



A Two-sided Message

I helped to write a grant application for a small project for our group to look at people who lived in private rented houses and to help find ways that they can improve the house or reduce the amount of energy that they needed to use. We trained about 25 volunteers to deliver on understanding what people's situation looked like and on advice that they could offer. So what was interesting, the money came from the government and the government grant was for a project to investigate how you connect with people who don't own the house in which they live.

I was keen to be involved in a community effort, but my motivations were around people who were in fuel poverty which made it difficult for them to keep the house warm enough, and you might suffer ill health as a result. I grew up in an area of the country where there was a very strong reliance on coal, because that was a natural resource. The quality of the housing wasn't good and it's very damp there, so you had lots of lung complaints. You know, that's the sort of thing I've suffered from. We've moved on a lot in terms of housing quality since then, but it's been unequal. So I think that the divergence between the people who are doing well and the ones who are not doing so well has become wider. So that's the real motivator for me: we still haven't brought everyone along with us on this journey.

And the fact that about half of the population also seems to change every year in the area, so many students come and go. Because it's transient there are very few people to make a stable kind of effort that lasts for more than a few months. So I felt that people in the community who lived there for longer, maybe they almost had to take on that responsibility to help make the commitment. So that was my motivation.

One of the challenges here is about half of the people live in rented houses, so they have very little control over the place where they live. The houses are quite an old type of house so they're not very good at keeping warm, and it struck me that they need a level of support from government programs. I looked at some of the programs and it was quite rightly delivered, partly to houses that had low income, that was fine, but a lot of the other measures ignored the fact that there were high heating costs because of Victorian housing. There's a lot of emphasis on preserving the area, how nice it looks and so on, but there's a lot of cost to people.

The high and low [of the experience] was the same incident: when I got to present some findings to the Secretary of State. I thought that was a fantastic opportunity to say, here's some money that we've received from your department and here are the findings. The low point was that I was the last

person to speak in that slot, with two minutes left for me to speak and he's looking at his watch wondering when his ministerial car is going to be ready. So I don't believe I grabbed his attention.

That was 2012. At the time I think climate was not very high on people's agenda. It was more about conservation of resources and sustainability. But some people recognized that just alleviating fuel poverty and making it more comfortable for people and the associated health benefits were very important. So it was almost a way of engaging people, not about a climate conversation, but then subsequently showing how some of these actions help you to reduce your use of fossil fuels, and therefore go on to help the climate. But yeah, it was a two-sided message really.

I felt some frustration that people would say, "No, climate needs to be the only message we deliver," and I would suggest that for many people in a given week, they have enough other worries that they can't put that top of the list. But if you're helping them with one of those worries, and as a result of that they've got more space to think about the broader issue, then I think that's a beneficial outcome for everyone.

I'm a strong advocate of trying to work in an area, not piecemeal one by one, and also that involving trusted parties, like community groups, alongside the local authority, is the right model for doing that. The tension for me was, there was a strong desire for people who own their own houses to find solutions that work for them. Whereas my belief was it needed to make sure that even people who were disenfranchised and couldn't do it themselves - because for example, the house was owned by a landlord - that we still found ways to enable that.

There were some tensions, however, because this was a project that was funded and people needed to do work on the project. I was actually paid to provide support and technical input to the project and yet this is a voluntary organization. So, I felt I almost owed a debt back to the group because I was just working as a freelancer at the time. I felt I actually needed to put more back into it to say thank you for the money that I earned, but maybe that's a self-motivation.

I think I have since then recognized you have to have a personal boundary as to how much of yourself you're able to give over to something. I've gone through quite a lot of internal turmoil, because you can't be perfect. I can't expect myself to live up to every single one of the values all the time.

Actually, it was a lovely lady who came up to me during one of the One Planet workshops that Bioregional ran, and said, "You did great stuff in collectively in your group, how can we restart it?" and you know, it took a year of talking about it. And then we found a few more people and gradually, things started to happen again. But the challenge for me was not to take on the burden of organizing or doing things myself, I needed to feel that there were other people who were willing to do more.

I would say, I've met a lot of people in our group over time who've been very motivated and wanted to improve their understanding of what difference they can make, and through being in that organization felt empowered to make some difference. So it's a mechanism to allow people to work together, come together and jointly find solutions to problems and I think then go away to the next stage in their life and take something with them.

I've allowed myself not to feel bad about the things I've not done, but try to be positive about where we've been able to do something.