Metadata Record

Local Authorities & Sustainable Energy Innovations

ESRC Grant Number: ES/N017765/1

**Project Summary**:

Both energy and political landscapes are changing in the UK, but so far no analysis has considered how these movements towards greater decentralisation relate to one another. Indeed, local authorities are becoming increasingly involved in enabling and providing sustainable energy programmes whilst, at the same time, some are applying for and securing devolution deals. A number of academic scholars and policy analysts have argued that decentralising energy will be vital in securing popular buy-in to sustainable energy transitions through greater civic participation, whilst others point towards the power of the local in delivering better-attuned services. This research project will reveal the details of how these two decentralisation movements, one political and one more technical, interact with one another in practice by exploring and mapping five local authority sustainable energy programmes and critically examining their relationships with central government.

**Methods**:

Mixed methods:

* 6 case study local authorities
* Analysis of energy and climate policy documents; and of academic, consultancy and NGO reports and surveys – this took place before and after the placements and interviews
* 3, 2-day immersive placements (at a specialist local sustainable energy NGO, and two local authorities)
* 47 semi-structured interviews with elite stakeholders (i.e. local authority sustainable energy, and other, personnel, specialist NGOs, community bodies and Westminster civil servants). The interviews took place – mostly in person but sometimes over the phone - between 2017 and 2018
* Two rounds of dedicated workshops for local authorities (Chatham House rules), in 2018 and 2019, for knowledge building, exchange and sharing
* At each stage of the empirical analysis a clearer picture emerged of the socio-technical conditions under which UK local authorities were devising and implementing sustainable energy policies, as well as how they worked to make the most of opportunities and overcome barriers.

**Why Methods Were Chosen**:

The above methods were chosen for the following reasons:

* *Relationship to conceptual approach*:

Methodological decisions have been guided by the conceptual lenses applied and by the explanatory objectives of the research. The conceptual lenses trained the empirical focus on better understanding the many, often (see below) fast moving, technical and political contexts within which local authorities innovate, adopt and implement sustainable energy policy. As such, it was appropriate to choose methodological approaches that would lead to deeper understandings of how local decisions are affected by various contexts, not least devolutions and energy decentralisation, and how they adapt and adopt new pathways. Placements, semi-structured interviews and knowledge exchange workshops proved extremely useful – not just for building up the data and information upon which the project would grow – but also for knowledge exchange between local authorities engaged in the innovative area of sustainable energy policymaking.

* *Type of policy area and availability of information*:

Methodological choices were also made in relation to the *type* of policy area studied. The main project aim was to extend understandings of local authority sustainable energy policymaking, which is an explicitly new and fast evolving policy area. In addition, the project sought greater understanding of how fast-moving contexts were influencing local authorities’ capacity to pursue sustainable energy and the types of choices made.

There was little primary literature on English and Welsh local government sustainable energy when the project started. In order to understand the overall landscape of local authority sustainable energy the project initially relied on (emerging) secondary literatures: think tank consultation documents, NGO reports, and local organisations. Interviews were then used as a method of building up knowledge about local authority sustainable energy policymaking, how processes inter-relate with local and national material and political contexts, as well as to access elite practitioner discourses and explore tricky issues of power and politics (Burnham et al 2008). Semi-structured interviews, immersive placements and knowledge exchange event, are particularly effective in exploring complex phenomenon, like sustainable energy transitions, and emerging, fast-moving areas of policy such as climate change (Denscombe 2010; Flick et al 2004).

* *The nature of information being sought*:

The unit of analysis is the local, or combined, authority itself, and the project concentrated on authorities considered either to be leaders or up-and-coming in the field of sustainable energy. These were identified through the initial analysis of central government, local government association and industry literatures relating to local energy transitions, with authorities regularly identified as particularly active in sustainable energy selected. This reflects the project’s interest in better understanding local government sustainable energy policymaking, which is best done by analysing those active in this area (with more experience).

The case studies represent a geographically and demographically diverse set, incorporating five urban authorities, one rural authority (Cornwall) and two mixed areas (Swindon, West Midlands). The selection of six case studies is representative of local authority administrative types in England and Wales. Although the selection does not contain any non-unitary district authorities, it does represent a diverse selection of authorities active in sustainable energy. The selection of six cases within the same national jurisdiction aids analysis of the interaction between national political context and local policymaking. All interviews took the form of extended face-to-face conversations and were loosely structured around a set of questions about sustainable energy policy choices, local and national politics, and how energy systems were changing. This less formal approach allowed for interviewees to offer their expertise unrestricted by too much pre-supposition on behalf of the interviewer.

**Ethics & Consent**:

Some of the subject matter discussed during qualitative interviews, and during placements at local authorities and NGOs, was politically sensitive in nature, and interviewees generally preferred anonymity. This was, in particular, when their answers might be referred to in written text format. For this reason, and because interviewees should be given the opportunity speak freely about sustainable energy, devolution, and all aspects of their political relationships, great care was taken to anonymise interviewees and not to directly reference specific interviews in publications, and direct quotations were avoided. Interview data was carefully managed to ensure that confidentiality was safeguarded, and that the disclosure of identities was avoided. The physical information (answers to questions in interviews and on placements) was stored in a secure location, and interviews were numbered, with each interviewee given a number code. The index of codes/interviews was kept separately. Non-disclosure of data was agreed in order to obtain open and frank views, and keep trust.

Interviewees were asked to give informed consent to the interview, and to the content of the interviews being analysed during the course of the project to inform project outputs (i.e. publications and policy briefings). Interviews were kept confidential, and participation was offered on the basis of anonymity, in accordance with relevant ethical frameworks (ESRC 2015; Warwick 2021). Interviewees could choose to withdraw from the study at any point in time, and the PI talked each interviewee through their answers, and how the PI interpreted those answers for the purposes of publications and/or blogs.

Please see ethics and consent forms used – attached separately. These were University of Warwick approved forms.

**Bibliography:**

Burnham P.; Lutz, K.G.; Grant, W. (2008) *Research Methods in Politics*. Second Edi. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke

Denscombe, M. (2010) *The Good Research Guide: for Small-scale Social Research Projects*. Open University Press.

ESRC (2015) *Framework for Research Ethics*. Available here: <https://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/guidance-for-applicants/esrc-framework-for-research-ethics-2015/>

Flick, U.; von Kardoff, E.; Stienke, I. (2004) *A companion to qualitative research*. Sage Publications.

Warwick (2019) *Codes of Practice & Policies*. Available here: <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/ris/research_integrity/code_of_practice_and_policies/>