation of the Revenue Support Grant and available budget-capping mechanisms | - Detailed local knowledge and expertise  |
| - Controls the largest portion of local capital expenditure   | - Controls the implementation of policy   |
| - Sets standards for and inspects selected services   | - Can decide its own political priorities, most service standards and how money should be distributed amongst service areas |
| - Has a national electoral mandate  | - Has a local electoral mandate   |

*Adapted from: Wilson & Game 2006: 187*

The table reveals a frequently unrealised advantage of local government in terms of the size of its overall workforce. A large and diverse workforce composed of various skilled and professional groups, through membership of influential professional bodies and trade unions it could serve to wield a much greater political clout. Additionally, the potential which extends from a detailed local knowledge and expertise should not be overlooked. Local government occupies a potentially far more advantageous position in understanding economic and social problems at a local level, authorities have a direct immediacy the sort of which national government will always struggle to

gain. Further through controlling the implementation of policy, local government has opportunity to tailor policy formulated at a national level to better suit local circumstances. Yet in spite of having its own electoral mandate (which could well be in opposition to the presiding government), local government has tended to adopt a 'passive' role in its relations with central government:

For local authorities it is not a relationship in the sense of interaction between themselves and central government. There are routines to be carried out which involve correspondence and contact between departments of the local authority and equivalent departments of central government. These routines are carried out within a defined framework. For local authorities that has the appearance of an imposed framework. Discussions may go on at the Association level, but for an individual local authority the outcomes are not seen as the product of discussion but as decisions made. (Stewart 2000:101)

Any possible power local government could wield in its relations with central government is compromised by the lack of association between authorities. Although the Local Government Association provides a national infrastructure of a sorts, a national association of local authorities seems to contract the intended and stated purpose of local government:

There are dangers in the role of local government associations. A national association of local government is almost a contradiction in terms. Local government is based on local authorities with a capacity for diversity. The danger faced by a local government association is that it will reduce diversity to the enforced uniformity of an association view. The more the association is expected to speak for local government, the more the danger grows. (Stewart 2000: 103)

This analysis of central-local relations extended relates to all local authorities but sets the scene for the following section which examines the degree of autonomy held by EDC 'the organisation'.

### 3.2.4. *'Partial autonomy'*:

In England, the seemingly subordinate position of local government is reinforced by the lawful doctrine of *ultra vires*, 'beyond the powers' (Wilson & Game 2006: 27).

...local authorities in Britain are subject to the rule of law. Before they can act (collect rates build schools, acquire property, etc.) they must be able to point to the statutory authority (normally an Act of Parliament) which authorises such actions. If a local council were to take action which was not sanctioned by the law (say by opening a chain of fish shops) or they exceeded their lawful powers (providing a laundry service where they were only permitted to provide public wash houses), they would be acting illegally, or *ultra vires*. When a court finds a local authority thus acting beyond its powers, it will declare these actions illegal and may punish members of the authority\*. In contrast, private organisations or individuals such as you or I can act in any way whatsoever as long as it is not forbidden by law. We can do what is not prohibited; local authorities can do only what the law explicitly allows them to do: what is permitted. (1983: 65)

In contrast, many European local authorities possess the power of 'general competence' whereby they are free to define their task and use all their powers, as long as these do not conflict with the provisions of national or provincial statute (Denters & Klok 2005: 66). The stultifying effect of the principle of *ultra vires* has been widely documented:

...our councils are narrowly limited in their powers and duties. There is a lack of expertise among them, and a feeling in many people's minds that they are unimportant and dull. (Keith-Lucas cited in Byrne 1983: 66)

The Maud Committee (1967) forty-five years ago argued that the principle of *ultra vires*:

Robs the community of the services which the local authority might render... encourages too rigorous oversight by central government... contributes to the excessive concern over legalities. (cited in Byrne 1983: 66)

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\* Senior Officers and Local Councillors in some instances may be held to personal account and, in some circumstances, are legally responsible for the actions of the local authority

Attempts to replace the principle of *ultra vires* with the power of ‘general competence’ remain unfulfilled. However, the Local Government Act 2000 introduced a new duty of local authorities “to promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing”. The Act relaxed some of the restrictions in place, providing local authorities with limited scope to innovate in the promotion of local ‘well-being’ (Wilson 2005). Some local authorities have taken advantage of the scope offered by the Act. For example Hastings Council entered into partnership with a local toiletries manufacturer and marketed their own range of cut-price sun lotion creams with profits made contributing to the ‘safer sunbathing’ campaign. The London Borough of Greenwich established a ‘not for distributable profit’ employment agency, with the profits generated used to support local arts projects and initiatives (Wilson & Game 2006:159). Despite falling well short of abolishing the principle of *ultra vires* the Act provided what Stewart refers to as “the new power of first resort” (Stewart 2003:16). However, the Act also provides a good illustration of the historically ambiguous approach of central government towards local government in a way which implies a lack of trust (6 et al 2002). Whilst the guidance permitted authorities to initiate a course of action likely to improve well-being, it stopped short of providing powers for local authorities to raise monies to fund new initiatives or for them to exceed existing frames of regulation.

In their 1997 general election manifesto *New Labour – Because Britain Deserves Better*, the then opposition set out the need for improved relations between central and local government:

Local decision-making should be less constrained by central government, and also more accountable to local people... [councils] should work in partnership with local people, local business and local voluntary organisations. They will have the powers necessary to develop these partnerships. (Cited in Wilson 2003: 324)

Various terms have been employed to describe the approach. Ed Balls, the Treasury Advisor to Gordon Brown, indicated a model of ‘constrained discretion’:

...with the maximum devolution of powers to encourage flexibility and creativity and meet consumer demands... constrained by clear long-term goals and proper accountability. Today it is simply not possible to either run

economic policy or delivering public services that meet public expectations using a top-down one-size-fits all solutions of the past. (Cited in Stoker 2004: 167-8)

Stoker (2004) outlines that the model of 'constrained discretion' indicates a number of new principles intended to guide the policy process:

- Clear long-term goals set by the elected government;
- A clear division of responsibility and accountability for achieving those goals with proper co-ordination at the centre;
- Maximum local flexibility and discretion to innovate, respond to local conditions and meet differing consumer demands;
- And, alongside the devolution of power, maximum transparency about both goals and progress in achieving them with proper scrutiny and accountability.

To an extent these principles were exemplified in the BV framework, specifically with regards to centrally prescribed performance indicators and service standards for local government, with progress of individual authorities monitored by a number of different instruments designed by government (Best Value Performance Indicators and Best Value Reviews) and the role of supervision and control practiced by the Audit Commission.

Elsewhere, the New Labour approach has been referred to as 'constrained autonomy' associated with the idea of 'earned autonomy'. Intended to drive public service improvement (Office of Public Sector Reform 2002) the approach apparently 'rewarded' good performance:

...better services should get more freedom and flexibility – earned autonomy for schools, hospitals, local government and other public services (cited in Stoker 2004: 219)

A major incentive of BV was the promised extension of 'freedoms and flexibilities' to those authorities recognised as 'good' or 'excellent'. Assessed as an 'excellent' local authority, a well placed senior officer of EDC explained:

It allows us more freedom and flexibility to be able to get on with day-to-day stuff and not be as strictly regulated as an authority that came out as weak or poor. ('Norah' interview)

However, when pressed to highlight specific 'freedoms and flexibilities' the interviewee remained vague and failed to provide any concrete examples of any such provisions. When a similar question was asked on another well-placed senior officer he scoffed implying that none had been granted, adding:

Well apart from the fact that we're not getting breathed on by the Audit Commission as heavily as other [authorities] are! ('Phil' interview)

The situation suggests a disparity between the rhetoric and reality of promised 'freedoms and flexibilities'. There are two possible conclusions, either these failed to materialise or were perceived of being of inconsequential worth (and thus not recognised) by the officers interviewed. Certainly, during the research, there was scant evidence of EDC as having been relieved of a significant bureaucratic burden in reward for its supposed 'excellence'. Regardless of whether the freedoms and flexibilities promised by the then Labour government were forthcoming, the principle of 'earned autonomy' is beset by a more fundamental problem, namely:

...the inherent difficulty of making the judgements involved. What is a top performing authority and what is a poorly performing one? In relation to bread-and-butter services, and to some measures of education and social care, it may be possible to make meaningful distinctions. But most authorities provide a mixture of good, moderate and poor services on (often disputed) measures. So which authorities get the rewards and which are penalised? The danger is that authorities will be rewarded for the right *policy* choices (e.g. directly elected mayors), as opposed to success based upon meaningful output measures. (Wilson 2004: 342)

It is difficult to draw any satisfactory conclusions about the notion of partial autonomy this is partly due to the complicating effects of multi-level governance arrangements and also because of the different interpretations placed on the notion of 'autonomy'. Wilson (2004:342) concludes:

...[the centre can still] exercise considerable influence through its control of legislation and its dominant financial position. At the end of the day, the centre does have the power to insist upon change. (2004: 342)

The control exercised over the legislative programme and the financial dominance of central government will always have a limiting effect upon the extent of autonomy practiced by local government. Local government is constrained by a legislative process to which it has only minimal recourse to alter and occupies a position of high financial dependence. Thus, regardless of its dance, the pitch and tempo of the dance is ultimately set by central government.

### 3.2.5. 'To provide a wide variety of services... through various and indirect means'

[Local Government has an immense] range of responsibilities. They are involved in someway or other, it can sometimes seem, with an almost infinite variety of different services. (Wilson & Game 2006: 30)

Miller (2005) claims a 'service fetishism' has become established in terms of contemporary conceptions of the functions executed by the local authority. Whilst historically local authorities have maintained the role of 'direct service provider' they have also variously occupied the role of 'regulator/monitor' of the activities of others and as 'facilitator' in providing advice and sometimes financial assistance to individuals/organisations undertaking activities consistent with the policy of the council – particularly those schemes seen as being in the interests of the local economy. More recently the role of local government has become that of 'service contractor' (Wilson & Game 2006: 30-2). In an attempt to improve overall levels of efficiency within local government the service contractor role has led to a separation between the commissioner and producer roles of local authorities. A defining feature of the earlier CCT regime, BV also maintained a strong commitment to separating the client from the producer function:

...it is claimed [this] delivers not only a clearer focus on your particular task or function but a willingness to challenge others involved in a chain of relationships with you. (Stoker 2004: 80)

An unshakeable confidence in the capabilities of the market to deliver positive change within local government informed both CCT and BV regimes. In part, it was held that imitation of private sector methods and approaches might achieve this end, hence: entrepreneurialism, competition and the creation of quasi-markets. However, such initiatives were based on an oversimplified understanding of private sector practice as summed up by Stewart:

There is an implicit and sometimes explicit pressure in the modernisation programme for management in the public domain to follow the model assumed to be dominant in the private sector. 'Entrepreneurial approaches' are to be encouraged; 'competition' will increase efficiency; the 'customer' is to be king. The language reflects the private sector model or what is believed to be the private sector model. (Stewart 2003: 175)

Stewart (2003: 175) argues that the effect has been to apply a misguided one-size-fits approach to the complex multiple functions of local government. As outlined above the role of local government extends beyond service provider to include regulator/monitor and facilitator. Further, Stewart argues, that the dominance of private sector models of practice has tended to ignore and sometimes distort the distinctive elements of local government. He concludes:

Local authorities require the development of management analysis as rigorous as in the private sector, but analysis grounded in the distinctive purpose, conditions and tasks of local government. Those purposes include promoting community, building citizenship, enabling democracy and achieving equity. (Stewart 2003: 177)

There has always been, to some degree, a close working relationship between the private sector and local government. In the nineteenth century most factories and commercial undertakings were owned by families who lived locally and often played a significant role on the local council (Stewart 2000: 269). Over time, patterns of industrial ownership and the politics of local government have changed, specifically, relations between local government, the private and voluntary sectors that have *"moved from personal relationships to official relationships which take many forms"*



(Stewart 2000: 269). Such 'official' relationships include the private and voluntary sectors as:

- Recipients of services from local authorities
- Suppliers of goods and services to local authorities
- Taxed by local authorities (non-domestic rates)
- The dependents of local authorities to assist in applications of funding and support (from Europe, the Lottery Fund, Single Regeneration Budget, etc)
- Partners to the local authorities in key initiatives (e.g. Private Finance Initiative, Local Strategic Partnerships) (Stewart 2000: 269-70)

The increasingly diffuse cross sector 'partnerships' maintained by local government has led to a diverse range of local public service delivery arrangements frequently shrouded in a complex tangle of relationships. Despite traditional ideological opposition to private sector involvement in matters of state, the Labour government 1997-2010:

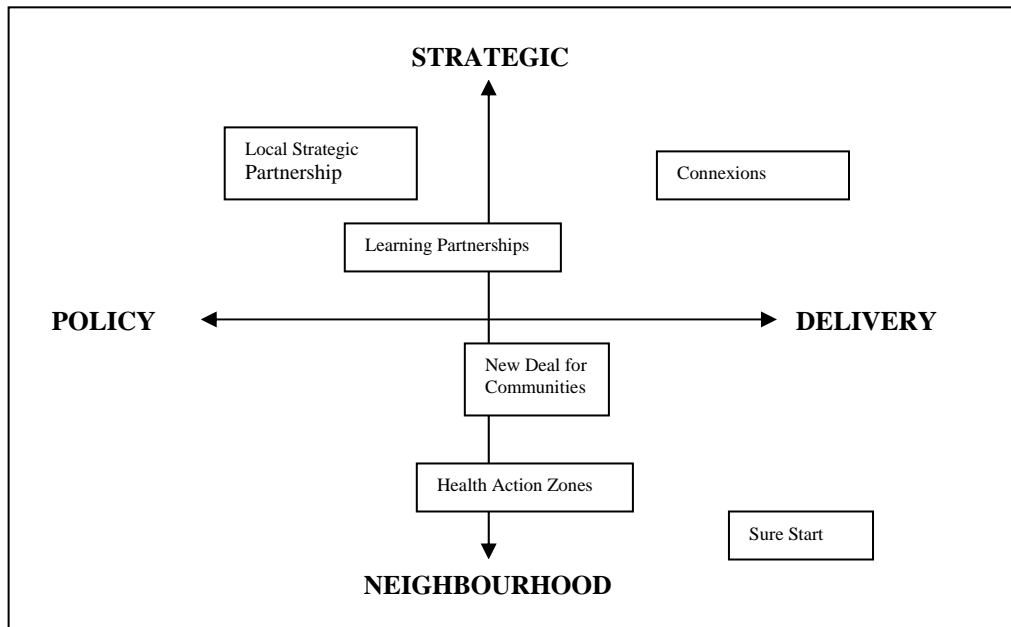
- i. Placed less emphasis on partnership as a tool for urban regeneration and instead gave stronger emphasis on the role of partnership in terms of service delivery;
- ii. Formed long-term partnerships, often over a period of ten years or more;
- iii. Made greater use of area-based initiatives;
- iv. Founded a new form of overarching partnership in arrangements for Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP). (Sullivan & Skelcher 2002: 24-7 cited in Stoker 2004: 159-60)

The situation led to a boom in multi-agency, cross-sector partnerships at both a local and regional level. Research by Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) estimated at least 5,500 local partnerships, spending in excess of £4.3 billion a year and involving some 75,000 as partnership board members. The partnerships varied in size, function and service area and included the full gamut of statutory, voluntary, executive, non-executive agencies, public limited and private limited companies and charitable trusts.

in a range of roles EDC was not immune to the trend and as an authority was particularly proud of its working partnership arrangements (Wilson & Game 2006: 148). EDC, far from immune from this trend, was particularly proud of its partnership

arrangements which extended beyond the statutorily required LSP. The diagram below summaries the intended purpose of the network of relations and the position in partnership activities post-1997.

**Figure 3.6: Institutions located in partnership activity, post-1997**



*Source: Skelecher 2004: 34*

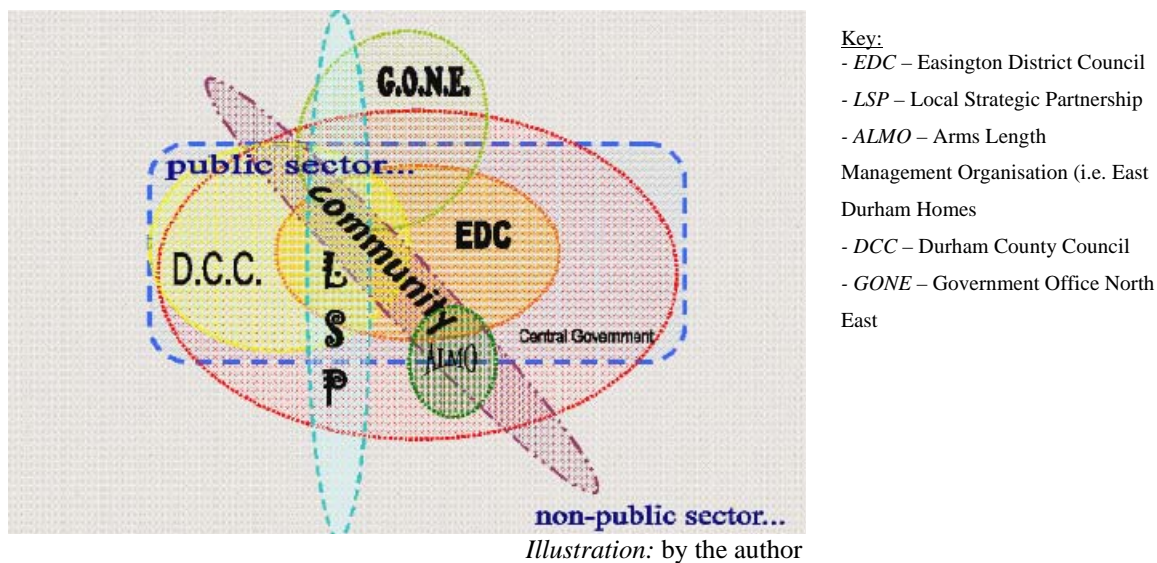
The partnerships listed reached across public, private and voluntary sectors. A product of the third way stakeholder society (Newman 2001) at the time the talk was of 'joint working' with the three sectors equally engaged in the mutual endeavour of meeting the needs, demands, expectations and 'aspirations' (a New Labour 'buzzword') of the local community. The purpose of this chapter so far has been to explore EDC as a specific organisational form: a district council (local authority) within a wider constitutional framework of local government. However, such are the complexities and intricacies of local government post-1997 that the individual local authority can no longer be considered a discrete entity which stands alone. Frequently during the course of the research the lines between different organisations appeared blurred. Aims and objectives were shared and joint funding applications made simultaneously to different bodies (e.g. Regional Development Agency, European Union, Lottery Funding) yet particular roles and responsibilities were maintained separately. As a researcher there were times when I was bewildered by these many different arrangements.

*Sentence recontextualised to make apparent the view of the researcher* At times I was bewildered. One employee attempted to explain the constitutional status of the Local Strategic Partnership:

[The LSP is] not really supposed to be part of the council. [It] is supposed to be a separate organisation. [Local authorities] are the key partners but... part of the current communication strategy is to *brand* the LSP, to give [the LSP] a style of its own and try to separate it from the council. ('Linda' interview)

The illustration below (figure 3.7) focusing on a key core of relationships had by EDC, illustrates the post-1997 'public policy through partnerships' layering of intergovernmental relations. At the centre is EDC, over-layered by Durham County Council (DCC) this indicates the two-tier system of local government in England, both EDC and DCC are within the public sector and both are further over-layered by central government. Central government is largely within the public sector however its role as regulator and the extent of its law-making powers extends beyond this realm. The ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation, otherwise East Durham Homes), the former housing section of EDC forms a separate 'sister company' to manage the housing stock owned by the local authority. GONE (Government Office North East) the "combined regional presence of domestic central government... with limited powers and confused accountabilities" (Wilson & Game 2006: 91) overlaps DCC and EDC, is accountable to central government yet maintains a number of external partnerships (e.g. ONE – the regional development agency) to promote achievement of central government policy aims and objectives. These are intersected by the Local Strategic Partnership and the wider community which traverse the public and non-public sectors. Institutional boundaries are shown by a broken line, to indicate the imprecise nature of the division between different organisations and the potential for fusion between the different agencies

Figure 3.7: The Layered Organisation



The complex and indirect means of local public service provision mediated by the notion of ‘public policy through partnership’ subsumed EDC within a wider entanglement of relationships. At time EDC appeared to be the localised administrative centre which co-ordinated partnership arrangements for the implementation of agreed policy objectives and public service provision. A great deal of the responsibility for the maintenance of partnership arrangements in terms of formal communications, production of supporting documentation, processing applications for additional funding, organising meetings between the partners had been assumed by EDC.

The notion of ‘public policy through partnership’ had a transformative impact upon local government, as New Labour advocated a community leadership role for local the ‘modern’ councils:

This is a key part of every council’s [*sic*] responsibility as community leaders.  
(*Preparing for Community Strategies* cited in Stewart 2003: 22)

The concept of ‘community leadership’ is outlined by Bennington (1996) as based on the three following assumptions:

- the purpose of local authorities is not simply to commission, deliver and/or manage services but to govern the local community. This includes not only representing the needs but also developing the voices (of individuals and groups) in the local community;

- the local authority has a unique and distinctive role in governing the local community because of its democratic mandate to balance the needs of the whole community rather than just its diverse and separate parts;
- the local council cannot govern the local community on its own, but needs to do this in partnership with a wider range of other bodies in the public, private, voluntary and informal community sector. In this sense local government includes but is broader than statutory local authorities.

(cited in Leach and Percy-Smith 2001: 78)

The idea of community leader put local authorities at the centre of the local community, aiming to dissolve institutional boundaries and establish authorities as key players in the economic and social well-being of the immediate locale in which they were based (DETR 1998). Much of the traditional identity of local government had been linked to the original community functions it performed, specifically in terms of municipal planting in parks and open spaces, street cleaning and refuse collection – key services of high visibility often amongst the first to be contracted out under CCT. The process of contracting out key services had eroded the positive community presence of many authorities and arguably this created something of an identity crisis in local government: *if the local authority was no longer responsible for refuse collection, street cleaning, parks and planting, then what were they responsible for?* To an extent local government became associated in the public imagination as a detached black box of bureaucracy. Thus, the role of community leadership can be seen as an attempt by government for local authorities to reconnect with their communities.

As shall be seen in Chapters Five and Six, EDC imagined a strong community leadership role for itself. However, as the research was conducted at a time when the community leadership role was an active part of the central government agenda for local government, it is difficult to delineate the extent to which EDC had adopted the agenda of government and the extent to which authority had already imagined such a role for itself as part of a wider indigenous local culture. Because of the strong emotive ties demonstrated by many in the authority, I am inclined to suggest the community

leadership agenda of government consolidated and formalised a sense of commitment which was already a part of EDC.

Importantly, the idea of community governance can be seen as providing a logically consistent fit within the NPM theories. A key feature of NPM theories is the idea that government and the public sector should ‘steer not row’ (Osbourne & Gaebler 1992) becoming monitors of policy implementation or purchasers of services rather than being directly involved in service delivery itself. (Denhardt & Denhardt 2002: 26) Seen in this light, community leadership became the mechanism by which the local authority was able to provide the ‘steer’ towards the improved social and economic future prosperity of the locale. Community leadership constituted a major centrepiece of the New Labour reform of local government and moves were made by the then government to formally institute the practice. The origins of this process can be seen in the 2001 roll out of Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) (see Chapter Two section 2.5.2) intended to:

...provide a framework through which local authorities and other local organisations agree challenging targets with central government. These include twelve targets for specific improvements in performance, and these can run across the full range of local services. Financial rewards, paid directly by the government, are associated with the achievement of these targets. (ODPM)

In 2004, the policy of LPSAs was further extended by the requirement of local authorities to establish Local Area Agreements (LAA):

... covering the area of one or more local authorities, which focus on a collection of goals across a range of services and which can relate to either national or local priorities. The local authority liaises with a range of bodies with an interest in joined up delivery to set these priorities. In particular, the policy aims to promote high levels of engagement of Local Strategic Partnerships. Funding for achieving these priorities comes from the respective bodies involved, through pooling or alignment of existing budgets. The relevant government office, e.g. North West, London, handles the negotiation of the LAA with the local authority and partners. (Department for Health definition)

At the time of the research, EDC working in conjunction with other Durham local authorities was included in the second wave of LAA pilots. At EDC the LAA was described as bringing together:

...all tiers of local government with the other main public sector agencies including the Police, Primary Care Trusts and Job Centre Plus, working with existing bodies such as the County Durham Strategic Partnership and Local Strategic Partnerships to examine and identify areas of major change that will most benefit local communities based around four key themes:

- children and young people
- safer, stronger communities
- health and older people
- economic development (Easington 2005: 'news')

Thinking back to Sullivan's definition of governance as: a multiplicity of processes of governing in operation at any one time. (2004: 186), the plethora of public policy partnerships founded post-1997 highlights the ever more complex and diffuse nature of *local governance*, which was extended far beyond the parameters of local government. Opinion was divided regarding the advantages/disadvantages of 'joined-up government'. For some, the notion of joined-up government concealed a centralising plot undermining the autonomy of local government. For others it indicated a sensible knitting together of local services to ensure a multi-agency response to the so-called 'wicked issues' which cut across different service areas (Stoker 2004: 164)<sup>+</sup>.

The attempt by New Labour to modernise English local government 1997-2010 covered a broad spectrum of initiatives composed of various different strands, of which BV was but one strand. The intention of government at the time was for the strands (e.g. performance management, community leadership and joined-up working) to come-together, "*to operate in a holistic fashion with key elements being designed to reinforce each other*" (Martin 2002: 293). It is important to emphasise that at the time of the research there was a great concentration of activity which was intended to have a transformative effect on the structure and process of local government. At a local

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<sup>+</sup> Such an example might include the problem of heart disease. The Primary Care Trust may take the lead in diagnosing and treating patients, whilst the local authority might lead on initiatives aimed at encouraging new routines and promoting healthier lifestyle choices to prevent onset of the disease.

level, within individual local authorities it was the responsibility of executive members and senior officers to make sense of these changes ensuring wider compliance with the frameworks introduced. Within the wider process of attempting to build a regional infrastructure for local government and public service delivery key workers at the frontline were required to make sense of the changes imposed whilst continuing to fulfil the requirements of their particular functions/operations/services. The purpose of the current discussion has been to highlight the ongoing process of evolution and the impact of the wider modernisation programme of the then government on the traditional, recognisable structure of local government. Moving on, in the next part of the discussion I turn to address the final element of Wilson and Games (2006) 'fuzzy' reality of local government in terms of the financial arrangements in place for local government.

### 3.2.6. 'Funded in part by local taxation':

Questions of finance provide an insight into the constitutional status of local government, which along with a range of other factors (location, socio-economic context, political and administrative leadership, etc) give shape to the highly individualistic character of a local authority. Further, funding arrangements for local government set seal to local-central relations. Central government exercises considerable control over all matters of local government finance, imposing significant restriction upon the autonomy (and, ultimately the authority) of the local authority:

[In the UK] the council has only one tax – generating a small fraction of revenue spending. And incredibly, even that is subject to capping by central government. Effective local leadership cannot be expected to prosper in such circumstances. (Hambleton 2005: 23 cited in Wilson & Game 2006: 208)

Despite a supposedly radical modernisation agenda, Labour (1997-2010) did little to alter existing funding arrangements in local government (Travers 2004). At the time funding arrangements for local government included capital spending from local government reserves accrued over time and through careful investment.; capital grants, for example Sure Start and the Single Regeneration Budget; fees/charges levied for use of council services (e.g. public transport, car parking, leisure facilities; and specific government grants ring-fenced to fund specific projects/services for a set period of



time. Local government could also access additional funds from external sources, for example from the European Union and the private sector through various PFI initiatives/partnership arrangements. However, despite access to a range of different forms of funding provision, local government continued to receive the bulk of its funding from central government in the form of the Revenues Support Grant (RSG). Allocation of the RSG involved a public process of financial distribution initiated six months before the start of the new financial year and involved a series of government announcements, proceeding as follows:

First, the government decides how much money in total that local authorities will be permitted to spend during the coming year – their *Totalled Assumed Spending* (TAS). Secondly, it declares the proportion of that spending – around 80 percent in recent years – that it will finance through national taxation, or *Aggregate External Finance* (AEF). The difference between the two figures – just over 20 percent – is the proportion that local authorities collectively will have to find for themselves...

The government then moves from the aggregate to the individual authority level. It produces an assessment of *it* feels each authority needs to spend – both in total and in each of the seven service blocks – in order to provide what it defines as a ‘standard level of service’. These figures constitute a council’s *Formula Spending Share* (FSS) and are absolutely critical in determining the level of grant it will receive. The government bases its calculation on a range of indicators, such as the council’s total residential population, the number of over-65s living alone, kilometres of road. If it over-estimates a council’s spending needs, the council will receive in effect a grant subsidy; if it under-estimates, council tax bills must rise, or services be cut.

From the council’s FSS, two deductions are made. The first is for the total income the government estimates the authority should receive, were it to set its council tax at a specified standard level – the *Assumed National Council Tax* (ANCT). The second is for the income it will receive from the government-set *National Non-Domestic Rate* (NNDR). A council’s RSG is the figure remaining after these deductions. (Wilson & Game 2006: 203-204)

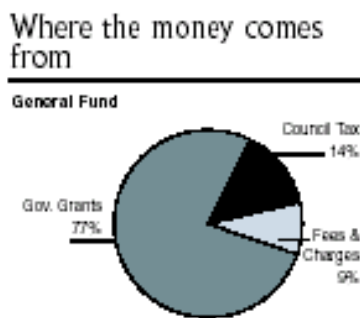
Distribution of the RSG enabled central government to exercise fiscal control of local government, a factor which has led to the 'assumption of hierarchy' whereby local government occupies a subordinate position to central government. The arrangement also explains why central government has maintained a close interest and scrutiny of the financial efficacy of local government. When operational, a number of BVPIs were designed in order to provide an indication of the overall effectiveness of the local authority in terms of the management of resources and cost efficiency of service provision – a trend which extended back further to Thatcher the founding of the Audit Commission and establishment of the 3Es: *economy, efficiency and effectiveness*.

In 1990 the system of local taxation in England and Wales was overhauled following the political disaster of the 'Poll Tax' (Wilson & Game 2006: 219-221). Since 1990, in addition to the RSG the two main sources of local government finance have included redistributed monies from the pool of monies collected in the form of the National Non-Domestic Rate (otherwise known as the Uniform Business Rate) and from 1993 the Council Tax – described by Travers (2004: 154) as "*remarkably successful...it was easy to collect and did not produce an unacceptably adverse public response.*" The annual NNDR charge is set by central government and is calculated according to the RPI-based multiplier. The rateable value of a property is assessed every five years by the Valuation Office Agency. The local authority is responsible for NNDR billing and collection, although collected monies are paid into a national fund before redistribution to the local authority in grant form. The system has been widely criticised because it prevents local authorities from setting the local charge and denies direct access to the funds raised locally (Stevens 2006). The Council tax combines a tax on property and a charge on the first two adults (with a number of exemptions ) over the age of eighteen living at the property Those living alone receive a twenty-five percent reduction. The charge set is based on the commercial value of the property as assessed by Valuation Office Agency according to 1991 prices. Properties are grouped into eight 'bands' – A (lowest priced), B, C, D, E, F, G, H (highest priced). The annual council tax charge is set by the local authority, although in two-tier non-metropolitan areas billing and collection are the responsibility of the district council. Thus, when County Durham had a two-tier system of local government, the districts were responsible for the process of billing and collection. A revaluation of the bands had been due to take place in 2005

however this was delayed by the Labour government until the outcome of the inquiry on local government finance. The much anticipated Lyons report was finally published in March 2007 but, with much of the world economy plunged into crisis, political unrest within the government and the fall of the Labour government, events eclipsed the contents of the report and key proposals for reform were allowed to gather dust.

As the pie chart below shows (taken from Derwentside District Council's *Corporate Plan 2004*) monies raised from council tax make up a small overall part of local authorities finances:

**Figure 3.8: Local Government Finance: an illustration**



(Source: *Derwentside District Council Corporate Plan 2004:68*)

The council tax charge is composed of a number of charges levied by a number of principle authorities including: (as applicable) county council, police authorities, fire and rescue authorities, national park authorities, and parish and town councils. The council tax enables the local authority to fulfil its spending commitment through plugging the shortfall of monies received in specific grants, fees and charges and the income received from the centrally processed NNDR fund.

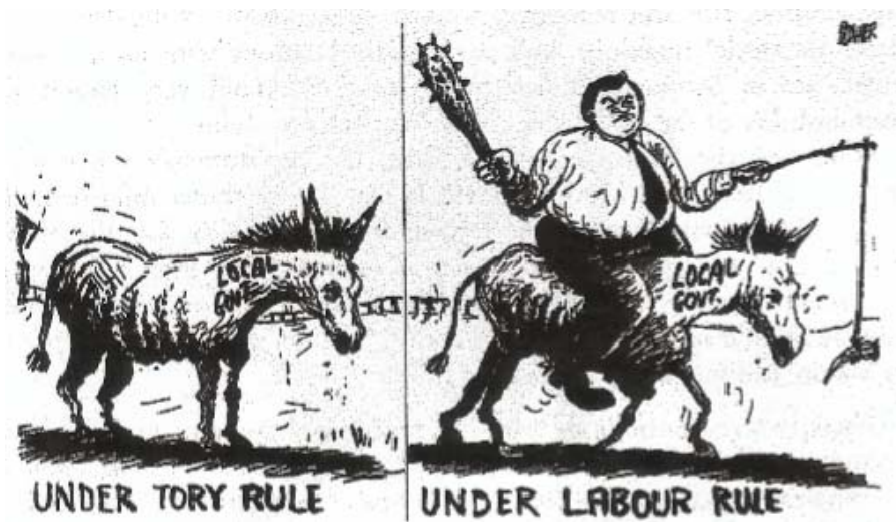
Council tax charges are nationally controversial and locally sensitive. As well as being susceptible to public resentment in terms of increases, Council tax revenues are shared amongst the local council and precepting authorities, only a portion of the total revenue collected going directly to the billing and collection authority. Current arrangements allow the charges levied by precepting authorities to go undetected, encourages a perception of the billing and collection authority as accountable for the amount charged; a situation which leaves the local authority in an unenviable position.

Earlier it was indicated that the council tax charged levied by local government can be subject to capping by government, if it is decided that the increase introduced is deemed 'unfair' or 'too high'. The process of capping was introduced by the Conservatives by the Rate Act 1984 and is described by Stevens (2006:125) as "*emblematic of the Tory government's view of local government spending*". However, the council tax charge has proven to be a politically neutral issue. Travers (2004: 158-60) documents the fierce dispute which took place between central and local government during 2003-04, when in response to growing public concerns the government threatened 'capping' proposed council tax rises imposed by local authorities – in the mould of the Conservatives in 1980 and 1981. The programme of local government improvement and modernisation pursued by Labour imposed an additional burden on the already strained budgets of local authorities. As an illustration: the BV framework demanded authorities appointed new staff in order to fulfil the statutory duty imposed by government (e.g. at EDC the Corporate Development Unit grew from an initial team of three full-time employees, to a team of ten full-time employees including a new appointed Assistant Chief Executive 2005/06); additionally, many local authorities found it necessary to employ costly external management consultancy firms in order to help bridge an existing knowledge/skills gap; further there were numerous costs associated with the process of producing planning documentation and the regime of inspection. As a result, local councils argued additional increases to the council tax charge were a necessary as a consequence of the rising cost of service provision and the new regime imposed by government (Travers 2004).

Whilst in government Labour made additional resources available to local government in the form of one-off reward payments to frontline services of individual local authorities, provided in exchange for annual 'efficiency saving' achieved by the authority. There has been no greater macro influence on local authority finances in recent years than 'Gershon' (Wilson & Game 2006: 169). In August 2003 Sir Peter Gershon was requested by government to undertake a review of public sector efficiency. The government requested that Gershon focus his report on the key objective of providing more funding to frontline services to meet the highest priority of public demand through improvements to 'back-office' functions. In his report

*Releasing Resources to the Front Line* Gershon required £21 billion of efficiency savings to be made by the public sector for financial year 2007/08. Local government (including police authorities) was required to deliver £6.35 billion in savings – a 30% share of outlined efficiency savings. Indicative of the carrot and stick approach of successive governments Gershon provided the incentive that at least half the total savings made by the authority would be released in the form of recycled payments to frontline services. The cartoon below aptly conveys New Labour's approach to local government.

Figure 3.9: 'Carrot & Semtex: New Labour's agenda for British Local Government'



(Source: *Local Government Chronicle* (15.08.1997) taken from Wilson & Game 2006: 177)

Wilson and Game outline:

In practical terms, each council had to identify its own ways of achieving efficiency gains over three years equivalent to some 2.5 percent of its revenue budget. Early reactions tended to be that figures on this scale were, as the parliamentary Urban Affairs Select Committee put it, an 'unachievable dream'. In 2005, however, although the efficiency drive was already 'beginning to bite' (*Local Government Chronicle*, 26<sup>th</sup> May pp. 4), most councils were on course to meet their targets, with the largest savings coming from the corporate of 'back office' services – finance, legal, human resources, ICT, assets and estate management – followed by adult social care and procurement, the latter an area

where collaboration between several local authorities and other public bodies can yield both swift and almost painless savings.

The authors add:

Whether this response says more about authorities' present efficiency or their previous inefficiency is unclear. (2006: 170)

The focus on efficiency was already a component of both BV, and later CPA; for example: the 3Es require local authorities to secure proper 'economy, efficiency and effectiveness' in the use of its resources. Further scrutiny of, and goal setting for, local government expenditure, as exemplified by the Gershon review, reinforced central government control of local authority finance to an extent that this determined the overall relationship had between local and central government.

### 3.3. Conclusion:

The aim of this chapter was to understand EDC as a district council operating within a national system of democratic governance. Outlining the relevance of local government as overseeing the process of local public service provision – of key, sometimes maligned, very often taken-for-granted, necessary everyday services on which we all to greater or less extent rely upon (e.g. road gritting and refuse collection) – the term ‘local government’ was distinguished from the often interchangeably applied ‘local authority’.

Building on a definition of the term ‘local government’ provided by Wilson & Game (2006) which outlined the ‘fuzzy’ reality of local government, the chapter subsequently provided an exploration of key features of local government addressing the wider local government reform and modernisation pursued by Labour 1997-2010 and also the specific reality of the changes implemented through reference to circumstances at EDC. Through outlining the fuzzy reality of local government and the reform agenda pursued by Labour, the chapter also explored the contemporary character of local-central government relations in which the assumed supremacy of central government was discussed in relation to the relative subordinate and ‘passive’ posture adopted by local government; the modernisation agenda – of which BV was a part, achieving very little in the way of relaxing the traditional controls of government. Additionally the chapter addressed the growing complexity of local governance arrangements, illustrating the idea of the ‘layered organisation’ whereby the process of local public service provision under New Labour became increasingly organised at a regional level blurring institutional parameters and attempting to integrate public, private and voluntary sectors.

The parameters of the current work (the practice of BV at EDC) have limited the discussion to include a broad, edited highlight of the New Labour reform of local government. Lowndes (2004) situates the process of local government modernisation within the context of a longer series of change influencing the approach of successive government since the 1970s. Whereas Leach (2004:90) the political changes which have taken place at a local level concludes that “*the party-based, service orientated and internally focused model*” of local government is “*past its sell-by date!*” To an

extent this – in addition to the other themes addressed – provides the context of the work ahead. The New Labour local government modernisation 1997-2010 is understood as indicating a time of great change and transformation, continuing to alter both the composition and practice of local government; surely this makes the case for an empirical investigation (such as is provided by the thesis) into local government practice all the more pertinent. Having highlighted some of the contemporary issues, in the next chapter I provide an overview of the research process including a consideration of methodological concerns and outline of the overall research design.





reality through the actions and interactions of active interpretative agents in the field: the research applied an understanding of BV as an outcome of the ongoing process of interpretation and interaction within EDC. During the research the following methods were used:

➤ *A qualitative analysis of local authority documents:*

Best Value Performance Plans as produced (2004-05) to gain an appreciation of the formal articulation of BV by the local authority.

➤ *'Shadowing'/non-participant observation:*

Members of and officers of EDC to understand everyday practice within the authority and gain an appreciation of the extent to which that practice was shaped by the requirements of BV.

➤ *Semi-structured interviews:*

A broadly representative sample of twenty-five respondents (including both employees and members) accessing individual understanding of BV.

The chapter begins by considering the purpose of social research and the problem of knowledge, outlining the historical sociological approach of the research. I then make the case *for* case-study research. The research employs a constructionist view of social reality; an interpretivist stance has informed the processes of data generation and analysis (Crotty 1998). I conclude by offering a reflexive evaluation of the research process.

4.1.1. Very briefly, the problem of knowledge:

The purpose of social research is to know. To render newly comprehensible an aspect of the world, or area of concern which was previous perhaps little understood or had been misconceived. *But what is knowledge? How can we be certain of that which we claim to 'know'?* To ask such questions is to be aware of matters of epistemology and ontology. Ours is an age characterised by change, flux and above all uncertainty (Berman 1983; Giddens 1990; Beck 1992; Hetherington 1997). Traditionally philosophy has maintained a distinction between 'knowledge' and 'opinion'. The deductive natural science model of inquiry was upheld as the principal route to knowledge. However, the influential findings of Popper (1943) and Kuhn (1970) have

combined to question science as eliminating certainty and highlight the instability of the scientific paradigm. More radically, Feyerabend has argued:

...there is not a single rule, however plausible, and however firmly grounded in epistemology, that is not violated at some time or another... [Further this is] both reasonable and absolutely necessary for the growth of knowledge.  
(Reading in Delanty & Strydom 2005: 84)

We are at a cross-road. Science is at War (Cooper 2003). The battle rages between the 'true' and the 'good' (Wallerstein 2000). The light of the Enlightenment has been extinguished (Hughes et al 1995). Yet in the darkness, there is perhaps a glimmer of light:

While postmodern approaches are often dark and pessimistic, there is also an abiding social hope that comes through. In their most hopeful moments, thinkers such as Lyotard, Foucault and Bauman seem to be saying that, if we wish to realise the Enlightenment social hopes, we need new ways of looking at knowledge, society, history and the very idea of freedom. For many such thinkers, the postmodern vision assumes socially produced selves whose identities are multiple and unstable, an awareness of the coupling of power and knowledge, and an image of society as fragmented, deeply divided and multicultural, and organised around a myriad of specific struggles. (Seidman 2004:203)

At the start of the new millennium, considering a possible way forward, Wallerstein (2000:12) wrote:

...only a social science that refuses to separate the search for the true and the search for the good, only a social science that can overcome the split between the two cultures, only a social science that can fully incorporate the permanence of uncertainty and bask in the possibilities of such uncertainty affords for human creativity and a new substantive rationality.

#### 4.1.2. Historical Sociology:

Naturally, I enjoy a historic sensibility. The past is a treasure-trove resource of the present and of the future. The specific reality which informs the underlying temporal

dimensions of the past, present and future is confirmed by the grammatical conventions of tense: the events of the past have *occurred*; the present is *ongoing* (but all too *fleeting*). Once events have occurred the present is a memory quickly consigned to the past. The future remains permanently outside of our grasp: unobtainable; until it becomes the present and so the course follows... In this respect the past provides our only actual recourse to knowledge.

Abrams (1982: 2) articulates the case for historical sociology:

Sociological explanation is necessarily historical. Historical sociology is thus not some special kind of sociology; rather, it is the essence of the discipline.

He adds:

...even in these small-scale social settings teasing out historical processes, the sociology of *becoming*, is for the sociologist the best way of discovering the social relationship of structure and action, the structural conditioning of action and the effects of action on structure. It is simply the most fruitful way of doing sociology. (Abrams 1982:6-7)

## 4.2. Knowing:

In becoming to know, there is first a process of knowing. I am referring to knowing reality – specifically our underlying conception of social reality as it informs the pursuit of knowledge. Crotty (1998: 10) observes:

Ontological and epistemological issues tend to emerge together.

### 4.2.1. Some (very basic) ontological and epistemological assumptions:

Blaikie (2000: 8) provides the following description of ‘ontological claims’:

...claims and assumptions that are made by the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological claims are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality.

Giddens (1976:79) makes a fundamental distinction between the natural world and the social world:

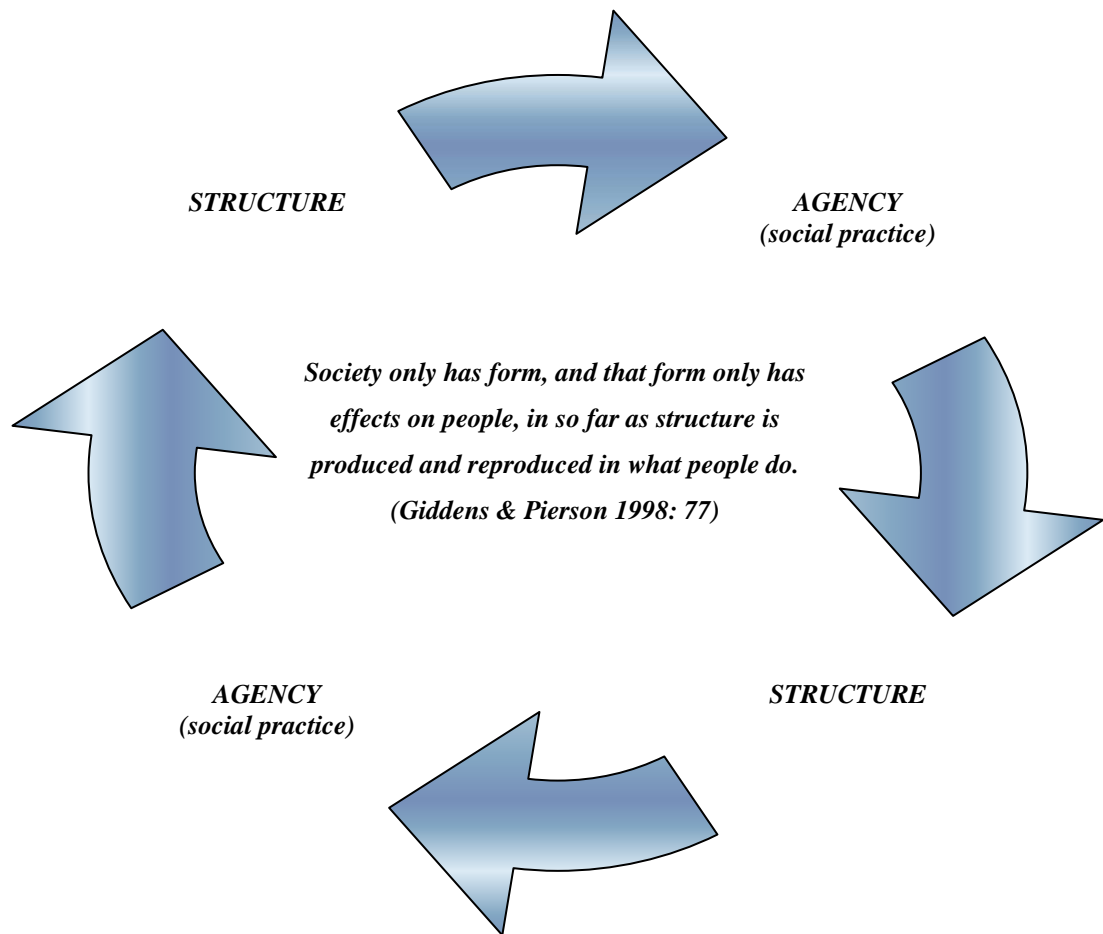
The difference between the social and natural world is that the latter does not constitute itself as ‘meaningful’; the meanings it has are produced by men in the course of their practical life, and as a consequence of their endeavours to understand and explain it for themselves. Social life – of which these endeavours are a part – on the one hand, is *produced* by its component actors precisely in terms of their active constitution and reconstitution of meaning whereby they organise experiences.

The idea outlined by Giddens (above) is of a world ‘always already there’ (Crotty 1998: 55), a world constituted and reconstituted through the interpretations and reinterpretations of active agents. In the words of Scott & Marshall (2006:644):

He attempts to transcend the traditional division in sociology between action and structure by focusing on ‘social practices’ which, he argues produce and are produced by structures.

It is an idea he outlines in structuration theory:

**Figure 4.2: Outline of Giddens' theory of structuration (1984)**



The table below summarises structuralist and voluntarist theories of the characterisation of structure and agency, providing a comparison with the approach of Giddens who outlines a *duality of structure*, rather than the typical dualism had between the force of structure and agency.

**Table 4.3: Modes of theorising structure and agency**

|                                   | Structuralist theories  | Voluntarist theories                                 | Structuration theory   |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Characterisation of structure     | Structures and cultures determine, shape or heavily constrain   | Structures are the revisable products of free agents | Structure is the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organises        |
| Characterisation of actors/agents | Actors' choices are illusionary, marginal and/or trivial. Actors are cultural dopes, the victims of circumstances or instruments of history | Actors make real choices. Actors determine           | Actors are knowledgeable and competent agents who reflexively monitor their action |

*Taken from Bryant & Jary 2003: 254*

In terms of understanding the practice of BV at EDC, we can see the formal framework of BV (established by government) and the ongoing established practice within the authority as coming together, being mutually interpreted, constituted and then reinterpreted and reconstituted through the ongoing practice of BV at EDC. The most important aspect of Giddens' theory of structuration is that social reality is not determined but subject to a process of *meaningful* ongoing determination. The theory is imperfect and has variously been criticised for attempting to overcome the constraints imposed by the traditional structure/agency divide by overemphasising the potential for change through the creative practise of agents – indeed, it something of a truism that many individuals/organisations attempt to change the world but few succeed. Bryant & Jary (2003:258) outline:

Two limitations of Giddens' original theory of structuration remain. On the one hand, it has little to say about the formulation and distribution of the unacknowledged and acknowledged conditions of action or about the differential knowledgeability of actors. On the other, it does not elaborate on individual and collective *transformative* projects, and the differential capabilities of actors to see projects through successfully, including the capacity to cope successfully with unintended consequences. Despite these limitations, however, it has proved highly attractive to empirical researchers. (pp.258)

I have selected Giddens' theory of structuration to inform the ontological assumptions of this study because (despite limitations) it provides a *plausible* account which acknowledges the reflexivity practice of everyday people and the role of practice in shaping patterns and conventions we might loosely refer to as 'structure'.

The implication of a meaningful social reality is that socially created meaning is open to interpretation (Schwandt 1998). The interpretivist approach "*looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world*" (Crotty 1998: 67). The interpretivist tradition adopts an anti-positivist stance and investigates that which is posited ('given'); it does not enter into speculation (Crotty 1998: 18-20). Interpretivism seeks to make clear its object of study, "*to bring light, [and] an underlying coherence or sense*" (Taylor 2003: 182). Within the interpretivist tradition,

hermeneutics is especially preoccupied with the investigation and interpretation of human action as intentional, it is particularly concerned with the content and form of what is being studied (William & May 1996: 198). Pawson and Tilley (1997) distinguish between hermeneutics 'one' and hermeneutics 'two'. Hermeneutics one is outlined as an earlier form of hermeneutics, associated with the approach of Becker (1971) and Blumer (1969):

...by being witness to the day-to-day reasoning of their research subjects, by engaging in their life worlds, by participating in their decision making, the researcher would be that much closer to reality. The hermeneutic approach, it was assumed, almost literally place one in touch with the truth... (Pawson & Tilley 1997: 21)

A later development, hermeneutics two is associated with the work of Hammersley (1992) and:

...starts from the point of view that all beliefs are 'constructions' *but* adds the twist that we cannot, therefore, get beyond constructions. It insists, in other words, that there are no neutral/ factual/ definitive accounts to be made of the social world. (Pawson & Tilley 1997: 21)

However as Crotty (1998: 63) has argued:

Social constructionism is at once realist and relativist... To say that meaningful reality is socially constructed is not to say that it is not real... constructionism is perfectly compatible with a realism in ontology.

He adds:

Realism should be set, instead, against idealism. Idealism is somehow confined to what is in mind, that is, it consists only of 'ideas' (to use the word employed by Descartes and his contemporaries). Social constructionism does not define reality in this way, (pp.64)

Denzin & Lincoln (2000) describe the current moment in social research as 'messy'. Much of this 'messiness' has been attributed to the 'postmodern turn' (Clarke 2003; Seidman 2004). An alternative understanding is perhaps the original scale and scope of



the Enlightenment Project was inevitably flawed (Hughes et al 1995) and what has happened since has been an attempt to close the fault-line between the 'good' and 'true' (Wallerstein 2000; 2003). Either way, we must now forge a path ahead; accepting to that:

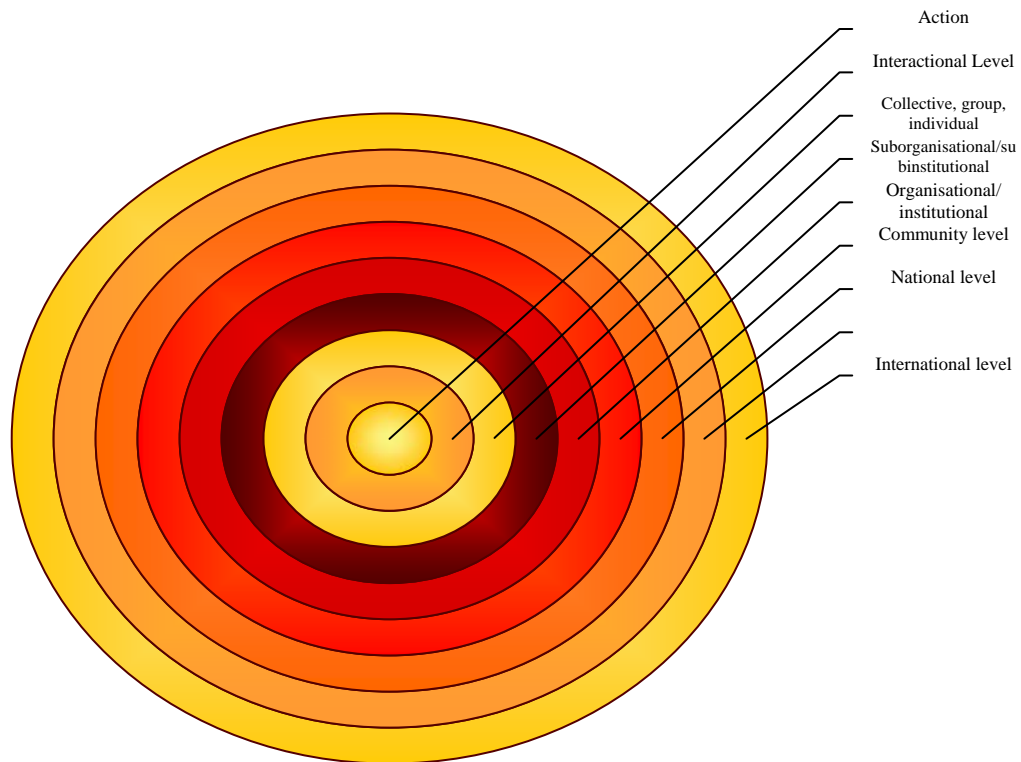
1. There is no neutral access to the world, knowledge is linguistic (by and large) and social, and language is not a transparent, stable medium, but opaque and slippery.
2. We can nevertheless develop reliable knowledge of the world and have scientific progress. (Sayer 2000: 71)

### 4.3. Finding ground:

The inductive approach of the research coupled with an aspiration to make sense of an observed reality, meant that the research was approached less as a search for answers and more as a study in what occurred. Consistent with a grounded theory (GT) approach, I suspended all theoretical assumptions about the practice of BV at EDC and adopted a research led design: findings ‘emerged’ from within the setting and subsequently informed the course of the research (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990). However, I make no claims that this constitutes an objectivist stance. Echoing Hammersley (1992), we cannot get beyond constructions and thus ultimately there are no neutral/factual/definitive accounts to be made of the social world. *This has important implications because it points to a knowledge within limits, a need for the author to justify their claims – and a need for the reader to remain alert and challenge the extent of the claims being made* (discussion further developed in section 4.6.2).

The use of a GT approach is consistent with the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of the research. I was further attracted to GT as it complemented the case-study design of the research, maintaining sensitivity to findings from the field and affording an opportunity to ‘learn from the case’. Other factors also informed the use of GT, in particular, potential in the application of the ‘conditional matrix’ (Strauss & Corbin 1990, shown in Figure 4.4) to understand the wider context informing the practice of BV at EDC.

Figure 4.4: The 'Conditional Matrix' – a possible framework for exploring context



Source: Strauss and Corbin 1990

In adopting a GT approach I was aware that there are:

...probably as many versions of grounded theory as... grounded theorists (Dey, 1992:2)

Following their original collaboration Glaser and Strauss (1967), the authors have subsequently gone on to develop and refine their own individual approaches – creating some confusion over what constitutes GT. Suddaby (2006: 634) suggests that GT approaches are characterised by:

- i. *Constant comparison*: in which the data are collected and analysed simultaneously...
- ii. *Theoretical sampling*: in which decisions about which data are collected next are determined by the theory that is being constructed...

Charmaz (2004:497) provides a more detailed set of principles:

- i. simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis phases of the research;
- ii. creation of analytic codes and categories developed from the data, not from preconceived hypotheses;
- iii. the development of middle range theories to explain behaviour and processes;
- iv. memo-making, that is writing analytic notes to explicate and fill out categories, the crucial intermediate step between coding data and writing first drafts of papers;
- v. theoretical sampling, that is, sampling for theory construction, not for representativeness of a given population, to check and refine the analyst's emerging conceptual categories;
- vi. delay of the literature review.

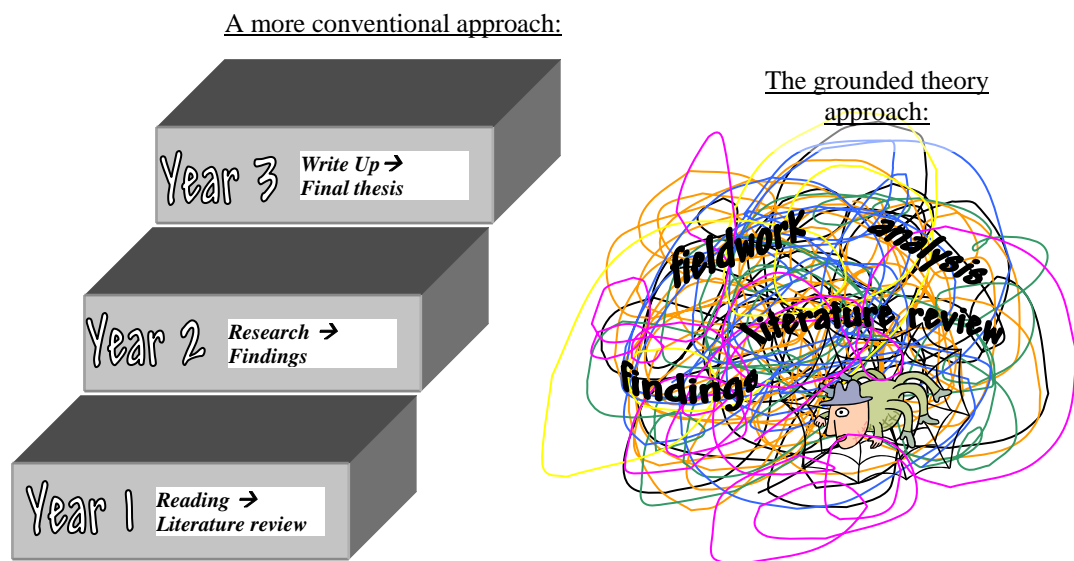
In particular Charmaz (2004:497) argues:

Grounded theory methods allow novices and old hands alike to conduct qualitative research efficiently and effectively because these method help in structuring and organising data-gathering and analysis.

I have come to recognise the mixed benefits of the GT approach. GT provides a practical framework in which to develop an ongoing context-sensitive analysis as relates to the exploration of ordinary everyday social relations, behaviours and practices of a group of individuals working within the bounds of an organisation (e.g. local authority). In some respects the approach provides a practical '*how to*' guide. Equally, for a postgraduate researcher the GT approach makes for a risky strategy in that it breaks the usual norm of: one year reading, one year researching and one year writing. Unlike my peers at the end of the first year I did not have a literature review. I had read widely, analysed BV Performance Plans, conducted a small number of pilot interviews and generated a mass of data. Much had been accomplished. Yet, I perceived my peers (who had completed a traditional literature review) as having established a foundation of the final thesis. I felt immersed in a very great mess. This is what makes GT a risky strategy for an inexperienced researcher: it involves *a lot going on all at once*.

The illustration below captures the difference between the two approaches. The more ‘conventional approach’ shows a progressive trajectory, in which each stage/year in the project is marked by the conclusion of a set task that builds towards the goal of final completion. In contrast, the grounded theory approach (my own experience) involves the researcher in a tangled web attempting to identify and tease out key strands of meaning and from this to weave a new web of theoretical understanding.

Figure 4.5: Contrasting two approaches to the completion of the final thesis:



#### 4.3.1. On stony ground:

Despite the promise of GT, my early attempts to code the data were unsuccessful. I continued the inductive approach: simultaneously collecting and analysing data, writing memos, and making use of the conditional matrix (- which I found provided useful prompts for analysis). However, beyond the open coding of research data I abandoned my original commitment to GT. Bryman (2001: 397) observes:

GT is very much associated with an approach to data analysis that invites researchers to fragment their data by coding the data into discreet chunks. However, in the eyes of some writers this kind of activity results in a loss of a sense of context and narrative flow...

In remaining faithful to the approach as outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1990), I found I was losing the meaning of the data. A key aim of the research was to attempt an

understanding of the achievement of BV at EDC. But in beginning to fragment the data and develop a coding frame my findings no longer made sense: *how could I create meaning, reach an understanding without sense of the original data?* Whilst it was possible to develop general themes, the practice I observed and the individuals I interviewed did not act/speak within a discreet realm of coding frames. What I found was much less defined, ongoing, messy and changing. The findings of the research were emblematic of the kind of reality typically encountered in the social world:

*Things add up and they don't. They flow in linear time and they don't. They exist within a single space and escape from it. That which is complex cannot be pinned down. To pin it down is to lose it.* (Law & Mol 2002: 21)

The metaphor I subsequently developed was of an incomplete tapestry. However, the problem remained: *how to go forward? How to produce an account of the data which made sense?* Riessman (1993: vi) describes a similar dilemma:

Applying traditional qualitative methods, I searched the texts for common thematic elements. But some individuals knotted together several themes into long accounts that had coherence and sequence, defying easy categorisation. I found myself not wanting to fragment the long accounts into distinct thematic categories. There seemed to be a common structure beneath talk about a variety of topics. While I coded one interview, a respondent provided language for my trouble. As I have thought about it since, it was a 'click moment' in my biography as a narrative researcher.

Unaware of Riessman's experience, I arrived at a similar solution in developing a narrative analysis which enabled me to maintain an interpretative, context-sensitive approach making sense of the data. I was further influenced in selecting this approach by the impressive hoard of documents and empirical data requiring analysis. In short, I had an excess of material, a problem that is, apparently, common:

The major problem we face in qualitative inquiry is not to get data, but to get rid of it! (Wolcott 1990 cited in Bryman 2001: 497)

The narrative approach became a practical device enabling sensible selection of themes from the data generated, without sacrificing the context-sensitive approach of the

research or losing meaning. In the conduct of qualitative research Rallis & Rossman (2012) argue that the researcher is the instrument of the research. I like stories, I frequently read and share in stories with others.

#### 4.3.2. The use of metaphor:

In understanding the practice of BV at EDC, I developed the metaphor of an ‘incomplete tapestry’. If ours is a storied reality (Lawler: 2002); it is also a metaphorical reality. Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 3) explain:

The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people... if we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do everyday is very much a matter for metaphor.

The argument provided by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5) is of a hidden metaphorical order, largely taken-for-granted found in language and structuring practice:

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.

Recognition of the role of metaphor in creating reality emphasises a meaningful social reality and that the source of meaning might be fruitfully accessed through interpretation. Law (2004:88) explains:

Allegory is the art of meaning something other and more than what is being said. Closely related to irony, and also metaphor, it is the art of deciphering that meaning, reading between the literal lines to understand what is actually being depicted.

If metaphor and allegory are used to communicate meaning, *might they not prove a useful device in communicating the findings of social research* – especially when much of our understanding (e.g. social reality/order and the relationship of structure and agency) is incomplete? Law (2004:90) advises:

...[allegory] uses what is present as a resource to mess about with absence. It makes manifest what is otherwise invisible. It extends the field of visibility, and crafts new realities out-there. And, at least sometimes, it also does something that is even more artful. This is because it *makes space for ambivalence and ambiguity*. In allegory, the realities made manifest do not always have to fit together. (Emphasis as original)



#### 4.4. Focusing on the case:

##### 4.4.1. Case Study Research:

During the course of the research I came to adopt a view of EDC as a social setting, and BV practice as the practical accomplishment of active participants embedded within a specific milieu. Keen to construct an alternative understanding of BV practice as informed by an exploration of internal processes of interpretation, negotiated sense-making and actual practice of local government practitioners, I employed a case-study design.

Scott & Marshall (2006: 54) define a case-study as: “*A research design that takes as its subject a single case or a few selected types of a social entity – such as communities, social groups, employers, events, life-histories, families, work teams, roles or relationships – and employs a variety of methods to study them*” . This does not imply use of a particular type of evidence or method of data collection (Yin 1981). In general, the case-study approach provides a flexible and open design, which is determined only by the requirements of the research:

The distinguishing characteristic of the case study is that it attempts to examine: (a) contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. (Yin 1981: 59)

Yin (1981: 59-60) explains:

- Case-study approaches may be exploratory, descriptive and/or explanatory;
- The case-study approach provides detailed explanations, rather than direct answers to a limited frame of research questions;
- As context informs a part of the study, there will always be too many variables for the number of observations made – thus, making standard experimental and survey designs inappropriate

Although providing a strategy equally applicable to quantitative research, key features of the case-study approach have combined to attract qualitative subjects. The focus of a single case/limited number of cases allows the researcher to deal with the subtleties

and intricacies of complex research situations. Additionally, the approach allows for a holistic, close study of social relations and processes; in a non-controlled research environment the non-prescriptive approach enables the researcher to study the phenomena as they occur, making use of multiple methods which may potentially enhance the overall findings made by the research. Further, the narrow focus of the case-study approach makes it a strategy particularly suited to small-scale research projects where overall resources are likely to be limited (Denscombe 2007: 35-47). However, the defining characteristic of case-study research “*its focus on just one instance of the thing that is to be investigated*” has traditionally proved its most contentious feature, in that it provides an insufficient basis to permit generalisation. For this reason the case study has been recommended for use only in the initial pilot stages of a research project as a test of particular data collection instruments and/or means for developing research hypotheses.

Flyvbjerg (2006: 233) provides an impressive challenge against this view, starting with a pedagogical argument for the case-study approach:

For researchers, the closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details are important in two respects. First it is important for the development of a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behaviour cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process in much theory. Second, cases are important to researchers own learning processes in developing the skills needed to do good research. If researchers wish to develop their skills to a high level, then concrete, context-dependent experience is just as central for them as to professionals learning any other specific skill...

Flyvbjerg (2006) identifies five advantages provided by the case study approach in the practice of social research:

- i. *Predicative theories and universal cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete, context-dependent knowledge is, therefore, more valuable than the vain search for predicative universals.*(pp.237)

- ii. *One can often generalise on the basis of a single case, and the case-study may be central to scientific development via generalisation as supplement or alternative to other methodologies. (pp.238)*
- iii. *The case-study is useful for both generating and testing hypotheses but is not limited to these research activities alone. (pp.239)*
- iv. *The case-study contains no greater bias toward verification of the researcher's preconceived notions than any other method of inquiry. On the contrary, experience indicates that the case-study contains a greater bias toward falsification of preconceived notions than towards verification. (pp.237)*
- v. *It is correct that summarising case-studies is often difficult, especially as concerns case processes. It is less correct as regards case outcomes. The problem in summarising case-studies, however, is due more often to the properties of the reality studied than to the case-study as a research method. Often it is not desirable to summarise and generalise case-studies. Good studies should be read as narratives in their entirety. (pp.241)*

#### 4.4.2. Selecting an appropriate case:

- *Why County Durham?*
- *Why a district council?*
- *Why EDC?*

For reasons of geographic convenience I decided to base the research in County Durham. I live in South Durham and thought it sensible to concentrate efforts locally, avoiding the inconvenience and cost associated with travelling. Although local government in the UK is marked by a high degree of variance in individual authorities, I had previously worked in a district council and considered I was reasonably familiar with the typical features exhibited by the district council form. Additionally, given the smaller scale of district council operations I felt reasonably confident that I would be able to develop an understanding of the authority under study as a whole thus developing an insight into the collective achievement of BV through a close examination of social relations and processes within the authority – achieving the aims

of the research and realising an underlying motivation to represent aspects of the regime otherwise marginalised/overlooked in dominant literatures.

I decided against approaching my former place of employment as a possible research setting. I felt this might have undermined the integrity of the research, by (inadvertently) exploiting previous relationships and ties within the authority and compromising the principle of 'freely given informed consent'. Finally, I judged my previous position as a barrier to access. Having occupied a junior position I anticipated that those in more senior positions (regardless of assurances of confidentiality) might feel inhibited and less likely to speak candidly when interviewed, limiting the findings made.

The initial aim of the research was: *to provide a grounded account of BV practice from within the setting of a local authority.*

...it makes sense to choose cases as extreme situations and polar types in which the process of interest is 'transparently observable'. (Eisenhardt 1989: 537)

EDC lent itself as a preferred site for the research. Following a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2003, EDC was officially categorised as an 'excellent' local authority. This provided confirmation that the authority was in compliance with the requirements established by BV and had attained the standard desired by government. This also minimised the possibility of the research becoming diluted or otherwise hijacked by the interests of the host authority.

Before beginning the research I was aware of the extent of deprivation in the district (Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004). Previous has research suggested a negative impact of deprivation on local authority performance (Boyne & Enticitt 2004; McLean 2007). John (2008) states:

Local authorities in poorer areas get worse scores, even controlling for other factors, such as local authority type.

Given the context of deprivation, I was intrigued by the accomplishment of BV at EDC. I thought this exception made for the possibility of an interesting case-study:

*how had the authority managed to overcome context and establish itself as an 'excellent' local authority? What was the secret of its BV success?*

#### 4.4.3. Gaining Access:

...gaining access to most organisations is not a matter to be taken lightly but one that involves some combination of strategic planning, hard work and dumb luck. (Van Maanen & Kolb 1985 cited in Bryman 2001: 294)

In gaining access to EDC I was lucky: all along EDC had been my preferred option. Further, the warm and friendly hospitality of those encountered at EDC contributed enormously to my own personal enjoyment of the research. I could not have asked for more and feel that I gained an exceptional level of access. I hope that this is reflected in the rich detail and depth of the findings presented.

Having previously worked in a local authority I had an awareness of the administrative procedures and hierarchies within local government organisations. I also had an expectation of the subtle conventions likely to inform their dynamic. Thus, as the research concerned the conduct of BV practice, I judged my initial approach should be to the *Best Value Performance Manager* (BVPM). I felt it unlikely that the BVPM would be able to sanction the research to go ahead, however as the research fell within their professional jurisdiction, I thought this the proper course. Following a telephone call, I met with the BVPM in person. I outlined the aims of the research and I was received with interest; the BVPM advised I make a formal request in writing to the Assistant Chief Executive (ACE).

A letter was written (see Appendix 2) and a meeting arranged. I outlined that I was keen to explore the accomplishment of 'BV' through an observation of the daily practices pursued by members and employees and individual perceptions and understandings of the framework through interviewing. I expressed that 'performance' *per se* was not the immediate concern of the research. The ACE, who had commissioned a number of commercially produced research reports, was intrigued and welcoming of a qualitative inquiry. Throughout the meeting I emphasised the modest scope of the research. The ACE was keen to ensure the interests of staff and the

authority, and I explained that I was required to abide by the British Sociological Association's code of ethics secure participation on the basis of *'freely given informed consent'* and maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. The ACE was generous in the time provided and discussion flowed off topic into other general areas. At the end of the meeting the ACE expressed her own personal support of the research and explained that she would pursue the request with the Senior Management Team and elected members.

Time wore on. I tried unsuccessfully, through a combination of email and telephone, to contact the ACE. I began to grow anxious: *what would I do if EDC refused to participate in the research?* Fortunately – after what felt like a much longer wait than two months – I read the words in an email (typed late one night) that EDC would be happy to participate in the research: formal approval had been granted. I was referred to a member of staff in the Corporate Development Unit (CDU), referred to here as 'Lydia'.

#### 4.4.4. The process of gaining ongoing access in the field:

In a bureaucratic field situation the needs of the organisation and not those of the observer determine what occurs and thus what he can study at a given time. (Blau 1955: 274)

Throughout my time at EDC Lydia became my main point of contact. She played an indispensable and interesting role throughout the research, extending a friendly welcome and a great deal of personal assistance.

On arriving for my first day of 'fieldwork' I was provided with a PC and desk in the CDU. I was then rushed off to attend a formal induction session along with three new recruits. I was required to sign various policy documents as proof that I had read and understood their contents. I was informed that the university would be required to complete a Health and Safety assessment form. I was given a name tag 'Charlotte Quarless – *work placement*'. Alarm bells began to ring. I tried a number of times to explain that I was a postgraduate student conducting research into the everyday practice of BV. *Yes, they'd had students on work-placements before! I was no bother*

*to them – just join in with the others everything was fine, nothing to worry about...* It seemed rude to break the flow of the instructor, I settled into the role of ‘new recruit’. The session proved an insight into the projected culture of the authority. Throughout I wrote notes and collected a bulging stash of documents. This was my first day in the field! I had begun to generate *actual* data!

I had concerns: *had I not stated the intentions and purpose of the research clearly? Had my reasons for being in the authority not been clearly communicated to others? How would others working in the authority interpret my presence? Had I mistakenly negotiated a work placement – was that the reason for the provision of a desk and PC in the CDU?*

Having been formally ‘inducted’ I returned to Lydia in the CDU. I explained that I was in the authority to conduct a programme of research that I was not on a placement, and did not expect to need the use of a desk or PC. But Lydia explained that the provision of PC access and a desk had been arranged by the ACE – a normal courtesy extended to all external parties in the authority for a prolonged period of time. I felt reassured, although I made a mental note *not* to be seen by others in the organisation as an extension of the CDU. I then spoke to Lydia for some time about the research, immediately she set to task: she had already arranged a number of willing participant-observation (‘shadowing’) opportunities and was keen to arrange an interview schedule. Gently, I explained the principle of *‘freely given informed consent’*. I also explained that I was keen to ensure a broadly representative sample of the authority in research activities.

Initially I was panicked by the arrangements made on my behalf and without my involvement. I was concerned that the authority might attempt to manipulate control over the conduct of the research. I worried that those initially approached would feel obliged to cooperate. I became concerned that Lydia’s initial approach potentially compromised the ethical standard of confidentiality. Very quickly Lydia grasped the nature of academic research, gained an appreciation of the ethical codes in place and through working together we reached an acceptable understanding. I came to appreciate the requirements of the research as being accommodated within the formal

bureaucratic framework of the authority. Access had been granted, a provision for my presence made and in order for me to conduct the research I would need to enter into the established flows and due process of the authority. I had already prepared a handout which informed prospective participants about me and the research (see Appendix 3). On this basis those approached by Lydia received an information sheet, and if willing to proceed an appointment was made for me to meet with them during work-time. I came to accept the fieldwork experience as a nominally controlled process of social interaction between researcher and prospective participants. There were no rules or established conventions, as an accomplished social actor I needed to negotiate myself through the setting. I needed to suspend my suspicion and trust in the situation of the research, *for how else could I proceed?*

#### 4.4.5. Developing a role:

When carrying out research:

Do we present ourselves as representatives from academia studying medical students (Becker 1956)? Do we approach an interview as a woman-to-woman discussion (Spradley 1979)? Do we ‘dress down’ to look like the respondents (Fontana 1977; Thompson 1985)? Do we represent the colonial culture (Malinoski 1922) or do we humbly present ourselves as ‘learners’ (Wax 1960)? The decision of how to present oneself is very important, because after one’s presentational self is ‘cast’ it leaves a profound impression on the respondents and has a great influence on the success (or failure) of the study. (Fontana & Frey 1994: 367)

During my time in the authority I was open about who I was and what I was doing, welcoming questions about the research. I contrived the role of ‘naïve researcher’ and took care to present myself as a respectable representation of a post-graduate student. Keen to distance myself from the CDU and allay suspicion of myself as a ‘plant’ or spy, I deliberately selected a smart casual wardrobe and developed a uniform of dark jeans, plain t-shirt and a corduroy jacket. I carried a small rucksack and an A4 sized ‘really useful box’ which contained papers and pens and doubled as an impromptu writing surface. The university is known locally and I was readily accepted as a



postgraduate student at Durham. I looked the part (because I was the part!) and individuals were able to readily ‘place’ me within an overall context.

Conveniently the role provided latitude to ask questions, even the seemingly obvious or obscure. The role served also to allay suspicion. A number of individuals actively elected to participate in the research on the basis that they had sons/daughters at university or else they gained a sense of satisfaction in helping a student in her studies. The role provided an excellent cover for my activities in the research setting. As a ‘student’ I was expected to make notes. Also, as happened, when workmates started to talk amongst themselves ‘privately’ my role allowed for a temporary pause when I became otherwise engaged in checking notes – my presence discreetly made ‘invisible’. At times, when I was party to a questionable comment or a joke of poor taste, I was able to feign bafflement – a confusion attributed to my role as ‘naïve researcher’. Thus the role evolved a number of conventions which enabled me to maintain social propriety, avoiding potential embarrassment/awkwardness.

#### 4.4.6. On identifying the case:

It was expected that the authority would be properly identified in the content of the thesis. However, in the early stages of writing-up the research I began to reconsider whether to formally identify the local authority. Mindful of the infamous ‘Springdale case’ (Vidich & Bensman 1958), I took my commitment to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants seriously. I was aware the uniqueness of some roles within the authority might threaten the anonymity of research participants. I toyed with the idea of creating an alias for EDC further disguising the identity of participants, a strategy deployed by Gill-McLure & Seifert (2007). However, such was the fundamental importance of place in framing the work orientations and informing underlying motivations of those working in the authority, that to deny or suppress any aspect of place would be to ultimately undermine the truthfulness of the work presented.

As a local authority EDC was a public organisation: elected members as locally elected representatives, and employees as public servants, were subject to measures of public accountability. I considered the research as extending a form of public accountability: publically funded by the ESRC, overseen and supported by Durham University a

public institution. *Was I not acting in the wider public interest?* I considered the aims and endeavours of the research to be within the wider democratic processes of society: involving public scrutiny of government and the findings of the research as potentially contributing to informed public discussion and debate of local government. When I mentioned to individuals at EDC my dilemma they were surprised and generally expressed that they expected EDC to be properly identified. In terms of my own moral conscience I believe I have been fair in what I have reported of the authority. I have endeavoured to provide the reader with a truthful representation of the reality as it was perceived. Any work of this nature has limitations and the thesis provides but a partial account of BV practice within EDC, founded on the analysis of the data generated by the researcher.

#### **4.5. Research Methods:**

...every research tool or procedure is inextricably embedded in commitments to particular versions of the world and knowing that world. To use a questionnaire, to use an attitude scale, to take the role of participant observer, to select a random sample, to measure rates of population growth, and so on, is to be involved in conceptions of the world which allow these instruments to be used for the purposes conceived. (Hughes 1990: 11)

##### 4.5.1. Testing the water:

Scott & Marshall (2006) define a 'pilot study' as:

Any small-scale test of a research instrument (such as a questionnaire, experiment, or interview schedule), run in advance of the main fieldwork and used to test the utility of the research design. (pp.493)

Prior to the research, I possessed little direct experience as a 'researcher'. In order to gain some valuable experience and provide an early steer on the eventual course of the research (in a way which was compatible with the GT approach) I conducted a small number of semi-structured interviews amongst friends. I made use of a Dictaphone, I made notes and then later transcribed the materials producing an analysis of the data. It proved useful practice. Later, I interviewed individuals at WVDC, Teesdale District Council and Sedgfield Borough. This proved a useful means of becoming freshly aware of BV/CPA and in becoming acquainted with the key issues facing local authorities at that particular time. These interviews helped to shape the initial interview schedule and helped me to gain a 'grounded' perspective early on in the research process.

##### ***4.5.2. Qualitative analysis of BVPPs***

...many researchers continue to produce ethnographic accounts of complex, literate social worlds as if they were entirely without writing...[s]uch accounts hardly do justice to the settings they purport to describe. (Atkinson & Coffey 1997: 45)

A key requirement of the Local Government Act 1999 was for local authorities to publish an annual Best Value Performance Plan (see Chapter Two). In the first year of the research I completed a qualitative analysis of BVPPs (2004-05) from all seven district councils within County Durham. These were official documents, produced by the authority and publicly available. The documents were approached as a demonstration of local authority compliance and as a public articulation by the authority of the conceived requirements of BV. The aim and purpose of the exercise was to understand how BV had been variously approached in each authority. Initially, the BV regime was informed by the bold pragmatic principle of '*what matters is what works*' (DETR 1997), creating an opportunity for innovation. Through a comparison of the data I was keen to explore the extent to which this had been realised.

In the analysis of BVPP I combined a grounded theory methodology with a critical discourse analysis approach, as outlined by Fairclough (1999, 2000). Critical discourse analysis was used as an approach to analysis, whereas GT was used as a framework in which to develop that analysis. Critical discourse analysis is based on the view of semiosis as an irreducible part of all material social processes and as such it allows for an oscillation between aspects of structure and agency – generally the accepted means by which social order/society becomes constituted (Giddens 1984). In applying this method the resulting analysis was based on a study of the dialectical relationship between discourse and other elements of social practice. Fairclough advocates that analysis be trained on an exploration of social problems, rather than the more conventional research questions. He adds that the objective for the researcher should be to identify the obstacles to be tackled through an analysis of the specific networks of practice within which the research is located and the relationship of semiosis to other elements of the practice and discourse itself. He argues that this should take the form of a structural as well as a textual and intertextual analysis of the discourse.

A text is a product and outcome of practice, as such all texts carry context:

...meaning does not reside in the text but in the writing and reading of it. As the text is reread in different contexts it is given new meaning, often contradictory and always socially embedded. Thus, there is no 'original; or

‘true’ meaning of a text outside specific historical contexts. (Hodder 2000: 704).

Meaning within a text is inherently unstable. Throughout the research I was concerned to provide a reading of meaning as it occurred in the text rather than causing a disruption to the meaning conveyed through the process of analysis. I have lazily referred to this part of the research as a ‘qualitative analysis’ of BVPP. However the process of analysis involves a process of attaining understanding through breaking down an object into its constituent parts; a process which involves a deliberate decontextualisation. It is therefore perhaps more accurate to describe my activities as involving *a qualitative study of BVPPs*.

In providing a grounded account of BV practice from within the local authority I have endeavoured to maintain a context sensitive approach. Initially enthused by the opportunities provided by Computer Aided Qualitative Analysis Software (CAQDAS) I first attempted an analysis of BVPP using NVivo. Fielding & Lee (1998) outline at length the benefits to be gained in making use of CAQDAS and I had hoped that NVivo would prove a useful tool in the management and analysis of the data generated – it was not so. Although I sought to remain positive in making use of NVivo I resented the computer in mediating my access to the data and found the meaning of the text altered and disturbed. As outlined above (Hughes 1990) research tools are neither objective nor impartial. In providing a means to knowing, by their application research tools also provide a *way* of knowing. While informing an important part of the initial research, the amount of data later generated in the case-study of EDC meant it was no longer viable for me to incorporate the comparative qualitative analysis of BVPP in the final presentation of research findings. Whilst analysis of the BVPP produced by EDC has proved directly useful, the ultimate utility of my extensive study of BVPP was in becoming immersed and achieving a ‘grounded’ perspective early on in the research.

**4.5.3. *Shadowing/'non'-participant observation:***

Observation offers the social researcher a distinct way of collecting data. It does not rely on what people *say* they do, or what they *say* they think. It is more direct than that. Instead, it draws on the direct evidence of the eye to witness events first hand. It is based on the premise that, for certain purposes, it is best to observe what actually happens. (Denscombe 2007: 206).

Although referred to as 'non-participant observation' in the original proposal, for a number of reasons I came to refer to this activity as 'shadowing'. First, the term 'non-participant observation' resulted in puzzlement from others. Second, I did not see myself as removed from the activities under scrutiny. Participants exercised choice in becoming involved in the research, legitimating my presence and establishing responsible, ethical research practice. The purpose of the research was not to scrutinise BV practice, but to provide a grounded account of BV practice as it occurred. This required a participant-eye-view, rather than a birds-eye-view. Informed by the context of the work I selected the term 'shadowing' to explain my activities. Widely used in the context of training, the term was readily understood and would-be participants had a better expectation of what to expect of the research. Additionally, the association predisposed participants to my asking questions which enabled a fuller understanding of the events/processes observed and an opportunity for me to validate the veracity of observations. The descriptor 'shadowing' more aptly describes my activities as researcher: in maintaining a close proximity to individuals engaged in their work I became an unobtrusive presence in the day-to-day accomplishment of work tasks.

In the shadowing process I endeavoured to observe a broadly representative sample which included both employees and elected members in order to capture the range and diversity of BV as experienced by those working in the authority. In the process of gaining formal permission from the ACE, Lydia arranged a number of 'willing volunteers'. I met with the individuals and reconfirmed their consent, maintaining the ethical standard of the research.

The final sample included: an elected member, a Director of Service, an employee of the CDU and the entire Benefits Section. Observations took place over the period of a month staggered one day a week (Monday to Friday) enabling me to gradually piece

together the typical events of a week. I thoroughly enjoyed the shadowing part of the research. I felt I gained an intimate understanding of the general approach to BV and the sentiment shared by those in the authority engaged in the everyday accomplishment of BV – *it was a sentiment that went beyond the formal requirements of the BV framework*. Initially I had been nervous, eight hours over the course of an entire working day is a long time in the company of a stranger. Looking back I think the role of ‘naïve researcher’ aided general acceptance of my presence and I was fortunate to develop a good rapport with the individuals who elected to participate in the research.

I completed an extensive and valuable ‘Fieldwork Diary’ which eventually ran to two volumes. Influenced by Lofland & Lofland (1995) I took care to observe everything. I familiarised myself in my physical surroundings: the different locations within the site, who was where, the décor and furnishing of individual rooms. During meetings I made copious notes (written in pencil on blank sheets of A4 paper, as an aid speed) and detailed who was in attendance, who was conducting the meeting, the mood, tone and content of the meeting. In the benefits section I sat alongside assessors engaged in their work and noted their actions and processes. Others, aware of my presence, often provided explanatory comments. I spent an afternoon in the ‘contact centre’ which handled incoming calls to the section and a morning in an out-reach neighbourhood office. I accompanied individuals on house calls. Attended community forum meetings, external meetings with partners and tagged along during an inspection of all authority owned and managed community centres. At times the action was thick and fast and I struggled to maintain an accurate record of events. At other times the minutes seemed to stretch into hours and I was simply an appendage, waiting for an opportunity to observe ‘something’.

Data were not collected but *generated* (Mason 1996). My overt role enabled me to openly record observations as events occurred, which lent credibility to my role as ‘naïve researcher’. I employed a number of resources: a clipboard enabled me to safely store additional handouts/forms/documents and an ‘observation sheet’ enabled me to quickly make a note of the time and the activity/process observed. I jotted real-time observations openly in an exercise book. Although I did not conceal my activities, I

treated all my notes and jottings as confidential information. I did not share their contents with any of the participants and took care that my notes remained in my person. On the drive home (about fifty minutes) I used a Dictaphone to compile an oral record of the day's events. The recordings were enormously helpful and enabled me to generate large amounts of data in a short period of time. I extended this practice to record additional thoughts/analysis following interviews. Generally, I would begin the process of amalgamating the information gathered the following morning. Often the process took a number of days and, consistent with GT methodology, during this I engaged in an ongoing process of analysis. I found the Fieldwork Diary a convenient platform for memo writing, enabling thoughts and ideas to develop organically during the research process.

**4.5.4. Semi-structured interviews:**

...interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet, behind each closed front door, there is a world of secrets. (Oakley 1981:31)

During the course of the research a total of twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted providing a final sample which was broadly inclusive of the hierarchical and administrative divisions within the authority.

**Table 4.6: Interview sample by: position occupied, department and gender**

|                                    | CDU     | Regeneration | Environment Services | Corporate Services |
|------------------------------------|---------|--------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Management/Senior Officer          | M F     | F F M        | M                    | M M F M            |
| Junior Officer/Front-line Employee | F F F M | M F F        | M F                  | F M M              |

The final sample included:

- ten participants in management/senior officer positions;
- twelve junior officer/front-line employees;
- eleven women (F);
- fourteen men (M);



- a male elected member;
- two employees of East Durham Homes were also interviewed.

All interviews were conducted in work time. Twenty-two interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. One participant consented to an interview but requested that it was not recorded – instead I made notes throughout the interview and an oral recording of my recollections afterwards. Two individuals became available for interview without a prior appointment; concerned not to let the opportunity pass I made notes throughout the interview. Although most interviews were arranged in advance by Lydia, care was taken to ensure that all interviews took place on the basis of freely given informed consent. One individual decided not to proceed with the interview having initially agreed. All interviews were treated as private and confidential and were generally conducted in a separate room away from colleagues, which enhanced the quality of audio recordings. Some participants asked to be interviewed at their desks within a shared office. All interviewees were assured of their personal anonymity, achieved through the use of pseudonyms – in some instances more than one pseudonym has been created for the same person.

Interviews were conducted following ‘Fred Davies guide’ (Lofland & Lofland 1995: 84-5). Pre-set interview questions (see Appendix 5b) provided a general frame with useful prompts but were not rigidly adhered to. I was content for interviewees to wander off topic, to explore other areas not anticipated by the research. In one early interview, ten minutes into the interview I had exhausted all the questions set. Mindful not to be seen as a time waster or to lose the opportunity in having gained access, I was compelled to think quickly and invite more general recollections from the participant. The interview eventually ran to about forty-five minutes, and I gained an appreciation of local social history and the impact of that history in framing perceptions and experiences within the authority.

Bryman (2001:328-9) summarises the advantages of participant observation:

- *Seeing through the eyes of others:* through a prolonged immersion in the social setting;

- *Learning the 'native' language:* e.g. special uses of words/slang that penetrate the culture;
- *Access to the taken-for-granted:* implicit features of social life are much more likely to be revealed as a result of the continued presence of the researcher;
- *Access to deviant and hidden behaviours:* Areas that insiders are reluctant/unlikely to talk about in an interview context may well become revealed during the course of observations;
- *Sensitivity to context:* Allows the context of people's behaviour to be mapped out fully;
- *Encountering the unexpected through an inbuilt flexibility of the research:* unstructured nature of participant observation is more likely to uncover unexpected topics or issues unanticipated/previously unknown by the researcher.

In contrast, he highlights the advantages of qualitative interviewing:

- *Allows access to issues resistant to observation:* some aspects of the social world are episodic, it may not be sensible or feasible to carry out a participant observation;
- *Reconstruction of events:* interviewees tend to think back over events, providing a retrospective view of how events evolved over time;
- *Ethical considerations:* ethical principles of 'informed consent' ensure the privacy of research participants;
- *Minimises reactive effects:* if individuals are conscious of being observed they may behave less naturally;
- *Less intrusive:* interviews generally occur within an allotted time and are therefore generally impact less on the personal time of the individual;
- *Makes longitudinal research easier:* follow-up interviews are likely to be easier than returning to the research site on a regular basis;
- *Greater breadth of coverage:* interviewing can allow access to a wider variety of people and situations;
- *Specific focus:* interviews can be directed at a focus associated with the questions of the research (pp.329-31).

Typically social research strategies combine methods of observation and interviewing (Baker 1997; Bryman 2001; Fontana & Frey 1994). Shadowing activities allowed intimate access to observe practice as it occurred, whilst interviews allowed me to access directly the thoughts, feelings, perceptions and understandings of individuals. I am not making claim that the combination of observation and interviewing enabled a fail-safe, capture-all and complete methodological totality of the practice of BV in the setting of EDC. However, through this combination I was able to develop a more nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of BV practice

Although time-consuming all interviews were transcribed in full. Through the process of transcription, the shift from ‘talk’ to ‘text’ implicates upon the process of analysis (Potter 1997, 2004; Perakyla 1997). In particular, Kowal & O’Connell (2004) note that the process of transcription can dramatically alter the original form of interview data, potentially undermining a key purpose of qualitative research:

Qualitative researchers are frequently interested in not just *what* people say but also the *way* in which they say it. (Bryman 2001: 321).

At times during the analysis of interview data I felt disconnected from the original process which had produced the data. I found it helped to actively listen again to the original audio recordings of interviews. In this sense I analysed much of the data ‘by ear’. I found in listening and hearing the voices of those interviewed I was reminded both of *what* had been said and the *way* in which it had been expressed. Interviews were not treated as naturally occurring talk. In listening again and becoming newly aware of the expressive features of speech (tone, pitch, intonation, etc) I accessed a realm of meaning otherwise absent in the word-for-word typed reconstruction of interview recordings. Additionally, in listening again to the recording made, I was able to ensure the accuracy of transcripts.

#### 4.6. A 'responsible' knowledge outlining the need for reflexivity

##### 4.6.1. A 'responsible' knowledge:

One of the first sociological texts I bought (and read!) as an undergraduate was Bauman's *Thinking Sociologically* (1990), a book which introduces the distinction between common-sense knowledge and '*thinking sociologically*'.

Key differences between 'thinking sociologically' and common-sense knowledge include:

- **Responsible Speech:** social research requires that the researcher puts aside their own personal prejudice and bias to ensure non-selective processes of data collection and analysis and that claims to knowledge are underpinned by a clear and non-exclusive presentation of undistorted evidence uncovered by the research;
- **Size of field:** social research goes beyond the concerns of the individual and researchers must "*make an effort to lift ourselves above the level of our daily concerns to broaden the horizon of experience*" (pp.13) in order to gain understanding of the interconnections between individual biography and wider social processes which inform that experience and might otherwise remain unexamined;
- **Making sense of human reality:** social research should seek to provide an explanation of the individual human condition through an analysis of the "*manifold webs of human interdependency*" (pp.14) in other words, explanations should be at the level of the social;
- **Defamiliarise the familiar:** "*familiarity is the staunchest enemy of inquisitiveness and criticism*" (pp.15) the researcher should challenge their own commonsense interpretations, question the seemingly obvious and familiar assumptions uncovered by the research – ask, "what is the purpose of 'X'? What function does 'X' serve? How do the peculiarities observed interconnect within the larger general scheme?" In short the researcher should attempt to see the everyday and ordinary through new eyes as though it was strange and extraordinary.

Drawing on these principles Bauman distinguishes secure and insecure means of knowing, urging truthfulness and openness that encourages challenges from others. But self challenging through reflexivity is also important.

#### 4.6.2. Reflexivity: knowing knowledge

Without some degree of reflexivity any research is blind and without purpose.  
(Flood 1999: 35, cited by Finlay 2002: 209)

Throughout the research process, the researcher engages in an ongoing and active discussion: *What to observe? How to observe? What to follow up? What to pursue? What seems most pertinent? What to include? What to exclude? What does X think? How to respond to Y? At what point have I done enough?* Inevitably, the process of producing knowledge relies on a system of discrimination. Harraway (1988) argued against the ‘view from nowhere’ in favour of the development of ‘situated knowledges’, writing:

It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see. (pp. 583)

The practice of writing imposes distance. Our thoughts are transposed into physical form, becoming permanently detached from the mind which created them, rendered anew in the paper we hold. It is through this process that our thoughts and ideas are externally constituted, apart from our own selves. Our own personal selves are rendered invisible, our audible voice redundant. Through the medium in which I now write, I am TimeNewRoman size 12 font. Both the physical and mental me have become permanently divorced from the transfer of knowledge onto paper (or, in this techno-age, the cybernetics of the cyberspace). It is perhaps a powerful reminder that the qualification of Ph.D. requires a *vica voce*: an oral examination in which the candidate is required to account (with the living *voice*) for the knowledge they have produced. As a student I must maintain responsibility for the knowledge I have produced and yet ‘the view from nowhere’ has become the established convention.

The need for reflexivity extends beyond the provision of mere biography:

...[reflexivity is] the need continually to turn the instruments of social science back upon the sociologist in an effort to better control the distortions

introduced in the construction of the object by three factors. The first and most obvious is the personal identity of the researcher: her gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, education, etc. Her location in the intellectual field, as distinct from social space at large, is the second: it calls for critical dissection of the concepts, methods, and problematics she inherits as well as for vigilance towards the censorship exercised by disciplinary and institutional attachments. (Wacquant 1998: 225)

There is a need to make an ‘object of the object’ – or in the words of Bourdieu (1993) to carry out a ‘sociology of sociology’. Interpreted by Jenkins (2002:61):

Only, if you like, by subjecting the practice of the researcher to the same critical and sceptical eye as the practice of the researched is it possible to aspire to conduct properly objective and ‘scientific’ research. Only by doing this is it possible to hope to understand social reality properly.

In consideration of Bourdieu’s practice of reflexivity, Jenkins (2002:47) outlines the idea of ‘double-distancing’:

the first step back is from the situation in question – this is one of the usual senses in which was talk about ‘objectivity’ – while the second step back is from the act of observation itself.

I feel a somewhat ambivalent response to Jenkin’s notion of ‘double distancing’. First, I am unconvinced by the merits of such an approach – *might feminists argue that such an approach would be to disembowel the already disembodied?* Second, I am unsure how to set about the task as a practical accomplishment. In response to Bourdieu’s ‘*objectification of objectification*’ I fear the need of a philosophical exposition quite outside the scope of the current work. The notion of a ‘*sociology of a sociology*’ is an idea with which I feel more comfortable and in certain respects I see resonances with Bauman’s precept to ‘*think sociological*’. However, a limitation of the position outlined by Bauman is that at no point does he remind us of the need to make explicit the role of the researcher as an instrument of the research (Rallis & Rossman 2012). Hence, I find it difficult to comprehend how the social researcher can maintain a

commitment to ‘responsible speech’ without having to first ‘pledge’ to the surety and soundness of the knowledge produced.

Controversially, Lynch (2000) argues against “*reflexivity as an academic virtue and source of privileged knowledge*”. Within the frame of the current discussion, reflexivity is being claimed (by me, the author) as a ‘methodological virtue’ and as providing “*superior insight, perspicacity and awareness*” of the knowledge produced. The benefit is twofold: first, reflexivity requires additional effort of rigour and vigilance by the researcher to uphold and ensure the findings of the research. Second, the process of reflexivity provides the receiver (reader) with access to the inner thoughts and processes of the research as has informed the presentation of research findings. The convention has tended towards a partial presentation of knowledge as a finished article – the extraneous parts of that knowledge suspended, missing or not reported – in the interests of overly clean final narrative (Blackman 2007).

Through a discussion of the practical requirements of the thesis, I became aware of the problem: *how to demonstrate to the examiners the validity of my own internal understandings of the phenomena observed at EDC as represented by the presentation of findings in the thesis*. Later, I began to think more generally about the problem of validity and the active demonstration of the internal understandings applied to the object of study as represented by the final presentation research findings. I was reflecting: flexing back. I understand this now as *being reflexive*.

#### 4.6.3. What about the theory?

GT is concerned with:

Theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process. In this method data collection, analysis and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:12)

However, as Bryman (2001: 5) explains, there is the generally unacknowledged problem of: what is ‘*theory*’?

Characterising the nature of the link between theory and research is by no means a straightforward matter. There are several issues at stake here, but two stand out in particular. First there is the question of what form of theory one is talking about. Secondly, there is the matter of whether data are collected to test or build theories.

He acknowledges:

... 'theory' is frequently used in a manner that means little more than the background literature in an area of social enquiry. (2001: 6)

There is little argument that GT encourages the researcher to adopt a different approach in their consideration of the literature, than is encouraged by more conventional styles of research practice. However, the principle of *tabula rasa* and the inductive approach of GT do not mean we should enter the research setting 'empty headed' (Dey 1999). Consideration of the literature remains an important component in the development of GT. *Certainly, selection of a GT informed methodology does not provide an excuse to ignore the literature/theories.* Glaser and Strauss (1967: 32) distinguish between 'substantive theory' and 'grounded theory', observing a direct and necessary link between the two:

Substantive theory is a strategic link in the formulation and generation of grounded theory. We believe that although formal theory can be generated direct from the data, it is more desirable, and usually necessary, to start the formal theory from a substantive one. The latter not only provides a stimulus to a 'good idea' but it also gives an initial direction in developing relevant categories and properties and in choosing possible modes of integration. Indeed it is difficult to find a grounded theory that was not in some way stimulated by substantive theory.

Suddaby (2006: 635) advises:

A final solution is not to try and overextend the objective of GT research. That is, researchers may shoot for the 'elaboration of existing theory' rather than an untethered 'new' theory.



The process of ‘theoretical sampling’ indicates that the established literature be actively sought and integrated into the process of ongoing data collection and analysis in such a way as the ‘substantive literature’ becomes woven into the account produced by the researcher, described as Glaser & Strauss (1967:47) thus:

[theoretical sampling] is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is *controlled* by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal.

During the process of this research, I have adopted this approach. Consideration of the literature has been woven into the presentation of main research findings as part of the case-study of BV practice at EDC. This is consistent with the later narrative analysis of the data, evolved in response to the limitation imposed by the more developed coding framework of GT as prescribed by Strauss & Corbin (1990). Ceglowski (1997) explores validity of the short-story form as a vehicle in the presentation of research findings, drawing on Richardson (1995), she refers to the text as ‘connective text’ outlining its purpose: “...to situate stories in the historical, social and cultural contexts” (pp.199). In this thesis I use social theory ‘connective text’, fusing together the historical, social and cultural; providing added depth to the ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973), of my own findings.

Earlier in the discussion I presented GT as a potentially risky strategy for the novice researcher. I outlined the potential benefits (certainly the emotional benefits) to be gained from the progressive ‘stair-case’ approach, whereby the postgraduate researcher builds incrementally towards final completion of the thesis through a clear ordering of ‘tasks’. Such a model would have encouraged a more discrete presentation of the components of the research. However, the problem is in separating description from explanation from analysis is that we lose something – the findings of the research become isolated and artificially suspended apart. Social research does not abide by a clear line of division between the empirical and theoretical: this is as Hammersley (1991, 1995) observes an unhelpful distinction, for the two are interrelated. The problem is that we have become rather rigid in our conceptions of what constitutes the

‘theoretical’. In this current ‘messy’ moment in the practice of social research (Denzin & Lincoln 2000) I propose that it is time to accept:

...there is no reason to privilege the production of theory... Research can have different types of product, and they are all of potentially equal value.

(Hammersley 1995: 63-64)

The subsequent chapters of the thesis put into practice the approach outlined here.

## Chapter Five

### Understanding Easington *the Place*

#### 5.1. Introduction: Overview of Easington the Place

The boundaries set for an authority define an area and give it an identity which can gain meaning over time. (Stewart 2000: 71)

During the research it became apparent that the wider district area defined the authority, it provided a source of identity in which individuals of the organisation came to invest great meaning. There was a palpable sense whereby the authority had oriented itself to the realities of the wider district area and the district area had come to define the task of the local authority, inculcating a sense of purpose and imbuing national policy frameworks (*such as BV*) with an additional layer of meaning. This chapter is an exploration of the connectedness of place in terms of the personal ties, shared perceptions, common heritage and future aspirations for transformation, as framing everyday practice within the authority – particularly as related to the interpretation of BV a theme developed in the next chapter (see Chapter Six: Understanding EDC the Organisation).

The chapter begins with a geographical description of the district; I then provide a portrait of the district before outlining the contemporary socio-economic context of the district which includes a study of the role of deprivation as shaped the commitment of those who worked in the authority. Moving on, in a considered treatment of the data generated I present a journey into space which enables an appreciation of the sense of place as gained by the researcher. It is an impressionistic account but it makes known the specific context in which the practice of BV came to be framed and understood by the research. In the final part of the chapter I consider discuss particular aspects of place, in relation to the historical practice of social relations in County Durham and in direct reference to Beynon & Austrin (1994) I contemplate the unique character of place. Moving on, I explore the potential of history as habitus – of heritage as informing dispositions of those within space. Finally, returning to the present, I engage in a discussion of the ambitious regeneration projects pursued by the authority the

potential implications of transforming place inferring from this an appetite for a particular type of change within the authority.

## 5.2. Situating Easington the Place:

The district, an artificial administrative division, was created in 1974 following the Local Government Act 1972. On April 1<sup>st</sup> 2009 the district ceased to be, following local government reorganisation and the amalgamation of all former district authorities into the single unitary authority of Durham County Council. Prior to this time, the district of Easington occupied an area of coastline in North East England, within County Durham. To the north, the district was bordered by Sunderland and Newcastle; to its south, there was Middlesbrough and Stockton – effectively, the district was sandwiched between the significant urban conurbations of the North-East. Lying westwards were its County Durham district neighbours, geographically at least it was as though Easington had turned its back on the county of which it was apart. Certainly economic hopes for the future were invested strategically within the A19 corridor of which it was a part. As the map below illustrates the A19 cut a swathe through the district, a road of regional and national import and at the time becoming established as a significant hub for the economic interests of the region.

Figure 5.1: Map of the Easington district



Taken from: [www.easington.gov.uk](http://www.easington.gov.uk)

### 5.3. Mining the Present:

Although there are clues to a more ancient past (particularly in Easington Village) it is the relatively recent past and the industrial legacy which has come to define the district. Mining activities were first commenced in the 1830s, and by 1900 there were a total of thirteen collieries in the district – three of which were in Seaham. EDC (2003) in its CPA Self Assessment stated:

Mining gave rise to a huge social infrastructure including housing, shopping, cultural and leisure activities. (pp.4)

As mining sites were discovered colliery villages sprang up enabling a pool of workers to move in and service the needs of the industry. However, the notion of a “*huge infrastructure*” perhaps overstates and over-contemporises the reality of a turn-of-a-century colliery village. Colliery villages were hastily erected rows of small terraced housing provided for mineworkers and their families. So quickly were some streets built that there were simply numbered: First Street, Second Street, Third Street and so on. With reference to Horden, Hudson (1990) writes:

It is said in the early days of Horden, the contractor Henry Bell was completing a house a day, the *gallowas* – the pit ponies – dragging tubs of brick and sand through the mud, along the same rails that were used to transport the coals underground. For none of the streets were made up. The whole place was a building site, the doughty pit wives staggering to and from the standpipes with their buckets on uneven ground. (pg. 44)

He adds:

The first streets had no yards. The netty – the toilet that served six houses – and the communal tap stood apart on waste ground behind. There were no pubs or clubs, but every pay day, which was fortnightly, a cart would come around selling beer... the only school was in the church hall. (pg. 45)

In time the villages did become established. Schools were built, churches erected, shops and markets came about, pubs opened and various social clubs were formed. Arguably however, such features were less about creating infrastructure and were more about the gradual social evolution of place. It is unlikely that those participating in

club activities such as enjoying a drink following a shift down the mine, or joining the colliery brass band would have actively conceived of themselves as participating in ‘cultural’ or indeed ‘leisure’ activities.

Mining dominated and became *the* focus of East Durham. Firstly, mining provided a reason for being. Men, with their families, had travelled from as far afield as the valleys of Wales and the tin mines of Cornwall in the hope of securing their work (although most were drawn from within shorter distances). Added, mining left its indelible mark upon the landscape. From the blackened sands of the beaches to the towering engine houses and colliery wheels which punctured the skyline. Easington district was an area which lived, breathed and worked coal. Still today, etched on the living memory of those born and raised within the district is the industrial heritage of coal:

There was a lot of collieries around Easington district, what is now classed as [the] Easington district area. All these little places and Wheatley Hill and Haswell, all had their little pits. Seaham had three, Murton had one. All gone. There is only one pit left now in the North East... (‘Bob’ Interview)

The influence of coal mining today is less immediately obvious. The ‘Turning the Tide’ project has yielded impressive results, the sands are no longer black they are golden and the pit-heaps of old have been variously reclaimed and developed. Instead, the legacy of the mining past is in the perceived heritage of those who live locally.

... we are very much from a mining background and we’re very proud of that. (‘Gail’ Interview)

Heritage is that which we believe ourselves to have gained as a result of the past. It endows and it bestows, grants a gift/privilege perceived as precious by the receiver. Expressed by Gail (above) is the belief of mining having instilled an unidentified source of strength in the character and identity of local people. It is a past of which she is proud; it is a past which continues to have resonances in the here and now.

### 5.3.1. Out with the Old, in with the New?

In 1948 the new town of Peterlee was founded, named after Peter Lee a leader of local miners and a Methodist preacher who became the Chairman of England's first all-Labour council, in Durham in 1919. Unique amongst the new towns which came into being following the Second World War, Peterlee was actually *requested* by residents through their political representatives. The original vision for the town had been fantastically ambitious, being constructed for a target population of 60,000. More than sixty years on it has yet to realise that ambition, EDC sources confirming a population of just 21,000. The purpose of Peterlee was to:

...facilitate and represent a new economic and social order for the North East region and particularly for the historic deep mining districts of east Durham.

The new town was designed to stand for everything that was modern it was seen, at least by its creators, as a place that looked forever forward.

(<http://www.peterlee-project.com/go/New+town>)

By the time of the Second World War already there was a decline in the relative economic prosperity of coal, hence the need for a “*new economic and social order*” in the North East. This resulted in the construction of North-East, South-West and North-West industrial estates in order to attract new forms of trade and commerce to the area. At the time of the research, the development of Peterlee was ongoing – a Master plan had been produced to secure:

...an attractive, accessible and safe environment for business, shoppers and residents and a town centre with a sense of place and focus for the community and for civic activity. (Peterlee Town Centre Masterplan 2006: 1)

Peterlee represented a source of ambivalence within the district towards its industrial heritage. A place which proudly bore the name of a famous forefather, a man steeped in the local mining and political tradition, yet in terms of its architecture and physical construction Peterlee was a place which aimed to sever former ties to the past and look only to the future. In the now, the insatiable appetite for the conspicuously new and modern continued apace.



Figure 5.2: Newly constructed industrial units (advertised for let) at Peterlee



Source: <http://www.edbs.co.uk/commericalprop1.jpg>

An anonymous construction, in its bold monochrome style the recently constructed industrial unit is audaciously futuristic and offers few clues as to its intended purpose or location.

The local decline of mining continued throughout the 1970s, further accelerated by the politically charged events of the 1980s:

Margaret Thatcher, she closed the pits. Not Arthur Scargill. She closed them.

It's surprising how much coal is still down there waiting to be dug out but they find it cheaper to bring it in from abroad. How that works, don't ask me because I couldn't tell you. ('Bob' Interview)

It was surprising for an area which continued to define itself in terms of its industrial heritage that the mine closures of the 1980s and 1990s did not elicit more comment in interviews. The closures were a prevailing tale of the authority, local deprivation being directly attributed to the collapse of the industry. Very few mentioned the 1984 Miners' Strike, despite reported active local participation in events. I found this a curious silence. Those most likely to mention strikes and pit closures were councillors, many of whom were of retirement age and had come from a mining background – women too. For councillors participation in the strikes and trades union movements was a source of pride providing proof of a lifelong commitment to the community, their sense of comradeship underlined *their* credentials as councillors.

The younger generation was less in touch with the legacy of coal; perhaps impatient for change or resenting the weight of history, mining was seen as the folklore of another generation: an irrelevance and hindrance.

*Interviewer:* It must be difficult for Easington what with the history of social deprivation, the mining having gone and all of that. What do you think?

*Interviewee:* Well I don't really think a lot of it. It is quite annoying considering I have worked all of my life and you've got everybody, lots of other people who have never worked a day in their life. You get that a lot around here. But I don't really think a lot of it really.

*Interviewer:* What about the mining heritage does that ever come into your thoughts? Certainly other people I have spoken to have been very conscious of it. Is that relevant to you as a young person?

*Interviewee:* Not really no. I mean it's not there anymore is it, so what am I meant to think about it? It's not there. ('Lucy' Interview)

Much as the underlying philosophy which founded Peterlee, Lucy was looking forward and had refused to join in the reminiscence of others. I remember the above as an uncomfortable exchange.

#### 5.4. Easington Now: 2007

*Easington one of the worst places to live...* (Hartlepool Mail headline 19.08.2005)

A television programme screened by Channel 4 on 09.08.2005 (*Location, Location, Location: 10 Worst Places to Live*) claimed Easington District as one of the five least desirable places to live in England and Wales. Assessment was based on a statistical analysis of crime, education, employment and lifestyle figures for all 434 local authorities in England and Wales. In particular, programme-makers cited low levels of academic attainment and employment as evidence of factors influencing selection. Similarly undesirable areas included: Methyr Tydfil in Wales, Salford in Greater Manchester, Hackney in London and Nottingham (Source: Hartlepool Mail 09.08.2005). Negative perception of the area was not confined to programme-makers at Channel 4. Sarfraz Manzoor, writing in *The Guardian* newspaper proclaimed:

Once it was the coal mines that made Easington famous, these days it is the pits. (06.12.2006)

The Index of Deprivation 2004 identified Easington District as the seventh most deprived local authority area in the country.

##### 5.4.1. Social and economic context:

If mining provided the theme of the past, deprivation was the story of the present. The authority estimated that since the mid-1990s 75,000 jobs had been lost in the district (CPA Self Assessment 2003):

[The closure of the mines] had a major impact on the social, economical and environmental wellbeing of the District, exacerbated by significant competition for inward investment from Sunderland to the North and Teesside to the South. Population was declining at a significant rate as residents began to move away to secure new employment opportunities. Decline left us with huge problems not only in terms of jobs but environmental decay and despoliation. (EDC 2003: 4)

**5.4.1a. Population and Demographics:**

At the time of the research the district had a total population of 94,000. An increasingly ageing population, in 2005 the Office for National Statistics predicted a future trend of local population decline forecasting the 2016 population at 89,500.

Age Breakdown (rounded):

The figures show a significant gender imbalance in the local population, which peaks in the 25-44yrs bracket (1100 more females) and the 65yrs and over bracket (2200 more females). In total, figures show 2800 more females living in the district than men.

| Age Group   | Males  | Female | Persons |
|-------------|--------|--------|---------|
| Under 5     | 2600   | 2500   | 5200    |
| 5 to 14     | 5900   | 5700   | 11,700  |
| 15 to 19    | 3300   | 3100   | 6300    |
| 20 to 24    | 3000   | 2900   | 6400    |
| 25 to 44    | 11,700 | 12,800 | 24,400  |
| 45 to 64    | 11,800 | 12,100 | 24,200  |
| 65 and over | 7,100  | 9,300  | 16,400  |
| Total       | 45,600 | 48,400 | 94,00   |

Source: Government Office for the North East Local Authority Area Profile of Easington (2007) citing Registrar General's Population Estimate for Mid 2006 Office for National Statistics updated Aug 2007

Working Age Population:

The working age population was 2% smaller than elsewhere in the North East and Great Britain.

|                          | Easington (numbers) | Easington (%) | North East | Great Britain |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------|---------------|
| All people – working age | 56,600              | 60.2          | 62.0       | 62.2          |
| Males – working age      | 29,200              | 64.0          | 65.9       | 66.1          |
| Females – working age    | 27,400              | 56.6          | 58.4       | 58.6          |

Source: *Ibid* – Census 2001 Office for National Statistics

Ethnicity and Religion:

At the time of the research the district was revealed as the '*whitest place in Britain*' (The Guardian 06.12.2006; BBC News 06.03.2008). Statistical data confirm low levels of ethnic diversity.

| Ethnic Group (all people)       | Easington (%) | North East (%)  |
|---------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| - White                         | 99.2          | 97.6            |
| - Largest Ethnic Minority Group | Indian (0.2)  | Pakistani (0.6) |

|                                    |                            |              |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Place of birth (all people)</i> |                            |              |
| - Born in UK                       | 98.8                       | 97.1         |
| - Born elsewhere in EU             | 0.5                        | 0.9          |
| - Born outside in EU               | 0.7                        | 2.0          |
| <i>Religion (all people)</i>       |                            |              |
| - Christian                        | 85.2                       | 80.1         |
| - Largest other religious group    | Muslim (0.2)<br>Sikh (0.2) | Muslim (1.1) |
| - No religion                      | 7.1                        | 11.0         |
| - Religion not stated              | 7.0                        | 7.1          |

Source: *Ibid* – Census 2001 Office for National Statistics

#### **5.4.1b. Economy and Employment:**

At the time of the research the district had the inglorious reputation as “*Britain’s incapacity benefit capital*” (Shiv Malik New Statesman 10.01.2005).

#### Work Status:

Although the statistics reveal slightly more favourable rates of economic activity than elsewhere in the North East, the figures compare unfavourably nationally. However, both regionally and nationally the proportion of those in paid employment was lower and the percentage of those unemployed was higher in Easington.

| Annual Population Survey<br>Jan 2006 – Dec 2006 | Easington (%) | North East (%) | Great Britain (%) |
|---|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Economic Activity Rate                          | 77.0          | 76.0           | 78.6              |
| Economic Inactivity Rate                        | 23.0          | 24.0           | 21.4              |
| Employment Rate                                 | 69.5          | 70.7           | 74.3              |
| Unemployment Rate                               | 9.8           | 7.0            | 5.5               |

Source: *Ibid* – NOMIS (Annual Population Survey) update Nov 2007

#### Total Job Seekers Allowance claimants:

Job Seekers Allowance was a benefit entitlement available to people over 18 years and under pensionable age, available for and actively seeking work of at least 40 hours a week. At the time of the research, the North East had a higher proportion of JSA claimants than the national average.

| October 2007 Claimant Count | Easington (numbers) | Easington (%) | North East | GB  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------|-----|
| All people                  | 1304                | 2.3           | 2.9        | 2.1 |
| Males                       | 956                 | 3.3           | 4.2        | 2.9 |
| Females                     | 348                 | 1.3           | 1.5        | 1.2 |

Source: *Ibid* – NOMIS Updated Nov 2007

JSA claimants by age and duration:

Easington had a particularly high percentage of 18-24 year olds claiming JSA, although there were smaller proportions in the age groups 25-49 and over 50 than the North East and Great Britain. Those claiming JSA in Easington tended to claim for a shorter period of time than those claiming the benefit elsewhere.

| October 2007 Claimant Count | Easington (numbers) | Easington (%) | North East | GB   |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------|------|
| <i>By age</i>               |                     |               |            |      |
| 18 – 24 yrs                 | 590                 | 45.2          | 34.4       | 30.3 |
| 25 – 49 yrs                 | 545                 | 41.8          | 49.4       | 52.6 |
| 50 years +                  | 140                 | 10.7          | 15.4       | 15.9 |
| <i>By duration of claim</i> |                     |               |            |      |
| Up to 6 months              | 975                 | 74.8          | 68.7       | 67.8 |
| 6 – 12 months               | 200                 | 15.3          | 15.6       | 16.0 |
| 12 months +                 | 125                 | 9.6           | 15.5       | 15.9 |

Source: *Ibid* – NOMIS Updated Nov 2007

Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disability Allowance:

Whilst the trends show a decreasing percentage of sickness benefit claimants in Easington, at the time of the research there were more sickness benefit claimants in Easington than elsewhere in the North East and Great Britain.

|                                       | Easington (%) | North East (%) | Great Britain (%) |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------------|
| All IB and SDA Claim Rates (Feb 2004) | 21.2          | 11.3           | 7.5               |
| All IB and SDA Claim Rates (Feb 2005) | 20.1          | 10.9           | 7.4               |
| All IB and SDA Claim Rates (Feb 2006) | 19.5          | 10.7           | 7.4               |
| All IB and SDA Claim Rates (May 2006) | 19.1          | 10.6           | 7.4               |
| All IB and SDA Claim Rates (Feb 2007) | 18.3          | 10.5           | 7.4               |

Source: *Ibid* – DWP website Aug 2007

Employment by Sector and Occupation:

Over a quarter of the district's working population was employed in manufacturing, a significantly higher proportion than elsewhere. Over a fifth was employed in public administration, roughly another fifth in distribution, hotels and manufacturing and banking finance and insurance. Interestingly, one third of the North East working population was employed in the public sector.

|   | Easington (%) | North East (%) | England (%) |
|---|---------------|----------------|-------------|
| Agriculture & fishing                       | 0.5           | 0.4            | 0.8         |
| Energy & water                              | n/a           | 0.8            | 0.5         |
| Manufacturing                               | 22.0          | 12.3           | 11.1        |
| Distribution, hotels and restaurants        | 19.2          | 22.3           | 24.3        |
| Banking, finance and insurance              | 18.3          | 15.6           | 21.4        |
| Transport & communications                  | 7.7           | 5.1            | 6.1         |
| Public Administration, education and health | 26.0          | 32.5           | 26.2        |
| Other Services                              | 3.2           | 5.1            | 5.1         |

*Source: Ibid – NOMIS ABI 2005 updated Nov 2007*

Employment by occupation:

Employees in Easington tended to occupy lower occupational groupings compared to employees elsewhere. Although a generalisation those in occupation groups 1 to 3 tend to earn more and enjoy a better standard of living than those employed in occupational groups 8 to 9.

|   | Easington Numbers | Easington % | North East % | GB %        |
|---|-------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| <b>Soc 2000 major group 1 – 3</b>         | <b>9900</b>       | <b>25.5</b> | <b>36.7</b>  | <b>42.3</b> |
| 1. Managers and senior officials          | 4400              | 11.4        | 12.3         | 15.0        |
| 2. Professional occupations               | #                 | #           | 11.0         | 13.0        |
| 3. Associate professionals and technical  | 3300              | 8.6         | 13.4         | 14.3        |
| <b>Soc 2000 major group 4 – 5</b>         | <b>9300</b>       | <b>24.0</b> | <b>23.7</b>  | <b>23.0</b> |
| 4. Administrative and secretarial         | 4100              | 10.7        | 12.3         | 12.1        |
| 5. Skilled trades occupations             | 5100              | 13.3        | 11.4         | 10.9        |
| <b>Soc 2000 major group 6 – 7</b>         | <b>7300</b>       | <b>18.9</b> | <b>18.0</b>  | <b>15.7</b> |
| 6. Personal service occupations           | 3500              | 9.0         | 8.4          | 8.0         |
| 7. Sales and customer service occupations | 3800              | 9.9         | 9.7          | 7.7         |

|   |               |             |             |             |
|---|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Soc 2000 major group 8 – 9</b>       | <b>12,200</b> | <b>31.6</b> | <b>21.2</b> | <b>18.7</b> |
| 8. Process plant and machine operatives | 5700          | 14.7        | 8.8         | 7.3         |
| 9. Elementary occupations               | 6500          | 16.9        | 12.4        | 11.4        |

*Source: Ibid – Annual Population Survey June 2006 – Dec 2008 updated Aug 2007*

#### Earnings:

Workers in Easington tended to be paid significantly less than those working elsewhere, with a pronounced high level of inequality experienced by fulltime working men.

#### *Gross weekly pay (pounds)*

|                          | Easington | North East | Great Britain |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|---------------|
| Full time workers        | 338.0     | 399.0      | 448.6         |
| Male full time workers   | 359.3     | 444.2      | 489.4         |
| Female full time workers | 304.7     | 341.0      | 387.1         |

#### *Hourly Pay (pounds)*

|                          | Easington | North East | Great Britain |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|---------------|
| Full time workers        | 8.34      | 10.05      | 11.24         |
| Male full time workers   | 8.88      | 10.85      | 11.88         |
| Female full time workers | 7.82      | 8.92       | 10.26         |

*Source: Ibid – NOMIS (Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2006) Updated Dec 2006*

#### **5.4.1c. Education and Qualifications:**

##### Education:

Levels of educational attainment in Easington were lower than those achieved elsewhere. Although in the three years between 2003 and 2006 the district did make a 10% improvement in the number of those gaining 5 GCSEs grades A\* to C, for Durham that figure improved by 12% and regionally by 11% . In 2006 12% fewer pupils achieved 5 GCSE grades A\* to C in the district than was achieved nationally, although between 2003 and 2006 the gap had been narrowed by 4%.

| Results                | Easington DC (%) | Durham LEA (%) | North East (%) | England (%) |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|
| 5 GCSEs A* to C (2003) | 36.9             | 44.6           | 46.8           | 52.9        |
| 5 GCSEs A* to C (2004) | 36.3             | 46.7           | 48.7           | 53.7        |
| 5 GCSEs A* to C (2005) | 43.3             | 51.3           | 53.5           | 56.3        |
| 5 GCSEs A* to C        | 46.3             | 56.6           | 57.3           | 58.5        |



|  |     |      |      |      |
|--|-----|------|------|------|
| (2006)                                       |     |      |      |      |
| 5 GCSEs A* to C<br>(2007) <i>provisional</i> | N/A | 59.0 | 59.6 | 60.3 |

Source: *Ibid* – DfES and Floor Targets Interactive websites, updated October 2007, district data not yet available

#### All Qualifications of those of working age:

A larger percentage of Easington’s population had no qualifications than the population regionally or nationally. In all other categories the district lagged behind significantly the biggest rates of difference shown at NVQ 3 (2 A-levels/Advanced GNVQ) and NVQ level 4 (HND/Degree/Higher Degree).

|                         | Easington<br>(numbers) | Easington<br>(%) | North East<br>(%) | GB (%) |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------|
| NVQ 4 +                 | 8000                   | 14.7             | 22.7              | 27.4   |
| NVQ 3 +                 | 16,900                 | 31.1             | 42.7              | 45.3   |
| NVQ 2 +                 | 32,500                 | 60.1             | 64.1              | 63.8   |
| NVQ 1 +                 | 40,900                 | 75.5             | 79.2              | 77.7   |
| Other<br>qualifications | 3700                   | 6.9              | 6.5               | 8.5    |
| No qualifications       | 9600                   | 17.6             | 14.3              | 13.8   |

Source: *Ibid* – Annual Population Survey (Jan 2006 – Dec 2006)

#### **5.4.1d. Health & Mortality:**

##### Health:

Nearly a third of Easington’s population described itself as experiencing “*limiting long-term illness*” compared to just under one quarter of the North East population.

|   | Easington (%) | North East (%) |
|---|---------------|----------------|
| Limiting long-term illness                | 30.8          | 22.7           |
| General health ‘not good’                 | 17.3          | 12.0           |
| Providing unpaid care                     | 12.7          | 11.0           |
| Providing unpaid care 50+<br>hours a week | 3.9           | 2.7            |

Source: *Ibid* – Census 2001 Office for National Statistics

##### Life Expectancy:

The table shows females are more likely to outlive males. Most startling, it shows that those who live in Easington are likely to die sooner than those who live elsewhere with this difference becoming more pronounced over time.

| At Birth            | Easington<br>(years) | North East<br>(years) | England<br>(years) |
|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Males 2000 – 2002   | 74.0                 | 74.5                  | 76.0               |
| Males 2001 – 2003   | 73.8                 | 74.7                  | 76.2               |
| Males 2002 – 2004   | 73.7                 | 74.9                  | 76.6               |
| Males 2003 – 2005   | 74.2                 | 75.4                  | 76.9               |
| Females 2000 – 2002 | 78.8                 | 79.3                  | 80.7               |
| Females 2001 – 2003 | 78.3                 | 79.5                  | 80.7               |
| Females 2002 – 2004 | 78.3                 | 79.6                  | 80.9               |
| Females 2003 – 2005 | 78.4                 | 79.8                  | 81.1               |

*Source: Ibid – Floor Targets Interactive website update Jan 2007*

#### Mortality Rates:

Whilst the table shows a decreasing trend of death from circulatory disease and cancer in Easington, regionally and nationally, rates within Easington are higher than those regionally or nationally and are declining at a slower rate than regionally or nationally.

|  | Easington<br>(deaths) | North East<br>(deaths) | England<br>(deaths) |
|--|-----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Circulatory disease per<br>100,000 population <75<br>(2001 – 03) | 139.4                 | 123.3                  | 102.8               |
| Circulatory disease per<br>100,000 population <75<br>(2002 – 04) | 138.7                 | 116.9                  | 96.7                |
| Circulatory disease per<br>100,000 population <75<br>(2003 – 05) | 130.3                 | 108.5                  | 90.4                |
| Cancer disease per<br>100,000 population <75<br>(2001 – 03)      | 153.0                 | 144.6                  | 124.0               |
| Cancer disease per<br>100,000 population <75<br>(2002 – 04)      | 149.4                 | 140.0                  | 121.6               |
| Cancer disease per<br>100,000 population <75<br>(2003 – 05)      | 145.8                 | 136.2                  | 119.0               |

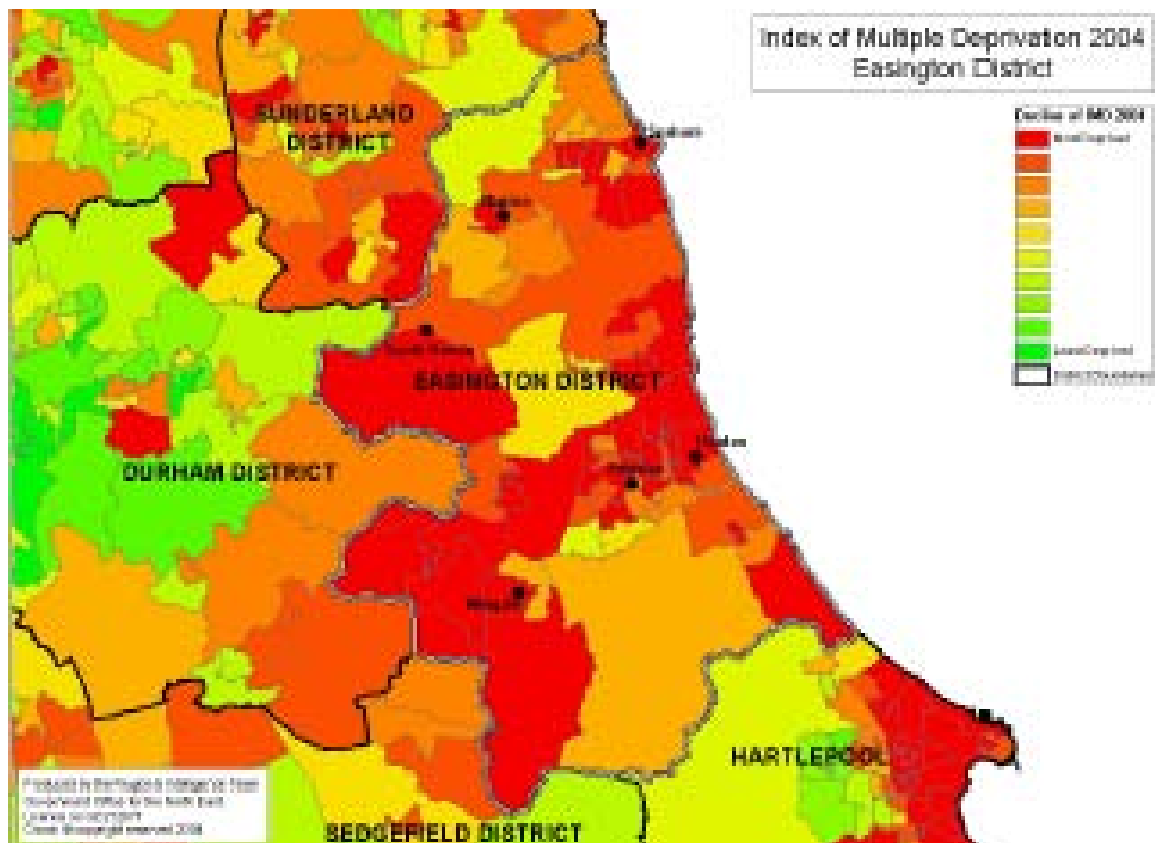
*Source: Ibid – Floor Targets Interactive website update Jan 2007*

### 5.4.1e. Deprivation & Poverty:

#### Deprivation:

The map below illustrates the extent of deprivation in parts of the North East by district. Green illustrates areas of least deprivation, whilst red shows areas of most deprivation. At a glance we can see that Easington district is mainly composed of red and orange areas.

**Figure 5.3: Deprivation Map**



*Source: Government Office for the North East Local Authority Area Profile of Easington (2007) citing Registrar General's Population Estimate for Mid 2006 Office for National Statistics updated Aug 2007*

According to the Index of Deprivation 2004 within the district:

- there were a total 63 Super Output Areas (SOAs)
- 71.4% (45) SOA were in the 20% most deprived (in England)
- 50.8% (32) were in the 10% most deprived
- There were no SOA within the 20% or 10% least deprived
- Easington was the most deprived district in the North East
- Nationally Easington ranked seventh in terms of extent of deprivation

*Source: Ibid*

#### 5.4.2. Deprivation: A Golden Goose?

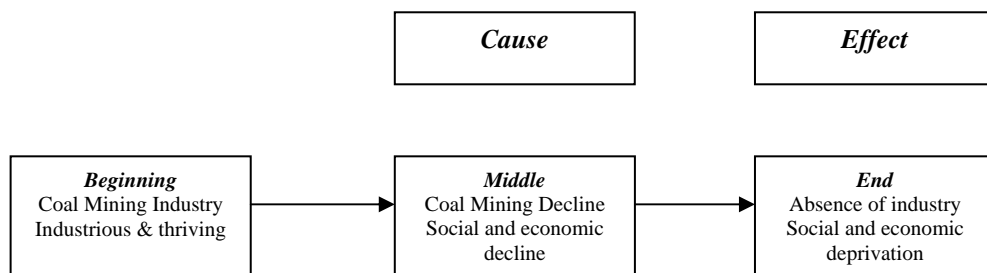
The parameters of the research did not permit a more thoroughgoing investigation of the nature of deprivation within Easington. Rather, our interest is in the implicit context of deprivation in understanding Easington the place. At EDC councillors and officers alike were often keen to outline the background of deprivation against which the authority was working. There was a sense in which the extent of deprivation in the district had afforded it special status, a status sometimes jealously guarded.

One Labour councillor was triumphant in retelling events which had taken place at a partnership meeting at County Hall. A group of councillors and officers had met to discuss the distribution of additional funds received by the county to alleviate the extent of fuel-poverty experienced locally. A number of suggestions had been put forward, when the meeting descended into acrimony as old rivalries between the districts surfaced. In particular, the Labour member from EDC had become embroiled in a bitter dispute with a Liberal elected member from the City of Durham District Council. The Liberal member, evidently still smarting over the recent bus-pass scheme agreed by the authorities (in 2005 the government devolved responsibility for the provision of free public transport to all those over 60yrs to local government; in Durham the scheme was administered at a county level, with all district authorities making an equal contribution to financing the scheme). The decision was controversial as it meant council tax payers from one area would in effect be subsidising transport provision for residents in another. Durham City had benefitted least by the scheme, whilst EDC had benefitted most. The Liberal member for Durham City believed council tax contributions raised in his area were unfairly subsidising the provision of free public transport in Easington. At the meeting, the Durham City representative favoured an even split of the monies between the partners (an equal seventh). In contrast the EDC member had argued for allocation of the monies based on need. The Durham City member argued that there was much hardship in his area, often overlooked as a result of the much commented upon deprivation in Easington. The EDC councillor recounted she had been robust in her dismissal of this claim and had landed a knock-out blow to the argument presented by the member for Durham City when she quoted official statistics to highlight the nature and extent of deprivation in

Easington: she had effectively trumped her rival whilst reinforcing her original argument that the monies be distributed on the basis of need.

This anecdote serves to illustrate the importance of local deprivation in terms of how EDC perceived its responsibility and presented itself to others: *for EDC deprivation was an overriding part of the story of Easington the place*. I considered why this might be so. First, there was an abundance of evidence which both identified and qualified the extent of deprivation within the district. Second, it was an easy story to grasp: *a once industrious/thriving district loses its industrial heritage and as a result suffers both economically and socially*. In many ways it is a simple story of cause and effect, with a convenient beginning, middle and end (Lawler 2002).

**Figure 5.4: Easington District – Outline of a narrative**



Additionally, it is a story without blame. The local population cast in the role of victim (of greater socio-economic forces). Within the authority the alleviation of poverty and disadvantage created purpose and galvanised the efforts of members and employees, whilst also underlining the achievement of EDC in gaining recognition from the Audit Commission as an ‘excellent’ local authority. Controversially, and highlighted to an extent by the example above, the deprivation factor provided EDC with an operational advantage – the authority was able to draw additional funds into the district by successfully ‘playing’ the deprivation card. EDC needed deprivation.

The 2006 merger of the Easington Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the five other PCTs brought the need to maintain the district’s distinction as a deprived area into sharp focus:

Alan Burnip [local councillor] says there have been concerns that Easington could now miss out, with some of the money going elsewhere. Ironically, he says, it is vital in financial terms that the bad news about health and deprivation in Easington remains obvious. He said: "It's important that the area is treated differently to other parts of the country."

Anna Lynch, the Director of Public Health covering Easington, says that Easington will continue to get the extra millions. But she warned that if, as has been suggested, councils are reshaped in future, that might change, as health statistics are looked at by local authority area. Easington's problems could be masked by the relative good health of its neighbours.

(BBC News: "*The unhealthiest town in England*" 31.12.2006 )

On April 1<sup>st</sup> 2009 all local authorities in County Durham were amalgamated into one unitary authority: Durham County Council. The effect of these changes has yet to fully emerge, undoubtedly though the interests of the local area are no longer communicated as directly as they once were.

### 5.5. A Sense of Place:

You know you see [it] on the television all the time – you know so many out of work in Easington district, it's got the worse sickness record, it's this, it's that. But it is still a nice place to live and there are some lovely places around about. You can't fall into the trap of thinking, "Oh, it's a right dump." Because it's anything but... There's some gorgeous places around about. There's Castle Eden Dene, there's the lovely coastal areas that have all been redone and Seaham – Seaham is lovely now with everything that has been done. Down the Colliery, there [are] some lovely places. Some beautiful housing, there is some very, very expensive housing in the district. You know there is some awful ones and that's sad but there is some really nice places. I mean everything, everywhere in the country that has got their bad bits haven't they?

('Elizabeth' interview)

Given the district's reputation of deprivation I had expected to see more in the way of the physical signs of deprivation. However, in recent years there has been a noticeable transformation in the district:

I was chatting to the inspector [and] she said, "Do you think things are happening in the district?"... I said that about five years before I came to the authority I was coming back from Teesside one night and I took the wrong turning... I came through Wingate and Station Town and I thought, "My God! What [is] this place?" (Laughs) It was like Dodge City and I said to her that was about five or six years before I came to the authority. Wingate and Station Town were the first in the Settlement Renewal Programme of the villages that we concentrated the cash. There was cash given out for shop fronts, there was new landscaping schemes and I said at the time, it hadn't long been done, you might not think it's a great place but if you turned the clock back five or ten years and saw it before we did the place it was absolutely abysmal.

('Dave' interview – employed at EDC since 1988)

Whilst at Easington I went on two organised tours of the district. On one tour I joined members and officers on a sustainability review of council funded community centres. The second was a guided tour of the district, an initiative had by the EDC Corporate

Development Unit (CDU) to better acquaint staff, key partners and inspectors with the local area.

#### 5.5.1. Into space:

The Community Centre tour included visits to Trimdon, Thornley, Peterlee and Seaton Community Centres. At the beginning of the trip it was explained:

EDC have an annual budget of £28,000 for Community Centres. Of that £24,000 is spent each year on Trimdon Community Centre. (Research Diary)

Trimdon Community Centre was the local authority's flagship facility. It had recently been refurbished and was apparently in great demand by those in the local community – it also fell within the parliamentary constituency of the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair. The centre was large and well equipped with meeting rooms, computer facilities, a small library, band practice room and a dance hall complete with stage. As a community resource the centre was certainly impressive. However, the immediate surrounding area can only be described as grim. The small two-up-two-down terraces which lined both sides of the street were in various states of disrepair, a number looked as though they had been abandoned. A member of the group commented on the disrepair of the Post Office; in the open green spaces surrounding the settlement there was evidence of fly-tipping.

Next we arrived at Thornley Community Centre which served the residents of both Thornley and Wingate – despite a longstanding rivalry between the two settlements. There were signs of widespread regeneration activity in both Thornley and Wingate. I was told that the plan was to make Thornley 'the best village in County Durham'. As we made our way towards the community centre I saw council houses boarded up ready for demolition. I was informed that the council was in 'partnership' with Persimmon Homes and that new houses would be built: *new Persimmon Homes*. I was told by a senior councillor that those who wanted could trade in their old house for demolition and receive a 25% discount on a new Persimmon house. I enquired after those who lived in council houses, or were opposed to the regeneration plans but a response was not forthcoming.



Thornley Community Centre was a large 1930's building with a flat roof. We were greeted by a man who opened up and then promptly left. We were guided around the centre by a quiet woman in her thirties, throughout the tour she remained quite reserved and provided a measured response to questions raised. The building was in a state of considerable disrepair. There was a faint smell of ammonia and damp, it was cold and there was evidence of water penetration. In contrast to the earlier mood of the group, individuals were surprised by the extent of disrepair and the review became a sombre task.

In the midst of the decay was the Miner's Museum<sup>\*</sup>. A local community project, the 'museum' was a large room with an assortment of mining paraphernalia arranged on tables: NCB Donkey Jackets, coal, mining lamps, shovels, helmets and a selection of key-rings available for purchase. In the centre of the room there was a living document which recorded the names of those in the Northeast who had lost their lives as a result of industrial accident/illness attributable to employment in the mining industry. At the bottom of the room was the Thornely miners' flag, proudly hung for all to see. The exhibition had been thoughtfully assembled and presented. Many in the group found the endeavor to document all casualties of mining in the Northeast moving. I was told volunteers aimed to have the museum open at least twice a week but that this was often difficult to achieve. The penury of the surroundings, the poorly supported efforts of the volunteers, suddenly made the rhetoric of EDC, regarding the import of the local industrial heritage as sealing the identity of place and imbuing a special strength of character, ring hollow.

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\* On-line webpage: <http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/t002.htm>

## 5.6. Easington in County Durham – the unique character of place:

Typically, deprivation is identified as an urban phenomenon. The Commission for Rural Communities (2008:3) states:

Our analysis of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) shows that, on average, rural areas suffer less deprivation than urban areas. (pg. 3)

I thought the deprivation of Easington complex. Although widely seen as a result of the decline of mining, this was undoubtedly an oversimplification.

### 5.6.1. Rural or urban?

Easington district was neither wholly rural, nor wholly urban. The two main urban areas Peterlee and Seaham both had populations in excess of 20,000 and provided a wide range of local services for business and residents. In contrast, Easington Village, founded in medieval times, looked the quintessential English village. The question remains: *was Easington rural or urban?* The answer, of course, is that district was a complex mix of the two. With direct reference to Murton, Beynon and Austrin (1994: 108), describe the ‘industrialised rural villages’ of County Durham:

J. M. Carmichael’s painting ‘Murton Colliery 1843’... places the colliery firmly in a rural setting. The pit is located within fields where cows and horses graze and where, in the foreground, groups of men and women stroll and carouse. The smoke from the colliery stack is counterbalanced by blue skies, trees and flowers. The pit, in the background of the canvas, is neutralised by rural life. Both seem at ease in each other’s company. While this painting can be criticised as idyllic, underplaying the harsher side of mining life, it demonstrates an important truth which has been handed down in popular memory. Coal mining, the central system of the capitalist expansion in Britain, took root in rural society and was held in tension within it. In Durham many of the mining villages were country villages. While they were organised in a new form around industry, and while they were covered in black coal dust they were nevertheless surrounded by fields and agriculture, and those fields played an important part in mining life.

*What does this matter?* Although there is much debate in the literature as to whether the positioning of social actors within a specifically rural or urban setting gives rise to a particular set of social outcomes, there is at least acceptance that locatedness within a distinctly rural/urban dimension contributes a range of lifestyle options. Pahl (1968) doubted the sociological significance of the categories 'rural' and 'urban'. Instead he argued:

Whether we call the process acting on local communities 'urbanisation', or 'differentiation', 'modernisation', 'mass society' or whatever, it is clear that it is not so much *communities* that are acted upon as groups and individuals at particular places in the social structure. (Pahl 1968 cited by Hillyard 2007: 21)

Whilst Pahl argued class (rather than the inherent features of a place) was the key factor in determining lifestyle options available to peoples, Cloke et al (1997:210) argue:

People in the countryside live their lives in different ways (pp. 210)

Cloke et al (1997: 227) do not deny the relevance of social class:

... many of the problems experienced in rural areas are fundamentally rooted in the nature of power relations in contemporary society. Here we include poverty, low pay, unemployment, underemployment, homelessness, lack of affordable housing, discrimination against certain groups (on grounds of gender, sexuality, race or other perceived 'non-conformity'), the loneliness of the elderly, the feeling of hopelessness experienced by many young people and so on. There does seem to be deep-seated structuring of society which accounts for the persistence of these issues wherever they are encountered.

The authors suggest an ontological dimension of countryside living, as distinct from living within the urban environment. However, rural living is characterised by difference rather than a uniformity of experience and is much more complicated than popularly imagined. Too often, particularly in terms of the popular perception, the rural realm is presented as non-problematic idyll – a refuge for the white middle-class from the pressures and strains of the city. Cresswell (2004:113) writes:

The countryside is portrayed as a problem-free realm of peace and tranquillity. This image of the rural, known as the ‘rural idyll’, has deep roots in British history with the romantic vision of ‘green and pleasant land’.

The example of Easington disrupts popular notions of the ‘countryside’. Although predominantly rural, the collective experience of the district was not that of white middle class privilege – officially the ‘whitest place in Britain’ Easington was also amongst one of the most deprived districts in England. For so long an important centre in the coalmining industry, Easington was never quite a ‘green and pleasant land’. In terms of understanding the specific character of Easington the place we have:

- industry contained within countryside
- a non-idyllic picture of countryside without the privilege of class
- the widespread experience of deprivation: itself a problematic and unstable concept

#### 5.6.2. A Paternalistic County Palatine:

County Durham is the only English county that is not a shire. Its Irish-like styling marks it off from the rest of England, and Durham retains, in name at least, its status of a County Palatine. (White 1976: introduction)

Until 1836 the county was ruled with special autonomy and authority by the powerful Prince Bishops. Perhaps due to its unique history, social relations within the county have evolved a unique character. Amidst the social upheaval caused elsewhere as a consequence of the industrial revolution, in *Masters and Servants* Beynon and Austrin (1994: 15) note of Durham:

...county society – with its institutions of country estate, Cathedral and Church lands remained intact as coal production increased.

During the research, I was struck by the paternalistic nature of social relations in EDC and in the response of the authority to problems as they emerged in the wider community. Paternalism seemed to be in the DNA of the organisational culture. I explore this character of the organisation in the next chapter. For now, I will trace this

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paternal trait through a discussion of the concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* and the work of Beynon and Austrin (1994).

Elsewhere in the country, industrialisation and the forces of capitalism brought about a great transformation in the organisation of society and the pattern of social relations. Widely seen in the context of the second half of the nineteenth century and generally referred to as the industrial revolution, this transformation is perhaps most famously conceptualised by Ferdinand Tönnies in the progression from *gemeinschaft* (community) to *gesellschaft* (society/association). *Gemeinschaft* is typified by pre-industrial, largely rural societies. In contrast, *gesellschaft* is typified by the development of industrial society and the rise of urbanism.

Hillyard (2007: 7-8) explains the concepts:

- *Gemeinschaft*: ...social relations were defined as intimate, enduring and based upon clear understanding of each other's individual position in society. That is a person's status was estimated according to whom that person was, rather than what that person had done. However, such relationships were relatively immobile, both geographically and socially (up and down the social scale). Therefore, in that respect, status was ascribed (that is, relatively fixed at birth) rather than achieved (based on merit or performance)...such societies were relatively homogenous, since well-recognised moral custodians, such as the church and the family, enforced their culture quite rigidly. Sentiments within this form of society placed a high premium on the sanctity of kinship and territory. At its core, *Gemeinschaft* was the sentimental attachment to the conventions and mores of a 'beloved place' enshrined in tradition which was handed down over the generations from family to family and therefore both more important and much stronger in the pre-industrial society. Derived from this form of social relations were enduring, close-knit relationships, which were in turn characterised by greater emotional cohesion, depth of sentiment and greater community – and hence were ultimately more meaningful.
  
- *Gesellschaft*: ...broadly everything that *Gemeinschaft* was not. The move towards industrialism and urbanism...associated with an increase in the scale,

and therefore the impersonality, of society. This impersonality enabled social interaction to become more easily regulated by contract (as opposed to obligation and expectation), so that relationships became more calculative and more specific. However, they were also more rational, in the sense that they were restricted to a definitive end and constructed with definite means of obtaining such ends. That is, social relations were laid bare under a contract system and the implicit web of obligations and ties of *Gemeinschaft* negated by the explicit brokering of work and roles. (pp. 7-8)

She adds:

Writ large, the replacement of *Gemeinschaft* by *Gesellschaft* relationships was ultimately a prerequisite of the rise of capitalism and hence of the rise of nineteenth-century industrial society (pp. 8).

In terms of the spatial character of the district, we have an image of pockets of modernity woven into the wider pastoral tapestry of place. Although problematic, on one hand the rustic character of Easington the place suggests a timelessness of pre-modernity which is further reinforced by the local sustained dominance of country estate, Cathedral and Church – redolent almost of feudal times. So what of the character of social relations within County Durham, specifically Easington district, of this time?

In their exploration of the peculiar nature of social relations in the Durham coalfields, Beynon & Austrin reveal a deeply paternalistic social order. Mostly, people employed in the mines hailed from North: Durham, Yorkshire and the Scottish borders. The 1851 census of Kibblesworth indicates that only 10% of ‘heads of households’ originated from towns, cities and villages outside the Northeast. Generally the migration was over short distances providing a northern exclusivity of sorts which tended to inculcate a specific cultural separateness amongst local people. Added the tendency of miners to marry amongst their own, a cultural and social homogeneity became cemented within the bonds of marriage. Perhaps most important was the strengthening of the old aristocratic order, flexible in its adaptation of the new opportunities provided by a system of capitalist production. The agricultural practice of tied cottages (already well

established in Northern regions) was quickly “*adapted and developed within the context of the colliery village*” (pp. 21). The authors write that almost 90% of miners in the North lived in company houses, provided as a part of their wage. In many cases the household depended upon the continued employment of the main wage-earner for its place of residence – added the practice of payment received in coal; labour provided a source of warmth and human comfort. In time the provision of accommodation and coal was extended by mine owners to include free medical attention, schooling and education, social and cultural pursuits. Mine managers lived close at hand and were employed to ‘keep miners in their place’ and both work and play, the eyes of managers trained not only on the workers but also on the wives and children of miners. Clearly the situation was paternalist:

A feature of a paternalist order is the belief that society ‘can be best managed and social evils best mitigated by men of authority, property, rank performing their respective duties towards those in their community who are bound to them by personal ties of dependency. To be a paternalist was to act towards dependants as a husband does to his wife, his children, and his servants.’ In this clear sense, the Durham coal owners were paternalists. They understood themselves, not simply as rational capitalists but as men occupying a position of honour and respect within a society. This society was organised around the *public* display of rights and obligations. (Beynon & Austrin 1994: 25, emphasis as original)

This description of colliery village life is typical *gemeinschaft*. The nature of social relations is intimate and enduring. There is a clear social hierarchy and relationships are fairly static with little opportunity for social mobility. Sons followed father into mining, daughters married miners and so a way of life was practised and reinforced by the next generation, and the one after that. The community remained stable and largely unchanged (regardless of individual preference) social relations became bound together in the notion of ‘community’:

Tonnies interpreted communities as ‘unorganised collectivism’, and this has influenced a great deal of writing about British mining – stressing the community forms of mining life and contrasting these with the more formalised and isolated patterns of urban living... While there is some truth in this, it is a

truth which should be approached with caution for it can mask many important aspects of mining life. (Beynon & Austrin 1994: 185)

Citing Calhoun (1980) Beynon and Austrin argue that :

...organisation is the crucial factor which may make a community... out of a mere aggregation of people. (p. 365)

And they identify the three realms of chapel, store and club as combining processes of '*organisation making community*'.

- *Chapel life*: central to development of mining culture in the north and of the emergence of *modern* forms of organisation in the isolated villages of County Durham. Primitive Methodism became synonymous with the rise of the trade union movement, many lay preachers such as Tony Hepburn combined preaching with union organising – Wesleyan Methodism was associated with ruling mine owners and managers.
- *Co-operative Store*: the movement built upon and transformed traditional patterns of colliery social life. Workers bonded together to purchase much needed goods and amenities, selling them to members and then sharing the profits through the dividend. Stores also made donations to relief funds, provided an important source of financial support at time of industrial dispute and contributed to the Miners Associations. Further, promoting a sense of civic pride, in the significance of economic and moral significance of co-operation.
- *Working Mens Clubs*: provided strong, cheap beer free from the influence of brewers and mine owners whilst also providing a forum for men to meet outside of work enabling rest and recreation. Sporting pursuits were organised, opportunities for education were sought. Men would also gather to discuss their wages and working condition down the pit, and hence the Clubs became a fertile ground for the union movement.

The impact of these developments upon the social structure of the villages and the sensibilities of their inhabitants was both far reaching and profound.

(Beynon & Austrin 1994:205)



Effectively, the *modern* institutions of chapel, store and club with their formal systems of organisation and association (in other words, *gesellschaft*) – provided a glue to the community which reinforced the development of community attachment and feeling – sentiments more typically associated with the state of *gemeinschaft*.

*So what of Easington now?* As a snapshot: the Primitive Methodist Church of Easington closed in 1964, and is now in private hands; the Wesleyan Chapel built in 1851 is still in use today. The Old Co-operative Building of Eden Street, Peterlee houses 'Maxifreeze', a discount frozen foods store. In June 2010 the closure of the Trimdon's Working Men's Club (the site Blair's election and resignation as Prime Minister) was announced. However, although gutted by fire in 1964 there is today an Easington Colliery Club and Institute with snooker, football and pool teams, and live entertainment on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

Of the process of organisation making community as outlined by Beynon and Austrin, the tapestry of old may be careworn by the upheaval of recent years, not least in the social and economic decline of the local area, but important threads remain.

**5.6.3. Images from around the District:**



**Easington Village**



*Photographs: taken by the author*



**Easington Colliery**



*Photographs: taken by the author*



## Easington Colliery:

Memories of an industry  
now gone...

Mining dedication garden and  
playground

Inscription reads:  
In memory of all those who  
worked and served at  
Easington from 1899-1993  
and whose souls have now  
departed



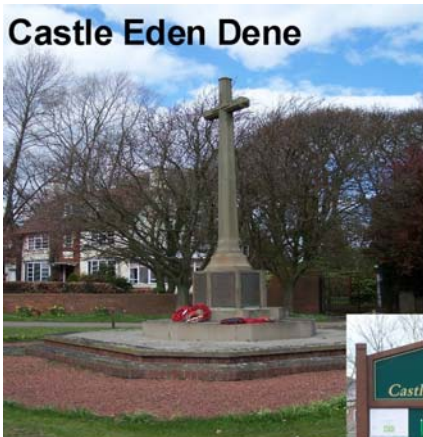
*Photographs: taken by the author*

**Blackhall Colliery:**



*Photographs: taken by the author*

**Castle Eden Dene**



*Photographs: taken by the author*

### 5.7. Realising Place:

The purpose of the chapter has been to convey a sense of Easington district, the place. An artificial distinction made for administrative purposes. Within the confines of EDC there was an underlying reality which generated a collective, inherently social, experience of place within space: Gieryn (2000: 473-474) writes:

If place matters for social life and historical change – how? Scattered literatures suggest that place: stabilizes and gives durability to social structural categories, differences and hierarchies; arranges patterns of face-to-face interaction that constitute network-formation and collective action; embodies and secures otherwise intangible cultural norms, identities and memories – and values like the American Dream (Whitaker 1996). These consequences result uniquely (but incompletely) from material forms assembled at a particular spot, in part via the meanings that people invest in place.

The findings of the research indicate the importance of place in reaching an understanding of the achievement of BV at EDC. Certainly the view expressed by Gieryn supports our current exploration of place. Thus far the discussion has been framed in an exploration of the past. We turn now to consider the nature of this influence on the district's present and imagined future.

Easington is a place where the past weighs heavy upon the present. The local area has a stubborn history which refuses to die:

... [You'll] never get rid of the roots that are here. ('Maureen' Interview)

There was an underlying belief that the struggles of previous generations had lent strength to current character of community. 'Stephen' a relatively new member of EDC, lived in Newcastle and commented upon Easington as:

[An] old mining community [with] quite a lot of social deprivation...quite a lot of regeneration to be done; but good community, a *good sense of community*. And a lot of old fashioned values in the communities and also in the council itself. ('Stephen' Interview)

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*What is going on here? In what ways do the past condition the present and future trajectory of place?* In this next part of the discussion, building on the concept of habitus as outlined by Bourdieu, I suggest history as a source of habitus providing a means to understand the temporal interplay in grounding the character of place.

#### 5.7.1. History as Habitus:

Bourdieu (1990) outlines *habitus* as:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions produce conditions of existence, produce systems of durable, transposable, dispositions, *structured structures* predisposed to function as *structuring structures*, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an expressed mastery of the *operations* necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organising action of a conductor. (pp.53)

The historical inheritance of habitus is outlined below:

The habitus as a shared body of dispositions, classificatory categories and generative schemes is, if it is nothing else, the outcome of collective history: ‘The *habitus*, a product of history produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history.’ (Jenkins 2002: 80)

Thus, in the formation of the habitus we have the collective coming together of individual strands of history which steer individual and collective social practice of the present. Seen in this light history provides the foundation of the habitus:

History culminates in an ongoing and seamless series of moments, and is continuously carried forward in a process of production and reproduction in the practices of everyday life. Here we have the process of production, a process of adjustment, and a dialectical relationship between collective history inscribed in objective conditions and the habitus inscribed in individuals.

History is experiences as the taken-for-granted, axiomatic necessity of objective reality. It is the foundation of the habitus. (Jenkins 2002: 80)

The underlying principle of Bourdieu's concept of habitus<sup>1</sup> is the idea of the preceding social order giving shape to and in turn shaping the current social order. Indeed, in many respects, the social world can be likened to an incomplete tapestry. There is no blank canvas and vital threads hang over from the pattern which has gone before; these threads are picked up and the already existing pattern may be replicated or a new pattern may emerge. Either way, it would be misguided of us to overlook those threads as it is the individual threads which provide continuity to the overall pattern – rather than mere repetition of that which already exists.

Jenkins explains history in the formation of the habitus as: “*an ongoing set of likely outcomes (probabilities)*”. The experience of history would seem to give rise to a likelihood, chance, or prospect of a constrained number of outcomes. For Bourdieu, this is a limitation implicitly known, understood and enacted in the unconscious action of individuals. Bourdieu writes:

If a very close correlation is regularly observed between the scientifically constructed objective probabilities ...and agent's subjective aspirations ...this is not because agents consciously adjust their aspirations to an exact evaluation of their chances of success... In reality, the dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions ...generate dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands. The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable.... As a consequence, history tends to repeat itself and the *status quo* is perpetuated (cited in Jenkins 2002: 80-81).

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly in the description of habitus provided here there are resonances with Giddens' theory of structuration outlined in the previous chapter.

The conditioning of history in the formation of the habitus is illustrated in the description of the nineteenth century Durham coalfields, provided by Beynon and Austrin (1994). Whereas elsewhere the changes of the industrial revolution prompted a transformation in the economic ordering of society and the emergence of a new capitalist class, in Durham social relations remained for the most part unchanged: the Church and Aristocracy continued an unbroken rule over county society and the agrarian principle of tied cottages was simply adapted and developed to fit within the context of a colliery village. Today, it is the present past of the local area as a heartland of the mining industry which *has shaped* and continues *to shape* current understandings of the specific character of place. This is a dynamic process which occurs within the ongoing socially perpetuated schema of history.

#### 5.7.2. Making the district 'great':

The stated aim of the authority, pursued with a missionary-like zeal, was to:

*'Make the District Great'* (BVPP)

At time of the research, energies were directed to:

...working together to turn the ambition into a reality. (BVPP 2003-04)

Reading the literature produced by the authority, it was unclear exactly *who* EDC was working with to achieve the ambition of 'greatness'. Potentially, the statement highlights a show of unity from *within*: the authority as united in pursuit of a collective aim. Equally the statement may indicate a willingness of a collaborative effort: EDC working with the community, key partners and other agencies.

Regeneration was the principal means by which EDC hoped to succeed in its aim. However, and importantly, it was the authority who defined the vision of greatness. Although there is a democratic process, ultimately local government has an unspoken authority to act and this holds a number of significant implications for the lived reality of (local) place(s). EDC was keen to highlight the context of deprivation against which it was working, adopted a forward looking/ future-centric approach. The future refers to a time yet to come, events have yet to be determined and therefore it is forever an uncertain realm. However although there are some who fear the uncertainty of the



future, it is also a time frame associated with optimistic possibility: we typically celebrate the arrival of a new year, in optimistic anticipation of improved fortunes in the coming year. Often the future is seen as an opportunity to escape the imperfect/undesirable circumstances of the present/past (the lived reality of life) and to start anew. Like newly fallen snow or a blank canvas the future awaits our impression. Yet, there is another aspect to the future – put simply *the future never comes*. The future evades our capture and remains forever unrealised. It is a state we permanently await, suspended in perpetuity and yet this source of unfulfilled desire manages to hold an attraction. Perhaps it is an attraction of neutral disappointment. As events have yet to transpire there is always a sense that an improvement can be wrought, encouraging a sense of hope and optimism to prevail: *ambition can become reality* because that reality is ahead in time, whilst ambition remains anchored to now.

Figure 5.5: Ambition into a reality



Source: EDC BVPP 2003-04

The image shows an artistic rendering of a fully realised Dalton Park merged with a photographic representation of the ‘real thing’. The Dalton Park project represents ambition (*making the district great*) as having been realised.

Historically and institutionally, moves to re-imagine the future of the district can be situated in the collapse of the local mining industry. Following years of decline, in 1991 the East Durham Task Force was established to co-ordinate regeneration activity within the district. It comprised an amalgamation of public, private and voluntary organisations focussed to attract new investment into the local area, in an attempt to

alleviate what were seen as the wide ranging economic, environmental and social problems of the time. Over time further initiatives became established, always the local authority played an active key role. The number of initiatives are too numerous and too many to dedicate individual attention, hence the discussion is confined to a general discussion of recent initiative in the Murton and Seaham areas.

### 5.7.3. Re-imagining Murton and Seaham:

Geographically, Murton and Seaham are in the north of the district. Although divided by the A19 there is a distance of just three miles between the major settlements and by car one can travel between the two points in under ten minutes. Whilst in more recent times Murton and Seaham share a common past in terms of coal, a longer view of history reveals deep differences between the two settlements. Seaham has a much more ancient past. Archaeological remains found north of the Anglo-Saxon church of St Mary the Virgin suggest the site may be older than Jarrow and Monk Wearmouth, possibly pre-Anglo Saxon. In the nineteenth century Seaham was a small farming community and the only major landmark was Seaham Hall, the home of a local landowner whose daughter Anne Isabella Millbanke later married the legendary romantic poet Lord Byron. Unimpressed by his surrounding Byron wrote:

Upon this dreary coast we have nothing but county meetings and shipwrecks;  
and I have this day dined upon fish, which probably dined upon the crews of  
several colliers lost in the late gales. But I saw the sea once more in all the  
glories of surf and foam. (From a letter written in 1815)

The marriage, short-lived, had a serious drain upon the Millbanke Estate and the family sold out to the Third Marquis of Londonderry. This would prove the turning point in the history of Seaham. In 1828 the Marquis built the first Seaham Harbour, to aid transportation of goods and encourage a growth in mining. The first harbour proved inadequate and was later rebuilt by the Sixth Marquis, employing engineers Patrick and Charles Meik. Production at the first town colliery, Seaham Colliery, commenced in 1846; the last town colliery, Vane Tempest, was opened in 1928. By 1992 all three of Seaham's town collieries were closed and regeneration of the area became the prime concern for both local people and EDC.

The history of Murton was tied much more closely to the local development of mining. As the table shows, following the discovery of coal the local population grew sharply:

**Table 5.6: Recorded Population of Murton (1831-51)**

| <i>Census Year</i> | <i>Recorded Population of Murton</i> |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1831               | 98                                   |
| 1841               | 521                                  |
| 1851               | 1387                                 |

Source: [www.durham-miner.org.uk](http://www.durham-miner.org.uk)

Within Murton there were clues of another, faraway land:

Murton... has a district known as Cornwall where streets now demolished bore names like Penzance and Truro, and where the school register contained plenty of Cornish Surnames. Some Durham miners insist they are the descendants of Cornish tine miners, blackleggers imported by Lord Londonderry to break a strike. Cornishmen proud of the fact that they were mining long before the Romans came, insist that someone had to teach the people of Durham how to mine, and that only Cornishmen were qualified to do so. (White 1969: 186)

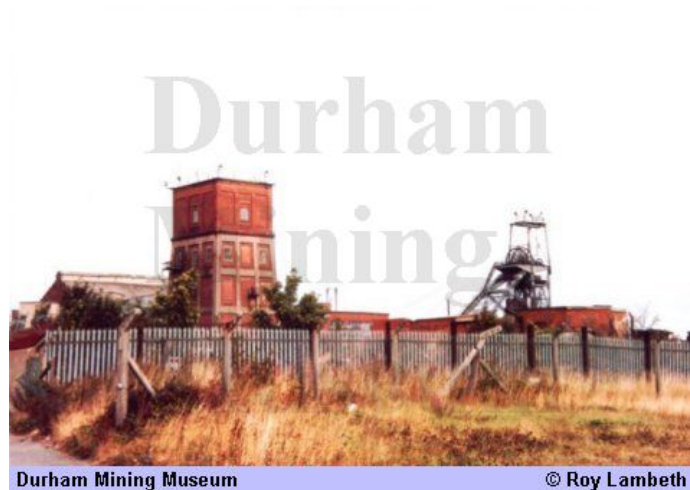
The sinking of Murton Colliery was begun in 1838. Owing to the great depth of magnesium limestone overlying the coal, made worse by shifting sands, it was five years before the South Hetton Coal Company was able to extract any coal from the site. Due to the expense of investment late shift working was introduced to the East Durham Coalfields for the first time, enabling around-the-clock working. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, coal had transformed the once sleepy back-water of Murton, as Jane Hatcher reports:

A directory of 1894 (17) gives considerable detail about the colliery. Of the three shafts, two were subdivided and used for drawing coals and men, and the third or West pit was used as an upcast shaft for ventilation, the arrangements for which were extensive with 460,000 cubic feet per minute circulating through the workings. Electricity and gas were used for lighting, and the daily output of coal was 3,000 tons, with nearly 2,000 men and boys being employed in the pits and the coke-works. The population had topped 5000 in

1851, the colliery village now consisted of over 1000 houses, and the colliery schools had an average attendance of 1,116 scholars. The Miner's Hall had been erected in 1875 and was a plain brick building with a lecture hall which could hold 700 people plus reading and committee rooms. The colliery supplied water for domestic purposes from its workings. (Jane Hatcher <http://www.durhamminer.org.uk/miner/projects.nsf/0/8b90282b011056b880256e860044389b?OpenDocument>)

Production at Murton remained until 1991 when following the 'Fall of King Coal' the colliery was closed and the local population was left without its traditional source of employment. In 1994 Murton's pit winding tower was demolished, despite Grade II listed building status having been granted.

**Figure 5.7: Murton Colliery (as was)**



The demolition of a major landmark is always significant, often symbolic. To remove the physical presence of a building from the landscape is to alter the lived experience and perception of place. Today the old spoil heaps are the site of the retail development Dalton Park. As one drives through the McDonald's 'drive thru restaurant', or shops the contemporary retail outlets, blanketed by a brilliant white tent-like canopy, it is hard to imagine the once heavy industrial landscape blackened by coal dust. The Teletubbie-esque landscape, (Phase Two of the development) serves as a nature reserve and outdoor recreational space, hiding the pit heap spoil beneath a covering of aesthetically pleasing modern landscape design – the future having eradicated the unsightliness of the past.

In terms of redevelopment and regeneration Murton and Seaham shared a common history of coal and inclusion in the Settlement Renewal Initiative (SRI), established in 1995 by the then Conservative government led by John Major. As part of the SRI EDC worked with Durham County Council, Seaham Town Council, English Partnerships, British Coal Property and Seaham Harbour Dock Company:

- i) To secure the physical regeneration and economic development of Seaham
  - ii) To provide an environment that is attractive to residents, in which business can flourish and that would serve to attract visitors and inward investment alike.
- (EDC: Investment in Seaham and Murton)

The work was ‘governed’ by the Seaham Regeneration Member Panel, including elected members drawn from the town, district and county councils. In addition an Officer Group was established to implement/facilitate projects and produce reports on the progress of initiatives to panel members. Arguably, the panel comprised of an exclusive group and offered little opportunity for a more fulsome public engagement – key decisions were made around the committee table. At the time of the research projects included

1. Relocation of the Seaham Harbour Dock Company to make way for a new retail development: the now completed Byron Place;
2. Proposed redevelopment of St Johns Square into a new ‘Integrated Service Centre’ described as a “*site which attracts vandalism, graffiti and anti-social behaviour*”;
3. Completion of the new a A19 link road providing Seaham with further links to the region and Dawdon and Foxcovert as ‘enterprise zones’;
4. Massive investment in the housing markets of Seaham and Murton: more than 1,500 new homes were built offering a range of accommodation types from starter homes to larger executive-style homes;
5. ‘Turning the Tide’ project was established to ‘clean-up’ the Durham Heritage Coast following years of industrialised use and providing a boost to local tourism;
6. Redevelopment of the North Docks at Seaham, plans included the construction of new berthing facilities, provision of workshops units for small business and a historical restoration of existing buildings;

7. Private sector redevelopment of Seaham Hall into a luxury hotel and spa facility by Tom Maxfield (former partner of Sage Software Company);
8. Private sector investment and development of Dalton Park as an out-of-town retail/leisure facility;
9. Redevelopment of the existing shopping parade in Murton, Woods Terrace.

Additionally, a number of ‘community’ initiatives were established with the purpose of creating a community resource to tackle social problems within Seaham and Murton.

10. Seaham Sure Start (national initiative)
11. Dalton Park Children’s Centre
12. Free the Way – voluntary based drug misuse rehabilitation centre
13. Aim High Learning Centre (national initiative)
14. Friends of North Dock Seaham
15. Redevelopment of Glebe Centre

➤ *Photographs (taken by the author) illustrating the regeneration/redevelopment of Murton and Seaham are shown over the next two pages*

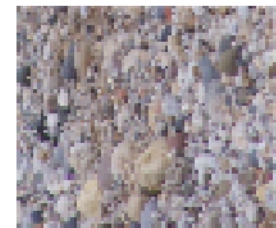
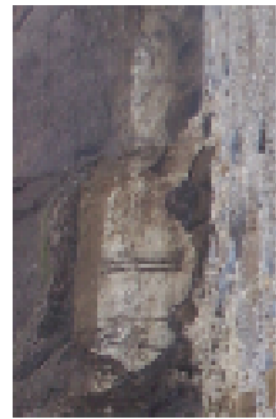
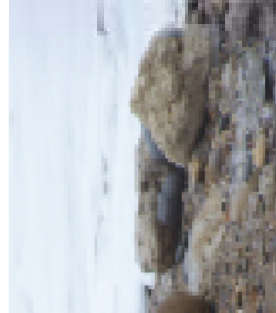


*Photographs: taken by the author*

**Seaham: Byron Place & the Eastshore Village**



*Photographs: taken by the author*



*Photographs: taken by the author*



Broadly, the proposals for the regeneration/redevelopment of Murton and Seaham (for the purposes of this research) can be categorised into two groups:

i. Economic: (list items 1 – 9)

Outward looking aiming to attract inward private investment into the district, securing the physical regeneration and economic development of the local area through exploitation of construction/retail/leisure industries.

ii. Social: (list items 10 – 15)

Inward looking aiming to manage problems related to economic and social deprivation of local area through a mix of local and national initiatives and a combination of public and voluntary sector working.

As indicated, the broadly economic proposals for the regeneration/redevelopment of Murton and Seaham depended upon the local authority being able to attract private investment into the district. Indeed, given the widespread experience of deprivation within the district, this would seem a sensible strategy to pursue. Yet this is not without its implications for the lived reality of place. External economic investment within the district would, without question, determine employment opportunities and shape of the local labour market. In addition, investment through construction and redevelopment would transform and reconstitute the physical appearance of the built environment. Moreover, external investment would come to determine the local provision of goods and services as well as opportunities for leisure and how residents would come to interact with the social space available to them.

## 5.8. Possible implications of the lived reality of social space:

### 5.8.1. The displacement of place:

The idea of a displacement of place rests upon the notion of the regeneration/redevelopment of the district as disrupting the distinctiveness of Easington the place; of the regeneration effort, as being an unequal and exclusive process which potentially marginalises practice and the existing social relations, prejudicing the desirability of the indigenous culture within place. A possible research area in its own right, the current scope of the work allows only for a truncated discussion. However, the discussion is necessary because it provides an indication of the shared attitudes of those who worked in EDC in relation to the wider district area – the very same creative agents responsible for the interpretation and implementation of BV. Many of these individuals felt a sense of *connection*, their own social reality and personal interest contained within the artificial boundary of the district; their work within the authority becoming blurred with their lives lived outside the authority. The argument is of space and place as a ‘canvas of interpretation’ against which the requirements of BV were interpreted and implemented and through this BV (a national framework, the creation of government) coming to gain local relevancy – *the argument is more substantially developed in the subsequent chapters of the thesis*. For now we confine ourselves to an understanding of the terms ‘social space’ and ‘place’.

### 5.8.2. Space: ‘social space’ and ‘place’

Put simply, space matters:

First, it matters obviously because such identities differ in different places.

That is fairly easy to grasp and perhaps agree with. But space matters also because specific arrangements that constitute a space are not arrangements in which social action takes place but they constrain, enable, influence, form, articulate, render, and condition such social action. (Isin 2006: 604)

Space is not merely a neutral vessel which contains social action: it is a mediating element, a potential constituent part of action, it is boundless and without determinable form. Such an understanding broadly corresponds to that outlined by Massey:

...space is open. In this interactional space there are always connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction (or not, for not all potential connections have to be established), relations which may or may not be accomplished. Here, then, space is indeed a product of relations (first proposition) and for that to be so there must be a multiplicity (second proposition). However, these are not the relations of a coherent, closed system within which, as they say, everything is (already) related to everything else. Space can never be that completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established, and in which everywhere is already linked with everywhere else. A space, then, is neither a container for always-already constituted identities nor a completed closure of holism. This is a space of loose ends and missing links. For the future to be open, space must be open too. (2005: 11-12)

For Massey, space is social. Her notion of space as a multiplicity refers to dynamism of space, “*simply the history, change, movement of things themselves*” (p.12) and above all it refers to the idea of an unfixed temporality of space. There is much to be commended in the description provided by Massey, particularly in the notion of an unfixed interactional dynamism – put simply, that spaces change. But where does this get us and how might ‘space’ differ from ‘place’? Surely, there are places within spaces and spaces have places?

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value ... The ideas ‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is a pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Tuan 1977: 6 cited in Cresswell 2004: 8)

Tuan, too, underlines the significance of interaction. However, unlike Massey who indicates an unfixed interactional dynamism as an innate characteristic of ‘space’, Tuan suggests an interactional temporality capable of transforming ‘space’ into ‘place’:

Tuan defined place through a comparison with space. He develops a sense of space as an open arena of action and movement while place is about stopping and resting and becoming involved. While space is amenable to the abstraction of spatial science and economic rationality, place is amenable to discussions of things such as 'value' and 'belonging'. (Cresswell 2004: 20)

In the limited space available I cannot hope to properly reconcile concepts of 'space' and 'place'. It is at least a beginning to realise the complexity of typically taken-for-granted understandings of 'space' and 'place':

Place mediates social life: it is something more than just another independent variable. (Gieryn 2000: 467)

*So, what of our understanding of 'social space' and 'place'?* Massey's description of the unfixed interactional temporal dynamism of space presents a liquid reality which forever occurs. Tuan's notion of an interactional temporality somehow transforming space into place – *that within a given moment understanding, meaning and value has been achieved, recognised and ascribed* – suggests a more tangible reality that can be known. When we consider the nature of the social world we can see that some things change whilst others stay the same. In terms of space and place there is that which we experience through an encounter (space) and then there is that which we experience through an engagement (place). Circumstances may dictate that we dwell within the encounter and become engaged. Conversely, the terms of the engagement may flounder and we find ourselves at another point in time and space. Furthermore, within the encounter/engagement there are further social interactions beyond our immediate control which may combine to alter experience. The issue is one of change. Regardless of the paralysis of space or the stability of place an interaction will occur to bring about change within a particular realm.

To ignore issues of 'space' and 'place' is to ignore vital mediating aspects of social life. The purpose of this chapter has been to provide an understanding of Easington the place as a means of accessing underlying perceptions of the BV scheme within the local authority. Bound by geography, lived in space and shaped by place, throughout the research it has been impossible to ignore the locatedness of BV practice – hence

the theme of discussion. Prior to this theoretical interlude, my concern was to understand the possible implications of the lived reality of social space within the district, through a discussion of regeneration activity in the Murton and Seaham areas, specifically in relation to the idea of ‘displacement of place’. As an aid to the reader I promised a notional understanding of the terms ‘social space’ and ‘place’. Whilst by no means exhaustive, the table below builds upon the themes already explored and indicates my thinking.

**Figure 5.8: Understandings of the possible differences between ‘social space’ and ‘place’**

|              | Characteristic   | Examples   |
|--------------|--|--|
| Social Space | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public as opposed to private/residential space</li> <li>- Possibly privately owned but permissible ‘open’ access provided (e.g. shop opening hours)</li> <li>- Publicly owned with possible designated areas/activities/facilities (e.g. marked footpaths, car park, toilets)</li> <li>- Provides opportunity for gatherings of multiple peoples</li> <li>- Provides opportunity for interaction (if desired)</li> <li>- Provides opportunity for communal activity (although this is not mandatory)</li> <li>- Non-living/non-working space</li> <li>- Transitory</li> <li>- Site of encounters</li> </ul> | Shopping centres/retail outlets<br>Commercial leisure outlets<br>Parks/gardens<br>Designated footpaths/nature trails |
| Place        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A specific site which encompasses a sense of meaning to a person/peoples</li> <li>- Geographical location</li> <li>- ‘Life’ space accommodates all aspects of living (family, home, work, socialising)</li> <li>- More than mere material reality</li> <li>- Metaphysical value</li> <li>- Conveys inclusion/exclusion</li> <li>- Providing, shaping, reinforcing identity</li> <li>- Durable reality and tangible history</li> <li>- Expressed in language as a proper noun</li> <li>- Site of engagement</li> </ul>   | Town/village<br>Colliery/Pit/Mine<br><br>Equally...<br>A pause within space  |

5.8.3. Out of place:

At the time of the research there were a number of local, regional and national organisations working in partnership to achieve regeneration of Seaham and Murton. At a local level these included: Seaham Town Council, Seaham Harbour Dock

Company and Easington District Council, whilst at a regional level partners included: Durham County Council and One North East. Nationally, English Partnerships and the British Coal Company were involved. Lines of demarcation appeared confused, the specific roles of individual partners were indistinctly defined and issues of responsibility and accountability appeared unclear. Additionally, the wider community appeared disconnected from the process of regeneration. To some extent it seemed as though a national/regional fragmentation diverged upon the locale to affect a disjunction between local interests of place and the agenda of external agencies. Hence, the possible creation of social space which may/may not reflect the needs, expectations or aspirations of indigenous peoples within place resulting in a potential disruption of 'placedness' (Cresswell 2004: 43-49) .

#### 5.8.4. Disruption of Placedness:

Arguably, the new large scale housing developments of Seaham and Murton illustrate processes of disruption of placedness:

To be inside place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is the identity with place. (Relph 1976 cited in Cresswell 2004:44)

In the case of Seaham this culminated in the artificial creation of new space, the 'East Shore Village' on the site of the former Vane Tempest Colliery. The 'village' marks the site of the new housing development as distinct from Seaham – a place of old. No attempt was made to integrate the new settlement within the bounds of the old settlement. Additionally, there was an apparent exclusion of local interest. Many of the companies involved in the construction of the housing development originate from areas outside the region: Haslam Homes has its head office in Doncaster; Miller Homes are registered in Edinburgh; Persimmons are based in York. Of all the developers only Yuill Homes could be possibly described as 'local', being based in Hartlepool. Also, whilst a large number of workers have been drawn from the immediate area many other workers have originated from outside the district, drawn to the area to meet local demand for labour and expertise. Further, employment in construction industries is notoriously short-term: once houses are built there is little need for labours to be retained. Such projects provide only a temporary source of

employment and so can hardly be considered a long-term solution in alleviating the social deprivation in the district.

The construction of the properties involved non-indigenous materials. For the large part, the houses erected were bland, commercially ‘safe’ and complied with the prevailing (and widely criticised) contemporary architectural aesthetic. Additionally, the houses were given generic arbitrary labels to indicate their design, for example ‘The Marlborough’:


**Figure 5.9: New homes in the district – ‘the Marlborough’**

### The Marlborough: 4 BEDROOM DETACHED HOME

This magnificent family home features an arched stone portico grand enough to make any visitor stop and stare. The sweeping lounge is over six metres in length and leads through double doors to a light and airy dining room. The well-proportioned kitchen has a separate utility area, while a further reception room can be used for quiet study or as a family room.

Upstairs, the master bedroom benefits from a large en suite including a bath set in a magnificent tiled surround and large walk-in shower – as well as two double fitted wardrobes. The remaining three bedrooms share the generously proportioned main bathroom.

Prices start from £310,000



Marlborough, a town situated in the Wiltshire countryside and having little known connection to Seaham, is perhaps most famously known for Marlborough College the second largest public school after Eton. Or else one might associate the famous Dukes of Marlborough of Blenheim Palace. Either way, the choice of ‘Marlborough’ as the product name of this Yuill off-plan house is deliberately intended to communicate an upmarket exclusivity – this in direct contrast to what once would have been thought possible of the district. Other residences offered by Yuill included: ‘the York’, ‘the Brompton’, ‘the Hampshire’, ‘the Hauxwell’ and ‘the Richmond’. Prices ranged between £189,950 and £315,000 (*prices correct 2007*).

At the time of construction, given the widespread experience of social deprivation in the district and the comparatively low rates of pay available to those working within the district, on grounds of affordability alone, the argument of these properties being built to meet local housing needs is difficult to sustain. Thus, by logical extension,

what we have here is the creation of new spaces in a calculated attempt to attract those external to the district to settle within its bounds. Significantly, development sites were chosen for their proximity to the A19 (at the time of the research, there were plans for improved transport links for Seaham) affecting a displacement of place in that it allowed those who originated from outside the immediate local area to live within the district, whilst working outside its bounds. Such a highly differentiated and transitory use of space resists the anchorage of place and gives rise to the postmodern non-space:

The multiplication of what we may call empirical non-places is characteristic of the contemporary world. Spaces of circulation (freeways, airways), consumption (department stores, supermarkets), and communication (telephones, faxes, televisions, cable networks) are taking up more room all over the earth today. They are spaces where people coexist or cohabit without living together. (Auge 1995: 110 cited in Cresswell 2004: 45)

Tuan relates a more directly human experience of non-places and perhaps offers an insight into the would-be resident of 'the Marlborough':

He moves around so much that places for him tend to lose their special character. What are his significant places? The home is in the suburb. He lives there, but home is not wholly divorced from work. It is occasionally a showplace for the lavish entertainment of colleagues and business associates. (Tuan 1977: 183 cited in Cresswell 2004: 46)

The relevance of the disruption of place and the rise of non-places within the district is that it undermines the rootedness and connectedness of community – those very features deemed as providing a core of moral 'goodness'. In the words of 'Stephen':

...but good community, a *good sense of community*. And a lot of old fashioned values in the communities and also in the council itself.

For Stephen, it was the moral fortitude found within the existing, indigenous population which permeated through to the council. It is possible to talk of the overlapping habitus of Easington the place and EDC the organisation as providing meaning to the interpretation and implementation of BV. An intrinsic feature of the habitus is the placedness of that habitus – the dispositions, values, meanings,



understandings as belonging to a distinct space and time within place. The displacement of place is a disturbance of that which binds together, the source of social cohesion or 'glue' within the district. This had consequences too for the lived reality of the social space within the district, but for our purposes it perhaps ironically weakened the overall strength of the underlying propellant which contributed to the success of EDC in the accomplishment of BV, while doing little to alleviate the actual social deprivation in the district other than to divert our attentions away from it.

### 5.9. Conclusions:

During the course of the fieldwork it soon became apparent that Easington the place, a locality contained within a specific social, economic, temporal and spatial reality was of immense importance in a number of key respects:

- That many of those employed by the authority had close personal ties within the district, either living locally or having friends/family based in the district and of this as creating a vested interest in the policy and practice of EDC;
- The way in which EDC the organisation imagined itself and the outward image it projected to external parties, especially with regards to actual and perceived levels of deprivation within the district;
- The way in which EDC the organisation reconciled the district's industrial heritage with the ongoing regeneration of the present and hopes and aspirations for the future;
- The task EDC had established for the years ahead and the potential transforming effect this has in terms of the experience of deprivation and the future economic viability of the local area.

The principal aim of this chapter therefore has been:

- To provide an understanding of Easington the place as a means of accessing the background canvas of interpretation which influenced the interpretation and implementation of the BV at EDC.

This has been achieved through:

- A description of the geographical position of Easington
- An outline of the social and economic context of the district and discussion of the nature and extent of social deprivation
- A discussion of the district's industrial heritage and the importance of mining in terms of the construction of local identity and introduction of the notion of history as habitus
- A journey through the district providing a textually rich account of the ongoing regeneration of the district through theoretical consideration of the significance of 'space' and 'place'

The chapter has established the highly specific context against which EDC the organisation interpreted and implemented the requirements of the BV as a local authority, thus providing a bridge enabling an understanding of the organisations accomplishment of *'best value'*.

## Chapter Six

### Understanding Easington District Council: *The Organisation*

#### 6.1. Introduction: Overview of EDC – *The Organisation*

Having established an understanding of the wider district as informing the context of the local authority, in this chapter attention is focused on ‘EDC: the organisation’. In the first part of the chapter I outline the formal aspects of organisation, providing an overview of the administrative and political structures of the authority and a discussion of the stated aims of EDC. In the second part of the chapter I aim to convey a ‘sense’ of EDC through an impressionistic reading (Van Maannen 1988) of the internal ‘lived’ spaces (Lefebvre 1993) of the organisation; reflecting upon the implications of these findings in understanding of the cultural representations of the tacitly ‘old’ and ‘new’ regimes within the authority.

## **6.2. EDC: the formal organisation (1974-2009)**

EDC came into being on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1974, following the merger of Seaham Urban Council and Easington Rural Council. On April 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, when the two-tier system of local government in County Durham was abolished, replaced by a single-tier unitary authority, the formal operations of EDC as a local authority were terminated. Up until that time, following the first round of district council CPA inspections carried out by the Audit Commission (AC), EDC was classified as an ‘excellent’ local authority. It was one among only twenty-eight (out of two-hundred and thirty-six) district councils across the country to be rated as ‘excellent’. Until its final days, EDC retained a bold mission:

***‘To make the District Great’***

### 6.2.1. Political Structure:

In May 2000 the authority introduced a Leader/Executive system with nine portfolio holders across:

- Health
- Housing
- Community & Culture
- Corporate Services
- E-government & Overview Liaison
- Social Inclusion
- Regeneration
- Environment
- Organisational Development

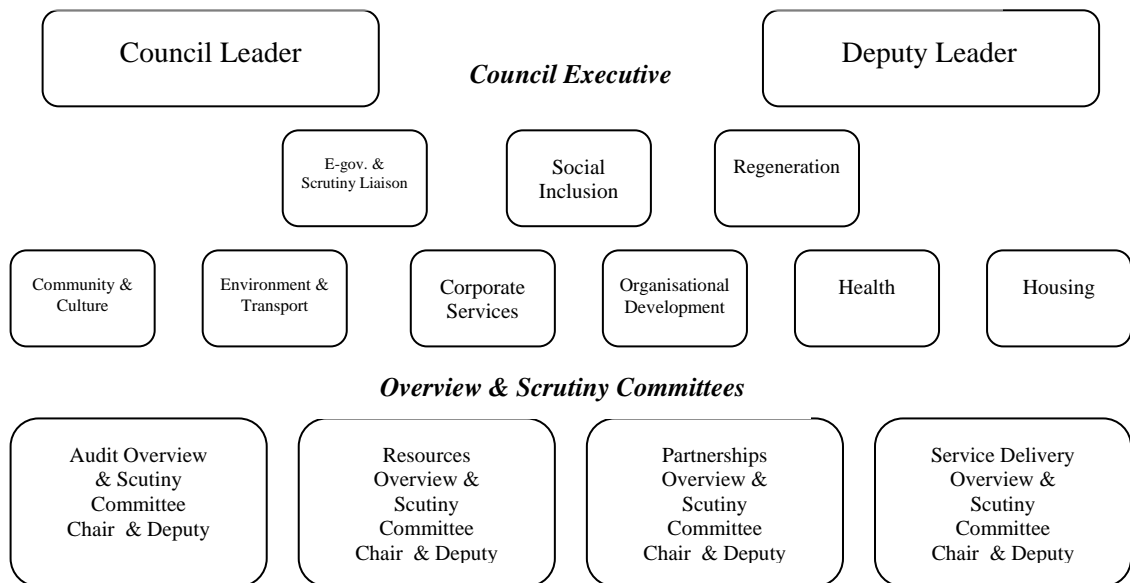
The previous committee system was significantly reduced in favour of an ‘Overview and Scrutiny’ arrangement, concentrated in four main areas:

- Service Delivery
- Audit
- Resources
- Partnerships

These were further underpinned by: *6 Executive Panels, 1 Standards Committee, 4 Area Forums and 4 Area Management Boards*. It was explained that under the new system care had been taken to allocate each of the fifty-one members, avoiding the possibility of ‘social exclusion’ and reoccurrence of political in-fighting.

**Figure 6.1: Political Structure of EDC**

*Total number of elected members: 51 representing 20 wards: 44 Labour, 5 Independent 2 Liberal Democrat.*



**6.2.2. Administrative Structure:**

Following the departure of the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive in 2004/05 (two senior figures who had steered the authority towards success), the financial year 2005/06 effectively began with a new senior management team; the only exception was the Director of Finance and Corporate Services, who continued to serve under the newly installed regime. The newly appointed Chief Executive was an internal appointment, the previous Director of Regeneration and Planning. The newly appointed Assistant Chief Executive and Director of Regeneration and Planning had previously worked at neighbouring authorities in County Durham; the Director of Community Services had been recruited from outside the county. Unusually, the two most senior posts in the authority were held by women. A fact appreciated by a number of female staff within the authority.

Figure 6.2: Departmental Structure of EDC

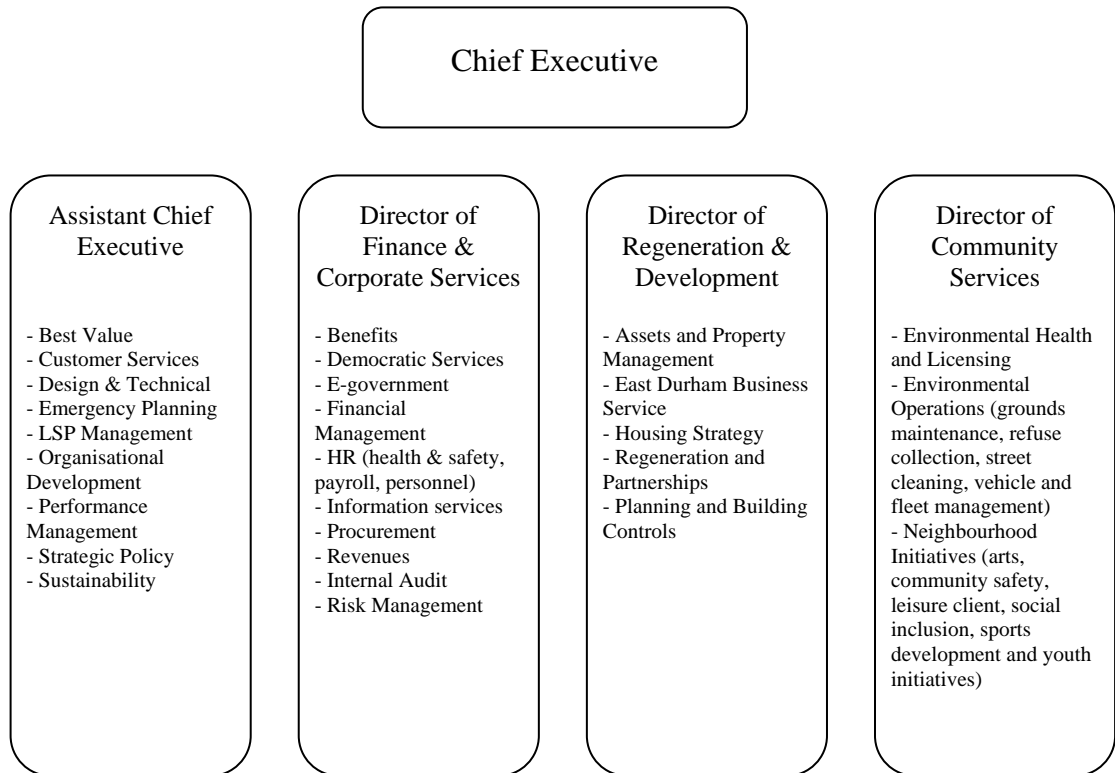
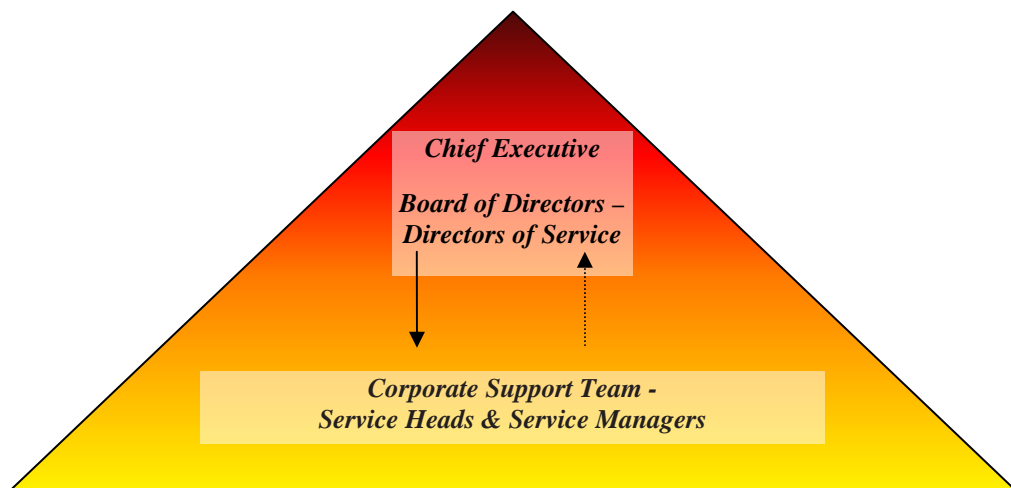


Figure 6.3: Hierarchical decision-making structure of EDC (paid service):



6.2.3. Formal Aims and Objectives of EDC:

The table below shows the corporate aims and objectives of EDC.

**Table 6.4: Corporate Aims and Objectives of EDC**

| AIMS (Priorities)                          | OBJECTIVES  |
|--|---|
| > Quality Services for our people          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To provide and promote accessible, customer focused, crosscutting services and to deliver more services electronically</li> <li>- To develop our community leadership and engagement role and to develop partnerships under the auspices of the Local Strategic Partnership</li> </ul>   |
| > Striving for excellence in the workplace | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To ensure effective recruitment, development, motivation, recognition and rewarding of staff</li> <li>- To develop the capacity to achieve in the organisation</li> <li>- To ensure corporate health of the council through sound and prudent financial management</li> </ul>  |
| > A sustainable job for everyone           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To secure economic wellbeing and provide quality, equal and diverse sustainable employment</li> <li>- To promote sound environmental management in the business sector</li> <li>- To bring about effective end uses for major redevelopment sites improving the environment and leading to employment growth, greater housing choice and improved choice of shopping and leisure facilities</li> <li>- To support and develop the tourism potential of the district</li> </ul> |
| > Decent homes for all                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To achieve a 2 star rating in housing and enable the ALMO to deliver decent homes for residents</li> <li>- To reduce inequality for residents by improving the standards of private sector housing</li> <li>- To provide a range and choice of private dwellings</li> <li>- To reduce energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions in domestic properties</li> </ul>  |
| > Clean, tidy communities                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To improve our surroundings by tackling pollutants, such as litter, dog dirt, abandoned vehicles, street cleaning and environmental improvement</li> <li>- To improve, protect and sustain the natural environment by reducing waste, increasing recycling, protecting wildlife and conserving resources</li> <li>- To encourage the use of renewable energy resources</li> </ul>  |
| > Better transport                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To promote improved infrastructure and enhance traffic management to secure better access to homes, work and leisure by range of different</li> </ul>  |

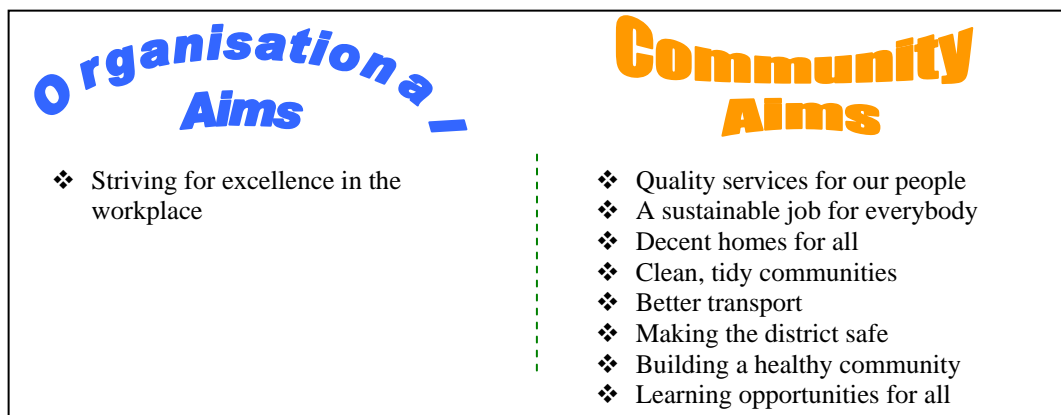


|  |  |
|--|--|
|  | types of transport, reducing the need to travel<br>- To ensure a comprehensive and effective physical and technological infrastructure |
|--|--|

Broadly, the formal aims of EDC can be divided two categories:

- i. organisational aims
- ii. community aims

**Figure 6.5: Organisational and Community Aims of EDC**



*6.2.3a. Spotlight: formal organisational aims of EDC*

The aim ‘*striving for excellence in the workplace*’ led to the development of new management practices and trained focus on the BV introduced ‘corporate health’ performance indicators.

**Table 6.6: Corporate Health BVPIs: (effective 2005-06)**

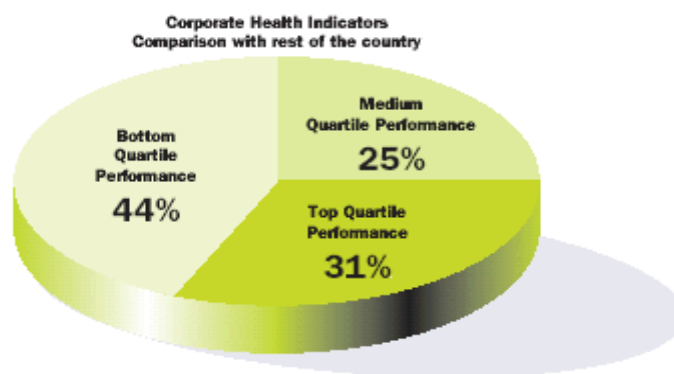
| <b>BVPI</b> | <b>Description</b>   |
|-------------|--|
| BV1         | Does the authority have a community strategy developed in collaboration with the LSP |
| BV2a        | The level (if any) of the Equality Standard  |
| BV2b        | The duty to promote race equality  |
| BV3         | The % of citizens satisfied with the overall performance provided                    |
| BV4         | % of complaints satisfied with the handling of their complaint                       |
| BV8         | % of invoices paid by the authority within 30 days                                   |
| BV9         | % of Council Tax collected   |
| BV10        | % of business rates received   |
| BV11a       | % of top 5% of earners that are women  |
| BV11b       | % of top 5% of earners who are from black and ethnic minorities                      |
| BV11c       | Top 5% of earners that have a disability   |
| BV12        | No of working days or shifts lost through sickness absence                           |
| BV14        | % of employees retiring early excluding ill health                                   |
| BV15        | % of employees retiring on grounds of ill health as a % of total workforce           |
| BV16a       | % of Council workers declaring they are disabled                                     |
| BV16b       | % of economically active disabled people in the district                             |

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| BV17a       | % of Council workers from ethnic minority communities  |
| BV17b       | Economically active people in the District from ethnic minority communities  |
| BV156       | % of Council buildings open to the public in which all public areas are suitable for and accessible to disabled people |
| BV157       | % of interactions with the public capable of electronic service delivery   |
| BV180a (i)  | Energy consumption of Council operational buildings compared with UK: electrical                                       |
| BV180a (ii) | Energy consumption of Council operational buildings compared with UK: fossil fuels                                     |

This ‘basket’ of corporate health indicators was utilised in combination to provide a snap-shot of the efficient functioning of local authorities and to ensure the wider agenda of central government in terms of its wider policy commitments: e.g. green /environment policy and promoting social equality and inclusion. The notion of ‘corporate health’ refers to the entity of the local authority (as a corporate organisational form; the word ‘corporate’ stemming from the Latin ‘*corpus*’ meaning body) as being possessed of a physicality and thus capable of exhibiting outward signs of ‘health’. Keen to comply with a positive depiction of this state, this ‘basket’ of BVPIs was singled out for special attention by many local authorities, including EDC:

*We had a mixed response in terms of our corporate health indicators. We made improvements in the % of invoices paid, the % of council tax and business rates collected, as well as improving energy consumption in our operational buildings. However, we were less successful in terms of our employment, diversity and accessibility indicators where we failed to improve in terms of % of black and ethnic minorities in the top 5% of salary earners; days lost through illness; % of ethnic minorities employed by the council; % of buildings accessible to the public; and, % of services capable of being delivered electronically.*

*44% of our corporate indicators were in the bottom quartile nationally while a third were in the top 25% in the country.*



### 6.2.3b. Spotlight: formal community aims of EDC

The formal community aims of EDC (see fig: 6.4) show a degree of overlap in the aims adopted by the authority and the corporate health BVPIs highlighted by government. We might reasonably expect a local authority to refer to: customers, citizens or residents. In contrast, the formal aim of ‘*quality services for our people*’ suggests promotion of a culture of belonging and connectedness within the local authority area.

**Figure 6.7: Dictionary Definition: ‘people’**

**People** (NOUN) (*usually functioning as plural*) 1. persons collectively or in general. 2. a group of persons considered together: *blind people*. 3. (*plural peoples*) the persons living in a country and sharing the same nationality: *the French people*. 4. one’s family: *he took her home to meet his people*. 5. persons loyal to someone powerful: *the king’s people accompanied him in exile* 6. **the people** a. the mass of persons without special distinction, privileges, etc. b. the body of persons in a country, esp. those entitled to vote  
(Collins English Dictionary 2003:1206)

The definition shown above, shows that whilst the term ‘people’ might refer to an amorphous mass, more generally it refers to a group of persons bound by common distinction and thus identifiable as a discreet group. In other words, the authority is communicating a perception of the people of Easington District as a distinct group sharing a common culture. Use the signifier ‘our’ in relation to the identified persons indicates a sense of association/ownership on the part of the authority. The observation, based here on a small part of the overall data, was variously reinforced throughout the research.

### 6.2.4. Ill-defined parameters:

The description of the ‘layered organization’ (Chapter Three) highlighted an increasingly complex set of contemporary governance arrangements in place. The Local Government Act 2000 enshrined in law a community leadership role for all local authorities, providing new powers to promote future community wellbeing. The role involved local authorities in a range of new activities, beyond traditionally maintained parameters, a state of affairs recognised by EDC:

The challenges our diverse community now faces relate to public engagement and social inclusion, housing, employment, crime and the environment. Many of the resources needed to tackle these are not in our direct control. (EDC Corporate and Performance Plan 2004-2005: 6)

The Local Government Act 2000 provided local authorities with a limited range of new powers to enable councils to act in areas outside their jurisdiction, importantly, where it was deemed to be in the community interest. However, as highlighted in the passage above, the problem was not so much in a lack of willingness to become involved. EDC enthusiastically embraced its community leadership role. However, in actuality it practiced a limited control over the formally stated aims of the authority. As the table below illustrates, many of EDC’s stated ambitions fell outside its formally constituted area of jurisdiction.

**Table 6.8: Whose aims?**

| <i>Aims within the direct and total control of EDC</i> | <i>Aims which required EDC to work in partnership with others across the private, public and voluntary sectors</i> | <i>Aims outside the control of EDC where the authority depended upon the co-operation of others</i> |
|--|--|---|
| - Striving for excellence in the workplace             | - A sustainable job for everybody ( <i>economic forces</i> )   | - Better transport ( <i>Durham County Council; Sunderland City Council</i> )                        |
| - Quality services for our people                      | - Decent homes for all ( <i>mixed market/mixed ownership</i> )   | - Learning opportunities for all ( <i>LEA; Learning &amp; Skills Council</i> )                      |
| - Clean tidy communities                               | - Making the district safe ( <i>warden patrols; Police and Fire</i> )  |   |
|  | - Building a healthy community ( <i>NHS; PCT</i> )   |   |

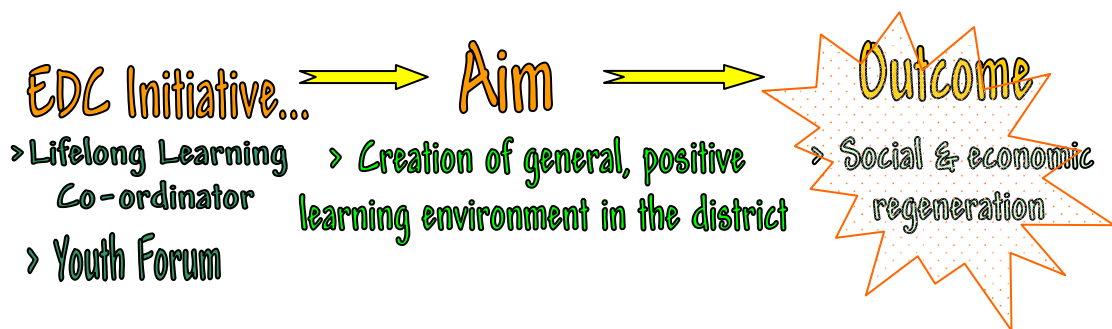
To an extent, local authorities have always practised a community leadership role:

The local authority as the elected council was expected to take the lead where major problems faced the area. When major disasters struck, the local authority played a leading role over and above its statutory requirements. Faced with serious economic problems and growing unemployment, local authorities developed a role in economic development, for which the Conservative government eventually gave them specific powers, even if only to better

control their activities. Local authorities campaigned against the closure of local hospitals and police stations. Yet these were particular and spasmodic initiatives. The local authority was not organised to undertake the role of community leadership in a continuing basis. (Stewart 2004: 9-10)

Based more on hope than hard evidence, there was a sense within the authority that if EDC encouraged the development of new initiatives within its stated aims it might trigger a linear progression of improved prosperity within the district. For instance, in relation to the aim of ‘learning opportunities for all’ the authority secured funding for the appointment of a Lifelong Learning Coordinator. The appointment was intended to improve upon existing levels of skill and training in the local workforce. An effort calculated to attract new investment to the district. Additionally, EDC created Youth Forums in an effort to promote social inclusion, making young people feel as though they had a stake in society by enabling access to democratic processes. Both initiatives were conceived to facilitate the creation of a generalised positive learning environment which would benefit residents (young and old), education providers and local business.

Figure 6.9: The assumed linear progression towards social and economic prosperity



*Created by the author*

Thus far, the picture is of an expanding responsibility over an increasingly diffuse area of interest, beyond that typically exercised by the local authority.

Local authorities in receipt of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) were required to establish a multi-agency local strategic partnership (LSP)<sup>1</sup>. Following allocation of NRF monies in 2000 the East Durham LSP was established. Partners were drawn from public sector organisations (the local authority, local police and fire brigade, Job

<sup>1</sup> The NRF was awarded to 88 local authorities, within five years the first 88 introduced LSPs expanded to 360 (Stevens 2006: 163)

Centre Plus, the local Primary Care Trust), private companies (particularly major employers), business organisations and the community/voluntary sectors (Stevens 2006: 162). Sullivan (2004: 191) explains: “*local authorities [had] the responsibility to establish these partnerships, but not necessarily to lead them*”. Wilson and Game (2006: 152) provide the following description of a LSP:

A single, non-statutory, multiagency body, which matches local authority boundaries and brings together at the local level representatives of the public, private, voluntary and community sectors plus local residents. The LSP’s initial aim was to prepare, implement and monitor a ‘Community Plan/Strategy’ to promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the area and its residents, and by working in partnership to increase co-ordination of service delivery.

The LSP was supposedly a separate, non-statutory body with an independent responsibility to promote the social and economic interests of the district. However, with two full-time officers based in the CDU (under the direct supervision of the Assistant Chief Executive) and with the Elected Leader of the Council as the Chairman of the LSP this division was far from clear. A view appreciated by those interviewed:

*Linda:* I think people get confused and think the LSP is part of the council. Which they are going to, when we work in the same office as people and we are actually under the corporate development unit for structural purposes, internally. But we do have our own structure. The LSP has got like the Community Network – this is the private and public sector, we do have our own structure.

‘Linda’ seemed confused as to which organisation she belonged – referring to the Council Leader as her ‘Leader’ when (employed in the role of Partnership Support Officer) technically, she should have referred to the Elected Leader as ‘*Chairman*’. Drawn from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, I enquired about the number of members and how the activities of the LSP were co-ordinated:

*Linda:* The full LSP which there is probably seventy people on that, but there is only ever about forty or fifty that come to the meetings. The other ones just get the information. [The full LSP meets]... every two months. The LSP

Executive, which is the decision making body [of the LSP], they meet every month...Between that you've got your thematic implementation groups and their meetings, which me and 'Simon' attend as often as we can. Then other meetings go on for work between the meetings. So [we] work probably on a daily basis with somebody in the LSP. Maybe not meetings, maybe just contact like: phone, e-mail, whatever.

The EDLSP was organised into five thematic groups:

- i. Employment and enterprise
- ii. Sustainable communities
- iii. Social exclusion and health inequalities
- iv. Investing in young people
- v. Restoring reassurance

Being without a dedicated office, meetings took place at a number of different locations within the district. Attendance and reasons for attendance fluctuated:

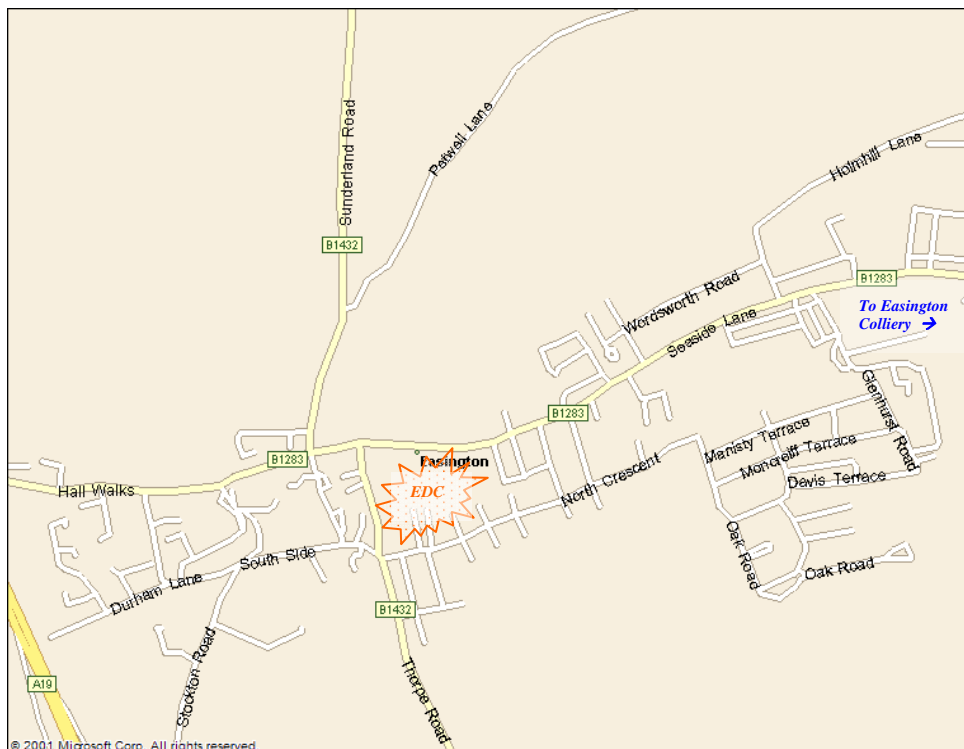
*Linda:* Initially, there was a lot of people coming along for their own interests and agendas but I think they are now starting to see that if you work together you get there quicker and better... I know this time of year when they're looking at the business for NRF (Neighbourhood Renewal Fund) the last meeting we didn't have enough chairs, everybody came because they knew the money on the table, or the money is coming on the table.

The LSP 'owned' the Community Strategy: a document drafted by an officer of the council and falling within the authority's framework of corporate governance. Indeed, much of the responsibility for the operations of the LSP was assumed by EDC. In practice little responsibility was distributed amongst partners. Thus, effectively the LSP was a quasi-division of EDC enabling partnership working, across the three sectors, to take place *outside* the democratic process of local government. The East Durham LSP provided an interesting insight into the workings of local governance whilst indicating the ill-defined parameters of the authority.

### 6.3. Conveying a ‘Sense’ of EDC:

First we get to know buildings and the lie of physical space. Later we get to know the people who occupy buildings and dwell within space. As a site, EDC consisted of an assortment of buildings, built at various intervals, in differing states of repair. The main council offices were located at the meeting point of Seaside Lane and Thorp Road. Easington somewhat ‘suspended’ in the space between Easington Village and Easington Colliery. Whilst the village was composed of a hotchpotch of older properties (some large, some small) arranged around a large sloping green, the Colliery comprised row upon row of tightly packed terraced houses running at right angles from a main street lined by shops and other commercial outlets. Despite a stark visual difference between the two settlements, there was an absence of any boundary between the two sites; both connected by the snake-like Seaside Lane.

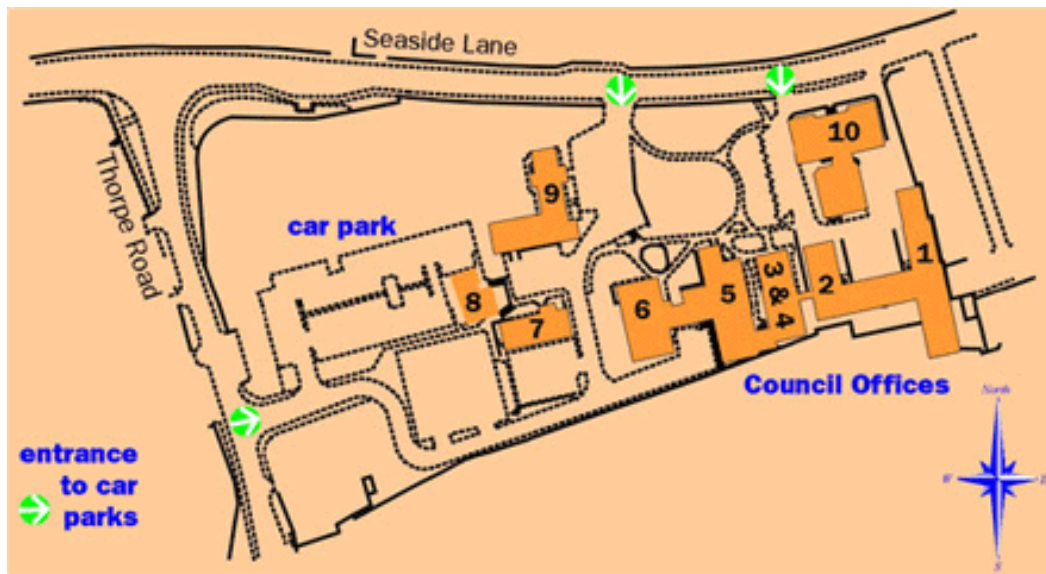
**Figure 6.10: Location Map of EDC**



Currently an outpost of the new unitary authority of Durham County Council, the former EDC occupied a large site with ample parking to members with an integrated landscaping and planting scheme:



Figure 6.11: EDC Site Complex (at the time of the research)



Source: <http://www.easington.gov.uk/visit/>

KEY:

Building 1: Regeneration and Partnerships, Asset and Property Management, Cultural Development, Community Safety, Sports Development, Personnel, Health and Safety, Development Control, Planning, Building Control

Building 2: Corporate Development, Environmental Services, Print Room, Environmental Health

Building 3 & 4: Audit, Finance, District Audit, Information Services

Building 5: Revenues, Rating and Income, Housing Policy, Benefits, Easington Cash Office, Housing

Building 6: Health Partnership Centre, Easington Primary Care group, Press and Public Relations; *later location for Contact Centre*

Building 7: Design and Technical Services, Housing Maintenance, Unison

Building 8: Warden Services

Building 9: *Formerly EDH which included:* Housing Strategy, Municipal Engineering, Operations, Integrated Repairs Administration, PSD and Housing Resources, Construction, Housing Maintenance; *later used for a range of functions including issue of bus passes to pensioners*

Building 10/'Main Building': Council Chamber, Chief Executives Department, Corporate Development, Democratic Services and Administration, Members

Although Buildings 1 to 6 maintained an external appearance of separate buildings – an impression reinforced by defined use of space for separate functions of the authority, each with a dedicated reception area – the buildings were linked by a series of rear connecting corridors. Indeed, it took time to become acquainted with the internal geography of the site.

### 6.3.1. The Main Building:

Shown as Building 10, the ‘Main Building’ (as it was referred to) was built in 1902 and had been the site of the former Board Offices. The building was revered by those who worked at the authority, despite the impracticalities caused by its period features.

**Figure 6.12: Building Ten: EDC ‘Main Building’**



Source: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~peter/workhouse/Easington/Easington1.jpg>

The ‘Main Building’ operated as a mainland to an island nation and there are a number of reasons why the building was deserved of the title ‘Main’. First, it was the oldest, largest and most architecturally impressive building of the site; other buildings were an assortment of anonymous 1970s brick-built constructions (with the exception of Buildings 7 and 8, which were temporary portable cabins). Second, at least from the Seaside Lane approach, the building stood as the front-face of the authority. In this position and through its appearance, the Main Building contrived to ‘perform’ a specific impression of EDC.

Goffman (1952: 32) employs the term ‘performance’ to refer to:

...all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.

Goffman was writing in reference to the social individual, not an ‘organisation’. However, there is a sense in which his ideas might also be applied to the physical structure accommodating particular types of organisations. Rarely is a building inert or passive. Buildings have a “*continuous presence before a particular set of observers*” and once occupied buildings becomes the site for much activity. Traditionally, although many organisations maintain a ‘virtual’ presence, organisations require a physical designated space in which to base their activities. Even when no longer in use a building can provide a trace of what went before; for example: a Roman Amphitheatre or the archaeological remains of a Viking settlement. In the context applied, the word ‘performance’ is understood as the manifest spectacle/event borne witness to by observer/multiple observers. In a very similar way, the traditional architectural design of banks was intended to impress a sense of economic security and prosperity to investors, savers and would-be borrowers. Roman colonnades, a design feature of many Victorian banks, represented both the supremacy of Empire and British capital. Such features enabled banks to figuratively assume their position as ‘pillar of society’, the pillars akin to fiscal masts supporting the economic prosperity and progress of the nation. It is in the sense outlined that supposedly inanimate bricks and mortar (providing the physical lived reality of architectural design) ‘perform’ – becoming a ‘*continuous presence before a particular set of observers*’.

Enriching Goffman’s concept of ‘performance’ is the notion of ‘front’:

It will be convenient to label as ‘front’ that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance. (Goffman 1959: 32)

Goffman (1959: 32-33) identified three features additional features of ‘performance’:

- i. 'setting' – i.e. "*background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it*";
- ii. 'appearance' – i.e. "*stimuli which function at the time to tell us the performer's social status*" (p.34);
- iii. 'manner' – i.e. "*stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation*" (p.35).

The factors listed above, according to Goffman, combined to make 'front' a:

... 'collective representation' and a fact in its own right. (pp. 37)

As a 'collective representation' front performance becomes a means of identification, symbolising that which we might reasonably expect. These features are embodied directly in the material fabric of the building. In terms of 'setting' the Main Building was out in 'front'; other buildings on the site were positioned behind the Main Building. The status of the Main Building was confirmed by its 'appearance'; its relative grandeur marked out by the plainness of other buildings on the site. Finally, the 'manner' of interaction which occurred within the building secured its performance as the 'Main Building'. As the seat of ceremonial and administrative power within the authority the building provided accommodations for elected members, the Chief Executive, the Deputy Chief Executive and the Corporate Development Unit (CDU).

Consideration of spatialities in the analysis of work organisations is a feature generally absent in much of the organisational sociology literature. Further, where there is an active consideration of spatiality the focus tends to be upon the use of space as a means of power and control:

...the main thrust of the argument is that space is *done to* workers: workers are *subjected to* specific architectural and managerial constructions of organisational space. (Halford 2004: 2.3 – *emphasis as in original*)

Halford, drawing on insights from cultural geography attempts to outline an alternative approach which emphasises a:

...broader investigation of the *meanings* of organisational space [and] how these are linked to *practices*. (2.6)

Such an approach is by no means straightforward:

Researching spatial meanings is not easy. Meanings are hard to elicit: hard for individuals to untangle from the habitual routines of everyday life (Knowles 2000) and difficult to articulate. (3.1)

In Social Anthropology, where there is an active interest in the internal organisation of space, accounts tend towards the descriptive rather than an analytic deconstruction of the meanings imbued in space. In this study, exploration of the internal spaces of EDC revealed organisational cultures. Indeed, it was through an interpretation of internal space that I first became aware of the two representative orders of ‘old’ and ‘new’ within the authority. Remarkably, the two operated in tandem and without apparent friction. This intriguing synthesis, requiring an analysis of the unexpected (Portes 2000) would later come to provide part of the explanation of the accomplishment of BV at EDC (see Chapter Eight).

The internal décor of the Main Building, in terms of the chosen aesthetic, represented an attempt to maintain the same sense of performance conveyed by the exterior of the building:

The concept ‘aesthetic’ originates from the Greek notion ‘*aisthetikos*’. It is sometimes used to describe a sense of the pleasant or beautiful. But in actuality it is broader, and connotes any sensual perceptions (Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary). Both natural and artistically created stimuli can elicit an aesthetic experience. (Wasserman et al in Fineman ed. 2006: 140)

Aside from a small boxed reception area (painted magnolia and accented in grey, beige and browns) the foyer of the main building did not correspond to the typical entrance design of a local authority. The proportions of the entrance were large and impressive as though designed for effect; a means, perhaps, of demonstrating the local import of what had originally been the School Board Offices. Richly decorated in tones of pink and red with a plush upholstered seating area provided to ensure the physical comfort

of any visiting posterior, the effect was vaguely personal – at least, in contrast to the usual utilitarian, impersonal functionality expressed of most local authority main reception areas.

There was an impressive staircase, with a deep wool pile carpet and solid wooden balustrade, stained a dark shade of mahogany. Deep hues of pinks and reds lined the walls interrupted only by a dado rail which had been painted to match the woodwork of the staircase. Framed, old black-and-white photographs depicting scenes from times gone by taken from around the district, lined the walls of the staircase: including, Blackhall Rocks, Easington Colliery and the coal blackened sands of Seaham. Many of the scenes showed local people, long since dead. The photographs were a reminder of a historical sense of past and place. Given that those shown in the photographs would perhaps have struggled to share in the same sense of place depicted, I thought their presence somewhat ironic. The scenes were of another era, predating the actual creation of the authority in April 1974 by many years. In this sense the pictures demonstrated a deliberate reconstruction of historical reality. The display would not have appeared out-of-place at a national pub/restaurant chain, trading as a ‘Ye Olde Tavern’. I was struck also by another comparison. Historical properties/stately homes commonly display portraits of deceased relatives (otherwise ancestors). At EDC *place*, rather than people, formed the basis of an organisation ancestry which connected the authority more immediately to the district for which it had administrative responsibility.

### 6.3.2. The Council Chamber

Up the first flight of stairs, onto a small landing and forward a few more steps, into a little entrance hall. Accompanied by my guide<sup>2</sup>, I took a peek around the tall heavy doors of the council chamber. I had been prepared, in hushed tones of reverence, for the majesty which would appear before me. A double-aspect room with large proportions, light streamed in from the tall windows. The high ceiling seemed to reach into the heavens. Echoing the sense of past found elsewhere, the council chamber was a time capsule which captured both the pride and sense of identity felt by those in the organisation. However, in contrast to the comfortable almost residential feel elsewhere,

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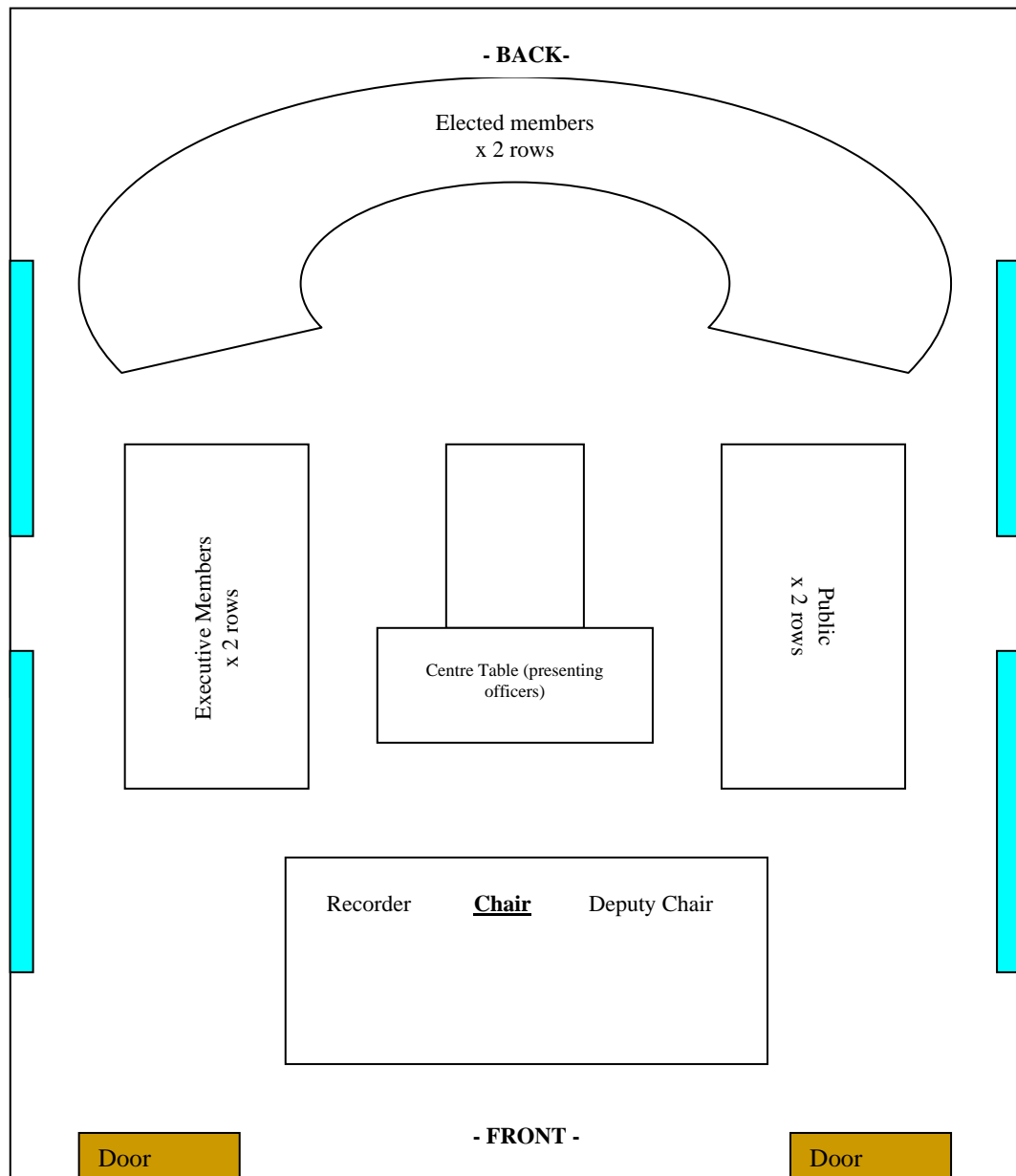
<sup>2</sup> On my first day of fieldwork at EDC I received a guided tour of the main office complex

the council chamber was a seat of power and authority and little effort had been spared to ensure the comfort of its elected inhabitants.

Suspended in perfect symmetry, mid-centre were two large candelabra style chandeliers – quite a contrast to merely functional overhead strip lighting. The walls, three-quarter lined in oak, were heavy and added a symbolic weight of authority to the chosen décor of the chamber. In much the same way tree rings provide clues to the climatic changes of the past, the oak panelling seemed to hold the resonances of the history. Furnished in original arts and craft revival handcrafted solid oak furniture, specially commissioned for the chamber in the 1930s, the room conveyed not just an aesthetic but an ethic: a system of moral values.

The arrangement of furniture within the room, demonstrated the ceremonial hierarchy structuring the actions of occupants. Towards the back of the chamber arranged in a continuous horseshoe, were two rows of Victorian-style school desks (complete with lidded tops and inkwells). Each councillor had their own designated seat within the chamber intruders were not tolerated amongst the ranks of the elected. Down from the semi-circle, on opposite facing sides of the room were two rows of rather plainer flat surfaced tables with chairs. The space on the left was reserved for Executive Members. The opposite facing side on the right was intended for visiting members of the public (although at no time during the research did I see these seats occupied). Centre-stage, and in the full gaze of the assembled audience, were two plain rectangular tables in a boardroom-like arrangement. A theatre-in-the-round, the arrangement of furniture enabled elected members to practice an amphitheatre of control which subjected reporting officers to the full formal gaze of the political process. At one point during the research I accompanied a senior officer in reporting to Council. Sat side-by-side, in the centre of the room, held in the full glare of the political process, I observed the sense of intimidation achieved by this arrangement. It was enough to make even experienced senior officers nervous of the confrontation. At the front of the room on a raised platform, which emphasised the import and status of those seated, was the throne-like seat of the Chair. This was flanked on both sides by a lesser throne for the Deputy-Chair and a space reserved for Committee Recorder.

Figure 6.13 (Approximate) Sketch of the Council Chamber:



### 6.3.3. The New Modernity of the Corporate Development Unit:

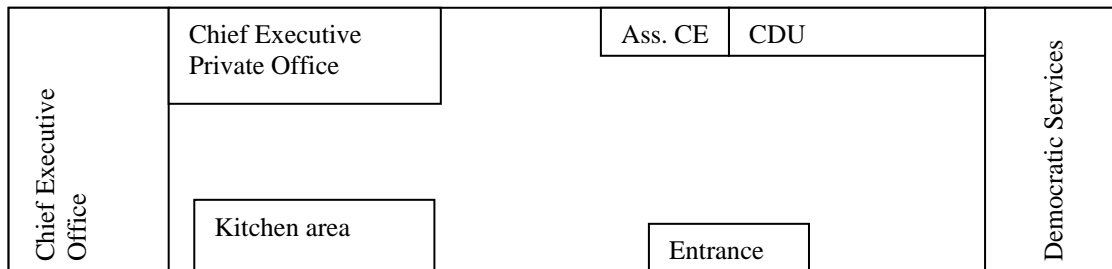
Still in the Main Building, I continued up the second flight of stairs which ran counter to the stairwell of the main entrance. With the aid of a key fob to enter through the security doors, I arrived at the part of the building occupied by the paid service. I entered a long corridor painted brilliant white, the doors and skirting accented in blue gloss. Anonymous and without personalisation, decoration had been kept to a bare minimum. Gone were the rich deep tones of pink and red and in its place was a design



of clean neutral utility. On the plain white walls within the corridor, statutory safety notification and posters detailing the latest performance results of the authority had been neatly pinned to notice boards. This was the space of the formal paid service: a faceless bureaucracy, carried out by a supposedly apolitical administration.

At one end of the corridor there was a small communal kitchen area complete with kettle, refrigerator, microwave and a small eating area. Opposite this was the Chief Executive’s office. At the other end of the corridor was the Corporate Development Unit (CDU). Next to this was a small office occupied by the Deputy Chief Executive.

**Figure 6.14. (Approximate) Sketch of CDU Corridor:**



In May 2005, as part of a more general reorganisation, the main hub the CDU was relocated from Building 1 to the Main Building. Ostensibly the CDU was moved to be closer to the Chief Executive and elected members. However, the move also confirmed the growing import of the specifically ‘corporate’ agenda within the authority at the time, also symbolising the ascendancy of the CDU.

The CDU was accommodated in a large double aspect room of generous proportions. In one direction was a view of the detached 1930s style suburban houses of Seaside Lane. In the other, the view (on a clear day) extended down Easington Colliery and towards the North Sea. In keeping with the outside corridor, the walls were painted brilliant white, the door and skirting accented in bright blue gloss paint. Although the original features of the room remained: elegant coving, generous tall skirting and dado; they had been blanked out, flattened by a newly applied coat of white paint. There had been no effort to pick out the original features of the room. Whereas elsewhere we

seemed to be constantly reminded of the past, in the CDU the past was conspicuous by its absence.

Colours have a powerful cultural significance (Fine et al: 1998). Culturally the colour red is associated with heat, danger, passion and bloody violence. In contrast, the colour green has been linked to nature and the environment, to envy, and to feeling nauseous. White is variously associated with purity, cleanliness, light, and neutrality. Other ‘white’ associations suggest a blank canvas – an absence of impression. Such absence might suggest a lack of history; even a blanking out of history in a ‘whitewash’ of previous events. Whilst the internal décor of the main building may appear a trifling matter of little sociological significance, Fine et al (1998: 452) argue differently:

...colour *per se* does not have any particular set of meanings. But when interpreted within a cultural domain based on previous contexts and grounded in expectations and socialisations, such collective representations seem self-evident and unarguable.

The Main Building ‘performed’ space. Both the external and internal spaces of the main building silently communicated the ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultural strands present within the authority. The juxtaposition between ‘old’ and ‘new’ was further indicated by the choice of furniture in the CDU. Whilst the furnishings of the council chamber had been a one-off unique creation and communicated the vestiges of an ethic from an earlier age: prioritising craftsmanship and demonstrating respect for public office; the furniture of the CDU was mass produced having been ordered from a commercial supplier. The only unmasked remains of past in the room was an impossibly large antique safe that had been too heavy to move at the time the CDU occupied the room – more than five foot tall and three foot wide the safe was used for storage of office supplies.

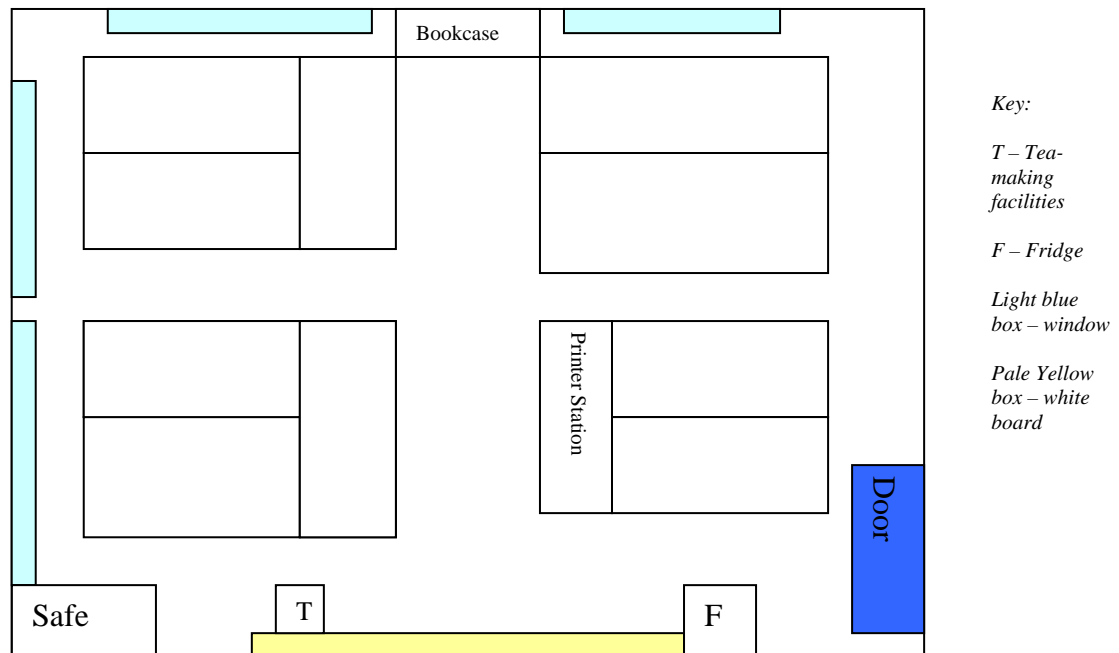
The internal space of the CDU was representative of modernity. Interpreted within the specific cultural domain (Fine et al 1998), the white painted walls of the CDU symbolised a break with the past: a blank canvas; fresh new start. The mass produced furniture emphasised convenient utility rather than a stylised ethic underlined by a specific set of cultural values. The proliferation of new technology confirmed the brash

modernity of the thoroughly modern CDU. As might be expected, each officer had their own personal computer which dominated their allocated desk space. In addition, each officer had a sleek and expensive PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) which took pride of place on their desk ready to assist them in their work. Impressed, I enquired about the device and received an enthusiastic demonstration of the touch-screen and various other functions. The officer who provided the demonstration admitted she rarely used the device. The PDA had been one of a package of goods received by core CDU officers during the move to the main building. The officer revealed that each of the Directors had been presented with a ‘*Blackberry*’ device: a wireless communication tool which enabled a constant virtual umbilical cord-like flow of communication between the transitory EDC worker and main office hub. The authority had made a considerable financial investment in the relocation of the CDU to the Main Building, underlining the significance perceived for the unit despite its ‘back-office role’ and an indirect contribution to service delivery.

There is great potential meaning to be unpacked in the outward appearance of a managerialist/corporate styling of local government. In light of the immediate discussion I am reminded of the practice of conspicuous consumption by individuals within the CDU as sanctioned and endorsed by the authority. Referring to Baudrillard, Du Gay (1996: 82) argues that:

...commodities and services have importance as signs and symbols. In other words, they have ‘identity-value’ and simply or primarily ‘use-value’. The consumption of goods and services is important not so much for the intrinsic satisfaction it might generate but for the way in which it functions to mark social differences and act as a communicator. Style, status and group identification are aspects of identity-value, where people choose to display commodities or engage in different spheres of consumption with a view to expressing their identity as certain sorts of persons...

The CDU had not only to *be* the part; but importantly, had also to *look* the part – an association intimately related to being.

**Figure 6.15 (Approximate) Sketch of CDU:**

#### 6.3.4. The Chief Executive's Office

Along the corridor from the CDU was the Chief Executive's personal office. A large spacious room with high ceilings and tall windows, on a bright day the room was bathed in natural light. In terms of general appearance the CDU and Chief Executive's office were quite similar. Walls were painted brilliant white, the original architectural features of the room camouflaged and rendered invisible by white emulsion, the skirting and doors were painted in the same bright blue gloss as elsewhere.

The Chief Executive's personal workspace consisted of two desks arranged in an L-shape. Both desks were immaculately tidy. One desk had a PC and designated workspace whilst on the other desk there were neat piles of papers arranged. Also in the room was a table (for up to eight persons) intended for meetings. Again, the furniture in the room had been recently purchased. The furniture coordinated and was of the same type and style of the mass-produced office furniture purchased for the CDU. The interior of the Chief Executive's private office communicated an obligation to remain current, to move with the times and maintain a guarded stance against the unconscious convention of tradition.

Although similar in style, the CDU and Chief Executive's private office notably differed. First, the CDU was a shared space. The Chief Executive was not required to share her space with colleagues. Second, whereas the Chief Executive's desk had been tidily arranged; the desks of officers in the CDU were littered with personal mementos, photos of friends and family, sweets and snacks, and tall towers of papers. In the CDU the radio played, there were tea and coffee making facilities and well stocked fridge. The space was 'lived-in' and although a formal place of work the room maintained a sense of informality. Colleagues enjoyed an extent of camaraderie. The office whiteboard which detailed the whereabouts of individuals had also been utilised as a fun merit-mark system commending 'good' green behaviours of staff – an initiative devised by the Environment and Sustainability Officer, conceived a spirit of fun. At Christmas the CDU was transformed into a Christmas Grotto, thanks in part to donations brought from home. In contrast the Chief Executive's office was a quiet sanctuary of calm, which maintained an impersonal and serious reserve. Possibly, it was not considered appropriate for the Chief Executive to reveal her personal self in the way of her colleagues down the hall?

#### 6.3.5. Elsewhere: Building 5 – The Benefits Section

Elsewhere, offices within the complex lacked the impressive grandeur of the Main Building. In spite of their more recent construction, the internal fabric of the buildings appeared tired and worn. During interviews a number of individuals bemoaned the standard of accommodation provided:

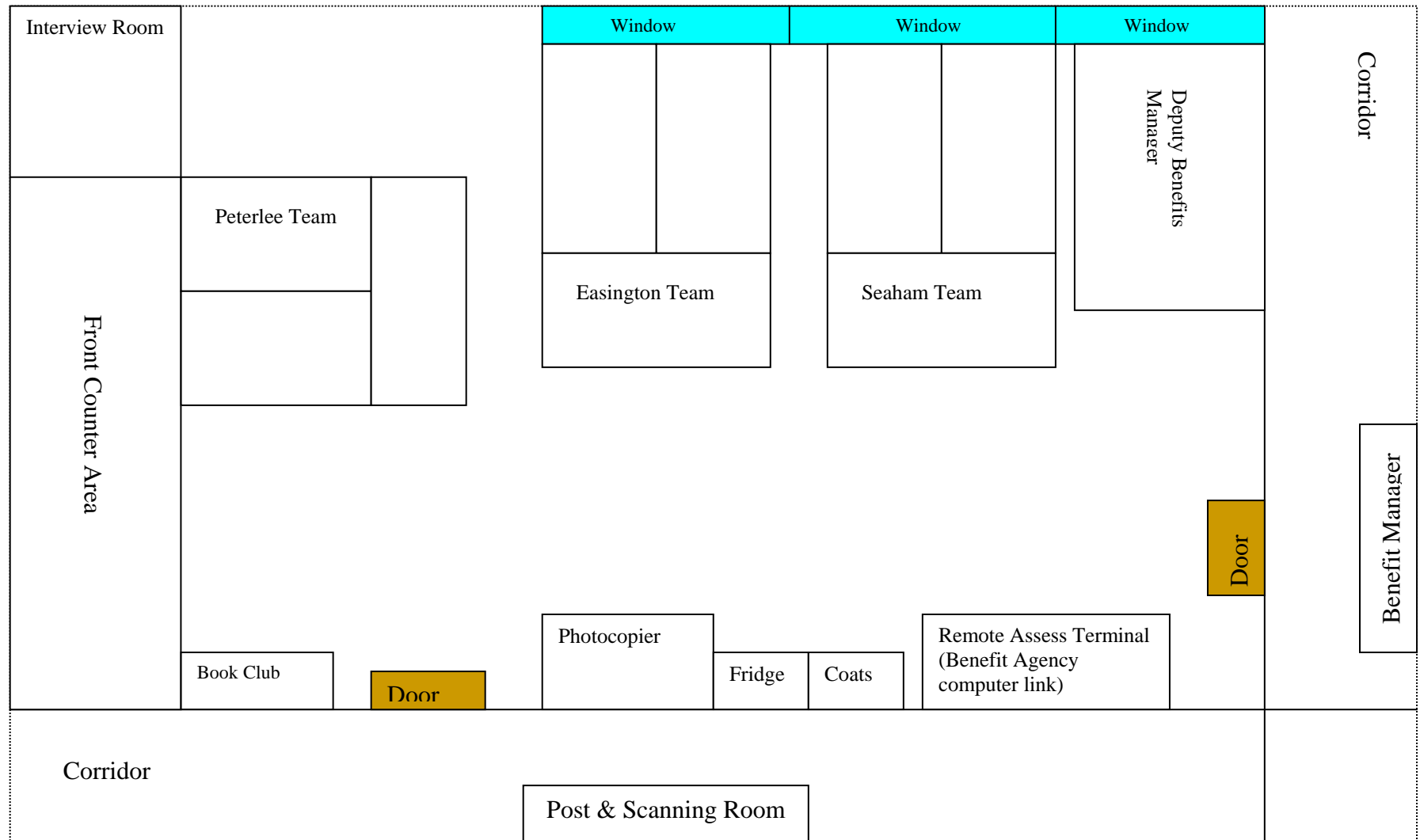
*Interviewee:* The buildings we work in are atrocious. The environment is dreadful. But everyone acknowledges that. And it is down to money and there is no easy solution to that, so it's not: 'you can just moan and moan and get somewhere'. It is a fact we're all in pretty bad office conditions.

*Interviewer:* It is a bit like a tunnel. [The office was long and thin, desks were arranged almost in train formation down one side of the room].

*Interviewee:* It is a dreadful office. Dreadful. Erm, it's not so bad now we've got air-conditioning in. Last year we didn't and it got so stiflingly hot it was unbearable. It was dreadful. It got to the point where people could have walked out. So the environment we work in is not wonderful. ('Maureen' Interview)

Building 5 housed the main functions of the ‘Benefits Section’. Other functions (Fraud, Overpayments, Welfare and the Verification Framework) were located in Building 7, a two storey temporary porta-kabin. The main office was a long narrow room, with desks arranged into three distinct teams according to geographical area. At the front of the office (obscured by a partition wall) there was a general reception area which permitted public access to the service; the public did not have access to the main office. At the back of the main office was a further area boxed in glass, this provided an enclosed office space for the Deputy Benefits Manager. Through the door and across the corridor the Benefits Manager had his own private office.

**Fig. 6.16 (Approximate) Sketch of the Benefits Section:**



Lighting in the section was poor, the main source being from diffused overhead florescent tubes and the glare of computer screens. There was a large window on one side of the office but this overlooked a small paved area enclosed on all sides. Further, access to this potential light source was restricted by permanently drawn, tatty white-grey Venetian blinds. Interior walls were semi-permanent partition walls long ago painted magnolia and in need of new coat of paint. The office plan (shown above) fails to adequately convey the highly cluttered nature of the space. In one corner (shown as 'Book Club') there were piles of books and novelty toys heaped, ready to be rummaged through and purchases made – a commercial book-club operated from the section. Coats were piled deep onto an inadequate plastic coat stand. Boxes and papers were stacked. A noisy office, there was a constant stream of chat, much of it banter which rallied, tennis-match fashion, from one side of the room to the other.

Unlike the CDU and Chief Executive's office, the furniture did not co-ordinate. It had been purchased at various intervals and was noticeably more worn. Chairs were a mismatch of many colours, although a number of officers had 'scored' new ergonomic design chairs to alleviate back trouble. Desks were large, coloured battle-ship grey and again, as in the CDU, were littered with photographs of children, trinkets and curiosities of amusement and sentimentality. Additionally, the section enjoyed use of a fridge and water-cooler.

Within the authority, Benefits was regarded as one of the more challenging areas in the authority in which to work. There was a genuine appreciation demonstrated which recognised the ongoing efforts of those working in the section at times displayed in an unusually indulgent fashion. During observation of the section, one Friday morning a homemade chocolate cake arrived. The cake was dished up to staff working, by the Deputy Benefits Manager who informed me that a lady councillor had made the cake to thank staff for their ongoing work in the district. The councillor (we will call her 'Rose') was a senior councillor of advancing years who worked tirelessly in her efforts to alleviate the economic disadvantage experienced by residents of the district. Rose felt passionately that a necessary first step in achieving this, her personal goal, was to ensure maximum receipt of benefit entitlement. She had recently become directly involved in the work of the section, through a benefit 'take-up' campaign organised at



different locations in the district. Rose enjoyed a close working relationship with the section and over time a mutual affection had developed. As a ‘reward’ for their ongoing work Rose would often bake cakes and biscuits, received enthusiastically by staff.

Baking cakes as an informal, personal gesture of thanks for those paid to do a job is perhaps an unexpected act within the context of a formal workplace. It is the contention of the research that the affection nature of this exchange, indicated the at time familial dynamic of relations within EDC – more so, when we consider the generational structure of the exchange. Rose was a senior councillor, whilst those for whom the cake was intended occupied a relatively less senior role and were significantly younger in age. In some respects, we can liken the actions of Rose to archetypal ‘Good Granny’. Somewhat stereotypically as an older woman, occupying a senior position of prominence, Rose had baked a cake. A task which required personal investment of time and toil, in an age of cheap supermarket convenience foods this is to be considered exceptional.

#### 6.3.6. Elsewhere: Building 6 – The Contact Centre

In December 2005 the much anticipated ‘Contact Centre’ was hurried into existence, despite the arrival of the appointed Contact Centre Manager being delay until March 2006. The Contact Centre was created as part of the then government’s e-Government drive. In line with BVPI 157 ‘*Number of types of interactions enabled for e-delivery as a percentage of types of interactions legally permissible for e-delivery*’ the authority was required to establish a contact centre service to enable its compliance. The eventual government target was for e-delivery systems to handle at least eighty percent of all incoming calls. Interestingly, EDC decided in favour of the euphemistic ‘contact centre’, rather than the widely derided and negatively associated ‘call centre’. Some time later the contact centre became known as the ‘Customer Service Centre’, employees in the section referred to as ‘Customer Service Advisers’.

An uneasy process which had led to wider upheaval within the authority, senior figures drawn from the CDU had overseen the development and implementation of the project.

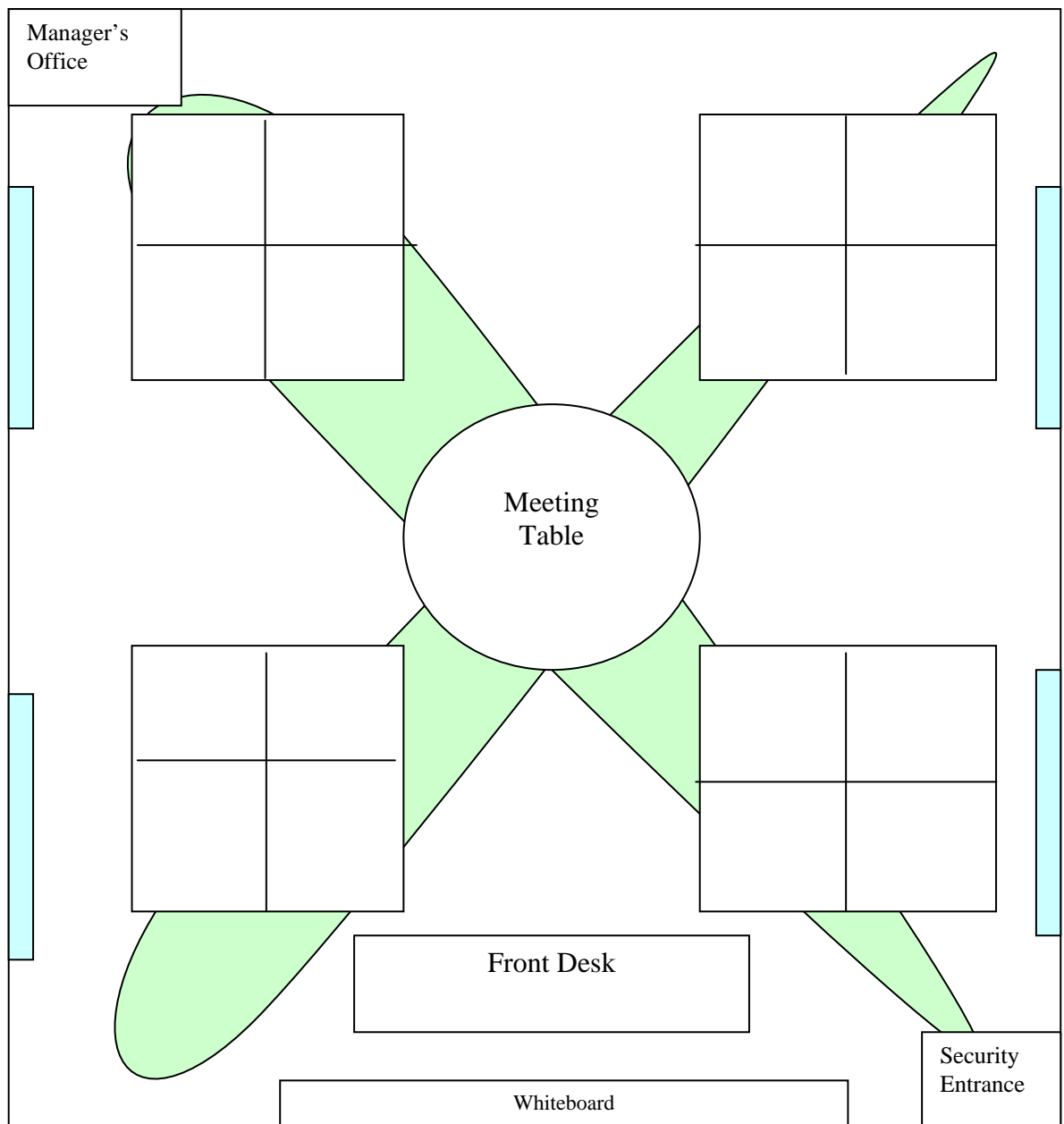
Over a period of months there had been: meetings with external IT providers; staff meetings (mediated by unions) with those affected by the move; and high-level negotiations with Heads of Service and Directors regarding the exact jurisdiction of the contact centre. In some quarters, the upheaval had led to unrest with some staff fearing future job:

We weren't *entirely* happy about it – at the beginning: the fact that our jobs had gone. And at first we were told that it was a secondment but actually secondment in the true sense of the word means that you're seconded somewhere and your job's still open for you, but of course our jobs had gone. So, we said, you know we can't be seconded. So, we were actually then told we would be transferred. So at the moment we don't, well technically we don't really have a job, until we're properly trained. But our jobs, if it is so much percent of your job, which it is in here, you're ring-fenced, so you know we're fairly secure.

(‘Elizabeth’ Interview)

As a newly created space, the contact centre provided an indication of the current dispositional leanings within EDC. Sited in Building 6 (see Figure 6.11) the contact centre was established in the former offices of the Easington Health Partnership, Easington Primary Care Group and Public Relations. Partition walls were removed and the space opened up to create one large office. In contrast to the dark and gloomy space of the Benefits Section the contact centre was open and bright, bathed in natural light. The walls were painted a clean and neutral white. All furniture in the room was newly purchased, uniformly selected in a light laminate beech with smooth ergonomic curved lines. Desks were arranged into four groups of four, positioned in the four corners of the room (at the time of the research only three of the four corners were occupied) and staff sat according to the previous role fulfilled. The section continued to await the arrival of ‘Evironcall’, an environment services contact point which fell within the Community Service Directorate.

Figure 6.17: The Contact Centre



The upper ranks of the CDU were proud of the achievement of the Contact Centre. An opening ceremony, complete with after-hours celebratory drinks, was organised to celebrate the event. Further, generally those who worked in the section were appreciative of the efforts that had been made:

Yeah, it's a lovely office. Lovely and bright and airy, much nicer than what we had before... Even as far as the carpet goes, with the meeting table in the centre, and even the colour of the carpet is done like that to divide it off, so it has been well thought out. We've got a new kitchen, yeah it's really good. So it's a very pleasant room. ('Elizabeth' Interview)

However, in spite of efforts that had been made the room lack the warmth and individual personality of both the CDU and Benefits Section. While in other parts of the organisation staff had asserted a personal territorial ownership of sorts through the visible introduction of personal effects, in the contact centre these effects were largely absent. Some months on from the official opening ceremony, there was much about the project to suggest it as unfinished. For instance: the Contact Centre Manager had been in post for only a week; staff training was considerably behind schedule due to interruptions by the external service provider; staff awaited arrival of telephone headsets; and, the section had yet to go ‘live’ with the Citizens Relationship Management system (an electronic call logging system, part of the e-government initiative). In short staff deployed to the Contact Centre were, four months after its official opening, continuing to fulfil the same functions they had fulfilled elsewhere prior to the move. In a candid aside I was told:

It’s like everything, if you ask me they put more time into how the place is going to look! (‘Rita’ Interview Postscript)

#### 6.4. Conclusion:

In the first part of this chapter I outlined the formal aspects of EDC. First I provided an overview of the political and administrative structures outlined as hierarchical and concentrating decision-making amongst the elite of the authority. Moving on, I discussed the stated aims and objectives of EDC. These were divided into two broad categories: i. organisational aims; ii. community aims. Organisational aims were closely linked to the requirements of BV, specifically the identified basket of BVPIs utilised by government to indicate ‘corporate health’. In the articulation of community aims EDC expressed a firm sense of connectedness to the wider district area and a perception of the people of East Durham as possessed of an indigenous culture. The stated aims of EDC were discussed as indicating the increasingly ill-defined parameters of local authorities, in some instances these ambitions went beyond the official jurisdiction and control of the authority. Thus at EDC, the New Labour agenda of ‘Community Leadership’ can be understood as extending the range of responsibilities maintained by the authority to include an increasingly diffuse area of interest. At EDC this challenge was met with much enthusiasm. The impact of these changes has been to blur the traditional boundaries of the authority. Throughout the research it was difficult to see exactly where the interests and operations maintained by EDC stopped and started; many different tentacles of the organisation were spread far and wide. A problem considered particularly so, related to the operations of the East Durham LSP – a supposedly separate entity which had been *incorporated* into the operations of the CDU and wider authority, significantly blurring local democratic accountabilities.

In the second part of the chapter I provided an impressionistic reading of the cultural strands present within the authority, through a thick description of the internal spaces of EDC. Through the work of Goffman (1959) the Main Building was discussed as a ‘front performance’ of the organisation. Moving inside, various old and new cultural strands of the organisation were identified through an interpretative rendering of the presentation of internal space, summarised below:

- Representative ‘Old’ cultural strands of EDC demonstrated in space:

- *Entrance Hall:* Place as organisational ancestry an  
High degree of connectedness to an indigenous  
'East Durham' people
- *Council Chamber:* Power, authority, status, hierarchy of political  
Ethic of respect for public office  
Steeped in tradition
  
- Representative 'New' cultural strands of EDC demonstrated in space:
  - *CDU:* White-wash of the past in favour of a new  
modernity  
Symbolic relocation represents ascendancy  
within EDC  
Conspicuous consumption: outward appearance  
of modern management/corporatism  
Individualised spaces, degree of socialisation
  - *Chief Executive's Office:* Whitewash of the past in favour of a new modernity  
Absence of personality  
Controlled, ordered, separate
  - *Contact Centre:* Creating a new modernity: style over substance?  
Creating culture: absence of personal  
Investment in new ways of doing local  
government
  
- Elsewhere:
  - *General observations:* Complaints: 'atrocious accommodation' acceptance  
of finite resources to affect change/improve
  - *Benefits Section:* Ordinary space  
Tired and worn, forgotten?  
High degree of individualisation  
High degree of socialisation (paternal/family  
dynamic e.g. cake)  
Clutter and mess, informal uses of space

In the next chapter I trace the wider process of change at EDC, including the formal implementation of BV.

## Chapter Seven

### Understanding Change at Easington District Council

#### 7.1. Introduction:

The key story to emerge from the research at EDC was one of *change*. Against a background of socio-economic deprivation (attributed to the local disintegration of the mining industry) the authority had accepted the need to create change in the district. Additionally, following a period of political infighting and neglect for the wellbeing of staff, a consensus emerged of the need to create change within the authority. Once the principle of local regeneration and organisation renewal was accepted, the general need for change was embraced thereafter. Having identified the discernibly ‘old’ and ‘new’ strands in the culture of the organisation (as encountered by the research) in the previous chapter, in this chapter I move on to unravel key events implicated in the process of organisational renewal at EDC. Through a narrative analysis of these events I construct an understanding of the complex multiple interplay of these strands, as manifest in the accounts provided by individuals and actions observed of the group. Taken in conjunction with the findings of the research presented in chapters five and six, this penultimate chapter provides a foundation for understanding the accomplishment of BV at EDC as outlined in the final chapter of the thesis.

This chapter begins with a brief metaphorical interlude, accompanied by a theoretical discussion of role of narrative in social research.

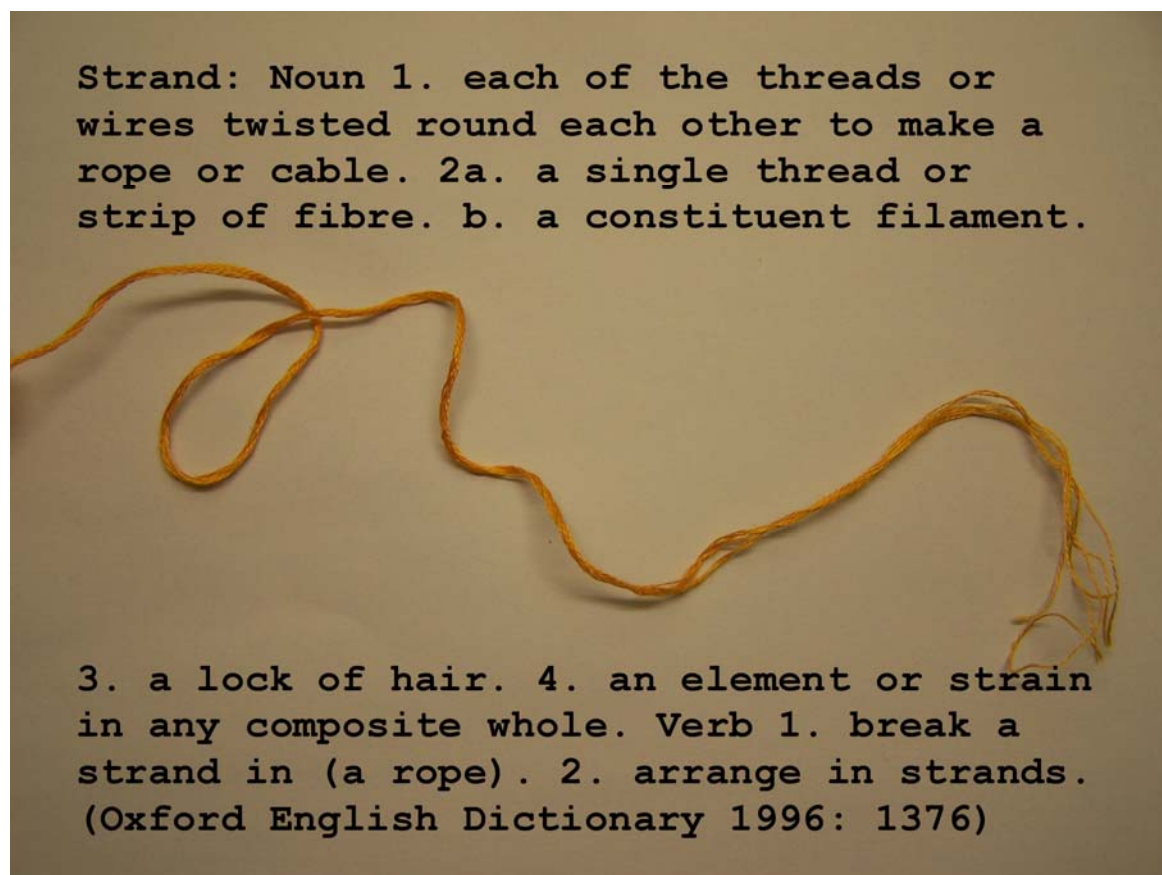


### 7.1.1. Cultural strands:

The depiction of ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultural themes within the authority as ‘strands’, has been deliberate. In an attempt to make sense of the data generated I came to conceive of the scene as an incomplete tapestry...

Typically a strand is a composite of like filaments spun together to constitute a single thread:

**Figure 7.1: Description of a strand**

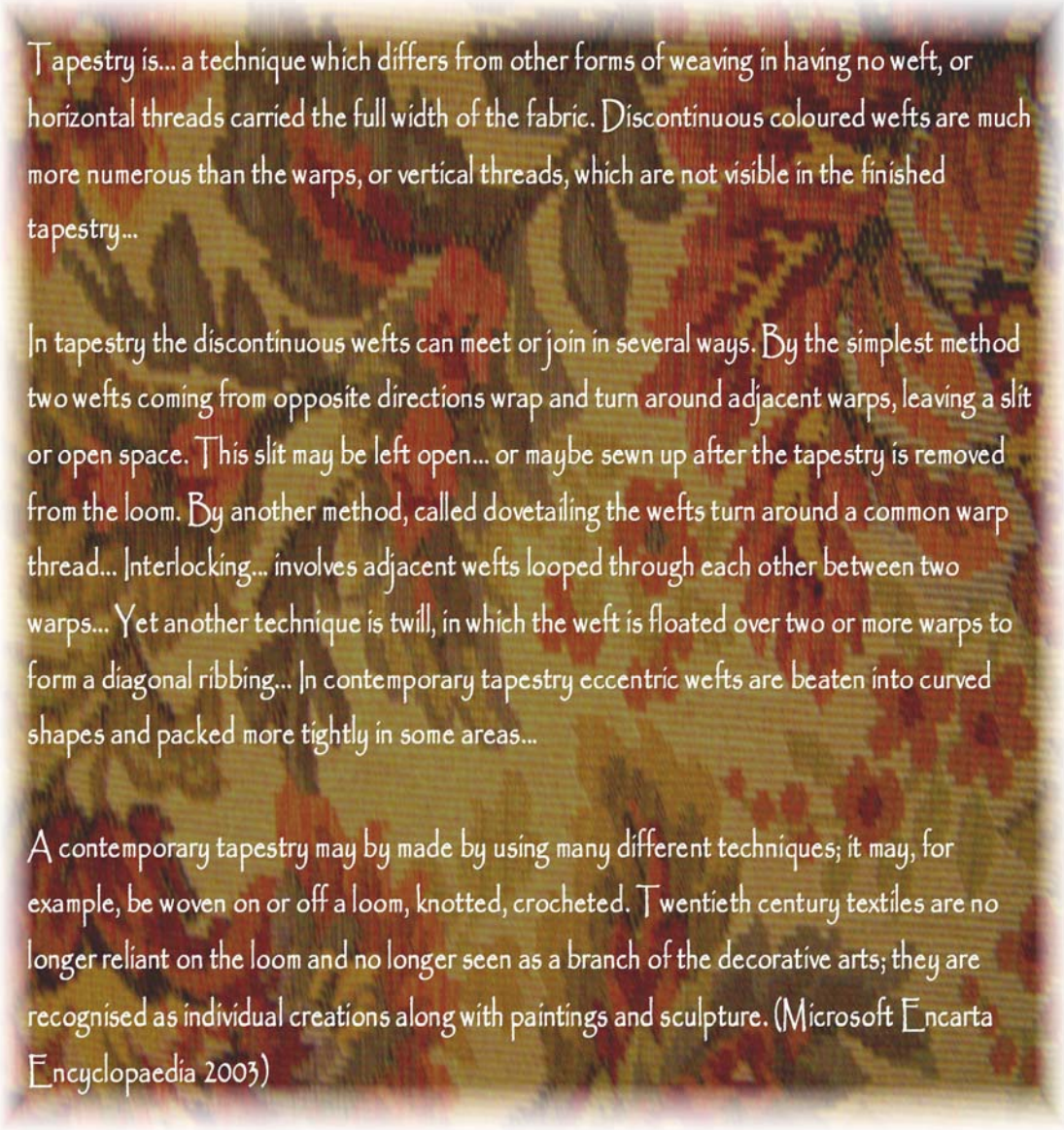


*Illustration: by the author*

I have employed the incomplete tapestry as a metaphorical device to explore the practice of BV at EDC, as a tapestry represents a creative, practical accomplishment. There are different ways in which a tapestry might be created. Single strands are brought together, gathered and woven into a recognisable pattern/form. The strands might be many, or they

may be few. Over time individual strands may well come adrift, only to be picked up anew and joined again into the weave of the original fabric. Whilst some strands may flow freely and seamlessly, others might become knotted into a complex tangle, knitted or even crocheted to provide for movement and stretch. Equally individual strands might well unravel. A finished tapestry might become faded, the fabric worn. But as an entity it can be reworked, repaired and even incorporated into something other.

**Figure 7.2: Description of a tapestry:**



Tapestry is... a technique which differs from other forms of weaving in having no weft, or horizontal threads carried the full width of the fabric. Discontinuous coloured wefts are much more numerous than the warps, or vertical threads, which are not visible in the finished tapestry...

In tapestry the discontinuous wefts can meet or join in several ways. By the simplest method two wefts coming from opposite directions wrap and turn around adjacent warps, leaving a slit or open space. This slit may be left open... or maybe sewn up after the tapestry is removed from the loom. By another method, called dovetailing the wefts turn around a common warp thread... Interlocking... involves adjacent wefts looped through each other between two warps... Yet another technique is twill, in which the weft is floated over two or more warps to form a diagonal ribbing... In contemporary tapestry eccentric wefts are beaten into curved shapes and packed more tightly in some areas...

A contemporary tapestry may be made by using many different techniques; it may, for example, be woven on or off a loom, knotted, crocheted. Twentieth century textiles are no longer reliant on the loom and no longer seen as a branch of the decorative arts; they are recognised as individual creations along with paintings and sculpture. (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia 2003)

*Illustration: by the author*

The notion of practice as tapestry as outlined here, is equivalent to the idea of culture as ‘social fabric’: both images emphasise the interwoven nature of interactions. However, a cloth is usually uniform in appearance whereas a tapestry may/may not reproduce the same consistent image. Thus, the metaphor of a tapestry allows an appreciation of the discontinuous within the continuous:

The imagery of the tapestry aptly conveys a picture of culture as integrated. Many strands, many colours, many patterns contribute to the overall design of a tapestry, just as many items of behaviour and many customs form patterns that, in turn, compose a culture. Culture is integrated only to a degree. (Rosman et al 2010: 9)

### 7.1.2. A narrative analysis:

In Chapter Four I provided justification of the selection of narrative analysis as a method for making sense of the data generated by the research. Lawler (2002: 242) provides the following description:

[Narratives are] *social products* produced by people within the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations. They are related to the experience people have of their lives, but they are not transparent carriers of that experience. Rather, they are interpretative devices, through which people represent themselves, both to themselves and to others. Further narratives do not originate with the individual: rather, they circulate culturally to provide a repertoire (though not an infinite one) from which people can produce their own stories. (- emphasis as original)

As an extension of Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration (see also Chapter Four) meanings created become invested over time within the culturally shared narratives, providing structuring structures which both enable and constrain the practice of social agents:

...as the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organises; the structural properties of the social system do not exist outside of action but are not chronically implicated in its production and reproduction. (Giddens 1984: 374)

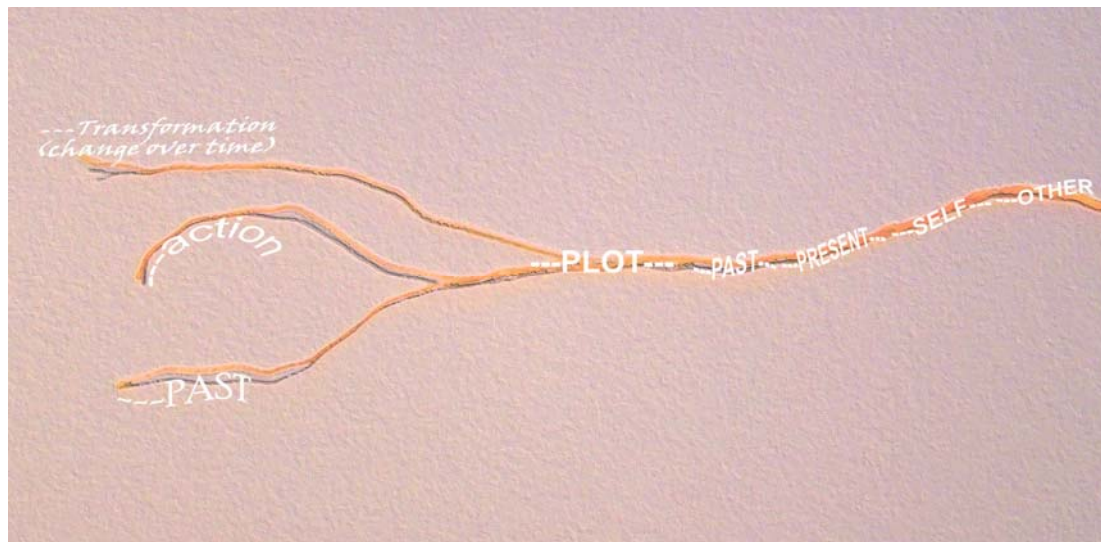
Potentially in the practice of social research, narrative analysis provides a means for understanding the interaction of social structure and agency in our descriptions of social practice.

Lawler (2002) identifies narrative as composed of the following elements:

- Transformation (change over time)
- Action
- Characters

Lawler outlines these elements as: “*a central means by which people connect together past and present, self and other*”. Extending the earlier image of cultural strands, I have represented the elements of narrative as identified by Lawler in visual form:

**Figure 7.3: The coming together of narrative strands:**



*Illustration: by the author*

### 7.1.3. Briefly, a consideration of the ‘truth’ of events

A single thread can be spun many ways...

Having directly experience the pressure of BV, I was aware of the performance management framework as having heightened awareness amongst individuals of a perception of being judged and of the possibility of the individual becoming convinced of

the need to create a self-consciously 'good' impression in providing an account of their own 'performance' in the workplace.

...when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation. (Goffman 1959: 26)

*Can we be sure of all that we see, all that we are told? Exactly what is being 'impressed' and why? As social researchers it is important that we remain alert to the impression conveyed to us by others. Equally we have too, to be sensitive of the impression we convey to others...*

## 7.2. Organisational Development:

*Best Value is not about capacity, it is about capability.* ('Mark' EDC officer, in discussion of the poor performance of Teesdale District Council explaining the accomplishment of BV at EDC).

### 7.2.1. The beginning of something new:

In 1997 EDC adopted the mission:

***To make the district great!***

Influenced by many years of social and economic deprivation attributed to the local collapse in the mining industry, elected members were determined to steer a course of change within the wider district area. The timing of events is perhaps revealing. In May 1997 New Labour were swept to office following a landslide election victory. A traditional Labour stronghold, the success of the party at national level is certain to have contributed a special impetus locally. There were also changes within the political make-up of EDC. The 1997 local elections had resulted in an influx of twenty-two newly elected members. Additionally, newly returned members were eager to put aside old hostilities and start afresh. Listening to an account provided by a long-serving senior elected member, I was told that members became united in the joint aim: *to make the district great*. This alone was not enough and it soon became apparent that in order to effectively bolster prosperity in the district, changes would need to be made internally within the administrative and political structures of the authority. Change at EDC, predated the formal introduction of BV.

### 7.2.2. A progressive commitment:

A central concern at EDC was:

Good relations between Members and staff together with tripartite working. (EDC Comprehensive Performance Assessment Self Assessment, 2003: 27)

In 1997 the new 'Tripartite Agreement' at EDC was founded. The agreement involved the official coming together of: elected members, the Board of Directors and the trades unions

operating in the authority (through the Chair of the Joint Trades Union). Its purpose was to maintain a flow of communications between members and staff, safeguarding against the spread of rumour within the authority. It was explained:

...to make sure that people know what is happening, as it is happening. ('Derek' Interview)

The Tripartite Agreement was a unique EDC initiative, the only one of its kind in England. An achievement viewed with pride by senior figures within the authority, the agreement was seen as confirming the original and proactive response of those within the authority – credentials which further underlined a reputation for 'excellence' as deserved.

**Figure 7.4: The Tripartite Agreement\***



Source: EDC BVPP 2003-04

\* The decision to reveal the identities of the Tripartite Leaders was reached on the basis of EDC as a public organisation and the materials referred to as being within the public realm. Those identified did not directly contribute to the findings of the research.

In the vein of ‘getting organised, members pledged to ensure the health and safety of all EDC employees. The Health and Safety at Work Act had come into force in 1974. However, despite this, in 1994 an incident occurred (details were not forthcoming) which highlighted the non-compliance of the authority. Members ensured that the situation was addressed and from then on the correct standards and procedures adhered. A member explained that the commitment to uphold the Health and Safety at Work Act was founded on a principle of care which went beyond mere legal compliance. I was told that the stance taken by members was intended to send a symbolic message to all employees: *that elected members cared personally*, for their safety and wellbeing in the workplace. A commitment further underlined in the formal policy of the authority, indicated by documentation distributed to new staff at induction:

- Health and Safety at Work Policy
- Safety Working Procedures
- Violence at Work Policy
- Stress at Work Policy
- Alcohol and Drugs Misuse Policy and Procedure
- Smoking Policy
- Workplace Bullying: What you should know
- A Pocket FAST Guide to Personal Safety (produced by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust)

Later in partnership with the PCT, the authority arranged twice weekly access to an onsite Practice Nurse for the benefit of staff and elected members. Appointments were made in the strictest confidence with special support provided for: stress reduction, smoking cessation, alcohol and drug related issues. At the time of the research, BVPI 12 ‘*number of working days or shifts lost through sickness*’ was included in the basket of performance indicators identified by government as indicating ‘corporate health’. It is possible to question the motivation of the authority: *was EDC guided by a sense of duty to employees, or was it attempting to ensure a good performance output?* Further, provision of healthcare advice could be construed as meddling with the authority inappropriately extending an interest into the private concerns of employees. Notwithstanding, it was



emphasised that the provision of a practice nurse demonstrated a *progressive agenda* within the authority to promote the personal health and wellbeing of employees.

Prior to creation of the Contact Centre the PCT had occupied part of Building Six, within the main office complex of the authority. At the time of the research, no other authority in County Durham had established a direct partnership with a PCT; together both organisations worked closely in the aim of ‘building a healthy community’. Further, EDC was the only County Durham authority to provide on-site healthcare access to staff. Proud of its trailblazing course, senior figures within the authority felt the initiative demonstrated an active response to local health improvement, a caring regard for the wellbeing of all staff and evidence of a bold pioneering spirit to devise local practice-based solutions to remedy social problems and effectively manage the organisation – further proof, if needed, of a deserved reputation of excellence.

### 7.2.3. Fully Integrated Organisational Development (FIOD):

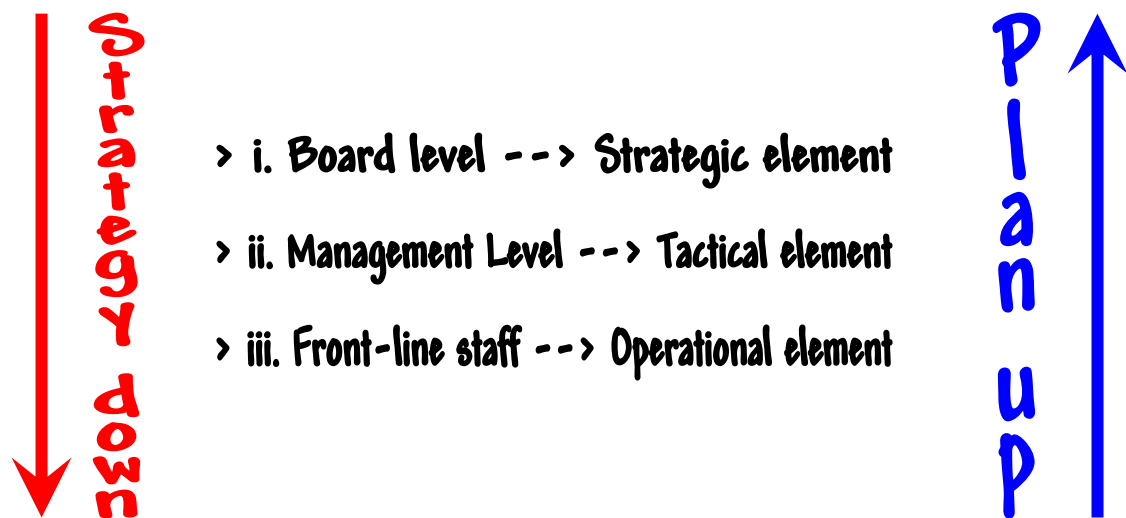
...with the assistance of consultants, we developed what is known as the Fully Integrated Organisational Development Programme (FIOD). (EDC *Comprehensive Performance Assessment: Self Assessment 2003*: pp.27)

At the turn of the millennium EDC encountered a number of significant problems which, it was felt, occurred as a result of inadequate project planning processes. The services of *Paul Wrights Associates* (PWA – a local management consultancy) were obtained and together the authority developed FIOD. Senior individuals within the authority, including both management and members, were particularly proud of FIOD. Commitment to the model was devotional and all projects in the authority were planned according to its principles. A nominated few had even been selected to spread the ‘gospel’, representatives of EDC travelling to instruct external partners in the approach.

FIOD employed a hierarchical planning process: a ‘*goals down – plans up*’ principle. Senior managers determined the main corporate objectives to be pursued by the organisation, whilst those below this level developed plans to achieve the goals outlined.

Elements of the framework were then completed in a top-down order of succession. A key feature of the design of FIOD was its (alleged) simplicity and the belief that the model required a minimum of specialist training. As a ‘fully integrated’ project planning approach, FIOD integrated: *risk assessment, planning, performance management, formal review* and *organisational learning processes*. Elements of the framework were delegated according to the position occupied in the hierarchy, senior managers conceived as primary ‘decision-makers’.

Figure 7.5: FIOD – a hierarchical project management planning framework



*Illustration: Authors own representation*

The *FIOD Implementation Pack*, produced by PWA explained:

Successful change strategies can only be implemented if they are correctly launched and driven. Research carried out by the Harvard Business School shows that the main reason many organisations fail is because they are unable to facilitate the conversion of business strategies into meaningful actions. FIOD is critical in achieving this. FIOD does this by providing a simple framework which is based on the empowering principle of *goals down ~ plans up*.

*STEP ONE:*

The first stage of FIOD, executed by the nominated strategic team (typically comprised of the board or senior management team), required completion of the ‘*Project Launch Document*’:

**Figure 7.6: FIOD Project Launch Document**

| PROJECT LAUNCH DOCUMENT   |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
|---|---|-------------|-------------|---------------|--|-----------------|----------------------|
| Project Name  | Project Number  | Issued By   |             | Issued to     |  | Start Date      |                      |
|   |   | Date Issued |             | Approved By   |  | Completion Date |                      |
|   |   |             |             | Approval Date |  |                 |                      |
| Project Description (continue on separate sheet if necessary)                 |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
| PROJECT PARAMETERS  |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
| Financial Budget  | Design  | Development | Engineering | Procurement   | Production   | Test            | Install & Commission |
|   |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
| Labour Budget   |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
| Applicable Standards  |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
| Departments/Organisations Required to Provide Input                           |   |             |             |               | Identify the Business Case Addressed by this Project |                 |                      |
|   |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
| Project Manager   | <b>ATTACH ALL RELEVANT SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION TO THIS LAUNCH DOCUMENT</b> |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
|   |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |
| <b>When completing this sheet refer to the notes on sheet 15 of this pack</b> |   |             |             |               |  |                 |                      |

Source: PWA (2006)

The document aimed to have established on one side of A4:

- Formal parameters of the project
- Project approval
- Timeframe and budget
- All parties to be included in the implementation of the project

- A designated Project Manager.

*STEP TWO:*

The next stage required completion of the ‘Objective Planning Sheet’ this too was completed at a strategic level:

**Figure 7.7: FIOD Objective Planning Sheet**

**OBJECTIVE PLANNING SHEET**

|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|---|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Project Name</b>   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                | <b>Project Manager</b> |                  |
| <b>Project Number</b>   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                | <b>Compiled By</b>     |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                | <b>Approved By</b>     |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                | <b>Date</b>            |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                | <b>Approval Date</b>   |                  |
| <b>No</b>   | <b>Project Strategic Objectives</b> | <b>Key Performance Measure(s)</b> | <b>Source of Measures</b> | <b>Frequency of Collection</b> | <b>Collected By</b>    | <b>Report To</b> |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
|   |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |
| <b>When completing this sheet refer to the notes on sheet 15 of this pack</b> |                                     |                                   |                           |                                |                        |                  |


*Source: PWA (2006)*

The document established a performance management framework for the project outlined. Following the introduction of BV, the document more easily enabled compliance of the authority and is illustrative of the direct impact of BV on the internal planning processes adopted by the authority.

STEP THREE:

The final stage in planning completed by the strategic team was ‘Risk Management Sheet’ designed to: “...identify the action required to remove or reduce risk” (PWA 2006 FIOD Implementation Pack).

Figure 7.8: FIOD Risk Assessment

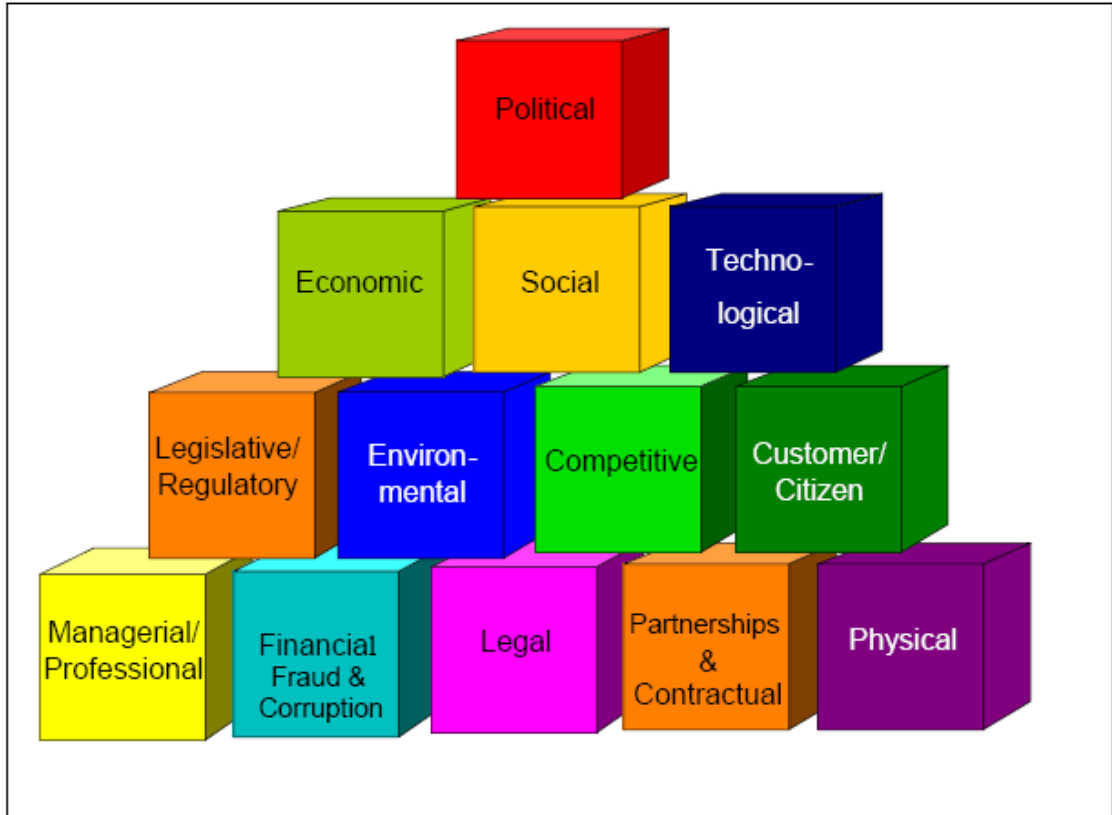
| RISK ASSESSMENT  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|--|---|--|--|---------------|--------------|--|-----------|----------|
| <br>doing it the wright way   |   | <b>Risk Assessment Matrix</b>  |  |               |              |  |           | Sheet Of |
|  |   | <b>Likelihood of Risk Happening</b><br>A <b>Very High</b><br>B <b>High</b><br>C <b>Significant</b><br>D <b>Low</b><br>E <b>Very Low</b><br>F <b>Impossible</b> | <b>Impact on Activity or Project</b><br>4 Negligible    3 Marginal    2 Critical    1 Catastrophic |               |              |  | Issued By |          |
| 1. Write down the risks below and score the<br>2. Ensure the risk number from the left hand column below is relevant to the box in the matrix above<br>3. Identify the target score, enter in the matrix and note the appropriate actions to deal with the risk in the right hand column below |   |  |  |               |              | Issued To                                    |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              | Date Issued                                  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              | Approved By                                  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              | Date Approved                                |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              | Risk Assessment Accepted By                  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
| <b>When completing this sheet refer to notes on sheet 16 of this pack</b>  | Project Name                            |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
| Project Number   |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
| Project Manager  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
| No   | Description of Risk (What can go wrong) | Likelihood of Risk Happening   | Impact on Activity or Project  | Overall Score | Target Score | Actions Required to Achieve the Target Score | Action By | When     |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |
|  |   |  |  |               |              |  |           |          |

Source: PWA (2006)

FIOD treated risk as inevitable and in an attempt to manage and minimise the negative implications of risk required a thorough identification of all possible risk factors at the commencement of a project. The strategy relied upon the prior knowledge and foresight of managers – however, even at its best, prediction is an inexact science. EDC employed

‘STORM’: a *Strategic and Operational Risk Management* methodology which required assessment of the identified “*thirteen blocks of strategic risk management*”.

**Figure 7.9: STORM – Strategic Operational Risk Management Methodology**



*Source: EDC Audit Committee (2007) Risk Management Progress Report*

In addition, it became established custom within the authority to include consideration of the following ‘implications’:

- Financial
- Legal
- Policy
- Risk
- Corporate Plan and Priorities
- Equality and Diversity
- E-government
- Procurement
- Communications

The process was intended to ensure that the project remained consistent with the formal policy, aims and objectives of the authority. It also enabled an on going demonstration of good corporate governance practice, useful at times of audit and external inspection.

*STEP FOUR:*

The ‘strategic element’ completed responsibility for the planning process was handed down the hierarchy to the appointed Project Manager, the project entering its ‘tactical’ stage of planning. First, the Project Manager was required to complete a ‘Roadmap Plan’:

**Figure 7.10: FIOD Roadmap Plan**

| Project Name     |  |                |           | When completing this sheet refer to the notes on page 16 of this pack |             |               |         |
|------------------|--|----------------|-----------|---|-------------|---------------|---------|
| Project Manager  |  | Project Number | Issued By | Issue Date  | Approved By | Approval Date |         |
|                  |  |                | Issued To | Issue Level   |             |               |         |
| Milestone Number |  |                |           | Start Date  | Finish Date | Sign Off      | Comment |
| 1                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 2                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 3                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 4                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 5                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 6                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 7                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 8                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 9                |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |
| 10               |  |                |           |   |             |               |         |

Source: PWA (2006)

In the accompanying *FIOD Implementation Pack* it was explained:

This document sets out a maximum of ten steps (**Signposts**), which are required to be taken to move through the project. Start and finish dates are established and

once agreed are not allowed to move. This document then drives the project.  
(PWA: 2006 'FIOD Implementation Pack')

The document is designed to ensure that the planned project is completed within the allotted timeframe. Although the framework makes no direct reference to the eponymous 'SMART' objectives, there is a clear sense in which this particular document and the FIOD framework in general had been devised according to these principles:

Figure 7.11: SMART Objectives

**S- specific**  
**M- measureable**  
**A- achievable**  
**R- realistic**  
**T- time limited**

*Illustration: by the author*

#### **STEP FIVE:**

Following on, the Project Manager was required to begin completion of the '*Strategic Progress Chart*', completed on an ongoing basis throughout the course of the project. A 'strategic progress chart' was completed for each milestone identified in the 'Roadmap Plan'. The task essentially involved the main task being broken down into smaller more achievable tasks, enabling tasks to be delegated amongst the team and accomplished within a set period of time. Additionally the document integrated organisational learning features e.g. 'problems identified' and 'possible consequences'.



Figure 7.12: FIOD Strategic Progress Chart

| Project Name          |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                | Department/Staff Required  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|-----------------------|--|-----------|------------|---------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------|-----------|----------------|--|--------------------|-------------|--|-----------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Milestone Number      |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                | Project Number   |                    |             |  | Project Manager |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Milestone Description |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                | Issued By  |                    | Issued To   |  | Approved By     |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Activity              | Activity Description   | Work Done | Work to do | Estimated Completion Date | Quality Acceptable? | Change required?   | Pending | Work Cont | Quality Issues | Issue Date   |                    | Issue Level |  | Approval Date   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|                       |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                | When completing this sheet refer to the notes on sheet 17 of this pack |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|                       |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                | Period in days, weeks, months, quarters (delete those not needed)      |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9                     |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10                    |  |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Additional Comments   | Problem Description  |           |            |                           |                     | Suggested Action   |         |           |                |  | Managers Comments  |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|                       | Possible Consequence   |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|                       | Likely Cause   |           |            |                           |                     | Report Compiled By |         |           |                |  | Managers Signature |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Legend                | <b>X = Executes work; D = Makes sole decision; d = makes joint decision; P = Managers Progress; T = provides tuition; C = must be consulted;</b><br><b>I = must be informed; A = available to advise</b> |           |            |                           |                     |                    |         |           |                |  |                    |             |  |                 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**STEP SIX:**

At this stage the tactical and operational processes of FIOD became fused as the Project Manager, working in conjunction with the relevant departmental manager, completes a ‘Critical Action Planning Sheet’ for each of the milestones identified in the earlier ‘Roadmap Plan’. The document established, at an operational level, the intended performance management framework of the project, thus further ensuring compliance with the principles of BV.

**Figure 7.13: FIOD Critical Action Planning Sheet:**

|                |                 |   |  |                    |                         |               |           |
|----------------|-----------------|---|--|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------|-----------|
| PROJECT NAME   |                 |   |  | PROJECT MANAGER    |                         |               |           |
| PROJECT NUMBER |                 | MILESTONE ADDRESSED                           |  | COMPILED BY        |                         | APPROVED BY   |           |
|                |                 |   |  | DATE               |                         | APPROVAL DATE |           |
| No.            | CRITICAL ACTION | KEY PERFORMANCE MEASURE(S)<br>Completion date |  | SOURCE OF MEASURES | FREQUENCY OF COLLECTION | COLLECTED BY  | REPORT TO |
|                |                 |   |  |                    |                         |               |           |
|                |                 |   |  |                    |                         |               |           |
|                |                 |   |  |                    |                         |               |           |
|                |                 |   |  |                    |                         |               |           |
|                |                 |   |  |                    |                         |               |           |
|                |                 |   |  |                    |                         |               |           |

Source: PWA (2006)

**STEP SEVEN:**

In the ‘Critical Action Control Sheet’ key tasks become further broken down into smaller more discreet tasks, enabling service level managers to delegate tasks to staff at an ‘operational’ level.

**Figure 7.14: FIOD Critical Action Control Sheet:**

| CRITICAL ACTION     |                     |           |            |             |          |               |  |
|---------------------|---------------------|-----------|------------|-------------|----------|---------------|--|
| RESPONSIBLE OFFICER | CRITICAL ACTION     | ISSUED BY |            | ISSUE DATE  |          | APPROVED BY   |  |
|                     |                     | ISSUED TO |            | ISSUE LEVEL |          | APPROVAL DATE |  |
| TASK                | DESCRIPTION OF TASK |           | START DATE | FINISH DATE | SIGN OFF | COMMENT       |  |
|                     |                     |           |            |             |          |               |  |
|                     |                     |           |            |             |          |               |  |
|                     |                     |           |            |             |          |               |  |
|                     |                     |           |            |             |          |               |  |
|                     |                     |           |            |             |          |               |  |
|                     |                     |           |            |             |          |               |  |

Source: PWA (2006)

**STEPEIGHT:**

The final element of FIOD ‘*Learning, Innovations and Development*’ required completion of the ‘*Project Close Out*’. This document was completed by the appointed Project Manager and provided for review by the Board. The document involved a comparison between the planned and achieved project outcomes and was intended to inform the course of future organisational learning.

**Figure 7.15: FIOD Project Close Out**

|  |                |                |             |                             |            |  |                      |
|--|----------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------|------------|--|----------------------|
| PROJECT NAME   | PROJECT NUMBER | CLOSE OUT BY   |             | ISSUED TO                   |            | DATE APPROVED                                  |                      |
|  |                | CLOSE OUT DATE |             | APPROVED BY                 |            | PROJECT MANAGER                                |                      |
| PROJECT DESCRIPTION:                                 |                |                |             |                             |            |  |                      |
| PROJECT PARAMETERS                                   |                |                |             |                             |            |  |                      |
| BUDGETS  | DESIGN         | DEVELOPMENT    | ENGINEERING | PROCUREMENT                 | PRODUCTION | TEST   | INSTALL & COMMISSION |
| FINANCIAL PLANNED                                    |                |                |             |                             |            |  |                      |
| FINANCIAL ACTUAL                                     |                |                |             |                             |            |  |                      |
| LABOUR PLANNED                                       |                |                |             |                             |            |  |                      |
| LABOUR ACTUAL  |                |                |             |                             |            |  |                      |
| DESCRIBE WHAT WORKED WELL AND WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL |                |                |             | PLANNED START DATE          |            | DID THE PROJECT ACHIEVE ITS INITIAL OBJECTIVES |                      |
|  |                |                |             | ACTUAL START DATE           |            | YES  | NO                   |
|  |                |                |             | PLANNED FINISH DATE         |            |  |                      |
|  |                |                |             | ACTUAL FINISH DATE          |            |  |                      |
| LESSONS LEARNED:                                     |                |                |             | SHARED LESSONS LEARNED WITH |            |  |                      |

*Source: PWA (2006)*

The diagram provides an overview of the FIOD process. The diagram highlights hierarchical responsibility and provides a short description of the task involved, indicating the specific process integrated by the framework. The final stage shows a ‘feedback’ arrow to the Strategic team. FIOD integrated a hotchpotch of corporate planning processes within the one framework, providing a checklist to managers and ensuring the compliance of the authority with the agenda enforced by government.

Figure 7.16: Overview of FIOD

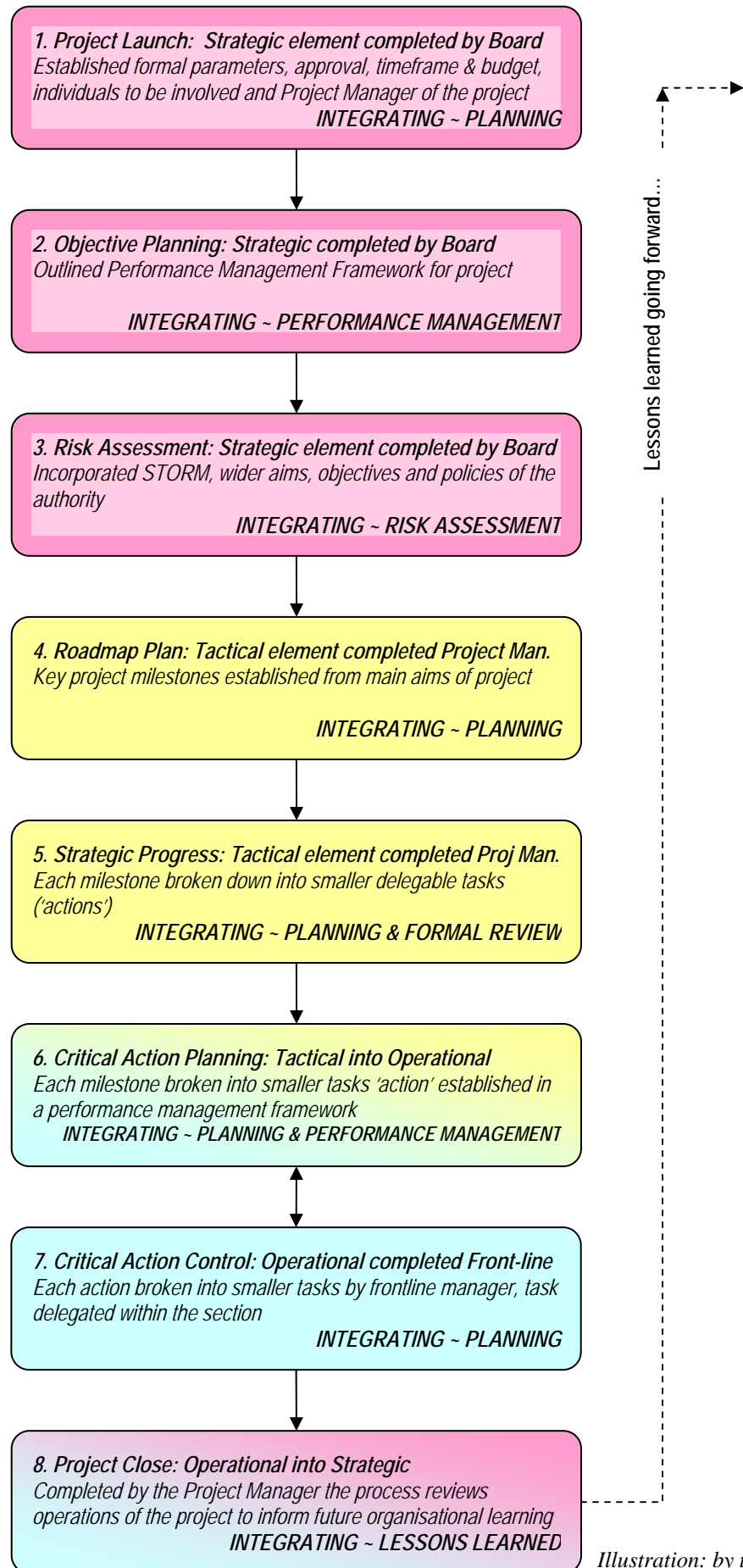


Illustration: by the author

### 7.2.3a. Spotlight: FIOD

The FIOD framework was at once bureaucratic and managerialist. Weber (1947) described bureaucratic forms of organisation as “*technically the most satisfactory form of organisation*”. Popularly bureaucratic features are characterised as involving:

...precision, continuity, discipline, strictness (Albrow 1970: 45).

FIOD demanded precision both in terms of the established parameters of the project (especially, with regards to budgets and timescales) and in specifying a desired level of output in the key measures imposed of milestones, actions and tasks during in completion of the project. Further, through the universal application of the framework continuity became established and all procedures strictly adhered to – all Directors and Service Heads were fully trained in FIOD methodology. Beetham (1987:15) provides the following (widely accepted) description of a bureaucracy:

The central feature of bureaucracy is the systematic division of labour, whereby complex administrative problems are broken down into manageable and repetitive tasks, each the province of a particular ‘office’ and then coordinated under a centralised hierarchy of command. The mechanical analogy here is quite precise: the subdivision of a complex set of movements into their constituent elements, and their reassembly into coordinated processes, achieves an enormous scope, precision and cost-effectiveness of operation. (p.15)

The framework imposed a systematic, hierarchically informed division of labour within the authority:

- *strategic objectives* into *milestones* → at a strategic level
- *milestones* into *actions* → at a tactical level
- *actions* into *individual tasks* → at an operational level

In the key respects outlined, FIOD can be said to have further underlined and reinforced the bureaucratically informed system of administration within EDC.

However, in the specific controls imposed of project parameters, the framework also demonstrated a more contemporary ‘management imperative’ (Reed 2010) specifying:

...sharper definition of costs and outputs, and of personal responsibility for achieving them... (Du Gay 2000: 125)

Increasingly, managerialist principles have come to inform nearly all contemporary processes, outputs and outcomes across the public, private and voluntary sectors (Du Gay 2000; Dingwell & Strangleman 2005; Rainey & Chun 2005). *Management* – more so than bureaucratic organisational forms, despite a continued dependency – has become ubiquitous. We even talk in terms of our own ‘emotional self-management’:

More than any other form of knowing or practice, management is claimed to be absolutely nomadic and universally useful. It is the synthesis and culmination of the stories of control of things, the control of people and even the control of control itself. (Parker 2002: 6)

FIOD was designed as a framework to enable complete control over all aspects of project management processes at EDC. Each worksheet within the framework a reminder of the responsibility established and the necessary approval required for completion of task:

*For example:*

|                 |                |           |  |  |  |               |  |
|-----------------|----------------|-----------|--|--|--|---------------|--|
| Project Name    |                |           |  | <b>When completing this sheet refer to the notes on page 16 of this pack</b> |  |               |  |
| Project Manager | Project Number | Issued By |  | Issue Date   |  | Approved By   |  |
|                 |                | Issued To |  | Issue Level  |  | Approval Date |  |

The framework design controlled allocation of specific planning elements within the project management process and delegated tasks to individuals: *essentially controlling what gets done, when and by whom*. At several points in the process the framework imposed a matrix of control to ensure the parameters of the project, as decided by the board, were observed:

*For example:*

|                      |        |             |             |             |            |      |                      |
|----------------------|--------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------|----------------------|
| PROJECT DESCRIPTION: |        |             |             |             |            |      |                      |
| PROJECT PARAMETERS   |        |             |             |             |            |      |                      |
| BUDGETS              | DESIGN | DEVELOPMENT | ENGINEERING | PROCUREMENT | PRODUCTION | TEST | INSTALL & COMMISSION |

Integrating: risk assessment, planning, performance management, formal review and organisational learning processes the framework aimed to achieve *ultimate control* of *all* local authority planning processes within one overall system. In a sense, attainment of control was deemed necessary to guard against the possibility of failure.

In a discussion of the contemporary trend for the increasing practice of management, Parker (2002:6-9) outlines three possible definitions of 'management':

- i. **Noun:** a group of executives directing an industrial undertaking; a new class of people; power and status within an organisation/society.
- ii. **Verb:** process or act of managing; skill in contriving/handling etc; the practice of management as a separation from actually doing, or practice of a higher level of control within these processes; Etymologically linked to the hand but generally a hands-off process; might substantively relate to the things managers do e.g. marketing, strategy, finance; increasingly a management of everything (e.g. home, divorce, children, workers, etc.); division is between management as good and non-management as bad.
- iii. **Noun:** academic discipline concerned with managing and administration; the part of the academic institution concerned with the same.

Parker identifies 'managerialism' as a "*generalised ideology of management*" in the sense of all three definitions outlined.



### 7.3. Informing of the context of change at EDC:

Thus far, through the lens of ‘organisational development’ I have indicated the formal processes of change at EDC, including discussion of the Tripartite Agreement and FIOD. The initiatives referred to were part of a process of organisational renewal begun in 1997 – encouraged by a number of factors which combined to create positive circumstances for change within the authority. *Importantly, this period predated the introduction of BV.* Senior figures were proud of the achievements made and saw the initiatives as revealing an ambitious and advanced agenda within the authority – a pride which was demonstrated in the altruistic instruction given to partners in the principles and design of FIOD<sup>†</sup>. However, there was a subtext which informed this main narrative...

#### 7.3.1. Bad Old Times:

When told of the 1994 contraventions of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, I had been surprised. Especially, as Easington had been an industrial mining area with a strong union tradition. During a formal induction on the first day of fieldwork (along with three bona-fide new recruits) I was told that prior to the process of organisational renewal began in 1997 there had been a Directorate in which the practice of bullying and intimidation by senior personnel had been routine. Further, that this was known and had been allowed to continue unchallenged – until a young woman, at the time eight months pregnant, suffered a miscarriage. Medical opinion was that the miscarriage had been brought about as a result of stress caused to the woman, triggered by the unacceptable acceptable workplace conduct of her superiors. Unable to ignore events, an inquiry was held. It resulted in the dismissal of the then Director, managers and supervisory staff implicated in the bullying. I was told that following this incident the authority had adopted a ‘*robust anti-bullying stance*’. It has also been vowed that under no circumstances would such events be tolerated again: the authority had made a promise to guard the interests of all its employees. The events enable an alternative view of the Tripartite Agreement...

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<sup>†</sup> In the period of one month I travelled first to Derwentside District Council and then on to the Shelter officers (based Old Miner’s Hall, Durham), in order to observe instruction of FIOD by EDC personnel.

### 7.3.2. An obliging organisation:

Throughout my time at EDC, I was frequently surprised by the availability of refreshment facilities. Most shared offices possessed at least a water-cooler, tea and coffee making facilities. Also, the addition of a fridge and toaster was not unusual. There were a number of well-equipped kitchenettes; a staff canteen which served hot/cold meals and snacks, with generous opening times; two not-for-profit tuck-shops which operated on an informal basis, available to ‘those-in-the-know’. It was quite usual during the course of the working day for individuals to leave their desks, only to return with a small snack and to consume these at their desks. Despite health and safety objections against such practice; the hierarchy of the organisation appeared content for this practice to continue unchallenged.

My purpose here is not to judge, rather it is to convey an impression of an organisation which far exceeded usual measures to ensure the personal comfort and contentment of its workforce. There was a sense that the generous provision of refreshment facilities was a necessary privilege that communicated and demonstrated that the ongoing efforts of employees were appreciated by elected members and superiors; that staff fully deserved the provision of refreshments. Arguably, access to onsite healthcare provision (see 7.2.2) also demonstrated a concern for the wider wellbeing of employees. Moreover there was little fuss from managers when individual employees requested ergonomically designed furniture, if such an item was deemed necessary a catalogue was produced and the item ordered.

The management of EDC understood and remained sensitive to the evolving (if operationally inconvenient) personal circumstances of employees. One employee, aware of her legal entitlement, was nonetheless appreciative of the perceived kindness shown to her when planning her return to work following maternity leave:

I was supposed to come back in June [but] just wasn’t ready for it. It was too soon... I came in and I saw ‘Phil’ [her line-manager] and he was really good. I know that you’re entitled to have the extended leave... I just needed to have a bit more time... ‘Phil’ said: “Put it in writing and [if] you would like to come back phased return you can come back and do a day a week, whatever suits you.” (‘Ruth’ Interview)

Ruth was appreciative of the sensitivity shown by Phil and that he had responded to her on a human level, allaying her feelings of awkwardness. He had provided emotional reassurance and his advice (although consistent with the bureaucratic procedure) had been framed in a compassionate and caring context in a way which mediated the formal requirements of the organisation and the very human need for emotional reassurance.

In the events observed and the accounts retold, I gained an impression of EDC as an organisation which maintained a compassionate interest in the wellbeing of its employees. Quite a turnaround from the event described of the past, when the practice of bullying has been openly tolerated. In outlining EDC as a ‘compassionate’ organisation I have deliberately outlined the unexceptional, emphasising the customary normality of such practice. *But what is compassion?*

...compassion goes beyond an individual feeling of empathy and is expressed through action of some sort. In organisations, this form of care giving often involves conveying ‘an emotional presence by displaying warmth, affection and kindness’ (Kahn 1993: 546). In some sense, compassionate acts often display a form of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995; 1998) and are guided by a mutual concern that allows action in connection with others. (Frost et al 2000: 27)

In the context of this study I understand compassion as a deliberate action, displaying a degree of warmth, affection and/or kindness in a way which provides for a connection with others. Events are rarely uncomplicated and during the research I heard murmurings of BV as beginning to exert pressure on the caring posture adopted by the authority. BVPI 12 ‘*number of working days or shifts lost through sickness absence*’ was one amongst a ‘basket’ of performance indicators prioritised by government and used to ‘measure’ corporate health. Off-record I was told of industrial action by two former employees of EDC, challenging premature release from contract on grounds of ill-health. At the time of the research ongoing, their action was supported by the trades union. Following the introduction of BVPI12 a concerted effort had taken place within the authority to reduce levels of recorded sickness absence – to the detriment of staff

with ongoing health issues. Disappointment was expressed, once the authority had been sympathetic, increasingly it was alleged as being less so.

### 7.3.3. Appearances matter:

On August 25<sup>th</sup> 1999, a nine year old girl from Sunderland was reported missing. Following an extensive ten day search by police and volunteers her body was found hidden under floorboards at a property in Murton. A local man was arrested at the scene and later convicted of the girl's rape and murder. I was told:

We [EDC] had a lot invested in the handling of the murder. ('Derek' Interview)

It was explained that the Elected Leader of the Council and the then local MP (John Cummings) both lived in Murton. The body of the girl had been found in council-owned property. The man, later convicted of the crime had, been a council tenant and a former employee of EDC. The description, presented as 'fact', consisted of no more than a series of unfortunate coincidences. The only relevant concern of EDC was that the girl's body had been found in a property of which it was the landlord. Following events, members of the community wanted the property demolished. A request complied with by EDC.

Initially puzzled, over time I began to make sense of the narrative re-telling of these events. Reminiscent of the traditional paternal practice of social relations within the Durham coalfields (Beynon & Austrin 1994) officers and members alike within EDC had conceived of a moral duty to protect those in the district – a duty which had been made more pressing by the experience of social deprivation. These events were perceived as indicating the failure of the authority, in having sworn a moral obligation to protect those within its community.

At EDC appearances mattered. As an organisation EDC *cared* about how it was perceived within the district. Further the authority was sensitive about how the district was perceived by those outside the local area. Following the success of the *Billy Elliott* film, Easington Colliery enjoyed a brief brush with fame. Much of the film had been shot in the A and B streets and the film had been based within a fictionalised mining village very much like Easington Colliery. The success of the film had been a decisive

factor in the decision to create a regional filming facility in Seaham. Yet, despite a successful association within the authority the film was met with ambivalence. In mentioning the film, I had anticipated much excitement but instead I found disdain at how an area within the district had been portrayed. One interviewee commented:

It's not all flat-caps and whippets, you know. ('Jan' Interview)

Jan, with others, was concerned that the representation of Easington Colliery in the film *Billy Elliot* might negatively influence external perceptions of the district and was resentful that this should be the case.

#### 7.3.4. Progressive 'efficient' change:

Many within EDC accepted the need for change as unavoidable and an inevitable necessity:

I think that [we] have to change, haven't got a lot of choice really... we have to be progressive and change with the times in order to exist. ('Samantha' Interview)

Samantha had previously worked in the private sector and occupied a corporate support role within the authority. She felt that in order for the institution of local government to continue to exist, local authorities were compelled to change. She outlined a specific version of change, namely '*progressive change*' and throughout the interview made a number of comparisons between the private and public sectors.

Perceiving the private sector as more efficient:

There is a complete different outlook. I mean, I was in shock! I didn't even think I would survive a year! People are slow to respond. They love meetings: meetings for meetings sake. You can go into a meeting and you'll sit there for two and you'll walk out that meeting and nothing is done, nothing [has been] actioned...

[EDC is] not [a] money-making organisation so it doesn't have that drive to be proactive... if your existence relies on profit then there is a different kind of attitude and I know that it is changing [referring to the efforts of the senior management team] they are trying to make it more business orientated...

culture is very hard to change, it takes a long time to change culture.

(‘Samantha’ Interview)

Samantha was not alone in her estimation of the inefficiency of local government:

I found that when I came to a local authority there were so many things you can’t change. It has been a real culture shock for me over the sixteen year[s] to find when something is not right you can’t just [change it]... There is this culture in local government still: *‘This is how it gets done’*. It has to go through this committee [and] that committee... I find that frustrating but I think it’s changing. Slowly, but it is changing. (‘Cora’ Interview – interviewee emphasis)

Of working in local government, a previous employee of the voluntary sector commented:

... you can’t be as dynamic as either the voluntary community sector or the private sector. (‘Edward’ Interview)

The views expressed reflect the popular opinion informing the course of public sector reform in recent decades:

A world-wide trend of privatising governmental activities and government-owned enterprises has proceeded on the premise that organisations and activities managed under the auspices of the public sector show important differences from those managed privately. Usually the premise holds that the publicly managed organisations operate less effectively and efficiently, and that privatising them will remedy their malaise.....

Reform movements, such as the New Public Management movement that has swept through many nations, often propose alternatives that involve applying to governmental management theories and techniques drawn from business management. (Rainey & Han Chun 2005: 72)

The notion can be summarised thus:



Possibly the notion is founded on the easier-to-quantify outputs of the private sector, particularly in terms of the profit-dependent business model: the production of profit ensuring the viability of business enterprise and thus associated as an indicator of success. However, residing within the argument of the supposed supreme efficiency of private sector business models is the unexamined notion of ‘efficiency’:

...‘efficiency’ seems to mean the provision of the same or greater outputs with reduced inputs. It thus subsumes within itself two other attributes, economy (less cost) and effectiveness (the achievement of specified objectives). The assumption here is that efficient government is also economic and effective government. This seems a somewhat immodest, one could even say simplistic, assumption (Du Gay 2000:104)

Conrad Russell (1993 – cited in Du Gay 200:105) succinctly demonstrated the complex relationship between efficiency, economy and effectiveness:

*... ‘if we take in more undergraduates without increasing the supply of books, the number of undergraduates who come to me and report that they cannot do their essays, because they cannot find the books, goes up. This appears to me to be inefficiency rather than efficiency.’*

On this basis Du Gay (2000:106) writes:

...it becomes apparent that it is more than possible for effective management to be inefficient or for effective management that is efficient in one context or at one time to be inefficient in another context or other time.

Dobbin (2010:213) suggests the socially constructed meaning of ‘efficiency’. Across all sectors the principle which informs the design of contemporary organisations is

efficiency, *but why should this be so?* Drawing on Meyer and Rowan (1977) he argues:

...firms come to look alike because they jump on the same bandwagons and not... because each figures out the single best way to organise. (p.213)

Meanwhile, Stein (2001:6) considers the ubiquity of the cultural phenomenon of 'efficiency', identifying a current 'cult of efficiency':

Efficiency is not an end, but a means to achieve valued ends. It is not a goal, but an instrument to achieve other goals. It is not a value, but a way to achieve other values. It is part of the story but never the whole. When it is used as an end itself, as a value in its own right, and as the overriding goal of public life, it becomes a cult.

#### 7.3.5. Surviving change:

Before I move on to outline BV at EDC, it is important to briefly pause and reflect a key theme to emerge from the research: *the generalised people of the district as having survived the tumult of change:*

There was a lot of us thought when the pits got shut: 'what we ganning to do now?' We had no life after the pits. But there is life after the pit... There will always be something... ('Frank' interview)

Many within the district had traversed the abyss of change and found '*something*'. Although entirely different from what had gone before this was not a '*nothing*'.



#### 7.4. Best Value at EDC:

So far, the chapter has concentrated on the history that informed the implementation of BV at EDC. Three years prior to the formal introduction of BV, the authority had already decided upon a course of organisational renewal. To an extent, this provided the authority with an advantage over other local authorities. Effectively, EDC had a march on the process of change required by BV...

##### 7.4.1. An 'excellent' local authority:

On the front page of the *Corporate Plan and Performance Summary 2004-2005* the authority proclaimed in bright orange type:



In the BVPP the authority pledged:

We want to be excellent in everything we do.

**You deserve nothing less.**

(EDC *Corporate & Performance Plan 2004-05*: 2 – emphasis as original)

An underlying local commitment and dedication to service informed the aspiration of excellence within the authority. In the year following their assessment, attention within EDC became focused on retention of its 'excellent' status:

The last year was a busy and challenging one. We continued to strive to build upon our "Excellent" CPA rating by the Audit Commission, to improve our services to you and to achieve the targets we set ourselves. (EDC *Corporate & Performance Plan 2005-06*: 4)

##### 7.4.2. Working at an 'excellent' local authority:

News that the Audit Commission had assessed EDC an 'excellent' local authority was met with a mixed response from employees:

Well, I think [excellent status is] good for everybody! I think it gives everybody a boost, I mean it can't hurt can it! I think you know Easington

being in a deprived area... you can't fall into the trap of thinking: '[Easington] is a right dump!' Because it's anything but... it's a place where the mines closed and that had a massive, massive impact on the whole district. So it's lovely to get something like that. It just shows it's not the down-and-out area the television likes to sometimes portray. It isn't! ('Sandra' interview)

For Sandra the 'excellent' status of EDC successfully provided a challenge to the negative conceptions of the wider district area. In this respect the judgement provided a psychological boost to morale. Another employee said:

.. I mean it is nice to have the kudos of working for an excellent authority.  
( 'Simon' interview)

Simon conceived that through the power of association the assessment of the Audit Commission had lent him a personal cachet. A distinction he considered likely to be beneficial to his personal career prospects. Others were more circumspect:

Um, how do you perceive 'excellent'? ...to be told you're excellent is pretty good. There is not a lot of councils that have been given that rating, so you know it is sort of like a privilege really. ('Richard' interview)

A Head of Service contended that the 'excellent' status had improved the calibre of those attracted to work at the authority:

I think it has helped attract staff. Certainly since we've gained excellent status the number of more professional, if you like the 'quality' that staff [bring] has improved – in terms of recruitment. We've got a new management team. We've got stronger Heads of Service than we've had in a long time. It's still going through, local government is in a constant state of flux, it is always changing; you're never consistent if you like... ('Paul' interview)

Some viewed the accomplishment as an anti-climax heralding a false dawn:

[When] we found out we were excellent... we were just so bogged down with the workload we were like: 'Yeah right!' We still have a hell of a lot to do, so what the hell does that mean?! ...we didn't know the benefits of us being an excellent authority...that wasn't communicated. ('Rachel' interview)

### 7.4.3. Understandings of BV:

When negotiating access to EDC I was surprised in being advised to exercise caution in how I approached the topic of BV. I was told to that some employees had little comprehension of the requirements of BV and to be careful in how I worded questions. At the time of the research, BV had been operational for about five years – and in that time had undergone a number of transformations (see Chapter Two). As EDC was an ‘excellent’ local authority I was slightly puzzled by this advice, but accepted BV was introduced to local government amongst a torrent of seemingly ceaseless central government initiatives.

Understandings of BV varied considerably across the authority. For some it was about process:

Well, there is the 4Cs which I know about. And I know that there is the continuous assessment and review of service delivery and this is linked into service plans and targeting, performance indicators and performance management. So I know a fair bit about the system and how it works, and previous incantations. (‘Ian’ interview)

Another employee outlined an understanding of the framework in terms of a process of negotiation and an assessment of economic ‘value’:

BV to me? There is a few things. Obviously cost, quality and performance is my three things. On my job, am I getting the best price I can pay [and] the best quality for my price? I mean if you go to the garage with £5000 you’re not expecting to drive away with a brand new Mercedes... They’re all affected by each other because your performance can be your cost and can be affected by your cost. If you’ve got a little builder who’s just small and he’s doing work for you but he hasn’t got the same numbers of staff as a big organisation, so his performance might be low but he might get more brownie points on his costs. The same can be said on performance, again on quality [but] quality should always be there! But then again is I say to someone I only want to spend £2000 on a house and he spends £2000 and then I say, ‘it’s still terrible.’ He could turn around and say it should have had £4000 spent on it. So it’s all linked, them three things there are linked, right... It’s like taking your car to the

garage: you want to pay a decent price for a decent job in a decent time. ('Eric' Interview)

Eric expressed an understanding in terms of a tacit acknowledgement of a practical and realistic assessment of 'value for money', somewhat in the mould of the everyday consumer. Others too applied a consumerist understanding of the regime:

...to me it's giving the customer what they want at a price they are prepared to pay ('Roger' interview)

The consumer-based expressed understandings of BV (premised upon both the local government as consumer and as vendor/supplier of service consumed by a wider public) indicate the business-like model approach which has come to inform public sector reform. Possibly, the attraction of such approaches lies in the simplicity of the principles involved. As active consumers in the consumer society it is convenient to conceive of the desirability of public sector reform in this mode, enabling discussion to become framed within the 'accessible everyday'. This provide license to the perpetuation of an illusion which enables the lay-person to express an expert opinion without any necessary qualification, whilst surreptitiously ensuring support for a policy which has (potentially) been improperly applied. Stewart (2000) reflects:

The emphasis on the customer had strengths, but also weaknesses. It hid the variety of relationships with the public. Some services are available on demand; others are rationed. Some services are provided free of charge; others are charged for, possibly subject to a means test. Some services have individual customers, but in others it is hard to identify an individual user. Some services are compulsory, while in others the public is free to decide whether to use the service. Local authorities arbitrate between different members of the public. They control and even prosecute individual members of the public. It requires not one word but many words to capture the variety of relationships. (pp. 259)

Others interpreted BV in terms of a professional duty to office. Yet, in addition to the rhetoric of professional piety, consumer based understandings of the framework continued to persist:

I try to look at it from both sides: customers and our side. This is a bit of pride I suppose in my job. I think that this section in particular and I am not privy to

everybody's work – except when I liaise with them. This section in particular I think provides extremely good BV to the customer and to the council. Because: we are very efficient [at] keeping on top of things. We have good liaison with our customers because we have a policy – which of course the council has – three rings and you pick the phone up, and it never fails in this office... the customer will get a response. [If] we say we'll ring back, we ring back. And you know, I can say that 100%. In this office they get the service that they pay for... ('Rita' interview)

Others expressed an understanding of BV in terms of efficiency<sup>‡</sup>:

I suppose it means providing high-quality services to the people of Easington in an efficient way. ('Peter' interview)

So far, the different descriptions outlined of BV were provided by employees occupying officer/lower management roles. Typically, these were individuals employed in a front-line capacity with an immediate responsibility for performance outputs, achieved directly or by subordinates. The passages reveal a range of understandings of BV amongst those at EDC. Yet despite these clearly different understandings of BV, EDC had thrived gaining recognition as an 'excellent' local authority.

A similar lack of uniform understanding was further demonstrated by more junior employees of the authority. A receptionist explained:

[To me BV is] giving the customer [the] correct information... ('Annabelle' interview)

Annabelle framed her understanding of BV in terms of the proficiencies she brought to her work. She explained that in her role as receptionist she took pride in ensuring that the member of the public who arrived at her desk was suitably directed by her, to the person within the authority best able to respond to their query. To an extent she had internalised her understanding of BV in terms of the 'value' she personally provided to the authority and the 'customer' in her professionally employed capacity as

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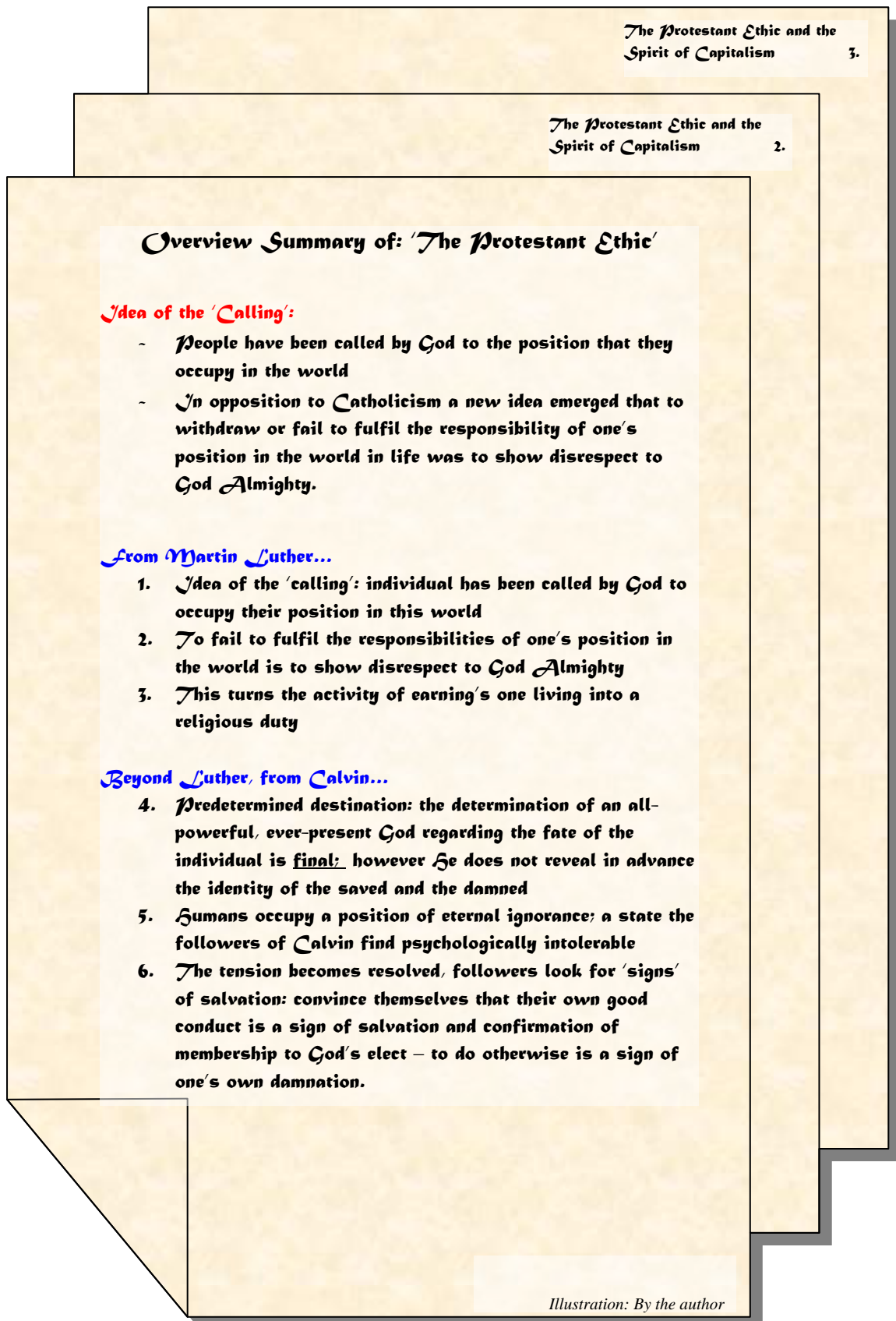
<sup>‡</sup> For 'efficiency' discussion, refer to section 7.3.4.

receptionist. Others had approached BV as a generalised work ethic, aiming to achieve an incremental improvement in the execution of day-to-day tasks:

...when you're working, you're thinking... something like *that* you can improve on... So I think people think: 'What have we got to be doing? Where are the changes I [can] make to do something [better]... We [in our section] do provide a good service and we do try and improve all the time. I think we have been doing BV anyway, without ever [thinking about it] for ages, sort of thing. ('Emma' interview)

Amongst the ranks of the workforce there was a convergence between the formal requirements of BV and the idea of a personal best effort. In such descriptions the 'value' of BV was equated in terms of the *personal value* provided by the individual as an employee of the authority. In this sense understandings of BV were framed within a personal estimation of the extent to which the contractual obligation of labour, in exchange for financial reward was honoured by the individual. Thus, the accomplishment of BV became self-regulating, dependant upon the honest endeavours of individual workers as assessed personally by themselves. Looking back on these interviews it is almost as if BV had awoken the ghost of the old Protestant Ethic identified by Weber.

Figure 7.17: Summary of Weber's Protestant Ethic



#### 7.4.4. A minimal impact?

Many interviewees maintained that the introduction of BV had exercised a minimal impact on the work carried out by them in the authority:

Hand on heart I didn't notice any [changes].... We have changed nothing in particular except that we have obviously had to look at what the BV target were and make sure that we are hitting them. I have not seen any difference in how we operate or in anything that we've had to change, other than prove that we hit those targets by showing the stats. ('Rita' interview)

The substantive content of Rita's work had remained unaltered by the introduction of BV, the only difference perceived was in terms of the introduction of 'targets' in the form of performance indicators. Over time, other considered that BV had come to exercise an invisible effect:

...now [BV is] not difficult to understand... I think it was probably harder...as an organisation to change. But it is like everything else isn't it when the government brings something in. You've got all these systems and processes in place and you've got to look at them all again. I think probably yeah, it might have been a bit of a shock... I think everybody is just embedded and you know what you've got to do and its part of the day-to-day process, I would say. ('Theresa' interview)

Thus, after the initial shock of the new, BV became seamlessly embedded within the ordinary processes of the authority. Theresa indicates the ability of local government – contrary to popular perception – to integrate and absorb change within its process. Typically change is viewed as that which causes disjuncture, but emanating from the themes discussed is a view of change as continuity.

BV exerted an unequal impact on the work of those employed in the authority. Working as a Service Manager with a technical background and occupying a non-corporate role within the authority, at the time of the CPA inspection Simon had had a relatively partial involvement in the process. Yet despite only minimal involvement he observed:



...it's a lot of work – you're covering areas that you don't normally do in your normal job and its bloody hard work. ('Simon' interview)

Following the assessment of EDC as 'excellent', the authority had been invited to share its practice of BV with other authorities. Simon recalled events at one such seminar:

...I can remember somebody from Blyth Valley standing up and saying: 'okay you've done this and good on you but we haven't got the staff resources to do this sort of thing' – you know.' ...our member said: '*Well we did it!*' And he was right, we did. But what the girl from Blyth Valley was saying was right. It had created an absolute mountain of work and it put a lot of people under pressure and it was a core set of people all the time.....

Acknowledging his own lesser involvement in the CPA process, Simon recognised the burden which fell to others:

I mean my team was involved in different elements of it but the main responsibility fell on the shoulders of a certain core of people. ('Simon' interview)

In the implementation of BV EDC had imposed a practical division of labour which involved senior figure attached to the CDU to a much greater extent, than those occupying more junior positions within the authority. I came to recognise the division of labour at EDC as being informed by an underlying cultural paternalism and the observation helps to explain the apparent minimal impact of BV. In effect, the activities associated with the process of BV had been 'bracketed-off', contained and confined within a key core of the operations of the authority. The account provided by Simon also indicates a disparity between employees and elected members. BV had demanded the "*bloody hard work*" of staff. Whereas, elected members, less involved in the direct accomplishment of BV were at liberty to pronounce: "*if we can do it, anybody can do it!*" Many elected members provide a valuable contribution which by any definition constitutes 'work' (Brown 1997; Grint 1998). However, the perception is that they were perhaps more at liberty to enjoy the accomplishment of BV.

#### 7.4.5. The challenge of ‘continuous improvement’:

The initial *raison d'être* of BV was ‘continuous improvement’. However, once an authority had received recognition as ‘excellent’ it had effectively exhausted the scale of measurement imposed – it could improve no more. Such is the problem of the absolute measure imposed by the regime and the idea of ‘continuous improvement’, which suggests an inexhaustible continuum of perfection. The effort of continuous improvement, by fact of its inexhaustible range, can demand an exhausting effort:

...keeping the ball rolling is difficult and it doesn't just stop when you get your end result of the BV process, continuous improvement is a continuous thing you know... (‘Kevin’ interview)

Recognising the implications of the scale imposed, whilst remaining committed to the principle of ‘continuous improvement’ in 2005 the Audit Commission outlined plans for ‘CPA – *the Harder Test*’. Initially, proposals related to unitary authorities and county councils only. Later a separate consultation for districts followed. By this time at EDC, only one member of the senior management team associated with the original accomplishment of ‘excellence’ remained. However, the new team was proud of the association and protective of the status it conferred, eager to preserve an impression of the authority as upholding excellent practice. The consultation of the revised ‘harder’ CPA for districts included options for

- an extended interval between inspections;
- authorities to complete their own self assessment;
- authorities to make an application to the Audit Commission for re-inspection on the basis that sufficient progress had been made to warrant re-categorisation;
- a ‘lighter touch’ approach of the existing model of CPA.

Ambitious in the scale and scope of its operations, the senior management team was keen for EDC to be treated on a par with unitary authorities/county councils and as possessed of the same capabilities, but without the equivalent capacity. It was felt in the options outlined belittled the districts, substantially diluting the previous rigour imposed by the regime. Whilst aware the possibility of re-inspection risked possible loss of ‘excellent’ status, the team expressed a preference for the ‘Harder Test’. Feeling this provided an opportunity in which to demonstrate the current levels of

performance whilst preserving the original spirit of BV in the principle of ‘continuous improvement’:

The pressure is on to keep it excellent! (Laughter) I suppose in an improving council you have always got something to aim at. Our aim is to keep it at excellent and to do that bit more. To keep it up there, because the last thing we want to do is to slip down, not to get complacent and to look at new ways of doing things all of the time. (‘Amanda’ interview)

Although in the time BV had been introduced, the performance management within local government had been variously transformed, within EDC an almost spiritual commitment to secure ‘continuous improvement’ remained.

#### 7.4.6. BV as imposing change:

The implementation of BV at EDC led to much upheaval in the Benefits Section. Early on (and gaining an impressive lead over its neighbours) made a substantial investment in the new Digital Image Processing (DIP) and Workflow operating systems, integrated for use with the existing IBS Open Revenues IT system. A keen advocate of such systems the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) claims:

Document imaging and workflow technology is about total document management. It offers the potential for electronic capture, storage, and management of literally every document generated or received by a council, including paper, reports, application files, emails and web-content.

The technology also offers the possibility of a single point of on-line access to all relevant information for whoever needs it, e.g. customer services operatives in contact centre and one-stop shops. Time spent on locating, copying or faxing physical files is reduced and significant savings are made on paper and filing costs. ([www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge](http://www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge))

DIP and Workflow combined two separate elements within the Open Revenues interface:

- i. Document image processing (DIP) is the process of scanning, indexing and storing documents into a database. These documents can then be

retrieved using any computer with access to the database.

([www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge](http://www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge))

- ii. ‘Workflow’ is about improving the performance and the management of business processes – of how work gets done in an authority...

Workflow is: ‘The automation of business process, in whole or in part, during which documents, information or tasks are passed from one participant to another for action, according to a set of procedural rules’

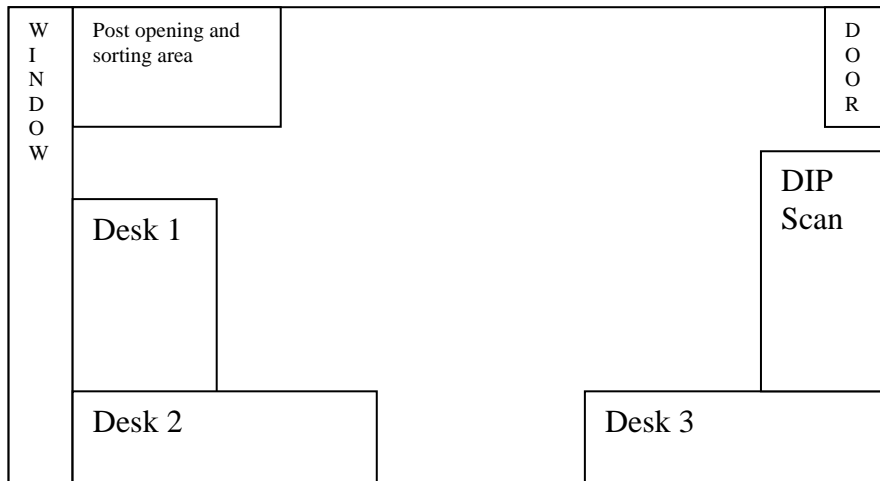
(Local Government Online). ([www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge](http://www.idea.gov.uk/knowledge))

The implementation of DIP and Workflow revolutionised the organisation of work within the section, transforming it into an archetypal modern ‘paperless’ office.

Following the introduction of DIP and Workflow all work in the Benefits Section was completed on computer, the traditional paper file being consigned to history.

DIP required personnel to scan, index and upload documents on to the database. A task completed by a dedicated team of three clerical assistants based in a post-room across the corridor from the main benefits office:

**Figure 7.18: Floor plan sketch of benefit section post-room**



The smooth operations of the section depended upon a faithful indexing of the correspondence received. The Open Revenues system (used across the authority to calculate Housing and Council Tax Benefit entitlement, manage the Council Tax billing process and the tenancies of council-owned housing stock) allocated all persons

with a unique fourteen digit ‘personal shell reference number’ for example: 23456189002371<sup>§</sup>. This number enabled the authority to centralise all records pertaining to the individual, regardless of a change of name/address. DIPS required an indexer to scan the items received and to link that image with the corresponding personal shell reference number on the Open Revenues system. Once scanned and indexed, items received were physically stored in bundles within the post-room for a period of six months. After six months all items were physically destroyed and the digital image relied upon.

Benefit Assessors assessed entitlement to housing and/or council tax benefit on the basis of the information stored on DIP. At EDC Benefit Assessors were organised into three teams according to geographical area: Peterlee, Easington and Seaham. In each team there were two Scale Six Assessors (referred to as ‘Team Leaders’) and three full time Scale Three Benefit Assessors. Through use of Workflow, team leaders shared joint responsibility for the electronic allocation of work within their team (team leaders also maintained a responsibility for assessing non-standard claims received and applications received for privately rented properties). Scale three assessors carried out all pre-assessment ‘quality checks’, a process which required an initial inspection of the claim received to ensure that all information needed to assess the claim had been provided. If additional information was required to assess the claim the assessor would send a written request for information, this action was then recorded and the claim would be electronically ‘pending’ for a further fourteen days. Scale three assessors were also responsible for the assessment of ‘council tax only’ claims and claims received for council-owned properties<sup>\*\*</sup>.

Once documents had been indexed and scanned they arrived at the electronic in-box of the relevant team-leader, who was responsible for categorising the information received according to the task required e.g. ‘new application’ or ‘change in circumstances’. This was important because it effectively set the clock running. BV introduced a number of ‘service standards’, the idea being to ensure completion of a set task within a reasonable amount of time. On this basis individual local authorities

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<sup>§</sup> This number has been generated for illustrative purposes only and does not knowingly refer to any individual person.

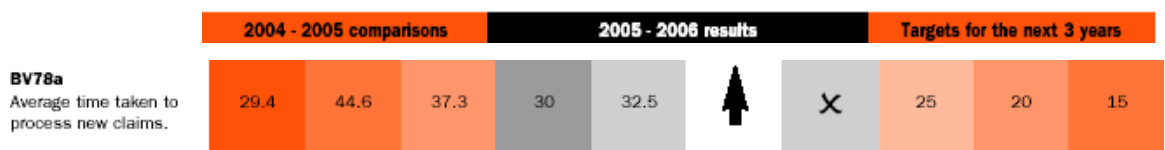
<sup>\*\*</sup> Regulations governing the applications received for privately rented properties vary, hence the distinction.

had established their own targets to ensure the possibility of a ‘continued improvement’ in service delivery. For instance for 2005/06 the BVPI 78a ‘average time taken to process new claims’ the section had a target of 30 days; for BVPI 78b ‘average time for processing notification of change in circumstance’ the section had a target of 7.5 days. The Workflow system consisted of an onscreen display of all work received, arranged in order of target date. Cases within date were shown in black, whereas cases which had exceeded the target date were shown in red – as an immediate visual prompt to assessors.

In addition to the Workflow system, quality checks had been introduced in an attempt to reduce the overall ‘average time taken to process new claims’. Any additional information required was requested immediately in an attempt to reduce the overall time it took for a claim to be assessed. The section also operated a ‘fast-track’ incentive whereby if a claimant provided all the information necessary their claim was processed without delay. This effectively enabled individuals to by-pass the bureaucratically imposed system of ‘queuing’ whilst also substantially reducing the overall average time taken to process new claims by the section. I was told that it was innovations such as these which had contributed to the section becoming (statistically at least):

...one of the best in the country for processing new claims. (‘Dan’ interview)

Figure: 7.19 Outturns achieved for BVPI 78a



(Source: EDC BVPP 2005-06: 46)

Computer software has made the task of performance management relatively simple and straightforward. Much can be achieved through the use of specially designed, pre-programmed platforms. However, IT does not eliminate the possibility of human error. The Benefits Manager and Assistant Manager would frequently run reports checking outputs and from this update spreadsheets which tracked the overall performance of the section. Apparently, alarm-bells began to ring when in the space of one week the average number of days to process new claims jumped from nudging 50days to an

extraordinary 465 days. On further investigation it was found that an assessor had made an error, entering the 'date of application' as 1902 rather than 2002.

#### 7.4.7. Introducing 'Brenda' and 'Eric': devotees of BV and change

While there were some employees who viewed BV as no more than an addition to their main duties and responsibilities, there were others who looked to BV as an opportunity. For these individuals BV and the wider process of change within the authority had contributed a new meaning to their ordinary work. Within her section Brenda had assumed ownership of BVPIs and had utilised the returned outputs of the collective performance of the section as a self-regulating measure of her own work:

...they laugh at me because I'm quite obsessive about [PIs]. I got like 99% and then I got 100% and when I was off on maternity [I heard that we had missed the target date] and 'Alan' (her replacement cover for maternity leave) was going: "*But it is Brenda's PI, it is Brenda and she'll go mad!*" And I said, "Alan it's got your name on it so I'm not as bothered." ('Brenda' interview)

Brenda outlined what she perceived personally as the investment of extraordinary effort in subverting the usual division of labour within the authority to achieve desired performance outputs:

...you put so much effort into getting the target... you know I've seen me even type them up and get them out myself just to get them done and hit my PI!  
( 'Brenda' interview)

Bunting (2005: 124-5) considers the 'tyranny of targets' and offers the description of the New Labour government as "*a hard taskmaster*":

Within two years of arriving in power in May 1997, Tony Blair's Labour government has set a staggering total of about 8,500 targets – it isn't possible to be more precise, because government departments didn't even keep track of their own targets.....

Tony Blair was unapologetic about the proliferation of targets, and insisted they would stay: 'They were in part constructed as a rod for our own back in order to make sure that we were as bold and ambitious as we could be'.

However, it is the opinion of Bunting (2005:125) that:

...the rod falls heaviest on those held responsible for meeting the targets

The account provided by Brenda is distinctive for its lack of reference to others. In her interview Brenda made no mention of the BVPI target outcome as established by seniors in execution of the formal processes of BV. Further, as can be seen in the reference to her colleague 'Alan' Brenda was not motivated by the principle of teamwork, she was interested only in her own personal achievement of BVPIs. Brenda's aim was straightforward: *she wanted simply to achieve 100%*.

'Eric' displayed a similar attachment to the principle of performance management as introduced by BV. The enthusiasm he demonstrated for his work was remarkable and he was a keen devotee of the principle of change in the greater quest of 'continuous improvement':

If something is not working we should change it. Not because it might mean somebody has to move his job or change his job or even, god forbid, lose his job. But if it's not working it should be changed. ('Eric' interview)

Unlike Brenda who had used the performance management framework of BV as a measure of personal achievement, the change prompted by the implementation of BV had enabled Eric to integrate elements of his wider self into the execution of work tasks. Having recently completed a course of independent study in 'computers' (applications in specified software packages), Eric professed himself a fan of graphs, charts and spreadsheets:

I love me charts and I like my graphs. ('Eric' interview)

Empowered by a new technical ability and the parameters imposed by BV, Eric creatively presented performance data in charts and graphs. Utilising these as a visual devices in which to impress his own agenda of reform and convince seniors of the merit of his ideas for change within the section. For example, he had long had a hunch that the standard allocation of holiday entitlement adversely affected the performance outputs of the section. Further analysis of the data soon confirmed this hunch:

I was able to show that the holidays did impact. Various holidays, see we've had bank holidays, we've had Easter, and it doesn't half drop... If you look at



the turnaround, that's showing the chart at this present time and we've come down. That shows you precisely how we're hit by holidays because people were off here [work outstanding] went up here. ('Eric' interview)

Using these findings, Eric proposed that holiday entitlement should be administered according to the birthday of the individual, rather than to coincide with the financial year. He told me:

I've been able to prove to meself that holidays does affect me. If he comes to me next year and says why is your performance down and I say I told you last year my holidays does affect me what have you done about it? It covers your backside really, it stops you getting wrong and that's what they're used for. ('Eric' interview)

Elsewhere receiving relatively attention, performance literate workers are able to utilise performance data as 'evidence' to ward against criticism from others. Such actions suggest an empowered workforce skilled to 'play' within the limits of the system and effectively trump superiors. However, it would be wrong to suggest Eric's use of performance management data as manipulative. Tacitly the process of social research involves judgement, and Eric was a man who acted with integrity and without ulterior motivation. He had worked at EDC for over twenty years over which time he had made a steady career progression, rising to occupy his current position. Further, for many years Eric had lived within the district and through his work he served not an anonymous public but friends and family, neighbours and fellow members of the local community:

... we should have a caring side... we're local people normally, providing a service for local people... there is that bit bond. ('Eric' interview)

Added to this sense of duty, Eric found enjoyment in the performance management framework imposed by BV because he imagined he was at play. Several times he made reference to football and, adopting the style of a pundit, he spoke animatedly appearing to enjoy a tactical intrigue he associated with 'the game':

Do we get in there early and make sure that everything's ready? So when that comes up, it's again cut out wastage, you know what I mean... I always try and

use as an example: it is like a footballer waiting on the wing for the ball to be passed to him. He's only going to get the ball now and then. Whereas, if he goes looking for the ball, he's going to get the ball more often, you know what I mean?

To continue the metaphor of the game: Eric was keen to get up field and make an early pre-emptive strike at goal. He was looking to make improvements, actively seeking out ways to make the changes necessary, in order to achieve a favourable result for his 'team'. For Eric the team was composed of family, friends and neighbours living in the district, it was the department and it was EDC.

Bunting (2005) outlines a work ethic, driven and underpinned by an aggressive pursuit of 'performance' as colluding to make 'Willing Slaves' of contemporary workers:

Pay and the lure of consumption may spur overwork for the bulk of people on the factory floor and at their desks, but they lose their force at the two poles of the labour market. Over the last two decades of the twentieth century it became a real issue to policy-makers and business to keep these two ends of the labour market working as hard as ever. At the top you don't need more money, and education can make you less interested in consumer status symbols; so how do you ensure those employees keep working hard? In the mid-seventies there were growing fears that the hedonism of the consumer culture would erode the Protestant work ethic, the underpinning of capitalism. But the work ethic was reformulated... as the route to personal fulfilment, identity and happiness.

(p.160)

She later cites Tony Frank *One Market Under God* (2001) arguing:

Paid work has so successfully absorbed the 'project of self' that it marginalises all other routes to fulfilment, such as caring or the passion of the amateur.

(p.169)

Whilst the earlier account provided by Brenda to an extent fits within the frame of the 'willing slave', it provides an insufficient basis in which to explore the underlying motivations evident in Eric's approach. There is more going on here. Typically,

personal idiosyncratic responses are sidelined for that which more easily fits within materialist and exploitative frames of reference. For a time after reading Burowoy (1979) I became convinced that those working to implement BV at EDC had gone beyond mere compliance and had positively consented to the regime in the sense of a deeper personal commitment. Reflecting now I can that Eric endowed his work with a deeper meaning. For Eric work was a meaningful part of life and BV had enabled an opportunity for the further construction of meaning. Further, even though he was at work, Eric *meant* to have fun.

#### 7.4.8. Extraordinary people:

By leadership, most people mean the capacity of someone to direct and energise the willingness of people in social units to take actions to achieve goals. Leadership in one sense can draw mainly on blunt power but usually the term implies legitimate authority. (Rainey 1991 cited in Denis et al 2005: 446)

Earlier I quoted Simon who considered that the practice of BV in EDC had been a responsibility which had fallen to “*a certain core of people.*” During the research a key story to emerge was of an extraordinarily committed group of individuals who had gained the confidence of colleagues and effectively steered EDC towards CPA success. One such person was ‘Ben’. Although at the time of the research no longer employed by EDC, Ben featured frequently in the accounts of others and was an active part of the living memory of the authority.

Ben had previously occupied a senior role within the authority as Director of Service and during the course of a BV review inspired a monumental effort from colleagues. He had also dedicated considerable personal effort to the task. I was told that he frequently arrived early, left late and worked on weekends. Eventually the hard work and effort paid off. Benchmarking had found that the service under review ranked amongst the best in the country for performance; the section also received a favourable outcome in the ‘customer satisfaction survey’ conducted as part of the review; and received national recognition in the reward of a Charter Mark. Ben was delighted with the result. Keen to demonstrate his personal appreciation he rewarded all those involved in the review with a gift of a commemorative mantel clock.

...he bought everyone that was involved a [mantel] clock – *everyone*. And we're talking what, fifty/sixty people? ...Everyone got a clock in a presentation case yeah. To say thank-you for all the work you've put in and the outcome of the review... [he] bought them out of his own pocket. ('Richard' interview)

There is something of a gift-giving custom in local government, usually in recognition of years of service. However, rarer is the reward of a personal gift made to individuals in recognition of a perceived extraordinary effort by a senior figure within the paid service. Indeed, there are strict rules which govern acceptance of gifts in local government. Within the private sector the practice is more widespread, particularly in the form of reward/further incentive. Anthropologically the custom of gift-giving is significant (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1954). Ruth (2004: 182) writes:

It is widely believed that people engage in giving and receiving as a means of entering into and maintaining social relations.

A clock is a relatively 'safe' gift option: gender-neutral, generally useful and a non-intimate decorative item. It is also a substantial item which, given due care and attention, should endure for years to come. As a timepiece there is also a symbolic recognition of time invested by the individual. In light of the circumstances and the nature of the item bestowed, 'Ben' can be identified as an '*acknowledger*' (Ruth 2004). He presented the gift in acknowledgement of:

- i. the result attained;
- ii. the effort dedicated by staff in the achievement of a specific valued aim;
- iii. the additional effort required of staff during the review process.

There is little doubt that such an act will have involved a considerable personal expense. I was unable to ask Ben directly what inspired such a gesture. Hearing of events I was reminded of the custom of ceremonial prize-giving, of Ben as having assumed a position of status and the paternal practice of local coal-field employers almost a hundred years since. Beynon & Austrin (1994: 204) write: "*presentations were formal events*" and they go on to describe events at a musical evening held in the 1920s, attended by Lord Londonderry in which he made a personal 'bequest' to workers.

Another 'extraordinary' person was 'Tony'. Tony also demonstrated the faculties of leadership whilst occupying an interesting, informal lynchpin role within the authority. Born and raised in the district, with a family of his own, Tony maintained a special affection for the local area. He was seemingly known throughout the authority and by his co-workers he was recognised as an archetypal 'good-guy'. Others spoke of him as knowledgeable, practical and resourceful. He was also known as somebody with a good sense of humour, could share a joke and enjoyed a laugh. Known as a long-serving employee many elected members could recollect Tony commencing his employment as a 15 year old having recently left school and many would ask after his parents. Tony was a keen attendee of work related social events, at one point he had been employed as a driver and in this time he had cultivated associations/friendships across the authority getting to know individuals personally in an informal, relaxed and fairly intimate environment – but interestingly, in a mainly subordinate role.

Tony was familiar with both the geography and history of the district and seemed to know many different people within the district – indeed it was Tony who had organised the guided tours of the district. A comprehensive tour of the district lasting up to three hours, these took place two/three times a year and had been conceived at the time of the first CPA inspection in 2003 for the benefit of inspectors. Later extended for the benefit of all existing staff, new employees and visitors the tours were intended to provide an opportunity for the individual to become better acquainted with the wider district and the work of the local authority. The sights included: Dalton Park, Peterlee, Seaham; new builds, industrial sites and sites awaiting development. The tour combined: a lesson in geography, a formal introduction of the work carried out by the authority in the district, a social history of place and incorporated the informal recollections of an individual who had lived his life in the district – we learnt where Tony had been christened as a child, the house where he had grown up and where he had played football as a boy.

Having worked at EDC since leaving school, over the years Tony had progressed to occupy a relative senior position within the authority. Committed to a project of self-improvement, in this time he had also taken a number of night-classes and completed a part-time degree course. A key architect of the performance management strategy

pursued by the authority, he seemed to possess an insatiable appetite for new management practice. Additionally, a keen practitioner of FIOD he extolled its merits and had developed a role for himself as instructor, often travelling outside the authority to instruct external partners. Within the authority Tony had voluntarily developed a role as an informal mentor to a small group of younger colleagues. It was informal in the sense that this was a role he was not required to fulfil and that in the main the arrangement appeared to have developed from an initial friendship basis. Such arrangements are a characteristic feature of most places of work:

Within every work group in a factory, within any division in a government bureau, or within any department of a university are countless acts of cooperation without which the system would break down. We take these everyday acts for granted, and few of them are included in the formal role prescriptions for any job. (Katz & Kahn 1966: 339 cited in Perlow & Weeks 2002: 345).

Interestingly, the arrangement enabled Tony to maintain his lynchpin role within the authority as he became an important link between the older more established parts of the organisation and the potential next 'generation' within the authority. Additionally, he transacted a cultural inheritance which potentially extended the base of the shared collective memory within the organisation. Tony effected change from within. Informed by a connection to past, Tony had been an employee of EDC for many years but through the energies he brought to his work he was active in determining the current 'new' practice of the authority. He was one of the '*certain core*' (alluded to earlier by Simon) to whom the responsibility of BV frequently fell. He had had an instrumental role in the accomplishment of BV at EDC. In part because through his involvement he had brought different disparate elements (the political and administrative divide, long-serving members of staff and new employees, the managerial and non-managerial, the young and old) in the organisation together.

It is not clear to what extent Ben and Tony might be considered as truly remarkable and talented individuals. The sense in which they were extraordinary was in the peculiar circumstances and setting of the organisation – and that they had both been singled out as extraordinary by their colleagues. *Might we call this 'leadership'?*

First, leaders are perceived as individuals who *influence* the behaviour of others who are often referred to as subordinates. Second the leader is examined in relation to a *group* – usually, in the context of leadership in organisations, a work group... Third, leadership research tends to place considerable emphasis upon a group *goal* that has to be accomplished. Thus, leadership is typically defined in terms of a process of social influence whereby a leader steers members of the group towards a goal. (Bryman 1992: 1-2)

### 7.5. Conclusion:

The key story to emerge from the research was one of *change*. To an extent change within EDC occurred not in spite of the past, but rather in active acknowledgement of a sense of history. It was as though the many years of noble industrial endurance, followed by social and economic deprivation (attributed to the national collapse of the mining industry) had entitled individuals within the district to the prospect of an improved future – one which the authority through its declaration: *To Make the District Great* was determined to provide. However, in order to fulfil this promise the authority had first to effect a self-improvement in terms of its own organisational fitness. Broadly, the process of organisational renewal commenced in 1997 can be equated to senior figures within the organisation as ‘getting their own house in order’ in measure of preparedness for the future.

Through the process of organisational renewal, the underlying context which informed the need for change and implementation of BV, key strands of the discernibly ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultures can be seen as coming together to ensure the accomplishment of BV at EDC. Interestingly, tradition – particularly in terms of a patriarchal expression of concern for the wellbeing of employees and the newly prominent position created for trade unions in the form of the Tripartite Agreement – can be seen as the means by which senior management and elected members re-established and reinvigorated staff relations following their breakdown in the past. In many respects, an argument can be made of the newly established traditions identified as reviving the local model of social relations practice of the past, as identified by Beynon and Austrin (1994).

In other respects the authority was strident in the leaps it made towards modernity, particular with regards to the implementation of new management practice (FIOD, STORM, performance management frameworks) and enthusiastic investment of computer technologies (DIP and Workflow in the Benefits Section). The commitment to new practice and innovation was in part a means of overcoming the perceived failures of the past and setting course towards a positive future.

The implementation of BV provided EDC with an opportunity in which to be recognised in having achieved change – change not only within the authority but in the



district more widely. Some conceived of the Audit Commission's recognition of EDC as an 'excellent local authority' as challenging negative perceptions of the local area, thereby providing a valuable psychological boost to morale and providing hope that local prosperity might be achieved in the future. Understandings of the formal requirements of BV varied considerably across the authority. Some individuals claimed to have been only minimally affected by its introduction, whilst others had seized upon the opportunity providing an individual and personally innovative response to the requirements introduced. The vague notion of 'best value' had opened the framework to a range of interpretations which contributed positively to the formal accomplishment of BV through the sustained (if technically incorrect) efforts of staff. For example, some staff had interpreted the requirements of the framework in relation to the traditional protestant work ethic. In this respect BV can be seen as providing the local authority with a formal system of measurement in which to assess the best possible efforts of staff. Regardless of whether staff had achieved the proper technical interpretation of the formal requirements of BV, the observation demonstrates an active process of interpretation and meaning-making by staff in the local authority.

In the next chapter I formally conclude the findings of the research and outline the wider contribution of the thesis.

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## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion: Learning from the case

**...behind any story is the tacit claim that there is something being said worth saying. (Van Maanen 1988: 109)**

#### 8.1. Introduction: A retrospective look forward...

Naively the research was commenced in the spirit of: *'telling it how it is'*. Of course, no one individual could ever sufficiently 'tell it as it is'. Even if such a task were possible, once told the final output would invariably become transformed into something other. Thus, the research represents an artificial textual reconstruction of the practice of BV as observed at EDC. Inevitably, the thesis provides but a partial account (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Atkinson 1990). Looking back, I am struck by the ethnographic character of the final thesis. Certainly the focus on culture, coupled with the narrative approach of the research, has combined to produce the appearance of ethnography. Van Maanen (1988) identifies three types of ethnographic writing ('tales'): realist, confessional and impressionist. Whilst the research has combined elements of all three, overwhelmingly the thesis provides an impressionist tale of the observed practice of BV at EDC:

Impressionistic painting sets out to capture a worldly scene in a special instant or moment of time. The work is figurative, although it conveys a highly personalised perspective. What a painter sees, given an apparent position in time and space, is that the viewer sees. (Van Maanen 1988:101)

Overall, I am content with this result:

Impressionist tales suggest that we learn more from the exceptional than from the topical. (Van Maanen 1986:108)

The original purpose of the research was to provide a 'grounded account of BV practice from within the setting of a local authority. Through an original case-study of BV practice observed at EDC, emphasising the ordinary everyday accomplishment of

BV by employees and elected members through shared processes of meaning-making, this aim has been achieved.

This final chapter formally brings the thesis to a close. In the first part of the discussion the contents of the thesis are outlined as ‘excavating’ the concept of culture, both with regards to the programme of improvement and modernisation pursued by the New Labour government 1997-2010; and, understandings of organisational culture more generally. In the second part of the discussion, final consideration is given to the accomplishment of BV at EDC. Finally, the work is drawn to a close with a consideration of the possible wider contribution made by the research.

## 8.2. The Research as Excavating ‘Culture’

The programme of local government improvement as pursued by New Labour (1997-2010) made for much activity within local authorities. Wilson and Game (2006: 376-8) observe that the programme of modernisation and improvement took eight years to evolve – doing so often “*fitfully and disconnectedly*”. By the government’s own estimate the final programme came to comprise more than twenty separate policies and initiatives, many of which were outlined in the discussion provided in chapters two and three.

Throughout the research, it has proved difficult to concentrate exclusively on processes of BV within the authority. Firstly, following the emergence of CPA the phrase ‘BV’ all but disappeared from the lexicon of local government (IDeA). However, as much of the operating procedures and underlying philosophy informing BV essentially remained intact (Lowndes 2004; Wilson & Game 2006), in practice this proved somewhat less of a problem than might be imagined. Solution was sought by extending the original extent of interest maintained by the research and simply to incorporate consideration of these elements. More challenging, however, was the diversity of the improvement and modernisation agenda pursued by the then government, said to have encompassed three main themes: community leadership, democratic renewal and improving performance (Stewart 2003). In practice it proved difficult to maintain these themes as being separate. Particularly, as the principle of ‘community leadership’ came to be conceived as informing the goal of improving performance and processes of democratic renewal:

Too often within councils the members and officer take the paternalistic view that it is for them to decide what services are to be provided, on the basis of what suits the council as a service provider. The interests of the public come a poor second best, The culture is still one where more spending and more taxation are seen as the simple solution rather than exploring how to get more out of the available resources.

In addition where the relationship between a council and its essential local partners – local businesses, voluntary organisations and other public sector bodies – is neither strong nor effective, that council cannot hope to lead

successfully. Worse, such an inward culture can open the door to corruption and wrongdoing.

Too often people are indifferent about local democracy, paralleling, and probably reflecting, this culture of inwardness. (DETR 1998b:14)

Keen to explore the lived reality of BV practice, consideration of the wider elements constituting the programme of modernisation are to be considered as providing an overall strength to the findings presented of the research. It is a truism that nothing stays the same and throughout the research the theme of ‘change’ has come to dominate discussions: specifically the research has variously addressed the notion of ‘change’ as implied by a process of modernisation. Prior to the landslide election victory in 1997, the Labour Party had engaged in a process of internal modernisation (Heffernan: 2003). Ultimately, this culminated in the unveiling of the Party slogan ‘New Labour, New Britain’ in 1994. Once elected the New Labour government announced its intention to ‘modernise government’ (Cabinet Office 1999). Driving the initial policy of BV was the New Labour ‘vision’ a ‘modern council’ (see section 2.2.1). As can be seen from the contents of the passage above, the New Labour government perceived ‘culture’ of local government as being in need of particular of modernisation.

#### 8.2.1. EDC: An organisation *within* culture

Throughout the thesis I have variously referred to EDC ‘the organisation’. In Chapter Three, I outlined EDC as a district council operating within a national framework of democratic governance. Whilst in Chapter Six I outlined ‘EDC the organisation’ as encountered by the research. Through a description of the internal structures and formal stated aims of the authority I indicated the *formal* aspects of organisation (Selznick 1948; Blau and Scott: 1962). Moving on through an impressionistic (Van Maanen 1988) reading of lived space (Lefebvre 1993), providing a thick description (Geertz 1973) of particular spatial manifestations (Halford 2004) within the physical space of the organisation, I provided an ‘inside view’ of the authority, unpicking various cultural strands in the uncompleted tapestry of interaction within the organisation (Dale and Burrell 2008).

In many respects EDC was not just one organisation, it comprised of many different forms and principles of organising:

Organisations enter our lives in different ways: we work for them, we consume their products, we see buildings which house their offices, we read about them in newspapers and absorb their advertisements. When we look to organisations, especially the larger, older, famous ones, they seem *solid*, they seem *permanent*, they seem *orderly*. This is, after all, why we call them organisations. Images of organisations as solid, permanent, orderly entities run through many text books. (Sims et al 1993: 1 – emphasis as original)

**Figure 8.1: Summarising EDC ‘the organisation’**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| ❖ <i>Place of work</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Including different types of ‘work’, both administrative and political</li> <li>- Formal and informal aspects of work interactions and processes</li> <li>- Co-workers: variously colleagues, work mates, peers, friends, neighbours... even adversaries</li> </ul>  |
| ❖ <i>An outlet for the consumption for products and services</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public sector organisation contained within a national framework of democratic governance</li> <li>- EDC was a complex organisation with many statutory obligations and responsibilities</li> <li>- “...purpose of public services is not to make money but to collectively provide protection, help, restraint, recreation and care outside market relations.”(Flynn 2007: 5)</li> <li>- Post-war distinction established between ‘private’ and ‘public sectors’ no longer as distinct (Rainey &amp; Chun 2005; Flynn 2007; Greener: 2009)</li> </ul> |
| ❖ <i>A physical presence</i>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Buildings and offices</li> <li>- The ‘place’ of local government</li> </ul>  |
| ❖ <i>A cultural presence</i>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activities typically seen as newsworthy</li> <li>- Eliciting wider public discussion/debate both locally and nationally</li> </ul>   |

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
|                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Projecting a presence to different audiences (business, community, partners, government)</li> <li>- As being informed by a wider 'cultural realm' e.g. from public administration to public management</li> </ul>                                 |
| ❖ <i>Solid, permanent, orderly?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local government in England as extending back to the Poor Law (Webb &amp; Webb 1963)</li> <li>- Local government as constantly evolving and changing</li> <li>- EDC amalgamated within the new Durham County Council unitary authority</li> </ul> |

Consistent with the epistemological and ontological stance of the research the approach of the research has been to realise EDC the organisation as a general social setting and site of interaction. The merits of this approach are outlined by Rose (1988: 273-4):

The claim that organisations are social units possessing goals obscures the variety of aims that their members, including their leaders, pursue in practice. Likewise the hierarchical, formal nature of organisational relationships is easily overstated. Actual working arrangements are much more fluid than organisational charts or manual suggest; and anyhow, other social units can be hierarchical and formal.

Dobbin (1994: 117) writes of organisations as a “*social construction of rational organising principles.*” This is an observation which alerts to a need to consider organisations as being of culture. Modern capitalist society *did not* ‘discover’ the principle of organisation. Forms and modes of organising predate modernity, for example: the great Ming Dynasty and the Greek and Roman Senates of ancient times. However, modern society did come to recognise specific cultural modes of organisation:

The cultural approach to the study of organisations... suggests that rationalised, universal, laws that purportedly constitute modern social practice are in fact *derived from* modern social practice. (Dobbin 1994: 141)

### 8.2.2. The modernisation of local government as being within 'culture':

History indicates a longstanding perception of the traditional recognisable local authority organisational form as outmoded and being in need of modernisation:

Radical changes in the local government of England and Wales are needed.

Excellent work is being done by the many 43,000 men and women members of the 1,450 councils elected to govern our towns, counties and rural districts and by many of the 1,900,000 paid servants of those councils. But the country is not getting full value in terms of human happiness for the time spent and for the increasing current expenditure now standing at £3,000 million (9% of the gross national product) that they spend each year. (Maud 1967: ix)

The Bains Report (1972) was more explicit in explicating the type and form of modernisation required:

...we believe that at its best local authority management compares favourably with management in other fields... It must be recognised that at senior levels, particularly in the larger authorities, management skills are as important as professional skills and appointments to senior positions should be made on that basis... We believe the corporate approach is beyond dispute if local government is to be efficient and effective. (2.1; 2.9; 2.12)

Generally, context provides for understanding (Johns 2001, 2006). In the context of the post-war, long boom of capitalism between 1950 and 1970 the culture of capitalism has come to achieve a prominence. Specifically, in terms of a general perception of the conceived wider benefits to be had in the applying rationalistic, managerialist informed, 'business' principles to organising different aspects of social life (Parker 2002). In practice and study of public administration this is typically seen as having an effect in the rise of NPM (Hood 1991, 2005; Bovaird & Halachmi 2001; Ferlie et al 2002; Bovaird & Loffler 2003; Hughes 2003; Denters & Rose 2005; Lynn 2005). In tracing the development of the academic study of the principles of government, Hood (2005: 10) outlines:

'Public administration' became the commonest term for the academic study of executive government in English-speaking countries from the late nineteenth century and became the approved label for the various journals, professional



chairs, degree and diploma courses, and professional organisations – the conventional apparatus of institutionalised knowledge – that started to develop from that time.

Preceding the timeframe of the research (and informing the introduction and implementation of BV – section 2.3), established convention became to speak in terms of the ‘management’ of public service delivery (Hughes 2003; Greener 2009). Such theoretical distinctions inevitably come to define general approaches to practice and the study of practice (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson: 2000:721).

### 8.2.3. Culture: a tricky concept

The local authority as a distinct organisational form is both part of culture and is *of* culture. Williams (1983: 87) contends the word ‘culture’ “*is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.*” Matters of ‘culture’ are inherently accepted as tricky (Crane 1994). Archer (1988:1) is against usage of the term, arguing:

...the notion of culture remains inordinately vague... in everyway ‘culture’ is the poor relation of ‘structure’.

The notion of ‘culture’ as a poor second to ‘structure’ relegates the role of agency in the constitution, perpetuation and transformation of culture. Giddens (1976) considers a key distinction between the social and natural world is that the latter does not constitute as ‘meaningful’. But from where does that ‘meaning’ arise? Following Geertz (1973: 5) the research has applied an understanding of social meaning as emanating from culture:

The concept of culture I espouse... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture as those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.

#### 8.2.4. Connecting local government improvement and generic managerialist principles of 'culture'

Tracing key post-1945 developments in local government, Elcock (1996: 180) notes the turning point in the late 1970s:

Margaret Thatcher and her colleagues – in common with many citizens – saw them [local authorities] as being bloated, unresponsive bureaucracies which needed to be converted into leaner, fitter organisations; in particular by exposing them to market competition and by transferring some or all of their functions to the private sector.

In discussing the pre-history which informed the subsequent development of the BV framework I identified the NPM as providing a 'golden thread' in the post-1979 reform of local government (section 2.4). A defining feature of NPM theories is regarded increasing reliance on private sector styles of management practice in the public sector and their presupposed superiority (Osborne & McLaughlin: 2002). Underlying such an assumption is a conviction of private sector methods and approaches as being superior to those traditionally employed in the public sector (Du Gay: 2000; Dingwall & Strangleman: 2005).

Since the late 1970s organisation theory has given increasing emphasis to the study of the cultural dimension within organisations (Pettigrew 1979; Pondy & Mitroff 1979; Deal and Kennedy 1982; Smirchich 1983; Ouchi & Wilkins 1985; Schein 1990; Hatch 1993; Brown 1995). Since the early 1980s a 'strong company culture' has been regarded as the key factor determining the success of organisations – regardless of the *type* of organisation (e.g. Ouchi: 1981; Peters & Waterman: 1982). In reviewing management theory and organisational theory literatures, Wright (1994) identifies four understandings of the concept of 'culture' in organisations:

- i. The problem of managing companies with various operations across the globe, each located in a *national culture*;
- ii. Management trying to integrate peoples with *different ethnicities in one plant*;
- iii. Informal *concepts, attitudes and values* of the workforce;

- iv. *Company culture* formal organisational values and practices imposed by management as a 'glue' to hold the workforce together.

Informed by a background in anthropology, writing from a critical perspective Wright (1994: 4) notes:

Culture has turned from being something an organisation *is* into something that an organisation *has*, and from being a process embedded in context to an objectified tool of management control.

Since the late 1970s, contemporary management literature has influenced the course of public sector reform pursued (Du Gay 1996, 2000; Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000; Parker & Bradley 2000). Established in 1999, by the Local Government Association, the IDeA (alongside government) played a prominent role in determining the course of local government modernisation. Assuming the nominal position as inside 'guru' to all things 'best practice', a generic understanding of 'organisational culture' as informed by mainstream management literatures can be seen as being in evidence. Reinforcing the New Labour view of the need for cultural change within local authorities, the agency provides a representation of the process of organisational cultural change as implausible straightforward:

**Figure 8.2: IDeA representation of organisational culture – 'The Cultural Changing Room'**



"That's the cultural changing room."

Illustration from IDeA

Counter to the approach adopted by the IDeA and consistent with the approach outlined of the research (see Chapter Four), the thesis has adopted a view of culture within organisations (as expressed by Wright 1994) *as something an organisation is*.

Capturing the complexity of culture within organisations Parker (2000: 32) outlines an understanding of organisational cultures as consisting of *'fragmented units'* arguing:

Many of the actual existing patterns of human interaction have no representation in the formal organisation at all, and others are inadequately represented in the formal organisation.

Dunleavy et al (2006: 468) comment directly upon the complexity of processes of public sector reform:

Defining period in the evolution of any complex system, such as public management systems in advanced industrial countries, is a tricky task. New developments accrete and accumulate while older trends are still playing out and apparently flourishing.

In the mode of Abrams (1982) the work of the thesis has involved 'teasing out' the complex matted strands as identified by the research. Further, in explicating the accomplishment of BV at EDC – through the vehicle of the case study – the research has provided a valuable empirically based example of:

- i. the complexity of the local authority as an organisational form;
- ii. a representation of patterns of human interaction within the culture of the local authority and otherwise as inadequately represented;
- iii. the synchronicity and subtle symbiosis of the apparently old and new.

### 8.3. 'Gathering': The Accomplishment of BV at EDC

**Gathering:** a metaphor like that of bundling in the broader definition of method assemblage. It connotes the process of bringing together, relating, picking, meeting, building up, or flowing together. It is used to find a way of talking about relations without locating these with respect to the normative logics implied in (in)coherence or (in)consistency. (Law 2004:160)

#### 8.3.1. Questions, questions:

During fieldwork I refined my original aim of providing a grounded account of BV practice within the setting of a local authority, to understanding the accomplishment of BV at EDC. As an area of significant socio-economic deprivation (IMDI 2004) EDC had achieved recognition as an 'excellent' local authority against the odds (Boyne & Enticitt 2004; McLean 2007; John 2008). I became motivated to comprehend:

*i. How had EDC achieved BV success, where others had 'failed'?*

Additionally, I became curious to explore further an apparent contradiction in the culture of the organisation. On one hand, EDC was a high performing, categorised as 'excellent' local authority, keen on new innovation and exhibited many of the features recognised as characteristic of 'new public management' approach. Yet through the practice of its social relations and interpretation of BV individuals within the authority maintained a sense of deep commitment to the local social mores of the past. To me, this begged the question:

*ii. How had EDC reconciled 'old' and 'new' cultural strands within the organisation to gain recognition as an 'excellent' local authority?*

#### 8.3.2. An appreciation of the fortuitous timing of events

Hindsight has many benefits, one being that it allows us to trace the path traversed to the present and to realise the ordinary sequence of events once they have become evident (Abrams 1982). Further, acceptance of chance and the realisation of serendipity, however non-scientific or rationally inconvenient, alerts to the infinite

variety and fluidity of the social world (Merton & Barber 2004; Simonson 2005).

Exploring pre-modern patterns of causality and time, Adam (2004: 87) writes:

Reading patterns, recognising significant coincidences understanding synchronicity and establishing acausal connections are means to unlock the future that are in fact shared across history by people with special access to the future: by Druids and Nordic sages, astrologers, as well as individuals consulting the *I Ching*. The principles on which these divinations are based, we need to appreciate further, are *diametrically opposed to those underpinning scientific prediction*, the primary and socially most legitimised means to modern Western cultures to access the unknowable future. In contrast to these ancient practices, scientific prediction is wedded to the principle of linear causality and projects into the future past patterns of repetition. (pp.87 – my emphasis)

The accomplishment of BV at EDC can be understood in terms of fortuitous timing of events. A number of factors combined to provide circumstances which favourably predisposed individuals within the authority to making a change:

- The collapse of the mining industry followed by years of socio-economic decline had contributed to the perception of a void in need of filling, especially if the district was to experience a new period of relative prosperity;
- National election of the widely popular, locally-supported Labour Party to government creating a mood of optimism that change could be achieved – locally as well as nationally. Renewed faith that national government would remain sympathetic to the local agenda, Tony Blair (the Prime Minister)'s constituency was Trimdon;
- An unprecedented influx of twenty-two newly elected members without knowledge/experience of the previous political arrangements created an opportunity for change to occur without opposition: new members knew no different, so why should they respond negatively to the changes introduced? Additionally, many long-serving members had grown tired of political in-fighting and were supportive of the changes made;
- Tragedy and perception of failure combined to underline a moral imperative of the need for change within the authority (e.g. a stress induced late-stage

miscarriage of a member of staff; ; unfulfilled health and safety obligations; child rape and murder in Murton);

- Realisation of being in contravention of work health and safety laws led to a general resolution that need to overhaul and develop internal systems and procedures within the authority.

Against this background, in 1997 the authority tentatively began the process of organisational renewal. This process continued for a number of years (possibly extended as a result of the national modernisation of local government, a period which brought undermined the operating systems and procedures employed by many authorities), arguably culminating in the appointment of a new senior management team at the authority. The process of organisational renewal at EDC slightly predated the formal introduction of BV, an observation which is significant because it demonstrates senior figures within the authority as already beginning to establish a formal internal infrastructure which would later come to facilitate the implementation of BV. The initial programme of organisational renewal included:

- Adoption of the ‘mission’: To Make the District Great!
- Political restructuring of the organisation of elected members, including appointment of a Leader elected by members and the appointment of a Council Executive by the elected Leader;
- Renewed commitment to uphold the welfare and wellbeing of staff through active compliance of Health and Safety legislation and establishment of the Tripartite Agreement;
- Development of FIOD and of Strategic Operational Risk Management methodology;
- A nascent corporate approach which encouraged greater co-operation across and between the Directorates, and establishment of a Corporate Development Unit

During the first round of CPA, EDC was the only second-tier local authority in County Durham to be judged as an ‘excellent’ performing local authority. The process of change instigated by the authority had effectively provided EDC with a head-start. To an extent the authority had gained a competitive advantage over neighbouring

authorities in the county, as the only 'excellent' local authority of the group, EDC had status. At times during the research, it was suggested that this had led to an informal leadership role being assumed by EDC at meetings with neighbouring authorities.

Whilst much of the early programme of organisational renewal was self-directed, the changes implemented can be interpreted as an attempt to establish a corporate capacity within a managerially informed (Parker 2002) process of organisational development; an observation which enables appreciation of the cultural influence extended by the contemporary organisation of the capitalist system (Sennett 2006). In Chapter Two, BV and the programme of local government modernisation pursued by the Labour government 1997-2010 was outlined as having been strongly influenced by NPM principles – principles which promoted private sector styles of management practice as superior. Thus, in terms of understanding the later accomplishment of BV at EDC, the changes implemented established the authority on the *appropriate trajectory* in terms of the wider process of government reform. In Foucauldian terms, the actions of the authority were within the prevailing episteme. It is doubtful whether the authority would have attained a similar level of success had an alternative course of change been sought.

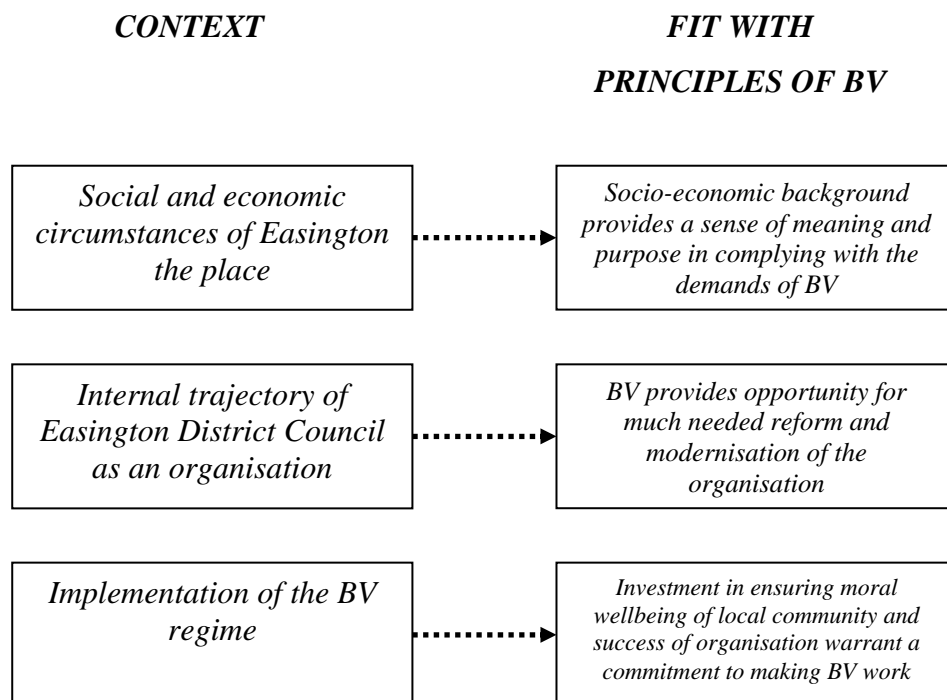
General acceptance of the need for change, in conjunction with the willingness of senior figures within EDC to affect change, should not be overlooked as critical factors which determined the later success of the authority under the regime. At the time of the research I interviewed two senior figures employed at Teesdale District Council (TDC). Whilst EDC had been judged as an 'excellent' local authority; following its CPA inspection, TDC had been assessed as 'poor'. Significantly, both individuals interviewed cited resistance by the Chief Executive and elected members as accounting for the failure of the authority – content with the status quo, the political and administrative leadership of TDC demonstrated hostility towards the principles of BV and (as far as possible) resisted the changes imposed by government. Both interviewees were unanimous in expressing the opinion that at the time of inspection the authority lagged significantly behind in terms of the progress made elsewhere, by other local authorities. Further, that this lack of progress had contributed to judgement of the authority as 'poor'.



### 8.3.3. Issues arising from the research: accepting the unexpected

BV was conceived as a set of universally applicable, transferable principles and processes intended to realise the New Labour ambition of modernising government and ensuring its vision of ‘modern councils’. In contrast, the findings of the research demonstrate the implementation of BV at EDC as intimately bound to context and as being conceived as potentially capable of transforming context. In terms of identifying elements of ‘excellent’ practice within the authority, possibly formal systems developed by EDC could have been taken and applied elsewhere e.g. FIOD. However, whilst such formal operating systems would no doubt be recognised as similar applied in a different context, it is important to recognise that such systems would be subjected to a process of being interpreted anew. Thus, it is unlikely that the meaning invested in such systems by key individuals within EDC, would necessarily translate to achieve the same or similar impact in a different context/setting. The argument is for a recognition of the processes of interpretation and implementation by individuals, within context, engaged in an active process of social meaning-making, in the application of formal operating systems and procedures.

**Figure 8.3: Linking context to outcomes – Best Value at Easington District Council**



Whilst individuals within EDC were (through a combination of circumstances) open to and accepting of the principles of BV, such acceptance did not automatically predestine the authority to becoming recognised as an ‘excellent’ local authority. Thus, categorisation of EDC as an ‘excellent’ local authority was, to all intents and purposes, ‘unexpected’. The idea is far from new: “*It is an old saying that things do not always turn out as we expect*” (Scott and Marshall 2005:676). As sociologists we are taught to seek out the unintended consequences of social action, a concept premised on the following suppositions:

- i. The announced goal is not what it seems/was actually intended;
- ii. The announced goal is intended by the actors but their actions have other significant consequences of which they are unaware;
- iii. The goal is what it seems but the intervention of outside forces transforms it mid-course into a qualitatively different one;
- iv. The goal is what it seems but the intervention of outside force produces unexpected consequences different and sometimes contrary to those intended;
- v. The goal is what it seems but its achievement depends on fortuitous events foreign to the original plans. (Portes 2000:7-8)

The underlying argument of the thesis is for a more nuanced appreciation of the complex interaction of diverse elements which inform the achievement of specific performance output by local authorities. Indeed, one lesson of the so-called ‘postmodern turn’ is of the study of social reality as resembling only fuzzy shades of grey. In appreciating the specific ‘weave’ achieved through the interaction of various identified ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultural strands within the organisation, I draw on the argument of Gusfield (1967) as these being cast as “*misplaced polarities in the study of social change*” (pp.351). Writing of the intersection of tradition (e.g. ‘old cultural strands’) and modernity (e.g. ‘new cultural strands’), Gusfield writes:

Just as ‘tradition’ is renewed, created and discovered, so too ‘modernity’ as a goal towards which men aspire appears in some specific historical guise.  
(pp.361)

In his argument, Gusfield identifies seven commonly assumed ‘fallacies’:

- i) The traditional order as static
- ii) Traditional culture as a consistent body of norms and values
- iii) Traditional society as a homogeneous social structure
- iv) Old traditions are displaced by new changes
- v) Tradition and modernity are mutually exclusive systems
- vi) Tradition and modernity are mutually exclusive systems
- vii) Modernising processes weaken traditions

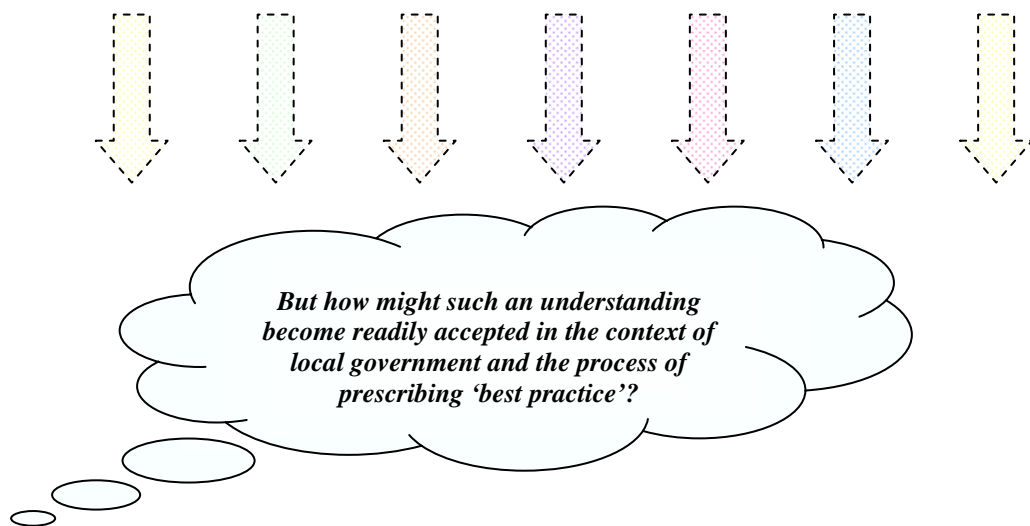
The argument is of tradition and modernity as discovered by similar conventions but constituted as separate by an enforced division of artificially negotiated, discreetly convened and distinctly identified temporal realms. The incompatibility of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ is thus constructed; premised upon exaggerated claims of the stability and consistency of traditional against the apparent weakness of the tradition in face of modernity and the challenge of the new. In this respect the typical argument assumed is essentially self-defeating: *how can an entity established and consistent become effectively ousted by the non-fledged and unformed?* There is a further salient point to be made: *were not the practices handed down by custom once also newfangled and modish?* Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) identify the social convention of ‘The Invention of Tradition’, whereby the present reconstructs the customary past for a variety of political, social and commercial reasons – a phenomenon observed at EDC. Further still, and with radical consequences for the argument outlining incompatibility between the ‘old’ and ‘new’, is the notion of ‘lived time’ as outlined by Chia (2002). Citing Bergson (1922/1999) Chia (2002:864) outlines ‘lived time’ as originating within our consciousness of duration, writing:

...real time is inextricably linked with our consciousness and involved the continuous progress of the past that gnaws into the future and swells as it advances, leaving its bite, or the mark of its tooth, on all things. It is this ‘ballooning’ metaphor of time that is overlooked when we begin to theorise on process and change.

Thus, it follows, the past is a part of the present, as the present becomes part of a future past – there is no straightforward dichotomy to be had between the ‘old’ and ‘new’.

The idea of change, then, is to be understood as a process of *'becoming'* (Pettigrew 1997) rather than transformation of qualitative difference. Following Chia, in identifying 'old' and 'new' cultural strands within EDC I am not making reference to specifically ordered temporal periods which might infer a formal sequencing of events. Instead, the categories of 'old' and 'new' have been devised to communicate a general conception of temporal anchorage. The argument holds a number of implications in terms of our understanding of organisations and the cultures within organisations, as already discussed.

**Figure 8.4: The relevance of the research in light of the argument presented above...?**



Whilst individuals within EDC were (through a combination of circumstances) open to and accepting of the principles of BV, such acceptance did not automatically predestine the authority to becoming recognised as an 'excellent' local authority. Thus, categorisation of EDC as an 'excellent' local authority was, to all intents and purposes, 'unexpected'. In untangling key threads of the findings of the research, the thesis has emphasised:

- i. culture as something an organisation *is*;
- ii. the essentially undetermined character of social structures, constituted on an ongoing basis through multiple meaning-making processes taking place at both the level of the group, organisation and 'society';

- iii. the simultaneous sequence of events coming to constitute over time, layering of social actions and processes within the organisation, understood in terms of *becoming*.

## 8.4. The Contribution of the Research

### 8.4.1. The case *for* completion of the final research: realising ‘performance’

In completion of the final thesis the question: ‘*Why bother?*’ arose on more than one occasion and at a number of different levels. The process has been a struggle. In talking with peers others who have similarly been through the process, the idea of ‘struggle’ seems to inform a common experience. In the many articles offering advice an oft quoted phrase is: ‘*It’s a PhD, not a Nobel Prize*’ (Mullins & Kiley 2002). For me, this is something I have come to learn through the hard wrought path of experience. Nothing can compare with the sense of what might have been. The research was begun in the bold spirit of wanting to make a worthwhile contribution to the academic field. The final contribution presented has inevitably resulted in compromise:

The tension between making it better and getting it done appears wherever people have work to finish or a product to get out... We want to get it done and out to the people who will use it, eat it, read it. But no object fully embodies its makers’ conception of what it could have been. (Becker 1986: 122)

The programme of local government improvement and modernisation as pursued by the New Labour government 1997-2010 is widely acknowledged as ‘unparalleled’ in terms of its scope and ambition (Laffin 2010). Comprising a period of intense reform within local government (Stewart 2003; Stoker 2004), initially the motivation for the research was informed by a concern to address the experience of local government reform, from the perspectives of those working *within* the setting of a local authority.

In declaring a commitment to improving public services, the New Labour government announced a commitment to making “*real improvements to the quality of people’s lives*” (DETR 1998a). In assessment of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA), Laffin (2010) identifies performance management regimes as having exerted a significant impact on local authorities. BV was the first performance management framework centrally imposed by the New Labour government. In this key respect BV provided an important foundation in establishing a new performance management regime within local government. However, closely allied to the NPM trend, the

application of performance management techniques (of which the principle of management by measurement constituted a cornerstone) in local government (Noordegraaf & Amba 2003; Vining & Weimer 2005; Talbot 2005) significantly predated the introduction of BV (see Chapter Two, section 2.3 onwards).

Hartley and Skelcher (2008: 3) indicate the agenda of public service improvement as raising important theoretical, conceptual and practical questions. There is little doubt of the existing field of local government public service improvement research as being already substantially developed. Key leading lights (as principally referred to in the opening chapters of the thesis) include George Boyne at Cardiff, Gerry Stoker at Manchester and John Stewart at Birmingham (– but by no means does this provide a comprehensive list of *all* contributors). In consideration of the programme of public sector reform pursued by the New Labour government, Hoggett (2005:169) identifies a ‘fetishization of service delivery’ arguing:

...public service reform in the United Kingdom has conducted itself as if the government were little different from running Marks and Spencer, that is, simply a means of delivery goods and services.

The argument, well worn, is of the performance regime imposed as prioritising a focus on measured performance outcomes and outputs. Van Thiel and Leeuw (2002: 271) question the value of performance management techniques, highlighting a ‘performance paradox’; and identifying “*a weak correlation between performance indicators and performance itself*”. In the very early stages of the research I pondered the ‘performance’ of ‘performance management’. Lyotard (1984) outlines an understanding of ‘performativity’ as based on an assessment of the efficacy of key actions in achieving desired outcomes. Collier (2008:46) observes:

A consequence of performativity is that some aspects of performance are highlighted, while other elements are downplayed.

Conceived within a performance management framework, BV emphasised the principle of measurement and maintained focus on the measurable aspects of performance. Entertainingly, Talbot (2000:63) explores the notion of ‘performance’ through the idea of a theatrical performance.

‘Performance’, of course, has two meanings – one relates to ‘achievement’ and the other to ‘acting’ or other entertainments, as in ‘to put on a performance of ‘Macbeth’.

The problem of the metaphor of a theatrical performance, as employed by Talbot, is that it determines an analysis of BV as an event – or rather, a ‘staged production’. Without being pedantic, the word ‘performance’ can be readily understood in a number of different senses (far exceeding two). Equally, the word performance might also be used to relate to the capacities of a machine, be it a car or a train. Complementing this understanding is the root derivation of the word organisation as ‘organ’ in terms of the “*abstract ‘instrument’ – agency*” (Williams 1983: 227). It is in the sense of lifting up a car bonnet and providing a description of the moving parts that the thesis has sought to explore the ‘performance’ (or rather accomplishment) of BV at EDC.

#### 8.4.2. Learning from the case:

The defining feature of the case-study, its “*focus on just one instance of the thing that is to be investigated*” (Denscombe 2007: 34), leaves the approach open to criticism as providing an insufficient basis to enable generalisation. In answer to the question, how might the findings of a single case be applied more generally to other cases? Bryman (2001:50) answers: “...*they cannot.*” However, the purpose of case-study research is not to propound a generalised thesis on the basis of a sample of one. Acceptance of such a criticism is to collude in the making of a myth. Yin (1984) identifies three types of case-study:

- i. the critical case;
- ii. the unique case; *and*
- iii. the revelatory case.

Broadly, the research should be seen as conforming to the ‘*revelatory case*’. The purpose of the research has not been to generate/ test a generalisable hypothesis. Neither has my purpose been to identify instances of ‘best practice’. As a social researcher, I was not in the least bit interested in the achievement of specific performance outcomes. As was explained earlier (see Chapter Four section 4.4.2) EDC was selected on the basis that its ‘excellent’ status provided confirmation of the



accomplishment of BV. Further, whilst the status of the authority served to highlight its achievement of BV as exceptional, as a district council operating in a national framework of democratic governance, EDC can in no way be considered as unique. Employing a qualitative approach, I have sought to ‘reveal’ incidental aspects of the accomplishment of BV from within the setting of the local authority – otherwise not officially recognised within the formal operating processes and procedures of the formal BV framework. In this respect, the research can be said to ‘*reveal*’ aspects of practice within the local authority setting which have hitherto remained hidden/unreported.

Viewed through the lens of personal experience, initial motivation for carrying out the research was informed by a sense of the need to provide a ‘missing account’. The government agenda of local government improvement and modernisation lent emphasis to principles of leadership and community, prioritising the role of senior management and the needs (sometimes also described as ‘aspirations’) of service users. However, wider consideration of those most frequently responsible for the mundane accomplishment of performance indicators and targets, through the endeavours of their labours (e.g. officers and frontline employees) seemed strangely absent.

Gerring (2004: 341-2) refers to the “*definitional morass*” which has plagued the case-study approach. In a search for semantic clarity, he propositions the following definition, providing also an indication of the potential merits of the approach:

The case study research design constructs cases from a single unit while remaining attentive to inferences that span similar units outside the formal scope of investigation. (Gerring 2004:353)

Originally, Ian Roberts was supervisor to the research. In those early meetings, he often repeated the phrase of the practice of social research as being about ‘*the art of the possible*’. Through the dizzy tumult of the ‘post-modern’ turn, the social reality it has come to be generally recognised as uncertain and composed of infinite difference (Law 2004). The definitive eludes. Instead we are turned on to the continuum of an approximate likeness/difference. Resources in terms of time and energy do not permit

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an intensive, in-depth study of *all* instances. In the words above, Gerring is suggesting the utility of constructing an intimate knowledge of the single unit in gaining a wider appreciation of similar instances which fall outside the formal, immediate parameters constituted by the research. Suggesting that the principle is not generalisation but rather it is *extrapolation* – a process requiring of a judgement of the reasonableness of that which might be inferred.

Reflexive self criticism informs opinion of the final thesis as imperfect. Inevitably the account produced is partial, highlighting only aspects of the BV regime as contingent on the findings made by the research. Further, the process has been far from easy. Aside from the practical difficulties involved, selection of findings made by the research has proven one of the most challenging aspects of the final completion of the thesis. The obvious restrictions: namely an upper word limit of 100,000 words, the extent of data generated and the pressing need to structure coherent understanding out of the original data has proven a constant source of challenge. However, it is a myth to think of the case-study as providing an approach limited only to the specifics of the case.

Outlined earlier, (section 4.6.3.) with reference to Hammersely (1995), research can have a number of different ‘products’ and “*they are all of potentially equal value.*” The approach of the thesis has been to provide a concrete, empirical example in which to explore the practice of BV within the setting of the local authority – outside the formal, officially constituted frames of reference and more typical accounts referred to in the literature (as outlined in Chapters Two and Three).

In assessing the actual contribution made by the research, the underlying question indicating a reply is: *what is hoped to be achieved in completion of the research in its final outcome?* Writing in rejoinder to Eisenhardt (1989), Dyer and Wilkins (1991) call for: “*Better Stories, Not Better Constructs, to Generate Better Theory*”. In celebration of the ‘classic case study’ (citing: Selznick 1949; Gouldner 1954; Blau 1955; Crozier 1964 – amongst others), the authors argue the rich contextual insight of a single/limited number of cases and an appreciation of the deep structures informing social behaviour. In conclusion, they highlight the power of the storytelling

convention, to an extent a defining feature of the classic qualitative case-study approach:

...stories are often more persuasive and memorable than statistical demonstrations of ideas and claims. The classics we cite are, in every case, good stories more than testable theory. We can experience vicariously the relationships and ideas presented. We therefore remember them longer and understand them more complexly than had they been presented as a thin description of a construct or as a statistical table. (Dyer and Wilkins 1991: 617-618).

Frequently the outcome of research is conceived in terms of the production of 'theory'. If we are to produce theory, then the aim without evocation is the production of 'good' theory. Defined by Weick (1989: 517) as:

...a plausible theory and a theory is judged to be more plausible and of higher quality if it is interesting rather than obvious, irrelevant or absurd, obvious in novel ways, a source of unexpected connections, high in narrative rationality, aesthetically pleasing or correspondent with presumed realities.

This would seem to suggest the need of a strong descriptive element. Typically, description is seen as lesser to analysis. For example, Sandelowski (2000) asks the question: "*What Ever Happened to Qualitative Description*". Strongly influenced by Geertz (1973) the thesis has provided a 'thick description' of the incidental informing of the accomplishment of BV at EDC. Sandelowski argues against perception of qualitative description as a "*lower level form of inquiry*". Similarly, Mintzberg (1979: 113) observes:

Theory building seems to require rich description, the richness that comes from the anecdote. We uncover all kinds of relationships in our 'hard' data, but it is only through use of this 'soft' data that we are able to 'explain' them, and explanation is, of course, the purpose of research. I believe that the researcher who never goes near the water, who collects quantitative data from a distance without anecdote to support them, will always have difficulty explaining interesting relationships.

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The research has endeavoured to convey the multiplicity of interpretations and interactions enacted in the accomplishment of BV at EDC, both at the level of the individual and at a more general level of the organisation: *it is this, which might be considered the contribution of the research.*

#### 8.4.3. Consideration of the ‘final’ contribution:

I feel the final contribution made by the research is a judgement for others. Having finally produced this tome and in making it available to be accessed by others I have surrendered control over how its contents will be actually used. Although as a preliminary, the contents of the final thesis are anticipated as providing a contribution to:

- ❖ Other researchers exploring the accomplishment of specified performance outcomes both in the context of the public sector and more general workplace, informing and alerting to the complex and often unaccounted meaning-making processes engaged at all levels of the organisation.
- ❖ Understanding some of the complex ties to place had by the local authority from the perspective of those operating within the setting of the authority, potentially providing a rich avenue for further research in examining the localised accomplishment of local government processes.
- ❖ Additionally, providing a ‘decentred account’ (Bevir & Rhodes 2003) it is anticipated the findings presented of the research might usefully inform the future course of local public service improvement in a way which more readily incorporates appreciation of processes of meaning-making as achieved in context.

## **Appendix One: Indigenous Culture within Place as an Identity Forming Narrative Strand of the Organisation**

### Unravelling the interplay of the 'old' within the culture(s) of EDC:

Stewart (2000:281) observes: "*The interactions between an authority and its area are many and complex.*" In chapters five and six I outlined 'place' as informing a sense of organisational 'ancestry' within EDC. An 'ancestry' in the sense of a deep commitment to an idealised version of historic/former place as endowed. For instance, I referred to old sepia prints showing locations from around the district lining the walls of the main building and the pride proclaimed by individuals of their mining roots/sense of shared industrial heritage. Given that the authority was instituted on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1974 (following local government reorganisation as preceded by the Local Government Act 1972) the scenes illustrated an artificially created sense of 'place', constructed to coincide with the creation of a new formal administrative boundary.

In chapters five and six I made reference to a perception amongst those in the authority of the 'people' of East Durham as possessed of an indigenous culture. The origins of that culture were firmly 'rooted' in a sense of geographically bounded past – premised on the former industrial mining heritage within the district. A similar finding was made by Beynon et al (1999) in a comparative study of wider of the socio-economic fallout caused by the collapse of the coal industry in Cynon Valley, Easington, Mansfield and St Helens jointly funded by the ESRC and Joseph Rowntree Foundation. In analysis of EDC, the authors note the 'sale-pitch' devised to convince potential investors of the qualities possessed by the 'indigenous' workforce:

Interestingly these positive attributes are spoken and written as being almost sui generis in their relationship to community. It is almost as if there is an invisible force that anyone from these places imbibes and absorbs into their very being or self. (Beynon et al 1999:3)

I have deliberately selected the word 'indigenous' to describe the mode of cultural representation extended by the formal organisation and individuals within the authority in description of local people within place. Definitions of the term 'indigenous' are problematic. In the Oxford English Dictionary, the term 'indigenous' is defined as

both: “*originating naturally in a region/born of a region*” and “*belonging naturally to place*”. Overwhelmingly associated with use in anthropology, the term ‘indigenous’, has conventionally been employed to indicate that which pertains to ‘natives’. In politically more enlightened times, Marsden (1994) has questioned this usage. Preferring the term ‘indigenous’ as indicating an authentic local legitimacy – based on claims of an original culture premised on an unbroken historical association with place. It is in a sense of an ‘unbroken historical association with place’ that the term ‘indigenous’ has been applied to describe the representation of culture within EDC. Understanding contemporary management practice as a process of control, Marsden (1994:49) outlines a situation whereby conventional management practice has subordinated useful indigenous knowledge/insights at considerable cost, and argues for:

The development of more effective managerial systems requires, then, more and more general, informal, indigenous information. (p.51)

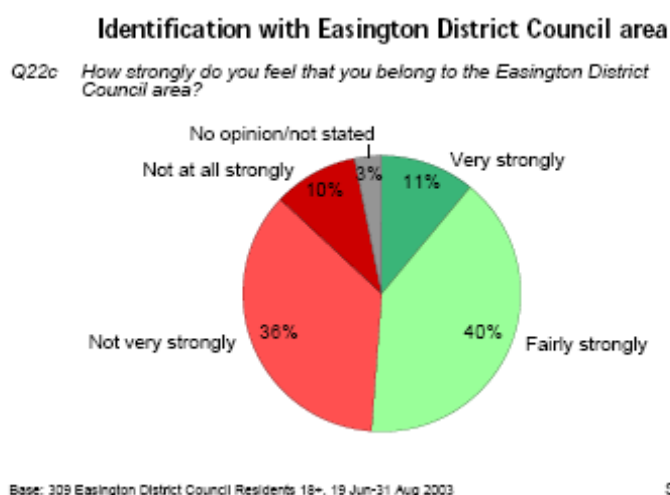
In arguing for a more nuanced appreciation of the complex of factors which inform the achievement of specific performance outputs by local authorities (as demonstrated by the findings of the research) I am attracted the line of argument provided by Marsden (1994). Certainly, I think an initial strength of the BV framework was the non-prescriptive formulation of the policy –recognised by Boyne (1999) as providing an opportunity for *local* innovation. This enabled opportunity of the implementation of BV in a way which maintained sensitivity to local context and, in the opinion of the research, proved a decisive factor in the success attained by EDC: part of the accomplishment of BV at EDC rested on the integration of BV within existing frames of meaning.

In remaining true to the level of complexity revealed by the research, the conviction of local residents as possessed of a distinct ‘indigenous’ culture (as maintained by those within EDC) is problematic: *particularly as claims of residents as possessed of an indigenous culture are in doubt and beyond the scope of the current research*. However, notwithstanding, the notion of an indigenous culture is beset with numerous other difficulties. First, the concept of culture to an extent evades description and is notoriously difficult to operationalise in a research context. Second, in taking a leap of

faith, if we are to conceptualise a notion of an indigenous culture on reported feelings of ‘belonging’, then there is a serious lack of data to support claims of a cohesive cultural identity (as generated by an unbroken historical association with place – indicating an ‘indigenous’ population) existing amongst those in the local population. Indeed, research conducted by MORI, on behalf of the Boundary Commission in 2003, reveals the situation as evenly split:

- 51% of respondents replied that they *did* feel a positive association of belonging;
- Whilst 46% of respondents replied that they *did not* feel as though they belonged to the wider district area.

\* **A local ‘indigenous’ culture? Results of a 2003 MORI survey**



Further, of those questioned who had lived in the district for eleven years or more, only slight difference in the average figures was recorded:

- 53% of respondents replied that they *did* feel a positive association of belonging;
- Whilst 45% of respondents replied that they *did not* feel as though they belonged to the wider district area.

In many respects, the conviction of individuals within EDC of local people as possessed of an indigenous culture relied on the coincidence of the Local Government Act 1972: *had EDC been amalgamated into the wider Sunderland area might a*

*different conception of the cultural dynamic within the district have ensued?*

Hypothetical questions such as these provide a challenge to the recognised course of history. The Coalfields Project Team (Beynon et al 1999) outline the representation of place as a process of ‘imaging’. The authors write:

...communities are imagined and symbolically constructed in places that are dying on their feet. What is most evident in this story-telling is that their narrators are trying to find these places, trying to create them and fill their spaces with meanings as such places cope with the devastating effects of post-industrialisation. (Bennett et al 1999:3)

From the research, the authors identified two distinctive forms of imaging:

- i. *imagining ‘needy’ places*: providing a back story which supports the need for economic investment;
- ii. *imagining ‘attractive’ places*: establishing the case to support external investment by outlining the benefits to be had by investors.

The discussion in Chapter Five, outlined the continued and deliberate representation of the district as ‘deprived’ by EDC and fits with the description of an imagined ‘needy’ place. This research completed in the years following the Coalfields project demonstrated the process of imagining place, with reference to the example of Dalton Park in Murton (see figure 5.5), as having been realised. However, my own hunch is of something more going on in this process of imagining.

#### Idealised ‘truth’:

W.I. Thomas decreed: “*If men define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences.*” Disregarding ontological concerns of claims of an indigenous culture originating from within the district, the research is motivated to unravel the implications of the fiction maintained. In the current usage, the term ‘fiction’ has been employed to indicate a partial/subjective ‘idealised’ truth, rather than truth as conforming to an objective state of reality (Clifford & Marcus: 1986).

In the main presentation of research findings in the thesis, the administrative functions and operations of EDC were established as being informed by an officially imposed,



specified geographic reality (decided by the Boundary Commission). Indeed, a characteristic feature of local government in England is the localised concentration of power and responsibility. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that *place*, in terms of a cogent spatial awareness as producing ‘identity’, tacitly informed by the practice observed from within EDC. Councillors *belonged* to place: located within wards many elected members had lived their entire lives within the confines of the district and felt a strong emotional attachment to place. Additionally, a great number of employees lived locally or thereabouts. Without being prompted, many made casual reference to a wider social network of family, friends and neighbours within the bounds of geographical place – hence, the idea of place as informing a social reality. In terms of understanding the potential geographic dimension of local government, place is space configured, informing of a context experienced as ‘real’ – a realm of experience *inclusive* of human emotion, conferring an inexhaustible range of feeling (Smith et al 2009). However, claims of an indigenous culture within space go substantially beyond the realm of social experience and demand further explanation.

Already matters of ‘culture’ have been outlined as tricky. Concepts of ‘identity’ – frequently related to culture – also prove tricky (Hall & Du Gay 1996). Scott and Marshall (2006:289) lament there is “*no clear concept of identity in modern sociology*”. Yet, in an everyday sense matters of culture and identity are pervasive. Questions of: *Who am I? What am I? To what do I belong?* ...are never seemingly far from the surface, especially when we are called to account/contribute in the formation of social relations. Although distinct and separate categories, in the study of organisations themes of culture and identity tend to co-emerge and overlap (Du Gay 1996b; Whetten and Godfrey 1998; Parker 2000). Recognising the malleability and broad remit of the terms involved, Hatch and Schultz (1997:357) provide a loose understanding of the term ‘organisational identity’ as referring to the wider perceptions, feeling and thoughts had by members in relation to the organisation with which they are associated. Importantly the authors recognise the collective process by which organisational identity is constituted, noting it as a “*commonly-shared understanding of the organisation’s distinctive values and characteristic*”. Additionally, from a social constructionist viewpoint (coincidentally, the stated epistemological position of this research – see Chapter Four) the authors perceive of

‘organisational culture’ as the “*symbolic context within which interpretations of organisational identity are formed and intentions to influence organisational image are formulated*” (Hatch and Schultz 1997: 360).

A narrative understanding of organisational ‘identity’:

At EDC place and past were entwined as one: constituted in the thread of an indigenous culture as an identity forming narrative strand, contributing to the formation of a ‘we-image’ (Mennell 1994). The argument presented here is of a subtle analysis of the *identity forming process within organisations – particularly local authorities*. Outlined here as a complex, nuanced and multilayered process, revealing of different aspects. I motion to leave behind the notion of an ‘organisational identity’ as expressed by Hatch and Scultz (1997). Much like understandings of ‘organisational culture’ (as challenged by Wright 1994) the description emphasises identity as something an organisation *has*, rather than something the organisation *is*. Such a view provides an over simplistic, determined and narrow conception of the identity forming process within organisations – or at least, as was observed in the instance of EDC. The notion of identity is perhaps most readily related to understandings and conceptions of the self (Calhoun 1994; Lamert 1994; Scott & Marshall 2006: 287-290). Again we have encountered the problem of whether to focus analysis at the level of the group, or at the level of the individual.

The word ‘identity’ is derived from the Latin *idem* implying sameness and continuity (Scott & Marshall 2006: 287). In terms of the individual, the problem of identity is succinctly expressed by Kluckhohn and Murray (1948):

Every man is in certain respects

- a. like all other men
- b. like some other men
- c. like no other man (cited by Mennell 1994: 76)

*Idem*, then is only ever *sameness to a degree*. Implicitly the statement recognises the potential for sameness, degrees of sameness and difference, to exist simultaneously regardless of contradiction and tension. In the main thesis, the notion of continuity in organisation (indeed, the social world more widely) was exposed as a myth in favour

of a conception of sociological *becoming*, supported by Giddens (1984) theory of structuration. There is no permanence in perpetuation: there is only progress which infers a situation of latent instability and change. The category of ‘identity’ involves an inherent schism between parts which are the same, similar and different: variables in a constant state of flux and which are recognised only in practice.

As I write the words of Geertz (1973: 5 – my emphasis) echo: “*man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”*. A web – much like a tapestry is composed of many strands. Regardless of inclusion/exclusion from the group, generally premised on the basis of a mutual understanding, the reality of the situation, in terms of an extent of feeling (e.g. *authenticity, belonging, truthfulness*), is experienced at an individual, subjective level: webs spun by the individual. Collinson (2003: 534) observes:

...many studies of subjectivity tend to examine identity as a singular phenomenon, concentrating narrowly on just on primary feature of self... By privileging one aspect of identity, such approaches neglect other, potentially important features of self that may intersect in complex ways.

He advises (2003: 543):

...the challenge for critical organisational analysts is to develop new ways of examining and representing these complex and sometimes contradictory simultaneities as they are reproduced within the multiple asymmetries and insecurities of the contemporary workplace.

Outlined in Chapter Seven (section: 7.1.2) the concept of a narrative reality maintains the notion of social life as storied. In the exploration of social reality as storied, the metaphor of storytelling seems particularly apt alerting to a process between individuals/peoples whereby meaning becomes shared and understanding mutually constituted over time (Somers and Gibson 1994). Some stories are retold many times over, given a twist, applied in new and different contexts, and so their original meaning becomes reconstituted or constituted anew. Always the process is dynamic providing opportunity for interception allowing interpretation by social science (Bevir 2011). Somers and Gibson (1994: 59 – emphasis as original) summarise:

...narratives are *constellations of relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space*, constituted by *causal emplotment*. Unlike the attempt to produce meaning by placing an event in a specified category, narrativity precludes sense-making of a singular isolated phenomenon. Narrativity demands that we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events. Indeed, the chief characteristic of narrative is that it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network (however incoherent or unrealisable) composed of symbolic, institutional and material practices.

These strands might be many and variously spun to constitute meaning in the form of ‘causal emplotment’:

Without emplotment, events or experiences could be categorised only according to a taxonomical scheme... To make something understandable in the context of a narrative is to give it historicity and relationality. This makes sense because when events are located in a temporal (however fleeting) and sequential plot we can then explain their relationship to other events. Plot can thus be seen as the logic or syntax of narrative. (Somers and Gibson 1994: 59-60)

Implications of the construction of an ‘indigenous culture’ within place:

The accomplishment of BV at EDC was at least as *social*, as technical, a feat. At EDC place and past were indeed entwined as one, in an identity forming narrative strand with special implications. Bennett (2009: 184), in consideration of the role of nostalgia in the construction of narratives constituting collective identity, begins:

Wheatley Hill’s Centenary Heritage Gala Parade started at 10 o’clock sharp on June 30<sup>th</sup> 2007 outside the Heritage Centre... The celebrations embraced a selective heritage of an ex-mining village as particular moments and eras were re/presented and symbols such as brass bands and banners were appropriated to affect a sense of collective identity, belonging and continuity.

Prior to local government reorganisation, Wheatley Hill fell within the district boundary. The events to which Bennett (2008) refers to took place within the

timeframe of the research. In key respects, the passage supports the findings of the research: of a strong sentimental attachment to a particular version of past as existing within the generalised area of EDC. I accept the thesis of Beynon et al (1999) of the local authority as ‘imagining’ both needy and attractive places in an attempt to attract economic investment. The interpretation is not wrong, during the course of the research I have made similar assertions. However, this provides only a partial account of intertwined nature of past and place at EDC. Informing a ‘canvas of interpretation’, the concrete history of past and the embedded, highly contextualised nature of place, provided for a cognitive reality which individuals at EDC utilised in making sense of the requirements of BV (Elsbach et al 2005).

The conviction of an indigenous culture within place provided EDC an easy access route to community, providing both those within the authority with a cogent sense of being (hence, purpose) whilst more generally validating the actions of the authority in the district. The concept of ‘community’ has been long argued over in sociology and in the social sciences more generally. Hillery (1955) identified 94 definitions of the concept. Yet despite a lack of clarity, a generalised concept of community remains. Nisbet (1967: 47-48) decreed ‘community’ as: “*The most fundamental and far-reaching of sociology’s unit-ideas... Community is a fusion of feeling and thought, of tradition and commitment, of membership and volition.*” Williams (1983: 76) acknowledged the warm, fuzzy glow of ‘community’:

Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organisation (*state, nation, society*, etc.) it never seems to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.

Possibly, this positive association explains the sentiment which informed the New Labour agenda of ‘Community Leadership’. We lack space for a thoroughgoing analysis of the concept of community. Of relevance to the current discussion is the belief of an indigenous culture as constituting the basis of community and the conviction within EDC of the authority as rightfully *belonging* to community.

Individuals spoke of the authority as ‘community-minded’ and conceived of the authority as having a strong sense of ‘community identity’. Note I am referring to the authority as being possessed of a ‘community’ disposition; principally, *because this is how individuals conceived of the authority*: as a collective entity which went beyond their own selves. Given the parameters of the research, we have only the perspective of those directly associated with the authority (employees and members) to account for this feeling of connectedness. It is highly likely individual residents and business owners would have shared an alternative perception.

Disregarding the contested nature of the ‘community’ (again, in the vein of W.I. Thomas) it is important to recognise the notion of ‘community’ conceived at EDC as informing an underlying collective sense of motivation within the authority. As an area with high levels of socio-economic activity officially recorded, prior to the introduction of BV, many councillors and employees of the authority were already motivated to affect improvement out of a sense of moral consciousness and ensuring social responsibility. In many respects, this was resonant of the peculiar Old Labour tradition documented by Beynon & Austrin (1994), to have emerged in the Durham Coalfields throughout the course of the nineteenth century, through the development of the mining industry and the mutual association of the Methodist faith, trade union movement and political links had to the national Labour Party. In the present day this provided for both a past pattern of interaction *and* a tradition to be emulated.

Feelings of community are often linked to nostalgia (Bennett 2008). Popularly the contemporary conception of a breakdown in ‘community’ provides for informal reminiscences of how things used to be: “*in the ‘good old days’ – when there was such a thing as community.*” However, understandings of ‘nostalgia’ should not be limited to over-sentimental attachment to past and yearning for what was once. As an identity forming narrative strand (constituting past and place) nostalgia provides a means of “*constructing, maintaining and reconstructing our identities*” (Davis 1979: 18). At EDC nostalgia contributed an identity forming narrative which informed the formation of an organisational ‘we-image’ (Mennell 1994).

Once BV was introduced a framework which formally linked performance to funding was instituted. The realisation within the authority was that performance provided prizes, often in the form of additional funds being released by government. Whilst individual motivations differed – as was noted with reference to Brenda and Eric (see section 7.4.7); some conceived of BV as a fulfilment of ‘duty’ whilst others considered it amounted to no more than good ‘customer’ service (section 7.4.3.). The tacit realisation of specific performance outcomes as securing additional funds became a powerful motivator which galvanised within EDC a collective sense to ensure a *good recognised performance for the greater good of the district*. Hence the accomplishment of BV at EDC was borne in part out of a deep, emotionally felt commitment to community – which also provided an identity forming narrative strand of the organisation.

## Appendix Two: A Cultural Weave: Incorporating Elements of the 'Old' and 'New'

At a number of points I expressed a sense of surprise at the seeming ability of those within the authority to reconcile paradoxical elements of the old and new in such an apparently sensible and flawless way. Indeed, it is the contention of the research that the accomplishment of BV at EDC can be understood in terms of a cultural coming-together (or, rather 'weave') of the 'old' and 'new'.

First though I should qualify, in identifying the presence of the conspicuously 'old' and 'new' in the culture of EDC I am summarising findings made by the research. Thus, the cultural strands of the 'old' and 'new' are understood in terms of a representative order within the organisation. Briefly, the summary below provides an overview of the process of categorisation involved in identifying cultural elements within EDC as specifically 'old'/'new':

\* **Identifying the 'old' and 'new'**

➤ **OLD:**

- The term old is generally defined in terms of that which is less recent in terms of origin; it may variously be understood as that which is weak/feeble through age/continued use and is considered in need of renewal or that which is familiar and is worthy of affection/provides for a source of comfort
- *Connotations:* past, tradition, old fashioned, gemeinschaft
- *Expectations:* slow to change, reliable/constant, established, familiar, dated/antiquated, more fixed social relations

➤ **NEW:**

- The term new is generally defined in terms if that which is more recent in terms of origin; it may variously be understood as that which is unlike that which has gone before, is without prior use, is untested; or that which has been reconditioned, substantially 'brought up-to-date' and newly reinvigorated
- *Connotations:* current, modern, à la mode, gesellschaft



- *Expectations*: of the moment, progressive, rapid pace of change, fresh, dynamic, an advance/discernible improvement from what has gone before, not proven, more fluid social relations

In a discussion of management trends in local government Stewart (2000) cites the research of Leach et al (1993) in the characterisation of ‘old think’ and ‘new think’ local government; in general terms the observations can be understood as indicating the transition from the traditional model of local government as public administration to the increasing influence of New Public Management approaches.

\* **Old v’s New think local government (Leach et al 1993)**

| <i>‘Old think’</i>   | <i>‘New think’</i>  |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provider/producer driven</li> <li>- expanding and stable revenues</li> <li>- municipalism</li> <br/> <li>- establishments and vacancies</li> <li>- slow rhythm of change</li> <li>- traditional, static</li> <li>- insular</li> <li>- centre-focused</li> <li>- incremental short-term</li> <li>- rule-driven</li> <li>- passive employment policies</li> <li>- no recognised corporate culture</li> <li>- finance/treasury driven</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- consumer driven</li> <li>- declining revenues</li> <li>- compulsory competitive tendering, buy-in, joint ventures (BV, partnership working)</li> <li>- cash limited budgets</li> <li>- fast pace of change</li> <li>- change orientated</li> <li>- open, communicating</li> <li>- customer-focused</li> <li>- business-oriented; planned</li> <li>- flexible</li> <li>- active employment policies</li> <li>- corporated (sic) culture geared to management</li> <li>- more policy driven</li> </ul> |

In applying the above to the findings made by the research, the old and new cultural strands of EDC are broadly defined in the descriptions below. The categories are provided only in the form of a working hypothesis to enable the coherent and logical argument of the accomplishment of BV at EDC as the outcome of a coming together of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultural strands within the organisation.

\* **Towards a definition of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultural strands within EDC:**

➤ ***Old cultural strands:***

- *Relating to a period of time*: that which pre-dates the implementation of BV, the process of organisational renewal began 1997 and the finding of the Audit Commission of EDC as an ‘excellent’ local authority (2003)

- *General features*: the expressions of past found within the authority, especially in terms of the maintenance and practice of (localised) 'tradition'
  
- *New cultural strands*:
  - *Relating to a period of time*: that which follows on from the process of organisational renewal commenced 1997, and the implementation of BV
  - *General in features*: the expressions of a current modernity found within the authority, especially terms of the conspicuous practice of modern (contemporary) management practice and technique

### **My time as a Benefits Assessor...**

Interest in the research area was informed by previous experience working as a Benefits Assessor at Wear Valley District Council (2001-2003). Here I witnessed firsthand (as an employee) the implementation of the BV regime within a local authority setting. I have mixed feelings about my time as a Benefits Assessor at WVDC. Being a Benefits Assessor was not the fulfilment of a life-long ambition. I had graduated from Lancaster University where I first met my partner, together we came to Durham and I needed a regular income to help pay the bills in the home we shared. Overall I found the job quite interesting. There was a lot to learn, the legislation was variously being nipped and tweaked. The opportunity to assist members of the public with their queries was usually rewarding, although at times the old 'public service ethos' was certainly tested. I made new friends, generally enjoyed the camaraderie of working in a large section and in, my time working with mainly women of all ages, I developed a very sweet tooth! However, the implementation of BV did instigate a number of changes within the section which were perhaps less than compatible with the easy content of the human psyche. BV played no part in my decision to leave the employ of WVDC, quite apart from the introduction of BV I had decided I wanted to continue my studies and so applied for the Masters in Social Research at Durham. My experience of BV was not positive, within the section I believe a rather aggressive approach to the implementation had been maintained. Although personally unaffected, perhaps being more able to set aside unpleasantness, I was upset to see friends and colleagues who had worked in the section for many years and employed by the authority for many years more, emotionally battered by the experience – several broke down and cried at their desks because of the strain imposed and others were forced to take a period of absence. Anyhow, I digress. Before I outline the changes implemented in the section under BV, I should perhaps sketch some background.

Since 1997, the service had undergone a number of significant changes through the introduction of new legislation by the government. In November 1997 the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) was made operational. Ostensibly established to reduce the number of fraudulent claims made, the body carried a responsibility for the inspection

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of the entire social security system in England and Wales. My Line Manager seemed to live in a state of almost perpetual fear that she would receive the 'call' and the following Monday the BFI would arrive to carry out their inspection. Putting aside the neurotic (although perhaps understandable) concerns of one individual aside, the effect of the BFI was to shine a spotlight on the rigour of the processes and levels of accuracy in the section. Two years later the authority decided to implement the Verification Framework (VF) ahead of schedule (VF became a statutory requirement in 2004). The Verification Framework established minimum evidence standards to enable assessment of benefit entitlement; for instance all new claimants were required to provide two separate items as proof of identification. Again the aim was to reduce the number of fraudulent claims made and ensure improved levels of accuracy. Arguably, the introduction of VF had a far greater impact than the establishment of the BFI in terms of the everyday aspects of the service. VF created an additional layer of bureaucracy, only certain forms of documentation were accepted as providing confirmation. Benefits staff needed to be made aware and fully trained in the requirements of VF. Claimant's needed to be made aware, and often reminded, of their responsibility to provide information when requested. However, by far the biggest impact of VF was that assessed entitlement to Housing and/or Council Tax Benefit could not be fully administered (i.e. paid) until full confirmation of the information required had been provided. The end result was backlog. When I joined the section in late 2001, there were claims that had been in the system for over eighteen months. Further, this delay often contributed to complicate assessment of benefit entitlement: it was by no means common but it certainly was not unusual to receive a brown buff case-file in which there were a number of un-assessed applications for different addresses, the main claimant had a different partner declared, new children had been born in the meantime, etc. Of course, the telephones rang non-stop with concerned claimants and landlords wanting an update on their claim/the claims of their tenants.

Although BV was formally introduced in 2000, it was only in about 2002 that we began to notice the impact of BV within the section. A point when the section was just beginning to emerge from backlog. Whereas once it had taken anywhere between eighteen months to two years to have a claim assessed, from this point on claims were assessed within two/three months – *occasionally a real humdinger of a claim*

*(involving multiple claim addresses, change of circumstances, etc.) would be uncovered (sometimes a claim only surfaced because the claimant was due to appear in court for non-payment of council tax!), but compared to where the section had been, massive improvements had been achieved!*

We were not quite out of the woods but as a section we were beginning to see daylight again! Although district councils provide a number of services, administration of Housing and Council Tax Benefits is generally perceived as amongst the most high-profile. Certainly it can be argued that the BV regime, to an extent, prioritised scrutiny of Benefit service outputs.

Every Friday a count of the outstanding work within the section was completed. One person from each of the two teams in the section would volunteer/be nominated and the total number of: new claims, renewal claims and change of circumstances within the section was counted. Totals were collated and handed to the Deputy Benefits Manager. The operation was fairly low-tech and the Deputy Manager in the management of the outstanding caseload within the section maintained a tolerance for an undisclosed number of outstanding cases. For example: if the number cases awaiting assessment suddenly rose then overtime would be announced; or else our working arrangements would be reviewed and for a period of time the section would prioritise (for example) the assessment of new claims. Within the section such tactics were referred to as 'fire-fighting'. The extent of the backlog was calculated by the item 'in the system' (read: files variously piled around the office in boxes, under tables, etc.) with oldest date stamp showing. Every Friday afternoon after lunch clerical assistants were required to manually search through files making a note of the least recent date stamped on correspondence/application form.

Removed from the situation I can see the tragic-comedy of the situation. The section provided a vital service, often relied upon by some of the most vulnerable in society and the situation was farcical. Within the section we were drowning in paperwork. All-out searches for missing files became a twice weekly event: typically this involved the whole section (more than twenty people) in a search for a missing file; a quest which could take anywhere between five to thirty minutes. In my time in the section, I did not

gain the impression that WVDC Benefits Section was exception. In meeting assessors from other local authorities the indication received was of a similar situation at other local authorities across the country. Nationally the service was in crisis. Given the context, you can perhaps imagine the impact had by the introduction of BV – a demanding and exacting performance management framework.

When I first joined the authority, the Chief Executive's position was vacant. Interestingly, the appointment of a new Chief Executive coincided (quite coincidentally) with the implementation of BV. Many working in the authority were convinced that this appointment had conspired to contribute added pressure on the successful outcome of the BV process. WVDC adopted as its mission the ill-defined aim to be *'the best District Council in England'*. In terms of the senior management of the authority this was understood as a comprehensive a top-quartile performance outcome across all service areas Hence perception of an overly aggressive emphasis on performance outcomes. In the Benefits Section, we were again treading water. The number of outstanding claims to be assessed had increased... we were in for a shock.

Initially, it took a period of time before the section became fully aware of what was required by BV. For instance, how exactly were we to calculate the number of *'days to process new claim'*: *when*, was a new claim a *'new claim'* and not, say, a report in a *'change of circumstances'*? *When* did the clock start ticking? Was it just weekdays, or did weekends also count? – For more than a week, as a section, we variously bickered about whether or not to include weekends in the *'number of days'* count. Finally, colleagues at another local authority confirmed that weekends were to be included in the total *'number of days'* count. Hopes were dashed! Within the section there were a number of false-starts. The section was variously reconfigured. New systems and processes were trialled, abandoned. Tweaked and recommenced. Overtime within the section ran continuously – one colleague paid for a nice foreign holiday with her earnings; I had double glazing installed. Progress was intermittent. At times the *'number of days to process new claims'* fell dramatically, at others the figures seemed to explode upwards. In spite of our sustained efforts, the section seemed unable to gain control over the work coming into the section. BV seemed to compound our problems. There was pressure from within the authority to improve performance outputs. Added,

the comparison element of BV served to reinforce feelings of inadequacy. Posters pinned around the section indicating our performance position in the bottom quartile did little to boost morale.

Following a year or so of this intense scrutiny, the Benefits Manager procured the services of two DWP-affiliated consultants. The pair spent a week in the section, during which time they made a study of existing systems and procedures, organised focus groups and interviewed managers and supervisors on a one-to-one basis. Friday afternoon that same week they reported initial findings back to the Benefits Manager and Deputy Benefits Manager; their proposals transformed the entire operations of the section. Whereas previously, incoming work had been completed by two teams under the new arrangements introduced we were each given a personal allocation of work. We were organised into three teams: Over 60s (newly introduced 'pensioner credits' had led to changes in the legislation governing the entitlement of those of pensionable age); A-K non-pensioner and L-Z non-pensioner. Each team included: a Supervisor, four Assessors and a Clerical Assistant. Within teams each assessor was allocated their own caseload, decided by alphabetical split.

The arrangements transformed the filing system within the section. Previously cases had been filed alphabetically, according to street name. Under the new arrangements each assessor was allocated filing space and all active cases were arranged according to the days of the month, in a 1 to 31 system. Cases were then filed according to target date, in an attempt to ensure performance standards were achieved. For example, at the time the national performance standard for new claims to be assessed was 40 days. This meant the authority had a target of 40 days in which to ensure assessment of the claim received. Upon arrival into the section the claim would be handed to (the relevant) assessor, checked and any further information needed to process the claim would be requested in writing. Statutory guidelines provided the claimant with a total of 28 days in which to provide the information requested. Notionally a new claim received on 1<sup>st</sup> March had until 9<sup>th</sup> April to be assessed, and be 'within target'. The practice was to send a request for further information, if after fourteen days the information was still outstanding then a reminder was sent. After 28 days government guidance allowed the claim to become withdrawn, the claimant had a further fourteen

days in which to challenge this decision and reactivate their claim, but after this date if no further information was forthcoming the claim could be officially withdrawn. Once formally withdrawn, the claimant was required to submit a new application for benefit.

Anyhow, we digress. To continue the earlier example: A claim received on 1<sup>st</sup> March would be logged onto the system, a request for further information made (if necessary) and then the file would usually be filed by the Assessor in day 14 of the 1-31 system. Two weeks later, on March 14<sup>th</sup> the Assessor would pull the case out of the filing. If the information had been received and time allowed (i.e. the assessor was not behind) the case would be processed there and then. If the information remained outstanding a reminder would be sent to the claimant, the case filed again for March 28<sup>th</sup>. If on March 28<sup>th</sup> all information had been provided the case would be assessed and the final total 'number of days to process' recorded by the system as '28 days'. However, if the information remained outstanding after this time, notification of a withdrawal was sent to the claimant. This allowed the claimant a further 14 days in which to provide the information originally requested to enable assessment of the claims received, after which the claim was officially recorded as 'withdrawn' – requiring the claimant to make a new application.

The eagle-eyed will have spotted that the system permitted the claimant a total of 42 days in which to provide the information requested; at the time, the performance standard for 'days to process new claims' was 40 days. This meant the section could effectively miss the target date by two days. As a result the period of a 'notification of withdrawal' was later reduced from 14 days to 7 days. This provided a system which enabled the assessment of new claims received in 36 days, providing a tolerance of 5 days in which to ensure compliance with national performance standards. Old routines continued. Every Friday Assessors were required to complete a count of the work outstanding within their allocation. Any cases which had exceeded the target date were logged and the Assessor held to account for lapsed targets, reporting personally to the Deputy Benefits Manager. As a character not given to compromise, this could be an uncomfortable experience.



There are a number of issues outstanding:

- First, as files in the section were no longer stored alphabetically, it became imperative that all Assessors maintained an accurate and up-to-date log of the location of individual files. This was achieved on the notes page of the electronic assessment system. At that time, Assessors were required to make a written note on the case file of the actions completed. The increasing reliance of on-screen notations led to a duplication of work, we wrote notes on the file and then typed a record of actions completed on the IT system.
- Second, the new way of working was contrary to the existing audit arrangements in place and actually went against regulations. Regulations required that Assessors have their caseload changed every six months. The arrangements served to ensure impersonal assessment of entitlement and safeguard against fraud (in the same vein Assessors were prohibited from assessing entitlement of immediate friends and family).
- Individuals working in the section became increasingly isolated, team spirit faltered and as a result morale within the section suffered. Even though the backlog situation had frequently made for challenging and unpleasant circumstances, for instance (quite understandably) many claimants and landlords could become quite rude and verbally abusive. Personal differences aside, overall the section maintained a good team dynamic: we were all in it together! The work in the section was shared. If it was seen that an Assessor was about to become buried under a mountain of brown-buff files, colleagues generally rallied round and lightened the load of their co-workers. It was tacitly accepted (if not always personally appreciated) that individuals in the section worked according to different abilities and speed. Usually it was not an issue that 'Barbara' had completed sixteen claims that day whereas 'John' had managed just nine. It was seen that there might be good reason for such an instance: perhaps John lacked experience, or had had a more difficult caseload – it could be that Barbara had assessed sixteen *easy* claims.
- Under the new arrangements introduced, even within teams, colleagues became pitted against one another. Personal caseloads were prioritised as failure to meet targets resulted in an uncomfortable exchange with Deputy Benefits

Manager. The regime was lean and mean; everyone within the section was formally given an allocation, there was no spare capacity. The regime lacked holiday-cover arrangements, which meant individuals would be required to juggle incoming work and annual leave – coming back to work after two weeks holiday provided many with a sense of dread. New staff were effectively thrown in the deep-end, given an official training period of twelve weeks and then responsibility for a full caseload – despite it being acknowledged that it took between about eighteen months of experience to become an fully fledged Assessor. Under these circumstance individuals suffered, and tears were not an unusual sight.

E-mail: [REDACTED]  
Telephone: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

08.03.2005

My name is Charlotte Quarless and I am a PhD student at Durham University, in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy. I am currently engaged in a programme of research which will seek to provide a grounded account of Best Value practice within a local authority. Subsequent to advice received from [REDACTED] Principal Officer, I am writing to enquire whether Easington District Council might be interested in participating with my research efforts, by providing access to the organisation and allowing a case study of the authority to be made.

In my research I am particularly interested in the lived experience of the Best Value scheme, specifically the ways in which the requirements of the scheme (articulated mainly in the form of performance indicators) are translated in the work processes and strategies adopted by the authority's employees. Also, I am keen to explore the impact and influence exerted by Best Value on the work orientations of all the council's employees and would like to ensure that all members of the hierarchy, from a managerial through to clerical level, are represented in the study.

My own interest in Best Value stems from my time spent as a Benefits Assessor at Wear Valley District Council, during the period December 2001 to September 2003. At Wear Valley I felt I witnessed the implementation of Best Value at first hand, and I became aware that the scheme represented a major qualitative change in the approach adopted by local government organisations in the conduct of their responsibilities at both a local and national level. From what I can gather, general opinion accepts that there existed a real need for change in the management of local councils' responsibilities. In addition, general opinion would also broadly accept that the Best Value scheme has secured widespread

improvements in the delivery of local services, to local people. However, I am of the opinion that local authorities are still undergoing a period of change, not least in the management and organisation of daily work practices. Indeed, in the rush to secure performance outputs and realise the aims and objectives of the Best Value scheme, I would suggest that the effect felt and the effort required by all members of the workforce can become lost in official reporting figures. It is this which I am keen to have recognised and which motivates me in my current work.

I understand that you formerly worked [REDACTED], leaving [REDACTED] to take up your new appointment as Assistant Chief Executive at Easington. May I take this opportunity to congratulate you upon your recent appointment and I hope all is going well. I would very much welcome an opportunity to speak with you personally with regards to my research. Please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience, my contact details are shown above.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Yours Sincerely,

Miss Charlotte Quarless

## Appendix 5: Handout Provided to Potential Participants; pp. 360

### INTRODUCTION:

I am a fulltime PhD Student at Durham University, in the School of Applied Social Science, and I am currently engaged in a programme of research which will seek to provide a grounded account of Best Value practice within a local authority. My academic background is in Sociology – a subject embracing many diverse interests and fields, which seeks to study the development, structure and function of human society. I have a first degree in Sociology from Lancaster University and I have recently completed a Masters in Research Methods at the University of Durham. During the period 2001 to 2003 I worked as a Benefits Assessor at Wear Valley District Council, where I witnessed the implementation of the Best Value, PIs and performance management (along with various changes in the legislation) at first hand. Indeed, it is this which has triggered my twin research interests: the evolving nature of organisations, and the human experience of working in organisations; specifically, local government organisations.

### MY TIME AT EASINGTON:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to base my research at Easington and I look forward to learning from you in your work. I am aware that Easington is an 'excellent' council and has received good recognition under the Best Value scheme. Also, I have a little knowledge of the context against which the council works and I am aware of the hard work in the attempt to tackle the historical socio-economic disadvantage of the district since the decline in the mining industry. I am also aware that you have a female Chief Executive and a female Assistant Chief Executive, a feature which surely singles you out as unique. In addition, there appears to be a good relationship between members and staff, as well as an awareness of the challenges facing local authorities. For all of these reasons Easington District Council is a good place to study from an academic perspective.

Although the PhD studentship is funded for three years (I started in January 2005) I expect to be around and present in the organisation between October and April/May, 2006 for a few days each week. This will give me chance to try and collect all of the information necessary and then I will have to begin the process of analysing and writing up (the PhD itself is a thesis of 100,000 words). My work is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, an independent government funded body and as such I have a professional code of ethics to abide by; the key requirements of which are the principle of informed consent and a code of confidentiality. So, it is up to you whether or not you decide to participate with the work and you can withdraw from the research at any stage of the process. Also, I have a duty to inform you about the work and answer questions connected to the work. Most importantly, anything information disclosed by you will be treated as confidential and I shall endeavour at all times to maintain anonymity.

### THE RESEARCH IN BRIEF:

The research will seek to provide a grounded account of Best Value practice within a local authority, with the specific aim being to reveal the processes engaged in by members of the organisation in the pursuit of performance and to understand the effects of performance management, as introduced by the Best Value scheme, in the organisation of local government and the experience felt by workers.

The Best Value scheme was introduced in 1998 and became a statutory duty following the Local Government Act 1999. The objective of Best Value is to ensure that management and business practice in local government deliver better and more responsive public services. The key elements of Best Value include the mandatory requirement of local authorities to publish an annual Best Value Performance Plan, the need to identify performance indicators and set targets and standards within an effective performance management framework, to ensure a full consultation with local people and carry out self assessment in the form of Best Value Reviews.

Although, it is recognised that the Best Value scheme has brought about many significant changes in the provision of services to local people by local authorities; it is also recognised that Best Value, through its specific aim to encourage a continuous (measured) improvement in the administration of local services to local peoples has necessitated a transformation in both the attitude and approach adopted by local authorities towards their role and responsibility within the local area. This transformation has taken place at both an organisational and individual worker level, thus the research will aim to address the effect of the Best Value regime at the level of the organisation and the individual.

### THE WORK AHEAD:

There are three main components to the research:

>*A qualitative analysis of local authority documents:* This part of the project is already underway and I am studying Best Value Performance Plans 04/05 from each of the seven district councils which form the administrative county of Durham.

>*Shadowing and observation:* Planned for October through to May 06; the shadowing of members engaged in their work, enabling me to learn about everyday practice within the authority and the extent to which that practice is shaped by the demands of the Best Value scheme.

> *Interviews:* Planned for October through to May 06, 25-30 semi-structured interviews; in which I hope to appreciate the individual experience of work and how this relates to the Best Value scheme.

OBSERVATION SHEET

DATE:

|       |  |  |  |
|-------|--|--|--|
| 08.00 |  |  |  |
| 09.00 |  |  |  |
| 10.00 |  |  |  |
| 11.00 |  |  |  |
| 12.00 |  |  |  |
| 13.00 |  |  |  |

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|       |  |  |  |
|-------|--|--|--|
| 14.00 |  |  |  |
| 15.00 |  |  |  |
| 16.00 |  |  |  |
| 17.00 |  |  |  |
| 18.00 |  |  |  |

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION ABOUT INTERVIEW AND INTERVIEWEE:

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Date of Interview      |  |
| Place of Interview     |  |
| Duration of Interview  |  |
| Interviewee Identifier |  |
| Interviewee Gender     |  |
| Interviewee Position   |  |
| Employed Since         |  |
| Professional Field     |  |
| Local                  |  |
| Additional Information |  |



**General Interview Questions:**

- *Less of a script or schedule, pre-set questions provided useful prompts during interviews*

Opening:      Position held  
                    Total length of service  
                    Description of job (duties and responsibilities)

1. What does BV mean to you?
  
2. When BV was first introduced what were the changes, both significant and insignificant, that you noticed in the organisation of your work and the organisation of the authority more generally?
  
3. What is the influence of BV on your daily work routine?
  
4. Do you like/ dislike your work? (look for examples)
  
5. What do you think of the officer-supervisor-manager dynamic at work? What is your experience of being a manager?
  
6. What do you think of the words ‘continuous improvement’ and ‘performance’? Are they meaningful to you, if so, in what ways is this meaning secured?
  
7. Can you point to any instance of a formal versus an informal organisation/ process which gets the job done and secures performance?
  
8. How is it you ‘measure’ your own performance at work?

9. Do you feel autonomous in your work?
  
10. Do you enjoy your work? What do you find motivates you in your work?
  
11. What do you think are the feelings of your colleagues towards BV?
  
12. Do you think the people of the district are being better served under BV? DO you think that they have noticed any change?
  
13. What of times gone by, before BV? Was there a BV-type concern then, how did it manifest itself?
  
14. What are your thoughts of the work-life balance? Is there a clear divide between the 'living' and the 'working' in your life?
  
15. Anything else?

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