TOWARDS HOLISTIC EVIDENCE-BASED ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

An Action Research Case Study On Improving Understanding Of Populations

Global
Urban
Research
Unit

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November 2003

Electronic Working Paper No 38

ABSTRACT

In the late 1990s UK local governance organisations were urged by national government to develop holistic evidence-based approaches (with partners) to better deal with joined-up issues affecting the population. However, developing associated *understanding* of the population (and issues) was not prescribed. This action research case study examines how such understanding was developed within one UK local authority (Newcastle City Council between 1997 and 2003) and explores how this understanding might be developed to be more holistic and evidence-based.

The research methodology involved placement within the authority, participant observations on projects and experimental initiatives, observations within, across, and outside the organisation, and interviews with stakeholders. The study examines stakeholder engagement and networks, current understandings, mechanisms used for developing understandings, the influence of context on learning, and the explanation of the links between these to arrive at a recommended program of change.

Significant strengths are found including innovative past learning trials for development, extensive ongoing networking activities, and the many varied and accumulating quantitative datasets across partnerships. However, entrenched organisational approaches and practices constrain the development of holistic evidence-based understanding: the absence of systematic maintained collective learning processes; weak recording of understanding; methodological exclusion of stakeholders from the development of understanding; the neglect of qualitative data, explanations, investigations, interpretations, and reflexivity; and also implicit organisational acceptance of such limitations and low aspirations. Nonetheless, untapped opportunities exist to enable change including: latent practitioner knowledge and innovative management champions, the desire for improvement and raised aspirations within learning networks, and the development potential of alterative learning approaches. It is concluded that holistic evidence-based understanding requires new learning approaches beyond those current in local government or academia. Recommendations are made to develop such approaches from those that have been trialed and reported in the case study. It is argued that the findings, conclusions, and recommendations may apply in other local governance partnerships as they may have similar understanding, similar learning mechanisms, and similar organisational contexts, and they may also seek to develop more holistic evidence-based understanding of their populations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people and groups stimulated this study from national and local government, departments and projects. Some (Appendix 1) generously and patiently gave their time, ideas, advice, information, support, encouragement, and help. They involved me in their ongoing attempts to improve practices and outcomes; they managed me, worked with me, and introduced trials and experimental initiatives with learning potential. Without these people there would have been no study; without their initiatives, efforts, and involvement, there would have been nothing *to* study; without their support and sponsorship I could not have studied it. I was simply a co-researcher in a much larger team. This action research study is therefore also a partial record of the action research of many others. I have drawn upon their ideas, projects, and visions. This study was not mine alone. I fully acknowledge this and I thank them all. Any inaccuracy, error, distortion, simplification, or bias is of course all mine.

I am particularly and deeply grateful to the following mentor-managers who enabled, encouraged, funded and shaped this study. Prof. Patsy Healey, Director of Centre for Research on European Urban Environments, Newcastle University, for project supervision, intellectual guidance, continuing education and scholarly direction. Brian Ham, former Director, Enterprise, Environment and Culture, Newcastle City Council (NCC), for overall support, senior guidance and wide involvement throughout City Council projects. John Lee, Assistant Head of Community and Housing, NCC, for initiation, management, development of City-University Liaison projects, and invaluable initial guidance and access in local government. George Kelly, Manager of Social Policy and Regeneration, NCC, for support and co-development of the project proposal, management on the Regeneration project, and additional ideas and advice. Michael Crilly, Manager of EU Social Exclusion Projects, NCC, for innovative trials, stimulating discussions, management and collaborations. Norma Murphy, former Community Co-ordinators Manager, NCC, for advice, involvement of staff and my participation on projects and trials. Geoff Quicke, Head of Research, NCC, for management of the Information Team and access to staff and information. Stephen Savage, Head of Public Health and Environmental Protection, NCC, for support throughout the project period, contract management, and use of department facilities and resources. John Dersley, Head of Regional Development Office, Newcastle University for management of the University-City Liaison projects, wider insight into university working, and support of the project proposal. Allen Creedy, NCC, for management on EU Peer Reviews and support during writing. I am grateful to them all. Many Thanks, Trevor Wren.

A Note to the reader on the reading and use of this research

I would wish to inject a cautionary note into the reading and possible use of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this case study. The aim of this study has been to explore the development of holistic evidence-based understanding and to suggest practical improvements through engagement with the realities of local government working. It therefore aims to be critical and constructive *with* the many participants and from *within* local government and several projects. The aim of the local government sponsors and participants was to improve understanding through identification of limitations and constraints. There is some potential for misuse and/or abuse here. In particular, it may be possible to extract and utilise some of the findings out of context to provide 'evidence' with which to criticise the self same participants and stakeholders who initiated, funded, and informed the study. Such an approach would be of questionable integrity and motivation. Firstly, it could discourage future learning in local governance. Secondly, it could suggest the critic knew something that participants and stakeholders did not, which is a form of deceptive self-aggrandisement. Thirdly, it would be at best a reinterpretation of the findings presented here (and therefore not my own declared interpretation) or worse, it could be a deliberate misrepresentation taken out of context. For these reasons I wish to state my own position clearly (and would ask that if the reader represent, relay, or record my view that this is done accurately or not at all).

One overall conclusion of the study is that many of the significant weaknesses and limitations associated with organisational learning identified here are in the author's view associated with structure, practices, process, methods, and organisational context. Identification of significant weaknesses and limitations are *not* directed towards the participants involved in this study, nor towards the members and managers of projects reported, nor towards other local government stakeholders *not* involved in the study, nor towards any general stakeholder groups referred to. This conclusion should perhaps be noted in advance, for if any findings, conclusions, or recommendations of this study are interpreted as being critical of the study participants, projects, or generalised stakeholders (individuals or groups) involved or mentioned, then the reader can conclude that either the study is badly written and fails to convey the authors' interpretation, or that the reader misinterprets the authors intended meaning. In short, I would not wish to be associated with any statement or view expressed which re-presents the findings, conclusions, or recommendations reported here as being critical of (specific or generalised) individuals, participants, managers, project team members, nor of any general stakeholder group noted or mentioned within the study.

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PART 1

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 National Government Objectives

This study considers how those working within local government come to understand the population they are responsible for, and accountable to, within the local government boundaries. It further considers how understanding of this population could be improved upon and, in particular, how more holistic and evidence-based understanding might be achieved (and indeed what this might mean and entail).

The national origins of this project can be attributed to the policies of the Labour Government which aimed to build joined up thinking to joined up problems, and the advocacy of these approaches in national government statements and documents, aimed at local government working.

Wilkinson & Appelbee (1999) highlight key statements of national government following the election of New Labour, initiating large-scale public voicing of the need for holistic approaches, with Prime Minister Tony Blair advocating ‘’joined-up solutions for joined-up problems’’, and the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit in December 1997. He reiterated commitment to these ideas one year later, stating:

> ‘’Even the basic policies, targeted at unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown, will not deliver their full effect unless they are properly linked together. Joined-up problems need joined-up solutions’’. (Blair, *The Observer,* 31st May 1998*).*

Christie (1999) states,

> ‘’The Labour government’s aims for a radical modernisation of Britain, and especially for a fundamental attack on the causes and consequences of poverty, crime and chronic unemployability, depend on its ability to make a reality of the idea of holistic government. It requires a cultural revolution in central and local government, and a new way of looking at policy design and implementation.’’ (p. v)

Here ‘holistic’ approaches include a focus upon causes and consequences of multiple issues, and Christie further develops an outline of the requirements of this cultural revolution; horizontal joined-up agencies and departments, vertical interaction between local and national government, broader planning perspectives with a focus upon prevention and anticipation as well as reaction, and extended involvement of citizens, all to be incorporated into policy and implementation.

Holistic approaches are urged in other respects also. The national government Local Government Act (2000) obliges local authorities to work with other agencies and to promote the economic, social, and environmental well-being of its area. Active consultation with communities is increasingly expected; participation and community involvement is stressed. Other literature sources advocate that the population, and particular groups within it, be engaged in these learning processes, to become better informed, and to be involved in developing understanding. In including issues of participation, citizenship, and exclusion, the issue of participation is raised where those understood are involved in developing that understanding. For example, Hall & Williamson (1999) advocate processes that explicitly link participation, citizenship, and learning. Furthermore, they state that it would be better if people were enabled to generate and gather information for themselves.

In a wider perspective the call for a holistic approach can be seen as a confluence of many diverse cultural, philosophical, and scientific influences (e.g. Capra 1982, 1988, 1996). One point where the general holistic movement and governance movements connect is within the sustainability movement. Here international, national and local organisations link aims and implicitly urge more holistic visions advocating longer-term perspectives, consideration of contemporary and future generations and holistically linked areas of attention (integrated social, economic, and environmental aspects) to improve quality of life (a holistic theme) of all (a holistic inclusion of all peoples), Wilkinson & Appelbee (1999) quote: ‘‘Sustainable development is development that enhances the quality of life of all, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’’ (Brundtland Report, World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This international longer term viewpoint was adopted in the policy statements of senior national and local government figures, such as John Prescott the Minister then responsible for Environment and the Regions, and Sir Jeremy Beecham, the chairman of the Local Government Association. Both advocate improvements in quality of life through integration of environmental, economic, and social goals, demonstrating holistic integration of intentions and aspirations, across local, national, and international levels (itself a holistic approach).

The literature discussing an evidence-based approach is also extensive and need not be reviewed in detail again here. A few key references will suffice for this introduction.

In a key national government document (Armstrong, 2000), the (then) Minister for Local Government and the Regions, argued that the Local Government Act (2000) forms one of the key foundations on which the National Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy will be built. She stated in the preface: 'if so little is known about social conditions of an area, how can effective programmes be developed to tackle social exclusion? If the level of deprivation is not known or reliable bases cannot be established, it will be difficult to assess whether renewal has been successful''(foreword). This focus of this viewpoint is information as evidence for use in performance management and targeted intervention.

In 1999 the 'Modernising Government' White Paper included a chapter on what must change in policy-making including reference to evidence and research, development from good practice across governance, and a creative approach:

> ''This Government expects more of policy makers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy making and better focus on policies that will deliver long-term goals. Our challenge, building on existing good practice, is to get different parts of government to work together, where that is necessary, to deliver the Government's overall strategic objectives without losing sight of the need to achieve value for money. This means developing a new and more creative approach to policy making, based on the following key principles''
>
> (Cabinet Office 1999, Chapter 2, Para 6)

Of the nine principles highlighted one is particularly relevant to this study, as it advocates the role of evidence in learning:

> **''**Learning from experience**.** Government should regard policy making as a continuous, learning process, not as a series of one-off initiatives. We will improve our use of evidence and research so that we understand better the problems we are trying to address. We must make more use of pilot schemes to encourage innovations and test whether they work. We will ensure that all policies and programmes are clearly specified and evaluated, and the lessons of success and failure are communicated and acted upon. Feedback from those who implement and deliver policies and services is essential too'' (Cabinet Office 1999, Chapter 2, Para 6)

This includes evidence preceding actions and evidence following actions, the use of trials, and including involvement of practitioners. It reiterates the idea that evidence will be used in learning stated earlier in the White Paper:

> ''….government must be willing constantly to re-evaluate what it is doing so as to produce policies that really deal with problems; that are forward-looking and shaped by the evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures; that tackle causes not symptoms; that are measured by results rather than activity; that are flexible and innovative rather than closed and bureaucratic; and that promote compliance rather than avoidance or fraud. To meet people's rising expectations, policy making must also be a process of continuous learning and improvement.''
>
> (Cabinet Office 1999, Chapter 2, Para 2)

So these statements give a clear indication that holistic working, joint actions, evidence, learning, and feedback from practitioners, are needed. However the possible processes required, what constitutes 'evidence', how 'learning' across organisations should occur, and the depth and nature of feedback processes expected are not prescribed.

Solesbury (2002) charts the rise of evidence in policy as driven by different pressures; firstly, through the utilitarian and instrumental turn in social research of funders now viewing research as a means to an end rather than an end in itself; secondly, in meeting the demands of a changing world where claims of practitioners to expertise and authority are contested; thirdly, in the transformation of the UK policy field towards pragmatism and away from ideology; what works is what matters. Solesbury takes issue with this final point in that this disregards other questions which are important to understanding a situation such as ''What is going on? What's the problem? What causes it? What might be done about it? At what cost? By whose agency?''(p94). He therefore advocates a need to better understand a situation and possible interventions. Finally, he also argues that considerations of knowledge and expertise must be considered with power and authority. Securing power and authority is an aim of leaders and their advisors; knowledge is a potential weapon, and through implication, the uses and purposes of evidence are also. In conclusion, although the government may advocate the development of more evidence-based approaches in the 1990s the academic literature does not forget to consider the interests of those who commission, provide, use, or advocate evidence.

In conclusion, the government edicts and literature strongly advocated the development of more holistic and evidence-based approaches in the late 1990s. These were often coupled with statements on information, on participation, on involvement and practitioner feedback, citizen inclusion, neighbourhood renewal, and continuous learning. Yet the means to deliver holistic and evidence-based understanding are not prescribed anywhere and within the academic literature there are calls for development of understanding beyond what simply works.

1.2 A Local Government Perspective

In response to the National Government objectives Newcastle City Council set up a multi-disciplinary and multi-agency project in August 1999 with the aim to support a major long-term citywide regeneration initiative (called 'Going for Growth'). The aspirations of this regeneration initiative were to be 'radical, holistic and evidence-based'. Within this larger team was an 'information support team' (also involving cross-department and multi-agency personnel). This team had a remit to collect and assemble relevant information to inform the wider regeneration project. The author was one of the researchers working within this regeneration information team until March 2000. In the course of this project the team members and management gained experience of multi-agency working and came to better realise the possibilities and limitations of the technical information approach in developing a more holistic evidence-base. The team assembled quantitative information on a range of indicators, confirmed city council concerns on citywide issues and differences between areas within the city. The team also made recommendations including the development of an integrated information system and the need to access and utilise qualitative understanding of the population. As part of these recommendations several new projects were proposed with different specific aims. One of those proposals led to funding for the research of this case study.

The overall aim of this case study was to 'step back' from the action-oriented processes of the regeneration initiative and from the immediate questions of short-term importance to local government. It would examine the meanings of holistic and evidence-based understanding and the means to deliver this. This project was to be both reflective and creative. It should embody an action research perspective – aimed at recommending future change to organisational practice. It should draw upon reflection on difficulties and successes of past projects, and on participant observations of parallel projects within local government as

further sources of evidence. It would be based within local government and should adopt a practical approach to the research questions and any recommendations (which should be grounded in real or potential practices of local governance). The project would also consider broader issues and questions arising from research questions, and in particular would examine the aim of development of more holistic and evidence-based understanding of the population, what this might mean and what this might entail. The proposal was developed in consultation with senior managers and staff in both Newcastle City Council and Newcastle University, and was later agreed and resourced. The overall project was supported, funded, and managed by Newcastle City Council with academic supervision provided through the Centre for Research on European Urban Environments, Newcastle University. It ran from May 2000 to May 2002 (and this study report draws additionally upon the author's experience of local government projects in the preceding period from 1997 to 2000, and in parallel projects during the period 2000-2003).

The study is therefore conducted on the particular case of Newcastle City Council, Newcastle upon Tyne. The city population is made up of over a quarter of a million individuals who are serviced by a wide range of organisations, systems and infrastructure including those of local and national government. The city is divided up geographically into 26 political wards: each with a population of several thousand inhabitants and three local councillors representing each ward. The City Council is organised into different Directorates including different sub-units and staff groups (mentioned within this study). At the time of writing the Directorates comprised: Strategic Support (including Policy and Research and within this Research Services, and also Social Policy and Corporate Initiatives), Community and Housing (including the community co-ordinators and housing officers), Education & Libraries (including an Educational Performance Unit and teachers out in schools), and the Enterprise Environment and Culture Directorate (including Planning, Economic Development, and Public Health for instance). Other directorates include Social Services and CityWorks.

The city population is further serviced by a number of other organisations (for instance the police, health, and employment services), which are linked together within informal and formal local partnerships. The need to develop joint understandings across organisations is familiar to local government managers but it is suggested that the ways in which this development might or should occur had not yet been prescribed or discovered:

> ''If you look at government guidance on local strategic partnerships, they are saying every city must have one, they must be made up of multi-sector, multi-organisational partners, they must reach agreement on the way forward for the city, and the area, and

> they must agree a common plan about how that is going to be done; that is the process [your case study is on] - its on the cusp of this. The government might not understand how hard it is but they are pushing it as a policy direction and therefore we are going to have to try and find ways of making it work, to find ways of pursuing the policy objective and making this kind of joined-up, multi-sector, multi-agency debate about the nature of social reality – when they all bring their own agendas and values but still are all charged with finding a way forward – so [the case study] really fits with what government are about, and with the neighbourhood strategy for neighbourhood renewal.'' (Local government manager)

This case study examines (and draws upon) perspectives within and across local government and across associated networks.

1.3 The Research Questions

The key research questions to be considered in the course of this case study were:

1. How is understanding of the population currently developed within local government?
2. How could such understanding be improved to be more holistic and evidence-based?

The first question is an analytical question to be investigated and the second is a normative question to be explored. The second question is aimed at delivering researched recommendations for change to be more holistic and evidence-based.

It was also necessary to consider the methodological questions:

3. How can current development of understanding of the population be researched?
4. How can improvements be identified and created (to deliver more holistic and evidence-based understanding of the population)?

The study first explores questions from perspectives and models in the academic literature (Chapter 2) and then addresses the methodological questions within the Research Methodology (Chapter3).

2 LITERATURE PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter some perspectives relevant to the research questions will be identified and considered within the academic literature. Specific perspectives and grounding are considered from the following broad areas:

- Perspectives from Epistemology
- Perspectives from Sociology and Psychology
- Perspectives from the study of Organisations and Practice

This is not a comprehensive overview. These areas are relevant in that they provide specific perspectives on the research and methodological questions. Firstly, they give different perspectives into the meanings of holistic and evidence-based understanding and therefore inform the aims of this case study. Secondly, they highlight different methodologies and approaches of learning, which can be then compared with (and added to) the case study findings to inform the conclusions and recommendations of this study. Finally, some of these perspectives inform the design of the research methodology of the case study.

2.2 Some Perspectives from Epistemology

There are different interpretations of social reality and therefore what can and what cannot be understood and what an evidence-based understanding might mean or apply to. These different schools of thought include the positivist (Popper, 1963), realists (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979, 1986, Byrne, 2002), social constructionists (Burr, 1995, 1998) and those of Kuhn (1962) for instance. In the early 1920s it was thought Positivism could raise sociology above its speculative and philosophical nature. Park and Burgess (1924) stated

> ''A great deal of social information has been collected merely for the purposes of determining what to do in a given case. Facts have not been collected to check social theories. Social problems have been defined in terms of common sense, and facts have been collected, for the most part, to support this or that doctrine, not to test it. In very few instances have investigations been made disinterestedly, to determine the validity of a hypothesis'' (p44)

In many ways this statement seems as applicable today as it was then. However the situation seems more complex now than it did then as there is a vast body of theory and practice that denies that broad evidence-based social theories are even possible. Yet modern governments, practitioners and many academics still study statistical correlations, test hypotheses, and use such methods to alter understanding of society.

Positivists such as Popper (1963) take the view that for a subject to be capable of refutation; it should be falsifiable. He explicitly assumes an objective reality, but deals with the definition of science. As local government knowledge is rarely (if ever) described as scientific, the approach of Popper is literally 'academic'. However in the context of the aim for developing evidence-based understanding, such criticism cannot be as easily dismissed, as much of what is described as evidence-based understanding in the medical field (one of the exemplars) satisfies Poppers criterion of falsifiability. It is based upon controlled experimental procedures, randomly assigned control groups, with double blind testing, and (all-importantly) the possibility of refutation. Such an evidence-base may be possible in certain circumstances (or if our knowledge increased significantly) but at the moment it appears to be an unlikely candidate for an epistemology to work in a holistic (open?) approach.

The realists (Bhaskar, 1978, Collier, 1998) also argue that there is an objective social reality 'out there' which we can come to understand through approximations and we can improve upon these. They reject the possibility of positivist approaches in social research as the subject is an open society and anyway (they argue) human systems are not predictable. However, in place of predictions they suggest that tendencies can be specified, expected, and then examined in the light of what actually occurs. Realists consider surprises and failures in social expectations (e.g. policies and strategies) to be data and therefore clear indicators of (and means to detect) errors between a mistaken social worldview and the objective social reality 'out there'.

This realist approach offers potential for a form of evidence-based understanding as it suggests making explicit statements of our understanding and also the expectations that follow. Evidence-based policy would be known or refuted through the implementation of it. Evidence could not precede formation of policy but would emerge in the course of the policy lifecycle and the actions in implementing and evaluating it. A first implementation of policy could never be 'evidence-based', and a second implementation would only be evidence-based if the circumstances were approximately the same as the first.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) also describe the scientific realist perspective on (evaluation of) social projects where the aim is to implement some form of social change, and they present a general model of social change. Therefore this approach may be directly applicable to changes implemented within local government (and also to the aims of this case study also where change is desired in the understanding within local government). They stress the need to consider explanation and the need to construct and consider the implicit theories at work in a program. These social programs and theories can be considered in terms of their CMR model (context-mechanism-regularities). Regularities are the repeating patterns, practices, circumstances, problems, and outcomes etc that are present or desired. These regularities are viewed as being caused by 'generative mechanisms'. The mechanisms act within a particular context, so that regularities (or outcomes) follow from the mechanisms acting in contexts. The realists therefore suggests an ontological position. Firstly, the embeddedness of human action within wider social processes means that causal powers may reside in higher relations and structures. Secondly, explanatory mechanisms should explain how things work 'under the surface' (requiring access to this level to understand and explain) but which may also be multi-layered and have macro as well as micro-causal contributions. Thirdly, mechanisms link to peoples' choices and capacities; they reach down to the level of reasoning (e.g. the desirability of ideas) and up to the level of resources. This suggests that the realist epistemology can inform aspects of the case study in terms of: understanding local government actions and social programs; understanding the 'regularities' associated with the population; and improving understanding within local government.

Byrne (2002) also takes a realist position, and recommends it as an approach, which can utilise both quantitative and qualitative approaches: 'For realists the world exists and…we can know it, although the process of knowing is a social process'' (p3). He rejects postmodernism and the associated assertions of relativism (where meanings may be different for all interpreters yet all have equal status, or where all beliefs are constructions and we can not get beyond these). He argues for a 'complex realism'. In complex systems the aim is to describe the system as a whole rather than in terms of its parts including consideration of emergent properties of the system. He argues that the complex realism approach recognises the social nature of measurement but that this still describes what is real and that this enables exploration of interactions of complex products of parts, wholes, part-part interactions, and part-whole interactions. This perspective has informed the case study in considering how a holistic understanding of the population might fit into a realist framework.

Social Constructivism also relates to the research questions as it concerns understanding and knowledge and how these are formed socially. Burr (1995) states that constructivism is characterised by (1) a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, (2) historical and cultural specificity, (3) knowledge sustained by social processes, and (4) knowledge and social action being intertwined. The epistemology challenges the view that the everyday world is as it simply appears, or that it comes to be known in a direct objective manner through unbiased observation, and it therefore calls into question common-sense understandings but also positivist (and in its strongest forms) realist approaches. In social constructivism different constructions exist, and each construction and discourse invites a different course of action. The social processes, and discourses available, are related to power relationships. These power relationships then influence what is thought to be known and the actions that are associated with this knowledge. Social constructionists see common ways of understanding the world, as not derived solely from the world but rather as constructed from the interplay of social interactions and the material realities. This indicates that language (and its study) is of crucial importance, socially and in thought, and therefore the discourses that are available channel what can be thought of, as does how we regard knowing and knowledge. These perspectives have offered useful insights and have influenced the methodology, areas of investigation and analysis of the case study.

In constructivism the concepts and categories that are used in understanding are located in a particular cultural and historical context, and are therefore relative, so that we should not assume that 'our' ways of understanding are necessarily any better (in terms of being nearer the truth) than other ways. What is regarded as 'truth' (in our the current ways of understanding) is also determined by social processes and language. In the strongest forms there is no truth. Burr (1995: p6) gives a 'soft' followed by a 'strong' social constructionist statement: ''All knowledge is derived from looking at the world from some perspective, and is in the service of some interests rather than others….in social constructivism there is no such thing as an objective fact''. In this latter strong form, social constructivism is allied to the postmodernist anti-foundational and relativistic perspectives on understanding (which if correct would undermine the aims, and methodology of this thesis and any claims to produce findings from it or to improve understanding of the population). This strong and postmodern form of social constructivism does not reflect the authors' stance and has not been utilised within the case study.

Social constructivism however is closely related to the interpretative and naturalistic schools, which are useful here in that they focus upon the taken-for-granted nature of understanding, draw attention to the power relations involved, offer the ways in which meanings can be

investigated and created, and advocate a large degree of reflexivity required to consider the potential impacts of such influences. These perspectives are recognised as relevant and are adopted within the case study.

Finally it should be noted that there are various mixes and alternatives to these apparently fragmented schools. Some ('purists') view these ontological and epistemological approaches as mutually exclusive, but others regard the various paradigms as choices to be chosen freely in a 'flexible and adaptive paradigmatic stance' (Cook and Reichardt, 1979: 19). Gergen (1998) comments upon a way forward in the dispute between realism and constructivism. He argues that he expects no 'knockdown winner' and he finds that each camp uses the others' arguments; he suggests there may be more in common than there is different, and that each perspective offers us a cultural resource. Deutsch (2000) argues it is not necessary to place oneself within a particular epistemological school (which are somewhat artificial) and he proposes that in practice the ability to be able to explain phenomena is the most important test of understanding (in line with the realists). Finally, Pawson and Tilley (1997: 21) suggest that the realist and constructionist views are compatible (to a degree). They distinguish between two hermeneutic approaches. The first approach stresses ''that by being witness to the day-to-day reasoning of their research subjects, by engaging in their life world, by participating in their decision making, the researcher would be that much closer to reality''. The second stresses the fact that all beliefs are constructions and ''that there are no neutral/factual/definitive accounts to be made of the social world''. In this view there is no single objective reality to report upon, and no linear progress in knowledge is possible. The realist position is stated to be compatible with the first form of the constructivists but incompatible with latter.

In considering the relevance of the different epistemological schools to the development of local government understanding (and in particular the implications for an evidence-base) it should be noted that local government rarely (if ever) aspires to the positivist vision of evidence-based experimental understanding. However it is not clear that in some cases a quasi-experimental approach can never be taken, or when developing understanding experimentally on small groups for instance as within psychology. Furthermore it could be argued that medicine and science are part of society and these successfully embody something of positivist thinking and therefore a holistic view of the population should also include positivistic approaches (although this is reinterpreted by the realists, see Pawson and Tilley, 1997: p57). However, positivistic approaches (embodying experimental observations) are clearly not candidates for general application to *generate* holistic understanding of large populations where there will be by definition many more influences than can be monitored

and controlled. The realist view (there is a social reality to be known which can be approximated through social processes) accepts the notion of a possible evidence-base created though investigation of causal mechanisms, and through the development of explanatory 'theories' that participants implicitly hold. This seems to be explicit in many cases in local government (as in statistical descriptions of features of a population) and also implicit in some consultation approaches (to better understand factors affecting a neighbourhood for instance). The (strong, or hermeneutic II) social constructivist calls into question the idea of an evidence-base referring to a simplistic objective social reality as it recognises no a single knowable reality an evidence-base can refer to, as all knowledge is regarded as socially constructed. The (softer, hermeneutic I) constructivist perspective includes multiple constructions, and the impact of power and socialisation in understanding, which seems to be implicit in the development of some local government understanding (e.g. when linked to diverse passions and beliefs) and it does admit individual experience and individual meaning as important in understanding and creating social reality. It therefore recognises experience, belief, and meaning as aspects of reality and admissible as evidence.

In summary, the author takes the view that in this case study both the complex realist and softer constructivist perspectives are appropriate, consistent, overlap and complement one another. They can be employed in guiding case study methodology, in conducting the investigation within local government, in developing understanding of the population, and in recommending changes to develop more holistic evidence-based understanding, and they also appear to be congruent with the implicit views of most stakeholders and participants involved in the study (thereby increasing the likelihood of engagement and action required in an action research study). This combined complex-realist-soft-constructionist epistemology is therefore deemed appropriate as an epistemology to inform, guide, and organise the current case study, research questions, findings, and recommendations for improvements.

2.3 Some Perspectives from Sociology and Psychology

The remaining section discusses the contribution of certain sociological, psychological and organisational writers whose work seemed particularly relevant to the subject areas of this thesis. Berger (1963, 1975) gives a sociological perspective on how understanding might be more holistic. Yin, (1989, 2003) and Stringer (1996) address methods and methodologies for developing understanding and broader forms of evidence in qualitative studies and in practice. Meil, Phoenix & Thomas (2002) identify ways is which learning and memory can be improved thereby improving understanding and they discuss psychological factors which influence understanding.

To Berger (1963) understanding is not always value free. Berger points out that understanding need not even *benefit* society – understanding can be used for self-interest or to manipulate as well as for benevolent purposes or to re-inform policy. So this should be recognised. This broadens development of understanding from the viewpoint of value-free information to value-laden meaning.

Berger further emphasises this difference between information and interpretation. He argues that statistical data by themselves do not make sociology and that they become sociological only when they are sociologically interpreted. This suggests two complementary perspectives; understanding as data and interpretation. Both perspectives are relevant and both can be used in practice. Holistic suggests the use of both data and interpretative perspectives.

Berger further links the aims of sociology and the aims of this study through the view that 'the sociologist in his quest for understanding moves through the world of men without respect for the usual lines of demarcation'. Which is relevant in that it suggests a form of study - to move throughout local government on different projects, as a participant or action researcher. It also is relevant in that it suggests that developing more holistic understanding is possible by crossing traditional lines of demarcation.

Berger further restates the idea that there are levels of understanding: '…the first wisdom of sociology is this – that things are not what they seem…..social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new level changes the whole.' (p 34)

Berger advocates that sociology and holistic understanding should include perspectives different from those of official perspectives:

> ‘’…..the problems that will interest the sociologist are not necessarily what other people call problems…People commonly speak of a ‘social problem’ when something in society does not work the way it is supposed to, according to the official interpretations…The sociological problem is always the understanding of what goes on here in terms of social interaction. Thus the sociological problem is not so much why things ‘go wrong’ from the viewpoint of the authorities and the management of the social scene, but how the whole system works in the first place, what are its presuppositions and by what means it is held together’’ (p49)

This suggests that governance organisations should aim to understand what is going on in terms of social interactions without adopting the viewpoint that *those* people are a problem to *us,* for it is equally likely that *we* are a problem to *them.* Berger suggests a further strategy help develop holistic understandings (by examining all sides of the story from competing vantage points of interpretation): ‘’…[the] ability to look at a situation from the vantage points of competing systems of interpretation is…one of the hallmarks of sociological consciousness’’ (p 50)

This further suggests that understanding the population should consider multiple competing perspectives and non-official interpretations.

Berger raises the possibility of understanding being hidden from awareness, which would question the value of methods which only deal with current understandings of people:

> ‘’To ask sociological questions….presupposes that one is interested in looking some distance beyond the commonly accepted or officially defined goals of human actions. It presupposes a certain awareness that human events have different levels of meaning, some of which are hidden from the consciousness of everyday life’’ (p 41)

and again, Berger (interpreting Durkheim’s perspective as competing with that of Weber’s):

> ‘’to live in society means to exist under the domination of society’s logic. Very often men act by this logic without knowing it. To discover the inner dynamic of society, therefore, the sociologist must frequently disregard the answers that the social actors

themselves would give to his questions and look for explanations that are hidden from their own awareness.'' (p53)

This suggests the need for methods to create new understandings not previously explicitly in awareness.

Berger refers to some of the work of Weber, which seems relevant in developing understandings, particularly the theme of 'unintended and unforeseen consequences of human actions in society'. Understandings and actions based upon them may (or may not) have the intended and foreseen consequences but in addition they are also to have unintended and unforeseen consequences. Any practical epistemology and also the practical development of understanding must incorporate and account for this. Berger suggests that Weber's sociology provides us with a radical antithesis to the view that understands history as the realisation of ideas or the fruit of the deliberate efforts of individuals or collectives. This has direct implications for the aim of better understanding the population and it means we need to differentiate between intentions and actual consequences in our understandings. This means that our interpretations (of how things have come to be or how things can be) will be in some cases incomplete and in some cases inadequate. This needs to be explicitly integrated into our understandings and communicated to others so that at least the likelihood of limitation, error, inadequacy, and incompleteness is built into them, and uncertainty admitted. As knowing what is *not* known suggests that qualified knowledge is a broader form of knowledge, holistic understandings should include the recognition of their possible and probable incompleteness, and the possible inability of governance organisations to fully understand or realise social objectives. Weber also explicitly argued for explanations that are adequate at the level of both cause and meanings suggesting that explanations of the population should include both.

Berger further discusses the perspective of Durkheim, which may be relevant to the aim of understanding of the population. In this perspective society is seen as a reality that cannot be reduced to psychological or other factors of analysis, and therefore the understanding of society can disregard individually intended motives and meanings of various phenomena.

This suggests two distinct types of understanding: that of the understanding of the intentions and meanings *in awareness* and those of the social system generally *outside individual awareness*. These perspectives may be complementary rather than conflicting, but in either case they represent two legitimate perspectives in developing more holistic understandings. In practice this translates into studies that attempt to integrate societal and statistical perspectives

with individual group and psychological ones. It is the view of the author that these two perspectives are likely to deliver more holistic understanding than either alone.

Berger discusses the concepts of sociologist Robert Merton of 'manifest' and 'latent' functions which complement the view of Weber, the manifest functions being 'the conscious and deliberate functions of social processes, and the latent ones being the unconscious and unintended ones. He gives the example of anti-gambling legislation having the manifest function of suppressing gambling but having a latent function of creating an illegal empire for gambling syndicates. This has use in understanding the effects of policy on the population, and therefore developing better understanding of the population. It seems possibly relevant in local government perspectives where limited understanding and implemented actions may lead to situations different from that intended.

Berger also discusses how 'ideologies' will influence our understandings as they 'serve to rationalise the vested interests of groups …and they can systematically distort social reality'. This also relates to the contemporary idea of 'frames' (Schon & Rein, 1994). It has implications for developing understandings. This may be relevant in considering the dominant political and cultural power structures as influencing understanding (which of course may be well-intentioned and achieve positive benefits also).

Berger further suggests that distortions can result from considerations of respectability:

> ''..another motif of sociology,…..[is] its fascination with the unrespectable view of society.'' Berger refers to Veblen in discussing the effect of 'respectability' in distorting a view of society. ''..where there is intelligence and where it manages to free itself from the goggles of respectability, we can expect a clearer view of society…..'' (p56)

This has relevance in developing understanding of the population outside respectability (anti-social and criminal behaviours, drug use, under-age sex, homelessness etc). In developing holistic understanding we may need to be alert to such distortions.

In using biographical approaches, Berger draws attention to the idea of alternation and biography – the course of events that constitute a biography can be subjected to alternate interpretations - alternation being the reinterpretation of self and past in the light of new circumstances and understandings, so that the biographies of people change as they reinterpret them and themselves. This suggests that biographies may not be stable which has implications

for understanding the population through biographies of individuals. He further suggests that this alternation is a significant factor in societies such as our own where many people are socially mobile.

Berger considers society viewed from the perspective of social control operating at many levels and in different contexts: physical violence (by people and state), cultural rules, political, legal, and economic pressure, the need for group acceptance, ostracism, contempt and ridicule. Indeed it is argued that although the economic and employment perspectives may have strong controlling influences, controls associated with intimate contact are often deeper because intimate relationships are those that are counted upon to sustain essential self-definition. In these senses an individual is socially located in a system of social controls. This suggests that understanding the population cannot be achieved without also considering the context of controls and related systems.

Berger views society as having an objective quality; as a thing, which constrains and controls. He states this in terms of Durkheim's conception:

> ''Society is external to ourselves. It surrounds us, encompasses our lives on all sides. We are in society, located in specific sectors of the social system. This location predetermines and predefines almost everything we do…. Society, as objective and external fact, confronts us especially in the form of coercion. Its institutions pattern our actions and even shape our expectations…. Finally we are located in society not only in space but also in time. Our society is an historical entity that extends temporally beyond any individual biography…. [Society] was there before we were born and will be there after we are dead.'' (p 108)

This perspective seems clearly valid and again points to the need to consider historical and cultural context in developing a more holistic understanding, and in particular the viewpoint that we are embedded within a pervasive and all-encompassing society.

Berger develops this approach in another way also, where individuals can be understood to be socially located through the idea of social stratification. Stratification refers to the systems of ranking within the society; in Western society the principle rewards of social position include power, prestige and privilege.

> ''The most important type of stratification in contemporary Western society is the class system…For our purposes it is sufficient to understand class as type of

> stratification in which ones general position in society is basically determined by economic criteria. In such a society the rank one achieves is typically more important than the one into which one was born (although most people recognise the latter greatly influences the former). Also a class society is one in which there is typically a high degree of social mobility. This means that social positions are not immutably fixed, that people change their positions for better or for worse in the course of their lifetime, and that, consequently no position seems quite secure. '' (p95)

This suggests a pathway to develop more holistic understanding by considering how understanding of the population is related to broader social structure and patterns.

The previous sections refer to the summaries that Berger gives on sociology and how this thinking might inform development of understanding of the population. In the remaining section some of the insights from psychology will be noted.

Within psychology there are some tantalising perspectives on additional approaches relevant to developing improved understanding. Meil, Pheonix, & Thomas (2002) discuss, for instance, individual learning, cognition and social cognition, perceptions, attention, and memory - all of which are relevant to the development of understanding. The way in which we come to understand (or misunderstand) situations and other people will affect our current understanding. Appreciation of these factors requires psychological knowledge, and may suggest how understanding could be improved upon.

Perceptions can be influenced by both external sensory stimulus but also by prior stored knowledge, perceptions can also be influenced by expectations and contexts. There is the constructivist view that we build our perceptions from incomplete information, by using what we already know. An alternative view suggests that we perceive without a need to integrate with stored knowledge, the world is perceived as a whole, another view (phenomenology) suggests that perception is a complex product of context and meanings. Attention is a process of selection of only *some* information therefore filtering out other information. There are limited capacity theories of attention (so that individuals will always fail to attend to everything that might be relevant). There are primacy and recency effects (where first and last observations dominate cognition and distort understanding). With the considerations of perception and attention above, it is argued that psychologically: ''our experience, knowledge, biases and prejudices, and the meaning of the situations in which they are encountered will all influence perception and attention'' (p 45).

Social cognition is also of further use as it addresses the processing of social knowledge; how people perceive, think about, judge, and explain, other people, relationships, events, and issues, and how social experience and expectations can influence thinking, perceptions, judgements and explanations (Buchanan *et al*, 2002). It deals with topics such as social schemas – how knowledge shapes perception of the social world, attribution theories – common-sense explanations of behaviour, and bias in reports and judgements. Knowledge of these cognitive processes can contribute the research questions of how understanding is developed and can be improved upon for individuals (inside and outside the organisation).

In addition psychology deals with individual memory and memory effects which influence understanding (Brace & Roth, 2002). Psychologically memory is conceptualised as encoding (putting information into memory), storage, (retaining information), and retrieval (getting information back). Memory is further conceptualised as short-term (or working memory) and long-term. The theories and experiments on memory offer additional practical advice on retaining understanding. This is relevant to how understanding is *lost* as well as generated.

In terms of developing the understanding of individual practitioners there are a number of lessons which can be drawn out from this literature which are directly relevant to the research questions, but which suggest issues and recommendations from a psychological evidence-based perspective (Meil, Pheonix, & Thomas, Vol 2, 2002) related to the learning of individuals. Learning, memory and understanding is inhibited or distorted when: learning tasks interfere with one another, points of interest lie in the middle of a sequence of unusual events (but first and last events are more likely to be recalled|), when a situation is new without former reference or experience, when working for long periods, when memory is recalled by leading questions, or if later information or suggestion contaminates it. Conversely memory (and learning) is improved when: it is written down, it is reorganised, it is processed in more depth, it is given meaning, it is linked to other meanings, learning is spaced out as a process rather than a concentrated event, categories are clustered rather than random, learning is rehearsed, context is reported, alternative perspectives are considered, learning is collective constructed and recalled, thereby filling gaps and negotiating details. This suggests that practitioners will better develop understanding when learning and memory processes are improved by means suggested in the psychological literature.

Psychological approaches have also clarified the nature of formal learning. Marton and Saljo (1976) have distinguished between students who took a *surface* approach to learning and those who took a *deep* approach to learning. In the first cases the intention is to more to memorise, acquire facts and increase knowledge, whereas the second it is to understand the

meaning. Entwistle (1987) has described the differences as given in Table 1 below and as reported by Norton (2003).

Table 1: Deep and Surface Learning

Deep approach	**Surface approach**
Intention to understand	Intention to complete task requirements
Vigorous interaction with content	Memorise information needed for assessments
Relate new ideas to previous knowledge	Failure to distinguish principles from examples
Relate concepts to everyday experience	Treat task as an external imposition
Relate evidence to conclusions	Focus on discrete elements without integration
Examine the logic of the argument	Unreflectiveness about purpose or strategies

From the literature on psychology we are given some insight into what will facilitate understanding, the approaches, practices, and contexts. This is directly relevant to the research question posed in that it suggests how best to engage people in learning.

The previous sections have largely concentrated on the ontological contribution of sociology and the substantive contribution of psychology. In the remaining section attention will be drawn to the research methods that can inform the development of understanding of the population.

Sociology and psychology each provide methods to develop and improve understanding from certain perspectives. In developing understanding of the population these methods may be useful to draw upon and will be briefly mentioned here for future reference. Once again the comprehensive listing of the different methods from across the entire subject areas listed above is beyond the scope of this study, but these provide a resource of methods and techniques. Numerous publications concerning methods and perspectives on such questions can be found in references, for instance, in a narrower realm: urban research (e.g. Andranovitch & Riposa, 1993), social science (e.g. Dixon, Bouma, & Atkinson, G, 1987), researcher-practitioner approaches (e.g. Robson, 1993), for case studies (Yin, 1989, 2003). For a discussion on the use of narratives in social theory (Stephenson, 2000). Bryman (1988) for mixing quantitative and qualitative social research, Mason (1996) for qualitative research from realist perspectives, and similarly Marsh (1982) for the survey method. May (1993) for an overview of social research issues and methods, and Williams & May (1996) for an introduction to the philosophy underlying the methodologies of social research.

In the discussion of qualitative research method applicable to this project one particular author will be considered in more depth. Yin (2003) argues that the case study approach is appropriate for questions of how and why and where there is no control over behavioural events and the focus is upon contemporary events (as in this study). Yin gives an overview of what is meant by evidence, and also gives direction on how evidence should be collected and evaluated. Yin is also useful to this study as he gives theoretical perspectives on how evidence should be analysed interpreted and reported in the instance of case studies however the viewpoint of a case study (without fixed methodology) might also be a useful model for some local government investigations which aim to generate evidence-based recommendations. Yin discusses the design, skills needed, preparation, collecting the evidence. The research methods give options on how to conduct such a study. In particular he discusses a number of approaches: Quantitative and qualitative approaches, action research, action learning, action science, participant observation, and participant action research. These approaches are described and help ground the study and this will be revisited in the research methodology (Chapter 3).

In summary perspectives within sociology and psychology offer both higher and lower vantage points on the research questions. The views of Berger give a widened perspective on what understanding could entail and this suggests directions and aims for developing more holistic understanding. The perspectives in psychology examine cognitive constraints on understanding, which encourage reflexivity on their limitations and also suggest practical ways to improve understanding. The literature also suggests methods to help develop understanding of the population which can be considered and adopted where useful. These perspectives could be examined further by local government practitioners, and some could be utilised in the development of more holistic and evidence-based understanding, but such a review is beyond the scope of the present study.

2.4 Some Perspectives from the Study of Organisations and Practice

In considering how local government comes to understand the population and how this can be improved the literature on organisations and practice is relevant. It considers research and learning of practitioners in real organisational settings and provides more realistic perspectives. It includes traditional models of research and research utilisation within organisations, models of learning technical and social learning, and learning and research in practice.

The traditional view of research is outlined in Clark (1972; 10) who categorises a number of research models of the time which are nevertheless still prevalent (but which can perhaps be questioned). Essentially this is a linear model.

Table 2: Clark Research Models

Research type	Problem orientation	Diffusion channel	Audience
Pure basic	Theoretical problem in basic discipline	Learned journals	Scientists
Basic objective	General practical, arising in many contexts	Learned and practitioner journals	Scientists (and practitioners)
Evaluation	Practical issues	Mainly Sponsors enterprise	Sponsor and practitioners
Applied	Practical issues	Sponsor enterprise	Sponsor and practitioners
Action	Practical issues with theoretical relevance	Reports to sponsor Journals and practitioner.	Sponsors, scientists, and practitioners.

In this model the question of the utilisation of social science research by organisations arises. Since the social science literature is vast; including sociology and social policy, economics, politics, and psychology, together with the micro-theories, macro-theories, data, interpretations, perspectives, and methods, the utilisation of research is directly relevant to improving understandings of the population.

For instance, Rothman (1980) investigates the interface between applied research and management in government departments. His work considers (and embodies) the 'two communities' model of producers of knowledge (researchers) and users of knowledge (appliers) and highlights some difficulties in this model. He comments: ''It has become evident that the space between researcher and applier represents a gap comprised of intellectual, social, emotional, and (usually) physical distance, with numerous barriers to

knowledge transfer and few facilitating linkages'' (p 20). He also considers the various models to overcome these barriers, including the initiatives of the researcher and applier, as well as various third party intermediaries who act as facilitators. He points out however that a number of studies have shown that communication (of itself) can not guarantee utilisation and therefore that these mechanisms for developing understanding are not as effective as might be initially anticipated. He concludes that when the researchers and appliers are closely linked (e.g. through in-house or commissioned research), then research is more likely to have impact. So the existence of knowledge does not mean it can or will be *used* to improve understanding in governance.

Another study (Percy-Smith *et al,* 2002) researched th**e** impact of research on policy and practice in local government. The researchers conducted surveys on several hundred UK local authorities, and then conducted follow-up case studies on five of these local authorities (including Newcastle City Council). In general it was found that the most likely research model for the organisation was for some research to be undertaken centrally with other research taking place at the service or departmental level (also the case for Newcastle City Council). It found that Newcastle City Council acted predominantly in reactive mode and carried out most of its work in-house. On accessing and disseminating externally generated research outputs in England, the study found that (across the sample) highest regular dissemination of reports to key officers was found to be of those reports from the Local Government Association (81%), those from DETR (80%), followed by those from the Improvement and Development Agency (58%), the Office for National Statistics (47%) and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (43%). It is worth noting that universities, consultancies, and think tanks accounted for only 1%. This shows (once again) that external research usually has little impact, and only certain organisations have significant impact besides the work of the local authority itself.

The works cited above are relevant in that the potential for developing holistic understanding is huge through use of all the human sciences literature for instance, but in practice its impact is likely to be negligible.

Percy-Smith *et* al (2002) also found that local authorities generate their own research, either in-house or commissioned, where work is undertaken in response to a specific need; it is relevant and officers have responsibility for it. Consequently such research is much more widely disseminated. However it found that access to research outputs by front-line staff is generally poor, with few formal mechanisms in place. It also found research generated by the local authority was more likely to be disseminated to local authority members than was

external research. However dissemination was often reliant on individuals and could be 'hit and miss'. It further claimed that many officers lacked the skills to evaluate and interpret research undertaken elsewhere. Systems for getting research to elected members were relatively well developed but it was not clear if it was then used. So locally generated research had more impact.

Research was often used to support a pre-existing viewpoint. Research was unlikely to drive policy change, which was found to arise from national government priorities, legislation, local issues, needs and politics, and budgetary pressures, and demonstrating a top-down approach. Locally generated research was more likely to influence policy. Officers felt research was not used by members in forming policy. The need for quick wins, and the speed of policy change, meant often that academic time-scales were not appropriate, as they would be out-dated before complete. Therefore external substantive research is not seen as a main mechanism for developing understanding. They conclude overall that there is a long way to go before local authorities achieve the status of learning organisations.

Easterby-Smith, Burgoyne, & Araujo (eds), (1999), include viewpoints of the technical and the social approaches to organisational learning. Both of these, and the distinction between them, are relevant to the current study.

In the technical approach, organisational learning is conceptualised in terms of information processing, interpretation, and responses to this within the organisation, where the range of individual and organisational potential behaviours is consequently changed. In the social approach, the effects of social interactions are brought to the forefront. Here there is recognition of the socialisation of newcomers, of tacit knowledge and embodied forms of learning (learning from each other and from experience, emulation, and in situated practice). It includes consideration of social constructionist theory, where meanings are constructed, of political factors, where defensive stances are present and power mediates interpretation, and of cultural factors. Here understanding may not be recorded, nor held by individuals, but nevertheless exists across the community as a whole, and this influences knowledge and practices. With this perspective some argue that current models of organisational and practitioner learning requires re-examination (Argyris, 1986) and control or minimisation of such political factors (Senge, 1990). Others argue that these confounding factors will always exist and should be built into organisational learning practices (Coopey, 1994, 1995).

Learning across organisational boundaries is considered by Dixon (1994:114) who suggests six principles of collective learning taken from the literature:

1. Teams and Organisations as the unit of learning. The practices of organisations are not simply the sum of members' individual competence; there is also competence and knowledge that is a product of the collective. For an organisation to learn new system level competencies, it must learn as a collective.
2. Organisational assumptions are limiting. An organisations ability to be effective is limited by its assumptions. Yet groups are often unaware of the assumptions they hold or the ways in which those assumptions serve to limit their practice
3. Co-inquiry. Learning across organisations is most effective when all parties are in a learning role rather than when one party is regarded as the expert and the other(s) as students.
4. Collective intelligence. The world is knowable by ordinary people and their knowing can be meaningfully organised to address the serious organisational issues they face.
5. Learning occurs over time. System change happens over a period of months – thus learning also needs to happen over that time period. Learning is not only planning to act; implementing, reflecting on the implementation and re-planning are also acts of learning.
6. Collaboration and alliances. There is a new spirit of collaboration among organisations that is a recognition that there is much one organisation can learn from another.

This is relevant to the research question in that development of holistic understanding will (necessarily) include learning across organisational boundaries, and this work suggests an approach. Note that the recommendations above do not suggest organisational learning as a surface consultation event but as a reflexive mutual learning process.

Argyris & Schon (1974) attempt to understand features of human understanding underlying *action* in social systems such as organisations. They argue that practitioner knowledge is of a different quality to that within the social sciences and that this should be recognised in organisational learning. Their focus is upon integration of thought and action and therefore offers an alternative approach to those of academic ones which they argue do not work well with real-time issues, and therefore can not contribute to the study of effective action, as in practice people need to become competent at simultaneously taking action *and* reflecting upon this to learn from it. It therefore provides a perspective on how understanding might be

developed within local government by the practitioners within it and by external stakeholders within local government partnerships.

They claim that such situations can be best considered through a conceptual framework which analyses the 'theories of action', concerning human and organisational behaviours which are developed and applied by practitioners in their work. They consider how these theories of action are formed, changed, in what ways they can be considered adequate or inadequate, and how they are used for explanation, prediction, and control. They postulate that we predict or explain behaviour by attributing to a person a theory of action. This is relevant to *practice* in that practice is considered as a sequence of actions undertaken by practitioners to serve or influence others. Their theory of practice has a number of subtleties in detail which they claim have explanatory value for the study of organisational and practitioner learning (understanding). Firstly, they differentiate between theories-in-use (actual theories governing action and behaviour) and espoused theories (stated theories of action and behaviour), and allow for discrepancies between the two. Secondly, theories-in-use can only be inferred from behaviours, they are often implicit and may be even outside awareness. Thirdly, practitioners may hold different theories of action which are often in conflict, but this conflict is neither visible nor examined because they implicitly involve assumptions about other people and protagonists including negative evaluations which are not declared. Alternatively they may include aspects of self-interest that are also not declared. In such cases learning is sub-optimal, as issues are not discussed.

Argyris and Schon (1974) state their view that the foundation for competence is the capacity to learn how to learn. Their practical approach is to make the theories-in-use explicit, to improve them, enable criticism of them and thereby to increase their effectiveness, predictability, explanatory value, and ability to control. Their models embody ideas of single loop and double loop learning and this is developed in several further publications. Single loop learning is characterised by application of theories-in-use; learning without fundamental change. Double loop learning is defined to be deeper including radical alteration of theories-in-use. In this model the development of understandings must include processes for excavating and examining the working assumptions, values and paradigms behind understandings. They suggest theory building and testing; developing one's own micro-theories of real-time situations. They summarise with a list of six criteria for an effective theory of practice: (1) It should permit detection of and response to its own inconsistencies, ineffectiveness, and its degree of obsolescence, (2) the theory should make the interaction between clients and practitioners conducive to mutual learning, (3) the theory should enable the practitioner to identify and seek out new kinds of clients, (4) it should include a theory of

reform of practice and should describe the transition from present to desired behaviour, (5) it should be conducive to creating a practitioner community that undertakes explicit, public, and cumulative learning, (6) the theory should make practice increasingly compatible with self-actualisation. Development of this work (Argyris, Putnam, McLain Smith, 1987) led to the concept of 'action science' where the idea of theories in action is developed and learning is promoted for action and change, but which distinguishes the methods and results of science and action science. Once again the perspective is one that blurs the boundaries between practitioner and researcher. It outlines (in some detail) the methods of inquiry and intervention of action science, including advice on engaging practitioners in learning processes. Essentially their approach requires the promotion of reflection and experimentation, expansion and deepening of learning, and the ability to develop new frames of reference. Once again the advocated learning approach is social, with mutual and cumulative learning, drawing upon the practitioner to develop understanding as a process of practitioner, theoretical, and personal development.

In Stringer (1996: 16) the action research approach to learning is simply summarised and discussed as a means for practitioners to develop their understanding. He sets out a basic action research routine as a continuous recycling set of activities:

Look	Gather relevant information (gather data)
	Build a picture: Describe the situation (define and describe)
Think	Explore and Analyse: What is happening here? (Hypothesise)
	Interpret and explain: How/why are things as they are? (Theorise)
Act	Plan
	Implement
	Evaluate

He further outlines the ways action research works through these stages. Such practitioner models give a simple structure to the process of learning in practice and in organisations, which can be used to compare actual practices against the model and to advocate changes.

In summary the epistemological, sociological, psychological, organisational, and practice literature can inform the case study and the research questions. In addition, by synthesising the different readings of the literature a number of alternative learning models and approaches can be made explicit as a potential resource to draw upon. The learning mechanisms and approaches noted include:

- Academic approaches (formal epistemologies, methodologies, and methods)
- Linkage of trials and aims with related literature (learning what has been tried)
- External Research Utilisation and Dissemination (use external substantive research)
- Technical Rationality (two communities; practice applying research)
- In-House and Commissioned Research (applied and evaluation research)
- Technical Learning (improved data development & information flows)
- Reflective Practice and Action Research (real time improvement and influence)
- Cross-Organisational Learning (collective co-inquiry of reflective teams over time)
- Social Learning (collective formal and informal processes)
- Stakeholder Consultation (knowledge in common sense and experience)
- Individual or Social Cognition, Perception and Memory (psychology of learning)
- Socialisation (social models of developmental learning in the social context)

Each of these has been briefly discussed and is noted for further consideration in this case study. This list is far from comprehensive and contains overlapping approaches but nevertheless suggests a number of alternative approaches to be considered in developing understanding. It also provides a framework for considering what occurs in local government and what does not. These perspectives and models will be discussed in more detail in the summary chapter (Chapter 9) where they will be considered alongside findings from the case study. In the findings sections (Chapters 4 to 8) these literature perspectives will also be drawn in comparisons and in suggesting issues and improvements (Chapter 9 and 10). In the following chapter some of these literature perspectives will be additionally drawn upon in the development of the research methodology and design.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Choice of Overall Methodology and Approach

This section outlines the overall methodology chosen for this study and the rationale for this choice. The aim is to recommend practical organisational change to develop more holistic and evidence-based understanding within local government. Therefore the overall methodology includes an action research methodology. Because the study must explore and recommend changes to one local authority in particular it adopts the case study approach. The case study unit of analysis is difficult to define precisely. It is tempting to describe it as the local government organisation and its partnerships but this is too general and oversimplified. The unit of analysis is perhaps more the informal and formal mechanisms for learning and developing understanding of the population, as embodied within and across the key identified stakeholder groups and organisational practices found within and across local government, its partnerships and communities, and the influences upon this from the wider UK governance and cultural context.

Writers such as Yin (1989, 2003) and Stringer (1996) discuss such methodological and methods perspectives in researching through a case study and action research perspective. It is noted (see literature review, Rothman, 1980, and Percy-Smith 2002) that insider perspectives of change are more likely to be effective in bringing about change. In order to attempt to achieve more credible insights and pragmatic recommendations it was decided that the study should also embody a participant observation or ethnographic approach**.** This was achieved through on-going full and continuous placement of the author within local government settings. It was expected that the qualitative understanding resulting would be more relevant and credible if such an approach was adopted in parallel with the action research perspective. It would also satisfy the realist aims to view, infer, and understand regularities, mechanisms, and context by participating within them. The combination of action research and participant observation is discussed as participatory action research (Whyte, 1991) and is an integral part of this research methodology. The case study also included creative trial attempts to improve understanding through advocacy and generation of novel approaches in collaborations with others. In such cases the methodology might be better described as ‘participant disturber’. From such experiences the author could test out support and resistance to change in some of the areas explored.

The strategy has been to examine the research questions from multiple perspectives. Different windows arise through participant observation on different projects with different teams and managers, and through interviews and observations with different stakeholders inside and outside local government.

The detailed research methodology and design has developed interactively and evolved throughout the project. This approach was informed by insights from the social constructivist, interpretative and naturalistic schools. In particular the view of Clark (1972) is relevant:

> ''the [naturalist interpretive or constructivist] evaluator needs to experience the context within which a programme operates and discover how the programme is experienced by policy makers, programme staff, and clients……Commitment to the concept of multiple and constructed realities rules out the possibility of formulating a research design beforehand……[researchers] approach research context as open-minded, willing learners, making no claims to know what the relevant questions are……in constructivist inquiry the research design is allowed to emerge or unfold as the research progresses'' (p59)

Also Guba and Lincoln (1988): ''..whereas positivists begin knowing (in principle) what they don't know [constructivists] face the prospect of not knowing what they don't know'' (p105), and Strauss and Corbin, (1990): ''one does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge'' (p23)

For such reasons the project adopted no initial explicit theoretical perspective, but it so doing it adopts elements of a constructivist approach (or hermeneutics I - see Pawson & Tilley (1997) quoted in Chapter 2). The methodology, literature, trials and stakeholder analysis all evolved in the course of the study and were not rigidly prescribed in advance.

A pilot programme of interviews was initiated and questions were based upon the research questions and experience. Subsequent interviews were then modified to account for the learning resulting. The study not only generated the data and findings reported here, but also generated an improved methodology for considering and answering the research questions. The final methodology reported here has gone through several iterations. The overall methodology has also included interactive and experimental investigations (which could not be specified in advance) based upon opportunities that arose and flexibilities in the research methodology.

3.2 Specific Research Methods

The overall purpose of this study was to investigate how local government came to understand its population and how this could be improved upon to deliver more holistic and evidence-based understanding. The following specific methods were utilised to gather data relevant to these research questions.

- A mixed methodology with local government stakeholders including formal interviews, informal discussions, observations, examination of internal documents and the data available and used
- Semi-structured interviews with local politicians
- Reflective practice and participant observation on projects and trials

Each of these methods brought different perspectives to the research questions; each involved different data sources, and generated different data for analysis and interpretation. Each of these methods will be considered in more detail below.

Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate how city stakeholders (both inside and outside local government) came to understand the city population and how this could be improved upon to deliver more holistic and evidence-based understanding. A number of individuals were approached and involved in semi-structured interviews (a detailed list of participants can be found in Appendix 1). The particular stakeholder groups identified in the course of this study included members from:

- Local government research staff
- Local government strategy & policy staff
- Local government managers (particularly those managing stakeholder groups)
- Local government politicians
- Local government community practitioners (those in contact with the population)
- Team members on specific projects associated with developing understanding
- External practitioners and practitioners in related governance organisations (schools, employment services, police services, health). This included research, policy, community, project members and managers in other organisations.
- Academics
- Citizens and community representatives

These stakeholders were arranged into four distinct stakeholder groups for the purposes of the case study and are introduced and discussed in different chapters of the case study:

- Local government stakeholders (practitioners and managers; researchers, community practitioners, policy staff, and project members). Chapter 4, 6 and 7.
- Local politicians. Chapter 5.
- External Managers, practitioners and academics. Chapters 6, 7, and 8
- Citizens (particularly excluded youth). Chapter 8

Around 20 local government stakeholders, practitioners and managers agreed to be directly involved in this study in discussions or interviews. Of these 10 agreed to formal interviews that were either noted or recorded. Quotations have been given anonymously. In addition seven councillors agreed to participate in this trial. These councillors represented one City Council Management Area which itself comprised several wards. Four of the councillors were interviewed individually and three as a group. To keep the councillors anonymous quotations have not been labelled. However it can be said that most of the quotations used in the findings originate from four of the seven councillors; of these the quotations of two councillors were drawn on more heavily as they summarised many of the views expressed. The councillor interviews were all recorded and transcribed. Eight city practitioners working outside of local government were contacted and interviewed in the course of parallel projects. These included employment service managers, employment service information managers, police service managers, and head teachers (listed in Appendix 2). Finally in the course of the social exclusion project around 50 citizens with some degree of membership with excluded groups were interviewed, and the author was a participant observer in around half of these. In addition to the formal interviews, there were many informal discussions conducted. One focus of this activity was to informally identify ongoing issues in developing understandings, and to generate and consider ideas for trials to improve the situation.

Another central method utilised within the study was participant observation upon projects (and reflective practice with past projects). The case study was set up as meta-project to examine parallel projects through participant observation. Participant observation and reflective practice was used on the following projects:

- City-University Liaison Programme (1997-2000)
- Researcher-Practitioner Interactive Learning Trails (2000)
- Going For Growth Team and Regeneration Information Team (Aug 1999-May 2000)
- EU Project: Dimensions of Social Exclusion and Urban Change: Novel Methods for Understandings and Engaging Excluded Groups Team (March 2000-March 2001)

The above projects are reported explicitly in Chapters 6,7, and 8 respectively. Further projects were examined and these are reported implicitly throughout the case study.

- Community Participation Strategy Working Group, Newcastle City Council (1999)
- Research-Practitioner Learning Network Trial (July to August 2000)
- Top10 Issues' Internet Democracy Trials in Newcastle City Council, IT (2000)
- EU Project: Youth Research Team (March 2001-March 2002)
- EU Project: Peer Reviews of Sustainable Urban Development (Oct 2002-Oct 2003)

All the participant observer source projects are discussed in more detail in Appendix 2. Participant observation was used to investigate processes of developing understanding in practice thereby identifying opportunities for modifying current practice to improve outcomes. It was utilised within projects that had some bearing upon the question of how local government comes to understand the population, or how this can be improved. Here the author worked upon the projects as a seconded practitioner-researcher, reporting to local government managers, within local government teams. This enabled observations with several project teams and several managers. The aim was to understand how local government came to understand its population and how this could be improved from the insider viewpoint of local government practitioners working in local government teams and situations. Participant observation would give a useful longitudinal perspective of developing understanding on real projects with ecological validity, while being able to understand the opportunities, issues, strengths and weaknesses within the system. Participant observation was explicit and others were aware of the aim and purpose. In some cases participant observation was as a full participant (actively working with practitioners as a colleague) and other cases it was as a full researcher (simply observing others in meetings or activities).

3.3 Analysis and Interpretation

In analysing qualitative data Yin (1989) recommends that there are three general strategies that can be followed: relying upon theoretical propositions, thinking about rival explanations, or developing a case description and developing a descriptive framework for the study. This final approach is one adopted in this study. The overall descriptive framework of the case study incorporates a number of dimensions. Firstly, the findings are organised into two distinct descriptive sections: local government stakeholders (Chapters 4 & 5) and participant observations on major projects (Chapter 6, 7, & 8). Secondly, findings are then organised approximately chronologically in terms of sources and findings; earlier located before later. Thirdly, a thematic analysis provides a unifying descriptive framework running through the analysis. (This approach to thematic analysis will be described in more detail below). Fourthly, within this thematic scheme references to stakeholders and projects are placed in similar and recurring sequential patterns to aid analysis. Finally a SWOT analysis is used in further analysing findings to develop conclusions.

In the detailed analysis, data from interviews were the notes and transcriptions of conversations with interviewees and the data from participant observations included field notes and typed reflections on these. This combined data was examined and manually re-organised into themed headings which had some bearing upon the research questions of how local government comes to understand its population or how this could be improved to be more holistic and evidence-based. The final themes emerged interactively through experience upon the project and through the literature from a longer to a shorter set found below. These themes and data arising from the different methods were combined and connected to give an overall background perspective - 'the general landscape'. Where common or convergent viewpoints or observations arose from the different methods these were then noted as standing out from the overall perspective giving the 'peaks and valleys' to focus attention upon. When many sources produced data that agreed then induction was used to infer a wider finding: where similar findings arose from different perspectives then triangulation was invoked in raising the significance of the data, and finally findings from different perspectives linked or reinforced then this consistency and connection was taken as additionally significant. By the end of the study this analysis process had reduced the themes in use to four with associated questions, as given below:

Theme 1: Stakeholders: Networks and Engagement

On theoretical grounds multiple stakeholders may hold different understandings of the population, and the different stakeholders may come to understand the population in different ways (Berger & Luckman (1967), Burr (1995)) the development of evidence-based holistic understanding requires more holistic input from stakeholders with evidence. Pawson and Tilley (1997) suggest that the realist researcher should also learn from participants (what is happening, why things are as they are, and what could happen through change) to begin to create and develop an explanatory theory of the situation to diagnose the situation and feedback to participants. In this sense the stakeholders need to be explicitly noted in the study. This theme absorbed factors relating to the different stakeholder organisations and people; means of engagement, the depth of engagement, the level of involvement and issues of participation and representation. It included questions: who develops (or could develop) understanding of the population? Who is being understood? How are they (and how could they be) engaged in developing understanding? What do (or could) they contribute to understanding of the population? How could networks and engagement be improved to deliver more holistic evidence based understanding?

Theme 2: Current Understanding: Data, Knowledge and Limitations

Current understanding can be viewed from two different theoretical perspectives. Realists suggest inclusion of available data sets for approximating something of an objective social reality (Bhaskar, (1978), Collier, (1998), Byrne, (2002)). Constructivists suggest consideration of the multiple realities of stakeholders (Berger & Luckman (1967), Burr (1995)). Pawson and Tilley (1997) suggest that the current situation should be first understood in evaluations of situations, and the causal mechanisms underlying this understanding be investigated. This theme absorbs data, knowledge and understanding; recording, storage and access of these; the uncertainties, gaps, disputes and unknowns in current understanding; the nature and purposes of understanding; continuity in understanding; categorisation of the population and those features (issues) attended to. It included questions: What types of data and knowledge are held or produced by stakeholders? Where does it come from and go to? How are the population categorised and what features are attended to? What are the limitations on understanding? How is understanding qualified and noted? Where and how are current understandings recorded, accessed and communicated? What theories and perspectives are used to explain the social world? How are alternative interpretations and meanings incorporated?

Theme 3: Context and Goals: Culture, Power, Frames and Aims

It is suggested in the epistemological, psychological and sociological literature that understanding (and learning mechanisms) will be influenced by the social context including the goals of participants (and by the values, beliefs and frames of stakeholders), see Chapter 2. The realist perspective emphasises the importance of context embedding mechanisms and the regularities in social situations. The social constructivist perspective emphasises the role of situational contextual and power factors on the development of understanding (Burr, 1995). Schon, & Rein (1994) emphasise the importance of implicit personal and organisational 'frames' that influence understanding. Reid (2003) argues that evidence is a contested term used in power struggles, and Berger (1963) gives broader perspective on the meanings of and aims of understanding**.** This theme absorbed general contextual issues related to understanding, including: organisational culture, management issues, power, the beliefs, values and frames that influence understanding, the aims in the organisation, and the meanings and aims of holistic and evidence-based.

It included questions: How is development of understanding influenced by organisational context? Who is responsible for learning and development of more holistic evidence-based learning? How is learning regarded and resourced? How is evidence contested? Do values, beliefs and frames influence understanding? What is meant by holistic and evidence-based approaches? How could context positively influence development of more holistic evidence-based understanding and learning?

Theme 4: Developing Understanding: Methods, Processes and Approaches

The literature study identifies or refers to many possible learning approaches, methods, and processes (see summary in Chapter 2). This theme deals with the causal mechanisms behind learning acting in local government; those in widespread current practice, those in novel trials where new mechanisms are introduced, and those which are in use outside local government but which might have potential to activate change if brought into the organisation. This theme absorbs methods and processes of developing understanding including development of explanations, interpretations, meanings, and investigations of the population.

It included questions: What methods processes and approaches are utilised to develop understanding? How do stakeholders learn individually and collectively within, across, and outside the organisation? How are uncertainties acknowledged and addressed? How are

interpretations and meanings created? Are values, beliefs and frames considered? What methods and processes would deliver more holistic evidence-based understanding?

These four final themes were used as an additional descriptive framework in analysing findings in this case study (chapters 4,5 6, 7, and 8). Following this preliminary analysis a summary analysis is conducted which brings together triangulated findings (from methods and perspectives). The different methods (interviews and participant observation) give triangulated findings, and the different perspectives (from different stakeholders, projects, and literature) also give triangulated findings. These are reported in the Summary (chapter 9). Through reflection upon these findings, further analysis and interpretation is conducted and reported in the discussion (Chapter 10). Further analysis and interpretation was conducted in terms of recording and interpreting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the development of more holistic evidence-based understanding. Using such a perspective it is then possible to diagnose weaknesses, to offer theoretical perspectives on the causes of these, and to begin to propose changes which have potential to activate the desired change (in regularities – improved learning, understanding, and engagement for instance), though alteration of (learning and engagement) mechanisms, and alteration of context where possible and feasible.

These considerations are then used to organise draft conclusions and recommendations. This involved additional returns to the findings and data (from interviews and observations on projects), and also post-interpretation from the viewpoint of a reflective practitioner and participant observer. In the penultimate stage of analysis related sub-conclusions and sub-recommendations, were combined together where there was overlap. The final stage of analysis and interpretation was to consider the many draft conclusions and specific recommendations and decide which to choose for inclusion in the final report. The criteria of selection of findings, conclusions and recommendations included the following considerations:

Research relevance: Are conclusions and recommendations relevant to the original research questions of how understanding is currently developed and how this can be improved to be more holistic and evidence-based?

Evidential support from this study: Is there strength of evidence or triangulation (arising from different findings, in different contexts, by different methods, using different data, or different perspectives) to justify and advocate them; does it feel right given all experiences and findings.

Theoretical or academic support: Are they grounded in, or related to, academically recognised perspectives and literature?

Utility and Practicality: Do they link to actual practices and potential; do they embody practical change or action potential with medium term improvements with appropriate investment?

Known or expected support. Are they agreed or raised directly by stakeholders themselves, are they either widely held or held at higher levels of responsibility and influence; if they do not do they link plausibly to what is known; would stakeholders feel them important; can they be explained and convincingly advocated; would other disseminate or advocate them? Do they link into what people want?

Potential for generalised applicability. Do they offer the possibility of generalisation beyond the case study boundaries; do they have potential for applicability in other local authorities and into the foreseeable future.

Significant implications: Is there any likely difference between stating them and not stating them or in acting upon them or not, what do they imply for the organisation and are these implications significant.

Explanatory value. Do they link into an overall explanation of situation; can it be explained through conclusions and recommendations?

Personal belief. Is it my personal belief given my experiences that they are important and relate to possible improvements; that they could be implemented, changed, and done better by those I worked with; would I want to be associated with them if they were – if not why should others?

Where draft conclusions or recommendations were judged to meet several criteria they were included in the final report (Chapter 11 and 12)

3.4 Summary of Perspectives, Stakeholders, and Methods

These different perspectives and findings will be presented in different chapters the following table summarises the different aspects of the case study which will be reported in the following chapters.

Table 3: Summary of perspectives, stakeholders, and methods

Perspective	Main Stakeholders	Research Methods Used
Local Government Stakeholders Chapter 4	Local government; research, community, managers.	Observations, informal and formal interviews.
Councillors Interviews Chapter 5	Local Politicians	Semi-structured Interviews
City-University Collaborations Chapter 6	Local government stakeholders and Academics.	Reflective Practice
City Regeneration Project and Information Teams Chapter 7	Local government stakeholder, External Agencies and Practitioners	Participant Observation Secondary Sources
Social Exclusion Project Chapter 8	External Practitioners, Excluded Groups/Youth	Participant Observation, Action Research Interviews and Focus groups
Integrated Findings and Discussion Chapter 9 & 10	All above and extended academic community	All and synthesis
Conclusions Chapter 11	All above and extended academic community	All and interpretation

PART 2

EXPERIENCES WITHIN LOCAL GOVERNMENT & PARTNERSHIPS

FINDINGS EVIDENCE AND SUMMARY

4 LOCAL GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDERS

4.1 Background

This first empirical chapter presents initial findings and observations that are drawn together from diffuse sources across the study, across projects and through general activities within local government. It discusses the main stakeholders within the local authority, their current contribution to understanding, the contexts and goals of these groups, and the ways in which understanding is developed and learning occurs.

4.2 Stakeholders: Networks and Engagement

In this case study a number of key internal stakeholder groups are identified as important in developing understanding of the population:

- Researchers
- Community Practitioners
- Managers
- Policy staff
- Local politicians

These labels correspond approximately to the official and common use of the terms but they include others that may not have these labels as official titles. Researchers refer to those staff that formally collect and generate data. Data is spread throughout the organisation and some people responsible for data would not call themselves researchers. However, there are two particular examples of recognised 'research groups' that each routinely deal with large amounts of data. Firstly, Research Services (RS) located within the central Policy and Research Unit, and act as a central and corporate resource, gathering data on the whole population. Secondly the Educational Performance and Monitoring (EPM) Section is located in the Education Directorate, and this deals with data on pupils and schools. These two groups will considered further as examples of research stakeholders.

Community practitioners are those staff working in close contact with the community. There are numerous groups including community co-ordinators, teachers and social workers for

instance. The 26 community coordinators are one key group that have responsibilities for all of the 26 geographical ward communities within the city. Coordinators serve as liaison and first contact points for each city ward.

Managers are a diverse stakeholder group as they are found in all sections and areas. However not all (but many) managers are involved in developing understanding of the population, and many are involved in delivering services or support which requires ongoing understanding of aspects of the population to ensure effective policies, actions, and services, for instance. They are also important in that improvement of understanding is not a statutory duty of local government and therefore the managers within the organisation initiate changes and set goals. For this reason particular attention was given to their views of issues and areas for improvement. Particular managers involved in the study included senior managers, senior policy managers, research managers and community managers. In this course of the study I was managed by around ten different local government managers at middle to senior levels, on projects, within teams, initiatives, or directly through line management responsibilities (see Appendix 2: Source 4). Although each manager had their own management style all were involved in extensive networking. The management networks were often wide and far-reaching. Where networks did not exist most managers would endeavour to create them, and they had little difficulty in developing collaborations with other managers and practitioners when a mutual need or benefit was being addressed. The managers also were able to divert time of practitioners to novel developmental projects. Managers associated most directly with the programme combined visionary innovative and pragmatic approaches. Most were action-oriented and task-driven (which was needed in networked collaborative projects as these could easily lose momentum without such management).

A further group of stakeholders was identified within local government and these have been collected together in one heading **as** the Political and Policy Stakeholders. This group includes those people in local government with responsibility for the population in political terms and those responsible for developing and implementing policies that influence the population. The political stakeholders are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

The different internal stakeholder groups have different current understanding of the population and different (actual and potential) roles in developing understanding. They each are engaged in different ways in developing understanding and each are linked into different networks within and outside the organisation. In the following sections this will be explored in greater detail by considering the examples of researchers and community practitioners as representing two stakeholder groups with different understanding of the population.

4.3 Current Understanding: Data, Knowledge, and Limitations

In this section the role of the two main research groups and the community coordinators will be explored in more detail.

In Research Services (RS) it was found that the dominant external information flows were from the population into RS. There were four major ways mentioned by which RS was able to contribute to the developing understanding of the city population and its communities. These were:

1. The 10 yearly National Census; demographics and key statistics on whole city population; quantitative
2. The intermediate Inter-Census (a 10% sample of city) conducted by the council; giving demographics, key statistics and quantitative data
3. The Annual Residents Survey (6000 people targeted seeking 2500 replies of around 100 from each ward); survey analysis of qualitative views; includes perceptions of the city and of service delivery.
4. The ongoing Speak-Up Initiative; an initiative involving 1000 residents to improve response rates to smaller surveys as needed (e.g. Best Value); a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The bulk of this data is quantitative and RS mostly produce descriptive statistics from this. Geographical and time series data is common. It was estimated by interviewees that the temporal perspectives would extend to around 3-4 years on most specific issues, but for general demographic change this might extend to around 10 years. Census data is stored within RS going back to 1971 and there is basic additional demographic data back to 1951 (with possibly health data available also). Fine reliable spatial detail is available at the Enumeration District level, but there were intentions to improve spatial resolution down to post-code after the 2001 Census. It was expressed that smaller resolution would be one way forward to improved understanding and that this may bottom out at around 500 households/area for statistical relevance (there are around 50/postcode). Knowledge and information on the population is often presented in terms of the geographical locations within the city (wards, enumeration districts, and schools). This format supports management approaches based on the boundaries of political or management responsibilities and also embodies a geographical component of community identity. This spatial approach is strong

and it is also developing with the advent and spread of GIS capabilities. The current practical intention is to improve spatial resolution to develop understanding of communities at sub-ward levels in terms of boundaries that have more meaning and relevance to the communities themselves, and in ways which encourage targeted considerations and interventions. This will contribute to the development of more holistic understandings through assembly of data from different sources and on multiple issues in standardised map formats. In RS it was not normal practice to categorise or analyse by communities[1] of interest or identity. However it was possible in some cases. When the information is implicit within survey results certain communities of interest and identity can be analysed and understood (e.g. students, old people, lone parents etc). When communities can be defined by recorded attributes these communities can also be analysed (e.g. the unemployed etc). Age-defined communities could also be extracted from the data. Sub-communities such as 'the socially excluded community' could be investigated through inclusion on the corporate agenda or if it arose in commissioned studies. The approach of focusing on longitudinal studies of groups of people (e.g. cohort studies of selected groups) are not a significant component of research activity of RS. Nor are studies of particular sub-groups that are undergoing time-limited or time-varying city processes. Therefore corporate Research Services tends to focus upon cross-sectional studies of communities of location in terms of the administrative geo-political boundaries within the city, with some communities of identity being derived from census data (e.g. age related).

The education performance and monitoring (EPM) section was found to be similar in a number of respects to RS yet different in others. Similarities include the use of large amounts of quantitative data, generally concerning the attainment of pupils. This data is primarily used for performance management reasons. Pupils are now tested at ages 7, 11, 13, and 15, and the information gathered is linked to target setting in schools. Information flows are largely between central government and local schools, but there is some data which is published and available to the public (on statutory requirements such as GCSE and key stage 2 and 3 results for schools). Intermediate organisations (which mark the exams nationally) are also involved in the flow of information related to the national curriculum tests. In addition to the attainment data, there are other data sets stored and utilised. Examples include attendance data, which is received directly from a national government department (submitted to it from the schools). Statutory data is publicly released.

[1] Local Authority documents and discussions occasionally distinguish between different types of communities in terms of communities of location, identity, and interest

One difference between the EPM and the RS is that EPM are developing longitudinal analyses of individual citizens moving through the educational system. Pupil performance is analysed using the PULSE system (a module of the national company EMS which analyses educational data). There has recently been development in the tracking of pupils. Every pupil (at the time of interviews) was to have assigned a UPN (unique pupil number), which then enables tracking of individuals through the system and their moves between schools. This additional education data is available only to an extremely limited group of users. In addition data on pupils is augmented, in that there is now a pupil level census, taken nationally each January. It is used, for example, in assigning funds to schools. It includes data on numbers of pupils and staff breakdown, and the performance unit receive summary information. Using this pupil level data, which includes data such as postcode, it will now be possible to analyse in greater detail, and this enables longitudinal studies to be conducted and increasingly linked to geographical socio-economic factors. This may be a significant difference between EPM and RS. Also with these systems it becomes possible to use geographical information systems in depicting and analysing data, so that spatial representations of data will become increasingly used.

In EPM there are few links made with socio-economic data. However one exception is in the use of the free school meals data, which gives a crude representation of a socio-economic profile for the school (and this data is used to categorise and benchmark schools in similar groups with similar levels of free school meals, with the view to comparing similar schools against one another). Other examples of such indicators include the numbers of pupils where English is an additional language. There are comparison tests (used in reading ability for instance) which are also used in assessing progress of pupils, in value-added terms, so that pupils are compared against themselves and other pupils of similar ability. It is on this basis that expectations of grades are given to pupils. This data is for internal use in schools. Most of the data is collected yearly, but some data sets such as attendance are collected termly. Beyond 16 years the organisation Tyneside Careers collects attendance and destination data. This is published annually in a document called ‘Destinations’.

The data of both research groups is stored in databases, some of these (increasing amounts) are available on the web, and some standard measures are released in documents to other departments and the public. However much more data exists than is publicly available, and those wanting raw data must request and be granted it (there is no general right of access). There does not appear to be any ‘directory of information’ held and no open access or availability to what is there. There are few official records and documents on the current or detailed understanding associated with this data that are easily obtainable or communicated to

practitioners, politicians or the public. Furthermore there is certainly no 'directory of current understanding' which would give interpretation and explanation of the current situation.

Community practitioners (and community coordinators as a particular example) do not formally generate data on communities but they do have an understanding of the communities from the experience of working with them and through learning that occurs as new initiatives are designed and implemented. Community coordinators deal with communities of location (as their responsibility) but are also involved in events connecting communities of interest and identity also, particularly if their own ward responsibilities include significant numbers of people within recognised communities of interest and identity within them (e.g. ethnic minorities). Other community practitioners have experience of other communities (social services with the elderly or teachers with pupils for instance). This knowledge is rarely (if ever) recorded and used as written intelligence on the population to be developed and improved upon.

Community practitioners do not just have knowledge of community circumstances, but they also know of community networks which can be drawn upon, and furthermore they have knowledge of the implementation of policies at the local levels (but again this qualitative data is not generally developed). Community practitioners were not systematically (or regularly) involved in developing deeper understandings of the communities; they were not generally seen as potential researchers, with qualitative knowledge and information gathering capability. Some informal conversations illustrate the point. One senior manager said they were seen as 'handbag carriers for the councillors', another manager said 'using the community co-ordinators in developing understanding was like the tail wagging the dog'. Despite these views and the clear exclusion of the community practitioners from research and policy processes they were generally positive and willing to be involved in new initiatives. They also felt this to be important. They felt they had something to contribute, and they would have wished to be involved in developing their own understanding with others. There was clear capacity, ability, knowledge and willingness to engage but the culture and systems (and time pressures and management) did not proactively create or support such initiatives. In all cases of meeting and working with the diverse community practitioners within local government. I was also left with a view that all had more knowledge to contribute than they did currently. They were also creative and would suggest, or at least support, new ideas to develop more holistic and evidence-based understandings. However there did appear to be a reluctance of staff to question and challenge those with power (despite the encouragement of those in power to do so, and my own observations on their willingness to be challenged and to respond to this without obvious ill-will because of it). In all cases I saw behaviours and views

expressed which indicated that the practitioners wished to understand their data or their communities better; they also wished that the system and senior managers and politicians would take more time to understand things better, and that systems be put in place to make such processes systematic and pro-active, rather than ad hoc and reactive (which was the dominant mode).

Overall, the primary conceptualisations of the population are as residents or users of services. These conceptualisations overrides all others. They tend to concentrate attention upon the community 'in leisure and in residence' (or travel into and out of these) or in interaction with a service. This influences the focus of understandings of the population. It gives a reduced and fragmented understanding of the population in terms of how things are and what is happening (in general quality of life for instance). Evidence is provided by the fact that local government focuses upon understanding the adult population *outside* work, education and training environments but not *within* these periods. This is further evident in the focus upon people *out of work* and children *out of school.* People shift from responsibility when they enter these other areas of their lives. The experiences and issues in this arena are not as relevant to local government as the experiences outside these arenas. However for much of the time people are in these 'hidden' environments. This time is considerable. What we understand about people is generally limited to times outside of these periods. Beyond the conception of the population as residents there are the contested conceptualisations of residents as either customers or citizens and the particular perspective taken seems to vary with the people asked and purpose.

Finally, from observations across projects, the current understanding in local government can often be considered as arising from different phases of previous learning. The following categorisation has been useful to the author in thinking about the origins of understanding in local government and the different contexts in which learning occurs.

1. Circumstance Understanding: The circumstances of interest, the issues, their interactions, the people affected, attempts at explanations and interpretations. This aim is fairly common. It may involve all internal stakeholders: researchers, practitioners, policy and political, and managers. It is often approached through mixed scanning processes and processes noted above. It may be recorded in terms of quantitative data gathered, but less often in terms of qualitative data gathered and interpretations and explanations (it is commented upon in more detail through the example reported in Chapter 7, and through novel – but unsuccessful – attempts to achieve this reported in Chapter 6).

2. Action Planning Understanding. The ways in which the circumstances could be influenced, theories of action, data and evidence to support this, alternative approaches and interpretations on means to influence, and the consequences of such interventions, gathering evidence to support most effective interventions or delivery of services. This does not tend to involve researchers. This stage is rarely investigated systematically or recorded and appears to occur informally on the basis of experience and judgement of policy and initiative makers (and sometimes practitioners) who are attempting to design a means to achieve specific aims. Utilisation of the action science approaches as recommended by Argyris et al (1987) was not commented upon in discussions nor interviews and did not appear to be evident.

3. Implementation Understanding: Learning arising through attempts to implement the action plan, when new data or stakeholders emerge, actions need to be renegotiated, plans need to be revised, knowledge is gained through the experience of attempting to implement the planned actions, and the actions generate new ideas and data to be considered. This appeared to be primarily associated with practitioners, managers, and politicians, and not researchers nor policy-makers. The reflective practitioner approach advocated by Schon (1983) might be claimed to be in action (as all practitioners are reflective) however observations and interviews suggest that practitioners generally had little time to reflect upon such learning (and therefore use it) and few (if any) systematic attempts to develop collective reflection on associated learning were observed. One example where such implementation learning did successfully occur is reported in detail in Chapter 8.

4. Evaluation Understanding: Learning when the action is agreed adopted and implemented, and following the subsequent effects (or otherwise) of the intervention and the changing circumstances resulting. Evaluation is often through superficial and informal consultation mechanisms and can often be challenged as definitive. Evaluation is often regarded as a 'final' activity to simply examine performance against targets (as was often observed in local government initiatives). It is noted that this is only one (limited) form of evaluation and others exist which are more appropriate for better identifying issues and possible improvements (for instance realistic, qualitative, constructionist, or reflective evaluations). Evaluation does not generally follow good practice models such as those advocated by Pawson and Tilley (1997), Patton (1987), Guba and Lincoln (1988) or Schon (1983), or see Clarke (1999) for a general overview. Furthermore the potential and demonstrable practicality of the use of web surveys to engage cross-organisational

practitioners in learning was observed in experimental projects (e.g. The Presud Project (LA21 team) or the Top Ten Issues (IT Department), Newcastle City Council) but these have not yet been widely recognised nor adopted as potential mainstream tools for connecting stakeholders in evaluative learning.

This offers a partial summary of current understanding and how this is developed in the local authority. This is driven by quantitative data and the (unrecorded) experiences, judgements and interpretations of practitioners and policy-makers, and relies upon a few core practices such as meetings, consultations, and performance management processes. These often do not include qualitative data, explanations and interpretations, possible practitioners and key citizen groups, and further opportunities for learning presented by the different stages possible within local authority activities.

4.4 Context and Goals: Culture, Power, Frames and Aims

The culture of the researchers (both RS and EPM) within the authority includes the importance of 'neutral and objective practitioners providing unbiased information to help inform those in policy and management' (who request it or who are ultimately responsible for interpreting and acting upon it). Information is largely quantitative and statistical and therefore considerations such as statistical quality and validity are important; such groups also deal with surveys and focus group sessions in which case the aims of random and representative samples are important. In the research context there is a focus upon accurate description and clean data. Researchers do not generally interpret data. When asked one local government researcher expressed the view of others also:

> ''that's not something we would deal with, being in research means you generally provide other people with information from an unbiased point of view so they can use that information and answer questions [about interpretations]. So it wouldn't be my responsibility to deal with areas like that. People come to us for information so they can be informed about what to do with it next. It's our job to basically provide the information in black and white and you may find some trend information over time. But as to what the information means, we just provide the information, and it is up to somebody else to interpret it.''

This view appeared to be common amongst research and information practitioners.

Although official interpretations were left to managers, policy personnel, and politicians, this interpretation was often not explicit. It was recognised that the development of meanings was part of a wider process, and that improvements in the various stages of this process could help develop understanding. It was recognised that there were power issues associated with the development of meanings. Development of meanings was rarely delegated to outsiders and communities, as recognised by a senior manager:

> ''There is a hierarchy of credibility and influence acting within the local authority, and at the moment whatever officers and members believe is the most credible (within local government). Even though I am sure others would not agree with this that it is currently true in terms of whose views determine action.'' (policy manager)

In the discussions with community practitioners, policy, and managers, the activity of interpreting situations was found to be much more commonplace than with the researchers and there was more reflexivity in considering limitations in interpretations. For example, the way the organisation views the population may influence what is then understood about them. Some respondents argued that the view of local government as a service provider was channelling and limiting understanding:

> ''Understanding communities is often limited by a view of people as customers, whereas they regard us as the local governing body and we should regard them as citizens (which requires a broader understanding). Although the service perspective is important we need to have a broader understanding and a broader role'' (community manager)

Furthermore it was recognised that meaning was shaped by the values of people involved in developing that meaning:

> 'even if you could get meaningful understandings agreed with people -about the realities in the city its population and its communities - whatever action you take is sifted through your values**.** '' (policy manager)

In an interview with a senior manager recognised how the culture and core practices of local government might influence learning in the organisation, but that there was a need to improve understanding:

> ‘[in local government] you do what you’re familiar with you don’t question a whole method of social enquiry do you?, you do it because that is the way that you have been trained to do it - that’s how your predecessors have done it - that’s the cultural institution ..it’s a form of socialisation in many respects. It’s hard to get people to just think about whether we are really doing this the right way: can we do it better? - that’s the point I want to address… how can we do it better’’ (a senior manager)

In an interview with a community manager it was stated that although holistic understanding was an aim, the aspirations and actions of the organisation were seen to be in conflict:

> ‘’We know that we look at things non-holistically, we know that we deal with symptoms not causes and furthermore the system demands it (people in all areas do not consider the holistic e.g. of kids playing truant or youth crime requiring more policemen as the solution not how we can do something (plus it costs money). We have short-term low expense solutions even when we know that we have not dealt with the real problem.’’ (community manager)

So the issue was not creativity, or even desire to change, but that

> ‘’the culture discouraged us doing anything with the holistic thinking that was present. Because we still need to test this thinking out we do not know it is correct – but anti-experimentation and sensitivity and resistance would prevent it’’. (community manager)

The context and purpose for developing more holistic evidence-based understanding was articulated from a policy management perspective:

> ‘’ I think we need to ground the research and development of understandings within the governments’ agenda on improving the quality of life and in decreasing the gap in the quality of life. Its an essential thrust of the public service agreements that we should be identifying the most disadvantaged and closing the gap so that they benefit from the same standard quality and opportunities of life that everybody else takes for granted.’’. (a policy manager)

Internal practitioners hoped for change but many did not seem to believe it would materialise. Most often quoted reasons were; firstly that senior managers (and less so politicians) had their own perspectives and they did not generally seek to have these views modified. Secondly,

some expressed attitudes such as ‘don’t rock the boat’, as competing viewpoints could be seen as a challenge to senior managers and politicians. On several occasions I noted that some practitioners believed that developing alternative understanding (to that currently held by the organisation, managers and politicians) should be avoided as it could create problems for them from those in power. Despite the fact that most managers observed and interviewed in the study welcomed and appeared comfortable with contrary understanding, this belief that power will impose understanding (whether based in reality or not) has implications for the further development of understanding in the organisation.

In summary the organisational context and goals are recognised influences upon the development of understanding, and therefore would need to be considered in any change program. The view of local government as a service provider was channelling and limiting understanding. Interpretation was separated from data gathering and analysis, and interpretation was often not explicit. Power could adversely influence interpretations and these were also shaped by the values, culture, and core practices of local government. There was a recognised need to improve holistic understanding to improve quality of life, but the aspirations and actions of the organisation were seen by some to be conflicting and prevented such development. Many practitioners and managers hoped for change. Some did not believe it would materialise, and that those in power would monopolise understanding, while managers believed this to be an unfounded fear, that the time was opportune, and the national and local context made improved understanding both necessary and welcome.

4.5 Developing Understanding: Methods, Processes, and Approaches

In the course of the study a range of common mechanisms used in developing understanding of the population were observed and noted:

- Meetings
- Consultations
- Performance management and monitoring mechanisms
- Quantitative data assembly and sharing
- Surveys conducted in-house
- Web and e-mail communications between stakeholders
- Informal and general methods (conversations and media etc)
- Mixed scanning combinations of above

Meetings and consultations are typically single events rather than processes they are typically developing support for collaborations, actions, and decisions, and joint working, rather than focused upon learning. Monitoring mechanisms include internal monitoring in education where updates on qualifications and absenteeism are regularly received and recorded or external monitoring such as the national monitoring programme leading to the production of an index of deprivation assembled by National government which is then available to local government. Quantitative data assembly and sharing is a common approach to provide background evidence on issues, comparisons, and trends. Surveys conducted in-house are used but are relatively infrequent. Mixed scanning refers to the commonplace practice of mixing of approaches and scanning existing understanding to arrive at an introductory overview understanding. These mechanisms were the main mechanisms observed and noted in use.

It was recognised by some (but not by all) that current mechanisms are limited in what they can achieve in learning. For instance simply consulting with more stakeholders would not necessarily deliver improved understanding, and improved learning processes were needed:

> ‘’,... we need to recognise that stakeholders bring values (priorities, agendas) into this arena, and these have to be accounted for’’ (policy manager)

Suggesting the need for deeper consideration of values and beliefs influencing, and as part of, understanding. So that learning processes should include these wider considerations of interpretations and values, and this should inform understanding:

> ‘’So its helpful to bring those issues in because you get a better dialogue and presumably a better understanding of what is important, not just about what is happening but what might happen, what you might do next.’ (policy manager)

In addition to the mainstream mechanisms there was the use of e-mail communications (which play a role in developing understanding as they occupy a significant fraction of local government officers and managers time) and the developing use of the web. In particular two web trials were created during this case study and are noted as offering future potential in the development of understanding. One web application was designed and trialed which enabled 450 practitioners to submit issues on the web for management attention (Top Ten Issues, IT Section). Once submitted the collective of practitioners had e-votes to democratically prioritise their own issues. Managers would then focus upon those priorities. Through such mechanisms it would be possible to democratically engage practitioners across and outside the organisation equally in identifying priority issues to better understand for instance. Another trial (Presud, LA21 team) was in conducting participant evaluations of programs or circumstances by web-surveying practitioners associated with an initiative (spread over several organisations) to gain their understanding and feedback as participant observers. The analysis and interpretation of this collective data then aided development of understanding of the program or circumstance of interest from different perspectives, and was capable of engaging practitioners anonymously. Although such trials offered potential they do not form part of the collection of mainstream mechanisms to develop understanding to which we now return.

It was found that official understandings are not developed through systematic, organised, nor regular processes which build upon previous understanding. Although particular stakeholders often use a particular set of mechanisms, methods and a particular contact network, the overall understanding is achieved through *ad hoc* informal or episodic (multiple and mixed) mechanisms, methods, and networks. Many officers learnt informally while working. It was found that there were informal additional mechanisms that contribute to the development of understanding (such as understanding gained through the activities of staff who directly engage with communities and sub-groups) but these are not generally recorded. Furthermore such understandings are not generally or systematically incorporated within the development

of strategic or holistic evidence-based understanding. There are additional informal mechanisms at work within communities themselves; particularly the role of the media, conversations, stories, gossip etc (evidenced from councillor interviews).

In terms of learning within local government and with partners, capacity building was mentioned to better link community and practitioners but also to link practitioners internally:

> ‘’……not at a grand level but simply at the level of staff sharing and developing understandings to improve them, through basic face-to-face interactions, through staff talking, sharing and developing views and ideas. ‘’ (a community manager)

One community practitioner added, ‘why go to conferences when we could learn so much with each other?’,

The community practitioners generally respected the knowledge of the researchers and wished to engage with it. The researchers were also willing (provided it had the support of managers) to engage with the interpretations possible from the community practitioners. In short both groups of practitioners were willing and interested to develop new learning processes which would attempt to integrate and develop quantitative and qualitative understanding of communities.

In response to the recognised need to develop collaborative learning, a trial was set up to link the researchers and community practitioners. This is the first trial to be reported in the case study (see the Researcher-Practitioner Interactive Learning Trials, Appendix 2: Source7). A series of three workshops were agreed and set up, where community co-ordinators and researchers were brought together to examine different perspectives, exchange of understandings, and examine the potential for collaborative learning. Discussions included how their respective understandings differed overlapped, where this should be developed, and how they might work together to improve these understandings through novel processes. Participating in and observing this trial suggested that there was value and learning outcomes in connecting those with experiential knowledge of communities and those with statistical knowledge of the same communities. Those participating, and those facilitating the trial viewed it as a potential solution to be adapted and developed. It gave evidence that research and practitioner learning can be combined to organisational advantage if supported by management and if practitioners are empowered to develop their own understanding collectively.

The general need for new processes for developing holistic evidence-based understanding was commented upon in interviews and in projects. Senior officers recognised that there were few systematic ways to develop understanding. Individual officers involved in this study were supportive of trials. However, learning is generally left to individuals and is most often done voluntarily in isolation. There are small programmes where learning has been encouraged and funded (e.g. an MBA programme). However the objective of this and the content of this was not geared towards understanding the population. No organised postgraduate programmes were in place for the development of understanding of the population by staff. So there is a need for improving understanding and recognition of this with most practitioners and some managers. In addition viewpoints on what new learning mechanisms should include were commented upon by a senior policy manager who summarised many of the findings presented during the case study from other interviews also:

- Learning required development of structures to support learning

  ‘’I don’t think people yet have a common understanding of what we are trying to do, and I think that, structurally, we – members, ourselves, communities, and stakeholders – are operating in an infrastructure that does not make it easy for the dialogue to take place about reaching common understandings. Its not just about time, energy and commitment – its about structures – there are very few structures where you can do that or there is a political imperative to do that. But I think government wants to create those.’’

- An overall learning processes is needed

  ‘’We have information – how are we analysing and interpreting that information? Who’s involved, how are they involved, what skills do they need to be involved, what are the core skills, who has got them, how are we going to get them to people. …to get regular, robust, top-notch management information, about the key things we need to know about the city. But that is only stage one. We then need to have to create a process which allows serious reflection on the information, that has to involve the key players and stakeholders in any city, so what do those processes look like what are we good at and what are we not good at? Then identify development areas for these processes. Then we move onto the final stage of how we actually use the understandings and information, what do we use it to do, who do we inform, to do what, to take what decisions, and who are we to inform – communities, government, our own directorates and services?’’

- Linking quantitative and qualitative approaches; the scientific and political

  ‘’I think what you are doing is interesting but it’s complex; trying to synthesise the two traditions – the scientific tradition of gathering and analysing facts and another tradition which is about community politics and the bottom-up view, the qualitative interpretation the ascription of meaning, and you are trying to bring them together in a political context so that we can manage to produce change that’s of benefit to people in the city’’

- Linking of facts and interpretations and values

  ‘’You move into a linked process - of facts and what they tell us - who interprets the facts, how do they interpret them, what values do they bring, this is really important and then having done that you reach the other conclusion that, in some instances, you are unlikely ever to get a complete agreement as people bring different values and priorities to the debate about the way to move forward’’.

- Linking of learning into possible actions:

  ‘’For instance the local community in X - even if we could get agreement on the reality of the city - you are going to have to have a political process which is about reaching agreement about ‘so what – what should we do with that understanding’, that is the politics of it and that will be influenced by the different set of values that people bring to the political battle – to go with a metaphor different ‘gladiators’ are fighting for different things in armour of this information.’’

- Acting to change mechanisms and context to deliver improvements

  ‘’I think there are all sorts of ways it can be done better - such as changing structures, or engaging within the policy officers network and policy content, or creating workshops, or a customised postgraduate program for a cohort of senior people, or changing the culture of how we do things. I think there are all sorts of ways learning could improve - and we know its an opportune time to shift to a smarter future’’. (a senior manager)

- Need to balance internal and external understanding

  ‘’Most of the development of understandings, the influence and the credibility is currently embodied in and across local government practitioner and the political communities. There is less involvement and linkage including (for instance) the academics and local communities.’’(a policy manager)

There was therefore a recognised need to develop understanding and there were some ideas of what this required. In this context there were a number of new approaches explored, trialed, and observed with some potential or intended aim to develop understanding of the population. In all cases the author was involved as an active participant observer. These initiatives will be discussed throughout the case study as possible learning processes observed. The following list records the different approaches trialed and observed in local government:

- University-Government Collaborations (Chapter 6)
- The Multi-Organisational Task Team (Chapter7)
- Interviewing Local Politicians (Chapter 5)
- External Practitioner Snowball Engagement (Chapter 8)
- Citizen Engagement and Interview-Mapping (Chapter 8)
- Practitioner-Researcher Interactive Learning Trials (this chapter)
- Web Engagement and Evaluation (this chapter)

Each of these approaches have presented findings concerning mechanisms and contexts to improve understanding and learning and will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

This section has indicated that there are limitations in the potential for development of understanding. Dominant mechanisms include meetings, consultations, performance management and monitoring mechanisms, quantitative data assembly and sharing, and surveys conducted in-house. There also exist informal mechanisms that could (and do) contribute to the development of understandings (such as those understandings gained through the activities of staff who directly engage with communities and sub-groups but who do may not generally record these understandings nor participate in the development of them). Official understandings are not developed through organised regular processes understanding is achieved through ad hoc informal or episodic (multiple and mixed) mechanisms, methods, and networks. Many officers learnt informally while working. In understanding communities and stakeholders obstacles mention included; the need for better

identification and participation of stakeholders, the need for learning groups and associated systematic infrastructure to stakeholders (rather than continuation of ad hoc approaches) and more time to learn though these (rather than accept superficial levels of understanding that currently dominate) this included the need to increase the capacity for participation and understanding internally. Practitioners felt a better understanding of community could be achieved through more holistic learning events and even through more informal open discussions between practitioners. The community practitioners respected the knowledge of researchers and wished to engage with it conversely researchers were willing (provided it had the support of managers) to engage with the interpretations possible from the community practitioners. In short both groups of practitioners were willing and interested to develop new learning processes that would attempt to integrate and develop quantitative and qualitative understanding of communities. The need for new organisational structures (including networks and processes) was also mentioned as a weakness that required development in order to deliver understanding. A number of small-scale trials to help improve understanding internally have been noted including researcher-practitioner interactive learning and web-based practitioner engagement and evaluation across organisations which offer potential for development. Finally, it is noted that the organisation itself has attempted to change learning contexts and mechanisms through a number of larger scale initiatives, some of which will be examined in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Local Government Stakeholders

Stakeholders

Many different stakeholder groups including researchers, community practitioners; policy, politicians, and management; easy accessibility and engagement of other public sector organisations but relatively difficult to learn and collaborate where private sector approaches require funding; access and engagement of citizens a particular issue; Exclusion of internal community practitioners from development of understanding; separation of practitioners and researchers; willingness and utility to collectively engage in learning

Current Understanding

Dominance of quantitative approaches; short-term focus; weak regard and utilisation of qualitative approaches; main focus upon communities defined geographically; generally cross-sectional not longitudinal (some underway in education); few explicit theoretical perspectives; researchers offer descriptions; community practitioners offer localised descriptions and interpretations; Separation of quantitative and experiential understanding; (large-scale and local scale); experiential understanding not recognised and respected as potential qualitative data; quantitative data recorded and stored but qualitative interpretations are not; potential to integrate these demonstrated in trials

Context and Goals

Extensive networking inclinations and abilities; management ability in cross-organisational initiatives; generally task, decision, and funding focused rather than learning; time pressures to complete job rather than learning and quality as criteria; few job sharing or secondment opportunities across organisations, but fluid in terms of mobility. Researchers see themselves as collectors and disseminators not investigators; community practitioners see themselves as locally informed but not qualitative researchers; organisation reinforces this; policy understanding not developed from interaction and trials; obstacle of task-driven or output-driven processes but practitioner empowered and learning-driven trials well received

Developing Understanding

Meetings and consultations dominate as collective learning mechanisms, developing understanding of citizens viewed as more data or more consultation; both typically surface learning; individual learning left to individuals; no systematic maintained learning data researchers more involved than practitioners; episodic surface learning; learning unrecorded; top-down approaches; descriptions of populations dominate without explicit explanations. Benefits of qualitative-quantitative interactions demonstrated; but lack of involvement with policy; absence of recording hinders development; potential value of interactions in generating explicit interpretations; but no systematic learning in place; desire and need for more learning internally; need to engage outsiders in learning also.

5 LOCAL POLITICIANS

5.1 Background

In considering how local government comes to understand the population, one of the key stakeholder groups (listed in Chapter 4) is that of the locally elected politicians. These politicians represent their ward communities (3 for each ward) in local government, and some are also involved in cabinet and in standing committees making decisions that will impact upon the communities they represent, as well as upon the wider population. It was decided (in consultation with local government community managers) that a group of councillors should be interviewed to see how they came to understand the population and how they felt this understanding could be improved. In Newcastle the 26 wards are now organised to give seven distinct Management Areas. It was decided that one Management Area would provide a focus (involving cross ward boundary issues). Of the councillors approached seven were interviewed representing the different wards within the larger Management Area.

5.2 Stakeholders: Networks and Engagement

The group of councillors are one set of stakeholders with an interest in developing understanding of the population. Councillors themselves came to understand the population through a wider group of stakeholders (in addition to other ways to be discussed). Stakeholders they identified included other councillors, practitioners from diverse organisations (for instance police and health), local government practitioners, and citizens themselves. Stakeholders involved in developing councillor understanding are generally (by definition) active with an agenda to be communicated:

> ‘’Usually you just find out who is active in the area and find out when they are meeting, you go to see them and make contact with people who are involved in the issues locally. The community is seen – at least partially – in terms of the issues of these active groups.’’

The resulting understandings were thought to be selective and partial and there was recognition that other stakeholders were excluded:

''The problem is that that can be quite self-selecting. So you have to try and look beyond that. Its like in any group of residents you will find the same people appearing in several different meetings and projects – so you have to be conscious that there are other people.''

In all cases councillors equated understanding of communities with participation of those communities. Low participation of residents was repeatedly mentioned as an issue in developing understandings of communities.

It seems important to distinguish communication *with* residents and participation *by* residents. Communications to residents might reach fairly large numbers of people:

''I communicate with about 1200-1500 people throughout the year, by way of newsletters, direct mailings, people coming to see me and communicating with me. There are some people I communicate with every month so - last week I was travelling the streets, I delivered about 50 letters, newsletter type things. I would probably do that – probably do a couple of hundred a month to the same people''

However councillor understandings were mostly developed from contact with a much smaller group of order 100-300 or so people who participate through forms of dialogue. There was a view expressed that actual community participation levels are of the order 1% of the possible level. Understandings were developed through two-way dialogue with these people – but mostly the same people over and over again:

''..when you look at the average work of a councillor – there are huge numbers of people who are not involved – perhaps less than 1% of our local community. You get the same people coming back again with some new comers''.

''I was at a meeting last night, there was 20 odd people there which was a hell of a good turnout. If you get that every month for say 10 months that's 200 people. So I suspect the truth is I probably see perhaps 300 different faces, sometimes repeated people, yes. I would say in a year perhaps 300 people…. I meet up with them on multiple occasions. The same old faces.''

Participation seems to be dominated by established groups and locations; such as residents and tenants associations, community centres, etc, through their meetings or through council

committees and councillor surgeries. In addition there are the general dialogues and personal contacts within the ward.

It was felt that those that were participating were *not* representative of the wider community:

> ''There are a huge number of people who don't turn up to anything. These are the missing bit. And I don't know what I am missing but I think the people I see are not truly representative of the community. I think they are a bit unusual in that they actually turn up.''

This was likely to give a distorted view of issues and limit understandings of the wider community. This 'participation gap' was frequently cited as one of the most important gaps in developing community understandings

All councillors regarded citizens as stakeholders in developing understanding of the population. But many of these stakeholders did not participate in local government processes, and therefore understanding of these groups was limited. The assumption was that participation in local government processes was the dominant route to understanding of these groups. Improving understanding of young people was an issue mentioned by all councillors. This will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 8.

5.3 Current Understanding: Data, Knowledge, and Limitations

All councillors held knowledge of the local communities they represented; this was generally established through multiple and mixed methods and experiences. Nevertheless the councillors, can be regarded as 'community practitioners' in the sense that they practice within the community, as well as the community co-ordinators. Through their contacts, roles, and interests they come to understand aspects of their communities, and this is augmented by the many additional diverse sources they draw upon. This knowledge is not usually written down anywhere, yet this a further potential source of knowledge, applying at localised levels, and reflecting the diversity of the population.

All councillors in the study mentioned the understanding of young people as an issue, although the definitions ranged from under 25, under 30 and even under 40. Yet all agreed on the need to develop and access understanding of the under 25s.

Purpose of understanding was usually to identify issues and ways to address these. Understanding predominantly concerns operational problems and issues, consensus and developing agreements, quick solutions and plans to address issues.

> ''I like to think I am pro active in trying to find out from people what they feel and just from a political point of view it is good for me to have my name around the area so people might even remember me when it comes to elections. It is two-fold, I like to give information, like to talk to people but, if I want to be re-elected again, I want to have a high profile in the area, and be seen to be doing things for the local community''

> ''I think it is more for getting things done, action. Which I think is important to local people because if they draw it to my attention and it is not dealt with they think a) I haven't done anything and I like to try to deal with things fairly promptly, get them done and then follow up with the person and say, look you raised with me last week about rubbish in the back lane, has it gone?''

When asked if understanding was geared specifically towards dealing with challenges, problems and issues, and the resolution of these:

> ''I think that is the bread and butter stuff of being a local Councillor. People don't ring you up at 10.00 at night to tell you everything is all right, they ring up to say there is a problem with their neighbour, or there is a problem with such and such and they want you to intervene to try to get something done, I just accept that is part of the job that's what you are there for to try and assist people who have particular problems around the way they live, and I accept that fully as being the job, and to a large extent that what makes it such a rich experience of actually dealing with people and resolving issues which they raise with you and the satisfaction that you get on a personal basis in being able to resolve issues.''

Understanding may be useful in accessing funding:

> ''in terms of making judgements about where money will be spent, if you think of the new neighbourhood renewal funds the Government has set up and it is going to be important in terms of using that fund to know quite a bit about different areas of the City. In some of those areas that might need attention there might not be that much recorded information that we could work with to access money from the fund.''

Strategic understandings were not the main result nor the main aim of many the mechanisms. The dominant understanding relates to operational levels, dealing with local problems and issues. Strategic understandings where they do exist are provided primarily through the surveys, research and polls. However, it was suggested that qualitative understandings at strategic level are similar to those of operational levels:

> ''I don't think there is anything, any information or attitudes that I see being a Cabinet Member which are any different from being a local Councillor. I talk to people…, I drive around (the ward) fairly regularly, I walk…, I meet people in pubs and clubs so my understanding of the area is still on a personal basis of actually talking to people, being there, seeing what happens there.''

Although explicit records are created and communicated, these tended to be of proceedings, decisions, agreements, actions, plans and policies. The explicit developing background understandings of the participants was generally not made explicit and recorded for others. What was recorded was spread around and fragmented:

> ‘’Its just in the head – and I think that applies to a lot of councillors…..Sometimes there might be a report – but often there would not be any hard information and probably not a record of informal information to help explain the background, or the way things have changed over a period. You would have to go to various sources to pull something like that together….. I would say it’s fragmented.’’

Recorded understandings mainly concerned some local issue and what was to be done about it. It seems that the recorded understanding of the complexity of issues, or why these issues arose, or analyses of alternative scenarios underlying interventions, or balancing participant viewpoints with those of opposing sub-communities, were relatively rare.

Generally there is no explicit summary or recording of the informal and qualitative understandings relating to community and groups and these may be known by the councillors and other people but are not easily accessible to others:

> ‘’Much of it [is] anecdotal information about the area and my own viewing of the area as I walk around it or drive around it. One forms impressions which are not recorded anywhere, just recorded in my brain’’

The absence of explicit recording of qualitative understandings was not necessarily seen as a problem or issue; understandings are seen as important in so far as they help identify a current or future problem:

> ‘’If recording [is done] for the sake of recording it then nobody would ever go and look at it unless they were doing some kind of academic research, but if it is being recorded for a purpose which is usually about identifying problems which need attention in the area, looking at the future of an area then it is probably quite important that it is recorded and kept somewhere accessible and that people know about it, and they could go and have a look at it and do something with it.’’

Some felt that qualitative understanding might be intrinsically inaccessible to others: ‘’you can not write it down, you can not get a hold of it’’

Councillors were asked in what respects they would wish understanding to be improved upon and in what areas local government understanding needed to improve to fill in current gaps

and uncertainties. First responses to identifying gaps in understanding tend to be associated with gaps in participation (low or non-participation):

- Generally low-participation and unrepresentative nature of those who regularly participate leading to gaps in understanding of the wider community.
- Some specific geographical areas of residence and on particular housing estates with low participation
- Parts of the population that are very mobile
- Young people and children

In addition to participation there were issues of understanding difficult issues or in understanding different lifestyles.

- Understanding and reporting crime when people fear crime or intimidation, and appreciating that understandings may under-represent the real picture.
- Understanding lifestyles which don't mesh with the way officialdom works and its views
- The ethnic population (who often do participate) and increasingly asylum seekers (with language or participation difficulties)

Other comments related to access to information and understandings, such as the lack of briefing notes on key issues and therefore the general improvement that could be achieved in our understandings if this was corrected:

> ''…often there would not be any hard information and probably not a record of informal information to help explain the background, or the way things have changed over a period. You would have to go to various sources to pull something like that together….. I would say its fragmented… it probably could be improved, it could be just to pull together briefings on particular issues - what is happening to employment in the area for instance, what are the trends and so on, briefings like that I think would be useful.''

The need for sub-ward level statistics and focus upon the variation within an area was seen as relevant:

> ''the problem with ward profiles is they give you a ward average, that average can be very misleading, …. so the average distorts things''

5.4 Context and Goals: Culture, Power, Frames and Aims

Although there was general agreement concerning the importance of the issue of low and non-participation in developing understanding there was no explanation offered with evidence as to why people did not participate. Limited explanations were offered and assumed (ranging from unsatisfied self-interest of people and the unfulfilled desire to see immediate action, to general cynicism and scepticism in communities) but only one councillor expressed the view that they simply did not know for sure.

It was noted that the city council and councillor perspective on the question tends to assume existing processes, people and purposes as fixed and given. This may prevent development of approaches that work. If ‘’non-participation’’ is viewed holistically in a sociological context it can be seen to mean ‘non-participation of many different people (that we do not know about), within taken-for-granted processes (that they did not create for themselves and they do not like), for purposes which they did not define or agree, in order to communicate short-term local operational issues and quick solutions (which may not be important to them), to people who are different from them in terms of roles views ages interests values and purposes’. Viewed from this perspective non-participation might be expected. This perspective was not strictly a finding of the local councillors study, as it originated over time and through (a) discussions with the Youth Exclusion team (Source 5: Appendix 2) concerning interactions with local councillors, and (b) the Community Participation Strategy Group (Source 6: Appendix 2). It is included here as it informs consideration of the context in which young people might participate and why they do not. This does not suggest that this view was expressed by the councillors.

5.5 Developing Understanding: Methods, Processes, and Approaches

Councillors were asked how they came to understand the city population and communities. Responses highlighted that there were multiple mechanisms and methods. All councillors agreed that the development of understandings of communities required participation of communities in that process. The following list gives the main ways councillors came to understand their communities.

- Through personal experience:

> ‘’As a Councillor you live among the population ….. I think if you are a Councillor who lives in the inner City area then you get a lot of every day contact with people round about …..’’

> ‘’what I see on a day to day basis when I walk around the area’’

But it was recognised that there were intrinsic limitations to this:

> ‘’you have to remember there is a fairly limited amount of contact so there are things you might not know about that are going on in the next street for example’’.

- Through Personal contact:

> ‘’The other way I suppose is through individual contact with people ringing you up with a problem or come to your surgery with a problem so it almost always is with a problem so again you are seeing kind of partial view of the world around you either with contact directly face to face or over the phone with people’’

> ‘’I meet with residents very regularly and that is Residents Associations throughout the area I represent. I just meet people as I go about my business and I have advice surgeries and people contact me by telephone and write to me about issues they are concerned about, and I also communicate fairly actively with writing to people just asking them about issues and giving them information about things going on and seeking their views about things which are happening in the area’’

This personal contact may increase in special circumstances such as in election years:

> ‘’Then when there are re-elections, of course, occasionally some other reasons I might go around knocking on doors and again you would be meeting quite a lot of people face to face and that is often quite revealing because you might get a picture of a problem on a housing estate you think is universal throughout the estate and once you go around knocking on doors and meeting people who don’t go to meetings or don’t raise concerns or contact you then you begin to get a more comprehensive view as to what the situation is so elections are quite a good focus in that sense’’.

- Through public meetings:

> ‘’..the other way which you would find out things would be through public meetings, local groups, you might be involved with or you might want to meet as a Councillor. That’s quite important except again it is fairly limited to those people who are part of groups or go to meetings and express themselves’’

These meetings tend to focus upon resident and tenant associations.

- Through contact with practitioners:

Councillors also draw upon contact with practitioners; the dominant contact seems to be with city council officers:

> ‘’We do walkabouts often mainly with Housing and Environmental Officers. Again you see things and you meet lots of people when you are going around looking at problems in particular streets or estates’’.

Other practitioners mentioned included police and health practitioners. Practitioner contact was pre-dominantly about seeking action, decisions, and agreements rather than any formal joint learning.

> ‘’I talk to public officials to a) find out what is happening in the area and b) to report things which are happening in an area to get things sorted out. I talk to Police Officials because criminality in the area is a bit of an issue. Whether it is talking to the local Superintendent at the West End Police Station or the Beat Bobby, I will use every

opportunity to pick up on issues which are brought to my attention or which I see in the locality. I sometimes talk to Health people as well, the people on the ground, the District Nurses, alternatively GPs in the area so I do have a fairly wide network of people I can discuss things with''

- Through meetings with other Councillors

''of course the other way would be through meeting with other Councillors seeing what issues they are raising on behalf of other people in other parts of the City''

- Through surveys, research, and polls

Most councillors drew upon surveys, research and polls to complement their understandings. Those explicitly mentioned included City Profiles, national government deprivation indices and specially commissioned research projects (e.g. New Deal areas). These perspectives provided context, and could be incorporated in dialogue and communications with people and practitioners:

''[there are also] more formal things like surveys, opinion or polls that exist, that kind of analytical consultation that goes on all the time in various ways and settings. So you will be looking for feedback through that and looking at how valued that was in terms of its groups, the people who talk to you and their responses. There is a fair amount of that ….''

These were often public documents and data that others could access.

''There is evidence stuff as well which is the first stuff I mentioned, it's all hard evidence done on the basis of research undertaken by whoever has done the information city profiles that are available to all who might want to read it, that is the Census stuff and studies as well. Which gives us a good background of the locality. Some more have been done very recently around deprivation indicators''

In some cases factual information was provided by other agencies such as the police on crime and perceptions of crime.

- Through the media:

''…then through the media of course…..things like radio phone-ins or newspapers, things like that''

- Through multiple mixed methods and mechanisms

Each of the mechanisms and methods have limitations but councillors noted that the sum of all is regarded as giving a better perspective than any individual method in isolation.

> ''you know all these things have their limitations in terms of what they tell you, it is when you kind of look at a whole number of them then you begin to build up some sort of a picture of peoples thinking on what is happening to them''.

Councillors were asked if there were any formal and systematic learning processes to develop and communicate understandings.

> ''I don't think you could say that there is anything systematic there. It will happen to an extent …. things like meetings or projects that create a vehicle for people to come together and maybe learn from each other or knock seven bells out of each other. There is always much learning going on. It's a bit hard to say because you need to take time for learning to happen and I think, well, people don't always have a lot of time and even when they come together in meetings then its about getting on with something else rather than spending time trying to understand things from other people's points of view. In a sense of learning about that so I think the honest answer is that there is probably not a lot going on right now.''

There was recognition of the need for more learning but with practical limits on this on the time of people and organisations, and once again the pragmatic requirement on understanding geared towards utility:

> ''I would think … there is always the need for more learning. You have to be a bit realistic about whether that can happen because I think it does demand working at building trust and confidence. That can be done given dedicated work on the ground because we know it has happened before. That goes on all the time in nooks and crannies. I guess it is the time that it takes really, its hard for agencies to commit themselves to, and for everybody else because of the pressures in their lives, their family

lives, their working lives. But also whether they can see the purpose of it because it doesn't lead to anything that is going to make a difference''

One councillor referred to the relatively superficial ways in which understandings are developed, recorded and communicated:

> ''[in my experience developing area understandings is] what are the first five things you can think about and stick on a post-it?, in only half an hour, which in my view needs to take much longer''

No formal or systematic learning processes to develop understandings were identified by any councillor in the study. It would appear that there are no such processes in place.

In summary specific additional methods for developing understanding mentioned by councillors included: personal experience and personal contact, through public meetings, contact with practitioners and with other councillors, surveys, research, and polls, public documents that others could accessed and the media. Most agreed that their understanding was developed through multiple mixed methods and mechanisms. Councillors were asked if there were any formal and systematic learning processes to develop and communicate understandings. No formal or systematic learning processes to develop understandings were identified by any councillor in the study; and it appears that there are no such processes in place. Councillors were also asked in what respects they would wish understanding to be improved upon and in what areas local government understanding needed to improve to fill in current gaps and uncertainties. First responses tended to be associated with gaps in participation; in particular low-participation and the unrepresentative nature of those who regularly participate leading to gaps in councillor understanding of the wider community.

It was found that developing understanding of the population required greater participation of citizens in that process. Understanding was limited by other issues mentioned the study. For instance; (i) the absence of systematic learning through stored official and organisational understandings, (ii) absence of systematic learning with the community, (iii) little recording and communication of qualitative or mixed understandings, (iv) the lack of availability of current integrated understandings and briefings, and (v) mechanisms to challenge and correct these. Although development of understandings may be limited in these respects, the councillors appear to find these weaknesses acceptable in comparison with the general weaknesses associated with community participation.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS
Local Councillors

Stakeholders

Low engagement with citizens in selective networks; wish for greater understanding of citizens; particularly mainstream non-active, youth and excluded groups; existing consultations highly dependent upon existing networks (e.g. tenant associations) .

Current Understanding

Mixed understanding developed from multiple sources; use of data and interpretations; focus upon population defined geographically and within ward boundaries; politically framed.

Context and Goals

Problem action and issue orientation; fixed purposes and practices, use of committee meetings, cabinet learning similar to ward councillor; short-term wins an explicit aim; not geographically holistic; evidence a mix of quantitative data observations, and experience.

Developing Understanding

Participation seen as key; short-term and local focus of understandings; meetings, and ad hoc approaches; mixed methods; need for briefing documents; no systematic learning or recording of councillor understandings.

6 UNIVERSITY-CITY COLLABORATIONS

6.1 Background

My first exploration of how understanding of the population is developed, and how this could be improved upon, came from experiences of the 'city-university liaison initiative' (part-time, 1997 to 2000). This was a trial initiative to identify, explore and stimulate collaborations and interaction widely between Newcastle City Council and Newcastle University. The assumed significance of this project was that the Universities engaged in the initiative would be an important source of knowledge and local government a focus for action. This was a local government initiated pilot project championed by a single manager which then became jointly funded initiative between local government and a local university led by a senior manager in each organisation. The author's role was to explore, create, and support linkage between the two organisations and managers[2]. The programme aimed to develop mutual links in many subject areas in the expectation that such links would lead to collaborations across both organisations. It first ran as a pilot and then it developed on a year by year contract basis, lasting approximately three years. This initiative gave insights across departments and directorates of both organisations involving both junior and senior participants. This diverse experience offered a unique viewpoint into the approaches of different stakeholders and how this might be developed across both organisations. This experience is drawn upon as reflective practice, as it provides some early evidence on the research questions.

6.2 Stakeholders: Networks and Engagement

A report memo to the senior management group of the university, in the final stages of the project (March 2000), stated that contacts with the both city and university academics were continuing and it could be estimated that over 200 staff, with mutual interests, had been identified or introduced across both organisations during the trial (source: memo and e-mail records). Stakeholders had been identified across departments and directorates as well as organisations. Different stakeholders had different types of information, used different methods, had different skills used for different purposes, in different organisational cultures.

[2] Note that the aim of this project was *not* to deliver holistic evidence-based understanding so the project should not be judged on this basis. However retrospectively the experiences gave evidence-based insight into the *possible* role of collaborations between local government and universities.

Knowledge (and knowledge generation capability) was spread across organisations, and also within each organisation (on number of occasions it was noted that colleagues within the same organisation were unaware of each others' common interests and complementary knowledge). This provides supporting evidence that there are multiple potential stakeholders associated with development of understanding of the population. It was noted that many local government and academic departments continued to be unaware of each others' interests and co-operation needed to be stimulated.

Generally, in the course of the initiative, it was observed that it was local government managers that initiated and managed the collaboration process. In busy periods there would be numerous meetings each day, involving several people from different departments and organisations. Cross-organisational collaboration required the sustained effort and the efforts of senior project champions, or alternatively the dedicated efforts of individuals often working without explicit organisational support. This demonstrated local government networking strengths and inclinations. This provides evidence suggesting that there exists extensive networking potential and capability in local government, particularly at the level of management. It was observed that many other networks could be accessed through local government (besides internal access across department). For instance many networks linking to other local authorities, regional bodies, national government departments, government agencies, were developed, in developing the city-university networks.

6.3 Current Understanding: Data, Knowledge, and Limitations

In meetings, and in informal conversations outside these university-city meetings, it was often the case that local government officers demonstrated significant local practical knowledge, access to information resources and networks, and mobilisation powers. Whereas university staff demonstrated deeper analysis and learning skills, alternative interpretation skills, or academic credibility, which were of potential use if larger projects got underway, but the academics often appeared to gain more understanding on the issue of interest than they communicated. This demonstrated the working knowledge and information that local government officers could bring to the development of understanding of the population. Often local government officers and managers would inform and educate their academic counterparts on areas of local knowledge and data. Unlike academic researchers with particular interests and subject areas, local government officers and managers were functioning as generalists with wide understanding of local interconnected issues and perspectives. This knowledge was often practical, grounded in action, and omitted systematic

consideration of wider theoretical perspectives. It showed the value of informal knowledge and know-how of local government practitioners to academics. These observations indicated evidence of significant knowledge and knowledge development capability latent within local government but this was rarely developed systematically or investigated as a matter of course within the local authority itself. Furthermore collaborations with university academics were not envisaged as joint-learning or joint-research ventures with practitioners. Practitioners would (in general) be expected to provide data and access to stakeholders and organisations and then *receive* the findings of academics which practitioners would utilise. This appeared to seem 'natural' to the academics and practitioners; but it would be limited in its ability to deliver organisational learning (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4).

In cases where development of understanding was an aim, this was always seen within local government as a short-term project, but in the academic context it was a medium to long-term project. This also showed the problems associated with local government funding academic approaches and the problematic time lags inherent in the university research funding systems. It also demonstrated the weaknesses of the academic research model in developing local government understanding. This gave evidence of short-term goals of local government in developing understanding, whereas university staff seeking longer-term projects to gain funding, publish papers, satisfy peers and develop deeper quality understanding in their own specialist areas. On several occasions this led to (privately expressed) mutual criticisms. In some cases academics felt they were acting as consultants without (being paid) and practitioners felt they were being used for their access and data but receiving little in return. Generally the introductions were well received, but much more time was spent discussing access to funding or possible mutual benefits of collaborations than was devoted to mutual learning or improvements in understanding.

Local government knowledge was often experienced, collected or gathered rather than formally generated. Methods used to develop new knowledge were also relatively simple in comparison with academic perspectives. Primarily this involved consultations with others (often unrecorded) or data gathering and direct examination of this rather than analysis. It showed the broad differences between local government and academic perspectives, how little university research was directly useful or applicable to the needs of local government managers. Dissemination of useful understanding rarely occurred. It also showed how little of local government methods and knowledge would meet academic criteria of validity and rigour. Local government had a great deal of anecdotal information on the population and access to many city networks directly relevant to the aim of understanding the population, but this knowledge was generally not rigorous nor recorded. In addition the experiences

suggested that within each organisation there were further sub-cultures and sub-groups within each larger organisation. Academics sharing an applied interest often met in meetings initiated by local government and had not previously been aware of their common contacts and applied interests. The university and local government approaches often appeared to be complementary rather than conflicting.

6.4 Context and Goals: Culture, Power, Frames and Aims

Whatever the subject matter or whoever the participants (which were diverse) the liaison activities between local government and university staff were almost exclusively meeting formats (introductions, aims, discussion, agreements and actions), rather than workshop mechanisms or other learning processes. The meetings were often aimed at clarifying common interests, which were discussed, and led to agreements and action. Typically local government personnel wanted to act to change a situation, whereas university personnel knew how to *get* to know something, and wanted to apply their skills to real world problems, also showing that the focus of local government was upon action.

Also, as previously mentioned, many of the meetings became meetings about developing funding proposals (as this was one of the ways in which collaboration could occur). This seemed to be a common university cultural perspective, and although practitioners would not be in receipt of funding they spent a significant amount of time supporting their academic collaborators in funding bids in the hope that it would *lead* to better understanding. However this was rare in practice as the success rate did not appear to be noticeably better. Background activity of practitioners and development of such an initiative was not enthusiastically received by representatives of the research funding bodies.

6.5 Developing Understanding: Methods, Processes, and Approaches

Although there were many areas where local government could collaborate with the university to develop understanding, there were relatively few areas where this actually occurred. Principle reasons noted included: (a) that the university often required or sought additional funding for conducting research and consultancy and this involved significant development costs (often going beyond the timescales that the information was required by) and (b), much of the liaison and meetings were not focused upon exchange of knowledge or development of understanding, but upon developing mutually beneficial *agreements* and joint collaborations for *funding* bids. Development of understanding was rarely the primary aim –

it was primarily organisational benefit. As organisational collaborations were often aimed at gaining organisational benefits and satisfying organisational interests, developing collaborations required that mutual benefits be identified and possible; but this route did not lead to greater local government understanding of the population. Furthermore organisational interests in some cases discouraged development of understanding (e.g. through the exclusion of competing organisations and groups). This provides evidence that suggests that networking does not always, or often, lead to collaboration, or development of understanding and it is therefore a *potential* not *actual* element in developing understanding. On occasions the mere presence of a network would be offered as evidence of collaboration whereas it was found that one did not follow from the other.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS
Collaborations with Universities

Stakeholders

Multiple stakeholders across university departments; potential links with external academics; extensive local government networking inclinations and abilities; local government management ability in cross-organisational initiatives; research councils as public bodies not engaged significantly in developing local government understanding; cross-organisational partnerships at management level and management-academic levels; practitioners better linked into local networks; academics linked into broader networks;

Current Understanding

Substantive knowledge at different levels and from different approaches of academics and practitioners complement each other; academics have more methodological and theoretical knowledge, managers and practitioners more experiential or detailed local data;

Context and Goals

Different and sometime competing goals and time-scales across local government and academia in developing substantive knowledge; Meetings more decision, proposal, and benefit oriented; aimed at reaching agreements and joint actions (not primarily practitioner-academic joint learning); dependent upon senior management support for widespread access but practitioner-academic mutual gains for joint working.

Developing Understanding

Attempts focused upon substantive knowledge development but different and incompatible time-scales in action and difficulties in securing significant funding; flexible collaborations attempted; meetings and consultations rather than mutual sustained learning; potential links with external academics; methodological expertise and alternative theoretical perspectives of academics not the focus; few theoretical perspectives in local government; meeting mechanisms; no systematic learning resulting.

7 REGENERATION TEAMS

7.1 Background

The City Regeneration programme (Going for Growth) was developed from 1999 onwards, as a long-term (20 year) plan for the City which was developed through a dedicated initiative and formation of a multi-disciplinary team of which the author was a participant observer member. It aimed to generate radical, holistic, and evidence-based strategies and policies, to help achieve regeneration of the city.

The regeneration team was formed from several stakeholder organisations. The resulting team of around 20 people were involved in off-site formation and introductions, with a bonding weekend. Organisations represented included Local Government Staff (from Community and Housing, Regeneration, Urban design, Education, Planning & Transportation, Economic Development, Policy, Social Services, City Works, Accountancy, and IT), and staff from external organisations; City Health, Home Housing, Northumbria Police, and a private PR and advertising company. The group interacted with developers, architects and others in later stages of the project.

The atmosphere within this group and the early initiative was exciting in that it promised a new approach with resources and time to explore this approach; evidence-based, holistic and radical. The regeneration and information teams also initially believed that such an approach was possible within the project. Many new ideas were suggested, some were developed, and a few were implemented (including this research study) Within the large interdisciplinary team there was a feeling of great potential. People acted as contact points and channels into their respective departments and organisations. The regeneration team was located in an off-site office and worked for 3 months in the plan development phase, and the larger team included various smaller teams developing specific ideas, tasks, and initiatives to support the regeneration of the city.

The smaller project teams included a communication and participation team, a housing team, and the regeneration information support team.

The information support team had a remit to work for 3 months to produce a quantitative evidence-based view of the vitality (socio-economic circumstances) and viability (trends) of population within the city. Developing holistic evidence-based information was an explicit aim of the project and therefore it is directly relevant in considering the research questions. The overall regeneration project further had the aim to deliver holistic evidence-based solutions and therefore it is directly relevant to the current project. The author was employed as a university researcher/participant observer working on this project. The aim was to contribute to the research process directly while also observing the team process to identify issues and suggest possible improvements.

This experience was directly relevant to the research questions (indeed they arose from experiences within the information team of the regeneration initiative). Observation on the regeneration initiative and the embedded information team produced direct evidence relevant to the research question of how local government develops understanding of the population. It also suggested ways in which this might be improved upon in future.

7.2 Stakeholders: Networks and Engagement

The initial networking between managers within local government and the partner organisations was not witnessed by the author. However the assembly of the team of around twenty people, from different departments and organisations, was achieved with time for those practitioners to devote to the 3 month project agreed by their own managers. This networking was clearly successful by those criteria. The set-up of the team seemed well managed from within the team itself. This demonstrated once again the extensive networking and people management capabilities of local government managers, and also the capability to mobilise cross-disciplinary teams.

Each organisation and department would bring a different organisational perspective and contact point, but also understanding of the city and access to data, as well as leverage once policies were established. The assembly of different data sets on crime, education, economic indicators, health from these different stakeholder sources, and the collection of these data sets together in map formats, generated an overview picture that conveyed a perspective of the city, where many of the issues appeared to be geographically linked together. Although this was not statistically established (by any means) the visual heuristic impact of these maps was evident within the multi-organisation regeneration team.

For instance, the assembly of visual maps showing indicators of unemployment, benefits, ill-health, crime, housing voids, low educational attainment at ward (and sub-ward) levels had high visual correlations with each other. This established an evidence-base that satisfied practitioners in the team of the interlinked nature of such issues, and their association with particular areas within the city, without recourse to statistical correlations or inferential statistics. The converse was also clear; the indicators demonstrated areas within the city with multiple advantages. This provided evidence of how the development of descriptive understanding can occur through pooling of information from multiple stakeholders, and the utility and potential of visualisation of evidence in maps, as a non-academic means to develop understanding of the population from data.

A participation group was set up, separately from the information group. The results of participation and information were viewed implicitly as different things. It was realised that the information group was focused upon quantitative data, and that soft qualitative data may be possible through participation (if designed as such). Within the group there were discussions around the connection of the two teams and management suggested common linkage in personnel to deliver this. However the participation team included the communication role and this role dominated the work of that team in giving out information about the regeneration programme. There was a feeling from community managers on the team that this approach was too top-down, and negative reactions were witnessed, attempts to redress the situation were made and eventually a large consultation (not participation) programme was initiated and undertaken to gain views on the (written) draft plans. This gave evidence of the view that participation is not seen as a research tool, with findings recorded and linked into quantitative systems

7.3 Current Understanding: Data, Knowledge, and Limitations

The data supporting the need for a growth policy was presented in terms of geographical differences over time. The understanding that resulted was primarily descriptive in that it told how areas of the city varied, and how the areas had changed with time on city-wide indicators, but it did not explain in evidence-based terms why this was so. The tool (the vitality and viability model) was developed further over the subsequent years. It displays multiple-indicator information at sub ward levels, and will also enable changes over time to be appreciated. This provided evidence that (spatial and temporal) quantitative descriptive understanding is a key approach within governance organisations, and that this understanding can be developed further by additions of further data sets.

The approach has value in that the overlay of indicators is suggestive and begs explanation or consideration. The usefulness of the 'indicator product' was demonstrated by its subsequent development of the idea into an IT based tool. The information flowed from the participating departments and organisations, there were some attempts to gather information from other organisations but these were relatively small in comparison. This provides some evidence that data from an organisation or individual follows most easily from participation of that individual or organisation within an organised officially recognised team or network (as opposed to informal requests between practitioners.

Qualitative data were not introduced by participating departments and organisations. For example, qualitative data on the population was not sought directly from practitioners working within the community (teachers, community co-ordinators, police officers, employment service managers etc).

The regeneration team attended to certain available data sets and issues. Key explicit issues included population loss from the city as a whole and from certain areas within the city, and socio-economic inequalities and polarisation across the city, with a particular concern for deprived areas of the city. These issues were related to (or composed of) others; as indicated in the occurrence of sub-features such as education, employment, health, and crime for instance. These in turn would be composed of further detailed features for instance GCSE results, attendance, youth unemployment, long-term unemployment low birth weights and high mortality rates, car thefts and burglaries.

As the project developed other large-scale concepts or features were introduced relating to a broadening of attention of the teams (such as social cohesion, quality of life, and the development of a cosmopolitan city). Indicators were examined as proxy measures of these. These qualitative features of the population (e.g. quality of life) were defined in terms of related quantitative measures (unemployment and crime for instance). They were not evidenced through additional qualitative data from team members or the population.

This gave evidence of how fragmented quantitative features of the population can be combined in broader features. Although the individual areas of attention may be those of the one particular participating department or organisation, they were combined under broad qualitative umbrella headings. So, for instance, by combining GCSE data from the local government education department with destinations data and from the Careers Service it was possible to gain a picture of influences and connections between the two. In such cases the

combination of descriptive data sets encouraged and stimulated hypotheses and interpretations of the data, which prompted questions for further investigation (but which were not followed through).

The project provided evidence of issues of accessibility. The early experiences of the information team included difficulties in accessing information from different departments and organisations even though these were officially represented within the regeneration team. The difficulties arose because of sensitivities of the potential release of such information, the possibility of misinterpreting the information, and simply accessing it from colleagues within the same organisation. The deadlines and time-scales for assembly of this information (3 weeks) could not be met. This evidence suggests a finding of difficulties in initially identifying, prioritising, and accessing holistic information across stakeholders, but this was resolved after prolonged debate and negotiation among the team members.

7.4 Context and Goals: Culture, Power, Frames and Aims

The initial management of the regeneration team, its objectives, remit, its formation, development, task and sub-team divisions, were originally regarded by members as exemplary with highly--motivated staff working within the regeneration team. The novelty and empowerment seemed to release the enthusiasms of many with experience of always doing the same thing – here was something new, important and exciting in its potential breadth and depth. The stated aims: to help regenerate the city, to attract people to stay or move to the city, to improve socio-economic conditions, and to reduce inequalities, through empowerment of team members, through a radical, evidence-based, participative, and holistic approach seemed instrumental in inspiring, uniting and motivating the team. This presents evidence that local government practitioners can be motivated and inspired by visionary management to develop new approaches to understanding the population, with high ideals, and a dedicated empowered team.

The information support group originally was given 3 weeks to provide the initial evidence-base to inform the regeneration programme. The team achieved very little in this time as much time was taken in debating what information was appropriate, what could be released by departments and organisations, and attempting to gain this information. The team appealed to managers, and the timetable for this process was extended to 3 months. The 3 month period was adequate to assemble quantitative information, but inadequate for assembling qualitative information, and investigation of explanations behind quantitative data. This evidence

supports a view that practitioners are generally given inadequate time-scales to achieve the stated aims (of developing holistic evidence-based understanding). This also provides evidence that a linear (time-limited) model of the overall process does not work. Both the information and participation aims within the regeneration project were under-estimated in terms of time, effort, and resources needed. The process was organised as a linear one, with finite discontinuous steps; information would be gathered and then stop, when consultation would begin, occur for while and then finish, so that plans could be made and agreed, which would then be implemented, revised and later evaluated. As the early stages were incomplete this suggests a better model may be the development of understanding as a parallel or cyclical process to implementation. It also provides evidence that management felt adequate information could be compiled in short while.

The information group and its management had difficulty in managing the initial collection of data across departments and organisations. Maintenance procedures need to be established if the process is not to falter and become out of date, departments and organisations are protective of their data, and sensitive to its possible misuse. There was no management of the generation of new understanding linking this data. The approach was compilation of data not generation nor interpretation. Data was on occasion not quality assured before use in presentations, statements and publications, and this seemed to have a detrimental effect upon the motivation and morale of the information team, and many resentments were expressed privately in the later stages of the information team, if they felt they had been pushed into unprofessional positions. This was also felt personally. The links between management and other groups appeared to erode (from field notes) Some inadequacies in the information process were addressed through later trials (see Researcher-Practitioner interaction trials, Chapter 4, and the Social exclusion project, Chapter 8) but these trials did not lead to mainstreaming actions nor did they influence policy development.

This provides evidence that the management of holistic information and interpretation is an issue, in particular it requires co-ordination, management and agreements across departments and organisations as personnel, managers, and circumstances change, with no single focus of responsibility to fulfil this role. Management of multi-organisational projects is clearly a complicating factor in developing holistic learning, yet the local government managers gained agreements to do so with other public sector organisations.

As the process developed and particularly towards the end of the project tensions developed between the management and (from) the information team. Members seconded to the project became concerned about their ‘home base’ jobs, and reputations being associated with work

they did not value in quality, and the information team were occasionally disillusioned when information was used that they could not fully account for or validate. This might be traced to the view that the information produced was being used 'unprofessionally' (i.e. by others with different standards of use). Examples included the lack of evidenced arguments behind stated targets for population growth, additional employment, and housing replacement figures, were not explicit nor clear to the information team. The figures appeared aspirational with little detailed explicit evidence-based argument to convince the team they were achievable. In addition there were occasional examples of figures being used by management that the information practitioners did not have confidence in, and this produced a feeling of mistrust, that data was being used and practitioner integrity might be compromised through such practices. Managers had no hesitation in defending this approach, and were not overly concerned by the viewpoints of the information team. On reflection this appeared to demonstrate two different cultures (the research-community culture and management-policy culture).

This provides evidence of a period of scepticism and mistrust within the information team, when considering management and policy use of information, and therefore the conflicting views on how the process should develop. This was in contrast to the high enthusiasms and motivation at the project outset. However it should be noted that many others developing the policy side did not feel this disappointment and remained enthusiastic and supportive (despite pressure and criticism).

In this project goals of management and practitioners could be observed in an experimental operational setting. There was an explicit aim of developing more holistic and evidence-based approaches. The project therefore serves as a source from which conclusions might be drawn concerning the operational meanings of these terms. From these operational meanings we might conclude something of what was done and how well this worked, and what was not done but perhaps could be in future to improve understandings.

In this initiative the meaning of holistic understanding was evidenced in the project set-up and management. The project was deemed holistic in that it (a) involved many organisational stakeholders working on the process rather than in one-off meetings, and (b) these stakeholders brought data and information on different subjects into the initiative, leading to a broader set of quantitative indicators representing a broader range of issues, and giving a broader description of the city. The programme was more holistic in that (c) it attempted to view the whole population, and relate the circumstances of sub-groups (particularly geographical) to wider perspectives. In particular, population movements were considered

within and across the city boundary, and secondly the multi-indicators approach led to a holistic perspective through inter-comparisons and understanding of diversity/inequality which embodies a holistic approach through consideration of the whole population.

This activity led to an example of what was regarded as an evidence-based holistic interpretation of the city population in terms of social structure (stratification evidenced by visual correlation of multiple socio-economic indicators and geographical dependency). This perspective was generally held within the regeneration team as a valid perspective of the city population and influenced much of the thinking within the regeneration project, including targeting of certain geographical areas and sub-communities deemed to be socio-economically deprived in relation to the rest of the city, as well as indicators to consider and targets.

Another possible sense of holistic emerged in (d) the attempt to bring together qualitative and quantitative data; information and meanings, but this did not develop within the short-time scales of the project. The information team further attempted to develop holistic understanding by (e) attempting to correlate chosen indicators (using a matrix where links could be characterised as strong links, possible links, or no links) but this was not completed in the course of the project.

Strictly speaking the policy (going for growth – to reverse city population decline) had been decided before the information team was assembled. Better information was gathered and presented to *support* this existing policy decision (which was nevertheless evidence-based in that population was known to be in decline). Furthermore evidence was gathered to show the detail of this decline (in terms of statistics on ward maps). However the 'causes' of this decrease were associated with the need for jobs, better housing areas and better schools for instance (before 'evidence' of this was produced). There was an explicit but unproven (plausible) theory of migration, which was based upon practitioner, managerial, and empathetic judgements. Some actual evidence of reasons for migration was later generated by a local university but this was only *after* the production of the master plan, which stated the need for better schools, jobs, and areas to address population decline. On reflection this approach can be reinterpreted as the generation of a 'first working theory' which could have been developed but which was not.

Overall a quantitative evidence-base for *describing* the city and its population in socio-economic terms was produced. This gave an overview of the city and its population. We did not produce an evidence-base that showed that certain interventions would lead to certain

outcomes, or that planned interventions would (or could) actually alleviate the problems identified. So it was evidence-based policy in that the detailed policy was created in *response* to evidence of city circumstances, but not in response to evidence that demonstrated the policy was sound or would have the desired impact through interventions. Proposed interventions were not based upon explicit evidence showing that these interventions would achieve their aims. The proposed interventions generated disagreements and discontent, not perhaps within the participating organisations, but certainly within the community. Also some people on the team could not see a need for mass demolitions (which were proposed as an outcome of the project). No explicit evidence had been presented that this would solve the socio-economic issues under consideration, but this intervention became the view of senior managers. In other words they were not advised of the effectiveness of this solution by any means known to the information team nor were they advised of this option by the larger regeneration team. This was a higher-level decision which came down to the regeneration team. There was no explicit evidence presented or generated by the teams that a demolition policy would improve the situation for local people, so this again was based upon practitioner and management judgement (possibly without empathetic judgement as other team members were hostile to this proposed solution – or rather to the way in which it had been produced and communicated). This provides evidence that the evidence-basis was limited to description of circumstance, and not to understanding of those circumstances nor to the likelihood of success of (or intention to evaluate) the intervention.

7.5 Developing Understanding: Methods, Processes, and Approaches

Given the brief to develop holistic, evidence-based, radical information to support regeneration, the information support team (with the wider regeneration team) discussed the inadequacies and limitation of methods, process, and networks in use within local government. On the basis of these discussions the team were able to generate proposed new approaches themselves. These included: experimenting with novel methods to engage citizens in giving views of the city, suggestions of trials to engage additional external practitioners, a need to structurally link those practitioners with qualitative and quantitative data, the need for investigative development of initial understanding, possibilities of learning seminars and the details of a quality assured statistical mapping of the city on a holistic range of indicators.

This provides evidence that it is the view of practitioners that existing methods, processes, and networks are inadequate for the purpose of generating holistic evidence-based understanding, and that new processes, methods, and networks are needed and furthermore

these can creatively developed by practitioners if they are empowered to understand a situation better (subject to resources particularly time and authority being available).

Once the master plan for the regeneration programme was established a tick-box survey asking questions on the regeneration of the city was sent to over 100,000 households in the city with the communication on the regeneration plan. The response was only around several hundred. Neither the information team nor the corporate researchers were involved in the production of the survey and it was felt to be a poor questionnaire by these groups; essentially the work was hurried and did not appear to involve research services, nor the information team. This gives an example of relatively high-cost methods that deliver little information of value.

The regeneration project also gave experience of how the development of understanding was in practice linked to interpretation and investigation. It was found that understanding (and many of the documents embodying understanding of the population) typically lead to *descriptions* in terms of facts and figures and *comparisons* between different facts in different places and at different times. Data was found on wide range of indicators and these were presented, recorded and circulated as *understandings of the city* demonstrating the issues to be addressed. These descriptions and comparisons *became* the resulting understanding; the development of understanding effectively halted at the stage where we could *describe and compare* different communities in terms of different features. It was then left to others to explain and propose policies to influence these features.

Towards the end of this project I experienced (with others) a sense of failure or dissatisfaction linked to a strong feeling that the understandings achieved were weak and superficial and this combined with a frustrating inability to clearly state why this was (and what could or should be done to correct the situation). The understandings did not intuitively satisfy but we were unable to identify the causes and cures for this dissatisfaction. In this case there was a great deal of information; in the form of statistics maps graphs and tables, reports with facts and figures, talks and presentations, and community views of situation. Still there was a feeling that this somehow did not achieve adequate ‘understanding’ of the situation. This remained the case when more data was examined; more data did not result in the understanding desired; too little information was not the problem.

In particular the authors' experience of the regeneration initiative, together with conversations with several local government staff (particularly research and community practitioners), suggested this was a more widespread circumstance. What had not been developed were adequate explicit and recorded explanations of the situation. It was rare for staff to record or develop implicit explanations available: of how population features were linked or how communities came to be the way they were. We did not explicitly record or explain what our descriptions actually represented and how they might be inter-related to each other or to other factors. We did not (adequately, explicitly) record explanations of how proposed changes were expected to lead to desired outcomes. We did not create or test alternative explanations against the evidence-basis. Explicit communication of the understanding developed stopped at the descriptive phase and explanatory understanding was in general either implicit or neglected.

The information team wanted to have an indicator product - the collected sets of data compiled by the team - which not only gave quantitative description of the city, but also included alternative views on what this data *meant*. However the team and managers acknowledged that what it meant depended upon who was asked; despite some team wishes to pursue the idea, the indicator product did not involve alternative interpretations and explanations. Retrospectively this would have greatly increased the team workload, but the unsatisfied aim is evidence of a weakness with the current state of understanding. Qualitative data, interpretations, and explanatory understanding were not explicitly sought, recorded or merged in the working of the regeneration team. This gives evidence of the predominance of descriptive quantitative spatial understanding in providing an evidence-base, and evidence of need for meanings and interpretation to be considered with the data, or else the understanding is incomplete.

The conclusions of the regeneration initiative were disputed by many stakeholders. Academics argued that growth was not sustainable, and citizens argued that re-housing and demolition of areas was unacceptable. Local government was accused of developing its own interests and the interests of developers over the interests of citizens. The background data published was not in dispute but the official interpretations in terms of local government policy intentions, actions and targets were disputed. This evidence supports the view that alternative and conflicting meanings are possible in interpreting agreed information, and that consideration of meanings and interpretations in addition to data is important in developing understanding.

The project gave insight into actual and potential learning processes across organisations. The regeneration team was to be the creator of a master plan. The information team were to support this in terms of developing information of relevance. However our team saw ourselves primarily as *assemblers* of information rather than *generators* of new understanding. Data to be utilised was agreed in meetings with practitioners and their managers (as explicit permission was often needed to release and use data). Collective learning beyond assimilating this accumulated data was not witnessed, and its absence was noted as a difficulty, which was brought to the attention of managers. The need and potential for further investigation was raised by staff from both the quantitative research and qualitative community perspectives. However the implementation of novel learning processes did not occur in the time-scale of the project. Nor were there any examples of learning mechanisms in place which could be utilised. The information team recognised the need to develop new learning processes.

This gave further evidence of the predominance of meeting formats (primarily to agree and decide information of use) and an absence of collective learning processes to generate new understanding from the existing information and data.

In the course of the project it was recognised that the bringing together of research and community personnel was one way in which qualitative and quantitative data could be brought together. This was developed into a proposal. This proposal generated interest debate and controversy, and it was recognised that the link of quantitative and qualitative had not been achieved in the initiative (the need was recognised and raised). There was evidence of the willingness to develop such links in both community and research camps and of the organisational capacity to develop a combined quantitative and qualitative learning approach.

There was some evidence that the incompleteness of understanding created an associated disappointment within the information team towards the end of the project. This positively lead to new proposals to account for identified gaps such as: absence of different perspectives and interpretations and absence of detailed investigation. Within the team there were diverse interpretations of the evidence assembled, from policy producing generally accepted evidence and introduced into plans, research officers stated more investigations were needed, community workers stressed the superficial nature of estimations used in housing targets and the absence of community perspectives as contributing evidence. Overall a feeling developed that understanding needed to be better thought out. Whereas to the rest of the regeneration team and the managers, this was seen as an iterative process which identified aspirational indicative targets rather than finalised facts and theories. The information team wanted to

know more before decisions were made, whereas those associated with policy seemed comfortable to learn through actions and decisions (or decisions were needed despite the uncertainty).

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Multi-organisational regeneration task teams

Stakeholders

Multiple stakeholder organisations and stakeholder groups within these; creates management level and coordinating links across organisations (police, health and employment for instance)

Current Understanding

Dominance of quantitative over qualitative; some qualitative data gathered by consultation after plans were developed; circumstances were (quantitatively) evidence-based but actions were based upon implicit-theoretical perspectives; widespread data sets available and power of GIS; focus upon communities defined geographically; but data not explicitly interpreted; neglect of qualitative approaches and data internally and little qualitative data supplied by partner organisations; separation quantitative and qualitative - of 'information' and 'consultation' teams; extensive local government networking inclinations and abilities; local government management ability in cross-organisational initiatives; cross-organisational partnerships at management level and in reaching agreements and actions (not learning focused)

Context and Goals

Specific aims of developing holistic and evidence-based understanding; but time pressures and task-driven; benefits and enthusiasms unleashed through aims to be holistic and evidence-based, some disillusionment with expectations vs reality within information and consultation teams.

Developing Understanding

Developed understanding of practitioners upon respective organisations; Episodic and linear learning limited in achievements; underestimates of timescales for data gathering; Significant learning about the circumstances of the population from GIS multi-layered data; no learning engagement with affected or target groups in advance of planning; long-term in planning but short-term focus in learning; based upon technical learning models not social learning; informal learning from each other but not systematic; dominance of descriptions of the population and some attempts at explanation; dominance of meetings consultations, and evidence of poor quality and utility surveys; widespread cross-organisational support and commitments of practitioners; some difficulties in data sharing overcome.

8 SOCIAL EXCLUSION PROJECTS

8.1 Background

This chapter reports on an innovative project to create networks and new forms of engagement of excluded groups (and associated external practitioners) to aid development understanding of the population (and particularly young people). The aim of the project was to develop and test, new methods, processes, and networks to reach and engage excluded groups, to develop understanding of their lives and neighbourhoods, and to record these to inform local government understanding. It trials an alternative to current consultation approaches through use of a small empowered 'learning team' with a remit to develop more holistic and evidence-based understanding in general areas of interest utilising flexible snowballing of networks. The effectiveness of learning in this approach is considered in comparison with existing approaches, as are the impacts on policy and the potential for mainstreaming such trials within local government. The project gives further insight into the viewpoints of stakeholders, the gaps in knowledge within local government, the limitations of existing methods, and the effect of organisational culture on development of a more holistic evidence-based understanding of the population. The project was European funded, it ran for one year, involved primarily interviews or focus groups, and included around 50 people who had some degree of membership with excluded groups. The project consisted of a team of three people (each working part-time on the project and including the author). The substantive aims of the project were not specified beyond the investigation of 'social exclusion' but the practitioners involved interpreted this to include exclusion from education, from employment, and from participative involvement in local government decision making.

8.2 Stakeholders: Networks and Engagement

In developing the project proposal, and in investigating how local government comes to understand the population, it was noted that local government stakeholders regarded understanding and involvement of 'excluded groups' as a current weakness and improvement in this was an espoused organisational aim. The local government stakeholders therefore sought improved understanding of the 'excluded stakeholders' as members (and examples) of the wider citizen group. It was recognised that existing approaches had not achieved engagement of these groups (Appendix 2: Source 6: Community Participation Working

Group) and it was known from earlier local government projects that new networks would be needed to access excluded groups (see chapter 5).

Two examples will be used to illustrate the approaches taken in the project.

Example 1: Snowballing networks and engagement

Unemployment of young people arose as one governance concern within the umbrella of 'exclusion'. We (the 'learning team') had adopted a flexible empowered creative approach and needed no permissions to follow leads. We realised that we might gain access to unemployed young adults (18 and over) through the employment service. Through an impromptu visit (the same day) to one such centre we introduced ourselves to the manager (labelled practitioner A), and explained the aims of the project to reach and engage excluded groups and to develop more holistic understanding of the population. This opened up three immediate opportunities.

Firstly the manager (who welcomed the approach and involvement in a learning project) agreed to a later interview. During this interview A gave an evidence-based interpretation (that we were previously unaware of) of the current situation with respect to unemployment in the area, and in particular on the changing circumstances of youth, with a particularly informative and authoritative account of the impacts of national government policy in the locality. This was recorded and later transcribed, checked by A, and was thereafter a recorded resource for general use. We gained significant alternative understanding from this encounter alone, but much more followed. Secondly, manager A gave further contacts where we could obtain similar information for another area of the city (practitioner B) and a further contact where we could obtain centralised statistics and interpretation on the whole local population (practitioner C). In both cases (because of the recommendation of A), B and C were both happy to be involved and be interviewed (we found they also welcomed involvement in a learning project). Further data and records of interviews were made and then available as a learning resource to local government. Thirdly, manager A explained that we could be given access to 16 and 17 year olds (we were unaware this was possible) as they came to the employment centre for hardship benefits (thereby being particularly excluded and generally regarded as impossible to reach from the viewpoint within local government). Furthermore manager A offered use of organisational facilities for interviews and focus groups (free of charge) and A instructed staff to steer *all* young people towards us when we were there (we then offered modest incentives for participating on the trials). Around twenty young people on hardship benefits were accessed and interviewed in a two-day period in this way. We set

up a further focus group session by asking the first group of young people to mention a future date to friends and a further session occurred. So from one practitioner contact, we developed specialised evidence-based recorded knowledge of the locality and the lives of unemployed 16 and 17 year olds on hardship benefits, several additional and valuable practitioner contacts to develop this understanding, and access and engagement of a significant fraction of the total number of young people attending the employment centre (and therefore in that area). This process was not pre-planned nor managed; yet it was quick, informative, productive, and developed networks, delivering qualitative data, and engaging external practitioners in a more significant meaningful way than the normal meeting and consultation processes.

In addition to the outcomes just outlined the network developed through questioning interviewees on their biographies. For instance, during the interviews (and trials of new methods discussed in more detail in a later section) in the employment centre, we asked young people about their areas, their lives, their social networks and biographies. During this we heard about special schools for excluded pupils and also school-aged mothers (we had previously been unaware of). This then prompted us to explore earlier stages of exclusion. We approached the heads of both special schools (practitioners D and E). In both cases (once again) the practitioners gave interviews, which produced evidence-based interpretations of exclusions, they introduced us to further contacts, they explained they could help us access further excluded young people, and offered use of facilities to do so. Almost 30 or so young women were interviewed, representing the majority of school-aged mothers in the whole city.

Example 2: Networks and engagement of mainstream pupils

Young people had been generally defined as excluded (in the sense of not participating in local government decision making). The learning team therefore sought to reach and engage mainstream pupils also in these trials (and to test out the methods with those groups also). Through contact with the Local Education Authority, it was found that there was a schools citizenship co-ordinator, who was responsible for the co-ordination of citizenship classes and teachers across the schools (citizenship was being introduced as part of the curriculum during this project). It was envisaged that by reaching the citizenship classes, the pupils could be involved in considering and discussing local issues, and that this might encourage citizenship thinking based upon local evidence. Through the citizenship co-ordinator the team were able to contact the citizenship teachers (and head teachers) in secondary schools. One of the citizenship teachers agreed to trial the approach with a class of pupils. These pupils were engaged using the same methods as the school-excluded young people. It was found that the approach and methods stimulated debate and produced data (which in principle could have

been collected over all schools through citzenship classes). In addition the head teacher of a school participated in an interview, and (once again) was able to provide an evidence-based perspective to complement the viewpoints given in classes. Once the utilisation of practitioner networks had again led to networks and engagement of young people.

Other examples could be mentioned (for example the police and probationary practitioners) and trials within the project suggested such approaches would also have valuable and productive outcomes. The flexible development of contact-investigation-new contact cycles with and through practitioners gave access, evidence (quantitative and qualitative), and interpretations of circumstances from the viewpoints of both informed practitioners and excluded youth. This was achieved with modest investment of time, recorded interviews were transcribed and this produced a potentially accumulating research and network resource for further reference and development.

In all cases it was found that the city practitioners and practitioners constituted an under-utilised city resource, who often had not been approached by local government officers and managers. It was found that in general practitioners expressed a feeling of exclusion of *themselves* from local government development of understanding. This process is distinguished from 'partnership working' which practitioners had experience of but which they regarded as relatively superficial in learning terms (as meetings were aimed at agreeing decisions, and partnerships approaches to action or funding). Practitioners could contribute to the development of understanding related to the communities they worked with however they had had little contact with local government for these reasons (it was also found that external practitioners demonstrated wider knowledge of the local communities).

The practitioners all demonstrated that they were able (and willing) to contribute a great deal more than just understanding on the communities and community features they knew something of. In particular they had access to further relevant information sources and could provide local government with this information. They were all willing, able and enthusiastic for such collective initiatives and volunteered their time to contribute (sometimes more freely than the practitioners within local government). They gave access to other key practitioner stakeholders and sources of understanding. They provided access to hard-to-reach sub-communities (school children, excluded youth, unemployed people, etc). They freely offered use of their organisational resources and facilities to help further understanding. The practitioners were often critical of the existing structures of engagement associated with local government. They also gave 'front line' perspectives (often not accessible to local government officers), and so they were a source of alternative (complementary and

conflicting) interpretations to local and national government understanding, and could comment upon practices and policies from their perspectives.

It was found that the practitioners and practitioners approached were generally excluded from development of local government understanding of the population, and wished to be more involved. This occurred despite organisational partnerships. Some commented that meetings and consultations had occurred but these were not associated with mutual learning events. Without exception no practitioner had been approached by local government to gain access to the excluded groups of interest, and no local government investigations of their viewpoints had occurred through these practitioners.

8.3 Current Understanding: Data, Knowledge, and Limitations

The understanding of excluded groups is often given as an example of a current weakness and gap in understanding requiring attention. The understanding of excluded groups is believed to present special challenges associated with: difficulties in reaching these groups, assumed apathy or disinterest in involvement, and lack of methods, processes, and networks to effectively reach and engage them.

Understanding of excluded groups comes primarily not through contact with them, nor practitioners working with them, and therefore it may arise through quantitative statistics or from empathetic understanding or perhaps simply from adopting the understanding of others.

In particular excluded groups are not involved in informing policies and decisions, they are not involved in communicating understanding of their lives to policy makers, and they are not involved in communicating views of the city to inform local government actions on particular city issues. The project further demonstrated that the knowledge of external practitioners is not generally accessed and is therefore a potential resource.

8.4 Context and Goals: Culture, Power, Frames and Aims

This section outlines how the approaches observed can be employed to develop more holistic evidence-based understanding. It also observes how current local government approaches can inadvertently ‘filter-out’ evidence and networks and therefore threaten the development of more holistic evidence based understanding.

The project provided additional operational and potential meanings of holistic and evidence-based, in that: (a) people were asked to give opinions of the city and neighbourhoods in an open-ended way without a pre-defined agenda (b) people were asked about their current and biographical life experiences, social and family networks, and their experiences of organisations, (c) findings were not censored or filtered by researchers - providing a more holistic perspectives on issues, (d) an extended group of stakeholders was contacted in developing these alternative perspectives (both excluded groups and practitioners associated with these groups), (e) an expanded view of issues and their causes and consequences was sought. In each of these respects either evidence was accumulated or the approaches made findings more holistic.

In developing innovative approaches and networks the project highlighted how current local government approaches can filter-out findings and networks and therefore act in opposition to its aims to develop more holistic evidence-based understanding. The following records some of the examples observed.

Example 1: Negativity Filters

While researching teenage pregnancy, truancy, drugs, and youth, examples arose where we found a tendency of interviewed citizen and practitioner participants to focus upon and convey mainly negatives under these themes, but without any balancing mention of positives associated with these themes that these people did in fact hold. For example, those interviewed would offer initial statements and judgements on areas, people, and issues that closely paralleled official versions, yet when questioned more deeply (asking them about their own experiences and beliefs) some of these interviewees would express positive viewpoints which were counter to official versions. Prompted by this the team decided to routinely ask participants for negative and positive viewpoints of issues, areas and people, to capture their actual views of the situation. This was supported by also asking participants about the positive causes and consequences in addition to the (predominantly) negative causes and consequences that had been volunteered. Examples from the project include teenage pregnancy where the consequences included many positives from the viewpoint of the mothers and the practitioners who dealt with them (mothers consciously chose to abandon what they regarded as destructive groups and practices because of their children). Another example was that of drugs use (in some cases youth had made choices to avoid the most dangerous drugs from knowledge and experience of them). Another was crime and group disorder (where membership of the groups provided fun, relief from boredom, and feelings of friendship and security). A table of some of the positive causes and consequences mentioned

by young people is given below. This of course is not comprehensive and others could be added to the list.

Table 3: Positive causes and consequences associated with issues

Feature / Indicator	Some Positive Causes	Some Positive Consequences
Under-age pregnancy and motherhood	Pleasure, satisfaction of natural sexual desires, wish to keep children, maturity	Abandonment of destructive lifestyle, entry into support networks, love for child, maturity, better schooling
Drug use	Pleasure, fun, enjoyment, saving money, removal of pains.	Puts people off through experience, avoidance of perceived dangerous drugs, removal of pains
Group disorder	Belonging, friendship, fun	Learnt independence, rebelliousness,
Truancy	Choice, independence, assertive behaviours.	Control, freedom, less homework, avoidance of boredom and negative self-image

In each of these examples it was found that the expectation of participants and local government practice can interact to give a more negative viewpoint than is the case as understood by citizens and practitioners working closely with those citizens.

Example 2: Power and Preconception Filters

The reporting of such results raised some additional findings on how the development of more holistic and evidence-based understanding can be threatened, which although not widespread, nevertheless suggested that power can obstruct the development of holistic evidence-based understanding.

It had been found that the numbers of school aged mothers in the city was smaller than expected (under 30) and that participants in this study and practitioners associated with this group had argued that these under-age pregnancies had been associated with net positive outcomes and were regarded by participants as a *good* thing contrary to local and national government policies. Counter-arguments included the fact that many young women had taken themselves out of troubled groups and back into school (via the special unit) and consideration of the impacts of their love for their children, whereas without these pregnancies both mothers and practitioners seem to agree that quality of life, education, and association with disruptive or criminal groups, would have been worse than without the these

pregnancies. When a senior figure (within local government management) was informed of this finding they stated they 'could not report that finding' as it would be unacceptable to managers, community, and politicians. When it was stated by the researchers that this suggested a novel understanding extending current views, the 'unrepresentative' size of sample was used as a further reason to dismiss the results. The researchers countered with the fact that most of the school aged mothers in the city had been interviewed as well as the practitioners associated with them, but the value of the finding (being counter to common-sense and current political direction) was still challenged; we were challenging a 'myth' with 'evidence' which was then dismissed. Clearly to have these results more widely discussed may have caused the senior figure difficulties if associated with it. The senior participant was being exclusionary in the development of their own understanding. This demonstrated evidence of power issues obstructing the development of more holistic and evidence-based understanding as well as evidence of exclusion of those practitioner views which are critical of aspects of local and national government policies (as was the case here). This certainly influenced the presentation of the practitioner-researchers (they were either directly or indirectly employed by local government) who then did *not* present other counter-intuitive findings on the positive and accepting viewpoints of drug use as found from interviews with youth *and* with senior police officers. Although impact on policy was not an explicit aim of the project, these examples show how dissemination and development of organisational understanding might be implicitly negotiated to avoid controversy if a single senior figure is managing such projects. As this then excluded the viewpoints and contributions of both citizen and police participants it provides an illustration of how espoused and actual aims of developing more holistic and evidence-based understanding may differ, and how practitioner intelligence and time may be wasted when findings run counter to official preconceptions and policy. There were no mechanisms to record, acknowledge, or discuss these alternative findings within local government.

Example 3: Common Organisational Belief Filters

Another factor associated with local government culture was that several officers, managers, and politicians expressed beliefs on accessing and engaging excluded groups. These beliefs then suggested that no innovative actions should be attempted, and that existing methods remained worthwhile. A number of (stated or inferred) common beliefs and obstacles in engaging excluded groups were noted. In the course of the exclusion projects these beliefs and obstacles were compared with the findings of the exclusion projects.

Table 4: Common organisational beliefs compared with project findings

INTERPRETATION OF COMMON ORGANISATIONAL BELIEFS	RELATED FINDINGS FROM EXCLUSION PROJECTS
Accessibility. Excluded groups are hard to reach, inaccessible, with little systematic infrastructure and process to deliver systematic contact and engage groups	Not as difficult as it might seem; some groups easily accessed with new approaches and networks created. Exclusions come in degrees. Stated belief considers *existing* methods and infrastructure.
Methods. No useful methods to elicit and capture holistic open-ended views of relevance to strategy formulation across groups and communities	New methods can be created, local government officers with researchers did so, and these were successfully tested on several groups
Interest. There would be a lack of interest of the groups in such initiatives; intrinsic barriers to involvement	Not the case. Mixed responses some found it very interesting, others thought it was neither interesting nor boring. Overall sufficient interest can be sustained 1-1.5 hours given modest incentives.
Relevance. Irrelevance of views in a strategic context; qualitative and therefore subjective only.	The issues raised were in fact relevant to strategic levels as well as operational. They sometimes confirmed issues but in general they neither confirmed nor contradicted strategies but refined and complicated them.
Banality and Contention. Work is likely to tell us what we know already or lead to counter-views to those of organisations and mainstream culture	Such studies show balance and diversity. Views agreeing and disagreeing with organisational viewpoints were observed.
Process. No process to deliver, record and develop such understandings in systematic effective and sustained ways.	One can be created, but this requires engagement and learning with external practitioners rather than independent initiatives.
Scale. Too many groups and people to involve, too diverse to be useful to make such efforts worthwhile; unrepresentative findings will follow.	Convergence and stability of views of areas and issues was observed with relatively small numbers of people. A ward has around 10,000 people with perhaps 200 16/17s. By reaching 20 this would be around 10% of the target population which is a highly significant sample for qualitative research purposes.
Resources. The resources in staff time and effort in these approaches more are higher than consultation which is quicker and cheaper.	Consultation does not engage them, nor deliver the same quality nor depth. Understanding has cost implications; but these should compared with alternative approaches and the costs/value of these. Qualitative research also delivers participation of these groups; synergies.
Additional policy and research infrastructure not needed; no additional responsibilities need be assigned; the organisation need not learn from such projects	Interviews and interview-mapping approaches were not adopted. Learning and findings did not change organisational knowledge. There were no links to policy or research or community practitioners interested in these areas. There was no point of contact (no one responsible for developing understanding of excluded groups to report to).

Overall this list of commonly perceived obstacles to reach and involvement of excluded groups, is backward looking and uncreative. It applies to existing networks, methods, and processes, and assumes it will always be so. As noted the exclusion projects found these beliefs to be erroneous and obstacles to be surmountable with modest creative effort, resources, and incentives. Such beliefs and perceived obstacles limit understanding and are accepting of exclusions. Taken together the beliefs, obstacles and findings present some evidence of unintentional *methodological* or *institutionalised* exclusion of these groups (and associated practitioners); they are defined as difficult to reach, but this is related to absence of organisational attempts to develop practitioner networks to help access excluded groups, low resources and no responsibility to do develop this, continuation of ineffective inappropriate engagement methods, with organisationally centred and defined agendas of little interest to the excluded groups. The problem lies with the beliefs and practices within the organisation and not with the young people. These examples again highlight how organisational understanding may reflect the limited interests and restrictive processes of that organisation (or those with power within it). Understandings may be distorted and not reflect the understandings of communities and practitioners outside the organisation. The development of holistic evidence-based understanding is limited by such beliefs and perceived obstacles.

8.5 Developing Understanding: Methods, Processes, and Approaches

This project examined alternative approaches to identify and develop networks to excluded groups (and in the process to external practitioners) and utilised alternative methods to consultation for both citizens and practitioners, which will be discussed.

One of the early findings from the projects to reach excluded groups was that there were no set and maintained networks to reach these groups in a systematic and direct manner from within local government. Existing processes and methods of engagement typically included ward committees and episodic ad hoc community consultation events. However local government stakeholders recognised that existing methods and approaches rarely accessed and engaged excluded groups. As the networks did not exist they had to be created in the course of the project. This project network developed organically and was not defined beforehand. It was found that the development of the practitioner network could positively (and significantly) generate and support development of the community network**.** This approach was much more effective in reaching excluded groups than the open focus event or existing structures (which did not facilitate access to excluded groups). Evidence of the effectiveness of this network development in accessing citizens through the practitioners that

most closely work with such groups, was clearly shown in the numbers and types of citizens it engaged beyond those accessible by conventional local government means.

Once people were identified and engaged through this network development they could participate in the development of understanding through engagement. The project experimented with alternative forms of engagement to those normally used in local government programmes which will be described in more detail below.

Both citizens and external practitioners were engaged in developing understanding of the population. The project used standard semi-structured interview techniques to engage practitioners. These were recorded and transcribed and this produced a qualitative resource (but often mixed with quantitative data also). The citizens were engaged through novel interview-mapping techniques.

In developing understanding of citizens the methods which were found to work best were open ended interviews (without an organisation nor service agenda nor decision led purpose; other than to help develop understanding of their lives and areas). The interviews were recorded in mixed ways; by tape (later transcribed) and using four visual participative mapping methods. Firstly, the social geography of the city, including the sub-ward neighbourhoods of the city. Participants were asked to colour in their home areas, 'similar areas', 'worse areas' and 'better areas'. No definitions of these terms were suggested – that was left to the interviewees. This exercise was followed with questions exploring their map and the issues they raised including why they had coloured as they had, and how they knew what they did. No judgements were made upon them nor their peer groups, but statements counter to existing understanding would be explored to clarify their views. The aim was to begin a dialogue concerning their knowledge of the city and issues within it and what was important to them. Secondly, 'lifeline maps' were created which were simply time-line drawings to help prompt and summarise the biography of an individual from birth to the present (and beyond to include expectations of the future) including notes on their significant major experiences and experiences of organisations (schools, police, social workers, health, employment services etc), the dialogue was also taped, again the interviewer asked for clarifications. The method also provided a longitudinal scan suggesting linkages, causes and consequences. Thirdly, in addition a social network map, which showed the participant at the centre, with closest emotional contacts drawn nearby, and weaker emotional contacts further away (usually showing family and friends), using this map the participants were asked to comment upon these relationships and the people represented, how life was for them, what was good and bad; all to help understand their networks and the influence of these upon the

participant. Finally, taking the issues mentioned in these mapping processes the interviewer attempted to create cause and consequences maps outlining the participants beliefs about links between issues they had mentioned.

The individual citizen interviews demonstrated that qualitative information and insight can be gained in a short time using the above methodology. Participants were generally very open and honest (sometimes covering personal issues, illegalities and prejudices freely). The mixed-method was regarded by the participants and project teams as a good method to get an overview of the city from the views of participants. The interview-mapping process did help identify issues on a geographical and residential basis. Examples included high crime areas; thefts, car crime, young people on the streets, disorder and disruption of local communities, general and racial harassment, lack of care for certain areas, pockets of difficult families, decline of areas, lack of investment to improve accommodation, and troublesome placements by private landlords. It was observed that this approach has the capability to engage diverse geographical communities and groups. Furthermore it has potential to complement the local government GIS mapping approaches which involve quantitative descriptive accounts of the city given on a spatial basis, through the addition of qualitative spatial understanding derived from groups normally excluded from such development processes. Another finding is that this method requires that communities consider their own areas *in relation* to other areas. Therefore it has an additional advantage of self-prioritising the city rather than giving a self-centred bias towards the engaged community or neighbourhood as implicit in current consultation methods. It is based on relative comparisons that automatically give views of neighbouring areas as well as that of the participant. All participating communities could be in principle involved in identifying priorities. It also offers a framework and mechanism to collect together qualitative and quantitative data on a geographical basis. The combination of both approaches is an advantage in that it gives a more detailed and holistic view of sub-communities and of the features most important to members of these sub-communities.

Some more general observations noted across many interviews included the following (taken from field notes at the end of the series of interviews with all excluded groups).

Firstly, the groups of young people demonstrated a good working local knowledge of issues affecting youth and some commonality about key issues, area preferences, and reasoning for these preferences. Reasoning of youth was in some ways subtle and refined in a number of areas that they had experience of and this could inform understanding. Secondly, saturation effects (where after a certain number of interviews the same findings appear to arise) were observed on the agreement of worst and best areas. Major issues were found to be repeated

and agreed upon. These included crime and disorder (with youth as the victims) particularly fighting, attacks, burglaries, gangs, intimidation, and fear of areas. Much of this was attributed to drunkeness and use of aggressive and/or expensive drugs. Thirdly, it was noted that many different organisations might be commented upon by a single participant. The understandings of issues from the viewpoint of excluded groups were relevant to community planning (city council), schools (follow-up), police (disorder), and the employment service (work experience). One outcome of holistic learning is the need for local governance organisations to have a joint system for disseminating this information and developing it further (which is currently not the case). Findings included mixed views and both positive and negative experiences. Fourthly, many issues were raised holistically in that personal, social networks, community, organisations and wider geographical and social issues were recognised to interact. There was therefore potential to link issues, people and organisations.

Additionally**,** the methods gave longitudinal perspectives and they were more holistic in that sense also. One common example noted was the escalating difficulties experienced by some, where there appeared to be connections between early negative teenage experiences of school and the beginning of criminal activities with friends. Some in difficulties had had mixed experiences rather than just bad ones (the problem was not 'school' but particular lessons or particular teachers, and not 'crime' but some aspect of it). Different participants told different stories; some experimented with illegal activities and diverged out of the mainstream, whereas others experimented and still returned to the mainstream (if perhaps at the edges). Organisations played a role in escalating this process in some cases. However it should also be noted that some young people were generally disruptive and some were potentially dangerous requiring practitioner supervision.

This chapter has reported on an innovative project to create networks and new forms of engagement of excluded groups to aid development understanding of the population. The project demonstrated that reaching and engaging certain excluded stakeholder groups was possible, including:

- School-age mothers
- Unemployed 16 and 17 year olds
- School-excluded pupils
- Mainstream pupils

It notes that potential networks to external practitioners are under-utilised and these are also effective in developing networks and engagement of some excluded groups (and particularly young people). An effective approach is the use of a small learning team (in this case including practitioners and an academic action researcher) managed at a distance, practitioner-empowered and flexible, utilising snowballing of networks, with the aim of developing more holistic and evidence-based understanding in general areas of interest. Methods beyond consultation were developed and utilised. In the case of external practitioners use of standard recorded and transcribed interviews can add significantly to the evidence-base on issues and communities. In the case of citizens the combination of interview and mapping techniques (visual, cumulative and participatory) are effective. Use of both practitioner and citizen sources gives a more holistic and evidence-based picture than either would alone. Although such approaches are rich in learning they need to be adapted to ensure embedding in cross-organisational practice to deliver ongoing learning, they need to have some independence from line management to avoid dismissal of oppositional findings, yet they need to be linked into policy research if they are to have impact. It is suggested that organisational practices, aims, and processes, may be inadvertently responsible for filtering-out available views of practitioners and citizens. A summary reminder of the key findings is presented in the following table.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS
Social Exclusion Project: reaching and engaging excluded groups

Stakeholders

Run by a small empowered team; multiple stakeholder organisations and stakeholders not formerly engaged in developing understanding are involved, therefore exclusion of external practitioners from this; wide engagement of excluded groups (particularly young people - excluded and mainstream); methodological engagement of excluded citizens is possible through external practitioners.

Current Understanding

No current understanding from the practitioners and excluded groups reached; no organisational understanding how to best reach and engage practitioners and excluded groups; developed understanding of improved access and engagement; belief that excluded groups were 'hard-to-reach'; project to address this.

Context and Goals

Flexible, organic, managed by practitioners with external academic support and management at-a-distance; action research project but had no impact on local government policy nor practices despite challenges to both; local government power and preconceptions sometimes dismiss knowledge when contrary to official perspectives; more holistic perspective in that citizen focused, including biographical and organisational experiences, lifespan considerations, and geographical areas in relation to each other (interview-mapping methods); more holistic as citizen and practitioner viewpoints combined. Evidence-based in that qualitative evidence was developed on key excluded groups and viewpoints of the city. The project also helps understand exclusion of others from developing understanding.

Developing Understanding

Can improve understanding in the short to medium term; new methods developed giving more holistic qualitative data; qualitative data gathered; separation of external knowledge and policy formation; no central place to store and index qualitative data; systematic learning possible with external stakeholders; enthusiasms of external practitioners for engagement and developing holistic evidence-based understanding; learning not used in policy nor research; capable of developing understanding of communities of interest and identity also; produced (evidence-based) descriptions of the (groups within the) population and also explicit explanations of these relating these to lifespan and contextual issues for instance.

9 SUMMARY AND SYNTHESIS

The case study has drawn upon many perspectives to investigate how local government comes to understand its population, how learning occurs in practice, and how this can be developed to be more holistic and evidence-based. The evidence presented is drawn from activities related to some of the major current themes within local government: social exclusion, regeneration, sustainability, participation, and collaboration in partnerships. It has examined learning from within individual projects and from the viewpoints of different stakeholder groups within local government including researchers, community practitioners, politicians, and managers, and also from the viewpoints of collaborations with external practitioners, academics, and excluded citizens. It includes observations within, and reflection upon, both regular practices and innovative trials. This chapter summarises and synthesises these collected perspectives and findings discussed in earlier chapters:

- Perspectives of National Government (Chapter 1)
- Perspectives from Literature (Chapter 2)
- Perspectives within Local Government (Chapter 4)
- Perspectives of Local Politicians (Chapter 5)
- Perspectives from University Collaborations (Chapter 6)
- Perspectives from Regeneration Teams (Chapter 7)
- Perspectives from Social Exclusion Projects (Chapter 8)

This summary will discuss and triangulate the findings from these different sources, summarise the learning processes that are common, those that have been trialed, and those that are further suggested within the literature.

9.1 Stakeholders and Understanding

In local government the population is understood primarily through the activities, observations, actions and reflections of key internal stakeholder groups that should be involved in the future development of understanding. The 'researchers' (those collecting data), the 'community practitioners' (those in direct contact with the population such as community co-ordinators and teachers), the 'policy staff' (those designing and implementing policies), the managers, and the local politicians. These groups represent a 'first approximation' to the internal stakeholders.

Each stakeholder group brings different approaches to the development of understanding; each uses different methods, has different forms of engagement, and draws upon different sources and perspectives. Developing understanding should utilise and build upon these different approaches. Much of the knowledge outside of the research centres was informal and unrecorded, whereas understanding based on quantitative and geographical understanding is systematically stored in local government and organised primarily in terms of geographical area. Therefore more holistic evidence-based understanding could result by considering the population in other ways (for instance as communities of identity or through qualitative data) and also by recording these understandings. Current understandings can be considered as relatively short-term so more holistic evidence-based understanding would be achieved through the development of longer-term longitudinal perspectives.

Understanding is distributed across the different internal stakeholders but this distributed understanding is fragmented. It is not systematically mixed, integrated nor interactively developed, which would be an alternative route to develop more holistic understanding. Current engagement of stakeholders through meetings and consultation is clearly one way to gain introductory understanding but this kind of activity can be criticised as a method for developing evidence-based understanding. Alternative methods are noted in the literature (and will be summarised at the end of this chapter) and these are recognised as better evidence-based practices. Development and use of mixed qualitative and quantitative data (with parallel improved quantitative analysis and improved qualitative generation recording and analysis) was one recognised approach to develop a more holistic evidence-based understanding.

Key stakeholder exclusions from the process of developing understanding included the community practitioners within local government, external practitioners working within organisations across the city (some directly with communities), and also groups of citizens

(particularly excluded groups and younger people). More holistic evidence-based understanding would result through the involvement of practitioners, youth, and excluded groups in developing this understanding. The weaknesses in current forms of engagement are recognised by practitioners (in local government and outside it) but this does not seem to be recognised nor addressed as an official nor organisational issue or priority. Current participation processes, purposes, and expectations, tend to restrict attention and this restricts the resulting understandings. Processes are directed towards short-term local issues, council operational considerations, identifying quick solutions, acting and to being seen to act, and accessing funding. Partnerships (when organisationally managed) tend to be working partnerships aimed at reaching collaborative agreements and decisions on tasks and actions. More holistic understanding could be developed if partnerships aimed to collectively learn and improve learning.

It was found that no set and maintained networks existed to reach excluded groups in a systematic and direct manner and stakeholders recognised that existing methods rarely accessed new citizen groups (and completely failed to engage excluded groups). Therefore new networks, processes, and methods are needed to both reach excluded groups and to engage them into giving their viewpoints of the circumstances of the city and its population. Closely-managed approaches were observed to be limited and weak in the learning that resulted in comparison with practitioner-empowered projects, whereas practitioner-empowered approaches were weak in delivering policy change or sustained engagement of organisations in comparison with closely-managed projects. Learning is facilitated by management at a distance with practitioners empowered to develop their own understanding, but significant organisational support and policy change is facilitated by close management. This suggest that if learning is to both improve *and* have impact then these learning processes need to begin and end in well-managed systems which link organisations, departments, and policy formation within them. However after set-up and before policy formation, learning should be practitioner-empowered (possibly with external academic input) and managed-at-a-distance to achieve significant improvements in learning. The value of well-managed initial and final phases was demonstrated in the university collaborations (Chapter 6) and the multi-organisational task team (Chapter 7) where managers created working agreements and networks (but were not good models of practitioner nor organisational learning). The value of a practitioner-empowered middle-phase was demonstrated in the researcher-practitioner interactive learning trial (Chapter 4) and in the social exclusion projects (Chapter 8) where practitioners managed their own collective learning (with academic facilitation) but these were not good models of influencing decisions or policy.

Community understandings are regarded as an output of community participation, and therefore politicians, managers, and practitioners saw understanding as being limited by the degree, breadth, depth, purposes, and nature of community participation. All acknowledged that the citizen networks were limited in type and numbers of citizens accessed. However, it was found that engagement of external practitioners greatly facilitated access to excluded groups. This suggests a new approach to the development of networks and involvement of stakeholders which is not yet part of the organisational culture. In this project stakeholder networks developed flexibly, through snowballing using the external practitioner network to access the citizen network, and accumulating depth and breadth as the project 'rolled' through the practitioner and citizen networks. This occurred largely because the local government practitioners undertaking the project sought to improve their holistic and evidence-based understanding, to engage others in this development, and were empowered to develop these networks themselves with freedom and time to do so. This approach was far more effective in reaching excluded groups than open focus group events, committee structures, and ad hoc meetings within the community (which had also been tested and were not successful in accessing excluded groups).

In University collaborations substantive exchange and joint working was one of the aims of the project but this did not significantly happen on local government timescales. Difficulties included the development time for proposals and the research lifecycle. The research councils did not have an accessible route for funding applied projects to be initiated and completed within a year, and developed in each subsequent year. Developing local government understanding should not depend upon external funding but should be resourced as an internal and cross-organisational activity of public sector organisations. The examples of both practitioner-empowered and management-led approaches shows that such projects are easily resourced in terms of the part-time contributions of practitioners, by sharing facilities and resources, and by collaborative working. Removing the need to develop additional funding frees up the practitioners to collaboratively learn.

It was also recognised that all stakeholders might agree with the descriptive data but different interpretations and values may lead to very different conclusions concerning action. The different value systems would lead to different kinds of conclusions about the best actions from those that local government produce. There will be a necessary political process for reaching agreement on what should be done in some cases. Development of more holistic understanding would require consideration of stakeholder interpretations and values (and this would require reflexivity within learning process).

Learning is not maintained nor systematically developed as an ongoing process. Learning within stakeholder groups is not generally an organisational (nor group) requirement and is left to the voluntary efforts of individuals. Learning within these stakeholder groups occurs informally in the course of achieving other tasks (rather than as a task in itself). Learning processes operating within and across stakeholder groups are also informal episodic events rather than ongoing processes (being mostly reactive or occurring as a by-product of other aims). A proactive approach involving learning process would be an alternative way to develop understanding.

9.2 Holistic and Evidence-Based Understanding

It was noted that although explicit records are created and communicated, these tended to be of proceedings, decisions, agreements, actions, plans and policies. The developing background understandings of the population were generally not made explicit and recorded for others. Recorded understandings mainly concerned some local issue and what was to be done about it. It seems that the recorded understanding of the complexity of issues, or why these issues arose, or analyses of alternative scenarios underlying interventions, or balancing participant viewpoints with those of opposing sub-communities, were relatively rare. Generally there is no explicit summary or recording of the informal and qualitative understandings relating to the population. However, the absence of explicit recording of qualitative understandings was not necessarily seen as a problem or issue; some felt that qualitative understanding might be intrinsically inaccessible to others as it 'could not be written down'. It is suggested that the absence of recorded current understanding is a far reaching and significant obstacle in developing that understanding.

In local government practices more holistic and evidence-based understanding was observed to develop in two different ways; firstly through increased stakeholder networks and collaborations (particularly in developing cross-organisational management and action-focused linkage) and secondly though the collection and sharing of multi-layered quantitative data sets. Although these approaches are clearly more holistic and include the development of an evidence-base, the meaning of 'holistic and evidence-based' in local government seems to be largely constrained to the creation of broader partnerships and the collection of multiple quantitative data sets across departments and organisations. Broadened and alternative interpretations of holistic and evidence-based understanding are possible and these will stimulate alternative learning approaches. This broadening will be covered in more detail in the discussion.

It was found that understanding (and many of the documents embodying understanding of the population) typically gave descriptions in terms of facts and comparisons between different facts in different places and at different times. But the development of understanding effectively halted at the stage where it could describe and compare different communities in terms of different features. It was then left to others to explain, interpret, and propose policies to influence these features. What had not been developed were adequate explicit and recorded explanations and interpretations of the situation. It is rare that staff record or develop implicit explanations and interpretations available: of how population features were linked or how communities came to be the way they were, or of the links between regularities, and causal mechanisms and contexts. This suggests more holistic evidence-based understanding should explicitly record, interpret, and explain what descriptions actually represent and how they might be inter-related to each other or to other factors. Understanding should include (adequately, explicitly) recorded explanations and interpretations of how proposed changes were expected to lead to desired outcomes. It should create or test alternative explanations against the evidence-basis.

In the additional trials more holistic and evidence-based understanding was developed through deeper engagement of practitioners (Chapter 4 and 8) and politicians (Chapter 5) previously uninvolved, the use of alternative methods and methodologies, the recording and analysis of qualitative data gathered, and through learning interactions between different stakeholder groups (researchers and community practitioners) with different understandings, different data, and different perspectives on the population.

The literature suggests many ways in which understanding can be more evidence-based (in terms of additional and improved research methods and methodologies (e.g. May 2001) and there are many writings that explicitly or implicitly suggest ways to make understanding more holistic.

Berger's ideas discussed in Chapter 2 (for instance Berger 1963, 1975) give alternative perspectives on understanding the population - these perspectives are generally broader and deeper than those found in local government literature and therefore they can be taken as indications of what 'more holistic understanding' might entail, particularly when phrased in evidence-based terms. This literature suggests practical approaches: the consideration of multiple realities of different stakeholders, the integration of data and interpretative modes of understanding (quantitative research and experience); viewing the whole system and asking how it works (larger contexts considered); and including identification and examination of

competing interpretations and vantage points (alternatives). It suggests a need to consider conscious and unconscious effects of social processes, unintended and unforeseen consequences, understanding within and outside awareness, and the manifest and latent function of initiatives. All of which require scepticism in relation to interpretations, biographies, and the generation of new perspectives. It particularly urges caution when dealing with issues of respectability (an issue in local government) and ideology (not an issue as noted in the study). It suggests consideration of the whole system including the historical and social context, and social controls, systems and structures having impact on the population. Finally sociological perspectives suggest that the development of theory is a central component in the development of understanding (for instance how regularities, mechanisms, and context interact). These perspective will be of use in considering the implications of the case study findings, and through theoretical comparison of how local government approaches development of understanding.

9.3 Existing Learning Approaches

In this case study the different learning processes operating in local government have been considered. In this summary the regular approaches used in developing local government understanding are noted, the alternative learning trials observed are recorded, and the additional literature perspectives on learning approaches noted in the literature are given.

Current learning approaches

The most common recurring approaches to develop understanding of the population were noted in Chapter 4:

- Meetings
- Consultations
- Performance management
- In-house surveys
- Quantitative data collection and sharing
- Mixed scanning

Local government meetings and consultation mechanisms were observed throughout the case study and are clearly effective mechanisms for introductions, engaging stakeholders, taking decisions, deciding actions, and they also have some potential for sharing and discussing

information. Meetings were geared towards, actions, decisions, and mutual benefits (or exchange of local knowledge to support these) and not towards mutual enlightenment of participants nor the ongoing development of holistic evidence-based understanding nor the development of improved and embedded learning processes. Consultations were usually with a limited group of people or within existing infrastructure and organisations. Meetings and consultations are the primary ways in which qualitative and localised understanding of the population is developed (directly or through representatives and practitioners). However they are observed to be weak in delivering learning beyond surface levels, and although they may be noted they are rarely recorded and transcribed as potential qualitative data. Performance management mechanisms are related to targets set by local and national government and data is then collected and recorded on key measures to measure progress towards these targets (examples include educational achievement, truancy, crime and safety, and health targets). This information often had a longitudinal element in terms of change in indicators. Surveys are relatively infrequent and are mostly service-focused. The collection of additional quantitative data and sharing of this generally gave cross-sectional snapshots of the population and is developing with GIS presentation and organisational data sharing. Mixed scanning methods are the most common in local government; they pragmatically utilise all that is easily available and quickly from multiple sources. They can give an introductory overview and understanding of an issue or a community or a process of interest and this provides an initial holistic and evidence-based understanding of a situation. However, although this approach is widespread, it is rarely systematically recorded or subsequently developed. In summary, there are several approaches utilised to learn about the population, however it is argued here that these are not adequate to develop holistic and evidence-based understanding.

Need for new learning approaches

There was an acknowledged and recognised need for more effective learning methods and processes by all participants in this study, so this suggests the issue is a systemic one; all agree but little changes. It suggests that methods and processes might be imported as many methods and processes have been identified as not being ever used in local government, and these present opportunities for development (see Appendix 4). However this does not simply imply that academic methods should be adopted (the practitioners could easily adopt some of these, and their current neglect limits data generated and investigated, however others are not compatible with local government aims). It does imply that new approaches trialed during the case study and reported here (Chapters 4-8) could be further developed, and that new methods and processes should be developed. Practitioners generally raised or recognised this need for

new learning methods; different from both current local government and academic approaches. Recommendations should emerge from their input to this study, which empower practitioners and which utilise and develop their skills, knowledge, and aptitudes. New methods and processes should offer some opportunity to address multiple issues and obstacles to learning simultaneously, while engaging and motivating all stakeholders, and improving upon current methods of developing understanding in a local government environment.

9.4 Emerging Learning Approaches

In addition to the common approaches noted within the local authority in the previous section a number of alternative learning processes have been observed in trials. The case study has considered these in some detail in each chapter, but overall it is noted that all are limited in what they achieve in developing more holistic evidence-based understanding. However, these approaches represent initial approaches which have the potential for further development in the future. So it will be worthwhile to note them, together with their comparative merits and limitations.

- Internal Practitioner and Researcher Interactive Learning
- University-Government Collaborations
- Multi-Organisational Task Team
- Practitioner and Stakeholder Snowballing
- Excluded Youth Mapping-Interviews
- Web-based learning and evaluation surveys

No single trial approach can be said to be entirely successful in developing holistic evidence-based understanding and each should be regarded as a developing form. However some offer significant advantages over current learning approaches and the experiences and lessons learned are (potentially) valuable organisational assets that could in principle enable development of more satisfactory learning models.

Research and practitioner interaction trials are models of learning occurring between those with quantitative overview knowledge of the population and those with local experiential knowledge in open and unofficial processes. The interactions stimulate thought, interpretations of data, and further investigations to help improve understanding, and they also create a mechanisms for engaging practitioners, while recognising and developing their understanding. However they require support in terms of time and in empowering

practitioners to freely developing their understanding. Such interactions could be developed within and across organisations. However such initiatives have been weak in three respects that they need management agreement to start and maintain them (and can easily be disturbed or dropped by management), they have not recorded their learning for later development, and they have had no influence upon management or policy decisions.

University collaborations can be useful but perhaps not as much as might initially be envisaged nor in the most obvious ways. Funding constraints limit significant substantive knowledge development, development time-scales are generally beyond local government interests, and even if successful the knowledge produced would not be retained within the organisation but be dependent upon external stakeholders and funders so this may not be the best approach. However practitioners and stakeholders already possess knowledge and data, other practitioners could develop data from their work and experiences but this is not widely recognised in the organisation. Academics can bring methodological, theoretical, and broader substantive knowledge into the organisation in critical and constructive interactions with practitioners. So university collaborations may be more effective in developing holistic evidence-based understanding through the development of practitioners techniques to generate, analyse, and present qualitative data. They may also be useful in identifying background literature and in considering theoretical perspectives.

The multi-organisational task team is a model for collective decisions, actions, agreements to share and assemble data, and possible associated policy development following introductory learning but it is limited in what it can achieve in developing holistic evidence-based understanding and learning as it does not utilise or embed learning processes and culture, it treats learning as linear and episodic to precede actions, and it neglects many potential sources, perspectives and learning opportunities. The managed task team is useful developing the infrastructure and agreements, and in kick-starting the learning, but it is weak in learning and developing understanding beyond quantitative data and surface consultations. However it may be also a useful model for receiving and absorbing learning into cross-organisational policies.

Stakeholder snowballing (throughout the networks of practitioners) is a model for engagement of practitioners beyond surface consultations and also the production of qualitative data to act as a learning resource, it further addresses participation of practitioners with front-line experience of issues and policies of potential value in evaluation of policies as espoused by national government. However it did not effectively link back into organisational learning, nor policy and management understanding, and the evidence-produced was

potentially dismissed as being critical of governance and individual understandings. This could be overcome by making resulting understanding available for all to view and develop critically or constructively.

Citizen snowballing and interview-mapping approach, is a model for engaging excluded groups and particularly youth. This develops more holistic evidence-based understanding of their lives, neighbourhoods, and viewpoints, and provides a counterbalance to the current understandings derived from those involved in existing participation mechanisms. It provides a qualitative resources and engages the citizens through participative visual mapping techniques, and these can be created in map formats to complement (or contradict) the quantitative GIS mapping processes developing at a pace in local governance. However the model requires recognition of the contribution and work of citizens in such cases and modest incentives and rewards. It requires the organisation to utilise and embed such models. It further needs storage analysis and integration of the qualitative data produced, and communication of the alternative viewpoints to those in power who then must act on a more balanced view of a situation which perhaps seems simpler without such insights. Each of these models (and those others listed but not discussed in detail here) can be developed upon the trials that have already occurred.

Web-based learning and evaluation methods were also trialed. These have potential to access and interconnect many organisational stakeholders (within and outside local government). Issues can be democratically agreed, learning can occur through exchange of information, surveys and evaluations of policy initiatives are possible over a distributed network.

9.5 Further approaches suggested from the Literature

The previous two sections have noted common learning approaches in use, and also the trial approaches attempted. In addition to these, the academic literature (Chapter 2) presents further leaning approaches for consideration in developing understanding:

- Academic approaches (formal epistemologies, methodologies, and methods)
- External Research Utilisation and Dissemination (of substantive research)
- Technical Rationality (two communities; practice applying research)
- In-House and Commissioned Research (applied and evaluation research)
- Technical Learning (improved data development & information flows)
- Social Learning (collective formal and informal processes)
- Reflective Practice and Action Research (real time improvement and influence)
- Cross-Organisational Learning (collective co-inquiry of reflective teams over time)
- Individual or Social Cognition, Perception and Memory (psychology of learning)

These will each be briefly discussed in relation to current, trial, and possible future approaches to develop organisational learning.

Academic approaches include insights from social constructionist and realist positions, they discuss the qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodologies, and provide numerous methods of use in generating and evidence-base. Academic method associated with qualitative and participatory research may be particularly relevant in local government.

Utilisation of external research and knowledge is discussed by Rothmans' (1980) work and this embodies the 'two communities' model of producers of knowledge (researchers) and users of knowledge (appliers). He concludes that when the researchers and appliers are closely linked (e.g. through in-house or commissioned research) research is more likely to have impact. This suggests academic (or local government) research should be located within local government at the place where it is expected to have most impact. Percy-Smith *et al, (*2002), investigated th**e** impact of research on policy and practice in local government. The study showed that external university research usually has little impact, and only certain organisations have significant dissemination impact besides the work of the local authority itself. This is relevant in that the actual potential for developing holistic understanding is huge (all the human sciences literature for instance) but in practice its impact is likely to be

negligible (at least in the current situational and historical context). In addition it was found that access to research outputs by front-line staff is generally poor, with few formal mechanisms in place. It also found research generated by the local authority was more likely to be disseminated to members, than was external. (This suggests learning should be conducted (not commissioned) by local government.) However dissemination was often reliant on individuals and could be 'hit and miss'. It found that many authorities (including that of the case study) acted predominantly in reactive mode and carried out most of the work in-house. As reactive modes of learning are by definition under time pressures (to find out now) it is clear that such approaches to learning will be sub-optimal. Proactive modes of learning would represent a different approach to organisational learning which could achieve more holistic and evidence-based understanding with the additional time available. It was also found that research was often used to support a pre-existing viewpoint and was unlikely to drive policy change. Policy change was found to arise from national government priorities, legislation, local issues, needs and politics, and budgetary pressures; demonstrating a top-down approach. Locally generated research was more likely to influence policy. Officers felt research was not used by members in forming policy. The need for quick wins, and the speed of policy change, meant often that academic time-scales were not appropriate, as they would be out-dated before complete. All of these points support, and are supported by, the findings of the case study. Furthermore they suggest how not to develop understanding, and how this may be done better.

Easterby-Smith, Burgoyne, & Araujo, (1999), discuss the technical and the social models of organisational learning. In the technical approach, organisational learning is conceptualised in terms of information processing, interpretation, and responses to this within the organisation. This was the core approach within the multi-organisational regeneration team. In the social approach, the effects of social interactions are brought to the forefront. Here there is recognition of the socialisation of newcomers, of tacit knowledge and embodied forms of learning; learning from each other and from experience, emulation, and in situated practice. Understanding may not be recorded, nor held by individuals, but nevertheless exists across the community as a whole, and this influences knowledge and practices. With this perspective some argue that current models of organisational and practitioner learning require re-examination (Argyris, 1986). These points also support, and are supported by, the case study where it was clear within local government that social models of learning were not developed but technical models were. Where trials were conducted (practitioner researcher and social exclusion projects) these were successful and they embodied social learning rather than technical. Also social learning has the potential to develop mixed data (both qualitative and quantitative) when involving practitioners and researchers whereas technical learning tends to

support quantitative data approaches. By developing social learning models in local government this will unleash some of the unused potential and give more balanced (holistic) understanding.

Argyris & Schon, (1974), attempt to understand features of human understanding underlying *action* in social systems such as organisations. They argue that practitioner knowledge is often of a different quality to that of the knowledge within the social sciences. Integration of thought and action is central and therefore an alternative perspective to that of traditional academic learning. They argue that the traditional research approach does not work well with real-time issues, and therefore can not contribute to the study of effective action in such cases, as in practice people need to become competent at simultaneously taking action *and* reflecting upon this to learn from it. They therefore provide one perspective on how understanding might be developed within local government by the practitioners within it and also for the stakeholders within other organisations and within the many partnerships associated with local government. They claim that such situations can be best considered through a conceptual framework which analyses the 'theories of action' that are developed and applied by practitioners in the course of their work. They consider these theories of action, how they are formed, how they change, and in what ways they can be considered adequate or inadequate. These theories are used for explanation, prediction, and control, or to predict or explain a persons' behaviour by attributing to that person a theory of action. This is relevant in that practice is considered as a sequence of actions undertaken by practitioners to serve others. In the case study it did not appear that practitioners within normal local government processes were acting (or were encouraged to act) as Argyris and Schon state, but in the trials the practitioners did function as reflective practitioners. This suggests that the reflective practitioner model offers potential as an aspiration, Furthermore this viewpoint is the most congruent with actual and potential practices and therefore it could be embedded into new learning processes.

Development of this work (Argyris, Putnam, McLain Smith, 1987) led to the concept of 'action science' where the idea of theories in action is developed and learning is promoted for action and change, but which distinguishes the methods and results of science and action science. Once again the perspective is one that blurs the boundaries between practitioner and researcher. Essentially their approach requires the promotion of reflection and experimentation, expansion and deepening of learning, and the ability to develop new frames of reference. Once again the literature advises a new approach engaging practitioners in learning *as* researchers, and the need to develop methods that question views of the social world, through learning. This approach is supported by, and supports, the findings of the case

study which argues that the practitioners are not currently regarded as researchers able to generate new and valid knowledge and learning, but that this is one way in which more holistic and evidence-based understanding could be developed.

Learning across organisational boundaries is considered by Dixon (1994:114). Organisations are not simply the sum of members' individual competence but there is also competence and knowledge that is a product of the collective. An organisation's ability to be effective is limited by its assumptions, yet groups are often unaware of the assumptions. Learning across organisations is most effective when all parties are in a co-learning role. The world is regarded as knowable by ordinary people, and change happens over months so learning also needs to occur over similar periods. Learning is not only planning to act but implementing. Reflecting on the implementation and re-planning are also regarded as aspects of learning. This is relevant to the research question in that development of holistic understanding will (necessarily) include learning across organisational boundaries. It was found in the case study that external collaboration activity did not generally lead to co-learning activity, nor did learning readily occur across all phases as Dixon argues should be the case. This approach supports the need identified in this case study for the development of co-learning processes to act across organisations. The social exclusion projects gave one example of how this might be achieved, and the researcher-practitioner interaction trials provide another.

Finally, the perspectives from psychology give additional insights relevant to the development of improved understanding (Meil, Pheonix, & Thomas, Vol 2, 2002). Memory (and learning) is improved when: it is written down, it is reorganised, it is processed in more depth, it is given meaning, it is linked to other meanings, learning is spaced out as a process rather than a concentrated event, categories are clustered rather than random, learning is rehearsed, context is reported, alternative perspectives are considered, learning is collectively constructed and recalled, thereby filling gaps and negotiating details. It is noted that such psychological perspectives did not appear to be utilised in the local authority case, and practices actively worked against psychological guidance on good practice for improving learning. Discussions around cognitive limitations and possible distortions were not observed, practitioners often worked for long periods upon multiple (and rapidly changing) tasks without individual or collective reflection periods, memory and learning was not aided by recording nor reorganisation and engagement with current understandings, learning was not rehearsed, learning was most often explicitly unattended to or if explicit episodic rather than regarded as a process, it was time-limited which did not encourage consideration of alternative perspectives context nor meetings, and there were no collective learning processes to enable collective constructions and negotiation of details. This perspective suggests ways

to practically improve understanding and learning (and that this will result if it is recorded, engaged with in social settings, rehearsed and presented for development) which should be incorporated in organisational recommendations to improve understanding.

Although the academic literature has given many insights into the development of holistic evidence-based understanding there is one further point to be made in considering it in overview. Firstly, no single reference was found which indicated how holistic evidence-based understanding of the population could be developed within and across local governance organisations. References which did refer to holistic or evidence-based approaches focused exclusively upon joined-up working and action on issues with multiple stakeholders but they did not consider the learning approaches used nor possible. Secondly, the organisational and practitioner perspectives also discuss learning practices but they do not apply these to the goal of developing holistic evidence-based understanding of a population through inter- and intra-organisational learning. Thirdly, the academic literature on research methods explicitly deals with evidence-based understanding, but does not view this from a multiple stakeholder perspective (research is typically conducted by academic research individuals or teams). The nearest academic perspective is that of multiple investigators or evaluators (or investigator triangulation). Finally the literature on developing practitioner knowledge (the reflective practitioner and action science) examines learning from practitioner viewpoints, but does not have the aim of developing holistic understanding and did not discuss what this might mean (which entails social cross-organisational processes and methods to develop broader perspectives on a situation). So there are few (if any) directly relevant literature perspectives to be drawn upon by local government politicians, managers, and officers, to identify the issues in advance and help develop holistic evidence-based understanding of a population. This case study attempts to contribute some evidence-based suggestions to this.

In summarising the suggestions within of the literature, it can be said that this does not present a single approach which will achieve the aim, but it does offer multiple approaches each offering a *partial* contribution to the aims. Each of the following literature recommendations offer a direction not currently observed within the case study. Firstly, academic methodologies and methods can help develop qualitative data through qualitative methods and methodologies (participant observation and action research in particular) and the academic approaches aid understanding through notions of constructivist reflexivity and realist explanation. Secondly, the literature recommends proactive learning within local government rather than dissemination of external findings which have little impact. Thirdly, learning should occur by social (as well as technical) approaches through interactions of practitioners and other stakeholders. Fourthly, new learning processes should blur boundaries

between practice and research. A more appropriate model is that of reflective practitioners engaged in action research and participant evaluations; learning while doing and acting. Fifthly, cross-organisational collaborations should embed co-learning processes acting over periods of change, rather than as episodic or linear processes. Finally, learning needs to be a process of engagement, of reorganisation, of deeper processing, interpreted, explained, given meaning, collectively constructed, rehearsed, and recalled, and written down to aid understanding and development. It is noted here that each of these key literature points has been supported by, and supports some the key findings of the case study lending additional support to both.

This summary chapter has synthesised the findings across projects and stakeholders to give triangulated perspectives on the different stakeholders associated with the development of understanding and the ways in which current understanding and practices will impede the development of holistic evidence-based understanding. The existing, experimental, and literature approaches to learning are then compiled and findings summarised. In the following chapters the situation in local government will be discussed, and conclusions will be given, leading to practical recommendations for change.

PART 3

TOWARDS HOLISTIC EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING

DISCUSSION CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

10 DISCUSSION

10.1 Re-Examining the Issues

The summary of findings presents a picture of the weaknesses in current understanding. It draws upon observations of many different learning approaches. It is noted that no single approach can be regarded as currently adequate as each has limitations. It will be useful to consider why these were not entirely successful before moving on to suggest improvements.

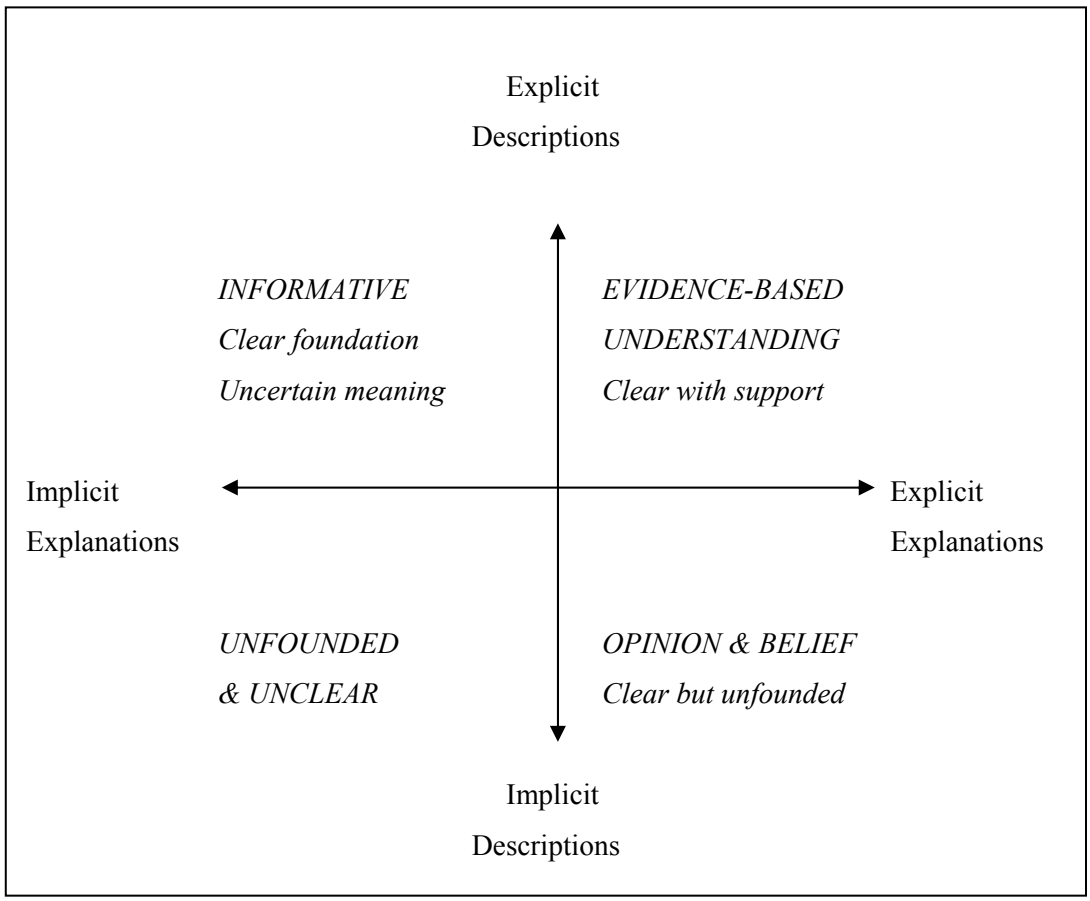
Modes of Description vs Explanation and Interpretation

It was found that understanding typically employed descriptions in terms of facts and comparisons between different facts in different places and at different times. It did not involve explicit explanations or interpretations. It was observed when this was encountered that this produced a feeling that we did not really *understand* the situation. On further reflection some key differences and implications between descriptive and explanatory explanations were noted and these are elaborated in the following table.

Development of Descriptive (and Comparative) Understandings	**Development of Explanatory or Interpretative Understandings**
Analytical, comparisons, records events data and trends	Synthetic, interpretative, links events data and trends
Systematic search to obtain data	Creative insight encompassing data
Unique data sets	Multiple alternatives possible
Leads to 'objective' understanding and unique understanding	Leads to 'subjective' understandings and alternative understandings
A mainstream activity of information practitioners	A mainstream activity of political and community representatives
Largely right or wrong	Inadequate/adequate, many equally valid explanations at different levels
More 'Objective'	More 'Subjective'
Agreements	Alternatives
Answers to what who where and when?	Answers to why and how and what next?
More about past and present, interpolations and extrapolations	Links past present and future, external links and expectations
Tend to identify deliver and refine comparisons, issues and priorities, and correlations	Tend to identify and deliver refine cause and consequences, possible interventions/expectations
Provides examples and illustrations of features	Provides overall meaning of features
Often associated with facts, evidence-basis	Meaning and interpretation of evidence-basis
How things are or have been	How things might or could be
Accumulating	Generating

For these reasons it is suggested that the distinction between these *descriptive* and *explanatory* understandings is an important distinction to make in developing understandings**.**

There are significant implications for developing understanding of the population and for learning. Where there is an absence of explanatory understandings we can not improve them or suggest and test alternatives. It may be that explicit explanatory understandings are the necessary seeds for improving and developing understandings. Descriptive understandings may be generally agreed but these can be often be explained in different ways. Two or more different explanations may fit the evidence-basis and they may be complementary (particularly when they offer explanations from different levels) or they may be contradictory. We need to be able to tolerate and explore all competing explanatory understandings. Another important implication is that whereas descriptive understandings are often used to identify issues and priorities, explanatory understandings tend to underpin expectations and therefore interventions. This makes the development of explanatory understandings particularly important in the local government context. Both aspects of understanding are needed in practice. These different cases are summarised in the following figure.



By making understandings explicit they become more credible and can be developed. Non-explicit understandings may give the impressions (possibly justified) that there is no

understanding to be found. Recording explicit understandings increases transparency and shows a willingness to develop them with others. Whereas the absence of explicit recorded understanding is more likely to lead to misunderstandings and might be taken to indicate an unwillingness to engage with others. This also suggests that the development of understandings might naturally support the developing participation and democratic modernisation agendas. The separation of descriptive understanding (common with researchers) and explanatory understanding (more common with practitioners) is viewed a limiting factor in the development of more holistic evidence based understanding.

Modes of Understanding

When considering how different local government stakeholders develop more holistic evidence-based understanding it is noted that this depends upon which stakeholder group is leading the development, and in particular what it is that stakeholder group *already* do.

Understanding can be considered as developing through at least three distinct 'modes', that were noted in the study. These are two data modes ('quantitative' and 'qualitative') and one 'implicit-theoretical' mode. In practice these are mixed (and all can be utilised in 'mixed-scanning) but the distinction between them is useful in representing an approximation to the situation observed. These different modes correspond approximately to the practices of different key stakeholder groups.

The main data mode is the quantitative mode where quantitative data is gathered and generated. This is the dominant mode used by local government researchers. Quantitative data is generally accepted throughout the authority as 'evidence'. Researchers aspire to objectivity and therefore do little interpretation of the data themselves (which is then left to others). Researchers are therefore mainly collectors and presenters of quantitative data and do not generally 'research' in the academic sense (of formulating and investigating research questions). Analysis is primarily exploratory graphical and descriptive. Although researchers are often trained in quantitative techniques there is little in-depth statistical analysis or interpretation. Quantitative data is stored and managed and this forms an accumulating organisational resource. The secondary data mode is mostly qualitative. This mode is the dominant mode utilised by the community practitioners but it is not widely utilised (or accepted) by others as valid 'evidence' and practitioners themselves hesitate to describe their knowledge as data. In this mode experiences and observations at localised levels underpin the understanding, coupled with qualitative data arising from consultation events or contact (informal unstructured focus groups and discussions). Practitioners are often not trained in

qualitative data methods and analysis, nor is this expected of them. Being qualitative the data is interpreted by practitioners, but they realise that alternative interpretations are possible and could be considered. Qualitative data is not widely used and is neither stored nor managed. The third mode is an 'implicit-theoretical[3]' mode where policy, political, or management decisions are made on the basis of understanding from prior experience, personal judgements, or are adopted from those in national policies. Here the understanding is often implicit and is rarely recorded. It is not developed in any systematic learning processes. It may be informed by quantitative and qualitative data, or it may simply assume the underlying justification and validity has been worked through at national level (or that it is self-evident).

Of the three modes noted the 'implicit-theoretical' is most associated with those in power and those responsible for management and policies, and this mode can over-ride the indications from other modes. The data modes may be subservient to this (and data may be sought to support the implicit-theoretical understanding) or data modes may stimulate development of new implicit-theoretical perspectives. Quantitative data is more widely regarded as evidence than is qualitative data (which is collected analysed and regarded superficially). The quantitative mode is most respected and institutionalised; the qualitative mode is least developed and is poorly regarded as evidence. The different modes could each be developed separately and independently, and can also be developed through mixing and through interaction. The quantitative mode is developed more systematically, whereas the implicit-theoretical and qualitative modes are modified through experience. Mixing and interaction of these modes would be one approach to holistic learning, and the development and mixing of the data modes leads to evidence-based understanding. However current structures and practices within local government favour separated development focused primarily upon the quantitative mode, or mixed scanning approaches which simply add the modes together without developing them. *Interactive* mixed *development* of these modes points to one way in which more holistic evidence-based understanding and learning could occur.

[3] this is a term constructed by the author and is not taken from the literature

Modes of Management: Practitioners or Managers?

In addition to the way understanding is routinely developed in local government there were new approaches trialed and new models of learning created and identified. The new approaches observed can be divided into two camps; those that were 'organisationally managed' (University collaborations, Multi-Organisational Regeneration teams) and those which were 'practitioner empowered' (Research-Practitioner Trials, Social Exclusion Projects). It has been noted that although each has shown potential, and each can be developed, but each has limitations. In the 'managed' projects learning was weak but the resulting actions and organisational embedding of these were strong. Learning was weak primarily due to external time and task pressures. In empowered projects the learning was strong but the actions and organisational embedding was weak. Learning was strong as learning was the aim of the project, it was not started and stopped a time-limited series of tasks. Clearly the aim of developing holistic evidence-based understanding requires that learning should be strong, but the purpose of this learning is to improve understanding underlying actions and policies, and therefore the potential for action and embedding within the organisation must also be strong. New learning processes must be created which utilise and embody both strengths. In the next section the limitations noted in the trials will be reflected upon and an interpretation on the underlying reasons for these limitations will be considered.

Modes of Change: New Partnerships and Old Practices

In considering those new approaches that were 'organisationally managed' (when viewed from afar) it appears as if radically different approaches have been attempted in trials; new partnership teams are established, new working arrangements are set up across departments and organisations, and data is broadened to cover many issues. Each of these developments is to be welcomed. However consideration of the 'core practices' within and underlying each new approach there is also a significant implicit element of 'business as usual' which is still embodied within the 'new' approach. So meetings still focus upon tasks and agreements, consultations are superficial and unrecorded, and increased quantitative data collection occurs. The organisationally managed approaches initially embodied a two-community model of learning (practitioners implement and academics research) and were heavily weighted towards technical learning (quantitative data flows and exchanges). So although the stakeholders involved in the partnership have changed, the core practices, assumptions, and aims are unchanged. Local Government meets consults and decides agreements and actions with other organisations and stakeholders (as before). Local Government collects more

quantitative data and largely neglects qualitative data (as before). Local Government does not significantly engage its practitioners (as before). Local Government does not generally record and develop understandings (as before). Local Government does not develop nor maintain systematic learning processes (as before).

This suggests that (despite the best efforts of participants) the changes in 'new' approaches may in fact be surface re-arrangements rather than deeper ones as sometimes suggested. This 'apparent change with underlying inertia in core practices' appears to be relevant at the level of roles also. In developing holistic evidence-based understanding managers tend to develop additional management structures or additional networks to other managers in other organisations (but within these the primary aims are still decisions, tasks, and funding bids rather than learning). Researchers associated with quantitative data tend to collect more quantitative data, from more sources, and on more issues (but they don't interpret this or add in qualitative data). Local politicians suggest increased participation as the way forward and suggest additional efforts to get people into committees or engaging with politicians (utilising the same engagement methods as before with the same purposes as before). Community practitioners raise their hopes that now their knowledge will be utilised, that deeper engagement of clients and citizens will result, and finally the broader issues will be acknowledged, but are later disappointed when they are again bypassed by management in the development of understanding. In university collaborations, local government looks to the academics to research an issue and academics reciprocate by seeking funding for additional research, or students to be placed within local government.

Although each of these responses does develop understanding (or has some potential to) and should be encouraged, what is noticeable upon reflection is that such changes (regarded as novel or even radical) can be regarded as change - in the *same* direction as before - in which the core assumptions, activities and processes remain unchanged. The participants appear to be doing something very different but are actually doing more of what they did before. The outside configurations of people and organisations change but the core assumptions, activities, processes and aims remain. This is not to suggest that such efforts will not contribute to the further development of holistic evidence-based understanding but only that these approaches will be inherently limited. Significant leaps in developing holistic and evidence-based understanding will require additional approaches which address the known limitations of core assumptions, activities, and processes, and which are different from existing ones.

It is suggested that there are different pathways to achieve development of 'more' holistic evidence-based understanding. Firstly understanding can be progressed (partially) through the continued development of current individual approaches - thorough 'intensification' of a current core activity (e.g. greater consultation networks or increased data sets) but that this is also limited in what can be achieved. Secondly, understanding can be developed through 'multiple intensification' (increased consultation and increased data) as in the regeneration initiative. This study has identified a third possibility, where it is possible to develop more holistic evidence-based understanding through 'directional change' where core assumptions, practices, approaches, and aims are significantly altered and applied in a new approach (e.g. the researcher-practitioner interactive trials or snowballing networks or inteview-mapping approaches). Fourthly, multiple directional changes can be embodied into multiple new approaches (e.g. researcher-practitioner interactions *and* external stakeholder snowballs). It is argued here that neither intensification not directional change alone is holistic, but that an aspirational goal would be to (1) utilise both intensification and directional change, (2) to develop multiple examples of each, and importantly (3) to facilitate interactive development of understanding through linkage across these approaches.

If this is so, it suggests that development of holistic evidence-based understanding requires reflexive or double loop learning (see Chapter 2) which also questions, challenges and modifies the core assumptions, activities, processes, practices, directions, and aims. It also suggests that by identifying these new approaches to improvement might be suggested. For instance, current core practices and assumptions include: the idea that holistic evidence-based understanding requires additional (but uninterpreted) data sets, additional networking to more organisations (rather than deeper engagement with the practitioners within existing structures) larger numbers of citizens involved in consultation (rather than smaller numbers more deeply engaged), the continued use of current meeting and consultation formats (rather than creation of learning processes or web interactions), that unrecorded understanding will suffice (rather than developing transcriptions and issue briefings), unsystematic episodic and ad hoc individual learning is adequate (rather than development of ongoing learning through all cycles), getting another task done is more important (than reflecting on a previous one), and action is more important than talk about actions. It is therefore argued such core assumptions activities, processes and aims are themselves limitations in learning; as such assumptions and practices could not originally address the challenge of developing more holistic evidence-based understanding, it might be anticipated that continuing with the same assumptions and core practices (whoever it is done with) will be limited in effect.

In those trials which were not task-managed but which were driven by 'practitioner empowerment' the core assumptions, practices, processes and aims were indeed questioned and challenged, and alternative assumptions, practices and aims were adopted. Learning was judged to be significantly improved by participants but the impacts of this learning were weak or non-existent and no actions nor policy amendments followed. The common new assumptions in practitioner-empowered models (Research-Practitioner Trials, and Social Exclusion Projects for instance) were that (a) knowledge is distributed across a network (of community practitioners, researchers, and citizens for instance) and requires formation and maintenance of this network as a pre-requisite, (b) stakeholders, tasks, aims, and methods should not be pre-specified but were to be flexibly developed as issues were identified and learning occurred, (c) tasks were to be outcomes of this learning rather than inputs, (d) practitioners themselves would drive the learning process as they identified new perspectives, information, and contacts, (e) learning would be *social* learning between participants facilitated by engagement with community practitioners and researchers utilising mixed methods and data, (f) the process was not time limited but would end when saturation occurred (no significant new knowledge was being uncovered) when other aspects would be explored, (g) all data should be accurately recorded and transcribed, agreed with stakeholders, and stored as a later evidence resource, (h) reflexivity and debate within the group was an important aspect of learning, (i) new data recording methods should be developed (pictorial, map formats, and network diagrams etc). Such approaches developed more holistic learning not because they did more of the same (with different people and organisations) but because they did things differently (with the same and different people). Those involved explicitly acknowledged and owned the issues and limitations identified through learning on previous projects, and they addressed these in *novel* ways that replaced core assumptions, practices, activities, directions, and aims.

No homes for holistic learning and the curtains close when it knocks

Despite this improvement in holistic and evidence-based learning, the practitioner-empowered projects had limited impact. Nothing changed in the organisation, in policy, nor in practice. Furthermore these projects would not have occurred without creative individual thinking, empowerment, management-at-a-distance, and external funding or external participation. One possible interpretation of this is that because they were holistic, and they did not adopt core practices, they had no natural 'home'. They linked internal practitioners and internal researchers across departments, or they linked practitioners across organisations, with citizens across ward boundaries. The processes were created flexibly in a bottom-up fashion with management support at a distance. These experimental processes were not

ultimately mainstreamed despite the wish of practitioners to do so. This finding suggests a significant limitation to developing holistic evidence-based understanding, in that relatively successful radical attempts are neither adopted nor learnt from. Learning did not travel it was not stored and faded as participants moved on and networks eroded. This may be partly explained by local government supporting apparent changes that continue (or intensify) existing core practices (doing more of the same) and these projects were different in their practices. In this case these different approaches generated more holistic understanding (through engagement of practitioners, the development of qualitative information, the disagreement of some findings with official versions, and the very holistic nature of the cross organisational activity) but paradoxically this may also be an *obstacle* to adoption and development as it does not easily 'fit' within existing expectations and structures (in which case who should manage it, fund it, and receive it?). This suggests holistic evidence-based learning will require reflexive attention on a number of levels within the organisation.

This section has presented a general overview of the developing conclusion - that new approaches are needed and possible, and that these should involve modifications of core practices. In the forthcoming conclusion section this general recommendation will be considered in more detail. But first it will be useful to pull together different strategies to develop holistic and evidence-based understanding.

10.2 Aims and Strategies for Holistic Evidence-Based Understanding

In the summary chapter limitations in stakeholder networks, current understanding, context and goals, and developing understanding are highlighted. It also gives a suite of suggestions for improved learning processes. The previous sections consider some of the obstacles to real change and suggestions for enhancing improvements in learning. In short the case study has (so far) dealt with where and how current understanding and learning are limited, and how these could be improved. This next section considers the question where could we go with this learning, what we could set out to achieve, and why existing strategies are limited in what they have achieved.

This section will review and discuss the many meanings of holistic that have been considered, witnessed or reflected upon in the study. As one of the research questions concerns how local government might improve understanding of the population to be more holistic understanding, answers to this question will depend upon the various operational and alternative *meanings* of the terms. The importance of these meanings is that the 'holistic

evidence-based understanding' developed will be dependent upon the implicit meanings of the terms as these set implicit aims and objectives. It has been shown in the case study that the implied meanings of 'holistic and evidence-based' are not as challenging as they could be, and what passes for 'holistic and evidence-based understanding' has disappointed some practitioners and academics as they see little real change in understanding. Improvements in current understanding may follow, or be stimulated by, explicit consideration of more challenging aims and strategies. The following is not intended to be comprehensive, but is indicative of many alternative aims and strategies that can be taken to develop more holistic understanding. Some of these aims and strategies have been taken directly from local government projects in the case study, others from the literature, and some from reflection and discussions.

Inclusion and engagement of varied Stakeholders

Firstly, one widely recognised way to develop more holistic understanding is to increase numbers and *variety* of stakeholders**.** Developing understanding would require stakeholder analysis; the people, groups, departments, organisations that have a viewpoint or information relevant to the subject of interest and an appreciation of the stakeholders involved (or not involved) in developing understanding. By implication a more holistic understanding better reflects the diversity of stakeholders and their perspectives. The case study noted that attempts to increase numbers of stakeholders is one of the dominant approaches taken in local government. Secondly, in conceptual terms it is not enough to increase stakeholders but this must lead to a merging (or collection or synthesis or conflict) of the many different perspectives. From different departments, different organisations, different topics, different subjects, different groups and communities, or different features. More holistic understanding might result with connections across viewpoints. This was a common aim in terms of organisations, departments and in some related subjects areas (e.g education and employment) but there was little linking of the perspectives of different communities or groups. Thirdly, given that a holistic understanding would be one resulting from combining the perspectives of more stakeholders, then more holistic understandings can and should be achieved by being inclusive off them all. However it should be noted that holistic understanding does not imply consensus. Holistic understanding can incorporate inconsistent perspectives within it (and not just those that are self-consistent). Balanced understanding does imply agreement. More holistic understanding could be achieved through inclusion of widely differing viewpoints; including conflicting and competing understanding; the holistic understanding is then the union of the conflicting understanding. In political processes this may be in principle common but such alternative understanding is rarely given equal space in official discussions or

writings, or is made explicit. Here holistic is achieved by acceptance of conflicting theories and evidence, which should be explicitly acknowledged, recorded, and developed also. This is rarely utilised and was on occasions discouraged when suggested.

Broadened conceptualisation of people, communities and population

More holistic understanding arises when focused upon the 'whole' individual citizen including that individuals' biography, context and connections. This would include whole life considerations, family and social networks, through lifecycles and longitudinal understanding, including transitions and change, with their social, biographical, and institutional context as part of the understanding. This was generally not observed in the case study although the experimental social exclusion project did attempt this (with some success through cumulative visual recording techniques). The approach would be more holistic as it would not begin with an organisational interest but with a citizen focus, and from that seek organisational implications rather than the reverse. This approach was found to be useful in engaging people and gaining a more holistic perspective on their lives, interactions with organisations, and social networks than is delivered currently in consultation approaches with pre-defined agendas and focus.

Equally it is possible to broaden conceptualisation of the population and its communities. The population and sub-communities are currently seen in terms of the interests of the organisation. It was noted that broader conceptualisation of communities would then give a more holistic understanding (e.g. from regarding communities as simply residents or consumers to groups of citizens with broader interests and relationships to governance etc). Currently the dominant way to consider communities is by location, therefore parallel consideration of communities of interest (e.g. workers, managers) and identity (e.g. students, minority groups, asylum seekers etc) would generate a more holistic picture. Furthermore noting changes over time, to give a longitudinal perspective, was an additional way in which more holistic understanding could be achieved. One specific way to develop more holistic understanding of communities was implicit in the idea of community profiles (Stringer, 1996:77) where community was considered in broader terms (geography, history, government, politics, demographics, economics, health, education, welfare, housing, transportation, recreation, religion, inter-group relations, and planning, for instance, with more detail contained in each theme). This approach was similar to that taken in the regeneration initiative. Note that in developing such holistic community profiles the organisational stakeholders linked to that community also become explicit. Community

practitioners and citizens themselves can be sources of such holistic understanding (provided they are not questioned only on a specific areas of interest only to local government).

Another way to develop more holistic evidence-based understanding is recognised in the interlinking of different features of the population (e.g. education and employment or lifestyle and health for instance). This is an approach which was observed to be acting in a non-rigorous way but could be additionally developed. A further approach noted was to investigate higher order connections and interactions and links across levels. The aim was to interlink features beyond first-order causal and consequence links. This was not generally observed although it was noted in the social exclusion project that mind-maps were useful in graphically representing peoples' beliefs about such links. Still another way noted was through including and integrating different levels (or scales) of attention; larger and smaller than the current focus of attention. The current understanding is placed in a wider context (for instance, spatial, temporal, or conceptual) and is reinterpreted if necessary in terms of effects or factors on such scales. Alternatively the focus may shift to the details acting at smaller scales and seek links and relationships there. So for example on spatial scales the population within the local government boundaries is considered as part the regional population giving a higher level view, and it is examined at the ward or community level also. In temporal terms the trends of interest might be perceived as being embedded within longer-term trends or comprising shorter-term changes. This approach was witnessed occasionally but could be developed.

Broaden Methods, Methodologies, and Theoretical Perspectives

Utilisation of mixed methods and epistemologies is another way to develop more holistic understanding**.** Mixed methods can be seen as an attempt to balance the realist and constructionist methods; data and interpretations, descriptions and explanations (and meanings). Some argue this is methodologically questionable others that this is acceptable. In the pragmatic environment of local government it will be less of an issue. Furthermore the need for mixed approaches can be argued from the recognition that even with full stakeholder networks and in-depth engagement there will be social phenomena and social facts that are as yet unknown. The stakeholder consultation approach will only tell us what is known (and perhaps what is currently not known). It can not tell us about the larger scale interlinks and effects (that a realist assumes exist) outside awareness. This knowledge must be created, and would require the involvement of statistical exploration to get beyond that which is currently known. Mixed methods produce mixed data. Evidence could be taken in the form of quantitative or qualitative data.

Applying alternative theoretical and subject perspectives to the population is a further way to develop more holistic understanding. The city population is large enough to involve quantitative statistical approaches, to be influenced by long-term cultural trends or larger-scale contexts, and to have these explained in broad sociological, economic and cultural terms. At the other extreme the population is comprised of diverse smaller communities, groups, families and individuals, where considerable variety is found and the details demand more qualitative understanding, on smaller scales, where particular biographical, environmental, and developmental pathways are important, and perhaps better suited to the interpretations and methods of the various social psychology schools for instance. In other words, the human sciences literature suggests that the holistic study of a population requires mixed-method and mixed-perspective approaches, a strategy which was largely lacking in the local authority studied.

Holistic thinking differs from reductionist thinking. So more holistic understanding will arise through consideration of emergent properties and complex systems (Capra, 1982, 1988, 1996, & Byrne, 2002). In holistic thinking the whole is contained in the parts, the whole is considered without boundaries or borders, the parts are seen in relation to the whole, which is regarded as more than the sum of its parts. On integrating conceptual levels Byrne (2002) argued for a particular kind of realism, which he labels ‘complex realism’. The approach offers some additional insight on the potential meanings of holistic. In complex systems the aim is to describe the system as a whole (rather than in terms of its parts) and to include dynamics, including changes of kind, and the way things interact as well as how they operate separately including consideration of emergent properties of the system. He argued that the complex realism approach enables consideration of different societal levels beyond simple aggregation of individuals, and that this enables exploration of interactions of complex products of parts, wholes, part-part interactions, and part-whole interactions. This approach was not witnessed within projects observed in the case study.

Broaden, Create, and Qualify Learning

Much of the understanding (or learning) in local government can be associated with different phases of planning and action.

- Circumstance Learning: Learning about the circumstances of interest, the issues, their interactions, the people affected, explanations, interpretations and alternative interpretations.
- Action Planning Learning: Learning about the ways in which the circumstances could be influenced, theories of action, data and evidence to support this, alternative approaches and interpretations on means to influence, and the consequences of such interventions, focus learning on possible interventions and ways to evaluate the alternatives, gathering evidence to support most effective interventions.
- Implementation Learning: Learning through attempting to implement the action plan, when new data or stakeholders emerge, actions need to be renegotiated, plans need to be revised, knowledge is gained through the experience of attempting to implement the planned actions, and the actions generate new data to be considered.
- Evaluation Learning: Learning when the action is agreed adopted and implemented, and following the subsequent effects (or otherwise) of the intervention, and the changing circumstances resulting.

Where understanding exists across all of these phases then it could be labelled more holistic in comparison with understanding that applies to only one phase. In practice it is likely that such learning will be interactive and not linear. In the regeneration project it was noted that learning occurs over all phases, but that the information group was addressing only the first phase. This is another area where more holistic understanding could be developed by broadening the areas to be understood.

Understanding noted within this case study was often regarded as being ‘out there’ to be collected as data and through consultation. Indeed this seems to be the overriding perspective within local government practices. However it was less well recognised that new understanding can be created through learning processes. The process of learning is then seen as an approach to generate both broader and deeper understanding, which is more holistic than simply collecting understanding. By combining the modes of collection and learning the resulting understanding is expected to be more holistic than through either mechanism alone. Elaboration of existing understanding is another feature of learning examples include: seeking

and recognising unintended consequences and causes of policies, actions, and understanding; considering negative and positive causes and consequences of issues to give more balanced perspectives on circumstances and issues; consideration of multiple step connections and multiple-influences beyond simple connections and simplistic influences (i.e. multi-dimensional models of cause and effect).

Another approach identified to develop more holistic understanding was to reflect upon what has *not* been investigated or what remains unknown, this then broadens understanding to include weaknesses, gaps, limitations and uncertainties. Such knowledge is qualified knowledge. This understanding is more holistic in that the knowledge is qualified by what is not known (which is a broader form of knowledge). So explicit inclusion of areas of ignorance, gaps, limitations and uncertainties in understanding would enhance that understanding (as would the recognition of (and likelihood of) errors in understanding). Holistic understanding implies an understanding of the whole; what is known and what is not known and the degree of certainty and uncertainty associated with knowledge. Developing more holistic understanding would arise through qualification of this understanding which is also recorded for explicit consideration.

Learning can also be broadened by integrating data, interpretations and personal reflexivity**.** More holistic understanding was noted to result from bringing together descriptive, interpretative, and reflective exploration and analysis. The combination (or interaction) of statistics with interpretations, explanations and meanings, and the inclusion of deeper features such as values, beliefs and frames, was noted as one way to develop more holistic understanding. It is regarded as important as one level influences another. It can be envisaged as a movement from how the social world is or appears to be, to deepen consideration of why we think this, including successive deepening of personal reflectivity:

Descriptive and Comparative Understanding; Facts and Data
Interpretations, Explanations, and Meanings
Values, Beliefs, Purposes, Interests, Frames
Unconscious or Inaccessible Personal Influences

In the case study most explicit understandings where constrained to the top-level of description. More holistic understanding might be developed through deeper personal reflectivity. This approach was not observed anywhere in the case study.

Finally, organisational learning can be further developed through organisational reflexivity and systemic thinking. One approach is to view the organisation (personnel, services, and policies) as being linked to the population and issues of interest (and possibly unknowingly contributing to issues under consideration). Alternatively, some solutions to the problems of one area may be causes of problems in another area. Another example noted was that questions that are asked of people in consultations will constrain what is discovered therefore more holistic understanding can arise from examination of the questions asked and alteration of these to be more holistic. Explicit recognition of organisational factors (including self-interest) may deliver more holistic understanding of a situation than if processes were unreflexive. This approach may suggest organisational changes as potential solutions to an 'external' problem.

This section has highlighted some of the many possible meanings and features of many more interpretations than noted during the case study. This suggests that more holistic evidence-based understanding might be stimulated by re-consideration and broadening of the implicit aims of understanding. These can be developed and they provide initial suggestions for new approaches and raised goals in the development of more holistic understanding. The previous discussions have focused upon learning in local government giving interpretations of the obstacles and general possibilities for improvements, and strategies to achieve holistic and evidence-based understanding giving alternative interpretations and therefore goals for consideration. In the final conclusion the focus of the case study returns to the general themes, the triangulated findings, and the original research questions. It concludes the case study through detailed notes upon the strengths, limitations, opportunities and threats identified relevant to the development of holistic and evidence-based understanding of the population. These detailed conclusions will then be combined with the more generalised previous conclusions to address limitations by building upon strengths and opportunities, leading to recommendations for action in local government.

11 CONCLUSIONS

This case study has considered how one local authority and its partnerships come to understand the population and how this understanding might be improved upon to be more holistic and evidence-based. The study has explored these questions through participation within a local authority, within partnership projects, through trials, through interviews with stakeholders, and through consideration of the literature. These have opened different 'windows' through which to discuss what actually happens, what is possible, what limitations in learning exist, and what recommendations can be made to address these. The research questions and findings have been organised and examined under four themes: stakeholder networks and engagement, current understandings, developing understandings, and context and goals, and these have been summarised. In particular a number of alternative learning models have been identified and trialed. The discussion re-examined the issues, presented a partial diagnosis of these and an approach for auditing or assessing current understanding and outlines additional strategies for developing holistic evidence-based understanding.

In the conclusion, the study moves from analysis, critique and identification of general possibilities, to an outlined program of change addressing identified weaknesses and threats, and building upon existing strengths and opportunities.

11.1 Stakeholder Networks and Engagement

Stakeholder Networks and Engagement			
Strengths	Limitations	Opportunities	Threats
Stakeholder networks and support for these; particularly at organisational and management levels Networking of managers and staff. Knowledgeable practitioners inside and outside the organisation Stakeholders linked by overlapping interests and same client population. Core set of academics interested in developing understanding with governance	Surface engagement of stakeholders Typically engaged in events not processes Methodological exclusion of internal and external practitioners and citizens from developing understanding Little data on citizens from citizens. Different aims of stakeholder organisations departments and roles	Larger networks possible; increased engagement possible Untapped capacity of practitioners wishing and willing to be involved in HEB learning Access to further stakeholder networks, evidence, information, and interpretations possible including citizens Complementary knowledge powers and contacts of practitioner stakeholders Collaborations exchanges and interactions Action research perspectives to better plan engagement of stakeholders as equals and co-researchers in developing understanding Organisational powers of inclusion	Distortions through lack of time involving stakeholders, through omissions and oversimplification Practitioners not valued by researchers or managers or themselves as researchers or sources of evidence and understanding Methodological exclusion of practitioners and citizens officially unrecognised Disillusionment of stakeholders if same approaches following promised potential Learning becoming dependent upon external funders and external stakeholders; knowledge not created or located within local government

It is found (and recognised within local government) that current understanding of the population is distributed across organisations, and across stakeholders within organisations, and therefore network development activity is needed and collaborative learning is needed.

There is indeed a high level of ongoing network development activity by local government managers, and networks are strong in terms of the organisations, departments and managers involved. Although extensive network development is a necessary precondition for developing more holistic evidence-based understanding it is not a sufficient one. These networks need to be extended to include an associated network of collaborating and co-learning practitioners. Practitioners need to be included in the development of understanding (both within and outside local government). The organisation needs to utilise this potential resource, and officially recognise and regard practitioner knowledge (in its own organisation or outside) and the potential contributions of practitioners in developing more holistic and evidence-based understanding. The network must also involve those community practitioners with additional knowledge and perspectives, it must also aim to develop understanding and not just decisions, actions, and mutual benefits, and therefore the form of engagement must be deeper than consultation, discussion, or information exchange which are the dominant forms of engagement noted within this case study.

Networks involving citizens are extremely limited in terms of numbers and types of citizens involved and the levels of engagement achieved. These are officially recognised issues within local and national government and increasing participation is an organisational aim. However attempts to increase participation (through meetings and consultations) have been shown to be of limited success and anyhow do not deliver holistic evidence-based understanding or learning. Participation should be linked to engagement in research, which would also deliver an additional evidence-base and more holistic understanding of the population.

Improvement of community and practitioner networks and engagement are in practice possible and desired. It merely requires that local government does so – and does so in such a way so that former problems with engagement are solved to the satisfaction of practitioners. This is desirable as practitioners (when motivated and engaged) act as multipliers for learning sharing networks, knowledge, time, resources, and information,

Further opportunities exist to improve citizen networks and engagement. Firstly, engagement of community practitioners and citizens are not separate issues as this case study shows them to be linked. So the opportunity exists to develop citizen networks through community practitioner networks. Secondly, new methods have been developed and tested which engage excluded groups (thereby improving engagement of citizens). These new approaches and methods are shown to be both possible and practical. It was also noted above that developing more holistic evidence-based understanding through networking and engagement with citizens increases participation of excluded groups and particularly young people which are

two key groups that government wishes to encourage. Within this case study it was expressed that participation is a major mechanism by which the organisation can develop understanding of citizens but unfortunately citizens don't participate. This view can be reversed (on evidence reported here): the development of holistic evidence-based understanding of citizens is better means to increase participation (and is particularly successful with youth and excluded groups) and it delivers research understanding also. Given the evidence that creation of networks and deeper engagement with excluded groups are possible and practical, such exclusions of citizens will again be labelled methodological exclusions (albeit unintentional). Despite the fact that local government officially recognises the need to engage excluded groups and espouses inclusion as an aim, local government networks, processes and methods are part of the problem.

It is concluded that there are limitations and threats to the development understanding but also strengths and opportunities to overcome these to and improve. Stakeholder networks can be developed and stakeholders can be better engaged. Community practitioners and excluded citizens can be targeted and will participate given the use of new methods and approaches. Local government managers demonstrate significant networking ability. They are able to encourage and facilitate networking and engagement of community practitioners within their own organisation. Managers can also network to gain agreements for participation of community practitioners managed elsewhere, and they can instruct, empower and facilitate their own staff to improve networks *and* engagement with other community practitioners and excluded citizens as has been shown possible. Community practitioners then constitute a mutual resource that can be maintained and developed. This shared resource can then be built upon as suggested in following sections to improve holistic evidence-based understanding of the population. Stakeholder networks and engagement are one component in developing holistic evidence-based understanding. The next area to be considered is current understanding; data, knowledge, constraints and uncertainties.

11.2 Current Understanding: Data, Knowledge, and Limitations

Current Understanding: Data, Knowledge, and Limitations			
Strengths	Limitations	Opportunities	Threats
Many quantitative data sets Trend of data sharing Descriptive and comparative understanding from data Geographical presentation and sub-ward mapping of quantitative data Knowledge of practitioners; including community practitioners Knowledge of citizens on own lives Methodological knowledge of academics; theoretical perspectives, critical and constructive potential; some substantive contributions	Unrecorded understanding; Unqualified understanding, no gaps and weaknesses Methodologically unrecorded; specific networks unrecorded No system to store and access such understanding Non-explicit interpretations and explanations; surface analysis and investigation only Limited view of what constitutes 'evidence'; weak on use of qualitative data Longitudinal understanding weak through short-term evidence-basis Data mainly on communities of location (not identity and interest) Integration of features scales and levels	Geographical information systems to present and record quantitative information. Awareness of limitations on understanding of researchers and practitioners; desire to correct Need for briefing notes on issues and potential for community profiles Some recognition of need for explicit and alternative interpretations Trials in linking researchers and practitioner knowledge Current limitations and issues a basis for learning existence of alternative methods and methodologies to improve generation of qualitative data New approaches to engage and understand excluded citizens and practitioners National Surveys and Data Archives to analyse and inform Psychological instruction to enable improved learning: write-it down, engage with it.	Measurable features - not rich nor explanatory Over - simplification Knowledge developed remains tacit or lies outside the organisation Culture of not identifying and recording weaknesses in understanding Not a task to identify nor address current weaknesses Old core practices installed within new initiatives

Current understanding of the city's population draws heavily upon the many quantitative data sets that are available. This data is collected and processed by different research groups within and across the organisation and yet others outside local government in other organisations. This is a strong and developing resource. This data provides a good descriptive understanding of the population. Averages and diversity across a population can be known. Variation with location and age (for instance) can be noted and examined. Changes and trends can be discerned and considered. The population can be described in such terms, and comparisons can be made within and outside the population. This descriptive and comparative evidence-based understanding provides background, aids prioritisation and targeting of issues, groups, and services. By its nature (and because it is managed and stored) it provides a cumulative resource growing each year and with each new source identified. The use of Geographical Information Systems enables geographical presentation and further aids descriptive and comparative understanding of the population. The ability to view many maps showing different data provides a more holistic evidence-based understanding of the population which is also useful to community practitioners, politicians, service managers and policy makers. The trend in increased data sharing across organisations adds to the potential. This developing quantitative data should be utilised within new learning processes as it provides a partial evidence-basis. Explanations and interpretations should be informed by this data, should include it, and should make sense of it.

A further strength is the significant knowledge of all practitioners, internal and external, but this is mostly unused as an organisational resource. Practitioner knowledge was often tacit including qualitative data from experience (often interpreted with mixed data multiple from sources). Practitioners are users of knowledge but they also integrate and re-create it, they apply it in real settings, and learn from the discrepancies between policy understanding and experience. Practitioners have knowledge of processes impacting upon the population, knowledge of organisational practices and potential, as well as knowledge of the population. Collectively the practitioners represent a broad applied knowledge base. Practitioners should be engaged in new learning processes, and also in developing evidence and interpretations. Their knowledge should be captured and recorded, and they should be empowered to improve their understanding collectively.

A further potential strength was the knowledge of academics which was complementary to that of practitioners. Academics could access literature perspectives, had knowledge of issues and the local population, were well trained in theoretical perspectives and could provide alternative interpretations of circumstances. They were particularly strong on methodological knowledge (which was largely unrecognised and untapped within local government). This

could help practitioners (and their organisations) develop their own research findings which will improve the evidence-base and also results in the engagement of practitioners in learning processes. This could be achieved through *in situ* training of practitioners in methodologies and methods as part of the development of new learning processes.

There is also an important weaknesses with current understanding in that it is not generally recorded and therefore systematic development is not possible. Some records of quantitative data are produced and disseminated but these are mainly descriptive, whereas interpretations are not generally recorded. Qualitative data generation and collection is weak and also correspondingly poorly recorded. Understanding is not generally qualified (gaps, uncertainties, unknowns, complicating factors, and critiques are not generally presented). The issue of poor recording is noted from several different perspectives. In all cases weak or non-existent recording translates into poor availability. This implies that understanding can not be truly organisational; it is lost to the organisation as personnel move jobs (and there is significant mobility). Practitioners are then unable to cumulatively develop and improve their understanding as a collective community and others (for instance citizens, activists, and external practitioners) are unable to challenge and improve this understanding. Understanding will be continually recreated by practitioners which is inefficient and costly, and understanding is lost. Without recording it is unlikely that understanding will be developed. Finally, it is not part of the organisational culture to explicitly identify, declare or record knowledge gaps, weaknesses, uncertainties, questions, challenges, and alternatives to current understanding, so current understanding fails to identify where future development could and should occur. The absence of recording implies a major obstacle in the development of understanding. Recording of understanding must become a part of any new learning processes, and these recordings can then be developed with time.

Quantitative data are strong in relation to communities of location but weak in relation to communities of interest and identity, the geographical focus dominates others and longitudinal studies are rare. By developing understanding of key communities of interest and following these through time more holistic understanding will be created. With a strong inclination towards use of quantitative data and neglect of qualitative data, current understanding focuses upon only measurable features of the population, the richness resulting from qualitative data and analysis is not achieved nor recognised. This can be addressed through the addition of qualitative data derived from new form of stakeholder engagement.

Understanding is highly developed in its descriptive and comparative sense utilising quantitative data but has little *explanatory* value. Yet it is the explanatory aspects of understanding that suggest effective interventions. Because rich interpretative understandings of current circumstances are not recorded they cannot be developed or challenged. The knowledge remains tacit and is to be associated with practitioners and not the organisation itself. These limitations affect the development of more holistic evidence-based understanding. Learning processes should aim to develop richer interpretations and explanations concerning the population.

In summary, there are significant opportunities associated with current understandings. The developing GIS enables increased quantitative data sets to be integrated maintained and viewed, creating a resource which accumulates year upon year. The willingness and desire of practitioners to improve understanding is a clear opportunity, and the current limitations and issues provide a basis for learning. Furthermore the existence of academic alternative methods and methodologies to improve generation of qualitative data (such as action research and participant observation methods, interview techniques, and stakeholder analysis) can be drawn upon to train practitioners. This can work in parallel with alternative methods for engaging and understanding excluded citizens reported in this case study. Finally the declared need for briefing papers on issues (mentioned in councillors interviews and noted in the projects observed) and the potential for more holistic community profiles (noted in discussions with community co-ordinators and on the regeneration project) suggest another opportunity to record understanding that will help stakeholders in the longer term.

Current understandings, data, knowledge, records, constraints and uncertainties are influenced by context and goals. In the next section these will be considered.

11.3 Context and Goals: Culture, Power, Frames and Aims

CONCUSION SUMMARY: Goals and Context: Culture, Power, Frames and Aims			
Strengths	Limitations	Opportunities	Threats
Culture of utilising quantitative data Motivational and engagement power in the aim of developing more holistic and evidence-based understanding; Past trials in learning and management to draw upon Network activity and task management	No explicit organisational learning aim nor culture Few training & development initiatives Focus on own perspectives No culture of developing & utilising qualitative data Past trials not developed or mainstreamed Single fragmented focus in aims; e.g. research, or training or partnership working, or social exclusion, or learning, HEB or understanding, or participation	Some management support to identify issues and proposed changes Alternative pathways to HEB understanding and learning Government aims to develop holistic evidence-based approaches Added value from new approaches linking different agendas Combine multiple holistic goals; to develop holistic evidence-based understanding; to increase and widen participation; to increase qualitative data; to maintain stakeholder networks; to link stakeholders; to evaluate policy implementation	Organisational focus on services needs and shorter-term issues, quick wins. Acceptance of limitations in methods and approaches Raised expectations vs organisational reality; possible disillusionment Little open reflexivity No government lead or duty to learn explicitly Inadequate time and linear episodic learning models Simplification of issues, their causes and consequences, through selection, or limited breadth and depth.

One key strength is the widespread culture of collecting, sharing, and utilising quantitative data. This provides additional evidence to be used to develop understanding, to describe and compare, to focus attention and prioritise issues. Another noted is the motivational and engagement potential of the aim to develop more holistic and evidence-based understanding which empowered and enthused practitioners and researchers inside and outside local government. A further strength is the past innovative trials in management to draw upon and learn from. Such projects include the City-University Project, the Regeneration Project, and the Social Exclusion Project. These projects each attempted to move beyond current

approaches and therefore can be adapted to form part of the new learning process required to develop more holistic evidence-based understanding.

The study noted limitations. Most importantly there was no stated organisational aim to develop holistic evidence-based understanding, nor was there an aim to systematically improve organisational learning. The organisational culture itself appears to work against such aims. Weakness identified are not recorded and addressed, the learning from trial projects dissipates and degrades, and there remains a fragmented approach to aims: research is seen as separate from participation for instance. Some projects show that such aims can be combined and collectively achieved by a more holistic process. The aim should be restated and institutionalised as both an ideal to strive for and a means to empower and encourage practitioners to do so.

Opportunities include the recognition of the need to change and the management support for identifying issues and possible changes. There is also an opportunity to redirect some funding to address issues more holistically. In particular the continued focus of consultation efforts upon developing engagement of citizens (who evidently lack interest in such approaches) is generally ineffective. Whereas practitioners with interest in developing understanding and access to citizen groups could be engaged in developing understanding instead. By re-directing some of the participation efforts to that of developing understanding through practitioner and citizen networks this would as a byproduct generate additional participation, but these new methods actually succeed to engage groups where current participation initiatives fail. Furthermore the output is then useful qualitative research material. This is an opportunity to combine different agendas of development of more holistic understanding, of qualitative research on the city population, of participation of citizens, and of inclusion of excluded groups. It presents an example of how a current focus upon *one issue* misses opportunities to develop more holistic approaches to solve several. Combination of qualitative research and participation aims should overlap.

In summary, systematic learning is threatened through the organisational focus on action, decisions, services, needs, shorter-term issues and quick wins. Inadequate time is given to the function of learning as judged by some who have to inform or implement policies, and in some major projects the learning models have been based upon a linear model. The acceptance of limitations in current methods is another threat to the development of understanding. Finally there is no local government lead or duty to develop holistic evidence-based understanding and this perhaps means that there is no downward pressure to seriously develop it.

11.4 Developing Understanding: Methods, Processes, and Approaches

CONCLUSION SUMMARY: Developing Understanding: Methods, Processes, and Approaches			
Strengths	Limitations	Opportunities	Threats
Current methods (data assembly scanning and consultation approaches) provide quick introduction and first overview in short term. Layered multiple quantitative data; GIS capability Recognition of need for improvements; stakeholder support evidenced Innovative initiatives and projects to learn from New approaches with academic, organisational, practitioner and citizen networks tested Some academic methods transferable; some academic perspectives appropriate for complex nature of holistic learning	No systematic collective learning processes to deepen and broaden understanding No infrastructure for learning Methodological and method limitations; *Ad hoc* events not processes Integration of reflective, interpretative and reflexive approaches output not method little investigative work; descriptive not explanatory Non-interaction of researcher and practitioner knowledge Learning through the project and policy lifecycles External funding; time delays. HEB difficult and unknown area	Further GIS development Supportive management champions researchers and practitioners seeking improved engagement and learning Medium term gap; a network response possible? Alternative approaches, processes methods and methodologies available Trials to learn from adjust and develop Technological and social change; e.g. internet & citizenship classes Action research approaches Learning becomes embedded in local government; National secondary data sets; computer aided analysis of quantitative and qualitative	No recording; no development Continued use of past methods and events; acceptance of limitations in methods and understanding Too much action too little time for learning and improving this *Ad hoc* approaches; constant relearning; Practitioner knowledge lost with moves and time; organisational forgetting Focus on task completion & outputs; not developing and embedding self-improving self-maintaining networks, methods and processes Chasing proposals, and funding to learn, but low success rates take time in which real learning could have occurred. Organisation being unaware of deeper learning potential and additional methodological approaches possible; Unreflexive approach to understanding personally and organisationally

One strength noted is that current mixed scanning approaches generate introductory understanding. This can be then be developed in principle. Such approaches are widely used within existing networks. Local government is strong in this; developing short-term understanding on time scales somewhere between a few weeks to a few months (through individuals or teams). This approach should be adopted as a way to *start* learning but it should not end there. Another strength is the method and process of integrating multiple quantitative data sets, from different sources, and on different issues, in GIS systems and the visual presentation of this information in map formats. This facilitates development of descriptive and comparative understanding in terms of quantitative data. There is an opportunity to engage stakeholders in discussions and investigations of the meanings and interpretation of such information, and this should be developed.

Significant limitations were associated with the development of understanding, in terms of the methods, processes, infrastructure and learning in the organisation. Firstly, and most importantly, there are no systematic collective learning processes to generate, broaden and deepen understanding. So although introductory understanding is created across many issues and areas, there are multiple layered quantitative data sets, and there are innovative initiatives and projects conducted - there are no organisational processes to systematically develop and improve the understanding initially developed. Meetings and consultations are events rather than ongoing processes and they aim to generate consensus, decisions, actions, and mutual benefits, rather than more holistic and evidence-based understanding. Finally systematic learning does not occur across project or initiative lifecycles, from preparatory stages in understanding a situation, to understanding possible actions, learning through implementation and though evaluation of the project. This is a key weakness to be addressed, new systematic learning processes are needed; they should be developed and implemented, and should operate across project lifecycles from understanding circumstances through to evaluation.

In addition to an absence of systematic learning processes no learning infrastructure was noted. Learning infrastructure would link the stakeholders within across and outside the organisation, it would store inputs and recorded outputs, it would encourage and facilitate organisational learning, it would disseminate understanding inside and outside the organisation, it would be recognised as infrastructure on organisational charts, and would give contact points and numbers details of planned processes. The infrastructure would embed the learning across organisations. This infrastructure would embody official recognition. Infrastructure was noted in term of the contacts and co-ordinators and members of partnerships but a *learning* infrastructure was not in evidence. Therefore infrastructure needs

to be created which will embody and support the learning network of collaborating practitioners and organisations.

Although more holistic and evidence-based understanding and learning are widely advocated, this is effectively a new unknown and difficult area. It is not clear how this should be achieved nor what alternative routes are best able to deliver what is needed. Past approaches, methodologies, and methods were perhaps adequate for achieving former governance aims, but the new requirement of developing holistic evidence-based approaches requires holistic evidence-based understanding and current methods are inadequate to deliver this raised expectation. The case study attempts to draw out some of the possibilities based on evidence. Local government is well placed to develop holistic networks but has difficulty generating evidence and understanding. Academic approaches are well placed to deliver an evidence-base but focus upon the researcher rather than a collective of stakeholders. The combination of both aims - holistic *and* evidence-based - then requires a broad *and* deep approach and this challenges existing governance and academic approaches. New approaches should directly and explicitly aim to create collective and evidence-based learning. Holistic evidence-based understanding implicitly requires new ways of working across organisations, and the trials indicate how this could be done (or rather continued and improved).

The focus upon task completions and outputs pervades most aspects of the organisation but holistic evidence-based approaches require learning which necessarily takes more time. Time is normally devoted towards tangible action and outputs. Cumulative organisational learning is not yet a regarded as a priority task and output. Dismissal of learning events as 'talking shops where nothing gets done' demonstrates a limited view of learning. Furthermore, developing partnership proposals and chasing funding to enable learning is seen as an important activity but it was noted that this takes considerable time away in which learning could have occurred. One key input to enable development of holistic based understanding is the time of participants. This must be supported by managers and organisations. Without adequate time allotted to practitioners significant improvement in understanding is effectively blocked. Adequate time must be given to practitioners; they will know what is adequate and should be empowered and encouraged to assertively state their needs as part of the new learning processes.

Opportunities also exist in terms of the various additional learning models and methodologies available to draw upon with from practice and the literature. These can be explored in more detail, to use and to develop further. In particular, social learning models match well with current networking approaches; action research approaches would work well in working with

practitioners and community stakeholders to develop qualitative understanding; novel methods to reach and engage citizens exist (e.g. the social exclusion interview-mapping methodology); there are available methods in the social sciences that could be utilised by local government practitioners (e.g. interviews, observation, participant evaluation). Such models and methodologies should be built into these new learning processes.

A further opportunity (and challenge) is that in local government a typical learning project lasts between days to months, but delivers only introductory or superficial learning. The academic approach, however typically takes two to five years from initial conception through proposal funding design and completion, and extends beyond local government timescales for action. There is an opportunity here to develop an intermediate process; one cycle of the learning process should last one year from initiation to feedback from disseminated findings and recommendations.

Finally there are ongoing technological and social changes which will provide opportunities. Two noted in the course of this study are the (almost) comprehensive linking of all practitioners by internet offering a new way to engage and interlink practitioners with each other. An additional example was noted in the introduction of school citizenship classes which could be incorporated into local government practice of reaching young people and gaining their perspectives on local and current issues (this was tested within the social exclusion project and the idea was well received). New learning processes should utilise these technological and social opportunities. Technological opportunities include the use of the web (to link stakeholders in the learning network in communications, to democratically raise issues to explore, for surveys and evaluations). Social opportunities include the use of citizenship classes as a two-way research-participation link between local government and those in schools.

The development of new methods, processes, approaches, is concluded to be a key consideration requiring attention to deliver holistic evidence-based understanding. This case study has reported or referenced such methods, processes, and approaches.

11.5 Overall Conclusion

This case study has explored some general questions concerning learning in local government organisations: how they learn; how their populations come to be understood from within the organisation, and how this understanding could developed to be both more holistic and evidence-based. It has explored these questions from multiple perspectives and has drawn upon a rich range of sources and experiences.

Developing holistic evidence-based understanding is found to be an ambitious ambiguous multi-faceted and underestimated learning task in local (and national) government. It is qualitatively different from existing approaches and is arguably an order of magnitude more difficult that anything previously attempted in local government (or academia).

It is argued that this cannot be achieved by simply continuing existing approaches, nor can it be achieved through the isolated approaches that have been developed and trialed. A further creative, developmental and integration phase is required. Trial learning approaches will need to be integrated and mainstreamed, but this should heed the learning from previous trials reported here. In particular learning processes should be managed *initially* (setting up, negotiating a broad initial program of areas of investigation with participants, and supporting and resourcing the program) and *finally* (linking findings and recommendations into organisational and policy development structures). But learning processes need to 'shift gear' and step away from existing practices to be fully practitioner-empowered throughout the *middle* learning phase (in setting tasks, developing networks, and improving understanding). Some additional infrastructure and networks need to be created and maintained to provide identity and overall purpose (a learning network to develop holistic evidence-based understanding of the population) and to record and store developing understanding, but this can build on existing agreements and partnerships. Local government should lead the initiation and management of process. Internal and external community practitioners need to be more deeply engaged in learning processes (and through practitioners so should citizens). Learning processes should be social, collective, and interactive linking across organisations, the identified stakeholder groups, and the modes of understanding. The processes should be evaluated and improved by participants (and be judged by improvements in holistic and evidence-based understanding). The overall approach should be proactive during the learning phase to prevent a return to superficial and reactive learning, and be within relevant organisational aims and job descriptions, to become embedded in working practices with

rolling development year-upon-year. The year being the only imposed timescale to start, learn, record findings, and submit findings or recommendations (to organisations and their management and policy structures) and to evaluate and improve the processes judged by participants in learning terms. The overall aim should remain: to improve holistic and evidence-based understanding of the population (which includes the understanding interactions of the population with the government and organisational processes, services, and policies). This aim was found to engage, motivate, and inspire many stakeholders to collaboratively learn together and suggested (without specifying) a welcome direction of change.

If the findings of this case study are more generally shared in local government then they suggest that local government utilises only a few learning approaches on a regular and widespread basis but that these are relatively weak in learning potential. However additional trials have been innovatively explored, and each of these have shown how organisational learning in local government can be improved upon. Although each learning approach can help improve understanding it is noted that no single approach can be regarded as currently adequate to develop more holistic evidence-based learning as each approach has natural limitations and therefore each approach requires alterations and development. In the final section of this case study a number of recommendations are made which seek to inform, stimulate, and guide the further development of holistic evidence-based understanding.

11.6 Recommendations for Action

RECOMMENDATION 1: ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS THE LIMITATIONS, RESTATE AND CHASE THE GOAL; UTILISE NEW CORE PRACTICES

(a) Acknowledge and address the current limitations in understanding and learning:

Limitations are present in current understandings and also within some of the core assumptions, practices, activities, approaches, and aims of local government. Without acknowledgement of these there will be limited progress. Such limitations are noted in detail in the study but include the following: no systematic collective rolling learning processes to improve understanding; limited networks to stakeholders with weak forms of engagement; methodological exclusion of practitioners and citizens; negligible qualitative data collection, generation, and analysis; very little integration of qualitative and quantitative data or analysis; weak on investigations and explicit explanations and interpretations; no generation of alternative interpretations and limited reflexivity; absence of recording of understanding with organisational forgetting; resulting distortions, omissions and simplifications in understanding and the implicit acceptance of these and their implications for policies, decisions, and actions.

(b) Explicitly consider, create, advocate, embed, and raise the goal to develop more holistic evidence-based understanding and chase this through organisational learning year by year.

The task of developing holistic evidence-based understanding is an order of magnitude beyond what has ever been achieved or attempted. Without a raised explicit goal current limitations will be implicitly accepted and maintained. Embed the raised goal throughout the governance as a guiding principle. Include: more stakeholder types with improved engagement; merging of multiple perspectives and inclusion of competing and conflicting understanding; interlinking of the varied features of the population; integration of the different scales of attention; Consideration of whole individuals and broadened the conceptualisation of community; learning through all phases; qualification of current knowledge; integration of descriptions, explanations, interpretations, and reflexivity; Simultaneous research, participation, and learning processes.

(c) Utilise New Core Practices, Activities, and Aims. Local government practices can all be improved upon but changes often reintroduce more of the same, even when initiatives appear

to be radically different the core assumptions, activities, and processes are often embedded into the initiatives, and the new initiatives are limited by these unchanged core assumptions, practices, and processes. More holistic understanding might be achieved by focusing upon new and additional core approaches. Instances of practices to avoid are given in the study but include: task-oriented and decision-focused meetings, increasing organisational stakeholder networks, ad hoc and rapid stakeholder consultations, non-recording of understandings, time-limited and episodic reactive learning, and the dominance of qualitative approaches as evidence, For example: Don't (just) engage more organisations engage their practitioners, don't (just) create more quantitative databases interpret existing ones or develop associated qualitative data, don't (just) look to universities for substantive knowledge (engage them in methodological improvements), don't (just) engage citizens through participation in committee structures (go out and interview them), don't (just) manage learning (but empower practitioners to do so themselves). Many more suggestions could be made, but the essence of the recommendation is that initiatives sometimes appear new but they are essentially the same as before and new approaches have been identified in this study which can better deliver holistic evidence-based understanding.

RECOMMENDATION 2: ENGAGE AND EMPOWER PARTICIPANTS TO PROACTIVELY IMPROVE HOLISTIC EVIDENCE-BASED UNDERSTANDING.

(a) Improve Learning Processes. Empower and encourage participants (particularly practitioners) to develop more holistic and evidence-based understanding and to improve learning and learning processes through reflection, qualification, and self-evaluation.

In particular by: identifying and addressing limitations and threats, and developing strengths and opportunities; deciding topics and subjects requiring better understanding; recommending change in approaches, process, methods, methodologies, and evaluation; improving mixed scanning understanding; and participant evaluation (of uncertainties, weaknesses, gaps, progress, approaches, process, methodologies, and methods associated with understanding). This approach should implicitly embody the reflective practitioner and cross-organisational learning models (Chapter 2). The primary aim is for participants to practically improve and qualify understanding (typically on one year rolling cycles).

(b) Improve Learning Products. Empower participants to produce recorded representations of these collective understandings (Briefing Notes) to be stored and be accessible for ongoing and further development.

Examples of recorded understandings might include one, some, or all of the following holistic evidence-based Briefing Notes: A Community Briefing Note for (a) communities of location and (b) communities of identity and interest; an Issue Briefing Note, on issues of concern, with data and interpretations and explanations; an Action Planning Briefing Note, on actions to be conducted, issues to be addressed, and explanations of their impacts, alternatives, stakeholders and engagement; an Implementation Briefing Note, recording how things went, what changed in practice, and what has been learnt; and an Evaluation Briefing Note, judging processes and initiatives with hind-sight and through the views of participants. Each Briefing Note to be a summarised report, including findings and recommendations for action, with references to a more in-depth report and other relevant Briefing Notes. The Notes and Reports are to be envisaged as developing products and perspectives, and not as official nor final interpretations.

(c) Improve Qualitative Investigation: Reflective Practice, Participant Observation, Action Research and Participant Evaluation

It is recommended that the perspectives of reflective practice, action research, and participant evaluation be adopted. These offer potential as they are congruent with practitioner and organisational needs, aims, and realities (being practice and action focused), and the empowerment of stakeholders to improve learning requires a perspective that will enable internal identification of issues and the means to improve upon existing assumptions, practices, activities, and aims. It is recommended that participant action evaluation be adopted as this offers potential to meet such requirements. Training in these methodologies (and associated methods) should be part of the learning process.

(d) Improve Quantitative Investigation: Model Building, Data Associations, and Analysis

It is recommended that quantitative investigation be developed to support learning. The investigation of existing data sets relevant to the population should progress beyond simple description and presentation of this data. It should examine connections, trends, causality and dependencies, and should incorporate attempts to develop multi-dimensional models of the population. These investigations should be conducted in interaction with qualitative investigations, and should link into interpreting learning processes also.

(e) Improve explicit theoretical understanding: Surfacing and developing interpretation and explanation within learning processes through interaction with alternatives and data

RECOMMENDATION 3: IMPLEMENT COMPLEMENTARY ROLLING SYSTEMATIC SOCIAL LEARNING PROCESSES WITHIN PUBLIC SECTOR LEARNING NETWORKS

There is a need to recognise that holistic evidence-based approaches require holistic evidence-based understanding and that this requires holistic evidence-based learning.

New approaches and methods are needed beyond current meetings, consultations, and quantitative data collection and sharing approaches. Alternative approaches have been trialed in local government and can be developed further from these (mixed) learning experiences; none of these approaches are yet adequate to achieve the task in their current forms but each has aspects and elements of promise that can be developed, and also limitations that can be considered and addressed. Furthermore additional models of collective learning can be found in the literature (as can alternative methodologies and methods) and some are noted in this case study. These should form the basis for new collective learning approaches.

It is noted that different infrastructural mechanisms may be necessary within organisations, across organisations, and in engaging practitioners, citizens, and politicians. They should endeavour to fill the current evident gaps in learning approaches; local governance approaches act over weeks to a few months whereas academic approaches act over 2-5 years. This suggests that processes which act between a few months to 2 years are needed (with the year being an obvious unit for recurring systematic development). Learning processes should be separated from focused discussions of external funding bids, decisions and action.

1. **The Learning Network**. A learning network needs to be created. It should be open (to avoid exclusion) but approximately balanced in terms of contributions of resources, networks, access, information, data, skills, time. Membership of the network therefore has mutually reinforcing *intelligence* benefits derived from interaction within the learning network but has obligations upon participants and organisations to support the network in resources, time, empowerment, and in the shared aim of developing more holistic evidence-based understanding from existing understanding (arrived at though mixed scanning approaches). A model which works well with governance stakeholders across organisations is that of the mutually beneficial exchange without charge. The trials reported within this case study suggest this is a useful approach in publicly supported organisations and agencies. Small additional funds should be available to engage other stakeholders not attached to any funded or funding organisation (particularly excluded citizens). Academic contributions could be negotiated where their contribution gives them inside access to the network. Government funded organisations should have development

and support of learning network commitments as part of their statutory responsibilities. The following is indicative of a proposed approach involving overlapping and interacting structures and processes:

2. **The Multi-Organisational Task Team.** The multi-organisational task team (Chapter 7) has benefits in that it creates working connections between organisations and departments within them. The formal collaboration serves to gain agreements, commitment, sharing of data, and creates more holistic engagement approaches and policies. It was proven to be effective in kick-starting the learning process, and it was also effective in receiving the learning to deliver organisational change and policies. These aspects should be retained. However the trial shows it to be weak in (i) practitioner networking and engagement (ii) citizen networking and engagement, and (iii) learning and investigation. It is recommended that these aspects be handled by different processes to be discussed below.

3. **Interactive Practitioner Learning.** The interactive researcher-practitioner trial (Chapter 4) provides an example of a model of interactive learning. In the particular case noted it brings together large-scale quantitative data and localised qualitative interpretations from informal experience. But it could also include other practitioners (e.g. policy makers). This stimulates mutual learning and further investigations as the different perspectives interact. This should provide a basis for developing collective learning *within* organisations. The learning should not be task driven but participant driven to improve understanding. Such a process could also link into existing internal data storage and dissemination mechanisms for resulting understanding. Trials showed that practitioners and researchers would participate given time, without additional funding, if supported at a distance by line and organisational management. Once the learning phase is completed the findings could be communicated (in an further learning process) back to the Multi-Organisational task team and the wider learning network.

4. **External Stakeholder Snowball Learning. S**takeholder snowball methods with external practitioners and excluded citizens (chapter 8) generated qualitative data and engagement of many stakeholders. Stakeholder snowball methods are a proven useful dual mechanism for reaching and engaging both practitioners and excluded citizens. This snowball approach could link out from an individual organisation but there is evidence that counter views can be suppressed so that development of small *multi*-organisational learning teams should apply snowballing approaches which can then resist undue influence of a particular organisational representative. The findings should be reported back to the multi-organisational task team.

5. **University Collaborations.** Academics can act as learning facilitators and also as trainers in *methodological* and *method* expertise to improve the development of the evidence-base *of* practitioners, they could conduct efficient and comprehensive literature surveys to inform initiatives and policies, they could contribute to the development of alternative interpretations. Such facilitation, methodological and method exchange could occur in local government timescales (over months), it would not require great time investment or costs to academics (requiring large-scale external funding) and it could be contributed on a exchange basis (or more occasionally upon an externally-funded or consultancy basis). University collaboration embodying a two-community view of creation or transfer of *substantive* knowledge or geared towards generation of external funding to support research should (in general) be tightly limited as this approach under-utilises the potential for organisational learning and the time-scales to develop new substantive academic knowledge are often beyond local government time-scales of use. Furthermore this knowledge generation capability and skills are then not developed and placed within the organisation.

6. **Web Approaches** . Web approaches can be developed which link practitioners across many organisations. These links can be proactive, they can be set-up to democratically engage practitioners in defining issues to explore, they can be used to give mass reach and involvement to complement social learning processes, they can be used in online surveys and more focused e-interviews, and they gave potential to evaluate (learn from) longer cycles of learning and implementation of policies.

By modifying these approaches to remove their known weaknesses, they can then be combined to mutually reinforce learning. Furthermore the potential interactions between the approaches should be maximised to enhance learning. One example of an interactive integrated approach could be to have a multi-organisational team gain agreements and develop introductory understanding (as in the regeneration team) over a holistic range of issues of relevance to participating stakeholders. This understanding could then be developed within organisations and across them. It can be developed within organisations through practitioners interactions (e.g. research-practitioner-policy interactions within local government) and can be developed across organisations through stakeholder/citizen snowball interviews. Both approaches should interact across the yearly cycle. Findings and recommendations can be reported in briefing notes, which are reported to the multi-organisational team at the year end, and stored in the learning network infrastructure. The learning and learning process is evaluated using a web survey and dissemination of the

learning network. Findings of relevance are disseminated and debated for their potential policy and organisational impacts. The process would restart the following year to develop further investigation if important gaps are present, or could move if understanding has become saturated for particular issues, and could return to them at a later stage when the social situation or population had changed significantly.

A Final Comment

This case study reflects upon six years experience of local governments' ongoing attempts to improve understanding of the population. What the study simply recommends is less action, more learning, through different and tested means, in those situations that are not well understood. But this includes every case where government has urged holistic evidence-based approaches because holistic evidence-based understanding is just a level harder than anything that has been attempted. We cannot move significantly towards this goal by repeating or intensifying past practices. We need improved methods, processes, and stakeholder engagement. We need improved learning interactions between practitioners, within and across organisations, and interactive engagement between interpretation and data. We also need to create and *sustain* a context that will unleash the radical, motivational, and inspirational possibilities of the goal and its stimulation of intelligent collaboration and continuous learning. This has not been achieved despite serious past attempts providing evidence that we need to do it *differently* and of what needs to be done. Past learning approaches can be integrated to overcome individual weaknesses evident in isolation. From the combination and interaction of these approaches a new model of learning emerges and can be developed by practitioners through an embedded action evaluation approach which aims to continually improve holistic evidence-based learning.

So let us not abandon the project of developing holistic evidence-based understanding of the population, but let us acknowledge the difficulty of the task we are setting ourselves and learn from our past attempts. Let us take the time to stimulate and embed learning in governance and let us do this well - but let's not put it off any longer, let's start it today, so we can start learning and improve it tomorrow.

Reflections on Strengths and Weaknesses of the Thesis

Reflecting upon the strengths of the case study I would suggest that it has been a wide-ranging study, developing an informed viewpoint from many vantage points, across departments, organisations, and projects, working with diverse practitioners and managers. It asks, and investigates, a fundamental question of wider relevance in modern governance and policy, beyond the needs of the current local government case study; how can we improve collective holistic evidence-based learning across organisations with multiple stakeholders utilising different types of knowledge and data. Answers to this question might have significant application and any improvements in the process could have impact. The thesis has sought to recommend both significant *and* practicable changes, which are themselves supported by evidence and learning on actual projects with practitioners. It advocates and outlines interacting ongoing learning processes that can utilise past learning in real practitioner settings. It does not (in my view) simply critique the efforts of others from afar, nor advocate simplistic or impractical solutions. It has included creative experimental trials to test some ideas, and it gains some credibility through the extended and varied participant observation work that has been undertaken. So it was generated through real and diverse experiences with practitioners and projects, and is grounded in actual practice and context. There has been enough positive feedback (from those associated with the project in local government and also from academics) to feel that the thesis has made some small positive overall contribution and it has further scope for further implementation, evaluation trials and publication (particularly in chapters 9 and 11, and in the discussion of ways to improve learning). Local government feedback on the overall conclusions and recommendations by key managers has been generally positive and supportive at different levels. This is particularly true of practitioners and middle-level managers who might benefit from the shifts in power that might result from learning which increases their collective voice.

On weaknesses, the final draft of the thesis should have been more widely disseminated, assessed and evaluated in its final form by all practitioners, and their collected comments assembled in an appendix. Any future mainstreaming of recommendations depends critically upon the support of senior managers, committed practitioners, and favourable contexts for development and implementation, but much has changed since the project inception. Such project management changes should have been better managed as an intrinsic aspect of qualitative action research. Discussion of the effect of power politics upon learning is limited, but this clearly influences how organisations learn and possibly why they do not. The viewpoint of this research (lying below senior and middle management levels) means that

discussion of ‘management’ has often conflated both senior management *and* senior political activity (where the political is not been viewed directly by the researcher but is experienced only through contact with management who themselves function in a political context which influences them). This means some of the observations may well give a distorted impression of local government management while not distinguishing this from (nor fully recognising) the political influence. Although there has been some agreement of the findings and conclusions, management may point to difficulty in implementing the recommendations suggesting the effort and engagement required has been underestimated. It is my view however that the effort required may be worth it, the required effort may be overstated and the potential results undervalued. But there are differences of opinion on this point. This also relates to the absence of involvement of organisational development personnel in the study, as some of the issues raised may require a staff development strategy. Equally it was suggested that other public service organisations may not be as willing as local government to adopt such recommendations as they have there own focus (and this uncertainty should be acknowledged even though the view expressed in this thesis is that practitioners are willing to be involved). Finally, there is contention concerning the right balance between the requirements of readers from both local government and academia. I find the thesis does not satisfy either fully, and (to some degree) disappoints both as they have opposing criteria of strength and weakness. Some final feedback from local government managers was critical of the academic language and format, which (they suggested) obscured the important key messages and they implied that the academic theoretical perspectives were mostly irrelevant to the real issues. The analysis needs to be made simpler to engage practitioners and managers. These issues may be correctable in terms of a clearer executive summary, briefing note, or accessible paper for wider circulation among governance managers and practitioners, or by clearer exposition of the need for *new* approaches, but I suspect one thesis will never satisfy both audiences. There should therefore have been *two* separate reports - one for each audience - but the interactive project analysis and write-up were underestimated (by myself) in both time and cost. From the other perspective, some academics have noted significant weaknesses in the literature review suggesting it should have been *extended* and *deepened* rather than reduced. This criticism is partially accepted but can be somewhat offset by placing the action research aims in context. Firstly, the strategy of the work was to have 'theory' emerge in the course of the work, and to 'observe from within practice' before 'imposing or being guided by the external literature'. Secondly, the literature relevant to developing and improving *holistic evidence-based understanding* of the *population* from the view of *governance* and *organizations* is literally massive (although very little exists on the whole combined aim). It includes; the substantive findings, methodologies, methods, and theories of the many social sciences, the significant psychological literature on individual, collective, and

organizational learning, and all the work on governance and government initiatives, public service management, cross-organizational and cross-disciplinary working. There may always be omissions – and that is compatible with this thesis. Thirdly, it took me considerable time to find and integrate the kind of 'applicable theoretical' ideas I required to act as the framework for the thesis. (I strongly felt this framework needed to be acceptable in both academic *and* practitioner communities, but that it should *also* connect to my experience in other diverse disciplines, and therefore it necessarily would be different from the focused academic or local government approaches I had encountered). Finally, I admit to being sceptical of many of the literature articles written without direct collaborative experience of the context and practices of the many stakeholders working within local government, and this has limited detailed exploration of the academic journal literature. However, despite these retorts, there were indeed *specific* literature omissions noted by the referees which I should draw explicit attention to. In particular: The Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy's Skills and Knowledge Programme, the Social Exclusion Unit's series of PAT Reports, Community Care Reform, NR strategy, and Sure Start, and the former literature on evidence-based practice associated with the case study Council (e.g. Blackman, 1994, and also the papers of Patsy Healey and Rose Gilroy on City Challenge and the Cruddis Park Development Trust for instance). These specific literature omissions are fully acknowledged.

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13 APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: STUDY INTERVIEWEES AND PARTICIPANTS

Newcastle City Council Managers and Staff

Brian Ham, Director, Directorate of Enterprise, Environment and Culture (DEEC)
John Lee, Assistant Director, Community and Housing Directorate (C&H)
George Kelly, Manager, Social Policy and Regeneration Manager (C&H)
Michael Crilly, Manager, Planning Department (DEEC)
Lorraine Johnston, Manager Youth Exclusion Team (DEEC)
The City Council Youth Exclusion Research Team
Norma Murphy, Manager of Community Co-ordinators (C&H)
Rob Gillie, Community Co-ordinator (C&H)
Annabel McKinnon, Community Co-ordinator (C&H)
Karen Laing, Community Co-ordinator (C&H)
Heather Davidson, Community Co-ordinator (C&H)
Sheena Ramsey, Manager of Policy and Research, Strategic Services Directorate (SS)
Geoff Quicke, Assistant Manager of Policy Research, (SS)
Chris Stephens, Statistician, Research Services, (SS)
Jon Powers, Research Officer, Research Services, (SS)
Debbie Tyler, Research Manager, Educational Performance Unit, Education Directorate (E)
Andrew Baker, Statistician, Education Performance Unit, (E)
Aiden Oswell, Policy Officer, (C&H)
Geoff Walker, IT Initiatives (C&H)
Joanne Berry, Research Officer, Tyne and Wear Research.
Kate Israel, Manager, Social Policy, (C&H)
Dr. Rajshree Shirbhate, Researcher, Research Services (SS)

Local Politicians

Cllr Joyce McCarthy
Cllr Nigel Todd
Cllr John O'Shea
Cllr Peter Wilson
Cllr George Johnson
Cllr Terry Cooney
Cllr Isabelle Cooney

External Participants

Diane Humberstone, Manager of the Newcastle East Employment Service
Barbara Peacock, Head of Ashlyns School for school-aged mothers
Geoff Lough, Manager, Parkway school for excluded pupils
Jan Brewis, Information Section Manager, Employment Service.
Mike Booth, Head of Benfield School
Two Senior Police Officers, Northumbria Police Force (anonymous)
A Citizenship teacher in local comprehensive school (anonymous)
East End 16 and 17s at the Newcastle East Employment centre
Byker Residents Focus Group
Pupils of Parkway, Ashylns, and Heaton Manor Schools

APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION SOURCES

Participant Observation and Reflective Practice were research methods involved in this study. Each method required source projects to observe and reflect upon. The list of such projects is given below. Each of these projects gave different perspectives on the research question of how understandings are (and can be) developed within local government and how these can be improved upon.

- City-University Liaison Projects (1997-2000)
- Multi-Organisational Task Team (Aug 1999-May 2000)
- EU Project: Novel Methods for Understandings and Engaging Excluded Groups (March 2000-2001)
- Experience of varied local government managers
- EU Project: Youth Exclusion Research Team (March 2001-2002)
- Community Participation Strategy Working Group, (2000)
- Research and Participation Interactive Learning Trails (2000)
- EU Project: Peer Review for European Sustainable Urban Development (Oct 2002-present)

There follows a brief description of each of these sources.

Source 1: City-University Liaison Project. A project to identify and develop links and collaborative working between the city council and a local university. It included links across many local government and university departments. It involved identification of interests common to both organisations and the setting up of meetings to explore the potential for collaboration. It began as a six month pilot, and ran for a further two years with joint funding, the author was the city-university liaison officer reporting to managers in both organisations. This project involved multiple meetings and contacts across both the city council and Newcastle University to identify and develop joint projects and initiatives. Although the development of understanding of the population was not always an explicit aim, it was often an implicit one. The project gives an example of holistic working (typically between several academics and several practitioners across both organisations) and therefore is relevant to the research question.

Source 2: Multi-Organisational Task Team (Regeneration & Information).

The 'Going for Growth' initiative is the long-term regeneration (20 year) plan for the City which was developed through a dedicated initiative and formation of a multi-disciplinary team of which the author was a members. It aimed to generate radical, holistic, and evidence-based strategies and policies, to achieve regeneration of the city. Within this wider initiative there was a smaller project team set-up to provide socio-economic information for the regeneration initiative. This team comprised members from each of the local government directorates with external members of the health and police authorities. It had a remit to work for 3 month to produce a quantitative evidence-based view of the vitality (socio-economic circumstances) and viability (trends) of population within the city. Developing holistic evidence-based information was an explicit aim of the project and therefore it is directly relevant in considering the research questions. The overall regeneration project further had the aim to deliver holistic evidence-based solutions and therefore it is directly relevant to the current project. The author was employed as a university researcher/participant observer working on this project. The aim was to contribute to the research process directly while also observing the team process to identify issues and suggest possible improvements.

Source 3: EU: Social Exclusion Project on novel methods to understand and engage excluded groups

To gain an external perspective on developing understanding of the population. The author participated within a European funded project; dimensions of social exclusion. In the UK this project ran for approximately one year and involved interviews or workshops and included around 50 people who had some degree of membership with excluded groups. Here a dual role of developing methods and networks was part of the project (as well as gathering content through testing of networks and methods). As it was learnt from preceding projects that ward based meetings and consultations events delivered limited understanding of the population. New methods were needed. It was decided that methods should be tested with excluded groups. Alternative participation processes and purposes had been identified as an issue through reflection on other projects (source1) and through on discussions with officers and managers. This research gave an opportunity to try to develop new methodologies and networks to reach those normally excluded from participation.

Excluded groups could not be expected to contribute to the first research question of how local government came to understand its population, but the fact that novel networks and trials were being created, gave insight into the question of how local government

understanding could be improved upon. In particular it was hypothesised that improved understanding could be achieved by engaging and involving normally inaccessible groups in the identification, definition and development of understandings of local issues of importance to them and to the city as a whole, and that this would be more holistic and create an evidence-base. Furthermore it was argued that the use of visual recording devices might help record and develop understanding. Reflection and participant observation on this project serve to test this hypothesis.

The project investigated and developed processes and methods to reach, gain participation and to gain a view of certain socially excluded groups on their understanding of the wider social and physical environment. The approach would attempt to be holistic in the sense that people would be asked to give opinions of the city and neighbourhoods, in an open-ended way, and we would ask about the biographical life experiences and understandings of the people involved. The work was conducted from within local government in the context of gain participation of 'hard-to-reach groups'. Therefore the primary exclusion examined and addressed was participative exclusion. The research gives a complementary perspective to the other components of this study, and gives further insight into the development of holistic evidence-based understandings of the communities in the city. Key trials with different groups of stakeholders were identified and involved in the course of the project

Source 3a: A community and activists learning event with local government officers, statistical maps
Source 3b: Unemployed 16 and 17 years olds, in a series of three events at East end employment service
Source 3c: Pupils at a school exclusion unit in focus group sessions
Source 3d: Pupils at special unit for school-aged mothers interviews with all pupils over two days with two interviewers.
Source 3e: A group of 10 year 3 school children from Heaton Manor School and in depth study with two older school children (6^{th} former and a year 4 pupil) looking at the possibilities of developing mutual understanding through citizenship classes.

The aim of the overall project was to develop networks and methodologies to engage communities in helping local government develop understanding. To test various networks and methodologies to achieve this. To gain views on local and city issues affecting the participants. From the perspective of this study, participant observation gave a perspective on methodologies for engaging the public in developing understandings, how excluded groups could be engaged in this process.

Source 4: Local Government Managers. In the course of the applied and action research work within local government I have been managed directly or have worked within managed projects with the following local government managers on noted local government projects:

John Lee, Assistant Director of Community and Housing (City-University Collaboration)
Brian Ham, Director, Enterprise Environment and Culture (Overall Management)
Michael Crilly, Manager of Urban Design Unit (two EU Exclusion projects)
George Kelly, Head of Social Policy and Regeneration (Multi-Organisation Task Teams)
Stephen Savage, Head of Public Health and Environmental Protection (Line Management)
Norma Murphy, Manager of Community Co-ordinators, (Participation Strategy Group)
Geoff Quicke, Head of Research Services (Regeneration Information Team)
Roger Edwardson, Assistant Director of Education (Education Training and Employment)
Tom Cosh, Head of Economic Development (Education Training and Employment)
Jill Preston. Director of Community and Housing (Multi-Organisation Task Teams)
Neil Cuthbert, Manager within Public Health and Environment (Top Ten Issues)
Allen Creedy, Head of LA21 team (EU Multi-City Peer Review Project)

And therefore can draw upon direct observation of over 11 management approaches and styles (there were also university managers). The study draws upon many informal conversations, experiences and observations with local government managers.

Source 5. Youth Exclusion Team Research. One year EU funded project to employ excluded youth to trial self-and peer group research. Several young adults between 16-26 years with experience of social exclusion issues were employed as 'youth researchers' for one year to give an insider perspective on these issues. They were trained in basic methods and chose research topics to work upon. The authors' role was of that of researcher and training in research methods, working with two city council colleagues and project managers.

Source 6: Community Participation Working Group Project. A one year part-time project involving working group comprising representatives from all six directorates within the city council. Work included an audit of all existing community participation work across the local authority and the development of a new community participation strategy for the local authority. The author was employed as participant observer and as one of directorate representatives on this working group. The project provided an overview of the different processes of participation underway in the city, and the ways in which these were used (or not used) to develop understanding of the population.

Source 7: Researcher-Practitioner Interactive Learning Trials. In recognition of the separation of quantitative and qualitative understanding in local government and the separation between researchers and practitioners a trial was developed whereby researchers (with city wide and ward-based statistical information) would meet with community co-ordinators (with experiential and interpretative local understanding) in a series of 'learning meetings'. In the first meeting basic information was presented and discussed, interpretations were requested and in some cases offered on linkage between different features observed or upon trends within the city. Each community co-ordinator had a particular interest in their own areas but could contribute to the wider discussion. Simplistic interpretations of the data were corrected by research staff who drew attention to subtleties in the data collection and presentation process. The first meeting ended with a requests for data the community co-ordinators would wish to see in a follow up meeting, and also requests for further investigation to explore various interpretations suggested (to rule out or confirm these). It was generally agreed a second meeting should take place. The co-ordinators wished that more such events would take place upon as a matter of routine, and they began to challenge aspects of current policy and approach, offering different interpretations of the data presented (and upon which policy had been decided). The research staff were enthusiastic for their work to be utilised and seemeed to be interested in investigating some of the interpretations further.

A second 'learning meeting' was set up when further data was presented, some of the enquiries (but not most) were answered by the research staff, and further dialogue on the meaning of data, and the current policies of local government developed. At the end of the final meeting participants (around 10 in total) were asked if they would like see such initiatives developed. The community co-ordinators did so and their manager wished this to occur. The research staff where also enthusiastic but felt it needed time to be allotted to the investigations in between meetings (which had been agreed for this limited trial only). This trial demonstrated the novelty of such initiatives, confirming the absence of such practitioner collaborations, and systematic learning processes. It further demonstrated the willingness and capacity of the practitioners to learn together, if given the time by managers (which unfortunately was not an ongoing situation). Interestingly the community co-ordinators would quickly ask questions the researchers they could not immediately answer, but the researchers seemed interested to investigate further. The atmosphere of thinking independently and collectively with different and complementary perspectives seemed to be well-received, the community co-ordinators and their manager expressed wish to develop this. It was noted that the absence of higher managers and politicians encouraged alternative viewpoints to the official one. Although the trial had no action focus, or decision orientation, it was not

regarded as a 'talking shop' (a killer phrase in local government), it appeared that mutual exchange and generation of general background understanding was welcomed by those working with communities (they after all would be better informed) and also by researchers (who saw their knowledge and analysis skills engaging with front-line staff. Participating in and observing this trial, strongly suggested that there would be value in such egalitarian mutually-informing connection between those with experiential knowledge of communities and those with statistical knowledge of the same communities. Nevertheless this was a short trial; it did not develop and record interpretations (this would have required many more meetings, and a learning process, with data and interpretations integrated and interacting). However those participating, and those facilitating the trial viewed it as a potential solution to be adapted and developed. It gave evidence that research and (practitioner) participation and learning can be combined in a motivational mix, if supported by management, and if practitioners are empowered to develop their own questions and answers collectively.

Source 8. European Peer Reviews Use of Peer Reviews to assesses the performance of cities in sustainable development. This included analysis of socio-economic information on European cities, combined with qualitative interview data. This is a three year project to develop a peer review methodology to assess the performance of Local Government in European Cities in sustainability defined in environmental, social, and economic terms. The method includes the formation of peer review teams of several people who then visit a city for one week and interview key internal and external stakeholders. The methodology has been developed and tested in nine European cities. The author is employed to evaluate and action research the process to suggest improvements. The methodology has included participant observation on the management team, steering group, on review teams in cities, and on city co-ordination for an incoming review team, web surveys of participants, e-mail and telephone interviews. The project enabled (i) a European perspective upon developing understanding of a local government population, and (ii) a perspective on multi-cultural peer group methodologies for achieving this. The role is now one of formal project evaluation. Participant evaluation and web-based surveys are dominant methodologies being used and tested.

Source 9: Data and Text Sources collected and examined:

Newcastle City Profiles, Newcastle Residents Survey, Newcastle Plan A&B, Community Participation Strategy, Community Planning: A White Paper Working together with Communities, Newcastle Vitality and Viability Model Documentation, Going for Growth Material, Statistical Data and GIS maps (multiple examples)

APPENDIX 3: DATA SOUGHT, COLLECTED AND GENERATED

Data was then obtained from interviews, reflective practice, participant observation, secondary research sources, and investigation of alternative perspectives and meanings. Data includes experiences and qualitative responses to questions in interviews. It includes observations in projects and the developing products of the projects, and notes made during the projects.

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviewees were first asked:

- To describe their role and responsibilities
- What they knew and needed to know about the city population
- How they (or their teams, sections, political parties) developed understanding of the population (which sources, subjects, methods, processes, people and communities)
- Were there other ways they come to understand the population (repeated until no further responses)
- How they thought local government understanding could be improved upon
- How they thought it should be improved upon

The interviewer noted any points to follow-up upon in an unstructured way

2. Project data from reflective practice and participant observation

Data was primarily generated through observations in working environments; observations of processes, people, and products. The products of a project (both in development and in final form) were particularly useful data sources. Other data included behaviours, experiences, utterances, management instructions and approaches, records of working, input and output documents and tools, implicit observations of colleagues, managers, teams and self, and the interactions between them. They were recorded in reflective notes, often written up as bullet points, paragraphs of reflection prompted by observations, or in the style of council memos or reports.

3. **Data collected from interviewee, participant observation, or reflective practice**

- An overview of statistical and qualitative data, information, knowledge, or understanding of the population received, collected, used, or generated
- The mechanisms, methods and processes, used for developing understanding of the population
- The mechanisms and methods *not* used for developing understanding (noted)
- The purposes of developing understandings
- Whether participants gathered quantitative data, qualitative data
- How data was interpreted, and by whom
- What were the problems in developing understanding
- Strengths and weaknesses in current understandings, processes, data, methods, perspectives, individuals, sections departments, and the organisation
- Issues and opportunities for developing or improving understanding
- Fit of aims, objectives, and outcomes
- Particular population groups or communities not well understood
- Substantive areas on which understanding was wanted
- Sources of information and interpretation
- Use of systematic learning processes
- Recording of understanding
- Availability and access of this understanding
- Means to challenge this understanding
- Use of spatial and temporal understanding
- Spatial and temporal resolution
- Development of interpretations and meanings
- Relative use of description or explanation
- Whose explanations are given
- Who is involved in generating meaning

4. Examples of additional experiential data from PO Perspective

- People employed on projects,
- Funders and purposes
- Objectives and approaches
- Differential behaviours and expressed feelings of project members
- Issues and areas of uncertainty and ignorance
- Issues which created tensions and disagreements between members and management
- Causes and resolutions of conflicts
- Processes utilised and not
- Management styles
- Team dynamics
- Change observed over time
- Project learning
- Results and effects of attempts to change aspects of the social system from within, and the responses and viewpoints of others
- Actual changes due to projects

Data from Secondary Data and Research

The focus of interest was not specifically the detailed content, but gave data on the following questions:

- What type of data and research was used?
- What was available?
- How could it be accessed?
- How was it presented and represented?

APPENDIX 4: POSSIBLE LEARNING METHODS UNUSED

There many mechanisms that are not significantly used to improve understandings could be labelled academic, learning, creative, highly-participative, and technological. Such methods therefore represent potential opportunities to develop understanding. This list included:

- Anthropological placements, observation, and investigation
- Social science and advanced statistical approaches
- Experimental approaches (e.g. social psychology)
- Simulations or models
- Historical investigations
- Evidence and learning seminars; internal and external
- Mutual sharing and learning processes for internal and external practitioners or communities and their representatives
- Teaching or induction methods to convey current understandings
- Books, essays, or course materials to record and communicate understandings
- Interview mechanisms with community sectors and practitioners
- Interactive digital, web-based, telephone or video conferencing mechanisms
- Organisational access to city workers as stakeholders
- School, college, and university access to young people
- Community members as co-researchers
- Regular or frequent presentations of city understanding
- Availability and circulation of national/regional understandings comparisons and contexts
- Programmes of secondments and exchanges to explicitly develop shared understandings.
- Explicit recording dissemination and cumulative use of local understandings
- Regular development of understandings (rather than re-sample or re-establish)
- Explicit recording of expectations based on understandings and the evaluation and review of these in the light of developments to correct and improve understandings

These alternative methods may be of some use to develop additional understanding.

APPENDIX 5: USE OF THE WEB

Use of the Web
Stakeholders Can utilise web to engage larger numbers of people in defining issues of importance and can democratically agree these through voting; alternatively can conduct mass surveys of practitioners to support learning and evaluation of this or other initiatives or to simply engage through e-mails and web sites. Particularly useful for engaging practitioners across organisations as many are familiar with web technology and are connected. **Current Understanding** With mixed quantitative and qualitative questions, understanding on the web is then both recorded and more widely accessible; some use in identifying and releasing data **Context and Goals** Contact and communication across large numbers of people; gathering of information from these groups; participant evaluation and aid to continuous learning; can democratically define issues to address (at practitioner level) or pre-define agenda thereby empower practitioners. **Developing Understanding** Can utilise software to engage large numbers of people in defining issues of importance and can democratically agree these through voting; tendency for staff to focus upon internal issues rather than external issues if not stated as an aim and when management are the receivers of issues; useful to support workshops and meetings; Practitioners in public organisations can evaluate programmes and initiatives through participant evaluation or action evaluation; practitioners perhaps well placed and willing to evaluate initiatives and policies from the inside. Supports democratic submission of views concerning improvements to learning processes. Has potential to engage citizens in future.

APPENDIX 6: INTERVIEW-MAPPING METHODS

Methods	Description	Evaluation
Open Recorded Inquiry	Use of inquiry. Asking open-ended questions on areas they prefer and dislike with follow-up (why, how, elaborate prompts). Recorded and transcribed. Looking for good and bad, worse and better, and explanations and understandings.	Able to work even with non-communicative interviewees. Can be rich in information provided but time-consuming to transcribe. Participants generally receptive. Avoids issue and service-led constraints and is holistic in the sense of being citizen rather than organisationally focused.
Mapping Area and Issues Geographical and Wider Social Environment	Use of area maps and colouring pens to prompt dialogue on issues identifying better and worse areas. Asking why these views and generating a picture of their geographical environment. Brings out both physical and social environment.	A useful method to quickly gain view of perceptions of area, main issues and evidence for these. Insight into spatial variations on social conditions and issues of importance to interviewee. (Can also stimulate discussion of short-term trends.) Also works with small groups although need mechanisms to reflect disagreements arising in mapping process Valued by interviewee also.
Life-Line mapping History and Organisational Environment	Work on a line from birth to present and into the near future. Use this to elicit and map out key life stages events and changes. Also include interactions with organisations.	Useful to gain temporal insights into life history, including significant influencing events and their causal and consequence links; also particularly useful for investigating interactions with organisations and views of this contact. Potential use in mapping future aspirations, possibilities and expectations.
Social Networks Mapping Close Social Environment	Mental model of Networks. Represent interviewee in centre of page, investigate immediate important social networks of family and friends nearby, and then the wider social networks further out. Enquire about these and map out	Conveys immediate social environment and influences. Able to investigate a wider group of people through this. Gives further means to investigate
Cognitive Mapping of Issues, Causes and Consequence Personal Beliefs about Issues and Environment	Record main issues. Take key issues identified and ask interviewee to consider causes of these (and causes of causes), also the consequences of issues (and their consequences). Look for patterns and themes and check these against views.	Useful as means of recording and mapping beliefs and views. Seemed to have some educational self-reflection value. Shows delayed effects. Better for small groups rather than large. Difficult to integrate. Questionable validity other than representing immediate opinions. Possibly better in small groups. Useful to identify beliefs multiple causes, consequences and circles of influence. Messy but issues can be prioritised