

Towards Sustainable Consumption

**An ethnographic study
of knowledge work and organisational action
in public policy development and implementation**

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Summary

This thesis is an empirical investigation of public policy-making and government action in the UK. It presents the findings of an ethnographic study of the work practices of a team of middle-ranking civil servants in DEFRA, the UK government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Analysis relies on data generated over a period of one year of research placement in the Department's headquarters in London, during which the author witnessed, and to an extent participated to, the everyday activities of policy officers.

The inquiry is framed around the problem of establishing empirical grounds for the study of public policy-making. The methodology the study uses combines elements of traditional ethnographic studies of work in organisations with the more recent theoretical background informing workplace studies. The interest is first and foremost micro-sociological, with a view of capturing language, discursive practices and practical reasoning and analyse them as local, ongoing accomplishment of office work.

An objective of the inquiry is to detail the status of 'sustainable consumption' policies in the United Kingdom during the period of participant observation (2011-2012). The analysis clarifies upon which formal or informal sources of knowledge policymakers drew in designing policies and interventions, and it describes the tasks and the work associated with policy development. Through the analysis of this 'policy work', the thesis also provides a larger picture of the ways policies and policy options are progressed or dismissed by the government through the work of Departments. Practices of project management, risk management and knowledge brokerage are considered and examined.

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Introduction

Introduction

These introductory pages set the scene for the analytical work I do in the rest of the thesis. Briefly, I present the source of data, the focus of the analysis, the research questions I investigate, and the methodological stance I adopt to answer them. I pursue two arguments in parallel: firstly, I argue that the study of public policy has much to gain by placing at the centre of the analytical stage the *work practices* of public administrators; and secondly, that there exist the grounds to establish a kind of policy research that capitalises on such a stance, and that prioritises documenting and describing over generalising and theorising.

The objective of the thesis

This study is a contribution to the understanding of the nature and the organisation of the work associated with the development of public policies in the UK. In between 2010 and 2012, I spent around twelve months observing middle-ranking officers in a 'policy area' of the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and, to an extent, participating in the ongoing affairs of the office. The study is based on data and materials I gathered during that time. While the study concentrates on the development of a specific class of environmental policies – the one pursued by the officers I sat with – the central objective of the research is to provide a more general and encompassing description of *how* the policy-makers I observed in the Department carried out the behind-the-scenes office activities associated with devising governmental initiatives and social programmes. The aim of the study is to offer a descriptive account of these activities: the analysis of the data engages with, and renders into a text, the lived experience of “policy workers” (Colebatch, 2005:22) at work. In the Chapters composing this thesis I show what policy-making involves at the level of the everyday working life of practitioners, and how these practitioners come to conceptualise some aspects of the activities they undertake. To do so, I adopt a

phenomenological perspective and a naturalistic approach to document and study the concrete features of the activities I had occasion to witness and get involved in. Hence, the account is based on my direct experience of “policy work” (cf. Harper, 1998; Page and Jenkins, 2005; Colebatch *et al.*, 2010; Maybin, 2013) and builds on the progressive familiarisation, albeit limited, with the practices handled in the organisational settings where the work under analysis took place (cf. Dingwall, 1981; Button and Sharrock, 2009). I shall spend some more time in these introductory remarks to comment on the kind of analytical treatment I applied to the materials I gathered, which will lead me to discuss the reasons the account I offer represents a contribution to the study of environmental policy-making, and somewhat more widely, to the understanding of the functioning of government agencies in twenty-first century Britain.

The research strategy

In developing the chapters composing this volume, I had two intertwined analytical interests in mind. I shall develop them separately. The first was to create a text through which all readers – regardless of their specialist knowledge, experience or expertise on matters of public policy and administration – could gather a sense of what is distinctive about working for government in a ministerial Department. My interest, in this sense, is to arrive at a characterisation of a specific class of professionals, the ones that in the UK are part of the Civil Service and are employed by government Departments. If we go with existing descriptions, a servant of the Her Majesty's Government (HMG) at the level this investigation is concerned with is regarded simultaneously as an advisor to ministers (Gains and Stoker, 2011), a public manager (Noordegraaf, 2000), a political administrator (Heclo and Wildavsky, 1974; Rhodes, 2016), an official (Marsh *et al.*, 2001), and perhaps using a label charged with negative connotations, a bureaucrat (Peters and Pierre, 2003). While nomenclatures abound, as do normative and prescriptive statements around the roles these professionals cover, the contemporary literature on policy-making recognises a lack of empirical evidence to substantiate a description of the profession, and enlists only few studies that can be considered close observations of these practitioners at work (Tombs, 2003; Wagenaar, 2004; Page and Jenkins, 2005; Noordegraaf, 2010; Stevens, 2011; Howlett and Wellstead, 2011; Hill, 2013). In this sense, the thesis wishes to make the work of policy

makers “visible” (Suchman, 1995; Harper *et al.*, 2000; Szymanski and Whalen, 2011) by discovering and describing *what* tasks they carry out and *how* they accomplish them, or more simply, how they get the activities constituting policy work done.

To pursue this objective, I choose not to adhere to a technical terminology to proceed with my description, but to make all the possible efforts to offer my observations using ordinary language (cf. Billig, 2013; Banton, 2016), so to preserve the *ordinariness* of the work under investigation (cf. Lynch, 1998:187). I give to the words 'ordinary', and 'ordinariness' both a semantic and stylistic sense – after Orwell (1946) – and a methodological one: I place a particular emphasis on the 'ordinary' – everyday, conventional, customary – ways in which practitioners talk and write to each other about what they are doing (cf. Randall and Sharrock, 2008:11). This intention translates into a systematic procedure to engage with the vernacular language used by the practitioners constituting the group I studied, and an attempt to unpack the language-in-use so to describe the natural organisation of the activities and the competencies required by practitioners to produce them (cf. Lynch, 1993:313; Szymanski and Whalen, 2011:5). More simply, I want to ground the analysis of the practitioners' doings on *their* semantic choices – on *their* 'ordinary' language. I elaborate at length on this procedure, and the two methodological approaches – ethnography and ethnomethodology – that inspired it, in Chapters 2 and 3. In a nutshell, the objective of the procedure, and subsequent analysis, is to use the lens of a micro-sociological description of the work under analysis in the practitioners' *own terms*, respecting and reporting *their own understandings* of what it is that they do while undertaking the activities associated to 'policy making'.

It is useful to note here that this procedure distances this study from the overwhelming majority of the scholarly contributions on the subject and analysis of policy-making and policy makers' work. I elaborate on this point and I offer a review of the literature in the opening Chapter. Generally speaking, scholarly contribution on public policy use conceptual repertoires that take notions and constructs previously developed in the fields of, among others, political science, law, economics, sociology, psychology and management science. In fact, the scholarly discipline specifically interested in public administration is generally located at the intersection of all these fields (Peters and Pierre, 2003) and builds on theories and analytical frameworks developed under the

aegis of this array of academic work. More recently, the study of policy-making and policy work has also developed into a field on its own, producing a body of writings increasingly engaged in unravelling the elements constituting policy-makers' practices, and – using observations around these elements as starting point – develop, challenge, or further theoretical understandings of government and government action.

Consequently, scholars align with perspectives, approaches and schools of thought – generally factious (cf. Lynch, 1993:74) and in competition for originality (cf. Billig, 2013) – each providing theoretical lenses through which reading, coding, elaborating and analysing empirical data, with the objective of arriving at general statements around the themes and intellectual preoccupations characteristic of the study of public administration. Classic examples of these themes are “efficiency”, theories about “decision-making”, “rationality”, “leadership”, “organisational structures”, “power”, the “state” and its role in contemporary democracies, “governance” and so forth.

Ethnographers of work, who use a distinctive methodological approach to the collection and elaboration of data (see Smith, 2001), are not excused from this almost inescapable tendency towards *theorising*. The prevalent mode of analysis to treat ethnographic data is that of noticing 'cases of', and test such cases against theoretical perspectives derived from existing scholarly work to make sense of, discuss and elaborate on whatever is obtained in the field (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Denzin, 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This treatment of data, generally known as grounded theory, has many advantages, and helps ethnographers to elevate their reasoning to a sufficiently abstract level to discuss the *grand themes* of the disciplines, and perhaps produce truth-claims able to contribute to the ongoing, sometimes chronic, debates in the academic circles. While these activities are intrinsically interesting and, as such, fuel those discursive practices constituting academic scholarship, there are reasons to question to what extent such endeavours do indeed further the understanding of governmental dynamics, or if, much more unsatisfactorily in terms of explicative power, are not just part of an endless tinkering around the edges of theoretical conundrums. I do not want these remarks to be misunderstood: it is not an all-together dismissal of theory that is being proposed here, nor an (impossible) a-theoretical stance. Such a move would lead to no more than analytical impasse, or as Lynch puts it to “something akin to contemplating suicide” (1993:153). Rather, it is a programmatic statement around the *grounds* theories ought to be built on, and for what purpose.

Such statement takes at heart what it is considered the fundamental lesson of the writings of Harold Garfinkel (e.g. 1967; 1991; cf. Button, 1991; Lynch, 1993), the father of ethnomethodology. This is the distinction between members' and analysts' *methods* in pursuing descriptions of domains of practice. Simplifying Garfinkel's claims, by borrowing concepts from theories to explain and describe (social) action, analysts tend to (or risk to) superimpose an “exogenous logic” (Coulter, 1991:39) to the domains under investigation. Such logics may lead analysts to make unwarranted assumptions, and to presume patterns of significance that get to be considered already inscribed into the phenomena under observation (cf. Sharrock and Button, 1991). The alternative way of proceeding with investigations of domains of practice, again with Garfinkel (cf. 1991), is to approach such domains as constitutively (and “reflexively”) produced by the practices and methods *used by* the participants in the domain. These are the members' methods: the ways in which, commonsensically and *in situ*, actors achieve (or “accomplish”, to use a distinctive ethnomethodological term) the task of getting their activities done. It is the detailed analysis of these methods, ethnomethodologists maintain, that illuminates the domain of practice, and not the other way around. This means that *each time* actors perform an activity the procedures for the accomplishment can be *observed* and *reported*. In terms of methodological stance, this is obtained by interrogating data asking questions such as: what is considered relevant? What is taken for granted? How do members recognise each other as being able to know what they are talking or writing about? (cf. Coopmans and Button, 2014) Which lexical choices are made to make sense of what it is being done? (cf. Moerman, 1988) Which criteria are used to discern potential courses of action? (cf. Schegloff, 1991:157) What is next in terms of practical action? (cf. Garfinkel, 1967; Cicourel, 1973; Button and Sharrock, 1998).

The detailed examination of practical activities recommended by ethnomethodologists is not, as critics of Garfinkel's project have claimed, an end in itself. The word “method”, in fact, alludes to a degree of systematic deployment – one that points at recognisable, *adequate* or at least good-enough strategies of acting and doing in given circumstances. Hence, they can illuminate what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949) famously called the “know-how”: the essential capacity of applying purposefully concepts, categories and analytical procedures in material events. Crucially, as Garfinkel's lesson goes, this capacity is irremediably social, in the sense that must stand, with no time-out, the tests of intelligibility the *context* of use imposes (cf. Wieder,

1974). When we apply this methodological reasoning to professional contexts, the procedures of ethnomethodology offer researchers (and ethnographers) a way into the practical reasoning of practitioners, within organisational arrangements, in given circumstances (cf. Wagenaar, 2004; Horlick-Jones, 2013). Hence, the analytical point is not to test the data obtained through ethnographic fieldwork against theories of “structures”, “the role of the profession”, “power” or whatever, but to discover, through analysis, whether practitioners use, consistently and in context, conceptions, models or, indeed, *theories* of whatever topic is under investigation (cf. Dingwall, 1981). The distinction is not as subtle as it seems. To an extent, it switches the analytical attention *from* academic preoccupations *to* practitioners' ones: applying it to field of action of interest for this study, the research question is not (only) 'what is it that policy-makers do?', but is 'what is it that they understand themselves to be doing and how do they accomplish that within the workplace?' (cf. Wagenaar, 2004; Randall and Sharrock, 2008:16). This is an important displacement (or “re-specification”, as Garfinkel wanted it) of what exactly should be of ethnographic, and sociological, interest in studies of work, and is taken as central concern for this study.

Research positioning and research questions

The trajectory of studies of the same subject – the domain of practice of professionals – has led communities of researchers in diametrically opposed directions. Orthodox ethnographers of work, with their quest for theoretical connections discovered through original data (in the best cases), secondary sources, or through downright speculation, continue the pursuit of new and sharper analytical concepts to arrive at technicised descriptions of actual practices, and perhaps dream of generalised theories of government, economic systems, welfare, medical care, (*etc. ad infinitum*) and, of course, *society*. Ethnomethodologists, with the avenues of inquiry they have inspired, have on the contrary barricaded themselves into the fringes of sociology, and they have found fertile grounds in cognate disciplines, such as business and design studies, and some provinces of organisational analysis. Alternatively, they have claimed a post-analytic stance (cf. Lynch, 1993) or a post-disciplinary status (Randall and Sharrock, 2008), both of which leave their position under dispute and under difficult location within the contemporary academic disciplines composing the panorama of the 'social

sciences'. The study this thesis proposes certainly does not find solutions to this state of affairs, nor offer ethnomethodologists any clue on how to find their way back into sociology (should they have the intention to, which I doubt). More modestly, it aims at offering an exemplar of the kind of analysis that *could* be possible when a constructive conversation between these two analytical tensions – traditionally at odds with each other – is ignited again (see Pollner and Emerson, 2001).

I develop my contribution to these methodological issues in the methodological section of the thesis (Chapters 2 and 3). Here, I rehearse old and more recent calls for such conversation to take place, for example after Moerman (1988), Atkinson (1988), Miller (1994) and Harper (2000). By reflecting on my own experience of producing one, I explore the possibility of *hybrid* studies, along the lines of others (e.g. Dingwall, 1981; Harper *et al.*, 2000; Samra-Fredericks, 2003) who have termed them ethnomethodologically-informed ethnographies. These Chapters come to a (quite abrupt) end, on the one hand to respect the limits of the word-length of a doctoral thesis, and on the other because I felt the urgency of getting on with the empirical work (cf. Lynch, 1993:311).

In the following Chapters, I engage in the business of re-constructing and rendering into a synthetic account the workings of a complex organisation such as a government Department, with its thousands of employees. This is neither easy nor straightforward, in particular when the interest is placed, as I wanted, on grounding observations on rigorous empirical detail. I have aspired to use and display these not for their own sake, but to describe vividly the real experience of working in *that* particular organisation, in *that* particular historical moment, with *those* specific problems the practitioners I observed and encountered while I was there. Whilst deploying the analytical procedures I had envisaged at the start, I did indeed encounter the themes and topics that animate so much classic sociological and organisational literature: do officers arrive at “rational” decisions? What is the status of formal organisational “structures”? How do they influence the actual behaviour of employees? What is the status of formal objectives, formal hierarchical chains, formal roles, formal procedures? How do power dynamics play out? Which sources of knowledge do employees draw upon? I shall anticipate here that the answers I offer in my description remain *limited* to those very situations I was able to observe. The opinions I obtained from participants and report as 'interview data' remain bounded to the specific workplace 'problems' they were encountering, *then*. I

make no excuses for such limitations, and I shall hasten to address the questions these remarks beg: 'so what?' and 'what *is* the point?'

There are several answers. Probably the most important to propose is that reasoning and proceeding in these analytical terms *preserves* the nature of situated working practices, in the here and now of their accomplishment. If on one side this impedes generalisation, the payoff is worth all the effort (and the frustration, for some) necessary to hold back the temptation to 'jump over' towards theoretical statements (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittle *et al.*, 2015). The payoff consists in realising the incredibly fine-textured interactional skills and competences necessary to accomplish the everyday doings constituting the professional practice of "policy work". It consists in maintaining intact not only the outcome of an activity, but also the workers' mechanisms of coordination (Orlikowsky, 1991) to arrive at such outcomes, and perhaps the practitioners' struggles to make sense of what they are doing, or the frustration at seeing such outcome being different from what those same individuals would have expected. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of the kind envisaged by Garfinkel and his students allows the placing of time and attention to *first* discover, and *then* reflect on the concepts, categories and analytical procedures that are used in practice, and ask some interesting questions about their origin, justification, and validity. What kind of categories did policy officers use to organise their understanding of the reality 'out there'? On which assumptions about human behaviour did the policies or interventions they were developing rest? How did they classify the populations whose actions they planned to change? How did they proceed with organising their working activities? How did they arrive at agreements around what to do? These are the research questions I explore in the thesis.

The more I ventured in the territories these questions opened up, the more I realised how unexplored such territories were. Let me give examples. After few weeks of working in the office, it became clear to me how important it was for officers to attend to very specific procedures: 'projects' had to be administered through filling in forms and digital records, 'risk registers' had to be kept, and the information to be provided in those discussed, agreed and drafted and re-drafted. 'Analysts' had to be consulted, 'papers' obtained and scrutinised. Officers spoke about 'getting excited' about things, or 'frustrated' about others, and complained there was someone 'pissing off the whole Department'. They spoke about difficulties in retrieving documents, about papers to 'chase', and new 'versions' to be obtained. They held hours-long discussions around

which colours to assign to each item on a list, whether green, amber-green, or red. They talked about 'scopes', 'momentum', new and old 'priorities', over and under-spends in the quarterly budget. This was all different from any of the descriptions of “policy work” available in the literature. Yes, some scholars note that 'project management' and 'risk management' procedures are in place. Yes, others point out that what 'policy-making' is all about is meetings and documents. Yet, these observations are limited to statements of facts. Tasks are either framed as forms of routinisation of the work, and as such dismissed as uninteresting, or used as resources to further conclusions about something else altogether (cf. Whittle *et al.*, 2015).

The account I propose follows a different path. It offers an insight into the ways in which management devices, organising principles, meetings, documents and other 'tools' were used in specific cases. This leads the analysis to illuminate first which devices were in use, and second, perhaps more interestingly, what exactly the practical application of them prompts, allows and achieves. Do officers use peculiar kind of reasoning around 'problems'? How do they achieve an ordering of the activities? How do they get to solutions valid for all-the-practical-purposes of the workplace? Investigating such questions leads me to offer very specific answers around how structures define officers' roles and responsibilities, how procedures point to certain choices and not others, how rules must be followed and how and when exceptions to rules can be made, how some working relationships are preferred to others and why – *in those specific cases*. Adopting the analytical lenses I suggested above, “policy work” emerges in a very different light than the one offered by existing descriptions: there is no messiness and chaos (cf. Chapter 1), and *pace* Kingdon (1995) and his followers, there is not a “primeval soup”. There are, instead, very deliberate choices made around agendas, alternatives and public policies. There are distinctive, meticulous and at times creative ways of allocating, cutting and disposing budgets. There are policy instruments preferred to others, interest groups that are heard and others that are not, representations of reality that are taken as facts and others that are quashed as fiction. There are projects announced in the press, launched with much fanfare and then ditched in silence. The fact that such dynamics play differently *across cases* does not warrant for characterising policy work in terms of randomness. On the contrary, it warrants the need for figuring out *how*, in each case, the “miracle of familiar organisational things”, as Garfinkel has it (1991:10), plays out to produce yet another ordered arrangement.

While I was engaged in the business of organising the data for analysis and presentation, I had to realise that such “organisational things” are familiar to practitioners, but not to the prospective reader of my text, also because, alas, they are seriously undeveloped in the literatures on British policy-making. There was very little material to reference. Perhaps this is not at all a fault on the part of researchers. The world of policy-makers is secluded. Practitioners' accounts are restricted by the rigorous workplace's secrecy agreements: they are scarce or irremediably biased. I could count, on the contrary, on an incredibly extensive access to the settings I had endeavoured to describe. Hence, my self-assigned task became that of representing to the readers, through describing my own process of familiarisation and *learning*, some of the features of the work under analysis. This is what I do in the second section of the thesis (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8) where I develop an extended thick description (Geertz, 1973) of my experience at the Department. Similarly to many ethnographic accounts, I use my own observations, interviews with informants and specimens from internal documentation to describe some aspects of the work I could capture by 'being there'. Also, I focus on the practitioners' use of language, on the commonly accepted arguments, on categorisations and metaphors (cf. Miller, 1994). I discover elements of the managerial disciplines in use, and develop some elemental analytical devices that helped me (and I hope will help the readers) to interrogate the ways practitioners thought about, talked about, prioritised and performed the activities constituting (part of) their jobs. The strength of such devices, as I elaborated above, is that they build on practitioners' models of understanding, as discovered, used, tested and made to work *by them* in practical occasions of application. It is their logic – or “situated rationalit[ies]” (Dingwall, 1981:135; Boden, 1994) – that my analysis is after. The specific cases that are used – namely sustainable consumption initiatives and policies developed in associated 'areas' – become then paradigmatic for considering far-reaching issues. These are of practitioners' interest, for example the inadequacy of understanding policy development in terms of distinct stages of “cycles”, or the difficulties of implementing anything near a model of “evidence-based policy-making”. These constitute problems *for them* because, while these representations have become totemic of what their profession is about and of the way it is explained to outsiders (and the public), they are also based, I will argue, on a superficial understanding of the nature of work practitioners carry out every day, of the relationship between politics and policy, and of the organisational arrangements in place to make a government Department work in the

multiple ways it does.

The significance for policy research

Yet these answers may not satisfy the 'so what' question. How do specific cases warrant anything generalisable? After all, things can have played, and have played differently in other cases. How can the opinions, complaints, difficulties of a bunch of officers who agreed to talk to an ethnographer contribute to a larger understanding? How are the findings transferable to other domains of policy, to policy-making at large, to policy-making in other countries? Are not, ultimately, specific cases tied to the contextual, cultural and historical circumstances under which they have been produced? The conventional answer ethnomethodologists offer to these well-placed criticisms is that researchers need a stronger empirical basis to make normative claims around how to improve working arrangements: without the granularity of close observations much of the reality of organisations gets lost, impairing the possibility of producing something useful to the development of systems to support workplaces (cf. Button and Sharrock, 2009). This is also the reason why researchers trained in ethnomethodology find their approach fit more to practical applications in business and design studies and consultancy, rather than in social sciences academic departments (Randall and Sharrock, 2008). But, other answers are possible. Answers that can be made to work in the direction of using that more solid empirical basis to ground sociohistorical inquiries (cf. McCarthy, 1990) and, within the domain of inquiry of interest for this study, answers that can feed into a new research agenda for the study of public policy and the investigation of the policy process (cf. Pollitt *et al.*, 1990). Let me explain.

Saying that specific cases are tied up to the contextual, cultural and historical circumstances under which they have been produced means recognising that researchers (and ethnographers in particular) have no way out from making use of their own knowledge of the social and political events surrounding the context and the occurrences they analyse (cf. Molotch and Boden, 1985). Furthermore, researchers do not have a God-like point of view, nor a presupposition-less language for description. Inevitably they draw from the very language used by actors, who, in turn, use language and understandings that stem from cultural and historical circumstances. The classic

policy of investigation for ethnography is to build conceptual scaffoldings, of second and third order (some would say), to explain, or attempt to explain, the motivations, the norms, the culture etc. subsuming the occurrences. I commented earlier on the risks and shortcomings of such an approach. Ethnomethodologists suggest something different. They note, building on Garfinkel (1967) and Sack's (1963) demonstrations, that concerted action produces and *re*-produces cultural and historical circumstances, by interactively constructing and retaining a sense of reality, of facticity (cf. Lynch, 1993:153), of social structures, and social rules (McCarthy, 1990:368). They suggest suspending (or “bracketing”) the judgement over the truth of actors' claims (“ethnomethodological indifference”), and instead to focus attention on *how* they arrive at those claims. The procedure does not aim at a transcendental objectivity, but at defining the grounds over which the *situated* objectivity necessary to get any activity done is established. Cultural and historical circumstances, structures and rules, can then be *inferred* by what was brought by actors, tacitly or not, within the realm of relevances the internal logic of concerted action imposed in the actual case (cf. Hughes *et al.*, 2008:133). This procedure of investigation locks in, and limits, the ethnographers' observations to what was relevant for the actors, but also allows them to discover, each time through, the practical reasoning members use to make cultural and historical circumstances meaningful, and with them, the concepts, categories and analytical procedures used to reproduce (or indeed, challenge) them. For ethnographic purposes, this is a process of *documenting* rather than one of explaining, and one that has a significant import for the study of public and social policy.

I can discuss finally the second analytical interest that guided the production of this piece of research, which proceeds from the discussion I have so far proposed. Through the process of describing the practical activities entailed in some occurrences of policy work activities, in fact, I wanted to create and report a description that worked as an accurate-as-possible *document* of the methods through which environmental policy-making was effectively carried out by the UK government the civil servants I observed were serving (Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition, 2010-2015). Seen through this second angle, the study runs as an extended, open-ended piece of social policy research on the status and development of the UK policies concerned with addressing the problem of how to make the consumption patterns of contemporary Western societies environmentally sustainable (Jackson, 2006; Giddens, 2009). Capitalising on the vantage point obtained by being an insider with extended access to the real-world

work patterns of government officials, I wish to show *what* policy-makers were doing when engaging, grappling with, discussing, defining, agreeing, proposing solutions and making decisions about the problems associated to consumption patterns in Britain. I wish to propose examples of the kind of “knowledge work” used by policy-makers to process and develop their action plans (cf. Jasanoff, 1990; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Wenger, 1998, Alvesson, 2004; Gherardi, 2006; Maybin, 2015) in the specific 'policy area'. This interest stems from the recognition – a research finding itself – that much of what constitutes policy work is the application of co-ordinated intellectual skills on the part of practitioners. Such skills entail selecting, reasoning around, assembling, discussing, finding agreement on, and finally make operative (in talk or in writing) multiple forms of knowledge, these in turn adapted and used for all the practical purposes of grounding, justifying and making records of deliberations around potential courses of government action. The process of documenting then is geared towards specifying which sort of government action was sought: what kinds of interventions were pursued, if any? How and why some interventions were preferred to others, and on which criteria the exploration and the definition of a course of action proceeded? Which sources of knowledge were selected, manipulated, mobilised?

It should not escape the reader, and indeed did not escape me while conducting the fieldwork in Whitehall and then drafting this thesis in the following years, that the meetings I had attended, the documentation I had seen used, and the decisions that were made had far-reaching consequences for the directions national¹ environmental policies were taking. While I make all possible effort to conceal and protect the identity of officers, I do take advantage of the fact that what I witnessed and I describe in these pages was also reported in the press, discussed in the public domain, and disclosed in some form or another. I do reference articles in the press, and the documentation made available by the Department and the government on the matters under inquiry.

References to such materials are an invitation to the readers to follow trails that will add

¹ So far, I referred to 'the UK' and 'Britain' to designate loosely the geographical jurisdiction of the Government institutions under study (the UK Government). The authority to develop and implement environmental policies in two of the four countries constituting the United Kingdom, however, has been transferred to the Devolved Administrations of Scotland (following the Scotland Act 1998), and Northern Ireland (following the Northern Ireland Act 1998) in a process of devolution of statutory powers. As for the devolved administration of Wales, the Welsh Government obtained the power to legislate on environmental matters from 2011 (following the Welsh Act 2006). The 'national' policies referred to in this thesis, covering the period 2000-2012, while formally developed by the UK Government, had and have effect in England and Wales only. The institution of devolved administrations, and how that has played out in practice for the policy makers of the devolved administrations and of the UK Government itself, is a topic not covered in the thesis, if we except the suggestion that such institutions could be effectively investigated by others under the same methodological auspices proposed.

to their understanding, which I could not develop in the thesis in so-many words. The account I offer, thus, wants to work as an addendum to the historical re-construction of specific political events, one filtered by the observation of the administrative (or “policy”) work going on behind-the-scenes. The primary objective is to shed light on what this work exactly entails, but somewhat inevitably, the description works as a document-of, a record-of the constitution of political, economic and historic forces. This seems to happen more clearly in Chapters 9 and 10, where I report and analyse actual cases of officers' activities linked to the development of sustainable consumption policies: a 'briefing' to a minister (Chapter 9) and a 'meeting' to shape the 'line' of the Department on the matter (Chapter 10), then detailed in an internal paper – a 'narrative' – outlining a proposal for future policies.

The kind of analysis I adopt in Chapters 9 and 10, a version of the methods of inquiry suggested by ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts, offers a sharper insight into the intrinsically political nature of “policy work”. The analysis of practices in-the-making shows the interplay of imperatives stemming out organisational considerations and historically determined conditions playing out in shaping policy 'directions'. The method of inquiry allows us to make manifest the relevant power relationships, not as stemming from a particular conception of “power” or “ideology”, but as displayed in the particular circumstances of negotiations and real-world interactions (cf. Strong and Dingwall, 1983; Hughes *et al.*, 2008:142). The data show policy work in yet a different light: as skilful and coordinated effort to translate political intentions into policy change, and to prepare materials (documents and talk) to stand the scrutiny of first an international forum, and then the public domain.

Finally, I use the concluding chapter to re-connect these findings with the theme that has animated the account that far: the work, and the conflicts, involved in bring forth organisational change, with the associated, time-consuming, struggles to “frame and re-frame” (Schön and Rein, 1994) issues to accommodate what officers term 'the ideology of the administration'. I reflect on the fact the inception of new political 'agendas', the development (and the abandonment) of initiatives, the creation of new organisational arrangements are matters that are not simply given, but that are the product of what, ultimately, policy workers do (cf. Button and Sharrock, 2002). The study of “ideology” in such sense, can be analytically re-specified from a sociological, meta-theoretical, preoccupation, to the analysis of the production of historically constituted material

practices of public administrators. These practices, the discourses that animates them, and the powerful ideologies that shape organisational outcomes *in given circumstances* is what this thesis is about.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

In the introduction, I made a number of claims about the location of studies of public policy in the landscape of social sciences, and criticised, somewhat heavily, *theorising* as inescapable procedure to engage with the subject, regardless of the disciplinary slant given to these studies. In the remarks that follow I detail the logic of these claims, starting from engaging with the conventional analytical *moves* that are typically made by those who adhere to the so-called “policy science” and “policy studies”: the fields where most of the analyses of policy-making and policy work have developed in the last decades. I will start by taking single examples, from well-known textbooks for graduate students and analysts of public policy, not to suggest that there is anything particularly 'wrong' with their approaches, but to demonstrate elements of the analytical procedures that epitomise the work of theoretical reconstruction which often characterises the 'study' of public policy, and that justify the move towards the idealisations so typical of the field itself. The objective of the pages that follow, I hasten to add, is not to argue that the theoretical approaches that I survey are without merit. Rather, I am interested in elaborating on the difficulties of grounding such theories in empirical details, or more specifically, the difficulties of reconnecting theoretical approaches with the real world experience and activities of policy makers (or “policy workers”), those pragmatically engaged in the business of developing policy in governmental agencies. This real world is what the thesis addresses. What I wish to point out is that in most of the existing literature on policy-making, of which there is no shortage, this world is unproblematically glossed over, first and foremost as a consequence of the methodological premises upon which theoretical constructions are based. The suggestion I propose, one from which the rest of the thesis develops, is that there is scope to reconsider some of these premises, methodologically and analytically. The main line of argument is rather simple, and certainly not new (cf. Wagenaar, 2004; Randall and Sharrock, 2008; Button *et al.*, 2012): in order to gain a firmer understanding of public policy processes, we have to discover them in the social environment and context in which they are produced, and crucially, thus engage with a detailed analysis of the activities and tasks that constitute them. The conventional ways of proceeding when engaging with the topic of policy taught to students, I show in this

opening chapter, is however rather different.

The chapter takes the form of a literature review. I survey the fields of policy “science”, policy “studies” and policy “analysis”, and highlight in these the preference for constructing theories at the expenses of concentrating on empirical studies. Then I move on to consider some different research traditions which could offer more fruitful grounds for the analysis of the policy process as it happens in real organisational settings, but I must note a scarcity of studies that target the work of public administrators, especially in Britain. The review singles out some notable exceptions. In the final section, the chapter highlights some recent developments in the literature on British policy making that come closer to the kind of inquiry I develop in the rest of the thesis.

Policy science

Before turning to discuss the approach used for this empirical investigation, it is necessary to outline the kind of accounts of public policy most prominent in the policy-making literature, so to locate the research in a more broader context, and define further what it is that distances the study of policy in the terms proposed herein from other traditions of inquiry. The study of public policy, or perhaps more precisely, the study of the process of public policy-making, is an extraordinarily varied field, beleaguered by conflicting perspectives (see e.g. Riccucci, 2010). The aim of this brief outline is not to endeavour in a full-blown review of research in the field, but rather that of discussing the salient features of this corpus of literature with which I take issue. I am concerned mostly with highlighting the reasons why much of the conventional academic studies of public policy are only tangentially interested in the domain of practice of policy-makers, and also with noting the consequences for understanding the nature of the policy process itself in taking analytical postures that imply, or leave unquestioned, the very grounds of the domain they discuss.

The first two editions of *Theories of the Policy Process*, an edited collection of distinguished contributions to the “policy science” field, open with a chapter by the editor, Paul Sabatier (1999; 2007), titled *The Need for Better Theories*. The chapter presents the range of approaches on offer to the neophyte of formal policy research: the

Stages Approach, the Institutional Rational Choice, the Multiple Stream Theory, the Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory, the Advocacy Coalition Framework, and Large-N Comparative Studies. Rather than reviewing each of these theories or “frameworks” and assess their explicative power, it is interesting to consider and reflect on the *procedure* Sabatier describes through which one might arrive at the formulation of theories of the “policy process”. After defining in the opening sentence of the chapter “the policy process [as] involv[ing] an extremely complex set of interacting elements over time” (p.3), he proceeds to list such elements:

1. There are normally hundreds of actors from interest groups and from governmental agencies and legislatures at different level of government, researchers, and journalists involved in one or more aspects of the process [...]
2. This process usually involves time spans of a decade or more [...]
3. In any given policy domain [...] there are normally dozens of different programs involving multiple levels of government that are operating [...]
4. Policy debates among actors [...] typically involve very technical disputes [...]
5. A final complicating factor in the policy process is that most disputes involve deeply held value/interests, large amounts of money, and, at some point, authoritative coercion.

He infers that:

Understanding the policy process requires a knowledge of the goals and perceptions of hundreds of actors throughout the country involving possibly very technical scientific and legal issues over periods of a decade or more [...] Given the staggering complexity of the policy process, the analyst *must* find some way of simplifying the situation in order to have any chance of understanding it. One simply cannot look for, and see, everything. (Sabatier, 1999:4; original italics)

The circularity of Sabatier's argument is hard to miss. The 'complexity' he appeals to, quite obviously, is created out of the initial construction that establishes the analysis. It seems to escape him that all the elements he lists, indeed confusing and inextricable when considered all at once, could have *each* be made a *topic* of investigation. Rather, he subsumes them all under his own conceptual gloss of “policy process”, opening up the grounds to proceed with the determination of the (indeterminate) set of phenomena he identified, somewhat arbitrarily. This procedure is recurrent across many domains of the social sciences: problems are produced in such a complicated fashion that they can only be 'solved' through the methods and theories of the paradigm that produced the problem in the first instance. As for Sabatier's argument, the temporal frame is arbitrary (“a decade or more”), the policy domain is arbitrary (“different programs involving multiple levels”), the boundaries of the activities appealed to are arbitrary (“agencies”, “legislatures”, “researchers”, “journalists”). What Sabatier does in this short passage is

to lay the grounds for what Garfinkel and Sacks (1970:361) have called “constructive” or “formal” analysis: the tenet and the heritage of functionalist traditions. Sabatier disguises, under one single conceptual heading (“the policy process”) or “formulation” (see Lynch, 1993:184), the very set of activities that constitute the phenomenon in the first place. The formulation works as a device through which to abstract such activities, which then need to be further specified in different terms, exploring the different meanings they may have in that very “complexity” the formulation has created, which now needs “simplif[ication]”. Of course, Sabatier has clear ideas on how to proceed analytically. He puts students in front of a crossroad:

Given that we have little choice but to look at the world through a lens constituting of a set of simplifying presuppositions, at least two quite different strategies exist for developing such a lens. On the one hand, the analyst can approach the world in an implicit, ad hoc fashion, using whatever categories and assumptions have arisen from his or her experience. This is essentially the method of common sense. [This] strategy is likely to be beset by internal inconsistencies, ambiguities, erroneous assumptions, and invalid propositions precisely because the strategy does not contain any explicit methods for error correction [...] An alternative strategy is that of science. Its fundamental ontological assumption is that a smaller set of critical relationships underlies the bewildering complexity of phenomena. [...] A critical component of that strategy is that scientists should develop clear and logical interrelated sets of propositions, some of them empirically falsifiable, to explain fairly general sets of phenomena. Such coherent sets of propositions have traditionally been termed *theories*. (Sabatier, 1999:5, original italics)

The chapters in the remainder of the edited book – as well as the contributions in many other contemporary textbooks, mostly written for American universities (see Sabatier and Wieble (eds), 2014; Smith and Larimer, 2013; Birkland, 2011) – dedicate themselves to the discussion, comparison and refinement of “frameworks” toward “more logically coherent and [...] fully developed theories” (Sabatier, 1999:261). Notably, the investigation of the “policy process” and its inherent “complexity”, in these terms, systematically eschews both the individual dimension of the policy worker (they are “hundreds of actors”, according to Sabatier, which makes the task impossible) and the lived dimension of the organisations they work for. This latter point, the need to address the organisational dimension, is actually made by Ostrom (1999:35ss), a theorist contributing to the Sabatier's collection, who is tasked with reviewing the “Institutional Analysis Framework”, itself a collection of candidate theoretical propositions to investigate “both organizations and the rules used to structure patterns of interaction within and across organizations” (p.36). She appeals to the “term *institution*” (p.37) and, keeping with the theoretical procedure outlined above, feels the need to proceed to a series of further formulations:

It is hard to make much progress in the study of institutions if scholars define the term *institution* as meaning almost anything [a list of candidate definitions follows]. I will use the term *institution* [...] to refer to the shared concepts used by humans in repetitive situations organised by rules norms and strategies. By *rules* I mean shared prescriptions [...] By *norms* I mean [...]. By *strategies* I mean [...] One of the most difficult problems to overcome in the study of institutions is how to identify and measure them. Because institutions are fundamentally shared concepts, they exist in the minds of participants and sometimes are shared as implicit knowledge rather than in an explicit and written form. (Ostrom, 1999:37, original italics)

Now, the point is not to establish whether Ostrom's formulations of institution, rule, norm and strategy are right or wrong – through some correspondence test with 'what really goes on in institutions' – but to note what the procedure of creating formulations claims to do. First, as with Sabatier's "complexity", it establishes a set of concepts divorced from the phenomena constituting the "policy process" in the first place. Second, taking seriously Sabatier's idea of what the "strategy of science" entails, it claims a superiority of such concepts over the lay "common sense" of the analyst so imprudent in not proposing a "coherent set of propositions" to explain phenomena. An implied corollary of this second point is that such a position of superiority *also* holds true with regards to practitioners' understandings – Sabatier's "hundreds of actors" involved in the process. As they do not use the procedure of 'science', nor do they adopt a technicised definition of 'institution' while being part of one or many, to get the work of those 'complex' subset of activities done (now forgotten as "impossible to consider"), the 'scientific analyst' can claim s/he knows better. Third, Sabatier and Ostrom's formulations use unquestioned premises: Sabatier assumes the applicability of concepts of causation and explanation of the natural science to a "process" that is inherently social; Ostrom locates organisations "inside the minds" of actors who follow rules and norms, adhering to a deterministic sociological model of the human being. Ostrom's actors are seen as behaving as rule-following 'dopes', who respond, un-reflexively, to institutional norms set for them (cf. Garfinkel, 1967; Lynch, 2012). Again, unveiling the (positivist) premises of Sabatier's and Ostrom's theory building is not a matter of claiming invalidity, but a way to note how, and why, they avoid any need for a consideration of the practicalities of activities associated with the phenomena they describe. In fact, these approaches are not motivated to do ethnographic studies at all, for their own good reasons. They proceed instead to create and establish a *professional language* to discuss "policy", "public administration", "principles of management", etc. which is passed on to generations of white-coated political scientists and analysts (cf. Goodin *et al.*, 2006), each tasked with learning such language, proceeding along the

“scientific” road with its specialised bumps and perils, and contributing, paper after paper, to the refining of the “sophisticated theoretical models” (Sabatier, 1999:261; see also Smith and Larimer, 2013:10) necessary to untangle the “staggering complexity” of that messy, unpredictable, chaotic thing that is the “policy process” (see e.g. Isenberg, 2016). The analytical and professional payoff of using such approaches is the very possibility of talking about a “policy process”, regardless of geographical location and historical conditions. The analysis lends itself to 'natural' idealisations, such as the well-known and omnipresent list of “stages” through which the “process” supposedly goes through.

The policy cycle

The construction of the “policy process” in terms of discernible, discrete phases has been around for six decades. Early proponents and developers of the model were Lasswell (1956), Jones (1970), Brewer (1974) and May and Wildavsky (1979). The model represents the process of creation of public policies in functional, chronologically sequential and cumulative stages (Nakamura, 1987). There exist several versions of the model, each resulting from the work of conceptual refinement carried forward by different authors, but mostly the variations have consolidated into a description of five or six stages, comprising “problem definition” and “agenda-setting”, “policy formulation or development”, “decision-making”, “implementation”, and “monitoring and appraisal”. The model is often depicted as a “cycle” rather than a linear construction, assuming (after Jones, 1970) a perpetual feedback of process outputs into new re-considerations of the policy problems (see also Jann and Wegrick, 2007).

In the fields of political science, policy studies, and crucially, within the professional circles of government agencies in English-speaking countries, the model has been used, and continues to be used, widely with significant consequences. Firstly, the model has compartmentalised studies of public policy into separate research agendas (Weible, 2014): for instance, there are analyses of the dynamics of agenda-setting (e.g. Kingdon, 1984), analyses of implementation processes (e.g. Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973), analyses of the evaluation stage (e.g. Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Second, the model has been imported by government agencies to provide outsiders (researchers and the public)

with a supposedly detailed description of the work that goes on in their offices. This is the case of the government of the United Kingdom in the 21st century, which, in an extended documentation available in press and online, provides versions of the model to account for “what they do”. The Treasury, for instance, claims the government activities of selecting particular courses of action follow the so-called ROAMEF Cycle, acronym of the words Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation, Feedback (HM Treasury, 2011:3). Specific government Departments also offer similar descriptions. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whose activities are object of analysis of this thesis, also offers a model of the 'policy cycle' largely inspired by the policy science literature (DEFRA, no date).

As for other theories, and indeed following the precepts of the quest for generalisable and testable statements, the 'policy cycle' stages work as simplifying devices to categorise under single ideas the circumstances in which policy workers *may* find themselves when going about their activities. The process of simplification takes advantage of the creation of ideal-typical situations: theoretical constructions that render into conceptual terms the circumstances of real-life. The concepts can then be connected to each other, towards the corroboration and further elaboration of the theoretical apparatus. Let us take an example of this procedure as applied in scholarly writings interested in discerning the role of government officials, in the specific case of the agenda-setting 'stage'. In a chapter of the *Handbook of Public Administration* (2003), Bryner (p.301) writes:

Although the policy making process differs for different kinds of policies, some elements are present in all policy efforts [...] The policy process 'begins', or, perhaps more accurately, a new cycle commences when people identify social and economic problems that might be resolved by government efforts. After the problem is perceived and defined, interests are aggregated and organized in anticipation of presenting demands or proposals to government officials. (Government officials themselves, particularly administrative officials, are often involved early in this step of the process, as they seek to develop support for policies of interest to them.) Depending upon the strength of the political forces behind a proposal and government officials' perception of its importance, the proposal may become an element of the policy agenda. Getting on the policy agenda is a major challenge, given the tremendous number of problems clamoring for attention. Interest groups may organise, mobilize their resources and lobby elected officials, but action may not occur until a major event or 'crisis' focuses widespread attention on the issue. Innovative policies are possible when there is a convergence of public attention, political interest in responding to public concern and 'policy entrepreneurs' who are able to channel the political energy toward policy change.

Without doubt, government officials may find themselves in the situations Bryner

describes. Proposals may or may not be “of interest to them”, and “may” or may not “become an element of the policy agenda”. “Policy change” may indeed happen, as Bryner prognosticates after Kingdon (1984), when there is the right “convergence”. It may not. Generalising in these terms, thus, is a powerful explicative device telling us why the policy process can work the way it does, *when it does*. However, it tells us little, or nothing, about several other things. The most important for my argument is that generalising tells us nothing of the real-life conditions under which some “public concerns” are taken seriously and others are not. Crucially, the procedure of generalising eschews all together the questions of *how* all the steps dutifully listed by Bryner are made to work in the ordinary affairs of public administrators (cf. Hughes, 2008). Also, it eschews the questions of *what* is entailed in perceiving and defining interests? In aggregating and organising proposals? In developing support for policies? These are indeed poignant questions, highly unlikely to be answered by systematically abstracting the ordinary work of officials in theoretical concepts and by hoping the concepts would just do the empirical work for us. Furthermore, the procedure seems to position empirical detail as irrelevant, and empirical analysis as somehow 'lesser'. Following from the discussion above, by building on existing conceptual apparatuses without testing them in real-world conditions, the foundations of such apparatuses remain unquestioned, or accepted by default. In the case of the extract from Bryner's chapter, as well as in many other contributions to the study of the public policy process in the 'policy science' field, some foundational concepts emerge clearly: for instance, the long-standing dichotomy between politics and administration, based on the assumption that administrators carry out the technical work associated to the problem-solving functions of governments (cf. Colebatch 2005:15); and the processual nature of policy-making, built on an understanding of public organisations as goal-oriented, organic, social systems (cf. Silverman, 1970; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The 'policy cycle', with its stages and sequential logic, does indeed the job of replicating such assumptions. These, however, became more and more problematic for many academics and practitioners alike (cf. Ruge, 2003:179).

Policy analysis and policy studies

Those who have attempted to re-construct the historical development of the

academic understanding of public policy have generally grouped investigations along the lines of a positivist and post-positivist divide (see e.g. Durning, 1999; Lynn, 1999; Dryzek, 2006; deLeon, 2006). In the former orientation, or at least in a pure version of it, inquiries and analyses adhere to what has also been called the “technocratic project” (Fischer, 1990; Barbehon *et al.*, 2015:242). According to such view, emphasis had to be placed on considering the appropriateness of formal structures, of the procedures and of the rules under which administrators operate. Policy-making, accordingly, is to be understood as a process of problem-solving undertaken in the direction of applying an instrumental rationality, a conception derived from the Max Weber's writings on bureaucracy (1948): given the ends set by elected politicians (in democratic countries), the administrators' role is that of choosing the most appropriate means to achieve those ends. Administrations can thus proceed by developing and applying working 'principles', and administrators are called to become expert in their application (cf. Henry, 1975). The development of such principles can be delegated to academic disciplines, such as a 'science of administration', in charge of developing a “scientific management of government” (cf. Allison, 2006:61), along the lines of Taylorist notions (1911): task division, standardisation, efficiency. The basis of such science can be found in social psychology (Henry, 1975): what mattered was that workers adhered, or better *conformed*, to rules and procedures, and these in turn had to be tuned towards more and more reliable and sophisticated tools of management. Traditional versions of such tools were central planning, operation research, cost-benefit analysis, management by objectives (cf. Goodin *et al.*, 2006). Later on, and in particular since the 1980s, these tools were to be superseded by the principles of the so-called New Public Management, characterised by an enhanced focus on decentralization, budgeting disciplines imported from the private sector, performance assessments and delegation of service delivery to private companies or to agencies.

In positivist conceptions, 'principles' and 'tools' – regardless of their nature and details – form part of a 'system', involving a set of mechanistic assumptions wherein senior management plans for rational decisions, each assigned to a line of workers, whose task is to execute and implement such plans (cf. Bloomfield *et al.*, 1997). Investigations could then be framed in terms of success/failure of given principles and tools, and on trying to understand why workers would depart (irrationally) from standard idealised procedures. Studies, mostly survey-based, on 'job satisfaction', 'efficiency', 'performance', 'distribution of incentives' became prominent, as findings could then feed

into strategies to avoid 'deviance' (Merton, 1968) or 'dysfunctions' (cf. Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and thus dictate the directions of 'reforms' (cf. Fesler and Kettl, 1996). Reform theorists and management innovators became leaders of the study of public organisations and administrative theory and practice: their contributions matter to practitioners themselves, who can import solutions and new ways of organising the work of the offices both in the attempt to enhance productivity, or in order to claim they are reforming the organisations in the direction to do so. The language through which the public sector has been and is described is largely influenced by the vocabulary of administrative reform (Fesler and Kettl, 1996): 'continuous improvement', 'downsizing', 're-engineering' and 'restructuring', 'reinventing government' through 'digitalisation' and other methodologies such as computer languages and application of mathematics, are some examples. Characteristic of the reform theories framed in these terms, as Knott and Hammond (2003) note, is that they often take place "in an empirical vacuum" (p.145). The research strategy that leads to the construction of formal theories of public administration, they argue, has the inevitable trade-off of excluding real-world politics and actual situations of application (idem). It is a price, authors adhering to these strands of research would argue, worth paying: formal theorising is both aimed at understanding and *improving* public administration. The investigation of the details of administrators' work is – rightly or wrongly – sacrificed at the altar of a normative drive towards making things better.

Another central tenet of the technocratic project is the understanding of the role played by academic research itself, and by a range of other kinds of knowledge, in the dynamics of the public policy process. A useful set of distinctions has been drawn by Gordon *et al.* (1977) and Hogwood and Gunn (1984). These have to do with the different concerns found in analyses *of* policy as opposed to analyses *for* policy, where the latter are run with the explicit purpose of aiding policy decisions and advising on alternative policies, while the former, analyses *of* policy, can be either conceived as the study of particular policy areas (e.g. housing, education, health, etc.) through time, or as analysis of policy outputs, as in the case of evaluations. A further category of studies *of* policy has to do with the analysis of the policy process itself, with a focus on "how policies are actually made in terms of the actions taken by various actors" (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984:27). What these categories show is the range of directions academic research interested in public policy *could* take, and how often the focus of analysis is placed on topics of interest *for* policy-makers, rather than on the study *of* their activities.

This trend towards producing academic studies that can be used instrumentally *by* policy-makers for their work forms the basis of much what has been called policy analysis. The main objective of policy analysis is in fact, according to Hogwood and Gunn (1984:30): “[the] developing [of] some sophisticated indicators of social conditions and problems, better forecasts, hierarchies of objectives, improved definition and appraisal of options, and so on”. In this sense, policy analysis produced by academics offers itself as substitute, an aid, and at times a critical perspective *for* policy-makers. Whatever the stance, the model adopted is that of the student of policy *as* policy analyst “speaking truth to power” (Wildavsky, 1979; Goodin *et al.*, 2006) on an equal footing of administrators themselves. This model, unconditionally accepted in the United States throughout the twentieth century, (slowly) gained prominence in Britain since the 1960s (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984). It became the main way to fund and commission policy research in the two following decades (Pollitt *et al.*, 1990), and was definitely consecrated as the golden standard for studies of public policy with the emergence of the “evidence-based policy movement” (Cabinet Office, 1999; Young *et al.* 2002; Campbell *et al.*, 2007; HM Government, 2013) from the late '90s, and with the recent establishment of the so-called 'impact agenda' (see e.g. Martin, 2011), which rewards highly strands of policy research that feed into the interests of government Departments. While these developments have been widely welcomed as a sign of the opening up of government activities to outsider policy analysts, they also had the consequence of marginalising the study and the understanding of the policy process in its own right, as Pollitt and colleagues, writing in 1990, observed and forecasted: the more policy studies were going to be tuned towards the instrumental use of research, relevance, and usefulness *for* policy-makers, the less interest (and, crucially, research funding) would have been placed on understanding, perhaps ethnographically, *how* exactly the policy process works in practice.

At present, it is recognised that a purely positivist stance towards the study of the policy process has been replaced by more nuanced theoretical understandings, which in principle reject the idea of 'pure' instrumental rationality governing the policy process as an “illusion” (Goodin *et al.*, 2006:19). However, much of the literature on the policy process, as we shall see below, seems to build upon the ruins of the technocratic project, respecting much of its original architecture. Prescriptive and normative stances largely abound in mainstream policy studies, with the difference that they are now being

acknowledged as 'inevitable' (see e.g. Goodin, *et al.* 2006). Policy analysis, in its original conception, maintains prominence over studies of how these analyses are selected and used, although much progress has been done in understanding how such dynamics run distant from the technocratic ideal of policy-making as problem-solving activity based on the linear acquisition and transfer of scientific expertise from non-governmental sources (Weiss, 1979; Jasanoff, 1990, 2012; Gibbons *et al.*, 1993; Renn, 1995; Strassheim, 2015). Regardless of this progress, even in the most “critical” of the perspectives in the study of public policy (cf. e.g. Fischer, *et al.*, 2015), the search of the Holy Grail of generalisable statements on the “policy process” continues: theory building remains the priority for scholars, and as a consequence, the real-world activities of administrators and politicians lay far away in the background.

Let us briefly consider for an instance the typical methodological move made by those who seek to investigate public policy without placing unconditional faith in the scientific method and in generalisable laws of causal explanation. Michael Hill's textbook *The Policy Process*, much celebrated in Britain as it focuses on British affairs, is now in its sixth edition (2013). It claims to be

unusual in asserting that it [is] appropriate to concentrate on description, to explore the nature of the policy process, to help to ensure that proposals about policy content or about how to change policy should be grounded in the understanding of the real world in which policy is made. [...] There is [also] a need to be cautious about use the word scientific in relation to the study of political and social life. (p.6)

Hill's adherence to a post-positivist stance, also reinforced by an “open-mind view of whether the process involves stages [or not]” (p.7), seems however to pay only lip service to the tradition of British empiricism. The methodological move that structures the book results in the substitution of Sabatier's preoccupation around causal *theories* with a concern with debates of the classic themes of *grand theory* organised around the lines of academic school of thoughts, or *perspectives*. Hill writes:

Any discussion of the public policy process needs to be grounded in an extensive consideration of the nature of power in the state. Any consideration of how the process works will tend to involve propositions about who dominates [...] a much debated subject [between] the pluralist perspective that [maintains] power is evenly spread and openly contested [...] widely opposed by views which draw upon Marxist theory or elite theory, which see power as very distinctively structured [...] or embedded in the nature of the machinery of the state itself. [...] Controversy about the state and about power is closely related to the debate about democracy [...] there are differing views... (p.8)

Hill's methodological recipe for policy research is to start indeed from an empirical basis of “relevant activities” (p.10), and then “acknowledge openly the validity of competing frames of reference and then explore a case study using each as an alternative lens” (idem). He follows this precept in the organisation of the textbook, where two examples of policies in England and Wales – the 'right to roam' and 'the reduction of child poverty' – are quickly presented in the early parts and then re-proposed, re-considered, and re-worked upon to provide a basis to discuss the frameworks through which power, state, government and democracy have been discussed, *in abstract*, by the several schools of thought around which generations of scholars have grouped themselves. Hill offers indeed a complete and admirably synthetic review, spanning from the origins of pluralist theories, cruising through Marxism, structuralism, globalism, networks theory, institutionalism, rational choice, game theory, and others, to arrive at considerations around the 'governance' perspective and around the possibility of integrating several approaches in one. The range of underlying interests underpinning all these theoretical perspectives, even taking into account the diverse, and indeed at times conflicting views, has one aspect in common: the search for understandings and explanations of large social processes and social 'structures', such as hypotheses on how the policy process is influenced by 'groups', 'coalitions' or 'classes', hypotheses on how 'politics and administration' coexist, how groups of interest 'win' and 'lose' as result of policy, whether decision-making is 'democratic' or not, and so on. Based themselves on formulations ('politics', 'administration', 'democracy', 'interests', etc.), the theoretical constructions assume these concepts play an overarching role over detailed organisational processes, and that therefore, all the analyst has to do (or can do) is – to put it with Sartori (1970:62ss), a political scientist critic of the method – to select “conceptual containers” and go out in “indiscriminate” fishing expeditions hoping to fill them with “facts”, selected out of the “information morass”, without much knowledge of the phenomena under consideration. While some of the theoretical perspectives are indeed solid and grounded more than others on some form of empirical basis, Hill's indications are of little use for proceeding with the contemporary study of the “real-world” of the policy process as he envisions in the opening remarks.

Significantly, Hill does not escape from the tradition of breaking down the policy process in 'stages' (the later chapters are organised around them), despite amply criticising the very possibility of their existence. In fact, very little of the promised “real

world in which policy is made” is to be found in Hill's pages. What his review makes clear is that the administrators' real-world is not there for two main reasons: first, there does not exist an organic tradition of inquiries that has investigated it in details; second, there are serious logistic impediments to the development of such tradition of research, in particular in the United Kingdom. Two passages where this second, important, point is made are worth quoting in full:

There are many relevant activities that are very hard to observe. This brings us back to the issue of power. The fact that many power processes are covert – indeed, their very success may depend upon them being so – is acknowledged in many colloquial expressions ('the power behind the throne', the 'kitchen cabinet', the '*eminence grise*'). Official secrecy is openly used as a justification for restricting access to situations or data necessary to evaluate policy processes [...] Analysts of policy process are thus thrown back on methods which must involve inference from the data they can secure. (Hill, 2013:10)

Administrative roles in the policy [...] process [are] the most difficult to research, because so much of the action is private (in the UK we have to wait 30 years for the publication of official papers, and even then some items are protected for longer, some are purged, and many were never committed to paper records in the first place.) (Hill, 2013:201).

In conclusion, the absence of observational studies of administrators at work finds two justifications, one reinforcing the other: theoretical work must take precedence over empirical description, and applying observational methods to a class of professionals whose activities are, anyway, secret, is by definition impossible. The second reason seems, however, to be considered an implication of the theoretical constructions drawn in the first place, and the matter of research access to administrators' activities is never discussed in full.

The post-positivist tradition

What goes conventionally under the label of post-positivist studies of public policy and administration is a collection of traditions of inquiry that developed in parallel to the “technocratic project”, and that can be (roughly) grouped together along the lines of the criticism mounted towards the structural-functional, or systemic, views of bureaucratic organisations. While few pages can hardly do justice to all the separate arguments of the different authors, it can be useful to trace some of the historical roots of the field, and, perhaps more importantly, to touch on some of the arguments that have

been brought forward to inspire investigations of public administrations radically different from those surveyed so far. One of the unifying criticism of the technocratic project is the view that organisations work as entities that are external to members and that make members act out of standardised directives provided by 'principles', management 'tools' and 'social structures' of the kind described above. Against this orthodoxy in the theoretical conception of organisations, an alternative view was put forward, according to which organisational life is much more dependent upon subjective constructions of human beings (Burrell and Morgan, 1979:261), upon the way members interact with each other, and upon how they accomplish, together, work tasks (cf. Garfinkel, 1967; Weick, 1969; Silverman, 1970). This view inspired strands of research that rejected the idea that organisational analysis should be based on measuring people's behaviour against standards, or should be subsumed under broader 'societal structures' (cf. Boden, 1994), and replaced it with pursuing an understanding of actions and interactions within the workplace, starting from considering *how* administrative work (or work in any other professional setting) is actually practised.

Early contributions to this view comprise Chester Barnard's *The Functions of the Executive* (1938), Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behaviour* (1945; 1957), Philip Selznick's *TVA and the Grass Roots* (1949), Peter Blau's *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy* (1955) and Melville Dalton's *Men Who Manage* (1959). While working from within the structural-functional tradition, and indeed mostly interested in theorising in the direction of developing it (cf. Burrell and Morgan, 1979), these authors, with different nuances, started to note that organisations were far from rational in their actual operations, and were instead greatly influenced by *the informal and the social aspect of the groups* constituting the 'organisation'. Mostly based on inquiries of managers and executives at work in public and private organisations, these studies opened the way to the much debated, but sterile, distinction in between formal and informal aspects of organisational affairs. Further investigations, in fact, demonstrated that many organisations “run in informal mode *all the time*” (Boden, 1993:4; March 1988), and that the *social* – more than the rational manifest functions of organisations (Blau, 1955), and more than their stated goals (Silverman, 1970; Strong and Dingwall, 1983) – play a prominent role in the way work in organisations is carried out in the everyday life of specific settings. With more and less intensity, another common point of the earlier studies that took issue with a pure version of functionalism was the reliance on *observational* methods of inquiry. The way of looking at organisations embraced by these authors began to move

the focus of analysis onto the real experience of working, dealing with 'organisational' problems in the workplace, and going about the everyday engagement with doing a job.

The establishment and the development of a research avenue in this sense is generally credited to the interactionist tradition, initiated by scholars of the Chicago School of Sociology. The main thrust of these scholars' work was methodological: a need to deploy the fieldwork techniques of anthropology, previously used mainly in the study of 'exotic' cultures, to understanding the cities, the communities, and, most importantly for my argument, the *workplaces* of American society. Within this tradition, Everett Hughes, Dalton's mentor, directed special attention to the study of professions, and set out a line of inquiry profoundly different from that of functionalists:

The thing was to discover in what forms problem[s] turned up, how serious it was, and how it was handled. Our aim was to discover patterns of interaction and mechanisms of control, the things over which people in line of work seek to gain control, the sanctions which they have or would like to have at their disposal, and the bargains which were made – consciously or unconsciously – among a group of workers and between them and the other kinds of people in the drama of their work. (Hughes, 1994:70)

The difference resides, as this quote emphasises, also in pursuing a way to look at work *from the point of view of those who do it* (cf. Button and Sharrock, 2009), rather than taking supposedly relevant concepts ('hierarchy', 'management', 'structures' etc.) and cast them against workers' behaviours. Hughes' writings and the interactionists he inspired to produce fine-grained *descriptions* of the real-world of occupations, paved the way for a number of investigations that took organisational analysis away from strictly theoretical preoccupations, and showed the human, occasioned, creative and subjective ways through which members of workplaces went about their tasks and 'routines'. During the 1950s and 1960s, the challenge to the conventional way of understanding formal organisations gained pace, in particular through studies that were observational in nature. In his ethnographic study of a gypsum mine titled *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*, Gouldner (1954), for instance, noted that officials can have very diffuse functions, that rule compliance is problematic, and that rules themselves do not warrant that a moral commitment follows. Gouldner also reversed the orthodox view of 'hierarchy', arguing that subordinates may know more than top managers, and they may use expedients to employ rules devised by managers for fundamentally different ends. Not specifically interested in the sectoral study of work, but nonetheless immensely influential for the discipline, were also the early writings of Erving Goffman (1959,

1961, 1963). In his studies Goffman provides extraordinarily sensitive accounts of how the interplay of organisational circumstances and individuals' inner psychological states provides for different rationalities of behaviour, laying the basis of cooperation and conflict. In *Asylum* (1961), he demonstrates how the stated goals of a psychiatric institution – therapy and care – can perversely be transformed by the actual practices enacted by the staff to 'guard' patients. As soon as the interactions of the “hospital underlife” are taken into consideration, the therapeutic role of treatment disappears, and disciplinary control and unwarranted punishment can be noted through the careful analysis of the staff's 'routine' actions. Goffman uses the metaphor of dramaturgy (1959) to explain and describe the innumerable social situations where human beings wear masks and perform organisational roles in dutiful, creative, artful ways to 'pass' (1963) as appropriate actors in each of those stages the everyday life takes them on. Workplaces are no exception. That art, so very human and often comprising the management of diverse personalities in front and back stages, was entirely absent from the mainstream organisational analysis of the time, while Goffman showed it was at play in even the most mundane of the social encounters, such as when two passers-by cross each other in the street.

Interactionists inspired a wave of ethnographic studies of work and professions (e.g. Becker *et al.*, 1961; Glaser and Strauss, 1964; Roth, 1963) and opened the door to what is known as the interpretative turn in social science, a challenge to the functional paradigm that led many scholars to re-visit the assumptions under which the whole enterprise of understanding society was being taken forward. At the heart of the interpretative argument lies the consideration that individuals understand situations, and work situations, in very different ways: their *interpretation* of what goes on matters because, to use the famous Thomas (1966) way of putting it, “if men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”. Moving from slightly different assumptions, two research traditions blossomed from the 1960s and established themselves as a challenge to the orthodox modes of analysis which had been used that far to characterise the work of organisations: symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. The common thread underpinning the challenge was the rejection of *abstractionism* as method of social analysis: “we must stop treating macroanalyses – Jack Douglas wrote in 1971 (p.11) – *as if* they were scientific arguments, that is, arguments based on carefully done, systematic observations of concrete phenomena”. Rather, turning the functionalist argument upside-down, social analysis (and by

inference, the analysis of work) must start *with* concrete phenomena and dedicate itself to ascertain how they are *constituted, possible and ordered in unfolding circumstances*. Both ethnomethodologists and symbolic interactionists – although with substantial differences (Cf. Denzin, 1971; Atkinson, 1988; Atkinson and Housley, 2003), and for some, insuperable ones (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1971) – set out programmes of research to investigate how people go about their jobs in organisations in their day-to-day conduct, recognising to them the ability to assign, modify, challenge, discuss, agree, use creatively *meanings, symbols, and categories* in the circumstances surrounding them. I will develop in Chapter 2 some further considerations on how these traditions provide for the methodological grounds to study administrators' work considered in this thesis, and, in Chapter 3, I will report on how I applied them in practice.

Here it is useful to note that the uptake of interpretative ideas and the application of fieldwork techniques of inquiry privileged, for several reasons, some settings and professional categories rather than others. The Chicago School scholars, as Everett Hughes reported (1994), dedicated much more attention to the “humbler occupations” (p.69): studies of janitors, factory workers, furriers, junk dealers, taxi drivers, traffic wardens, to give famous examples, featured more prominently in this tradition. Again according to Hughes, this was due to the desire towards “ennobling what some might have considered less than noble” (p.70). Also in the development of the interpretative tradition, the specific realm of public administrators in the high echelons of governments remained untouched. Ethnographic studies of educational, medical and science laboratories settings were preponderant (cf. Atkinson and Housley, 2003), most probably due to the readier availability of research access.

A somewhat more eclectic range of settings and professions featured in the studies produced within ethnomethodology (cf. Garfinkel, 1991), although the same consideration applies: until much more recently (e.g. Harper, 1998; Button *et al.*, 2012) the same detailed attention to occasioned work practices reserved for example to jurors (Garfinkel, 1967), clinicians (Garfinkel, 1967), police officers (Sudnow, 1965; Bittner, 1967); receptionists of welfare agencies (Zimmerman, 1971), lawyers, witnesses and judges in court settings (Atkinson and Drew, 1979); astrophysicists (Garfinkel *et al.*, 1981), teachers (Mehan, 1984), neurochemists (Lynch, 1985), mathematicians (Livingston, 1986), employers of business firms (Anderson *et al.*, 1989) and photocopier technicians (Suchman, 1983; Orr, 1996) was *not* paid specifically to

workers developing public policies for national governments, nor to the larger pool of professionals, including lobbyists, employers of think tanks and other policy-oriented bodies and associations, that are labelled by Colebatch *et al.* (2010) “policy workers”. This shortcoming had led some scholars to insist on the criticism that ethnomethodology, and more at large ethnographic and observational methods, are ill-placed to deal with the *grand themes* of the 'state' and 'bureaucracy' (cf. Button *et al.*, 2012), 'policy-making' (cf. Pollitt *et al.*, 1990), and 'organisation' (cf. Strong and Dingwall, 1983). This thesis aims to demonstrate that the opposite is the case: the fine-grained analysis of the work of policy workers (and specifically for Britain, of the civil servants working for government agencies) is *the place to start* in order to generate more realistic accounts of how these macro-phenomena are produced in the first instance (cf. Hilbert, 1990; Boden, 1994; Coulter, 2001; Button *et al.*, 2012).

Observational studies of policymakers at work

The influence of interpretative and interactionist arguments in political science and organisations analysis started to be felt from the early 1970s in the United States, and, with notable exceptions (e.g. Silverman, 1970; Silverman and Jones, 1976; Hawkins, 1984) much later and sparsely in Britain (cf. Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Atkinson and Housley, 2003). A turning point in political science is usually credited to the publication of Graham Allison's *The Essence of Decision* (1971), a monograph dedicated to the analysis of the decision-making process of the American administration during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The work of Allison exemplifies the problem of applying theoretical lenses and conceptual apparatuses to the analytical interpretation of administrative processes. Using the same evidence available to re-construct the crisis, Allison demonstrates that by applying three different analytical models of action (the rational actor paradigm, as developed in classical economics; the organisational process paradigm, inspired by the emergent 'bounded rationality' models theorised by Simon (1957) and Cyert and March (1963); and a model of bureaucratic politics, as developed by Charles Lindblom (e.g. 1959)) it was possible to “produce different explanations of the same happening” (Allison, 1971:251). Allison continues:

[Analytical] spectacles magnify one set of factors rather than another and thus not only lead analysis to produce different explanations of problems that appear [...] to be the same, but

also influence the character of the analyst's puzzle, the evidence [s]he assumes to be relevant, the concept [s]he uses in examining the evidence, and what [s]he takes to be an explanation.

None of the models, crucially, could explain “what really happened”, leading Allison to argue that different kinds of “historical evidence” had to be sought to progress with an understanding of the events.

In the same era, publications on public administration and public policy academic journals began to consider in more detail the actual practices involved in the work of the American governmental policy analysts, offering glimpses of the actual making of policy work. One example of this stance is Meltsner's (1972) paper on the tools available to the policy analyst to produce meaningful work, which included the “Delphi method” (p.866, n5) to “pencil scenarios” (p.860), the need to define the boundaries of “policy areas” (idem), to develop “political categories” (p.861), to draw “political maps [...] by estimating which actors [...] will exercise power” (p.863), and the need to choose between “mathematical models and the data that goes into them” (p.866). Meltsner enjoyed extended access to bureaucratic offices thanks to the so-called Oakland Project, a partnership between the University of California and the city of Oakland, a project designed to allow academics to observe (“sympathetically”) the decision-making process of a federal agency and of city administrators, including the mayor and the highest civil servants in rank. A product of this partnership was *Implementation*, by Meltsner's colleagues Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), a short book providing one of the most vivid accounts, as yet, of the difficulties involved in the conversion of a social programme into governmental action operational in a city. Mostly based on interviews, original memos, and on a detailed account of the funding process, Pressman and Wildavsky offer a blow-by-blow account of the destiny of key reports, of the politics behind amendments and revisions to plans, of the written exchanges between key actors, and of the reasons projects forming part of the programme (the construction of a port terminal and an airline hangar) failed. They account for “agreements dissolved slowly over time in unpredictable ways” (p.91), and show that “what seemed to be a simple program turned out to be a very complex one, involving numerous participants, a host of different perspectives, and a long and tortuous path of decision points that had to be cleared” (p.94). The strength of *Implementation* is that the complexity found in the field of research is not used as gloss to call for analytical simplification (as Sabatier (1997) invites students to do, see above), but is used to re-

specify the problem and describe the number of separate decisions that form what is thought as a single one (Sabatier's "policy process"). "The happenings we record – Pressman and Wildavsky write (p.93) – are important to us for their everyday prosaic character". While only incidentally, policy work on the part of the officials of the administration agencies under observation (federal policymakers and local officials) emerge for what it entails in its everyday-ness: part of that are the written correspondence and the meetings, the bargaining on "principles" (p.142), the "number games" (p.119), the "legal jockeying" (p.59).

Wildavsky and Pressman's interest in providing an empirical backing to the abstract and formal budgetary process in the US was reflected in another work of Wildavsky, composed in collaboration with Hugh Heclo, an American scholar based in Britain, first in Manchester and then at Essex University. *The Private Government of Public Money* (1974), pioneered the use of sociology and anthropology to investigate policy-making in Britain and the role of the Whitehall civil servants. According to Parry (2003), Heclo and Wildavsky's approach was so novel, so unprecedented in its methodological approach it was "a shock to see civil servants' words in print" (p.5). Their examination, based on partly-anonymised interviews and analysis of official documentation, achieves to portray the officials of the Treasury in their London-centred "real-world patterns of relationship", where personality and reputation count more than "formal structure and procedures" (Heclo and Wildavsky, 1974:6). Furthermore, and arguably for the first time, the *language* through which officials talk to each other and conduct their business is explored: the subtleties, the hypocritical use of grand statements in political talk, and the "cosmetics" (p.304) of the bureaucratic writing style come to light, together with the associated officials' skills in reading through the lines, in interpreting ambiguous situations, in doing a great deal of preparatory work (p.310) which may end up being sidelined (p.348). What strikes the reader the most through Heclo and Wildavsky's pages though, is the extraordinary amount of work Departments' and Treasury officials are called to do to avoid *disagreement* and *conflict*, and to settle dispute and matters "before they get out of hand" (idem). This is nicely captured by borrowing classic anthropological themes such as "kinship", "nuclear family", "village life" (cf. Parry, 2003) in developing an account of the British government as a "system of reputations" glued together by the need for "mutual confidence" (Heclo and Wildavsky, 1974:14). The highest echelons of the British government are depicted as a "fortress" (p.341), where *trust* and the need not to rock the boat is more important than policy analysis

(p.361), where political dilemmas are solved with much more attention paid to saving faces and preserving unity and interests than to considerations of what are the “policy effects after savings, cuts, and other expenditure manipulations” (p.359). While *The Private Government of Public Money* displays a great deal of admiration towards the administrative officials and politicians who develop the skills necessary to survive the system, it is also an exposé of the lack of transparency and effectiveness of the workings of Whitehall, in particular when it comes to account for the budgetary process, Wildavsky's central research interest (cf. 1964; 1975). Strikingly differently from the American system, it was nearly impossible – the analysis with Hecló concludes – to trace the fate of policy options and public policy decision-making from official data (cf. Parry, 2003) and without taking in consideration the behind-the-door bargaining in the Treasury and in Departments. Their proposed research agenda, by the end of the book, is clear, but crucially it forecasts it will remain difficult to pursue:

The British constitution has always been said to consist of the organic tissue of practices that underlie the effective government of Her Majesty's realm [...] What these practices are, why they exist, where they go wrong – to begin to answer these questions it is necessary to study government. What tends to develop instead is a tacit conspiracy of silence. That political administrators find secrecy useful is understandable; that citizens and social scientists should acquiesce is less so [...] Those inside who do not wish to be seen make common cause with those outside who could try to see but do not. (Hecló and Wildavsky, 1974:341)

Seen in retrospect, this quote correctly predicted that the style of academic studies of government and administration developing in the United States in the 1980s would have not find a match in the more secretive Britain. The American-based studies I have in mind are, for instance, Herbert Kaufman's *The Administrative Behavior of Federal Bureau Chiefs* (1981), and perhaps more vividly, Martha Feldman's *Order Without Design* (1989). The former is a detailed analysis of the day by day work of six “bureau chiefs” of the federal government (the equivalent of the UK most senior civil servants), obtained by direct observation:

I observed the chiefs, sitting in their offices as they went about their routines, scanning the materials crossing their desks, sitting in on most of their meetings, listening to their telephone calls, sometimes joining them for lunch, often discussing what was going on when they had a break in their activities [...] Extensive notes were taken on all these sessions, which were spread over some fourteen months to sample all phases of the agencies' annual cycles (Kaufman, 1981:11)

The latter – Feldman's ethnography – offers a description of the work of “bureaucratic analysts” sitting at the US Department of Energy (the equivalent of the UK middle-rank policy specialists in Departments, see Chapter 6), obtained through eighteen months of

participant observation. The focus is on the details of report writing and “issues interpretation” (Feldman, 1989:23) on the analysts' part, and how such interpretations are bounded to “negotiated agreements related to organisational interests” (p.99) on which she duly reports examples from case studies. Feldman reports real life policy *in-the-making*: the process, the outcome of decisions, the incidence of analyses in actual cases. She notes, famously, that such influence is relatively little: many times reports are written “because they are scheduled to be written” (p.80). Equally detailed and illuminating in terms of description of practical work is Kaufman's contribution (1981): the senior officials are depicted exercising discretion against “the specifications on *how* things were to be done to the abundant provision on *what* was to be done” (p.93, original italics). Reporting verbatim exchanges (see e.g. p.105ss) and a deluge of examples from actual practice, Kaufman manages to specify the constraints on the chiefs' behaviour – the “imposition of agendas [...] outside their control” (p.91), the limits imposed by “statutes” (p.92), the “programming” running “from cabinet level to the rank and file” (p.96) – but also what, within these constraints, chiefs had to do to make directives and procedures operational, and where, exactly, the “confines of their leadership” stood.

What Kaufman's and Feldman's monographs have in common is the prioritisation of empirical data over theoretical preoccupations. This does not mean that they are not concerned with theory. Rather that they discuss theory *in the light of* what is obtained on the field of research. Feldman capitalises on the organisational analysis approaches developed by March and Olsen (1976), which give importance to the question of “how individuals and organisations make sense of their experience and modify behaviour in terms of their interpretations of events” (p.56), and by Karl Weick (1969; 1979), who pioneered and developed the study of sensemaking in work groups and larger organisational environments. She shows *how* the work of analysts contributes to the Department's organising, and *what* their practices consist of. Kaufman reserves theoretical “inferences and speculations” (p.175) to the very end of his book, *after* the reader has gathered an highly detailed account of what chiefs' work is about. Once readers get to the end these two slim books, they *know* what was like to work as “chiefs” and “analysts” for the American government in the 1980s. They know what it took to write documents and reports, which sources were likely to be used, which voices of other sections of government and interest groups had to be taken into account, what sort of negotiation and bargaining went on. These are descriptions of the professional

work of administrators. As we shall see below, no account of this kind exists with regards to the British equivalents in the same period.

Whitehall: the forbidden city

Political sociologist Edward Shils, in his *The Torment of Secrecy* (1956), compared the possibilities of research access in the American administrative system with those in Britain. He wrote (p.49):

the British ruling class is unequalled in secretiveness and taciturnity. Perhaps no ruling class in the Western world, certainly no ruling class in any democratic society, is as close-mouthed as the British ruling class. No ruling class discloses as little of its confidential proceedings as does the British.

Peter Hennessy's commentary to the rules of confidentiality in the UK Civil Service, in the monumental and much celebrated *Whitehall* (1989:367-368), published thirty years later confirmed the point: “despite much lip-service to open government by successive administrations [...] Whitehall's secrecy rules remained as tough as ever in the late 1980s”. Whitehall, the centre of the British administrative life, was both for journalists and social scientists a “forbidden city” (Margach, 1978:1). This had dire and direct consequences for the quality and nature of the academic accounts of the civil servants' work in the literature of the time. Paralleling the more famous Edward Shils' complaint with regards to the study of jurors' work in the United States, amply discussed by ethnomethodologists (cf. e.g. Garfinkel *et al.*, 1981; Heritage, 1984:298ss; Lynch, 1993), it can be said that such literature is 'about' British civil servants, and eschews systematically “descriptions of what [civil servants'] activities consist of and [...] how the practitioners manage the tasks which, for them, are matters of serious and pressing significance” (Heritage, 1984:299; see also Lynch 1993). This 'missing what' emerges significantly in the most important and cited academic analyses of the British administration in the decade: the one part of Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman's comparative analysis of “professional state bureaucrats” in Western democracies (1981), Richard Rose's writings on the British Higher Civil Servants (e.g. 1984), and the nascent 'policy styles' literature focussing on Britain (Jordan and Richardson, 1982).

Aberbach and colleagues' *Bureacrats and Politicians in Western Democracies* (1981)

heavily suffers from the procedural problems Allison (1971) had highlighted ten years earlier. Their treatise is framed by theoretical questions: what is the *influence* of civil servants on the policymaking process? (p.1) What is a valid equilibrium for an “effective democratic government”? (p.viii). The investigation proposes *a priori* four “images” (p.4ss) of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats derived from theories, and tests them against the results of some fourteen hundreds semi-structured interviews conducted in seven different countries. Using statistical analyses they are able to answer questions regarding, among other things, the “social origins” of their participants (p.47), about what participants think are the most important “traits” for the roles (p.107), their “ideological stance” (p.140), their “patterns of contacts” (p.218). They seek to demonstrate the growing influence of civil servants in the process, and unsurprisingly, they manage both to confirm their hypothesis and to highlight the “institutional distinctiveness” of the United States in comparison to Europe, which they had foreshadowed (p.23). Their considerations around the British civil service own more to Hecló and Wildavsky (1974) and Richard Rose's ongoing work than to their own data. Practices and procedures of work are entirely absent in their account.

Rose's work (1974; 1984) adopts the position of the sociologist dealing with phenomena that is barely able to observe in real life, and who, forced by the circumstances of inaccessibility, has to rely on hearsay, chronicles and leaks from newspapers articles, and theoretical speculations. Among the authors who wrote about the British civil service, Rose is arguably the one who accomplished the richest and the most detailed of the accounts, relying on published sources, especially those of reformers. The portrait of civil servants trickles down through the writings of the Northcote-Trevelyan Commission, which in 1854 established the Service in its contemporary form, and that of the Fulton Committee (Committee on the Home Civil Service, 1968), which sought to modernise it. Rose's question is the same permeating Aberbach and colleagues' analysis: given the structural qualities of the system, what civil servants *ought to do*? Do they “obstruct” ministers? Are they apolitical or do they maintain a political status? To arrive at his conclusions, more sharply than Aberbach and colleagues, Rose offers some insights in the work of “coordinating and reviewing programs, [and] considering their interrelationships” (1984:150), and the consequences of the “frequent changes of posts” which impair the development of some administrative skills over others. Importantly, he expands on Hecló and Wildavsky's findings on the importance of reputation in Whitehall's circles (p.154), highlighting the need for administrators to adapt “his[/her]

own behaviour in order to get along well with ministers with a variety of personal styles” (idem). Also, Rose, perhaps for the first time in print, considers some very practical matters:

a unique function [of the civil servants] is to provide the “institutional memory” about the work of the department, and how to defend or advance its interest in Whitehall [...] He [sic] will have at his command all the previous files relating to a problem (including files connected with the government of the previous party, which are closed to ministers).

Furthermore Rose is able to describe with some precision the distribution of responsibilities between ministers and servants:

servants are expected to provide ministers with information and advice that reflect a collective, not a personal opinion, the accumulated experience of the department about a problem at hand [...] given the numerical weight of administrative class civil servants by comparison with ministers, they can (and must) handle the great burden of labour. As precondition of formulating or carrying out new policies, a minister must see to it that routine departmental responsibilities are satisfactorily discharged [...] The minister is responsible for such tasks as answering questions in the House of Commons, meeting delegations, and delivering speeches at meeting of pressure groups concerned with the department. Servants will brief the minister on answers to parliamentary questions; on potential demands by pressure groups; and prepare speeches for him to deliver on departmental business. (Rose, 1984:156)

Rose, however, never elaborated on specific cases and answered questions around *how* civil servants do these things, yet his pages remain, thirty years later, the place to go to gather a sense of *what* it is that officers do behind the armoured doors of government departments. His theoretical contributions are also important in defining the “dialectical” character of the making of major policies, and in identifying in the “seeking of consensus” the bulk of civil servants' activities – theses that will permeate the analyses of others at the time and in the decades to come. One example of Rose's influence, for example, is the work on the peculiarities of the British “policy style” by Jordan and Richardson (1982), who elaborated on the “logic” through which departments engaged or not with power groups through “consultation and negotiation” (p.86). While their analysis is not anchored to any evidence from practical administrative work but relies on accounts of politicians, they had much to say around the “clientelism” (p.84) and the creation of “policy communities” (p.88) around policy issues: “the bureaucratic preoccupation – they write (p.92) – tends to be the minimisation of disturbance, the securing of a stable environment of negotiated order, rather than significant policy change”. The characteristics of a “*dominant* British policy style” (p.80) had been identified. How that worked out each time, and how the

negotiated order proceeded in policy areas or for particular policies, remains an interesting research agenda which few have followed by engaging with the question how such 'style' is produced in observed practices of work.

The absence of accounts of civil servants' work weighted heavily on the students of Whitehall and of British public administration writing in the 1990s and at the turn of the century. Pollitt *et al.* (1990) did not mince their words in stating that “forms of resistance to scholarly investigation [into policy issues were] on the increase” (p.169) and the possibilities of researching the contemporary policy process were seriously “handicapped” (p.188) by a systematic reluctance to embrace ethnographic approaches and post-positivist methodologies both in analysis for policy, and in the analysis of the policy process itself. The dearth of available data became a common complaint (James, 1992; Smith *et al.*, 1995; Marsh *et al.*, 2001; Rhodes, 2005). Information about administrative activities had to be obtained obliquely from memoirs of ministers (e.g. Crossman, 1975; Kaufman, 1980; Castle, 1984), whose reports and diaries were often one-sided, sketchy, and sanitised in order to obtain the official clearance for publication (cf. Morgan, 1976; James, 1992; Rhodes, 2005). The biographical-historical approach of Peter Hennessy's *Whitehall* (1989), for many the best book ever written on the British administrative-political class, was also of little use: too broad the remit of the author's intentions and too anecdotal. Only few civil servants emerge as extraordinary “draftmen”, these were those who deserve a place in a carefully composed history book. The preferred sources to consult were works of fiction (cf. Rhodes, 2005) such as the television comedy *Yes Minister* (Lynn and Jay, 1990) and Charles Snow's *Corridors of Power* (1964), where administrators are stereotyped as adjuncts to the politicians' 'old boys network' in charge of explaining them how things *really* work (cf. Noordegraaf, 2010) – “men trained to discretion” (Snow, 1964: 38), admirable for their “charme of confidence” (p.43), for “sounding competent, master[s] of the details of the job” (p.24), “with skills and nerve” (p.41).

Fiction, however, is fiction. International acclaim does not make up either for sharpness of analysis, nor for the validity of evidence. Ironically, one had to go all the way back to Harold Edward Dale's *The Higher Civil Service of Great Britain* (1941) – a book written *by* a senior civil servant – to obtain some answers to the most basic of questions around administrative work from the perspective of practitioners. Researchers today

will still find a whiff of fresh air in this 75 year-old book, by scrutinising both the way Dale sets out his inquiry and how he conducts it. In Dale's words:

My principal object is [...] modest, viz. to offer some account of the highest section of the Home Civil Service [...] and of the functions which in fact they discharge day by day within one part of their region of labour, the field of policy. A long and complicated Bill is introduced by a Minister into the House of Commons, an important decision is announced or an awkward question evaded in carefully chosen words, an elaborate Order having the force of law is issued under some existing Act of Parliament. No one can suppose that the responsible Minister has himself done the detailed work which issues in these manifold products and events. It is surely natural for any one at all curious after realities to ask not merely 'Why' but 'How' and 'By whom' – 'How were the substance and the details of that Bill actually determined? What influences settled the shape of those regulations? What was the process by which that decision was in fact reached, and who drafted the wording of its announcement? What sort of people are they who stand behind Ministers in all this business?' [...] A reasonable satisfaction could be given to the inquirer without going far outside the walls of Government Departments; and this book is mainly an attempt to provide it. (Dale, 1941: ix)

Dale swiftly enumerates the *material* tasks occupying the working days of officers and composing the “Department's daily work” (p.35): first the writing (or, at the time, the dictating to a typist) of instructions, minutes, memoranda, letters – each requiring “constant vigilance” (p.23) in determining to whom redirects it, and, of course, precision, because “one unguarded phrase or careless omission in a letter which on a hasty reading appears perfectly safe may embarrass the Department for years” (idem); the minutes of interviews and meetings “with all manner of people” (p.24); the notes of committee work; the drafts for Parliamentary business; the written responses to “requests from superiors for a statement of the fact and reasons” (p.26); the annual report to be drafted, or the colleague's draft to revise. Second, and “the most important” (p.40), *talking and listening*, activities that Dale manages to characterise by defining the administrators' “qualities of mind and character in those who practise the profession” (p.66): practitioners have the “passion for precise facts and close inferences, and a grim distrust of vague generalities” (p.81), they develop a deference for those higher in the hierarchy and for the Minister, who is “little less than a god” (p.83), they “perpetually” ask themselves “not only 'What is the right thing to do?' but also 'What are the difficulties about doing it?', 'What opposition will there be?' 'How is it to be overcome?' and (what is much the same) 'Who must be frightened or persuaded and how?'" (p.88). Civil servants also learn how to network with the relevant colleagues (p.87), they become “enthusiastic for moderation and prudence” (p.93), sensitive not to the “absolute best measure or line of policy, but to the best practicable and as offering all that can be hoped in an imperfect world, a distinct balance of advantage” (p.100). If

ever a psychological analysis of British senior civil servants existed and with it a sociology of their work, it starts, and, if we except the incursion of Goffman in the subject (1959) which makes direct use of Dale's materials, *ends* with Dale's pages, drafted in 1939.

Opening a black box

Similar considerations must have been made some sixty years later, when the Economic and Social Research Council, the leading social science funding agency in the UK, initiated the Whitehall Programme, an extensive programme of research (1994-1999) intended to fill what was rightly identified as an “enormous gaps in our knowledge of the key actors and institutions in British government” given that “there were [only] badly dated [...] few studies on how central government departments work (Rhodes, 2000a:ix-x)”. Despite having secured “access”, “time”, “frankness” and “invariabl[e] hospitality” (Marsh *et al.*, 2001: xii) on the part of “183 civil servants, ministers and interest groups' spokepeople [sic]” (idem) much of the literature produced as outcome of the Programme, 23 separate projects run by 49 researchers (cf. Rhodes, 2000b:2), reads today as a missed opportunity to investigate the *practical* work of administrators. The urgency moving the programme was in fact distinctively theoretical, resting squarely in the tradition I considered earlier with Michael Hill's textbook. Subverting the objectives set out by the programme itself, some of the leading researchers introduced their work by stating:

We are usually presented with an analysis of an institution, for example Parliament or a department, that examines how operates, but the study is not located within the context of broader questions about the nature of governance in Britain and fails to utilise meta-theoretical discussions, for example on structure and agency or the role of institutions and ideas [...] Our broader view on British governance is upon a sympathetic critique of Rhodes's differentiated polity model... (Marsh *et al.*, 2001:5)

They embark in a general “analysis of Whitehall” (p.14) centred on the “conceptual device” of “culture” (p.15). They seek to go beyond “cultural theory” (p.18) by discussing Mary Douglas, Michael Foucault and Erving Goffman among others, and, on the basis of such theoretical jostling, argue that “there are distinct sub-cultures in departmental divisions and competing cultures and interpretations of cultures in

Whitehall as a whole” (p.36): these are supposed to be “a traditional Whitehall culture”, managerialism, public service ethos, “old ways” (p.39) all immersed in an unspecified flow of cultural changes. They venture in assessing the “grand strategy” of reforms (p.44), dedicating two pages each to four departments to discuss their “changing organisational structures” (p.59ss) “over 30 years” (p.67). Quotes from informants in the service are scattered through academic analyses to offer examples of theoretical insights, in support or in opposition to theses around “pluralist democracy” (p.201), “the globalisation of the state” (p.211), the “systemic level” (p.212), etc. The same analytical procedure permeates the volumes of published contributions stemming out the Programme. While successful in streamlining an all new vocabulary of social scientific jargon to engage in the study of the British public administration, these collections in their entirety offered little comfort to the students interested in the perhaps more naïve, but certainly pressing, questions of how policies developed, day by day, in the hands of administrators, and what was involved in the production of such development.

These shortcomings and criticisms thereof probably rang a bell in the ears of the Whitehall Programme's principal investigator, Rod Rhodes, whose publications in the following years marked his conversion to the “interpretative” and “ethnographic approach” (Rhodes, 2005:3; 2011; Gains, 2011; Rhodes, 2012). *Everyday Life in a Ministry* (2005) and *Everyday Life in British Government* (2011) claim to apply anthropology to public administration, and concentrate on “describ[ing] the changing world of permanent secretaries and ministers through an account of their daily life in government” (2011:xii) to fulfil the intention of “put[ting] people back in to [his own] analysis of policy making in networks” (Gains, 2011:156). These publications also are said to mark an “interpretivist turn” in the study of public administration in Britain (Hay, 2011). While Rhodes pays a long and careful tribute to the methodological discussions of ethnography by, among others, Geertz (1973) and Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), his empirical work appears to miss the point of the discipline of participant and non-participant observation. Rhodes, puzzlingly, chooses to leave out of his account any description of practices and actions all together – the starting point of any ethnographic work (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:3). He gives the following explanation to a questionable analytical move:

Practices consist simply of what a group of people do, and the unintended consequences of these actions. So, the state or a government department is a set of embedded practices [...] Practices often help to identify beliefs. I interpret people's actions by ascribing beliefs to them. Nonetheless, practices cannot explain actions because people act for their own reasons.

I explain their actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors, not by reference to the practice itself. I unpack a practice as the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals. It is possible to explain people's beliefs (and the practices to which their actions give rise) only by locating them in a wider web of beliefs. (Rhodes, 2011:4)

These “web of beliefs”, unsurprisingly, stem out those very “models” that had permeated all the Whitehall Programme literature: the “Westminster model” (2005:13), “managerialism” (2011:88), “governance” and “meta-governance” (2011:296). “I encountered managerialism”, Rhodes writes (2011:88). By ascribing these conceptualisations to his real-world encounters, however, Rhodes forgets to tell us *how practically* these things play out or are of relevance in real occasions of application. Disguised under the veil of ethnographic work, Rhodes continues with hypothesis-testing around if and how the civil service has changed. To epitomise this reversal of the precepts of ethnographic research one can look at his analysis of the workload of the permanent secretaries he was allowed (in an unprecedented fashion) to shadow at length. “The work of a permanent secretary is conventionally divided into policy, management, and representational roles” he writes, presenting his findings (2005:6). He proceeds to code a full year of entries from the diaries of the secretaries, around these categories, adding sub-categories (e.g. “budget”, “substantive policy” [sic], “hello meetings”, “phone calls”, etc.; p.8). He *times*, to minutes, how long the secretaries spent doing these things. Readers are then able to know that of the 232 hours and 40 minutes one secretary spent “doing policy and politics”, the 3.62% was with a minister, the 0.56% was with the media, the 2% was in Parliament, and so on. The problems with the procedure are, of course, that these data are coded by someone else (the secretaries' personal assistants), they are the organisation's organisational account predicated on the fact that the secretaries *ought* to do those things (cf. Anderson *et al.*, 1989:127), and, perhaps more importantly, they tell the readers nothing about what these practices actually entailed in the first place. The treatment of interviews (see e.g. 2005:12-13) suffers from the same problem: Rhodes is in search of data to fit theoretical categories he casts over the research, such as “loyalty”, the “core belief [of] the senior civil service” according to the “Westminster model” which “for many academics is an outmoded account of British government” (*idem*), but, he concludes (p.16), civil servants still “believe in [it]”. While Rhodes may have a point in defending his accounts as “valuable in their own right” (2005:16), the question remains as to whether Rhodes' version of ethnography has any of the potential to instil new blood into policy research Gains has accorded to it (2011). By mishandling the concept of “situated agency”

(Rhodes, 2011:5), which is supposed to overcome the structure/agency conundrum around the origins of collective human action, Rhodes manages to tell the readers very little about the realities of organisational structures and the scope of the 'agency' of actors. His characters move in a vacuum disconnected from local and wider contexts, where their actions have no consequence for any specific course of policy, no consequence for anything in the real-world of policy, and only for the realities of the discourses of academic conferences and journals, where now 'interpretivism' is the new 'turn' to quibble about (cf. Hay, 2011; Gains, 2011) and the new grounds to call for a reform (Rhodes, 2013).

Rhodes' "elite ethnography" is risk-free research, a vehicle for the self-image of politicians and administrators, delivered to avoid embarrassment and obtain easily clearance for publication (cf. Rhodes, 2005:19). In administration, he finds, "beliefs about the state and political institutions are in [...] perpetual flux" (2011:6), the life of a permanent secretary is a "web of words embedded in a web of relationships" (p.206), and of course, there is "chaos" and "arbitrar[iness]" (idem). This vagueness does not mean that Rhodes' findings are not useful: they confirm solidly that the classic politics/administration dichotomy is untenable, and after Wildavsky (1974), he invites to think about the highest echelons of the government as a political-administrative elite, working in constant symbiosis, or as Foster (2005:24) has put more incisively in his *British Government in Crisis*: "an organic unity for decision making purposes". Rhodes also points out, unfortunately without following up the emergent finding (as ethnographers should do), that little substantive analysis of policies go on at the level he addressed, but that that is streamed to director generals and down along the hierarchical lines of officers at lower level. While this is an interesting preliminary consideration, if Rhodes' intention was to investigate "government" for what it does he should have at least said something around the interaction between his characters and those who do the work of analysis. This remains not addressed, if not by metaphors: "policy emerges from routine and builds like a coral reef. Similarly [...] policy analysis creeps into the decision process almost by osmosis, by becoming part of the zeitgeist, rather than overt deliberation" (Rhodes, 2013:485). The "coral reef" metaphor is little more than an embellishment of the classic 'cogs in the machinery' understanding of the work, function and doings of the numerous high and middle-rank officers populating the government departments' buildings and offices. Rhodes' view reproduces the assumptions on organisations and human action of the functionalist tradition. He sees permanent secretaries, ministers, and the officials in the Department as cultural dopes: they act out

of the 'beliefs' in administration 'principles' (such as “loyalty”) and what need to be investigated is whether actors are (or better, say they are) faithful to such beliefs or not. The need for ethnographies, in these enquiries, is a mean to “getting up close and personal” (Gains, 2011:256) to check whether these beliefs stand the test of the analyst's inquiry, questions and interpretation of the answers. These are ethnographies of people, where there is no space for the analysis of their work, and therefore no space for the analysis of policy-making as phenomenon constituted by this very work.

Far more insightful in this sense are the empirical work and analyses of Page (2003), and Page and Jenkins (2005), who start by freeing the image of civil servants from the “misleading” and “old” (2003:673) politics-administration distinction, as well as from the “usual-suspect theories [which] fail to provide a coherent account of what goes on in [British] government” (p.652). Page sets out to investigate the work of civil servants in a neo-realist fashion, taking inspiration from the 1950s Italian cinematography of De Sica and Zavattini: the intention is to depict characters for what they do and what they say they do, away from any dramatisation, away from the illusion of enacting any grand design dreamed by theorists. Given that, as I have argued so far, the real activities of developing, discussing and writing policy and legislation were at that point “almost entirely unknown” (Page, 2003:652), the analytical procedure – “inductive” and refusing to engage with “constitutional formality” (p.674) – pays off both in terms of providing an empirical basis to statements around the policy process, and in terms of descriptive strength. Page, arguably for the first time in several decades, *investigates* the work of the officials who are charged with producing legislation (2003) and *gives them a voice*, by letting them speak about their experiences in the service, about the details of their everyday activities, about the nature of what they do, about the impact they think their work has on 'policy' (Page and Jenkins, 2005). Page (2003) looks at “bill teams” (p.653), the group of officials effectively in charge of drafting four Acts of Parliament redacted in 2002, and discovers that most of the members of such teams “are outside the top ranks of the civil service”. Teams in fact involve three to ten officials all at “Grade6” and below grades (idem; cf. Chapter 4). This finding alone debunks the idealised picture of policy “decided by some form of single meeting of the top people in the department which then becomes the blueprint for handling and developing that issue” (Page and Jenkins, 2005:6). *In the light of this finding*, they discuss the insights of Gouldner (1954; see above) and the suggestions of Michael Lipsky (1980) who, famously, highlighted the room for discretion exercised by officers who do not work

under the close supervision of superiors, to assert that the “expertise and knowledge [of middle-rank officers] gives them power over their inexpert masters” (Page and Jenkins, 2005:10). Page also notes (2003:651) that “ministers typically know relatively little about the law they are bringing in until they receive the submissions and briefings from their officials”, which in turn means that relatively junior civil servants handle the issues, draft the clauses of the bills, and propose final drafts “with significant autonomy” (p.672). Also, it emerges from Page's analysis that politicians and the most senior civil servants such as permanent secretaries “are often not even aware that [...] policy problems exist before policy officials raise them” (Page and Jenkins, 2005:vi). Page also identifies the mechanisms of control that limit initiative and autonomy (“the need for ministerial approval” and the consequent need to “anticipate ministerial reactions”, p.673), but his point remains strong. In government departments there is “a cast of thousands” composed of middle-rank officers whose work is crucial and decisive for policy-making in Britain, and “we know virtually nothing” (2003:652) about what they do.

As this review has amply demonstrated, Page and Jenkins (2005) certainly moved in an uncharted territory. Their method of inquiry is as simple and intelligent as appropriate to the task they set to themselves: to “give an understandable picture of one particular slice of life, the working life of relatively junior officials in the [British] policy bureaucracy, [and] a clear portrayal of sets of activities that can be described and understood in fairly straightforward terms” (p.ix). Having secured the possibility of interviewing officials in a two year period, they chose to address the questions of “what the person sitting in front of us had been doing today [...] how officials went about *doing* their jobs, rather than what they *thought* about abstract or hypothetical propositions” (p.xi). The 128 officers who volunteered to talk to them, were thus left free to elaborate *in their own terms* about their daily activities, starting from quite simple questions. While the procedure meant the analysts gathered materials spanning a large breadth of coverage, the quality of the materials and analysis is enormously enhanced by the fact practitioners spoke to analysts in *the language of the office*, rather than that of theoretical representations. The categories Page and Jenkins use to analyse the interview scripts and organise the analysis – for instance, for policy work, “production”, “maintenance”, and “service” (p.60) – emerge from data, rather than being ascribed on respondents' answers. Readers, finally, gather a sense – albeit a broad-brush sense – of what it entails to work as civil servant at the level considered,

and in what way officials intervene in the making of policy. While there are not in-depth case studies of particular courses of government action, nor of policy development, and while the authors have no access to internal documentation or actual occasions of practice, Page and Jenkins shed light on a variety of practices that they demonstrate are *fundamental* for the understanding of the policy process, and that that far had remained victim of “too much theoretical clutter and jargon” (2005:ix). It is in this territory that the chapters that follow also move, but not before, however, mentioning a few recent studies of government action conducted in the United Kingdom that border the kind of analysis I propose and that address the question of how the policy process is constituted *in* and *by* the occasioned practices of policymakers.

Some recent developments

First, I have to agree with, and reiterate, Noordegraaf's point (2010:45) on the fact that “text[s] on 'real' policy work and on day-to-day policy experiences are scarce”, whilst adding that they are also dispersed in different geographical locations and, therefore, administrative systems. This exacerbates the problems with importing findings from one country to the other, and, crucially, impairs the opportunity to cumulate data. Noordegraaf (2000), for instance, studied the equivalent of the British senior servants in the Netherlands, a country where – seen other literatures (e.g. Wagenaar, 2004) – social scientists seem to enjoy easier access to the settings of ministries. Noordegraaf's depiction of the “meeting and paper driven” (p.32) managerial work of public officers does offer scope for generalisations – public managers are “professional sense-makers” (p.33) regardless of location – but only at this basic level of analysis. Indeed Noordegraaf admits that interpretation and political roles on their part will play differently in different occasions, which are themselves “an empirical matter” (p.33). This point lends itself to the consideration that looking elsewhere to define the nature of policy work in British administration can result in a pointless exercise. So, if some inspiration can come from studies such as Howlett and Wellstead's investigation on the tools used by policy analysts in the Canadian government (2011), it is only observations of British policy-makers at work that can tell something about what British policy-makers do at work. Unfortunately, despite the growing interest in the interpretative methodologies in the last decade, as discussed earlier, few investigations

have been conducted in departmental settings, addressing the problem of describing the work of officers populating those settings. Three exceptions are Katy Wilkinson's ethnography of the exotic disease division in the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2011), Alex Stevens' report on his partly-covered research on the work of an unnamed department (2011), and Jo Maybin's study of the officers of the Department of Health (2013, 2015).

Wilkinson (2011) sat with DEFRA officers as participant observer for long enough to understand, and be told, that the formal models of decision and policy making proposed by the policy science literature such as the policy cycle, are simply “not present in Defra” (p.961), where the world of policy-making proceeds, she writes, in a “disordered and often chaotic” fashion (*idem*). The mechanism that constitutes the order of actions and meaning, in her account, are “stories” (p.962): a “mode of ordering” which gives employees of the Department a sense of purpose. The central “story” Wilkinson sees happening is that of the “bureaucratic procedure”, whose rhythm is marked by a “punishing routine of meetings” (p.967). Building on her and her colleagues complaints around the pointlessness of many of their activities (“working life consists of writing reports no-one will read and attending meetings where nothing is decided”, p.971) Wilkinson insists on a description of “inefficiency” and “inertia” (p.969), which is suddenly suspended when her division – exotic diseases – has to face crisis of disease outbreaks. In such occasions the “story” of bureaucracy changes: “the conventional values of bureaucratic government are completely subverted: [...] specific and pressing problem[s must] be resolved as swiftly as possible” (p.970). In such cases, and it seems only in such cases, “officials and scientists find meaning in their work” (p.971). Wilkinson's ethnographic sensibility and vivid descriptions of the office arrangements offer a valuable insight in the material world of officers at work, for example informing us of the distance in between the desks of policy officers and those of scientists, or about the materials that are used in the emergency meetings following outbreaks, when they all convene around a map on a table: “blu-tac, stapler, stapler extractor, pens, marker pens, highlighters, telephone pad, post-it pads, spare paper” (p.972). It is unfortunate she decides not to document how these have been used to proceed with the problem-solving activities she associates to outbreaks, limiting herself to define “laughable” and “trivial” the fact that such stationery is required in a written document (*idem*). Her conclusions are also not located in the doings she is exposed to (and to which she participates), but in the sociology of John Law (1994). Her “story of

bureaucracy” is not told by her participants, but by Du Gay (2001), Merton (1968) and Crozier (1964), whose sociological work she duly acknowledges in the text. The readers come very close indeed to what officers say in meetings, and, crucially to the substance of decision-making when she sees the machine of policy-making in motion during emergency outbreaks. One can see the office, breathe the air of anticipation of heated exchanges. Readers are close, but just not there.

The “stories” Stevens (2011) reports from the field, the offices of an unnamed department in London, are of different nature. Rather than finding them as the product of the narrative turn in social science, as Wilkinson does, he discovers them in officers' interactions at work. Mostly preoccupied with investigating the use of evidence in policy development, Stevens describes the process officers follow to pull together convincing policy proposals. Officers refer to the internal papers outlining policy options and preferences as 'narratives' (Stevens, 2011:241; cf. Chapter 6). In drafting 'narratives' officers need to find “internal coherence” and a convincing argument “that made sense” (p.242). Stevens' bulk of data consists in the description of his own attempt to provide 'evidence' for one 'narrative' for the team of officers he worked for. What was important, he reports, was not that the evidence was solid or authoritative, but that first did not conflict with other government publications, second that helped “sell the policy” (idem) to other officers and external contacts, and third that *looked* visually convincing – it had to contain “killer charts” (p.244). Stories in Stevens' field are also officers' accounts of their own career prospects. By analysing them, he discovers that officers find incentives in *not* developing specialised knowledge in any policy area, but rather in becoming expert of “the complex inner workings of Whitehall” (p.245) – knowledge that nothing has to do with the “outside world” (idem). “Policy stories” have then to “fit” government policy in ways that little have to do with evidence validity, but that are shaped by “the currently dominant modes of thought” (p.246) and by the need to “avoid uncertainty, complexity and contradiction” (p.247). Stevens, elaborating on his data, challenges a number of theories and pre-conceptions about policy-making – first and foremost its messiness and chaos. Order can be found in the construction of 'narratives', and in other mechanisms that have little to do with the substantive content of policy proposals. Readily, alternative explanations of social problem that 'do not fit' with these mechanisms are discarded or buried “in silence” (p.248). The closest one gets to the material practices through which this order is constituted – Stevens' careful treatment of quotes from *office talk* demonstrates – the clearest this picture emerges.

Maybin's account of the policy work she observed at the policy and strategy directorate of the Department of Health (2013; 2015) is, in this sense, groundbreaking. Arguably for the first time in the existing literature, readers are able to engage directly with the civil servants' "conversations with one another in [departmental] meetings" (2015:293) and, through these, gather a sense of the nature of the problems practitioners encounter in their days at work. Maybin dutifully reports the ways officers characterise what they are doing, while they are doing it. Meetings, *pace* Wilkinson, are held with precise objectives, and are part of the texture of a complex, but *ordered and emergent*, development of policy activities. Maybin's ethnographic insights take the reader in a world of *talk* and *written texts*, of forms to be filled, of *definitions* to be arrived at collectively, of external contacts to be consulted and informed, of maps of populations to be plotted (2013:165), of problems in need of quantification, further research to be commissioned, more discussions and consultation to be organised. She frames her questions in officers' terms: "what does *making policy happen* mean? And in what sense are ways of understanding issues considered 'useful', and policy proposals as likely to 'work'?" (2013:186) She finds her answers *in* civil servants' "daily work practices" (idem). Arguably for the first time, these are *described*. Maybin also reports, through her participants' interview answers, the officers' difficulties and the struggles to secure the superiors' 'patronage', the ministers' support, the 'alignment' to "powerful agendas" (2013:195) that are "in flux" (p.197). This means officers, every day, need to:

participat[e] in regular meetings where colleagues would update one another on the latest developments, being present in meetings where the latest language was invoked by senior colleagues, and by being copied in email chains in which draft documents and plans were circulated. (Maybin, 2013:195)

Civil servants are thus described as engaging in "pragmatic inquiries" (p.209): they need to gather information and evidence that 'works'. This means they need to be knowledgeable of the organisation they are part of, of its culture, practices, structures, changes. These are *not* "generic skills" (p.212) – Maybin concludes – but competencies developed 'on the job', "forms of knowledge and knowing" (p.221) that are *distinctive* of the profession. They are instantiated in practices, Maybin argues with Garfinkel (1967:9), each time "for another first time". Indeed, Maybin's work powerfully demonstrates, "they need to be studied in real-time, as they occur" (Maybin, 2013:53).

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that much of the knowledge on policy-making is based on writings interested in prescribing rather than describing, and that there exists a limited number of observational studies of 'policy workers', especially in Britain, where the operations of government Departments are considered particularly secretive and difficult to research. The existing studies on the subject, I have argued, have also a tendency to rely on concepts, generalisations and theories based on very limited empirical grounds. Analysts seem to be more interested in finding presupposed, underlying working 'principles' to which administrators adhere, rather than in preserving the circumstantial detail of actual offices' activities and subject these activities to a kind of disinterested study that I believe could better inform the analysis of the 'policy process'. The failure to understand how policy-making is done in practice – consequence of the literature gap this review has identified – is taken as starting point for the inquiry I develop in the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the ontological and epistemological approach I chose in order to develop my inquiry. The discussion furthers the methodological considerations I have outlined so far, by exploring the possibilities of ethnographic and ethnomethodological approaches to study the work behind the development of policy. I start by reflecting on the problem of description and on how this has been addressed by different interpretative research traditions. I claim that a combination of ethnographic methods, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis is particularly well suited to provide descriptions of work in formal organisations, and that a fruitful way to proceed with the investigation of public administrators' activities is to interrogate the language in use *in* the organisational settings where these activities take place. Analysis – I argue with ethnomethodologists – can begin with the actual, real-world communicative practices discovered *in situ*, rather than build over theoretical formulations. The chapter then spells out in what ways these considerations have contributed to inform the methodology, the data gathering methods and the analysis strategies I used to pursue answers to my research questions.

Studying civil servants' work

This thesis is an empirical study of public policy-making and government action in the UK. By describing the practical activities entailed in doing 'policy work', it pursues the understanding and the description of the tasks civil servants carry out on an everyday basis and how the development of public policies happens in real time. This study's ambition is also to shed light on the ways knowledge is used in public decision-making with particular reference to the development of policies promoting 'environmental sustainability' and 'sustainable consumption'. The methodology the study uses combines elements of traditional ethnographic studies of work in organisations (Schwartzman, 1993) with the more recent theoretical background informing workplace studies (Heath and Button, 2002). The interest is first and foremost micro-sociological, with a view of capturing language (Silverman and Jones, 1976), discursive practices (Goodwin, 1994) and practical reasoning (Horlick-Jones and Rosenhead, 2006)

employed in the activities constituting the *job* of a circle of civil servants committed to develop environmental policies for the government. Consequently, the research design has been conceived to provide means of capturing and documenting interaction on the workplace, and analyse it as local, ongoing accomplishment of office work (Heath and Button, 2002; Luff *et al.*, 2000; Suchman, 1983; Garfinkel, 1967). 'Shop talk', conduct in the workplace (Lynch, 1985) and the use of documents and their 'careers' (Harper, 1998) – that is the ways documents are composed and become what it is done and decided in the workplace – are considered central empirical resources.

The data supporting the inquiry are ethnographic materials gathered in a two-year period of observation and participation in the everyday life of public administration officers in the headquarters of a government Department in London. The officers I had opportunity to study had the responsibility for discussing and developing policy initiatives to promote 'sustainable consumption' for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). One objective of the inquiry is to detail the status of these policies in the UK, with particular reference to the sources of knowledge that are used in their design. More specifically, I am interested in ascertaining which understanding – or models, if they are used – come to be embedded in these policies. Through such analysis, moreover, the thesis also aims at providing a larger picture about the ways policies and policy options are generally progressed, re-negotiated or dismissed by the government through the work of the Department, and how this happens in practice.

An ethnographic investigation of policy work

I visited the Department in the role of observer for the first time in the winter of 2011. I was then given permission to formally interview the members of a 'policy team'², who later became gatekeepers and colleagues in two periods of placement carried out in 2012, which lasted seven months in total. During the placements I had opportunity to spend time in the Department and observe officers while going about their jobs. Gathering materials on what they did and how they did it has been my central

² As we shall see in Chapter 4, the organisation of civil servants in structured teams is one of the basic features of their work. Being introduced and later 'accepted' in the team responsible for the development of the policies of interest has been the objective of long and challenging access negotiations, whose developments I detail in a later chapter (cf. p.73). The success of the negotiations was essential to the very opportunity to conduct this study.

preoccupation. To do so, I used classic ethnographic methods in the anthropological tradition: observation, interviews, informal conversations, shadowing, tape-recording of exchanges in formal and informal occasions, collection of documents, both in digital and paper format. I also took copious fieldnotes and occasional digital pictures. Increasingly during my residence at the Department, I was assigned to do work for and with research participants. This has helped me to acquire further familiarity with their everyday practices, and to be exposed to work situations that would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to witness had I relied only on observation. With reference to the classic typology of roles in sociological field observation discussed by Gold (1958), the research design and the circumstances of fieldwork provided me of a positioning very close to that of the *participant as observer*. In this positioning, Gold notes, researchers do make participants aware of their observational role, but at the same time strive to gain participants' familiarity and trust to the point of being considered a 'colleague'. During fieldwork, in fact, I found myself in charge of basic tasks or in charge of aiding others in doing theirs – as negotiated with gatekeepers at access stage. These arrangements, and the day-by-day accomplishment of field relationships, allowed me to experience first hand – albeit not for long and only at junior level – what it means to work among policymakers for a national government. I consciously used my own learning of junior practitioner as a research instrument. In more recent literature on ethnographic fieldwork, such positioning has also been called *marginal membership* (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007): a situation where the researcher can manage field relationships by oscillating from complete 'embedment' to 'strangeness' in strategic and opportunistic ways. In contrast with critics of this fieldwork approach, various scholars have argued (cf. Miller, 1994, Atkinson, 1995; Horlick-Jones and Rosenhead, 2006) that the acquisition of a certain degree of local, technical knowledge is not only consistent with the maintenance of an appropriate degree of anthropological strangeness, but it is exactly in such oscillation between being inside *and* outside that reside rich opportunities both to collect valuable ethnographic data and to pursue genuine sociological understanding of the milieus of interest. This ethnographic approach, clearly influenced by the *unique adequacy requirement* endorsed by the ethnomethodological tradition (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Lynch, 1993), is considered a particularly suitable research attitude to conduct ethnographic studies of work in large organisations (cf. Scwhartzman, 1989) and has been used in this study to investigate what civil servants do to progress environmental policies.

The first concern of this research is to bring back to the centre of the analytical stage the *activities* of policymakers: what do they do on everyday basis? To which tasks do they dedicate their working time? How are these tasks organised and how do they relate to the development of policies? What knowledge is used and how? These questions have provided the grounds to design this project, which – in search of detailed descriptions of practices and of the *logic* supporting them – has adopted a qualitative and ethnographic approach.

Ethnographic research entails an immersion in the natural settings of those one wishes to study and a commitment to making sense of what happens 'through the eyes' of those composing the scenes (Schwartzman, 1993; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). This simplified explanation of the position of ethnography within qualitative methodologies skates over many of the ongoing debates within the field, but sets already some important points for this study, on which I shall elaborate. First, a qualitative inquiry into the work of policymakers based on an ethnographic approach necessitated the collection of new data *in situ* (Baszanger and Dodier, 1997). The scarcity of previous studies on the subject is only one of the justifications for this. A more important reason introduces a fundamental tenet of the ontology this study adopts, best elucidated by the Lucy Suchman's (1983, 1987) concept of *situated action*³. Suchman's now classic work builds on a conception of human behaviour and social organization that emphasizes the contextual nature of action and re-specifies the classical, 'rational' relation between plans and courses of action in office work (and in everyday life). Rather than seeing organisational plans and procedures as given structures to which workers adapt in purposefully rational ways, Suchman proposes to see them as the *product* of the orderly work of the office:

the topic for study is the process of finding the “definite meaning” of office procedures as a constituent feature of the work of getting them done. The work of finding the meaning of organizational plans in actual cases is referred to as *practical action*. The structures of the office, accordingly, are located in the organization of practical action, rather than in procedural specification *per se* (1983:321, original italics).

Elaborated in the context of research on designing human-computer interaction (HCI) and heavily based on ethnomethodological understanding of the enterprise of social

³ Suchman's (1987) research draws heavily on the work of Harold Garfinkel, which I will discuss later in the chapter.

sciences (Bittner, 1965; Garfinkel, 1967; Zimmerman 1971; Heritage, 1984; Button, 1991; Lynch, 1993), to which I shall come back, the approach of situated action suggests the need for the analyst to 1) preserve and display the circumstantial details of action and to 2) avoid hasty generalisations in the analysis stage, recognising that what can be observed and studied is inherently contextual. This means that the practices I observed and that this study analyses and describes are not generalisable as descriptions of what *all* civil servants involved in policy work do, but that they are generalisable as descriptions of what they *can* do in the context of any policy (cf. Peräkylä, 1997). Following Suchman, I placed the focus of analytical attention on the ways workers orient to procedures, and choose in *real time* among the “unelaborated, partial inventory of available courses and desired outcomes” (1983:322).

For the practical purposes of the research, embracing this analytical framework meant that during fieldwork the central concern of data collection had to be placed on capturing materials that genuinely reproduced the features of the work I intended to study (cf. Button and Sharrock, 2009) and subject them to analysis to attempt a description of them *before* venturing in explanations grounded in this or that *theory* of government⁴. An ethnographic methodology was thus adopted, with the aim of documenting details of the workers' activities in an as fine-grained fashion as possible. More specifically, my research intentions move from giving particular attention to the *stated* objectives of the organisation, to trying to unpack the ways such objectives are set and progressed, and *how* setting and progressing happens in practice through the actions of officers working for the organisation with the specific license and mandate of government action. I use the terms ‘license’ and ‘mandate’ borrowing from the writings on work and occupations by Everett Hughes ([1959] 1984: 287). He writes:

An occupation consists in part in the implied or explicit *license* that some people claim and are given to carry out certain activities rather different from those of other people and they do so in exchange for money, goods or services. Generally if the people in the occupation have any sense of identity and solidarity, they will also claim a *mandate* to define - not merely for themselves, but for others as well - proper conduct with respect to the matters concerned in the work.

As Strong and Dingwall (1983) have powerfully argued after Hughes, the study of formal organisations can hugely benefit from unpacking the ways license and mandates are accomplished in (inter)action, rather than taking organisational goals as a given and

⁴ On the importance for the analyst to give priority to the 'what' and 'how' questions of social practices before attempting to give theoretical explanations (the 'why' questions) see Gubrium and Holstein (1997) and Silverman and Gubrium (1994).

then check on what extent workers follow same stated, 'official' rules. Strong and Dingwall's argument clearly overlaps with Suchman's situated action approach.

Ethnographers also commit to rely on what anthropologists have called the *emic* perspective: they aim at observing the 'natives' of the milieu in order to see and understand the meaning of their actions *from their point of view*. This is the basis of ethnographic studies of work in the Human Relations research tradition (Schwartzman, 1993) and also what distinguishes this kind of qualitative inquiries from other sociological enterprises based on positivist canons (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Adopting the natives' perspective in studies of social milieus constitutes in fact the basis of the interpretative programme in sociology. The research procedure, known after Max Weber as *Verstehen*, is what ties together an array of sociological research perspectives. Despite presenting a substantial unity of intents – understanding human behaviour from the point of view of the actor – various strands of the interpretative programme disagree on the ways the very same object of analysis should be investigated, and with what final purpose⁵. I shall dedicate the next section to reflect on the problem of description and on how it has been addressed by different interpretative research traditions.

The problem of description

How to describe the (increasingly) complex affairs of human beings in contemporary societies remains a contested ground within sociology⁶. I address the problem of description here to justify the choice of data I considered particularly valuable, and to explain how I went about analysing them. At the heart of the disagreements among qualitative researchers lies the status of the 'knowing subject' and, at more philosophical level, that of the 'subject' in general. To start unravelling the terms of a debate that has engaged sociologists since the birth of the discipline (and still

⁵ A clear treatment of the problem in relation to the structure/agency controversy can be found in Sharrock and Button (1991:137ss.)

⁶ Gubrium and Holstein (1997) provide a succinct and informative account of how different strands of qualitative inquiries in the second half of the twentieth century have gone about seeing and describing social realities. They review naturalistic, ethnomethodological, emotionalist and postmodernist traditions. We will not have space here to elaborate on all these developments. Rather, I will prefer to take a step back in time and discuss in principle older controversies based on different conceptions of human action and nature. Central to the discussion is the ways 'interpretation' by individuals is considered to develop in real life.

engages sociologist of knowledge and philosophers) I will take a quite pragmatic stance and boil down its terms by referring to and elaborating on the distinction between traditional sociological naturalistic inquiries and ethnomethodological-informed ones (cf. Dingwall, 1981; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). I will claim, after Miller (1994) and Moerman (1988) that a combination of ethnography, ethnomethodology and applied conversation analysis is particularly well suited to provide descriptions of work in formal organisations.

Traditional inquiries have sought a rendering of the reality on the assumption that a reality 'out there' exists independently from the subjects populating it. Weberian *Verstehen* has been therefore interpreted as a research procedure to be exploited in order to reach a sufficient empathy with the subjects one intends to study. Another assumption is that human beings interpret the 'objective' world surrounding them and act accordingly to the meaning they attach to it through what have been identified as 'mental processes'. The analysts' goal is to ascertain what goes on in a given social situation by exploring *individual* human behaviour through observation (hence naturalistic inquiries) and interrogating the 'motives' of behaviour of the subjects involved. The ethnographer's task, therefore, is to artfully provide in writing a vivid rendering of the subjects' worlds, and to document and represent them as accurately and vibrantly as possible, with a view on providing a causal explanation of action – so to fulfil what is considered by naturalists, following Weber, the ultimate goal of the sociological enterprise. Action is assumed to be somehow *always* meaningful⁷. The accuracy of a sociological description, in this view, derives from the ability to describe subjects' interpretations and subsequent decision-making for action. In terms of methods, participant observation and in-depth interviewing provide the ethnographers with powerful research tools. What naturalists are after are subjects' 'true' stories as descriptive devices to talk about social milieus and society in general. Research success derives from the abilities to 'exploit' the right key informants and from the adequacy of original ethnographic text to the conventions of the ethnographic literary genre.

This type of naturalistic inquiries is problematic for a number of reasons. The classic criticism moves from the acknowledgement that the sociological analysts must necessarily apply a further process of interpretation to work with the data. In order to do

⁷ Weber (1947:91) recognised that “the line between meaningful action and merely reactive behaviour to which no subjective meaning is attached cannot be sharply drawn empirically”. He suggested a typology of rationalities which sees the irrational as deviance - so to characterize even this latter as 'meaningful': “influenced [...] by affects and errors” (92). See also Lynch (1993:3-10)

so, analysts in fact claim for themselves a sort of privileged position, from where they maintain they can observe 'objectively' what goes on in the physical world and in the minds of human beings. This problem has been somehow glossed over or partially resolved by committing to disclose 'reflexively' the researchers' interests and the negotiation of their identities in the field and during analysis (see e.g. Coffey, 1999). Indeed, this procedure has provided (and still provides) grounds to the most faithful and fervent ethnographic works in the sociological tradition. However, what remains unresolved is to what extent sociological descriptions should rely on the very same subjects that are studied, or in other words, to what extent subjects are able to give authentic accounts of their own behaviour on individual basis⁸.

The ethnomethodological inception

A different strand of the interpretative programme departed from the Weberian methodological individualism and the focus on motivations, which in turn informed Talcott Parson's theory of action in the structural-functionalist tradition. Rather than concentrating on the subjects' accounting of what they think they are doing and why as definitive source of evidence about social action (cf. Antaki, 1994) attention was placed on the ways subjects' very same actions come to be constituted in their making:

actions are treated not simply as the products of individual dispositions nor of external constraints, but as reciprocally organized within a setting in which the actors' cognitive frameworks are instantiated as patterned interaction (Heritage, 1984:307)

This switch of analytical interest, sustained since the early 1950s by the ethnomethodological movement (Dingwall, 1981) following the path traced by Harold Garfinkel, had profound consequences for the practice of ethnography⁹. Key to

⁸ The best critique of the research tendency to relying exclusively on vocalization of motives by subjects probably remains C. Wright-Mills' article *Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motives* (1940). More recently, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) revived the point in their critique of an 'interview society'.

⁹ See Paul Atkinson's critical review (1988) for a cautious recognition of the potential contribution of ethnomethodology to empirical investigations in sociology. Atkinson's paper criticises behaviorist tendencies and argues that ethnomethodology cannot be considered a homogenous research project. Such criticisms, together with others', are taken by Lynch (1993) as points of departure to present the status of ethnomethodology at the time of publication. Lynch does distinguish different strands of ethnomethodological studies (proto-ethnomethodology / ethnomethodology / post-analytical ethnomethodology). I will render the gist of the debate – inherently epistemological – in the reminder of the chapter. For a recent elaboration on some of the Atkinson's points, see also Pollner (2011). The article is published posthumously and reflects on the state of ethnomethodology in the early 21st century.

understand the departure from the Weberian sociological enterprise is the work of Alfred Schutz, upon which Garfinkel heavily drew. Central to the development of the ethnomethodological proposal is the phenomenological understanding of the ways humans go about their everyday life – what Schutz called the 'natural attitude'. Such conception breaks with the idea that in going about their everyday affairs humans apply the Cartesian method of doubt¹⁰, as if they were all involved in the very same kind of reflections philosophers apply to their work. On the contrary, Schutz maintained that people take most of the things that constitute reality *for granted*, and live and act in the flow of time mostly preoccupied about getting things done for practical purposes.

To illustrate this point let us consider the way an analyst may encounter the term 'organisation' and making sense out of it. When one names an organisation – say the university, a company, a government agency – (s)he is already making a number of assumptions about it: what the organisation is composed of, what is supposed to do, etc. This is necessarily true both for the 'person of the street' and for the professional sociologists, with the difference that the latter can claim a certain superiority of their accounts due to a professional status, and to the fact that (s)he has the time to negotiate the 'concept' of organisation, by a process of analytical 'sophistication'. In any case, in using the word 'organisation' in everyday conversation, such sophistication disappears all together. In interaction, and in the flow of real everyday life, the utterance (or the use in written text) 'organisation' has the same status of any other word used in the ordinary language. As for 'organisation', any concept imposed by researchers to identify or 'label' a phenomenon risks glossing over the nature of the phenomenon itself. Sociologists, as Garfinkel (1967) spelt out in what was received as a disconcerting attack, had for too long assumed that doubt, reflection and sophisticated labelling are general conditions of human existence – that humans are all involved in an intimate and thoughtful meaning-attaching process driven by values – as Parsons, Garfinkel's mentor, had claimed. In opposition to this view Garfinkel, following Schutz, proposed sociology as the study of that very 'natural attitude' as background condition that sustains the sense and the meanings people normally attach to things, words and actions, and more importantly the study of how people's natural attitudes come to work *together*, for practical purposes and as basis of the social order. Coming back to our example of the word 'organisation', the analytical problem is not what the person of the street means by it when asked to elaborate, or what the analyst has come to define as 'organisation' after years of studies,

¹⁰ See Cuff, Sharrock and Francis (1981, 150-179), on which the remainder of the paragraph draws on, for an extended elaboration of this point.

but what becomes important are the circumstantial conditions of the use of the word, and what will be mutually understood by the users in the here and now of its evoking (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1971). For the practice of ethnography, the epistemological consequences of adopting an ethnomethodological stance are best elucidated by the now famous, but yet controversial, suggestion of Zimmerman's and Pollner (1971) to consider ethnographic materials not as resources for sociological analysis, but as topics. This means giving particular attention to the world that comes to be taken for granted – *intersubjectively* – in the milieu under study, in its details, in its features that are *not* discussed at every point. The ethnomethodological proposal, or 'policy' to use Garfinkel's term, is to take, in our example, 'organisation' not as an analytical resource to be applied to account for a given institutional reality, but as topic to be explored through the analysis of the ways whoever uses that particular word or sense does it to suits some yet to be explained practical purposes.

It may be useful here to further elaborate on the Garfinkel's project. The publication of Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967) constitutes as radical a change for sociology as the theories of Copernicus to the Ptolemaic model of heavens. The term 'revolution' has been smoothed to 're-specification', but there is little doubt that the influences of the *Studies* has been deep and strongly opposed since its inception – characteristics of many shifts of paradigms in other human attempts to come to grasp with natural or social 'facts'. In some ways, in contrast with those who have labelled Garfinkel's studies as 'obscure', the ethnomethodological re-specification is based on a quite simple research agenda. Yet it is in its simplicity that lays its radicalism. The point of sociology, Garfinkel explains in the *Studies*' preface, is not to establish objective social facts – as Durkheim had suggested and as the 'mainstream' sociology of the time hold – but to study the grounds on which 'establishing', 'objectivity', and 'facts' are arrived at as a matter of everyday life, to use Garfinkel's words, as “organizationally situated methods of practical reasoning” (1967, viii). These grounds are (just) a matter of 'common sense', but if researchers had to take this 'sense' seriously, it will reveal that is not common at all, at least in the meaning that 'common sense' holds in ordinary conversation. Firstly, the question is what this 'commonality' is made of. For example, what is it that makes sociologists sociologists? What is it that makes jurors jurors? What is it that makes bureaucrats bureaucrats? The second question is how do sociologists, jurors or bureaucrats make sure that the social expectations their positions hold is recalled, identified, chosen, adapted to and, in cases that are likely to be at least surprising, departed from? How is it that the shared sense of this commonality is

sustained? These are all 'new' questions for the traditional ethnographer. The Garfinkel's answer to these questions is 'ethnomethods': the artful practices members¹¹ use to make their own activities (whatever they may be) simultaneously recognizable to themselves *and* other members – in Garfinkel's own analytical vocabulary – 'accountable', 'for all practical purposes' (1967, vii). This means that social action, in its 'orderliness', is not the result of the summation of individual intentions or dispositions, but is to be found in the *concerted* ways social action come to be constituted in its making. There are several features of ethnomethods on which I wish to reflect. The following list summarises, necessarily in condensed form, characteristics of ethnomethods that helped to narrow down the focus of this study.

1. Ethnomethods may indeed be based on cognitive properties, but they find their substantiation in interactional practices, and in turn, in existing 'social structures'. The study of ethnomethods, thus, does link what traditional sociology had considered micro-sociological features with considerations pertaining to macrostudies.
2. Ethnomethods are circumstantial. They are used and deployed in different ways in different occasions, *vis-à-vis* with the circumstances at hand. It is likely that there exist established ways to deploy ethnomethods, but these ways are necessarily organisationally, historically and culturally grounded. The study of ethnomethods can illuminate organisation, history and culture, but not the other way around (see 5).
3. Ethnomethods are used *a priori*. It is not a matter of consciousness or unconsciousness, it has to do with the inescapability of their use. There is of course an overlap between ethnomethods and what Alfred Schutz called 'natural attitude'. It is likely that users would not be able to elaborate on their own deployment, unless particular (usually destabilising) circumstances arise. In any case, as Garfinkel clearly demonstrated in the experiments with his students, even when the elaboration happens it can never be considered complete. This is also known as *etcetera clause*.
4. Ethnomethods, no matter their 'sophistication' or the complication of the circumstances of their use, have to do with thinking, meaning, speaking, acting, and using technology in exactly the same ways they have to do with everyday situations.

¹¹ The substitution of the word 'actors', which I used so far, with 'members' is made consciously and will be retained from now on in the text to generally refer to research participants. On one side I start embracing the ethnomethodological analytical vocabulary, on the other the choice of the word stresses the contextual character of my considerations.

Language, in the broad sense of the word, is the medium *par excellence* for ethnomethods' constitution, use and modification.

5. Ethnomethods are more easily learned than taught. When teaching is attempted, it is more likely to witness the attempt to reproduce the organisational, historical and cultural grounds that facilitate the possibility of their use, but this does not warrant the use itself (see 2).

The questions I will address in the remainder of the chapter is how is it possible to observe and describe ethnomethods, and how I went about identifying and unpacking their use in the specific settings of interest of this research.

In search of ethnomethods: interrogating language-in-use

As established by the ethnomethodological literature, ethnomethods underpin the ways knowledge becomes embedded into members' actions so to make those very same actions recognisable, appropriate to the situation at hand, and from the point of view of the actor, *what follows as natural in competent conduct* in the settings under inquiry. The study of ethnomethods in work situations, therefore, is the study of the stock of socially distributed knowledge at hand to workers to getting things done, or to use Goodwin's (1994) words, the study of *knowledge in action*, as used by members of a profession. The target of description becomes the

practices used by members of a profession to shape events in the phenomenal environment they focus their attention upon, the domain of their professional scrutiny, into the objects of knowledge that become the insignia of their profession: the theories, artefacts and bodies of expertise that are its special domain of competence and set it apart from other groups (p.606).

As demonstrated by Goodwin himself, and by a number of successful studies of work conducted adopting an ethnomethodological approach (cf. Chapter 1), one of the most fruitful research strategies to investigate professional practices starts from a fine-grained analysis of the *ordinary, or natural, use of language* (cf. Silverman and Jones, 1976; Heritage, 1984; Lynch 1985; Moerman, 1988; Miller, 1994; Silverman and Gubrium, 1994). Harvey Sacks, the pioneer of the strand of studies that addresses the use of

language in conversation (or talk-in-interaction) known as conversation analysis (CA), half a century ago wrote:

we offer the observation that persons, because of the fact that they are heard to be speaking a natural language, *somehow* are heard to be engaged in the objective production and objective display of commonsense knowledge of everyday activities as observable and reportable phenomena. We ask what it is about natural language that permits speakers and auditors to hear, and in other ways to witness, the objective production and objective display of commonsense knowledge, and of practical circumstances, practical actions, and practical sociological reasoning as well (1963:342)

By 'natural' it is intended that use of language that – rather than being elicited by researchers as in the cases of surveys and interview-based studies – pertains to the *objective* everyday life of the settings under study, which is, quite simply, what it is said and done to accomplish the work itself in real time. As Sharrock and Watson (1990) elegantly put it in writing for the French journal *Raison Pratique*, in most occasions what it is said *is* what it is done¹²: it is “*l’unité du faire et du dire*” – the unity of doing and saying. The same argument was developed later on by the writings of Deirdre Boden (cf. in particular 1994), who argued that the analysis of conversation in the workplace is key to understand the world of formal organisations. In Boden’s words (1994:62, my italics):

[in organisations] administrators have to work to achieve conversational alignment on a set of critical issues; the alignment is managed *first conversationally and thereby organizationally* (and not the reverse). By segmenting both their conversation and their organization into meaningful units, organizational actors not only make sense to each other locally, they give to the world its practical structure of action.

Recent ethnomethodologically-informed ethnographies of large organisations (e.g. Harper, 1998; Harper, Randall and Rouncefield, 2000; Heath and Luff, 2000) thus, have pursued the witnessing and capturing of the 'objective production' of talk and conduct in the workplace and use them as central empirical resources. Researchers need to gain access to the settings and witness the flow of events, with the objective of unpacking the inter-subjective intelligibility of action and its constitution (Coulter, 1989), that is to say

¹² This is true in particular when the target of analysis is professions in which talk and creation and manipulation of text are essential to the job, like, as we shall see, in the case of civil servants. In recent literature (e.g. Alvesson, 2004) these professions have been placed under the label of 'knowledge work', and the ever-increasing number of employees and consequent economic value in Western systems noted. It is probably time to re-launch the Barley and Kunda's (2001) claim that there is still a long way to go before the nature and the features of knowledge work (or 'post-bureaucratic' work, as they call it) are properly understood and described. My position at these regards is that the strategies of ethnomethodological-informed ethnography, as detailed in this chapter and in the literature cited, are particularly well-suited to bring these kinds of work “back in” the sociology's remit.

the ways language in its everyday, interactional use in the settings gets to define, shape, modify what follows as practical and appropriate in situated occasions, as it works *for* research participants¹³. The fundamental unit of analysis for this analytical approach, as Schegloff (1991) discusses in depth, becomes talk-in-interaction as distinctive form and primary constituent of social life. Central to the analysis of talk-in-interaction is the sequential order of turns of speech. Schegloff (1991) writes:

Socially shared cognition is nowhere more important than in the course of direct interaction between persons. The very coherence and viability of the course of such interaction, jointly produced by the participants through a series of moves in a series of moments that are each built in some coherent fashion with respect to what went before, depends on some considerable degree of shared understanding of what has gone before, both proximately and distally, and what alternative courses of action lie ahead (157).

Other followers of the conversation analysis project initiated by Harvey Sacks insisted on relating the *temporal organisation* of talk-in-interaction – the physical, necessary and unavoidable condition for the developing of a meaningful conversation among two or more persons – to the display of the knowledge in use in interaction, and consequently, identified analysis of speech exchanges in natural occurring occasions as the richest locus to investigate ethnomethods, and their deployment. Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998), for instance, write:

Conversation analysis treat the transitions between turns during talk-in-interaction as revealing two kinds of things. First of all, the next turn is the place where speakers display their understanding of the prior turn's possible completion. [...] Another aspect of this is that the relationship between turns reveals how the participants themselves actively analyse the ongoing production of talk in order to negotiate their own, situated participation to it. (p.38)

The recent workplace studies literature (Heath and Button, 2002; Luff *et al.*, 2000) also recognises that to interrogate work activities analysts need to be in the position to observe and document *natural-occurring* instances of uses of 'competence' and to become familiar with appropriate conduct in the everyday development of work. Luff and colleagues (2000:1-28) discuss the successful developments of workplace studies. Conceived as attempt to analyse work in order to provide technological support for workplace activities, the genre departs from the tendency to analyse activities *assuming* their meanings and their functions (perhaps relying on workers' elaboration for

¹³ The echoes of the philosophy of the late Ludwig Wittgenstein and his invitation to address and study the *language games* to understand social action should become clear here. Coulter's *Mind in Action* (1989) and Pollner's *Mundane Reason* (1987), both defending ethnomethodological positions, pursued the connection between Wittgenstein's philosophy and sociology, a path opened some thirty years before by the seminal, and often forgotten, Peter Winch's [1990 (1958)] *The Idea of Social Science*.

description). Rather, the focus is placed on observing and describing work as it happens in real settings. It becomes thus paramount to document *from within* the settings the “competence system” (Lynch, 1985: 6) that one pursues to describe and to provide “material demonstration” (idem) of the practices studied, as basis for description and analysis. Talk, as for traditional ethnographies, is fundamental, but for ethnomethodologist/conversation analysts (EM/CA) what it is said to the researcher or what it is heard among research participants (together with analysis of how organisational records and written text are put together) is *not only* resource and definitive basis for ethnographic reporting – the ultimate data – *but also* point of departure and topic for analysis to access the world of what participants do, and how they do it. Talk-in-interaction needs to be witnessed and captured as deployed in the natural use, to be then subjected to inductive analysis to unpick what constitutes the mutual understanding among research participants as basis for progressing activities and tasks. Arminem (2000) has noted how fruitful the EM/CA approach results in addressing organisational and institutional settings, such as the one object of this study. By elaborating on the use of talk-in-interaction in the workplace, he writes, research addresses that

continuously updated basis for an intersubjective working consensus for the accomplishment of every task. It does not only enable activities but also constrains the participants. The parties have to ceaselessly maintain an intersubjective understanding to sustain the basis for the orchestration of activities (p.444).

Arminem goes on to clarify that a careful analysis of verbal interaction in institutional arrangements is not only key to address the distinctive features of workplace activities, but also to tap into the dynamics of use of power, knowledge and morality in context. Given a sufficient acquisition of local knowledge by the researcher, analysis of conversation in institutional settings allows the tapping into the members' way of organising and structuring the accomplishment of the practical tasks, and how members manage to bring forward meaningful social action.

The potential of combining ethnography as research strategy to access and document settings of interests, and analysis of talk-in-interaction (CA) to provide a solid empirical basis for ethnomethodological description, that is to say the identification of the methods and practices members use to accomplish their practical activities, had been strongly endorsed by the anthropologist Michael Moerman, who saw the applied use of the conversation analysts' discoveries of the machinery of talk-in-interaction (Sacks,

1963; Schegloff, 1991) as the most powerful way to enrich traditional ethnographic reporting. The combination of the two methodologies (ethnography and EM/CA), Moerman (1988) and later, Miller (1994) argue, bridges the traditional interest of ethnographers in the description of the culture of the milieu of interest, with a rigorous, systematic analysis of how such culture gets to shape action in the moment by moment occasions of interaction among the members of the milieu. Conversation analysts, in bringing forward the Sacks' project of unpacking the ways talk-in-interaction comes to be an orderly phenomenon, have developed a set of analytical tools and vocabularies¹⁴ that Moerman proposes as key to ground ethnography in detailed, “culturally-contexted” (1988:7), records of natural events in the real world. As he argues, this does not mean that ethnographic materials other than audio or video-record of natural occurring conversations¹⁵ on the work floor become useless, but it means that a conversation analysis of such exchanges that takes into careful consideration the ethnographic background (or the 'context' of speech¹⁶), can constitute the answer to the problem of accessing the system of competence and the organisation of the practices in given settings, as ethnomethodologists have pursued since the Garfinkel's inception.

¹⁴ There will not be space here to introduce the body of CA findings in details. In methodical fashion, they will be presented and discussed in the chapters of the thesis where CA is applied as the analysis unravels.

¹⁵ These are the kind of data CA analysts exclusively work on. In fact, CA developed in parallel with the invention and the technological progress of audio-recording devices.

¹⁶ There is a heated, longstanding, and apparently still unresolved, debate between 'pure' conversation analysts and ethnographers who use CA as analysis strategy on whether analysis of conversations should be considered 'context-free' or 'context-sensitive', i.e. whether ethnographic data are or are not fundamental to unpack the dynamics of speech exchanges. Dingwall (1980) and Duranti and Goodwin (1992) both offered a clear treatment of the problem. I do agree to their separate but overlapping conclusions, which basically endorse an 'applied' use of CA for ethnographic purposes. Cf. also ten Have (1999).

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

In this chapter I move towards explaining how the adoption of the methodological stance described in Chapter 2 led to concrete research practices. I report on how I obtained access to one of the Departments of the UK Government as seconded researcher, and how I went about obtaining research participants' trust and collaboration during the months I spent working full time for the organisation. The chapter has three sections. The first two sections describe the design of the study from the earlier stage of access negotiations to the various stages of fieldwork. Given that ethnographic inquiries that place focus on the understanding and the description of public administrators' work activities are scarce (cf. Chapter 1), I feel it is useful to describe what I did in detail. The objective of the discussion is to document how I went about witnessing and documenting *natural occurring instances of work*, and what I did to minimise the impact of my presence as observer and ethnographer. Many of the techniques I deployed belong to the toolkit of traditional organisational ethnographers: the prominent methods are the application of fieldwork techniques of anthropology, with the objective of familiarising oneself progressively with the workplace and the workers. The third and last section of the chapter considers the strategies of analysis I used to proceed with ordering, selecting and presenting data once I left the field.

Getting in

As discussed earlier, gaining a participant-as-observer role (Gold, 1958) was central to the strategy pursued in this study, as it was taking advantage of that positioning to capture in as much details as possible what happened in the settings. Central to my strategy-in-the-making has been the negotiation of the opportunity to attend formal instances of work, namely meetings where decisions about the policies of interest were discussed¹⁷. Such discussions, as both the literature and my early exposure

¹⁷ Schwartzman's study *The Meeting* (1989) provides a lucid analysis of the relationship between decision-making and the meetings composing the work of formal organisations, with an extensive discussion grounded in classic organisational literature. Ethnomethodological echoes are clear in her

to the office's activities confirmed, are in fact an essential feature of 'policy work'. One thing I had to realise was that each setting under ethnographic inquiry poses distinct challenges for data collection (Heath *et al.*, 2010), and of course the study of the public policy process as it happens in governmental agencies does pose additional issues. Firstly, civil servants employed by the UK government Departments work under a constitutional framework of conduct, which regulates their behaviour both inside and outside the workplace. The framework is known as Civil Service Code. Confidentiality and restrictions to the nature of the information they *can* disclose is central to the rules:

Civil servants should not without authority disclose official information which has been communicated in confidence within the Administration, or received in confidence from others. They should not seek to frustrate or influence the policies, decisions or actions of Ministers, Assembly Secretaries or the National Assembly as a body by the unauthorised, improper or premature disclosure outside the Administration of any information to which they have had access as civil servants. (Cabinet Office, 2006:Section 4.1.)¹⁸

Breaching of the code can be sanctioned heavily: the most serious offences can be punished with arrest under the 1989 Official Secrets Act. As a fact of life, and as expression of a prudence that became proverbial, civil servants are therefore extremely reticent about their work affairs, which consequently are rarely documented in academic or other sources (cf. Chapter 1). Evidence of this is the fact that recent scholar enquiries on civil servants' work have had to rely on covert research (e.g. Stevens, 2011) or to a certain extent on data based on anonymous statements leaked online (e.g. Wilkinson, 2011). Civil servants in government Departments thus belong to an extremely closed group, whose boundaries and rules are strictly indicated in writing. This meant that obtaining research participants' trust and collaboration from the earlier stage of access negotiations and throughout fieldwork was essential to the undertaking of the study. This is a running theme of the sections that follow.

Secondly, it is useful to anticipate that the commissioning, assessment and use of social science research constitutes a fundamental part of many of the research participants' work under analysis here. Government Departments in fact manage sizeable amount of funding to conduct social research in-house and above all to hire contractors across the country to conduct social research to inform policy development. The characteristics of such management will be analysed in details in later chapters (cf. Chapter 8), but it is

rationale, as meetings are considered and consequently analysed as topic of study, rather than used as resources.

¹⁸ The latest version of the Code can be retrieved on the About the Civil Service section of the website www.civilservice.gov.uk [last accessed 25 September 2013].

important to stress here that research participants are *sponsor, managers and consumers* of studies grounded in the practices of social psychology, psychology, and other social science disciplines. They are therefore (to diverse extents) professionally aware of the strategies of researchers, of the ethical requirements of research, and of many of the different approaches to the study of human behaviour. This social science 'literacy' practised and trained at professional level, inevitably, shaped the strategies of fieldwork and the ways this study was presented to them. Expectations had to be managed carefully and a lot of effort, as we shall see in the remainder of the chapter, was made to pursue engagement and collaboration.

Access

Access is about gaining physical access to the settings, gaining permission to witness instances of work, and laying the grounds to establish a working relationship with research participants during fieldwork (Heath *et al.*, 2010). First and foremost, key to accomplish access was an agreement between the researcher and the host organisation that was from the very beginning perceived as of mutual benefit. Access was obtained incrementally, in the stages detailed below.

The study was presented to the Department as part of the EU-funded international programme of research entitled PACHELBEL¹⁹ – acronym of Policy Addressing Climate Change and Learning about Consumer Behaviour and Everyday Life – with which I was associated. The programme was concerned with the trialling and deployment of innovative research instruments to investigate 'environmentally-friendly' behaviour and to assess strategies to promote sustainable consumption in a comparative dimension across six European countries²⁰. Conceived as an action research project, and designed as quasi-consultancy, the PACHELBEL researchers engaged at early stage in contacting and detailing the research intentions to the target organisation. It was offered, in essence, a consultancy free of charge in exchange of the opportunity to run an ethnographic study of the work of the offices involved in developing sustainable consumption policies (cf. Espluga, *et al.*, 2016). A series of meetings in person and by

¹⁹ EC-FP7 grant n.244024 (2010-2012).

²⁰ More information about the project can be found on the website www.pachelbel.eu. Detailed accounts of the project implementation can be found in Espluga *et al.*, 2016; Prades *et al.*, 2013; Horlick-Jones and Prades, 2015.

phone were arranged in between the coordinator of the consortium of researchers and the senior manager heading the policy team with the responsibility for progressing the policies of interest. The general themes informing the PACHELBEL project were presented, and a member of the senior manager's team invited to a workshop of the consortium. The workshop was occasion to present the researchers' work in more details, and to give the opportunity to the Department to assess whether the PACHELBEL research was worthwhile to take further. A positive response followed. Clearly, the proposed research resonated with the organisation' objectives. In parallel with the development of this first stage of access negotiations a written agreement in between PACHELBEL and the Department was drafted, and successive versions addressed various provisos on access to and use of the data, ethical issues and intellectual property of the ethnographic materials collected during placements at the offices of DEFRA. A definitive version of the agreement was signed on December 2010, and the following month the first visits to the organisational premises were arranged.

Ethical clearance

In parallel with access negotiations, ethical approval was sought and obtained through two separate applications to the Research Ethics Committee of the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences, one concerning the overall PACHELBEL project (January 2010), the other specifically addressing my role as independent researcher (March 2011). The committee assesses compliance with the ethical guidelines set by the Economic and Social Research Council (2010) and by the Cardiff University Research Governance Framework. The following are the key steps taken to adhere to ethical research conduct.

As documented above, detailed written information about the nature of the research project was provided to organisational gatekeepers. Early negotiations guaranteed key actors extended time to consider the proposed research process, and therefore the nature of my involvement with the organisation. The hosting organisation was free to withdraw from the research at any time. In relation to my specific role as ethnographer, it was acknowledged fieldwork would have entailed the participation to meetings of various sizes and the observation of the work of a number of actors both of the organisation of

interest and from various others. It was important to stress that the focus of the research is on everyday practices and interactional processes (the work) of the participants observed, rather than on their personal characteristics. Data were consequently anonymised to ensure the identity of all actors object of observation is protected. Only when strictly necessary, reference is made to the status as members of the organisation rather than private individuals.

In the course of the research, key participants other than those involved in access negotiations were provided of a written document detailing the aims of the research and arrangements regarding confidentiality, anonymity and the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. As it will be detailed later in the chapter, I also made effort, when feasible, to ensure that participants who were more peripheral to the specific policy-making process being studied were aware of the nature of my work.

Given the potential sensitivity of some of the information gathered, measures to ensure restricted access and security have been taken. Data were stored in a secure location and digital files protected by a system of double passwords, both on my computer and on back-up copies. No raw data has been disseminated to third parties. Conditions for the publication of findings, in particular regarding confidential or sensitive material, has been discussed with the organisation before fieldwork, as part of the negotiations for access. I have ensured the conditions for research independence, taking seriously every concern of the organisation studied regarding dissemination of ethnographic materials. I acknowledge here that the responsibility for conduct of the research in line with relevant principles rests with me and of course I take full responsibility for the analysis, arguments and conclusions contained in this thesis.

Fieldwork stages

In the first instance, a short engagement involving two half-days of field observation and a series of informal interviews with members of staff were proposed, and soon agreed. This stage of preliminary fieldwork provided the opportunity to gather substantial information about the work of the policy team, and to establish further ground for collaboration. It was in fact proposed an initial period of full-time placement of five working weeks, during which, in exchange of the opportunity to witness the policy team at work on every day basis and to learn more about policy development of

sustainable consumption policies, it was suggested most of the fieldworker's time would have been dedicated to work *for* the policy team itself. I will refer to this stage of research in the remainder of the chapter as first stage of fieldwork. In this period the intention to produce recordings of talk exchanges on the workplace was not mentioned to gatekeepers.

As Heath et al. (2010) recently made clear, gaining the trust from access negotiations throughout fieldwork is critical not only for the success of a research project, but for the whole opportunity to undertake it. Initial access to settings did not warrant in fact continuous collaboration by research participants, in particular because access negotiations were made at senior manager level, while the undertaking of the study involved engagement with a large number of middle-rank and junior officers who were not aware of research objectives till they physically met me in the settings. The pursuing of access to potentially interesting organisational events, the opportunity to talk at length with potential informants, and the proposal to record formal meetings remained an ongoing concern in the first stage of fieldwork, and as we shall see, in the second and last stage as well. The second stage consisted of six months of secondment to the same offices in the same Department. The opportunity to undertake stage two was discussed and proposed at the end of stage one²¹, when, on the basis of the materials gathered, a report was produced and made available to relevant gatekeepers. At the same time, a request to undertake a longer period of secondment was put forward. In the same incremental fashion in negotiating access, it was proposed a second stage of fieldwork lasting six months, with a review of my position at the Department to be reviewed after the first three months in residence. The proposal was accepted and stage two of fieldwork started in spring 2012. As scheduled, my position was reviewed half way through phase two by gatekeepers, and the opportunity to conclude the fieldwork as planned, finally granted.

²¹ The first stage of fieldwork consisted in sum of two preliminary visits to the settings to attend meetings indicated by the head of the policy team as relevant to the PACHELBEL research, a series of seven audio-recorded interviews conducted in four successive visits to the premises, and five weeks of full-time secondment during summer 2011.

Being there

During a talk delivered in 1974, Erving Goffman provided the following statement about doing ethnography using the participant observation method:

By participant observation, I mean a technique [...] of getting data [...] by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation or whatever. So that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them. (1974, [1989]:125)

The strategy of fieldwork deployed in this study took these recommendations seriously. I started by observing and adapting to the dress code, to the etiquettes of greetings entering the workplace in the morning, to the topics of work-unrelated conversations during working time and the breaks, and, incrementally, to the use of organisational jargon. The objective, not different at all from the genuine aspirations of a 'novice' to any work environment, was to be accepted and trusted in the long term as a 'colleague' (Gold, 1958). Central to the strategy was the juggling of the observational role on one side and the full participant positioning on the other. My primary concern was to interact positively and engage with organisational members in a way that on one side respected the ethical requirements of informed consent – through making explicit at the first suitable occasion my research interests to each of the relevant participant – and that, on the other, allowed me to gain a positioning appropriate to witness organisational events as they happened, minimising the potential biases provoked by my own presence in the settings. In order to do so, I made myself available to members to undertake any task they may have regarded as useful to them and perhaps that could have lightened their workloads. The rationale of my behaviour was obviously based on the expectation that if I could help them with their work I would have also been able to see what they do, and – by asking them what was expected to carry out tasks properly – *learn how to proceed as they would have done it*. In parallel, the recommendations and strategies for observation detailed in the organisational ethnography literature (Harper, 1998; Schwartzman, 1993; Randall and Rouncefield, 2007; Button and Sharrock, 2009) were implemented to various degrees. Particularly useful was Button and Sharrock's (2009) invitation to be proactive in looking for the features of the work in the organisation. This is done in practice by

asking people to describe what they do. Following them as they move around the organisation to see where they go and whom they interact and collaborate with. Following the input of their work to see where that goes and how others use what they have done. Asking them questions to probe them about what they are doing as they do it. Making notes of everything that occurs, not just notes about what they tell you (p.83).

Again, such strategy is only slightly different from that of a new employee concerned with making a good impression and with learning the ropes quickly to establish one's own competence and reliability on the workplace. Such difference consists in spending time to take extensive fieldnotes about what one learns, and store systematically the materials (files, emails, meetings' agendas and handouts, internal papers, successive drafts, memos etc.) one gets to see and use, in order on one side to be able to retrieve at a later research stage all the elements a task, or an organisational procedure, was based upon²², and on the other to track - and re-view, document and analyse at later stage - one's own learning curve.

This dual fieldwork strategy facilitated the collection of ethnographic materials of various natures, all contributing on one side to my learning curve about the organisation and the work of its members, on the other to the gathering of data for analysis. Some of the participants were more comfortable with me taking a stance of pure ethnographic informant, willing to dedicate time to answer my questions and talk at length about organisational affairs. Others declined my invitations to discuss directly my research, but were well inclined to provide me with work-related tasks and offer detailed instructions on how to carry them out. Other participants accepted my proposals to 'shadow' them, i.e. to let me follow them while going about their ordinary work activities²³. In the everyday development of the fieldwork, approximately seven months in total of full-time engagement with research participants, I made all efforts not to be perceived as an intrusive presence and I avoided doing anything that I had any indication could have perceived annoying or disruptive of others' duties. On the contrary, when assigned to do some work, I made my best to carry it out promptly,

²² Organisational documents can be extremely useful to re-construct instances of work. One example of the insights tracking documents can achieve is Richard Harper's EM-informed ethnography of the International Monetary Fund (1998). Central to Harper's reasoning is the idea that observing and describing documents' *careers* is a suitable way to access and understand the working principles of the organisations under analysis. See also Atkinson and Coffey (1997) on strategies to run ethnomethodological analyses of organisational records.

²³ The practice of 'shadowing' higher rank officers is used in the organisation under study as 'normal' practice for training new employees. Interestingly, 'shadowing' is also recommended in the organisational ethnography literature as research instrument (cf. Button and Sharrock, 2009). See also Wolcott (1984) and Gilliat-Ray (2011).

enthusiastically and showing that very same collaborative spirit I was pursuing from my new 'colleagues'.

Key to gain and ensure participants' trust and collaboration was to address promptly their concerns about the nature of my role at the Department and the purposes of my data gathering activities. First and foremost I insisted in assuring the participants that I was not working at a critical analysis of their practices (cf. Heath *et al.*, 2010) – I used several times the word 'non-judgmental' to convey this sense. I explained plainly and in many occasions that the research objective I was pursuing was a description, rather than a critique, of the nature of their profession and of the everyday tasks they carry out. I supported my claim mentioning the lack of in-depth analyses of the work of civil servants both in academic and non-scholarly literature, such as in the press, receiving often nods in agreement as a reply.

A second precaution was to clear the air of the idea that I was interested in assessing their performances against organisational standards, or to uncover mistakes or failings on behalf of the management. I did so by reminding them of the scholarly nature of my studies, and by stressing the fact that I was working towards the completion of a doctorate, rather than composing an internal review for organisational use. I assured participants that none of the contents of the conversations I was having with them would have passed on to other organisational members, least of all to higher rank officers or seniors in executive positions. I stressed at all points that my interest was to capture the nature and the details of what they did, and that did not matter at all *who* was doing it. Of course I informed participants, both in person and when feasible in writing, that what I was told and what I could witness would have been made anonymous in my notes and in all the materials that I was going to produce in the future, unless they were keen in having their statements attributed to them. In a sense, I used the knowledge of the latest frameworks for social research ethics and the intention to comply fully with their requirements, together with a full disclosing of the research objectives and practices, as a feather in my cap.

I counted on the research participants' professional awareness of social research strategies to prompt interest in what I was doing, while at the same time building my own competence as researcher by taking all occasions to elaborate in detail on what I was after, explaining as plainly as possible how they could have helped me in constructive ways. Crucially, among other achievements, this strategy facilitated the authorisation – strongly opposed or denied all together in the first stage of fieldwork –

to use audio-equipment to record events in the settings. As for obtaining access, gaining permission to record on tape was obtained incrementally. In the first instances I proposed to tape informal conversations I was having with officers in one-on-one meetings. Once the practice became routine and most of the officers of the policy team were aware of it, the request to use such equipment was put forward in advance of larger meetings, and authorised with the acknowledgement of all the participants. In this way it became possible, in the late second phase of fieldwork, to capture on tape formal meetings organised to discuss sustainable consumption policies and to make key decisions about their progress. Of course, once left the field, these tapes were considered the most valuable datasets available to analysis. The two final chapters of the thesis are based on this data.

Rationale of data collection

Ethnographic inquiries that focus on the understanding and the description of work activities take a distinctive approach on data gathering and analysis. As well as traditional organisational ethnographies, the prominent methods are the application of fieldwork techniques of anthropology, with the objective of familiarising oneself progressively with the workplace and the workers. The attention, however, tends to fall squarely on the witnessing and documenting of *natural occurring instances of work*: the interest is on *how* work is done *while* it is done. To follow the distinction drawn in Chapter 2 between orthodox ethnographies and ethnomethodological-informed ones, there is a switch of perspective to be stressed. While the former conceive fieldwork as method to penetrate work settings to get to know the people populating it, their approach to work and their working culture, the latter use fieldwork as research strategy to capture and document work activities, as *performed* by workers. The difference may seem subtle, but has important consequences on the conduct of the researchers on fieldwork, what data should be considered important and more valuable, and what analytic claims are made as result. In this latter version of fieldwork, ethnographic data collection becomes a matter of identifying instances of work and gathering materials with a sufficient level of details to be able to re-construct them at later stage (Button and Sharrock, 2009). In practice, in comparison with traditional ethnographers, fieldworkers interested in work activities have to deal with some additional concerns. Three of them

stand out to anybody approaching settings with a serious intention to embark upon the kind of detailed description ethnomethodology recommends:

1. Accessing the sites where work takes place to identify (and then follow) the activities of interest as they are temporally organised. Some strands of organisational literature call these streams of activities *workflows*²⁴, while in the settings they are identified as 'strands of work'.
2. Being able to introduce recording devices to capture in as much details as possible what the ethnomethodological literature identifies as the *scenic conditions* (Garfinkel 1964; Schegloff, 1991; Lynch, 1993) of what happens in real time.
3. Learning a sufficient level of local and technical knowledge to be able to retrieve in the analysis stage²⁵ the features of what happens.

What needs to be stressed again is that the target of the analysis is *work*, and not the people carrying it out, although to be able to observe work as it happens, it is of course with people that one has to engage. Button and Sharrock (2009) put this very clearly:

Workflow is not just an abstraction on a page; *it crucially involves people in the organization*, and so it is just as important to follow people and see where they go and with whom they interact. Therefore, *an important part of keeping close to the work is to follow the work and the people* to see where they go and, in effect, how they go (p.55-56, my emphasis)

Therefore, to acquire a suitable positioning for the task and to foster that learning necessary to be able to describe the local accomplishment of activities in the analysis stage, the merging of the methodologies (ethnography on one side and EM/CA on the other) suggests the usefulness of a broad ethnographic toolkit, to be applied to the extent the circumstances of fieldwork allow and in relation to the nature of the research problem. A multi-method approach of data collection, with the ultimate objective – let us recall from the methodological approach this study adopts – of tapping into the competence of the subjects studied and describing the socio-historical knowledge that comes to be employed by participants to act in a certain way in work-related situations (cf. Duranti and Goodwin, 1992; Lynch, 1993) was used. Data gathering strategies can

²⁴ I borrow the term from Button and Sharrock (2009) who, in presenting the most recent and probably more practical guide on how to conduct ethnomethodological studies of work, use it extensively. See also Randall and Rouncefield (2006:35ss).

²⁵ This is what the ethnomethodological literature identifies as unavoidable feature of the *unique adequacy requirement*. For a discussion of the idea and the consequences for ethnographic investigations see Lynch (1993:271ss)

thus be grouped in three categories: a) observation and fieldnotes b) interviews, informal conversations and audio-recordings of meetings c) collection of organisational records and internal documents. The remainder of this section is dedicated to detail how the use of each of these was deployed during the fieldwork stages of this research. Before getting into details, however, it is useful to introduce the settings where data collection took place, and provide an overview of how fieldwork was designed.

Pre-fieldwork activities and fieldwork design

All ethnographies in one way or another have to narrow down the scope of their interests towards particular themes or problems. Once an inquiry's design has been tuned towards work, the problem becomes how to be able to observe and document it once in the settings, and how to get to see that mundane level of detail necessary to provide an empirical foundation for the analysis. One of the most fruitful strategies followed by organisational ethnographers interested in describing work has been the pursuing of an 'insider' perspective. As Harper explains it, clearly drawing upon the ethnomethodological tradition, a way to achieve such perspective is to ask “to do some of the work in question” (1998:76). This way of proceeding was central to the design of my fieldwork, and shaped what I did before actually going 'out there'.

In the months preceding fieldwork, I concentrated on gathering information on the substantive matter of the workflow I had chosen to follow in the organisation: I wanted to know as much as possible on 'sustainable consumption', thus once in the field I could count on a stock of competent knowledge to be used to establish field relationships with officers involved in the workflow. This was done by reviewing the academic literature, searching how the theme was being handled by the press, and, of course, reading the existing documents published both by the Department and by other bodies involved in steering government on the issue prior to my arrival at DEFRA. An important aspect of these knowledge-building activities was the engagement with the PACHELBEL project's researchers, who were monitoring the development of sustainable consumption policies in six European countries in a comparative perspective.

This approach informed key features of the fieldwork design. Rather than pursuing a fieldwork experience based on a go-there-and-wait-to-see-what-you-bump-into strategy,

the field was conceived with a clear target. The choice of the single workflow helped to devise a systematic and organised approach (cf. Harper, 1998), as envisaged by the body of research, commonly known as workplace studies (cf. Harper, 1998; Heath and Luff, 2000). First, it narrowed down the range of the potential activities target of the observation to those concerned with SC. Second, it guided the selection of potential informants within the organisation, prioritising workers specifically involved in the selected workflow. Third, it provided the basis for establishing the fieldworker's credibility (cf. Randall and Rouncefield, 2006) in the field, by providing a safe territory for knowledge exchange with the selected informants.

The settings

The headquarters of the UK Government departments are located in a range of few hundred yards around the Palace of Westminster, in the heart of London. Towered by the Big Ben, re-named Elizabeth Tower in 2012 in honour of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, the area is a world-famous hub for tourists, who – regardless the conditions of the weather – crowd the roads and the squares throughout the day and night. Many of the government buildings are placed on the sides of Whitehall, a large road that runs north from Parliament to Trafalgar Square. The facades of the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Cabinet Office, the Departments of Energy and Climate Change, the Department of Health, the Department of Work and Pensions can be all seen strolling along this one-kilometer-long road – one of the most famous spots of the United Kingdom and the beating heart of the country's political and administrative machine. The buildings' large dimensions convey a sense of grandeur and, despite the swarms of a mix of tourists, civil servants and passers-by, looking around there is also a sense of order. Policemen do little to hide their widespread presence, and a glance to the top of the lampposts reveals that there must be little space here not covered by the silent eyes of CCTV cameras. There is no trace of litterbins and bike racks, as they were all removed under the threat of terroristic attacks. These crossroads are probably one of the safest places in the world, or at least, the most controlled.

As other government departments' buildings, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, shortened in the acronym DEFRA, sits at a walking distance from

Parliament. Heading south, towards Pimlico, Whitehall changes its name in Abingdon Street, and then in Millbank. Once left the House of Lords on the left, and the back of the iconic Westminster Abbey on the right, the road gets again on the Thames' northern bank, shadowed by lines of trees and leaving space for the triangular lawn of Victoria Tower Gardens, which hosts at its center a fountain commemorating the end of slavery. Nobel House, DEFRA headquarters, is a light grey and anthracite eight-store building sitting at the corner of Millbank with Horseferry Road, with a large facade looking over Lambeth Bridge. The building is named after Alfred Nobel, a Swedish chemist and engineer who invented dynamite and promoted the Nobel Prizes. He was, according to the chronicles, also a fine poet.



Picture 3.1: The DEFRA building's façade

The inside of the DEFRA building, with its maze of corridors and its ramifications into the neighbouring office blocks called Ergon House and Millbank, is the workplace of around two thousand civil servants, and the physical starting point of my ethnographic endeavour. Engagement with the settings started with six preliminary visits carried out in the winter of 2011. The first two of these, to which I was invited as result of the access negotiations in between managers in the Department and the researchers of the PACHELBEL project (see above), consisted in attending two meetings, each lasting around two hours, as observer. In these occasions I was escorted in the building immediately before the meeting started, and escorted out once the meeting was over. I was introduced to meeting participants as a 'researcher' and not asked to contribute to

the meetings at any time. During the meeting, I took extensive field notes about what I heard and what I saw, and I asked and obtained a copy of the handouts, memos and materials circulating among participants. As most of the participants were taking notes in handwriting as well, I did not feel necessary to hide in any way my notepad. In these two meetings I was literally transported 'in the middle of action'. Decisions about how to progress SC policies were discussed, and I could gather substantial information about what these discussions entailed. During these visits it was possible to start tracing the workflow of interest, and I made the first contacts with the officers involved in developing it.

Another four visits took place in the following weeks, as scheduled with an administrator and gatekeeper involved in the negotiations for access. These visits were arranged in order to conduct interviews – two per visit – with the officers who had organised the meetings observed in the first two visits. Eight workers in total were interviewed, with exchanges lasting in between 45 minutes and one hour and 15 minutes. These interviews were designed as occasions to talk with the workers about their work, and a way to introduce to them the research project and its objectives. In order to do so, and in line with the style of interviews preferred by ethnographers (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), a loosely structured design was chosen. In the first part of the exchanges a quite long and detailed introduction to the project was proposed, with the aims of making participants aware of the nature of the inquiry, and prompt their interest in participating in an active way. Arrangements around confidentiality, anonymity and the descriptive, non-judgemental take I was willing to pursue, was made clear in writing - by circulating an informed consent form in advance of the visit - and in person once the interview started. All the interviews took place in the headquarters of the Department, in a different room at each occasion, and were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewee. The style of interview was inspired by the active interview method proposed by Holstein and Gubrium (1995), with its stresses on the collaborative nature of meaning production in the interviewer/interviewee interaction and on the incitement to produce a 'narrative' account of one's own (working) life. As in other organisational ethnographies interested in analysis of work that use interviews as complementary method of data collection (e.g. Harper, 1998; Suchman and Wynn, 1984), the method of questioning is tuned toward tapping into the respondents' stock of competent experience of work, with a view on discussing the details of the activities individuals need to do to get such work done. This is obtained by asking versions of questions such as “what is your role in the organisation?”, “what does your role

entail?”, “what is it that you do in practice?” and then pursue clarifications on the pointers that are made in the early remarks of the answers, using questions such as: “what do you mean by...?”, “what is involved in...?”, “could you be more specific about...?” (cf. Harper, 1998). Of course, my central interest was to gather information about the specific activities the interviewees carried out in relation to the workflow of interest: the development of SC policies.

The interviews, moreover, were occasions to inform participants of the features of the following stage of fieldwork, designed as full-time engagement with the officers in the form of secondment to the organisation. Therefore, the exchanges were used to introduce the researcher to participants, his background and his research interests, and to clarify the form the secondment would have taken shortly as agreed with the management at access negotiation stage. As in any first encounter with those who a new employee sees as one's future colleagues, effort was made to make a good impression and to anticipate the intention to be a collaborative and dedicated person to work with.

Secondments: observing officers and recording meetings

The secondment stage of this research was carried out in two parts, lasting seven months in total. I spent five weeks working full-time in the Department in the summer of 2011, and around six months from late April to early December 2012. During these periods I spent in between 7 and 10 hours per working day attending the office, for a conservative estimate of approximately 850 hours of engagement. I respected the standard Monday to Friday, nine am to five pm work pattern followed by full-time employees, occasionally staying in the office some extra hours in the evening, some days working remotely from home. Secondments constituted the core part of fieldwork, and allowed prolonged, and *progressively* fruitful, activities of data gathering.

Attending the office on a day-to-day basis provided enhanced opportunities for observing the research participants at work. From the first day of secondment I was assigned a desk in the same open-space office the participants I had interviewed worked, a large hot-desk area with two dozens positions. I was also given un-restricted access to the building, with its maze of corridors, meeting rooms and seemingly infinite lines of workstations. As many organisational ethnographies, the "spatial exploration" (van der Waal, 2009:31) of the workspace played a preliminary role in building

understanding of the nature of the activities carried out. More important, however, was the opportunity to access the organisational online communications network (Intranet), to which I could connect anytime through a personal computer provided by the organisation for my exclusive use. As all the other employees, I was assigned an account on my name, with corporate e-mail, calendar, and Internet access tools.

From my position at the desk I could interact with eight to twelve officers, according to how busy the office was. The observation of the officers at work started by taking notes on their habits in using workspace. I engaged them in brief chats, or I listened to the conversations they had between them or over the phone. If we exclude the activities performed outside the organisational building, the working day of a typical officer is split into two main 'modes': performing tasks at the desk using a computer machine (usually a laptop connected to a fixed screen placed on each desk), and attendance at face-to-face meetings of various nature. My experience in the Department took from the first day these patterns, while I engaged in gathering detailed information on what the research participants did while sitting at their desk and what they did and said during meetings. One of my primary concerns became doing so without being perceived as an obtrusive presence, which entailed a great deal of patience while waiting for suitable moments to start conversations, ask questions or permission to follow participants in meeting rooms. Time at the desk was used to explore the organisational Intranet pages, and to take extensive fieldnotes, which documented my observations on the flows of events.

A slow way in

There exists a stark contrast in between the theory of ethnographic fieldwork and its application in practice. Research manuals, to diverse extents, do provide guidelines that seem easy to follow when one sits in the library planning the fieldwork, but all that becomes a different affair once the threshold of the real settings is crossed. No matter how structured is the idea on how to go about gathering data, it is the contingencies of the moment-by-moment development of the life on fieldwork which dictates opportunities or dead ends. Each fieldwork experience, as a careful reading of classic ethnographic works suggest, is in fact a story on its own.

Armed with a notepad for fieldnotes, an audio-recorder, and the best intentions my fieldwork plans encountered at first a number of difficulties. Despite finding the officers

I interviewed welcoming and available to help, the extent I could deploy my intended methods of data collection fell short of what it was possible to do in the Department. My requests to have permission to tape-recording meetings, for example, were received in a rather cold way, on the grounds that the practice was never carried out in the Department, and that it would be unfeasible, and "inappropriate" (fieldnotes), even to ask. In the first months of the fieldwork, with one exception that I felt caused more than one long face, I had therefore to rely only on note-taking to have a record of what happened during meetings. Officers were also reluctant to let me shadow them at their desk. The following email exchange with a social research officer, one among other refusals, documents the caution with which my requests were received:

LM: [...] I was wondering if you are still ok with me shadowing you at your workstation sometime tomorrow, as discussed last time we met. [...]

Officer: Thanks [...] I think the honest answer is my work is so boring and I'm such an inefficient and unproductive worker that I am too embarrassed to show you how little I do and in what a haphazard way... I probably will have to disappoint you through being too self-conscious. Doing work together is good but even for a social researcher like me being observed is extremely difficult... Many apologies. [Email exchange, 210711]

Field relationships, however, began to relax with time. By the beginning of the second month of secondment, I felt that the officers I was spending more time with were more inclined to let me observe closely their day-by-day activities. An excerpt from my field notes, written after six weeks of secondment and after a long break from the field, reflects a change of attitude:

I think my return at Defra is being very positive. The fact some people already know me is of course very helpful in avoiding that 'suspicion' I could feel last time. In meetings, I am being introduced to others as 'seconded researcher' and - although officers are very well aware of the nature of my presence here - this somehow relaxes field interactions. (fieldnotes)

Looking back, it was clearly the building up of relationships of trust that made the difference. As foreshadowed in phase of fieldwork design, the key to gain trust and consequently enhanced access to organisational affairs was the request to get involved in the work the officers did. The following email exchange documents the way I was introduced to the Department:

We have a research fellow from Cardiff University called Lorenzo coming to work in our team, starting on Monday – you may have met him before as he's been involved in the Pachelbel project ... We are trying to identifying specific short terms projects which we could give him for his time here, and X and I both felt that there may be something around [activity] that he could work on?

You'll have seen my email to Y concerning [activity] ... I spoke to Z and thought that it might be possible to get him to do some research around [...], but I would be looking to you for the detail of what he should be looking at [...]

What do you think? [email, 030711]

Thanks [name of the officer]

What an excellent idea – this would be extremely good and well-worth drawing on expert academic knowledge. I have not come across Lorenzo [...]

It would be a real bonus for him to help as you suggest – I can have a think about some specific questions [...] Academics are much better than us at reviewing published literature and drawing together a short scoping review about theory and also exemplars of good or less good practice... [email, 040711]

Week after week, by getting involved in the officers' work and completing tasks they assigned to me²⁶, my positioning within the field switched from that of complete observer to that of participant-as-observer (cf. Gold, 1958). I started to be invited to more meetings, to social events, and the time officers would dedicate to talk to me increased exponentially. We began to learn about each other as actual people, instead of as 'researcher' versus 'officers under observation'.

The bulk of data - informal conversations and audio-recordings of meetings

In the last four months of fieldwork the opportunities to gather detailed data on the development of sustainable consumption policies, as it happened in the workplace, multiplied. Through observation and participation to the workflows, I could identify the most important processes and track most of the information who came to be included, or excluded, by the discussions which were taking place both within the team of officers in charge of progressing the workflow, and at higher level in the organisational hierarchy. I became familiar with all the officers composing the team deputed to work in the 'policy area', and I could engage them in informal conversations during the day. Most of the officers, to diverse extents, became interested in my project, and were ready to let me accompany them to meetings and events – both in the Department and externally –

²⁶ By the end of the secondments I had participated to a range of different workflows, both related and unrelated to SC. They included the re-organisation of inspection regime for farms, the waste collection in large cities, the discussion of evidence on how to extend the lifetime of products, a proposal to create a segmentation of businesses according to their green credentials, and a review of internal procedures to progress policy proposals.

that they attended in order to gather information they regarded important for their work. I was also given brief opportunities to shadow officers at their desk, and I spend one working day following a director.

The multi-sited nature of my fieldwork experience was a feature that had to be realised in the development of the events, rather than planned at design stage. Increasingly, I found myself attending events in other Department buildings (especially the Department of Climate Change (DECC) and the Department for Transport (DfT)) and other venues around London. In one occasion, I traveled to Bristol to follow an officer attending a conference at a university venue. I also received invitations from colleagues to attend a meeting in Manchester and a conference in Bruxelles, both of which I had to decline as other meetings happening in-house seemed more important. Recent organisational research literature, in fact, recognises the usefulness of multi-sited ethnographies (see e.g. Nicolini, 2009) when the target of the study becomes the practical activities carried out in an organisation, rather than the organisation itself.

The building of collaborative relationships of informal nature with officers allowed for the deployment of data collection strategies other than interviews. Increasingly, informal conversations on work matters could take the form of exchanges that resembled what the research literature identifies as 'accounts of accounts' (cf. Cicourel, 1973; Silverman and Jones, 1976). These are obtained by the elicitation in real time of participants' interpretations of and reactions to what happens. Usually after attending meetings or other organisational events, I engaged in asking additional comments, prompted by questions (or variations of them) such as: 'what happened?', 'what was going on in there?'. In many occasions, such accounts were delivered without a researcher's prompt, as talking about what happened after a meeting is what participants normally do as soon as they leave the premises and cannot be heard by the other attendees. I paid particular attention to this kind of talk exchanges, as they enriched the interpretations I could give of what I had witnessed. I considered such data very valuable materials because they provide insights on the way members account to each other in natural settings (Dingwall, 1997)²⁷.

²⁷ The 'accounts of account' research strategy is inspired by the Aaron Cicourel's concept of indefinite triangulation: the expression 'indefinite triangulation' suggest[s] that every procedure that seems to 'lock in' evidence, thus to claim a level of adequacy, can itself be subjected to the same sort of analysis that will in turn produce yet another indefinite triangulation of new particulars or a rearrangement of previously established particulars in 'authoritative', 'final', 'formal accounts'. The indefinite triangulation notion attempts to make visible the practically and inherent reflexivity of everyday accounts. The elaboration of circumstances and particulars of an occasion can be subjected to an indefinite re-

In practice, the opportunity to collect this sort of materials was also extended to the mode of meetings known in the organisation as 'one-on-ones' (1:1). These are exchanges formally scheduled in the officers' diaries, when two officers meet to update each other on the state of their work. They usually last in between half an hour and one hour, sometimes over breakfast or lunch. I started organising 1:1s with research participants in the last months of secondment, once every fortnight. In these occasions, I had time to discuss my own work for the organisation, but also to ask them questions to check my understanding of organisational affairs. Occasionally, I asked clarifications and comments on what I had been told during interviews conducted in earlier phases of fieldwork²⁸.

With the time passing, and while the relationships with the officers I met first deepened, I was introduced to a number of other officers with different interests in SC policies, and had opportunity to entertain long conversations with them. By this stage, such exchanges took the form officer-to-officer email exchanges, phone calls, or meetings, *in exactly the same way* they would have happened in between two organisational members. The fact I was conducting a study of the work of the Department was mentioned at the beginning of each new encounter, but this information was presented as *a side interest* to the substantial matter of what was under discussion. Under these premises, the request to audio-record conversations was most of the times accepted, and most of the officers I was interacting with became familiar with the fact I needed a tape of what was said for research purposes.

Once most of the officers were aware of my requests to tape, and in particular in the last two months of fieldwork, nobody raised any objection when I asked to audio-record the weekly meetings of the SC team, or larger meetings where the development of SC policies were under discussion. By the end of the seven months of secondment, several hours of tapes of audio-recorded meetings and conversations were available to analysis. The nature of the tapes is summarised in the table 3.1.

elaboration of the 'same' or 'new' circumstances (Cicourel, 1973). These methodological understandings have been used in practice "to observe the construction of multiple accounts of apparently the same social scene, as participants, at different times, focus on or recall varying particulars from the infinite properties of any social interaction" (Silverman and Jones, 1973:67).

²⁸ This strategy is also known in the research literature as 'triangulation', although with slightly different characteristics from the way Cicourel had intended the 'indefinite triangulation' method.

Interviews	22
Triangulation of interviews transcripts	6
1:1 meetings with officers	25
Meetings of the SC policy team	3
Board meetings where SC policies were discussed	1

Table 3.1: Tapes available to analysis

Document collection

Documents play a central role in the development of policies and in all the activities associated with it. Most of the officers' time spent at the desk has in one way or another to do with the use, creation, manipulation, circulation or storage of some sort of printed or electronic document. Being able to see, read and collect copies of the documents handled by the research participants was of course central to understanding the work performed. As for the rest of the activities of data collection, the selection of what was deemed as important was based on whether participants' involved in SC actually used, in practice, such documents. I made copies of an array of documents and artefacts (corporate guidelines on how to handle procedures, meetings' agenda and notes, printed slides of PowerPoint presentations, fliers, brochures, announcements, memos, handouts circulated in meetings, etc.), which I witnessed participants consulting or using.

The most important activity of document collection, however, entailed following the drafts of internal papers related to the work of the officers I was observing. As we shall see in more details in the coming chapters, the classic pattern of policy development starts and finishes with the composition of a paper (an option paper, a white paper, a green paper, a report) which is usually multi-authored and circulates for a certain amount of time in the organisation. Paragraphs and sections are added and dropped, wording is progressively refined, and what goes and what stays is the object of discussion both in formal meetings and in conversations that many times take place on the work floor.

For the entire length of my fieldwork the most important task I set to myself in relation to document collection was to keep track of the composition of a single paper, called by the officers 'the narrative'. The aim of these pages was to summarise the position of the Department on 'sustainable consumption': what was agreed during meetings dedicated to discuss the policies of interests, in a way or another, ended up being mentioned there. By the end of my secondment, four successive drafts were crafted. Monitoring the writing practically done by two officers that had the responsibility of progressing the paper, getting to see the comments to the drafts by others, the modifications, the sources referenced, and tracking the trajectory of the paper within the organisation (and outside it) became a sort of routine commitment, and at points, an obsession. The reasons of such deep involvement with the activities around this paper were first that it embodied, in a single stream of words, the main *outcome* of the work I was there to observe, and second, because it worked as proxy for any strand of work in the organisation (cf. Harper, 1998). The drafts, the emails discussing them, the comments on the margin of the document, and, of course, *what was said* around the crafting of this paper were among the most illuminating data I was able to gather.

The table below lists the key datasets obtained during fieldwork.

Fieldnotes	900 pages of reporter notebooks
Interviews, informal conversations, 1:1 meetings with officers (audio recorded)	53
Audio-recordings of meetings	4
Successive drafts of the SC narrative, with comments	4
Internal Emails	approx. 9000

Table 3.2. Datasets available to analysis

Data analysis

The thought objects constructed by the social scientist have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the commonsense thinking of men [and women], living their daily life within their social world.

Alfred Schutz

As envisaged in the first part of this chapter, the rationale behind the data analysis of this study attempts to capitalise on the reciprocal influences and the constructive discussions that ethnographers and ethnomethodologists have entertained in the past few decades (cf. Moerman, 1988; Atkinson, 1985; Miller, 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Gale Miller (1994:286-287) provides a pleasingly simple synthesis of the way ethnographic methodologies and ethnomethodological intents find common grounds in the use of what has been called elsewhere “applied” (Duneier and Molotch, 1999:1270) or “culturally-contexted” (Moerman, 1988:7) conversational analysis:

Ethnographic strategies and techniques provide analysts with information about social settings as condition of possibility, and members' knowledge about how different settings are related in ways that may go unrecognized by the less frequent and intense observer. Such strategies and techniques allow the observer to learn about the “background expectancies” associated with the social settings [...] Conversation and ethnomethodological analysis of social interactions are sources for understanding how the possibilities associated with social settings are interactionally organized and managed by setting participants, and how some potential reality claims come to be treated as truthful and linked to concrete social action. Such analysis identifies the methods used by setting members [ethno-methods, cf. Chapter 2] to produce reality claims.

This strategy thus suggested a way of working with the data structured as follows. On the one hand ethnographic fieldwork, with the associated activities of in situ interviewing, notes-taking, document analysis and everyday learning fostered by participation, informed the *identification* of activities and events where the substantial object of study – the work of policy development – takes place in concrete settings. On the other, the analysis of the micro-interactions of such events – “hot spots” for analysis as recorded on tape (Jordan and Henderson, 1995:43) – informs, in turn and at a greater level of details, ethnographic understanding of *how* such activities and events are practically accomplished.

Start with participants' words

The aim of ethnomethodologically-informed ethnographies interested in work activities is to interrogate practices in-the-making and to understand their logics. Inevitably, the starting point for the analysis is the performances, by actors and artifacts, constituting such practices. The first stage of the process of analysis, therefore, was preoccupied with *identifying* instances of the activities of interest, or in other words, with replying to the question of *what* is it that participants do – what activities they perform – to progress policies. Such analysis, prompted by the research design, started on the very first day of fieldwork and informed the activities of data gathering, narrowing down the scope of relevant materials necessary to progress the inquiry. Following a now well-established corpus of studies of work activities, initial analytical interest was placed on the natural use of language in the settings. A common feature of organisational jargons is to create formulas, expressions, acronyms, metaphors and other semantic devices all tuned towards identifying fields of action – and their meaning – *relevant to the participants* in the settings. As with the learners of a foreign language, or for children at their first stages of socialisation (cf. Cicourel, 1971), grasping the meaning of words in the natural, socialised, use is the first step in finding one's way through a new world.

Simple as it is, this analytical posture prompted a detailed scrutiny of the first ethnographic materials in search of the ways participants defined what was done in the settings and their definitions of what their work consisted of in practice. Such early materials consisted of the fieldnotes taken during the preliminary visits to the Department and the transcripts of the first series of interviews conducted in the early engagement stage of fieldwork as described in earlier sections of this chapter. Transcripts and fieldnotes were thus read several times, and terms pertaining specifically to the activities of interest highlighted and noted in a separate notebook. Some expressions used by participants were recognised as unfamiliar, prompting questions about their meaning in the settings. Other expressions were identified as *markers of relevant domains of work*. Examples include the recurrent use of terms such as 'scoping out', 'moving our thinking forward', 'developing a narrative', and 'writing the specs'. The identification of these prompted a number of questions about the practical activities associated with each of these stated actions. The following stages of data collection were consequently designed to provide further materials to inform my

understanding of what such actions meant in practice for participants and how they went about performing them.

Systematise observations: the Register of Actions

With the progressing of fieldwork the initial categorisation of actions grew in volume and sophistication. As soon as I could witness, or participate in, the practical activities pertaining to the domains identified by participants I took notes of various elements, and instances of use of the terms which I regarded as 'strange' in the first instance. These notes went to inform what I called the *Register of Actions*. Initially based on the separate notebooks I used to note words and expressions that struck me as 'unfamiliar', the Register collects data according to headings and sub-headings referring to the specific features of the work carried out by participants²⁹.

By way of example: participants during the preliminary interviews stressed repeatedly the importance of gathering *evidence* to support policy. The process of such gathering is usually done in practice by commissioning research from external organisations – research centres, research groups in universities, private companies specialising in data gathering and analysis, etc. 'Commissioning research' became one of the domains of work clearly in the remit of the research participants and to the activities pertaining to such domain I placed my attention during fieldwork. So far my observations may sound obvious. To do 'commissioning research' in practice, however, a number of tasks are carried out. There is a research budget to negotiate against annual expenditures, there are research questions to be spelt out to inform the design of potential projects, there is a need to decide what is really needed, someone has to write the tender specifications ('write the specs'), and someone else has to check that recent past commissioned research, both within the Department and elsewhere in Government, has not addressed the same problems. If such research exists, it must be reviewed before taking any step further. A number of practical activities are involved in the process of doing each of

²⁹ It is probably worth re-stating here that the creation of such headings and the identification of tasks or actions followed either the *witnessing* or the *experiencing* of such tasks and action in the real settings during fieldwork. Categories are not, *by any means*, derived from some theory of what 'doing policy-making' or 'doing commissioning research' is supposed to consist of, nor they are derived from the enormous amount of internal guidelines officers have opportunity to consult on the organisational Intranet, something that it seemed to me they seldom did. Categories' headings are chosen instead on the basis of what was practically done and how such 'doings' were defined and referred to *by research participants*.

these things, which relate only to the *preliminary* phases of 'commissioning research'.

Later on, the tender resulting for the drafting of specifications is advertised and once the bids are received, they must be scrutinized, assessed against specified criteria by different officers, scored numerically, the scores collected and added up to reach a final decision, usually based both on scoring *and* on discussions held in a series of meetings among the interested parties. Preliminary meetings will be held with the winners to decide and negotiate timelines, reports' format and deadlines, potential additional budgets and plans for publication. Once the research is commissioned, it has to be managed according to internal procedures set out for project management. A risk register anticipating potential problems has to be completed together with detailed contingency plans in case problems arise, regular e-mail or phone correspondence with the researchers has to be kept, any modification from the original plan has to be monitored and negotiated. Routine meetings with the contractors are held during the different stages of progressing of the project, with the consequent updating of the risk register and the monitoring of developments. Finally, following the presentation of *any* finding – usually consisting of research reports and recommendations – further activities take place: officers have to ensure standards for publication are met by contractors, officers have to distill 'policy-specific' questions from research results (which often lead to further commissioning of research), they need to anticipate and assess whether reports are going to create controversy if published externally. If the reports do create controversy they have to make a case to delay publication, or avoid it all together, or at least make sure that the officer presenting the findings in public is well-prepared to face criticism and knows how to respond. Drafting briefings to anticipate questioning on the value of the commissioned research, for example for senior officers at official public presentations, is another task officers perform. Last, and certainly not the least, officers draw conclusions from the research findings to inform their advice to ministers.

Each of these tasks, within the domain of 'commissioning research', is identified in the Register of Action by a subheading and further helps to navigate the analysis of other materials. Comments or observations expressed by participants in relation to each task, for example those elicited by questions in interviews or informal conversations, are recorded under each sub-heading, noting the positioning of the information in the fieldnotes journals or in the interview transcript, for late retrieval or checking.

Organising statements

Fieldnotes and interview transcripts contain of course much more of what can be categorised in the Register of Actions. As anticipated in the data collection section of this chapter, following analytically a single workflow does not necessarily mean that observation is restricted to a single strand of work. On the contrary, as Harper (1998) brilliantly demonstrates, by starting from concentrating on the mundane details of a single workflow researchers can use the workflow under analysis as *proxy* for analysing any strand processed by the organisation: one can map out key processes, understand the diversity of work that is coordinated, unpack the distribution of work, determine what is important 'in the bigger picture' (cf. p.69-70). Ethnographic materials for this project, in fact, served also as a way to address different levels of analysis, which transcend the specific policy development process on SC initiatives. Participants' comments and my personal observations, as recorded in the fieldnotes, were categorised in four topics, listed below:

1. Statements about SC and related policy development.
2. Statements about the policy team deputed to the SC policy development.
3. Statements about the Department, its particularities as opposed to other Departments, and working as an employee of the Department.
4. Statements about Government, about the Civil Service in general, and working as a civil servant in the UK.

The organisation and the categorisation of statements paid particular attention to register, statement by statement, the context of the utterance, that is who said what on which occasion. This becomes very important when it comes to weighing the validity of such statements and using them in the writing-up stage. To illustrate this point let us use the following statement:

'Unfortunately Defra is not a heavy-weight Department in Whitehall. Our mission is to try to persuade the Treasury and BIS of our cases' (fieldnotes)

Different significances for the analyst can be drawn from this statement according to the occasion in which it is uttered. One should refrain from regarding its meaning as something incontrovertible if it was told by someone whispering during a coffee break, but it would indeed represent something reliable if it was said by an executive director

in an all-staff meeting, without objections or any murmur by the audience. The latter, in this example, is the case.

Analysing the use of documents

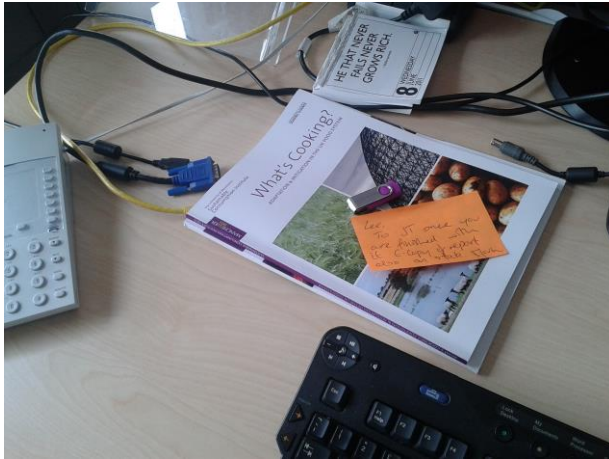
As clearly constitutive feature of the work of research participants, internal documents (drafts, papers, spreadsheets, memos, etc.) have been collected and stored for analysis. Following Lynch (1985:7):

these records are not appropriate as ‘descriptive data’ on work practices. Instead, they are examined for how they comprise scenic conditions for the analysability of work within an organisational setting. The analysis of such records is viewed in studies as a practical accomplishment of those persons in the organisational settings whose work involves the design and reading of the documents.

This strategy of analysis entailed following the trajectory of the documents through the organisation – what Harper (1998) has called the “information career of documents” – to get to see *how* documents were used by participants and how they got to shape what was done in real time. Analytical questions address the modifications that are made and the selection of relevant sections for further use. Central to the analysis was of course the tracking of the internal document summarising the position of the Department on SC and its evolvment during my residence in the organisation, although a number of other observations proved of great usefulness in understanding features of participants' work.

To exemplify the nature of these observations I will use the following three examples: one related to the circulation of external reports, one related to the *use* of documents in the activity of reading and one where a memoranda illustrates the way work is broken down into component elements and distributed to officers for action.

Example 1

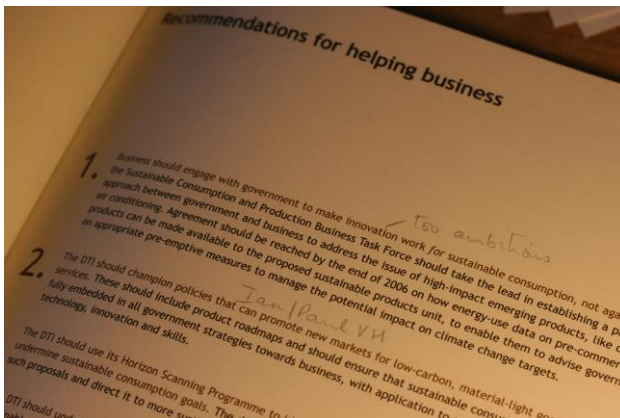


Picture 3.2: A report found on an officer's desk

A paper copy of a report is left on a manager's desk with a note on a Post-it. The note reads: 'Officer X, please forward this to [director] once you have finished with it'.

Tracking how reports such as this are circulated among officers and which reference are made to them both in talking during meetings and in the composition of internal reports / papers / drafts helped re-constructing what was considered 'relevant' by officers.

Example 2

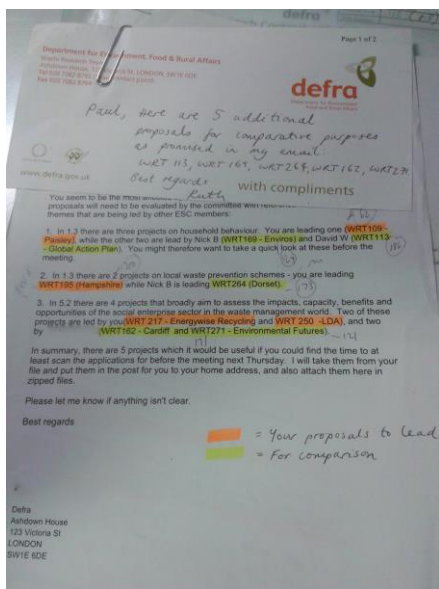


Picture 2.3: officers exchange important ideas by taking notes at the margins of reports they each consult in turn

A senior officers' scribbles on the margins of a report can be revealing of the ways in which documents are read and assessed against professional judgment. The page of the report in the picture lists recommendations for policy development on SC by a contracted adviser. The first recommendation is considered 'too ambitious', and no

further action is envisaged. The second recommendation, on the contrary, will be assigned for scrutiny and further analysis to other officers. Names of the officers to whom a request for action will be forwarded are scribbled down.

Example 3



Picture 3.4: A memo prepared by an administrator for a manager's use

This internal projects memoranda contains instructions from an administrator to a more senior officer about what to do in preparation for a meeting. Relevant bits are highlighted and classified in the categories 'to lead on' and 'for comparison'. The choice of words for the classification presupposes mutual understanding of the further actions required. Learning what 'leading on' and 'comparing' entail in practice, and how such actions are performed once assigned, constituted the basis for directing further data collection during fieldwork. Being able to describe the performing of such actions, after learning either from observation or from the researcher's participation in the practical accomplishment of actions such as these, was the target of post-fieldwork analysis.

Triangulation and learning curve

A range of methodological writings concerned with establishing grounds for the validity of the inferences ethnographers make from their data often stress the value of using multiple data sources (cf. Fielding and Fielding, 1986). 'Triangulation' is the term

used to describe the analytical process of comparing, combining and cross-checking data obtained through different data-gathering strategies. As my discussion of the procedures through which ethnographic materials were gathered suggests, my study makes abundant use of what has been called 'between-method triangulation' (p.25): 'when different methods are applied to the same subject in explicit relation to each other'. This is a characteristic feature of participant observation studies that make also use of the interview method. Becker and Geer (1957:32), in a classic article, have noted:

The participant observer [...] operates, when gathering data, in a social context rich in cues and information of all kinds. Because he sees and hears the people he studies in many situations of the kind that normally occur for them, rather than just in an isolated and formal interview, he builds an evergrowing fund of impressions, many of them at the subliminal level, which give him an extensive base for the interpretation and analytic use of any particular datum. This wealth of information and impression sensitizes him to subtleties which might pass unnoticed in an interview and forces him to raise continually new and different questions, which he brings to and tries to answer in succeeding observations.

Between-method triangulation, therefore, is entrenched in the very same design of a participant-observation study. In many ways this design *locks in* the validity of data in the context of the milieu under inquiry: the very same words forming the 'native' language, the very same actions constituting the daily life of research participants, are tested and re-tested during fieldwork through attempts to operationalise their meanings and their everyday 'normality' in those very same settings in which they are firstly observed³⁰. 'Subliminally', to borrow from Becker and Geer, a learning curve builds up³¹. Such learning, on which ethnomethodologists have insisted in designing their studies after the Garfinkel's suggestion that acquisition of a 'unique adequacy' had to be pursued to study the work of professionals, opens a number of opportunities and implications.

The first of these opportunities is that *during fieldwork* it becomes increasingly clear to the researcher where one should look to find that for which one is searching. In other words, the acquisition of a certain degree of local knowledge ends up *guiding* the selection of particular actions and activities that address in more straightforward ways the original research problem. In some respect, this is how the ethnographies inspired by

³⁰ Such operationalisation was pursued, as it happens in other forms of learning, with a trial and error approach. When one attempt was successful I could tell the use of a word or a certain behaviour was appropriate. When it was not, the attempts worked as some sort of 'breaching experiments' (cf. Garfinkel, 1967): what was really expected came to light all suddenly. I cannot hide that in the latter cases few occasions evolved in awkward situations.

³¹ This testing may happen in informal exchanges, in interviews, scrutinising documents, observing others, or trying to use in participation mode a certain word or a certain understanding of how activities are done.

the workplace studies literature differ from other kinds of ethnographies. This research attitude also addresses the criticism often given to ethnographic enquiries about how such selection is done in practice, that is how is it that ethnographers decide on which particular materials they should concentrate their analytical efforts. The notion of 'Intuition' is inadequate as an explanation. In studying what civil servants actually *do* to progress policy, therefore, it was the ongoing data analysis during fieldwork that suggested which events, namely specific meetings, had to be considered more important than others, and on those I concentrated further analytical attention.

The second opportunity a certain degree of 'unique adequacy' affords is that the analyst is able to resist more easily the temptation to bring into the analysis elements that are exogenous to the settings under inquiry. Theoretical understandings and pre-ordered categories schema imposed on the data, or inferences made out of preconceived historical factors, violate the very same nature of emic analysis, which ethnographers pursue as a starting point for their understanding. Therefore, what is considered important from the point of view of this investigation is the extent to which the policy actors that were observed found meaning in their work in terms of *their* theoretical understandings, pre-ordered categories schema and interpretations of historical factors. Consequently, the objective of the inquiry is to demonstrate, through empirical evidence, that the work observed was oriented towards specific historical and policy-contextual features (cf. Schegloff, 1992), but these have to be discovered *in situ*. I shall spend the final section of this Chapter describing the kind of analysis I used to pursue these discoveries further.

Conversation analysis

The post-fieldwork analysis was designed to engage with the full matrix of the communicative events and procedures composing the settings, with the intention of 'zooming in' (Nicolini, 2009) on those materials that had been identified as particularly valuable to address the research problem. These were of course the audio-recordings of the meetings of the policy team dedicated to discuss policy development. The value of such materials was ethnographically recognised: meetings were selected and recorded as the most important events, among different types, marking the workflow selected during fieldwork. During these meetings, in fact, participants engaged in the task of

juxtaposing their perspectives on policy development, and built up coordinated cases for action. The objective of further analysis of such materials is thus to unpack the 'concerted interactional accomplishment' (Schegloff, 1992:117) of instances of activities in which *interaction*, and in particular *talk*, is “fully taken up with working” (idem).

The audio recordings were thus approached analytically not only with the intention of gathering in detail what was decided by the actors being observed, and perhaps why, but also with the objective of gathering insights into *how* such decisions were reached, and on which grounds³². As a consequence, rather than investigating the intentions or the motives of individual participants, the attention fell on ascertaining which were the “organisationally appropriate ways” (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996:89) shaping the particular decision-making of the group of workers engaged in the exchanges. The interactions of interest were thus transcribed so as to allow the researcher to familiarise himself with the moment-by-moment, step-by-step emergence of talk (cf. Heath and Hindmarch, 2002). The transcriptions use a selection of conventions based on the Jeffersonian Transcription Notation. Transcribing itself represents a first strand of analysis: it allows the clarification of what is said, by whom and crucially, allows the researcher to listen and re-listen to the tape to get all the details of verbal interaction in real time. Such detailed analysis, per se, would never be possible relying on fieldnotes only (cf. Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998).

The transcriptions of these meetings, despite representing only a portion of the multi-modal kind of data each real situation involving human interaction is likely to produce, do replicate with a sufficient degree of fidelity the *language games* constituting the production of work in real time. A simplified version of the transcribing conventions elaborated by Gail Jefferson was used to take into account and render in writing pauses, acceleration and deceleration of speech, volume and overlapping sequences³³. The conversations during meetings were therefore subjected to the kind of scrutiny conversation analysts developed after the pioneering work of Harvey Sacks (cf. Sacks *et al.*, 1974). Of particular inspiration were those studies concerned with interrogating the tacit rules governing the design of turn-taking and the elicitation and the management of topics in specific institutional circumstances (cf. e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991). Transcription were therefore looked at as a kind of

³² This is what I understand the procedure of using ethnographic materials as topic rather than resources entails (cf. Schwartzman, 1989).

³³ Details of the conventions are provided in the Appendix A.

“speech-exchange systems” (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998:147) where features of the tacit negotiation among participants could be highlighted in parallel with what was made explicit – what was actually said – in talk. Two of such features are of particular interest for the research purposes of this study and will be insisted upon in the presentation of data, analysis and findings in the chapters to come. They are the ways in which language in use gets to work as a vehicle for interpretative procedures to convey instructions to participants about deciding what is next in terms of practical action (cf. Cicourel, 1973), and the ways in which exchanges provide the grounds for establishing, intersubjectively, what constitutes matters of fact (cf. Zimmerman, 1969).

Chapter 4: A history of DEFRA

Introduction

I want to approach the enterprise of describing the practices of the work of policy-making in DEFRA by taking a step back from the previous discussion and say something more about the Department as a government institution³⁴. This Chapter introduces the ethnographic report I develop in the following Chapters by considering, necessarily in a condensed form, some of those underlying (and legal) principles through which officers conduct their affairs, and to which they adhere as members of the Civil Service and employees of the Department. This introduction, therefore, proposes a version of the basic, 'official', functioning of a ministerial Department in the UK Government, as proposed by accounts offered by the Department itself. I refer to these, after Bittner (1965), as the “formal programming” (p.76-80) of the organisation, with its associate “mandate” (Hughes, 1984:287; cf. Chapter 2). The Chapter is based on the stated and formal accounts of what it is that the organisation does, what are the stated goals and procedures, as represented to the general public through official, published, documentation. The Chapter has two sections. In the first, I sketch a history of the Department, drawing on existing literature. Here I proceed to present DEFRA's structure of agencies, the associated organisational charts, and a skeleton rendering of what its employees are required to do by statute. In the second section I pose the problem of what significance the official mandate and the overall structure of the organisation have for workers, and I argue for the usefulness of taking public records seriously when starting to explore and detail, ethnographically, the workings of the organisation from the point of view of its members. I end the discussion by clarifying what status should be given to public records in the kind of organisational inquiry I present in later chapters, and the reasons they offer an important, but incomplete picture, of what the employees of the Department do in practice.

³⁴ I use the word 'institution' here in a rather general sociological sense denoting a specialised kind of community, organised around structured social practices with a spacial and temporal extension, acknowledged by most of the members of society (see Douglas, 1987).

2001-2005: A difficult start

Like many of the Departments constituting the structure of the UK Civil Service, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, more commonly known by the acronym DEFRA, is a product of a re-configuration of previous organisational arrangements. This re-configuration was prompted by a series of scandals that outraged public opinion, which in turn convinced the government to pursue reform and new ways of dealing with some of its responsibilities in changing circumstances. In the history of the British government such occasions recur (cf. Hennessy 1989): the evolution and the changes of names, structures and objectives of the Departments composing government proceeds almost seamlessly thanks to the application of a legal principle that came to be known as the Ram doctrine. According to this principle, the government has the power, and the discretion, to organise and re-organise the Civil Service without parliamentary approval and without the need for legislation (cf. Oliver, 2003). Such powers rest with the Prime Minister. No act of Parliament, nor even a consultation with representatives of the employees, was necessary for the making of DEFRA in June 2001, when, a few days after the elections that reconfirmed the Labour Party in power and Tony Blair as Prime Minister, the decision to merge parts of three existing Departments into one, was taken. According to the memories of former civil servants, the briefing around the decision reached those interested by the re-arrangement on a Friday, and the Department formally opened its business on the Monday after the weekend (White and Dunleavy, 2010).

DEFRA was formed from three separate ministries: the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), parts of the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and a small part of the Home Office. The merger was seen as necessary in order to re-brand MAFF, which had accumulated blows to its reputations with its handling of the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis in the 1980s and 1990s and the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (see e.g. Wilkinson, 2011). The Ministry was also accused of having become too close to some pressure groups, in particular the “immensely powerful” National Farmers' Union (Hennessy, 1989:444; Smith, 1993; Rhodes 2011). The tipping point leading to the dismantling of MAFF in favour of a 'new' organisation was the publication of *The BSE Inquiry: the Report* in October 2000, also known as the Phillips Report, from the name of the Lord chairing the Committee that compiled it. The Report denounced the government's shortcomings

during the unfolding of the BSE crisis. Political commentators found in the Report “a devastating indictment of the government machine” (Assinder, 2000), accused of excessive secrecy, misuse of science (Wilkinson, 2011) delays, lack of rigour and misjudgement of risk with regards to public health (Philipps, 2000). DEFRA was thus created with the intention of marking a transition into a long list of new priorities for public policy: a more prominent place for environmental concerns, a switch from producers' interests to consumer protection, an integrated approach to land and sea management, the protection of biodiversity and animal welfare, a commitment to recognising climate change as an urgent problem to address and the adoption of sustainable development as the path to follow to achieve these objectives (cf. DEFRA, 2002:16; Rhodes, 2011).

It was a troubled start. One year after its creation, the first Departmental Report to inform Parliament of DEFRA activities was, according to the House of Common Select Committee in charge of its scrutiny (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2002a), drafted in “extremely vague terms... waffle[d]” (para12) and showed that there had been slippages in the achievement of targets, flaws in internal financial scrutiny, mistakes in tables of data in Departmental reports, increased workload and low morale. The Committee blamed too broad a remit, and convinced the Prime Minister to set up a further investigation into the running of a Department, which was seen as too large and unsuccessful. At its creation, DEFRA had in fact responsibility to oversee 58 external agencies (21 executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies, 31 advisory agencies, four tribunals, and two public corporations). Such complexity was deemed to be too challenging proportions (Rhodes, 2011). The investigation led to another damning report – the *Rural Delivery Review* (Haskins, 2003) – which highlighted a substantial overlapping of agendas, and questioned the value for the taxpayers of having so many agencies in place. Haskins' recommendations led to a period of wrangling over which functions to retain in the Department, which to delegate to funded or unfunded external bodies, and which of those to dismember or merge. The Haskins' *Review* (2003) was seen by analysts (e.g. Woods, 2008:270; Ward, 2008) as a warning that it was not possible for DEFRA to fulfil the ambitious objectives and major reform it had been established to achieve. The inquiry led to a rescaling of the ambitions and a series of restructuring exercises. Commentators kept expressing doubts about the effectiveness of the Department in the following years (Toynbee and Walker, 2005; Rhodes, 2011). By 2005, it seemed clear the objectives the Department had set for itself were beyond its

possibilities of influence, and progress in a number of environment-related policies (for instance climate, energy, nuclear, recycling) was stalling, or “incoherent” (Toynbee and Walker, 2005:247). The first DEFRA Secretary of State, Margaret Beckett, in office from the creation of DEFRA to 2006, did not received much praise either: critics argued that while DEFRA had contributed to make a case for raising the profile of environmental issue in government, nothing new or radical had come out of its policies (cf. Pollard, 2005). Rather, the Department seemed to maintain the profile of an organisation mostly reactive to the recurring crises that plagued its first years of existence, these ranging from the controversies on fox hunting and genetically modified crops, to the mishandling of the administration of the newly-instituted Rural Payments Agency, which caused considerable delays in paying European Union subsidies to farmers in England, with the consequent wave of criticism and accusations of incompetence (see NAO, 2006).

2006-2010: New commitments, old problems

In the following years, the UK government made a number of commitments in international fora, such as the promise of promoting more sustainable systems of production and consumption, put forward at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (Foxon *et al.*, 2005). These seemed to reinvigorate the initiatives of the Department: a number of landmark long-term sustainability goals were set, both at domestic and international levels, such as the intention of reducing by 60 per cent the carbon dioxide emissions of the UK by 2050. The publication of the Energy White Paper (DTI and DEFRA) in 2003, and the speech of Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, on climate change in September 2004 (*Guardian*, 2004) were seen as early indicators of a fresh UK approach to environmental problems, which in turn prompted an injection of new blood (and investments) in the development of policy initiatives and strategies to follow-up on commitments. DEFRA 'took the lead', as policy officers say, on a number of actions and plans. Some illustrative examples were the Environmental Action Fund 2005-2008, and its follow up in 2009, the Greener Living Fund, which distributed funding to third sectors' organisations to raise awareness and to encourage citizens' action against the threat of climate change. Another initiative was the ActonCO2 information campaign, which brought, through TV adverts and other materials online and on paper, climate change to the centre of the national debate,

leading to an unusually extensive media coverage for an environmental issue. Further 'momentum' was added by the commissioning and publishing of *The Economics of Climate Change. The Stern Review*: a 700-page report released in October 2006 written by the top economist adviser to the Prime Minister, Nicholas Stern, who argued, in synthesis, that the benefits of intervening *in advance* on the long-term impacts of climate change far outweighed the costs the UK economy would have incurred in the future if it did not act. The Review also estimated the potential damages to water resources, food production, health and the environment, and quantified the forecasted overall losses in economics terms (Stern, 2006). The Review, together with an increasing level of cross-party political support (Foxon *et al.*, 2005) led to the drafting of the Climate Change Bill in 2006, passed into law in November 2008. The resulting Climate Change Act 2008 enshrined in law the commitment of the UK to a transition to a low-carbon economy by 2050, established an independent Committee to advise and monitor on progress (the Committee on Climate Change), and enhanced the power of ministers to introduce measures and provisions to make the transition happen.

In a parallel development, many of the DEFRA responsibilities on climate change policies were delegated to a new organisation, the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC). Despite the loss of part of its remit, the Department retained the ownership of policies on 'sustainable consumption' and 'sustainable production', on which it had invested heavily in terms of research effort and policy development. Political consensus had gathered around the idea the transition to a low-carbon economy could happen only by empowering individuals into reducing their own carbon footprint, an approach championed by the DEFRA Secretary of State who succeeded Margaret Beckett in 2006, David Miliband. He pursued a twofold environmental policy strategy for the UK government: on one hand showing leadership and commitment at the international level, with calls for unity at EU and UN levels on climate action (Miliband *et al.*, 2007); on the other pushing domestically for the adoption of policies that encouraged what came to be known as pro-environmental behavioural change (DEFRA, 2006; 2008; 2011b). Miliband left the Department to become Foreign Secretary the following year, and Hilary Benn was appointed in his place.

According to the recollections of the officers I interviewed, the strands of research undertaken by DEFRA since 2005, named Public Understanding Research (Dresner *et al.*, 2007) and the following Framework for Pro-Environmental Behaviours (DEFRA,

2008), steered many of the Department's programmes towards a new direction: 'behaviour change' – the shorthand for the approach proposed – quickly becoming a candidate for a new fashionable way of thinking about policy problems, across the Department and Whitehall at large. The DEFRA Framework for Pro-Environmental Behaviours, published in 2008, drew on several longitudinal surveys of public attitudes towards environmental issues and investigated, through both statistical and qualitative analysis of the answers, the willingness of participants to behave differently. The methods to develop the Framework emanate from the principles of market research, with an analysis of (self-reported) consumer behaviour, a segmentation of the consumers based on the findings, and a (proposed) tailoring of interventions around the clusters obtained by the segmentation process. The profiling of the clusters was commissioned to the British Market Research Bureau (Enlightenment and DEFRA, 2007), the longest established market research agency in Britain and pioneer of the computer-assisted interview methods underpinning the research. While attitude and motivation survey research was not new in government, and DEFRA and its predecessor Departments had run environment surveys since 1986 with the National Statistics Office, the systematic application of marketing principles to interpret results and develop public policy accordingly was, in the words of the officers developing the framework, "groundbreaking" (fieldnotes). It was so for two reasons. First, the Framework challenged and broke with the monolithic assumption, commonly held both in government economics and policy design (cf. Halpern *et al.*, 2004), that people assess their choices in terms of cost and benefits, seek to maximise their welfare, and that policy should be tailored to match such rational model of behaviour. The Framework imported ideas held in the marketing industry, shifting the assumptions towards a different tack: one where people may, and indeed do, depart from rational behaviour in systematic and predictable ways. The theoretical underpinning of the Framework is that such departures can be anticipated and exploited to enhance the effectiveness of policies (DEFRA internal paper, no date, unpublished), in ways that resemble the marketing strategies used to boost sales in the private sector. Second, the Framework, and the work behind its composition, introduced an innovative vocabulary that recast in totally different terms the way officers across the Department were asked to discuss their development and design of policies. Much of such lexicon stemmed from a series of consultations with experts in consumer policies, business managers, academics and citizens representative, led since 2003 by one of the DEFRA advisory agencies, the Sustainable Development Commission. The Commission had set the tone of the UK

Government Sustainable Development Strategy (HMG, 2005) and worked with DEFRA in the following years to make operative an alternative approach to the “classic” way of conceiving policy instruments such as command and control regulation (p.25). The language of 'taxes', 'penalties', 'media campaigns', 'schemes' and 'regulation' was enriched with, and to an extent substituted by, concepts such as 'removing barriers', 'creating opportunities', 'leading by example', 'co-production', etc. all synthesised in a model that came to be known as the '4E tools', out of the initials of the main strategies envisaged as what public policy should be about: 'Enable', 'Engage', 'Exemplify', 'Encourage' (cf. HMG, 2005; DEFRA, 2008; Giddens, 2009). The Framework was the first systematic operational application of the '4E' model, and an example of what the development of public policy could look like when policies are diversified according to the clusters of population to which they are applied.

With the government's commitment towards sustainable development high on its declared agenda, the publication of the Framework projected the Department “at the cutting edge of the governmental arena” (interview with DEFRA researcher), considerably raising DEFRA reputation and influence within the Whitehall circles. A special unit, named Centre of Expertise in Influencing Behaviour (CEIB), was set up to disseminate the findings of the Framework, continue the work of its predecessor, the Behaviours Unit, and expand it. Its members enjoyed some notoriety: they were invited to present the 'behaviour change' approach to other Departments, to external organisations, to EU policy makers in Brussels and to officials and ministers of other European member states. The '4E' tool and the Framework were also applied across the Department as a new perspective for conceiving and handling policies in other areas of DEFRA remit: a segmentation of farmers, the most important DEFRA 'stakeholders' (cf. Chapter 5), was commissioned and carried out (although never published), a Water White Paper (HMG, 2011) included elements of the approach, as it did the architecture of the Green Deal, the UK government policy (then delegated to DECC) to make loans available for installing in British properties energy saving measures, such as solar panel, heat pumps and loft insulation.

The DEFRA work paved the way, and in a certain sense anticipated, the take up of 'behaviour change interventions' across most of the Departments (see e.g. Science and Technology Select Committee, 2011). The Framework, with the research and the tools it used, also provided the bedrock for the assimilation of the rationale of policy

interventions based on principles of social psychology, in particular those disseminated by the hugely influential American book *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), which quickly became a must-read in policy circles in Britain. The book presented the potential (and the cost-effectiveness) of applying elements of choice architecture to public policy, by building on theories of the psychology of persuasion (cf. Marvulli, 2011). A synthesis in between the DEFRA '4E' tool and the 'Nudge' approach was provided for policy-makers to use by a spin-off think tank of the Cabinet Office, in 2010, through its publication *MINDSPACE* (IfG, 2010), where detailed instruction to design 'nudge' policy are given. In the same year, the newly-instituted Coalition Government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats (2010-2015) set up the Behavioural Insight Team (BIT), also known as the "Nudge Unit", in the Cabinet Office, which featured Professor Richard Thaler, one of the author of *Nudge*, as advisor. By 2012, the Department of Transport had set up its own Behavioural Insight and Attitudes Team (BIAT) and developed its own segmentation model of people's use of personal travel (Thornton *et al.*, 2011), the Treasury used behavioural insight to design letters and forms, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) worked with the BIT team at Cabinet Office to develop its policies, both the Department for International Development and DECC had promoted the '4E' and *MINDSPACE* tools among its staff, as it did the Welsh Government. The officers who authored the Framework for Pro-Environmental Behaviour, managed the research behind it, and set up some of the policy projects that followed, claimed it was a great success story for DEFRA, which had put for the first time in its short history as a re-branded organisation its weight at the forefront of innovation in policy development in the UK.

The DEFRA behaviour change initiative only partially cast some positive light on a Department that remained plagued by criticism and accusations of poor financial management of public funds. In 2008, a report of the Committee of Public Accounts highlighted that the Department was still struggling to implement the recommendations of the Haskins Review (2003), in particular in providing sufficient scrutiny and financial accountability for its raft of sponsored organisations, whose number was not reduced. The committee asked for a "rationalisation", following two consecutive years of overspending and poor accounting, which caused some projects to be suspended after being already funded. The statements around the intentions of the Department to reform its structures and culture piled up (cf. DEFRA, 2007), and a further programme of re-organisation, called Renew, was instituted six years into the Department's creation.

While the authors of the seemingly endless yearly Departmental reports (each scoring over 200 pages) did their best to highlight progress and some “notable successes” (vii) across the incredibly wide range of issues DEFRA was called to tackle, a rather gloomy picture kept emerging. In 2007, the UK had missed emission targets, fuel prices had risen, air pollution worsened (p.9) as did other indicators measuring the progress on sustainable development (p.29), recycling rates were up only in some parts of the country (p.37), the reported progress in nature conservation was deemed unsatisfactory (p.47), the recovery from the BSE crisis was below expectations (p.67), and the responses to the outbreaks in England of the avian influenza, a new virus, were mixed (p.95).

By 2009, the senior management claimed some “step change” had been made in improving DEFRA financial management (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2009:35). The members of the Committee who scrutinised the Departmental annual report (DEFRA, 2009) were not convinced. The auditors claimed they could still not find a “clear line of accountability and seniority” (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2009:31), and that, for some programmes of spend, information was nowhere to be found on “what [the Department] ha[d] actually been spending this [money] on” (p.34). The then Permanent Secretary had to admit that it was “difficult to explain [...] how we manage our departmental expenditure” (idem), although she defended the Department claiming it had “significantly improved”. The Committee conceded that the organisation of DEFRA was “an unnecessarily complicated system and [...] one that is innately difficult to operate” (p.35-36), with “too many things that are going on” (p.37): too many overlapping objectives, some of which “difficult to monitor” (idem).

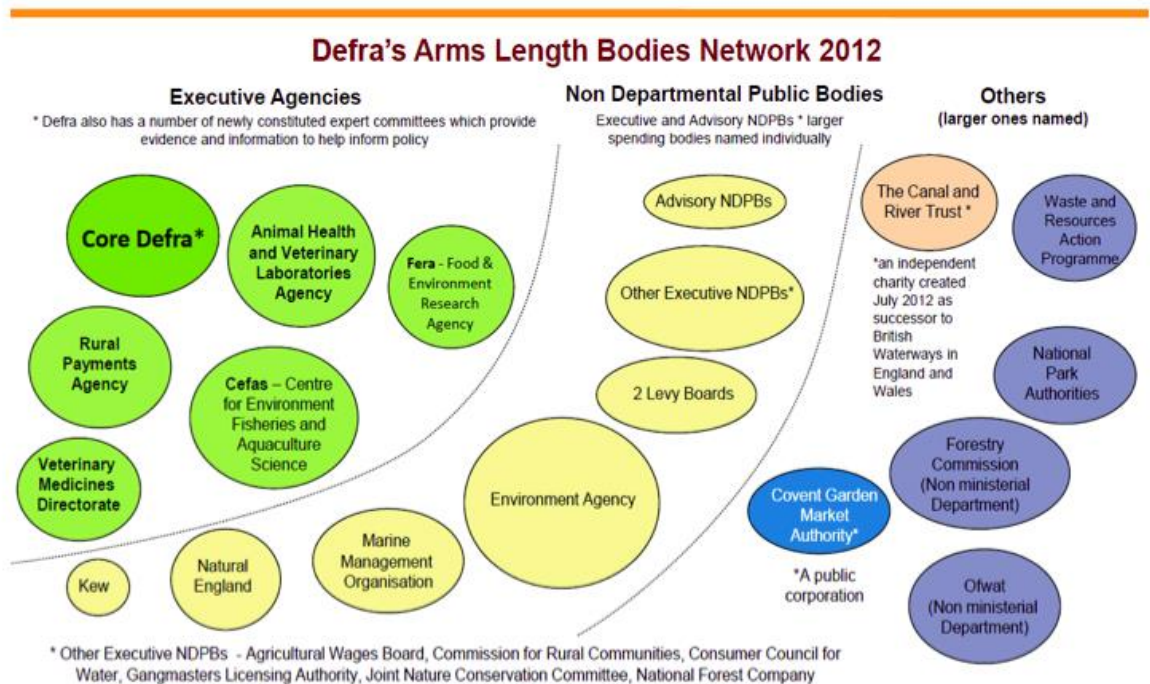
2010 onwards: DEFRA under the Coalition

The UK general election in May 2010 resulted in a hung parliament, resolved by an agreement between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats to form a Coalition Government. DEFRA had a new Secretary of State, Caroline Spelman, and few months after the elections, a newly-appointed Permanent Secretary. Changes in the top posts of the organisation were followed by a further re-structuring of the ranks and a move towards a new management style in accounting for the Department's operations.

Continuing and speeding up a process initiated in 2007 (cf. Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2009:29), the 66 'directorates' composing the Department were remodelled around 'areas', 'programmes' composed of 'projects', and 'ongoing functions'. By 2011, the Department had assembled and published a new detailed 'organogram', with organisational charts detailing the new names and size of its 'policy teams', had devised a new system to link its remit with its operations and to account for its responsibilities. In November 2010, it started publishing online its 'business plan', with reports on progress against 'indicators' updated quarterly. The newly drafted business plan broke down DEFRA remit into a small number of ministerial and governmental 'priorities', and associated 'actions' to each of them, in an accounting discipline closer to the private sector, where 'business plans' are the norm. This represented a radical transformation of terminology: the language of Public Service Agreements (PSAs), with the associated Department Strategic Objectives (DSOs), in use since 1998 under the three consecutive Labour governments, was consigned to the national archives. Instead, the Department articulated its work along the lines of project portfolio management (PPM), with 'deliverables', 'timescales', and 'milestones' set up against 'actions' intended to deliver the 'vision' and the priorities' of ministers. It set, together with other Departments, common standard of reporting, with the intention of making its operations “compar[able] against public and private sector organisations” (DEFRA Business Plan, internal document, unpublished). In order to do so, it instituted a baseline of key data set, to form part of a public reporting “kept under continuous review... available free of charge” (idem). Corporate data published in the first of such 'transparency' exercise, included 275 datasets published on the re-branded cross-government website data.gov.uk, and also the names, job titles and annual pay rates of senior officers (directors general and directors). The Department also set out new 'indicators' “to help the public scrutinise our inputs” (idem). Some examples were: number of farm inspections carried out by type of farm; number of trees planted as result of the national tree planting campaign; incidence of TB (bovine tuberculosis) in cattle; statistics notices on meat and related animal products and slaughter statistics for cattle, sheep and pigs; statistics on broadband coverage, fuel poverty and housing in rural communities; data on litter levels in England; emissions and concentrations of air pollutants in the UK; flood and coastal erosion risk management quarterly reports; data on waste management activities of local authorities.

The approximately sixty agencies and non-departmental bodies under DEFRA control

in 2009 were reformed, many merged and many others abolished, as a result of a cross-government review aimed at saving on Departmental costs (Cabinet Office, 2012). The operation was dubbed by the press as the “bonfire of quangos”, after the epithet given to the quasi-governmental organisations composing what in administrative terms are called Arms Length Bodies (ALBs). By 2011 the number of such organisations – largely responsible for the delivery of DEFRA policies – was reduced by one third, and in the following year halved. DEFRA managers claimed they had completed the introduction of a clearer “framework of direct accountability” for the remaining agencies and bodies, in the form of “business plan[s] measurable against key performance indicators”, and that they “held them to account through six-monthly performance reviews” (DEFRA, 2012:7). As part of the Coalition Government effort in accounting for its operations, an effort more commonly known as the ‘transparency agenda’, data on the missions, history, composition of workforce, budgets and expenditure of each such organisation was published in a single, comprehensive report (Cabinet Office, 2012).



Extract 4.1: the DEFRA Network in 2012

In parallel with the ‘transparency agenda’, the Coalition government implemented a plan to reduce its budget deficit, which meant significant spending reductions for most of its Departments, these outlined in the 2010 Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010).

DEFRA settled for a reduction of 29 per cent of its resource budget, to be delivered by 2015 (p.64). Between 2010 and 2012, approximately 650 DEFRA employees left the Department, taking advantage of voluntary redundancies schemes or facilitated reallocations to other governmental agencies. In 2012, the overall headcount of the DEFRA 'core staff' was 2,160 (ONS, 2012:table 11), continuing and accelerating a downward trend, both in terms of resource budget and staff numbers, existing since the institution of the Department ten years earlier (cf. DEFRA 2009:228).

Table of spending for 2011/12 to 2014/15

This section sets out the Department's planned expenditure over the Spending Review period, as agreed with the Treasury.

£bn ¹²³⁵	Baseline 2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Total departmental expenditure allocation	2.9	2.5	2.4	2.3	2.2
<i>Administration spending</i>	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5
<i>Programme spending</i>	1.7	1.5	1.5	1.4	1.3
<i>Capital spending</i>	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4

Extract 4.2: Planned Departmental spending after the Spending Review 2010, as in the Business Plan 2011

The *DEFRA Annual Report and Accounts 2011-2012*, published in July 2012, achieved what none of the previous departmental reports, according to the auditors of the House of Commons, had achieved in the past: attempt a synthetic outline of the lines of accountability at the highest ranks (cf. above). The DEFRA structure was described as follows (DEFRA, 2012):

The **Secretary of State**, who has *statutory and political accountability to Parliament* for all the matters associated with the Department, heads a Ministerial Team, composed of one Minister of State and two Parliamentary Under-Secretary, also known as 'junior ministers'. She also chairs a **Supervisory Board**, composed the Ministers, the Permanent Secretary, directors general, the finance director and the non-executive directors.

The **Permanent Secretary** is the most senior official of the Department, has responsibility for the overall organisation, management and staffing of the Department. She is also the Accounting Officer (cf HM Treasury, 2007; 2011) and as such, *is personally accountable to Parliament for the propriety and the standards of the management of funds.*

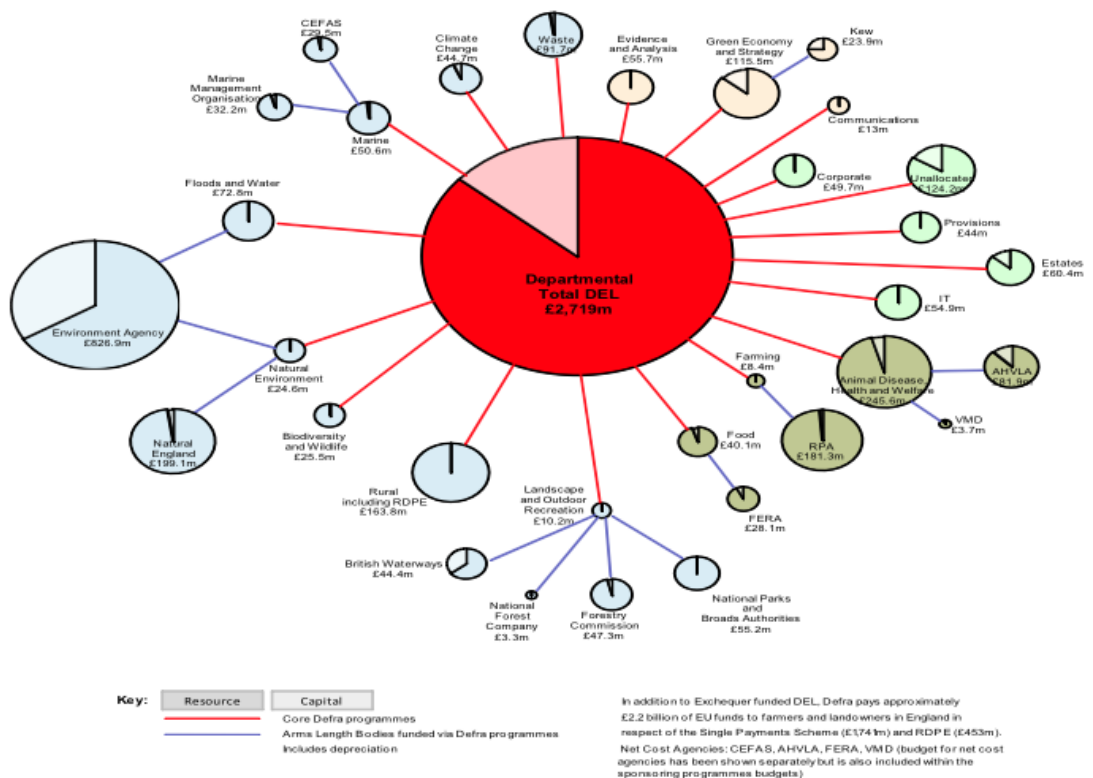
The Supervisory Board has three sub-committees, of which the most important is the **Management Committee**, composed of all the members of the Supervisory Board *except the Ministers*. According to the organisational charts published, in 2012 it was composed by four director generals, three non-executive directors, the finance director and the chief scientific adviser³⁵. The management committee and its members supervise the work of the Department at the lower levels of the hierarchy, where the existing sixty-six “old” directorates were merged into three large groups of operations, **Food and Farming, Environment and Rural, and Green Economy and Corporate Service**. The three groups covered the DEFRA remit which, despite the work of simplification and reduction, remained vast. The label assigned to the 'programmes' in place (which are listed below, drawing on internal documentation dated 2011, in descending order approximate budget resources assigned) gives an idea of the Department's remit. The list is not exhaustive, and contains some peculiar associations in between programmes (cf. DEFRA, 2011).

- Rural Development England (includes Common Agricultural Policy)
- Green Economy and Strategy (included, oddly, all corporate services, e.g. communications and press office, legal services, finance, staff performance appraisal, IT, evidence research; *and* sustainable production and consumption; sustainable development; local, regional and EU governance co-ordination)
- Veterinary Science
- Waste
- Bovine TB
- Landscape and Outdoor Recreation
- Waterways
- Marine Environment (oddly grouped with the Human Resource division)
- Floods and Erosion Risk

³⁵ The other two committees were the Audit and Risk committee, formed by non-executive and “independent members” (DEFRA, 2012: 4), such as a National Audit Office (NAO) representative; and the Nominations Committee, in charge of “succession planning” (idem).

- Water availability and quality
- Atmosphere and Local Environment
- Food chain
- Biodiversity
- Livestock
- Chemicals and Nanotechnologies
- Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation
- Rural communities
- Animal Welfare
- Exotic Disease Response
- Crops and Soils

The Management Committee is in charge of the major decisions with regards to “strategy”, emergency planning and response, and the overall resource allocation of funds to programmes (DEFRA, 2012:4). The business plan 2011 included a visual representation of the planned allocation of the Department budget against the key programmes and major agencies (ALBs) for the upcoming financial year (DEFRA, 2011, internal document, unpublished):



Extract 4.3: Breakdown of the Department budget in programmes, as in the Business Plan 2011

The planned budget reductions, however, meant that the programmes in place, as

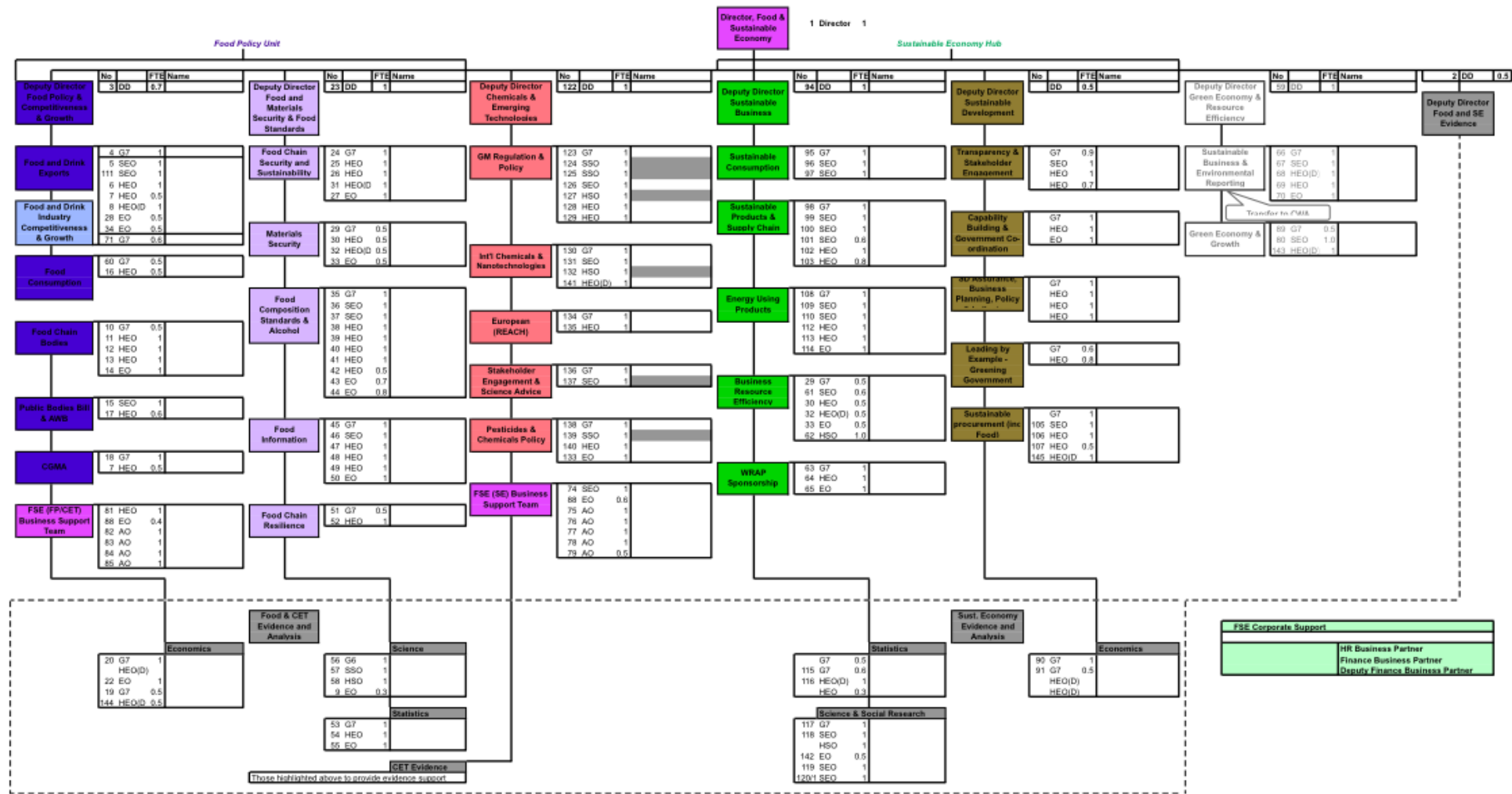
reported in formal accounts, were subject to further mergers and re-definition, as result of the announced plan of internal change, called, perhaps unimaginatively, **Change Programme** (DEFRA, 2012:9). By the end of 2012, the annual report had been published, a new “high level structure” had been put in place, many programmes' names were changed, and new organisational charts were circulated in the Department to inform the officers down in the hierarchies of the results of the latest 're-structuring' decisions and their consequent new position in the ranks. Comparing the published documentation pre and post-2010, it can be seen how, to a large extent, the modifications to the formal structures mirror the new 'priorities' detailed in the newly-instituted 'business plan'. The 'priorities' established by ministers for the period 2012-2015 were (DEFRA 2011a; 2012):

- to support and develop British farming and encourage sustainable food production
- help to enhance the environment and biodiversity to improve quality of life
- support a strong and sustainable green economy, resilient to climate change
- prepare for and manage risk from animal and plant disease
- prepare for and manage risk from flood and other environmental emergencies

Reading through these formal objectives one can note, to an extent, what one of the many trajectories of changes entailed: no reference to 'sustainable development' as policy objective is made. While it can be mistaken for a matter of terminology, this marked a stark discontinuity with what the Department had done in the previous five-year period (cf. above), and a dismissal of what had been declared, ten years earlier, “its principal aim” (Environment, Food and Rural Committee, 2002b:6; DEFRA 2002). The names of newly-defined 'programmes' reflect that discontinuity, with the inclusion (and demeaning) of the 'sustainable development' programme in a re-defined policy area (Green Economy), together with a subsequent merging of its resources and people deputed to administer it with others. As a result of the Change Programme, the Green Economy programme was again merged with what was known, pre-2010, as the Food Policy Unit, and with some other divisions deputed to supervise recently-devised programmes (Chemicals and Nanotechnologies, Food Chain).

The chart below, detailing the formal structure of the 'policy area' following such merging, details the composition of the ranks below the directors in the Food and Green Economy group (only few months before the Green Economy and Corporate Service

group, cf. above). The names of officers in the chart have been removed for the obvious reason of respecting the officers' anonymity, while the names of the 'policy teams' are given. The chart details the lines of authority, descending from the top of the chart (one 'director', seven 'deputy directors') to the clusters of officers on each vertical line. Each cluster, in the rectangular shapes, is also organised by authority, with the 'team leader' (rank: 'G7') at the top and the lower officers listed in descending order of responsibility (senior executive officer, SEO; high executive officer, HEO; executive officer, EO). In the middle-low part of the chart, two clusters (Support Teams) list the administrators (AO): these, while clustered along two vertical lines only, operate for all the teams in the chart. In the low part of the chart, within the dotted lines, stand the 'analysts': economist, scientists, statisticians and social researchers. The relation in between the 'policy officers' constituting the 'policy areas' in the high part of the chart and the 'analyst' in the lower is itself to be considered in evolution. The Department was in fact experimenting with a new way of composing 'policy teams', one that moved on from having a rigid split in between 'analysts' and 'policy officials' (cf. Wilkinson, 2011). In the office, 'analysts' sat now together with the policy officers, while in recent past they had occupied different sections of the building, and there was a great care taken in separating them and the meetings they held (cf. Wilkinson, 2010:964ss). The chart offers a picture of how a division of the Department looked, on paper, in December 2012, the last month of my secondment to the organisation.



Extract 4.4: Organogram of Department division

What the analysis of this documentation shows is that the Department must be seen as an organisation able to accommodate sudden modifications to its mandate: the statute and the management disciplines in use to implement it evolve over time. As we should see in the coming Chapters, dedicated to detailing the officers' responsibilities and activities at middle-rank (administrators to Grade7), change and evolution are not to be intended as discreet moments in time – particular phases when the structure and statutes are re-negotiated. Rather, they constitute a fundamental feature of the work at hand. The question I pose then is not how to account for change, or how to track it (itself a very difficult task³⁶), but rather how officers cope with doing work in such recurrently changing circumstances, and how, nevertheless, they manage to get their work done.

The formal programming and its significance for workers

Through a rapid overview of the evolution of the Department's mandate over time I have introduced some of the features of the “formal organisational structures” through which the Department's affairs are conducted. Such structures underpin the overall 'rationality' of the organisation as presented to the public. The yearly departmental reports, the estimates and the final accounts of spending, and since 2011 the business plan, manage to display, in some details, the *overall scheme* under which the employees of the Department work. This is a very good point of departure to understand how the Department conducts its business. It facilitates exploration of its purposes, and, among other considerations that pertain to the field of policy analysis, allows us to track how policy 'stories' develop over time. One example of such stories, which is highlighted earlier in the Chapter, is the rise and decline of the DEFRA 'sustainable development' programme. The very fact that a re-construction of this kind is possible through the analysis of public records, allows for some reflections over the role of such documenting devices.

Reports have a number of purposes. First they offer the opportunity to define all that happens within the organisation as either a success or a failure, under a rubric which is defined by the organisation itself (cf. Bittner 1965). Second, by offering an overview of

³⁶ See Porritt, J. (2011) for a recent attempt to track in detail DEFRA policies (at least one part of its remit) through one year of Department operations (2010-2011).

what the objectives are, what the intentions to pursue them are, how the Department is organised, and how it has scored against performance measures, reports exhibit the adherence to the framework of legality under which the organisation operates (Strong and Dingwall, 1983). Reports demonstrate the organisation has fulfilled its duties of accountability towards the community at large. The agencies in charge of scrutinising records' integrity can conduct their evaluation role, and – as it has often happened in the history of DEFRA – sanction shortcomings and request ameliorations. These duties exist to qualify the Department as public organisation, and, as such, define its legitimised action. Third, and related to the first point, official reports provide specifications of *the modes of discourse* through which any observer, competent or not, is called to think and believe about the organisation as domain for the professionals who work within its territory (cf. Hughes, 1984, Silverman, 1975, Strong and Dingwall, 1983). Such modes provide a vocabulary, a rhetoric, and series of “legitimizing symbols” (Silverman, 1975:147) that are proposed to an audience (the public, in the case of published reports) as *stable* definitions of the situation, what is being done, and what degree of success can be associated with organisational action. While such definitions, as I showed, are subject to constant evolution and change, they provide, each time, for what Goffman has famously called *frames of reference*: representations in symbolic forms that allow users to locate, perceive, identify and label concrete occurrences defined in their terms (1974:21). To frame means selecting some features of the reality and making them more salient in a text, in such a way so as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman 1993:52). Typically, the contents of official records documenting governmental action are structured around a normative frame design: once a problematic situation is defined (e.g. 'air pollution', 'food safety', 'how to green the economy', etc.), a commitment is made (generally by politicians) about what *should* be done, some sort of action is negotiated (by the 'administration'), budgeted and given a time frame.

Resource	2012-13 Main	2012-13	
	Estimate	Supplementary	
	Net Resource	Estimate	2012-13 Outturn
	Outturn	Outturn	Net Resource
	£000	£000	£000
Spending in Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL)			
Voted expenditure			
<i>Of which:</i>			
Support and develop British farming	391,981	257,387	242,459
Help to enhance the environment and biodiversity	374,064	434,192	442,862
Support a strong and sustainable green economy	172,129	151,553	138,677
Prepare for and manage risk from animal and plant diseases	223,473	262,801	206,481
Prepare for and manage risk from environmental emergencies	33,120	28,292	25,260
Departmental operating costs	216,794	152,667	164,452
Support and develop British farming (NDPB) (Net)	1,418	1,418	644
Help to enhance the environment and biodiversity (NDPB) (Net)	489,337	478,644	518,197
Support a strong and sustainable green economy (NDPB) (Net)	500	-	-
Prepare for and manage risk from environmental emergencies (NDPB) (Net)	331,446	325,647	338,301
Total spending in DEL	2,234,262	2,092,601	2,077,333

Extract 4.5: Extract from DEFRA Annual Report and Accounts

3. Support a strong and sustainable green economy, resilient to climate change (p.1 of 4)

Help to create the conditions in which businesses can innovate, invest and grow; encourage businesses, people and communities to manage and use natural resources sustainably and to reduce waste; work to ensure that the UK economy is resilient to climate change; and enhance rural communities

ACTIONS	Start	End
3.1 Drive a 'zero waste' agenda		
i. Agree goals for 2014/20 and set the path towards a 'zero waste' economy through a review of waste policies	Started	Jun 2011
ii. Publish waste goals for 2014/20 including on waste in central government	Jun 2011	Jun 2011
iii. Assess progress against commitments made in waste policy review, including progress on new voluntary responsibility deals on waste	Mar 2012	Mar 2012
iv. Explore voluntary responsibility deals on waste among businesses	Completed	-
v. Repeal Climate Change Act powers for household charging	Started	Nov 2011
vi. Set out steps to promote increased energy from waste through anaerobic digestion, for consultation with stakeholders and industry	Completed	-
vii. Publish detailed strategy to encourage anaerobic digestion measures	Jun 2011	Jun 2011
3.2 Reform the water industry to enhance competition and improve conservation		
i. Review the water regulator (Ofwat) and publish findings	Started	Jun 2011
ii. Examine the conclusions of the Cave and Walker Reviews and publish a White Paper on the reform of the water industry to ensure a more efficient use of water and to protect poorer households	Started	Dec 2011
iii. Introduce required legislation, as soon as parliamentary time allows	Apr 2012	Apr 2012
3.3 Drive sustainable public sector practice across government		
i. Publish action plan with the Department of Energy and Climate Change and Cabinet Office to ensure government operations and procurement are the greenest ever	Completed	-
ii. Review the Government's sustainability commitments	Completed	-
iii. Announce new sustainability commitments	Completed	-
iv. Data released on progress against government sustainability commitments	Completed	-

Extract 4.6: Extract from the Department business plan 2011

Records thus offer a precise image of the Department. They refine and define its mandate, breaking it down into sub-areas of action and interventions. These are cascaded down to smaller divisions of the organisation of the kind displayed earlier, each in charge of 'delivery'. Such representations fulfil a dual practical purpose: on one hand they promote to the public a specific *way of seeing* and understanding public administration, on the other they provide to employees a larger number of different

elements of the Department's mandate, so that each of the commitments and the associated organisational actions become for them *the work at hand* (Strong and Dingwall, 1983). More reflections can be offered on these two aspects of what the public records afford.

First, on the image offered to the public. This promotes a specific way of conceptualising the Department grounded on a defined theory: the metaphor used is that of the 'machine' – specialised divisions that perform goal-oriented activities in routinised, efficient, and predictable ways (cf. Morgan, 2006). The records construe this image against the records users' background understanding of 'bureaucracy': thousands employees, each inserted into lines of hierarchy and chains of command, manage 'programmes' and a network of 'delivery' agencies to produce outcomes. The image proposed appeals to a harmonious, internally consistent, system of parts that work together to achieve ends (cf. Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Some modifications to the image are achieved in that the self-description allows for the accommodation of diverse political aims, which change over time. The image is thus modified towards that of an adaptive entity, able to adopt (and change) business propositions, able to put in place different delivery methods, and also to interface with non-governmental agencies through 'consultation' and 'networks of partners'. The conceptualisation remains inspired by a functionalist paradigm and draws on an underlying objectivity of government action: the records document the 'programmes' of policies in place under the direction of ministers, they document the system for monitoring the administrative action, they prescribe evaluations to be done which lead assessments of progress, which in turn lead, if the actions are seen as not satisfactory, to further commitments, with further budgets, new time frames of implementation for the actions. This mechanistic rendering is mirrored both in the texts of the records, penned in a style charged with formalistic impersonality, and in the accepted ways the administration is referred to in common and journalistic language: the Departments form the 'machinery of government', and the civil service and Whitehall work as a 'Rolls-Royce machine'. The image is also grounded on further distinctive elements: a traditional distinction between politics and administration, where civil servants, by codified formal rules (see Cabinet Office, 2006), act impartially in delivering politician's objectives; and a claim for a substantial monopoly in the ownership of knowledge used to make decisions on public policy (cf. Burnham and Pyper, 2008).

It would be ingenuous to dismiss such images as mere presentational devices. Accounts exist and must be written. Accounts document expenditures. Expenditures fund 'policy programmes', and such programmes are devised in detail. This brings us to my second point: if we switch the focus of analysis from the theorised reality found into public accounts to the observable behaviour of the employees of the Department, the image described above is all but insignificant. The Department's mandate, broken down into a large number of different elements, constitute the domains of action for particular workers: the 'overall scheme' *also* defines the constraints within which employees justify their action to themselves and to superiors (Goffman, 1961), and once their activities are documented in accounts, to the public (cf. Strong and Dingwall, 1983). Invariably, the organisational mandate becomes what all employees 'are there for': they work to 'deliver the ministerial priorities', employees themselves would say. If the priority in a specific 'policy area' is, for example, 'to enhance biodiversity in England' that becomes the *raison d'etre* of the workers involved in the activities associated with the pursuit of that goal. Mandates thus create a set of expectations and meanings through which the members of the organisation are able to understand and interpret the sense of their own activities (Silverman, 1975). Mandates can thus be invoked every time workers need to justify their own actions, and in many cases, define the limits of what is thinkable and doable: they work as fundamental orientation for the actions of each worker (cf. Strong and Dingwall, 1983). From these *emic* considerations, as I detailed in Chapter 2, this inquiry wants to move. Public reports and their accounts are important because they *already* offer a description, and one that is *relevant* for workers of the Department themselves. The mandate and its constituent parts are invoked in every-day circumstances of work, and limit, in most occasions, the possibility of what is actually done (cf. Strong and Dingwall, 1983).

Some features of records of the kind analysed so far, however, deserve further commentary and analysis. First, it will not escape any reader that the official goals are phrased in rather vague and general terms: 'support a strong and sustainable green economy, resilient to climate change', as in the example above, does designate a field of action, but tells very little about the practical interventions that are sought. Even when more specific 'actions', documenting the supposed means to achieve these aims are spelled out, the language remains highly abstract. Take for example one of the item in the list of Figure 6, from the 'official' Department business plan: "explore voluntary responsibility deals on waste among business". While the action itself is somewhat

clear, several questions can immediately be raised: what about other measures to limit the amount of waste businesses produce? What options does the 'action' exclude? Which businesses are being consulted, or targeted, and how? How are the negotiations conducted? What is the incentive for businesses to volunteer? Where is the 'deal'? More questions obviously could be asked. The more fundamental point is that this level of accounting (to the public) is inadequate and insufficient for a full understanding of what exactly the organisation does (cf. Perrow, 1961), and, crucially, *how* the deliberations for actions are arrived at. This leads to a second important feature of the public records. They necessarily document decisions *post facto*. This means that reported 'actions' may gloss over the motives and the rationalities at play in the selection of the decided course, and gloss over the infinite possibilities that have been discarded, either by negotiation of the desired outcome, or by discretion in exploring the possible means to those ends (cf. Silverman, 1975). What is left out is the process through which members of the organisation achieve the practical determination of the meanings inscribed in public records (cf. Bittner 1965, Garfinkel, 1967; Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Lynch, 1985): how do members use ideas and language to constitute the rationality and orderly character of records? How do records connect with the actions of officers? What sort of co-ordinating mechanisms (cf. Strong and Dingwall, 1983; Orlikowsky, 1991) are in place to make sure workers' actions share an orientation to the formal programming described so far? The objective of the Chapters that follow (5,6,7,8) is to offer some answers to these questions, and investigate the local methods in place to *arrive at* the constitution and definition of the organisational actions by workers as “everyday activities in everyday settings” (Sharrock and Button, 2011:38). Such methods, I have argued, are nowhere to be found in public records, but became manifest once I was in the position of observing 'policy work' *in situ*. To describe these, starting from the next Chapter, I switch to a very different kind of analysis: one grounded in the everyday life of employees at work, as I witnessed it, and as I learned to understand it (cf. Chapter 3).

Chapter 5: Inside the Department



Picture 5.1: The entrance of DEFRA's building

Introduction

This chapter introduces the settings of the Department and the technologies officers use, and it presents the research participants I spend time with during my residence at DEFRA. The description also starts to characterise some of the peculiarities of the officers' work associated with the making of policy, a task that I will continue to pursue in the following chapters composing the remainder of the ethnographic report (Chapter 6, 7 and 8). An introductory section sets up the report by offering some reflections on the rationale of the analysis. These further those presented in the methodological section. Here I comment on the choices I made when selecting, organising and displaying data, and I explain why I avoided some conventions of 'orthodox' ethnographic analyses. I also present an important textual device that is used consistently in the report, and I explain the logic behind its deployment. The remainder of the chapter begins to present the core of the ethnographic report, and some findings. As in later chapters, the analysis builds upon the voices of research participants and

presents actual episodes of work in the Department, with a light touch on using others' theoretical constructions. The focus here falls on the work of officers at the lowest levels of the hierarchy, and on one of the activities that occupies their time: project management.

On the rationale of the ethnographic report

What are policy officers at DEFRA doing when they are engaged in the work of developing policy? I posed earlier the problem of describing organisations and the work that goes on in them, and argued, drawing on Garfinkel's programme of studies (1967; 1991), that to address these is essential to engage with the “everyday activities in everyday settings” (Sharrock and Button, 2011:38) that *produce* the work and the organisation in the first place (cf. Suchman, 1983; Boden, 1994). The analytical strategy envisaged by studies of workplace carried out under these auspices, I maintained when I set up this enquiry (cf. Chapters 2 and 3), avoids employing expert conceptions of what research participants are supposed to be dealing with. Instead, it replaces it with a kind of research that places attention to the detail of the actual production of office work (cf. Suchman, 1983), and does so by grounding the description in the world – the *lifeworld*, with Husserl (1970) and Schutz (1972) – of organisational members. In this chapter, I start to pursue this strategy. I propose a preliminary exploration, phenomenological in spirit, of the immediate sphere of experience of research participants.

Life-worlds, as intended by phenomenologist philosophers, are made of the objects, the persons and the events encountered in the pursuit of the pragmatic objective of existing. Life-worlds provide, in Schutz's theses (1972), both the grounds for experiencing the world-out-there *and* the “system of relevancies” (idem) that guide humans toward the selection of a conduct rather than others. Again with Schutz, life-worlds are composed firstly of some physical settings, secondly of an experienced social reality (*Umwelt*), and thirdly of all those relevancies – actualised moment by moment – within what Schutz calls the “reach” of persons' grasps. Taking inspiration from Schutz's characterisation, the ethnographic report I propose begins with a description of the physical environment that hosts the officers' work (*the workplace*), with its artefacts and devices that support officers in accomplishing their tasks. The report here makes use of photographs as visual method to identify the material means officers have at hand to do what they do in

the office. While the features of an office in the early twenty-first century could be mistaken for unremarkable, I argue that a pictorial description is useful for the reader to familiarise his or herself with the world where officers live their every day working life, and to understand what makes the environment officers inhabit an office 'for doing policy in'. Included in this section of the chapter is information on the computer technologies used by participants. These support and underpin both the officers' interactions, and the tools to compose documents, records, and several other kinds of paperwork, all of which can be seen as the most immediate products of their activities. Technologies of communication, digital text processing tools, and the software supporting the production, modification and archival of documents are used in this section as entry point task to describe the complex settings officers inhabit (cf. Atkinson *et al.*, 2008). In fact, settings and technologies define the officers' workplace, or *workscape* (Szymansky and Whalen, 2011): the spatial and virtual environments where the very 'things' of the work officers accomplish are encountered. The Department is seen here as “a professionalised locale, a geographical site where persons [belonging to the profession] come together to carry out their respective purposes” (Strauss *et al.*, 1963:150).

Once the scene is set, and from the second section of this chapter on to the following chapters, I move on to consider the *Unwelt* – the world of the Department's staff involved in the work activities associated to DEFRA's policy-making. I approach this social reality as a web of “we-relationships” (Schutz, 1972:163), professional in character, and I exploit the division in ranks to organise the analysis. I introduce some of the women and the men of this social reality, and I use their voices and *words* to present, detail and analyse the work they do. As tasks and activities are different at the different levels of the hierarchy (cf. Chapter 4), I consider ranks separately: administrators, executive officers and their respective activities are examined in this chapter, officers at higher level (Grade7s) and the so-called 'specialists', again with the assignments specific to these positions, in the following ones.

It is probably useful to restate here (but cf. Chapters 2 and 3), that the target of my ethnography is *work*, and *not the people* carrying it out. For this reason I did not feel it was necessary neither to collect and report demographic data, nor to use interviews to “get up close and personal” with research participants (cf. Rhodes, 2011; Gains, 2011; cf. Chapter 1). Instead, I use research participants' voices to get, *from the inside and*

from their point of view, definitions and descriptions of the work activities carried out in the settings. On these *activities*, rather than identities, personalities, or personal “beliefs” (cf. Chapter 1 and 2) I place further attention in proceeding with the inquiry. The world of officers thus is, for what I am concerned, no more than the inter-subjective phenomenal field where the ascription of meaning to action, and of identities to actors is accomplished *together* (cf. Schutz, 1972; Chapter 3). Consequently, the description of who the personnel is and what they do is constructed around a quite elemental strategy of analysis: one that brings the description of activities to their fundamental level of everyday phenomena carried out by human beings embedded in an organisation of labour (cf. Simon, 1957; Weick, 1969). When adopting this conception, reminiscent of some classical attempts by organisational analysts (cf. Barley and Kunda, 2001), I wish to follow up on the intention to anchor my observations to what was directly observable, and move on to consider, in the same fashion, concrete example of work activities. The examples I report have been selected both because of their illustrative power, and because of their close relation to the work of policy development on sustainable consumption. This was the workflow (or 'strand of work'; cf. Chapter 3) I was able to observe more closely given my positioning in the organisation, in turn strategically obtained to align to the secondary research interest of this inquiry (cf. Introduction).

Furthermore, when proceeding with the analysis and in line with the strategy detailed in previous chapters, I will break with the conventional method of testing data against the fittest explanatory devices proposed by theorists: I will not be searching for elements, for instance, of a constitutional view of the British government (Birch, 1964; Oliver, 2003), nor of a New Public Management narrative (Ferlie *et al.*, 2005; Rhodes, 2011), not either for a network governance story (e.g. Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). While all of these could have been somehow possible, the route this ethnographic account takes is rather different: the matter under investigation is how actors carry out, *competently*, the work activities typical of their job. The analysis is thus driven by the questions: what do these activities consist of? What does the officers' competence to carry them out consist of? Examples are used, pragmatically, to find answers. I keep the conversation with the literature to a minimum, and I avoid engaging the readers in point-by-point discussions with the referenced texts, which would eat up space for more empirical insights. References are rather used to flag that the academic texts in question, as well as journalistic sources, may have more to say on the point. Instead, I try to keep the analysis guided by my own understanding of the specific settings and to build up a line

of inquiry that emerges from data themselves.

The principle for developing the report builds on the fact that elements of the participants' life-worlds are most likely to be taken for granted: workers do not question all the time why they engage in work relationships, or why they use some particular language to say what they say, or to do what they do. This is the Schutzian “natural attitude”: participants and their cognitive activities are fully taken in the business of living their working life – they take for granted the majority of the “system of relevancies and typifications that allows them to get things done” (cf. Schutz, 1970:120). The analysis targets exactly this system and develops with the intention of unpacking it. Features and elements of such system, as I have argued in Chapter 2, can be retrieved by interrogating analytically the ways local language is used to progress work. Attention is therefore placed on commonly accepted arguments, definitions and categorisations, analogies and metaphors. The words officers use to name activities, people and tasks become particularly important and deserving description and reflection, and with them the customary ways of describing synthetically what is being done, the meaning assigned to specific terms in the organisational jargon, the tropes that officers recognise as valid. In order to preserve these specific, characteristic (and often revealing) ways of using particular words in the settings, I elaborated a system of quotation marks to render these in the ethnographic text. Slightly different from academic writing conventions, I use the single quotation marks (' ') to flag words that are used “naturally” by participants in the workplace, and that I believe are especially significant for the practices of work of officers and managers, and significant to understand how their work is organised. Double quotation marks (“ ”), instead, do follow the canon: they are used for longer quotes from participants' talk, and to cite academic literature or other sources. Longer extracts from email exchanges and fieldnotes are indented and in smaller font, while extracts from interview are reported in italics. As announced, the analysis starts with participants' words. Then, it introduces further devices to display, describe and reflect upon participants' work problems and assignments *in their own terms*. Words in single quotation marks are those I believe are most important to proceed with the task, and therefore are used as organising principle for the display of data and findings.

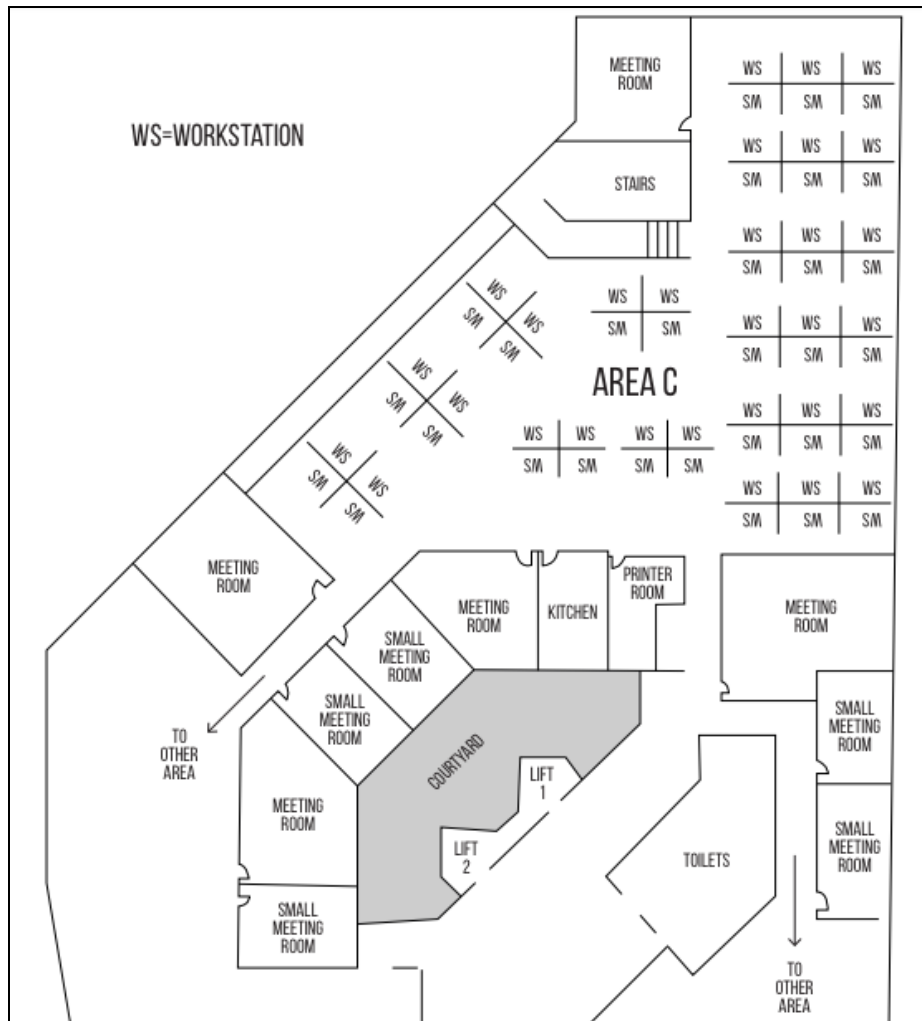
As the old saying goes, one cannot understand a person until a mile has been walked in her shoes. In this journey we are now about to embark.

In 2012, 'Core DEFRA', the central Department in charge of administering the network of agencies composing the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (cf. Chapter 4), employed approximately two thousand officers, most of whom based at its London headquarters. Physical access to the Department's buildings is highly restricted: armoured access control doors are placed at each of three entrances, and reception duties are shared with security guards. In comparison to other Departments of the UK Government, DEFRA's entrances have a relatively unsophisticated system of security devices composed of circular bulletproof glass interlocking doors with pass scan. The Home Office building's entrances, for instance, are also equipped with X-ray metal detectors of the kind usually seen in airports. Their use, however, is limited to periods of enhanced security levels, as it would take too long to scan all the employees at each access. Like in all the other Departments, a system of photographic passes is in place at DEFRA to allow employees' access to the premises. There are different kinds of passes: permanent staff and those on a long-term fixed appointment are issued with a multi-coloured pass, casual staff or contractors and consultants with a pale green one. Electronic readers register time of entrance and exit of each employee, while the reception of visitors is delegated to security guards in phone contact with desks. Those who occasionally need to enter the buildings for a meeting or other duties are identified by receptionists, their access cleared by phone, and provided with a temporary paper-based pass marked 'visitor', of different shape and colour of the employees' ones. Visitors must be escorted through the buildings, and give the temporary pass back when they leave. Large signs at the entrances and on noticeboards around the buildings warn it is compulsory to keep passes well visible and invite to report to security anybody spotted without one. Employees are also instructed not to wear the passes visibly outside the premises.

DEFRA's offices develop through three inter-connected buildings, called Nobel House, Ergon House and Millbank. The first time in, orienteering around the buildings can prove very challenging. The inside is literally a maze of corridors, open spaces with hundreds of workstations and meeting rooms of various sizes. Although each building has a separate entrance, there are internal links between buildings, and they are (oddly) situated at different floors. The few signs for directions hanging outside the lifts doors are of very little help, as it is the uniformity of office furniture and the regularity of the

disposition of the areas. Visitors and firstcomers are asked at the reception to wait for an officer who will escort them to the meeting room they are expected to, both for security reasons and to avoid them to get lost. In Ergon House – the building where I was given a desk during my placements – there are glass elevators to reach the higher floors, and most meeting rooms and desk areas have at least one transparent glass wall. Although I spent most of the working day at a workstation at the fifth floor, the short panoramic trips in the lifts soon became a highlight of my working days. From there I had, although only symbolically speaking, a privileged point of view to see what went on in the Department.

The inside of the buildings are structured around the archetypal civil servant's working time in the office. This is divided into two main modes: at desk and in the meeting room. The floors are populated by long lines of workstations in large open-space areas, bordered by meeting rooms of different sizes. Some of these areas provide work space to up to one hundred employees, sitting at around six to eight feet distance in lines of three to eight. Each workstation is equipped with an office chair, a desk with a chest of lockable drawers, a monitor, keyboard and mouse, a phone. Lines of workstations are generally positioned one against the other, so employees work back-to-back. Non-transparent plastic panels at head level usually divide the workstations, to create open cubicles.



Picture 5.2: A sketch of the 'area C' of the office, where the sustainable consumption officers worked

Each floor has a number of meeting rooms of different sizes available. These are on one side of each area, or in lines on the side of the building at some distance from the open spaces. The furniture of the meeting rooms is limited to the essentials: generally there is one table with chairs, one speakerphone for conference calling (called by most 'spider phone' given the shape of the model in use), a flipchart easel or a wall whiteboard, a projector screen.



Picture 3.3: A meeting room in the office

Together with the pass to access the building, at the start of their appointment and for the entire length of their service at the Department employees are provided with a portable personal computer. This is the single most important piece of equipment each employee uses in the delivering of work: it grants access to the basic tools of personal information management – calendar, email account, web-browsing tools – and to organisational platforms for sharing data, files and lists of contacts. At the time of fieldwork, all laptops were TouchPad IBM-Lenovo machines equipped with Microsoft Office desktop applications and Microsoft Outlook communication software. It is through these machines that each employee has access to the core functionalities of the UK government electronic communication network: the Government Secure Intranet (GSI), the online platform employees are required to be connected with when 'at work', and use exclusively for all work-related communication. The standard package for new employees also included a Blackberry mobile phone, a device with most of the functionalities of the laptops, including access to email inbox and text composition tools.

Accounts in the system are personal and protected by a system of at least two passwords. The paperwork associated to the delivery and the authorisation of use of a machine to a new employer offer insight into some of the features of the work of civil servants serving the highest echelons of the government. Security policies are the first organisational documents new employees get to see, but it is also all the rest of staff that is routinely reminded of what they entail: notes on the lists of the stringent measures in

place to avoid data losses are a recurrent sight both on notice boards around the buildings, and on screen. With a frequency of few months, all staff finds at the switching on of the laptop a compulsory logging in procedure that requires the reading of several pages of statements, each of which necessitates a click of the mouse to demonstrate reading and acknowledgement. Access to the electronic system is denied unless all the statements are appropriately ticked. These includes instructions on what sort of information must be shared exclusively with other GSI accounts, the prohibition to access the government's network using machines other than the corporate laptop, or to download materials on any non-official device, including private USB keys or other personal media storage equipment. In going through security related paperwork, employees must routinely agree with statements such as:

I must make effort to ensure that my screen cannot easily seen by any unauthorised persons when I am working, to prevent inadvertent disclosure of protectively marked information, especially in open plan environment.

and

My use of the system may be monitored and/or recorded for lawful purposes. (internal log-in online procedures, 2011)

Officers take the secrecy of their activities seriously. This became apparent to me during a coffee break, when one officer recalled with colleagues her efforts to organise the room where she worked from home “in a way I can be sure my husband can't see the screen” and the remark was commented upon without any hint of irony (fieldnotes). A system of notifications is in place to inform and remind them of confidentiality. Before accessing the software applications for the first time each employee agrees and signs forms containing more statements and instructions, in compliance both with the law (the Official Secrets Act 1989) and the confidentiality requirements of the Civil Service Management Code (Cabinet Office, 2006). These provisions go well beyond the standard clauses of secrecy adopted in most of the private sector, protecting for example commercial data or procedures. They embrace, crucially, the very same opportunity to explain, or document, the nature of one's activities as civil servant publicly. One of the paragraphs of the Code (4.2.4) states this in an eloquent phrasing:

Civil servants must not take part in any activities or make any public statement which might involve the disclosure of official information or *draw upon experience* gained in their official capacity without the prior approval of their department or agency (my italics).

The Code goes on in clarifying that restrictions apply to any form of “personal memoirs reflecting their experience in Government” (4.2.5), both whilst in employment and after leaving the service.

Further restrictions involve having contacts with journalists, and voice personal or political views while officers are speaking “in the exercise of their duties”. Although, when asked, research participants concede that a literal application of the rules would be “practically impossible” (fieldnotes), they are very well aware that breaches leading to ‘troubles for the Department’ – the most common being leaking documents to the press – will be heavily sanctioned, and of course will cost in terms of reputation and career. Conversations on the topic made me also realise that beyond the formal system of sanctions, the confidentiality rules seem to stick to the identity of officers in a peculiar way. A young civil servant explained the effects of the confidentiality rules of departments’ employees wittily when during a public conference in summer 2012 was asked whether he “personally” thought the work he had just presented – as representative of a Government agency – had potential for being effective in the long term. He dodged the question joking: “I am a civil servant, my ability to have an opinion has been significantly removed” (fieldnotes).

Documents and 'corporate business'

The office is silent on a Friday afternoon. Many of the officers usually sitting with me in the Area C, fifth floor, are 'working from home'. It is customary for many of them to do so, so to avoid travelling to central London on at least one occasion a week. Mondays and Fridays seem to be the preferred choices. Across the open-space, the silence is broken irregularly by typing noise, coming from workstations I can not see. The meeting rooms are mostly empty. For those who do come to the office on Fridays, 'writing' in solitude at the workstation seems to be the most common activity. During all the other working days the meeting schedule is “so tight”, officers admit chatting about their working habits, “it is good to have a day to write those pending emails” or “finally complete the paper for the Board, before I have to do it in the weekend, or in the middle of the night before”(fieldnotes). It was during this sort of downtime for the office that

more fieldwork time could be spent in exploring the organisational materials accessible in the GSI Intranet and from using digital archives search tools.

The analysis of the architecture of the electronic network system used in the Department offers good hints of where to look to start understanding the nature of the work of its employees. Most of the activities, as typical of office work (cf. Garfinkel, 1967; Zimmerman, 1969; Suchman, 1983), are accompanied by the assembling, the maintenance and the archival of records. The core of the system is the *SharePoint* platform, an Intranet-based technology for documents management. The platform provides virtual spaces for storage and collaborative text editing functionalities, such as lists of versions of documents ordered by editing time, lists of users connected to the sites, and sets of tools to work cooperatively, remotely and synchronously on text editing. One of such tools is a multicast online chat technology, of the kind widely available on popular social media such as Facebook: this gives the opportunity to communicate in real time via text messages. *SharePoints* thus allow personal workstations to be connected and officers to share materials and documents with other team members. Virtual archives are organised to store all documents produced, so the technology affords the progressing of computer-based work from cradle to grave. Document creation in this fashion sees several contributors connected from different workstations to work on the same digital documents in *hypertext* mode (cf. Harper, 1998).

There are two kinds of virtual spaces available to officers: they are known as *shared drives* and *Team Sites*. The former are mostly dedicated to the storage of completed documents, while the latter generally host documents subject to on-going construction and editing. New employees are instructed to store their work in the appropriate systems, and – as stated in an internal letter included in the accompanying documentation (part of an ‘induction pack’) – “it is unacceptable to create private shared drives or store information (other than what is being worked on) onto laptops”. All the work produced must end up in the official filing system. Email correspondence is also stored – again in internal papers’ words – “all evidential emails which relates to key decisions and transactions” must be archived.

Shared drives and Team Sites can be seen as the equivalent of paper archives before the introduction of digital devices and Computer-Mediated-Communication (hereafter CMC; cf. Harper, 1998), and therefore skimming through the contents of them gives an

excellent idea of the nature of *paperwork* – if the term can stand anymore – handled in the 'organisation'. The purpose of the table in the next page, adapted from an internal staff memo giving instruction on ‘what to keep’ and ‘what not to keep’ in the system, is to provide a fairly comprehensive overview of the document *formats* deemed 'important' for the accomplishment of the 'business'. The headings of seven columns – Projects, Research and Reviews; Policy and Legislation Development; Ministerial Business; Liason with legal teams; Answers to Information Rights; Financing, Accounting and Contracts; Corporate Services and Administration – refer to macro-areas of activities, as locally categorised, all part of the ‘corporate business’ – as the Department’s management likes to call what it is that is done in DEFRA. The purpose of showing this (adaptation of) a full list is to address the extraordinary variety of the formats, and to glimpse at the complexity of the records handled by DEFRA staff.

Projects, Research and Reviews	Policy and Legislation Development	Ministerial Business	Liaison with Legal teams	Information Rights	Financing, Accounting and Contracts	Corporate Services and Administration
Initiation documents	Early and minor drafts	Advice on and briefings for Ministerial visits/visitors	Direct involvement in proposals for new and amended EC legislation	Information requested under the Freedom of Information (Foi) Act or Environmental Information Regulations (EIR)	Original strategy and policy decisions on Defra national accounts	Framework documents
Interim and final evaluation reports	Drafts reflecting changes in approach relating to the policies and the formulation, development and implementation of national and EC legislation	Ministerial diaries	High profile casework	Non-routine case records leading to a precedent	Casework on bids Contract management: signed contracts and tenders	Management Boards reviews
Project proposals	Constitution, briefings, agendas and minutes of boards, committees of enquiry, commissions and councils led by Defra	Parliamentary Questions	Policy to implement EC legislation	Routine Foi or EIR requests/cases	Direct Defra involvement in public expenditure and select committees	Privatisation and mergers
Project research, feasibility studies, plans, specifications	Final versions of principle policy information concerning the structure, objectives and functions of Defra	Ministers' correspondence	Significant contribution to draft legislation		Financial/accounting transactions i.e. invoices, receipts, loan repayments, grant applications	Review of Agency status Annual leave records Internal recruitment, promotion, transfers
Terms of reference, minutes, agendas, briefings and reports for high level project boards and steering groups	Minutes and information of bodies where Defra is consulted in an advisory capacity	'Dealt With Officially' correspondence	Application of legislation		Funding decisions Minor cases of fraud, misappropriation, write-off, recovery or overpayments	Short term personnel matters
High profile research including interim, summary and final reports, expert advice and statistical data		Memorandum of Understanding	Contribution to Defra-led legislation (proposals, amendments and revisions)		Monitoring of spending including travel or subsistence	Audit
Published reports		Petitions	Statutory Instrument material recording controversial or high profile issues			Buildings and estates: leases, maps, surveys, asbestos reports, project information, maintenance
Routine projects or steering groups		Submissions requiring funding decision and funding decision taken	High profile and precedent prosecution cases Instructions to Defra			Complaints
Routine research and statistical data including that reported to the European Commission (EC)		Submission requiring policy decision and policy decision taken	Legal: specific legal advice, opinions, rulings			Health and Safety information
			Routine information concerning legal issues			Machinery and equipment: IT supply, programming, maintenance, stocktaking
						Personnel matters including: accident reports, contingency planning, honour and awards, learning and development, pay and grading, staff appraisal reports
						Press and public relations
						Other vital records i.e. information that is essential for preserving, continuing or recovering business group's critical business activities

Table 5.1: Overview of DEFRA document formats. Adapted from internal documentation

The lists of document types presented – based on local naming – starts delineating what is considered essential information for 'preserving', 'continuing' and 'recovering' the 'business' of the Department. 'Reports', 'minutes', briefings', 'drafts', 'studies', 'plans', 'research' and other documents are digitally stored to create organisational records, of activities carried out by 'boards', 'steering groups', 'committees' to inform 'funding decisions' and 'policy decisions' of ministers. Such decision-making (and funding) grants the allocation of 'public expenditure' to 'contracts' and associated 'projects' (many of which, 'research projects'), which in turn need to be managed, accounted for, and their administration recorded. The management takes also as responsibility 'policy development' leading to 'legislation', and to the production of all documentation associated to the creation of Statutory Instruments, the principal form in which legislation is made in the UK. The process of 'making laws' passes through 'early drafts' at 'legislation development' stage, 'submissions' to Ministers and operations in 'liason with legal teams'. Ultimately, the Department has formal responsibility for the 'application of the legislation'. It also responds to Freedom of Information ('FoI') requests, and of course has in place internal departments of Human Resources to deal with personnel matters, and of IT technicians to deal with equipment, hardware and software.

'Working for government'

Policy officers like to stress that there is no such a thing as a typical day in 'working for government'. When asked, most of them find difficulty in identifying regular patterns of work activities over time, and to define precisely what one is and will be 'up to'. Common qualifiers they use to describe their work are 'varied', 'variegated', 'complex', and also 'unpredictable', but such responses sound more of a gloss over the appreciation of some naïvety in the person who asked the question in the first place (cf. Page and Jenkins, 2005). Having the opportunity to observe officers going about their everyday affairs clarifies quite soon that new arrivals who expect a typical day will find their life as 'government officials' deeply disconcerting, and analysts who attempt to pin down regularities that have descriptive and explicative power will find themselves deluded. A more apt way in to characterise the officers of the Department at work is to refer to older descriptions of the profession, for example to the metaphor of the

“juggler”, who can “keep many balls in the air at once”. The metaphor was used by Herbert Kaufman (1981) some thirty years ago to describe the Washington equivalent of London top civil servants. The metaphor stands the test of time, as well as distance and differences in administrative systems. A passage is worth quoting in full (p.176):

Some people do not function well when they have to shift their minds back and forth among different, widely disparate matters in rapid-fire order [...] The job of the bureau chief imposes a simultaneous rather than a sequential mode of life on the incumbents. Things come at them all at once, not in single file. Their days are splintered. They may go from an issue of national policy to the problem of a single employee, from an intense struggle over substance to a light-hearted ceremony, from giving testimony at a legislative hearing to receiving a presentation by an interest group or staff. The most constant characteristics of their work is its diversity, fragmentation, and velocity. [...] Nobody of a sequential disposition would be happy as a bureau chief.

Those new to departmental work find out soon that tasks and 'ways of working' – as they are called – must be discovered on the go: once one is assigned to a 'unit', a 'team', a 'project' or a 'programme', a consistent part of what it takes to 'do the job' is to understand *what* will be involved in doing it (cf. Sharrock *et al.*, 2013). The first port of call for newcomers is their location within the 'ranks'. Employment relationships are regulated by legal provisions, but what is more important is that individuals' position in the Department provides officers a basis for existential security, and for a definition of “who they are” (cf. Alvesson, 2004). Being appointed to a 'post', with a given 'grade' and 'function', means membership and belonging. With these comes a sense of one's position in the hierarchies, and in the organisational charts.

Administrators

Some of those who pursue a career from entry-level do not cope with the demands a 'policy job' places on them. Either by choice, or for lack of promotions, their career trajectory settles into a strictly administrative role (AO and AA) or at a low-rank executive one (EO), where more repetitive tasks abound. However, the perspective on the daily fabric of policy-making of these administrators, in particular those who manage to stay in their post for some time, is that of someone watching the traffic go past their window. They know what is going on, when the peak times are, and witness what happens when accidents occur. In contrast to the low position in the hierarchy, it is

evident that colleagues treat some of them with the same reverence accorded to directors and deputies, and not only because they often act as secretaries of the seniors. “If something is going on in the office, she knows about it”, I was told when introduced to Sarah, one of several administrators populating the fifth floor of the building. The comment made more sense to me when I realised that together with escorting visitors from reception, setting appointments, dealing with the logistic of meetings, sorting out the mail, and responding promptly and with a smile to colleagues' questions on where to find file and forms in the IT system, Sarah also 'does the finance'. She has the responsibility for handling the minutes of the units' financial transactions – materials considered in the office 'very sensitive'.

Sarah declined to sit down with me for a formal interview. She was a shy woman, but showed clear-cut understanding of the dynamics of the office and responded with the same kindness accorded to others to my occasional questions. On a day the minister announced the introduction of mandatory carbon reporting (cf. Jowit, 2012) – “finally a policy!” I noted on my fieldnotes while reading about it on internal 'Defra Newsflash' dispatch – I met her and asked what she thought. “It won't go far”, she frowned, “it is rushed... the policy didn't go through due process, and there wasn't much agreement... it's just some embellishment for the coming international conference” (fieldnotes). In fact, the announcement of the minister had taken many in the office by surprise, and it was what “all Department was talking about”. Time would prove her right, as the implementation was delayed by several months, and the guidance proved controversial (Paddison, 2013).

In another occasion, she explained to me she had declined the interview for my research because she felt she understood little about the Department, and felt confused about its purpose: “I have been in the civil service for seven years, but that's not a long time because things change so quickly. Units open and close in a matter of months and we move around so quickly, I don't get why at times. Defra looks to me [as if it were] one of those organisms... an amoeba”. Nestled in modesty, Sarah's metaphor gives the gist of those pioneer organisational analysts who had to re-consider 'organisations' as fluid entities, and warned that had someone looked for stability and an unvarying “rationality”, would have found nothing (Weick, 1969). From their standpoint, administrators see the traffic go past, and Sarah had just noticed a boy racer. Their eyes, or rather their civil service gaze, gets trained the longer they stay. Administrators with

some experience get a good grasp of the basic rules of Whitehall, and they know how special these are. They risk little in any case, as they rarely go out and try driving. Those who do drive – 'drive policy forward' to use one of their expressions – are a 'grade' or two up in the hierarchy, and to them we turn our attention.

HEO and SEO

'High Executive Officers' and 'Senior Executive Officers' have operative roles in 'policy work' and sit at the core of 'what the Department does'. In numerical terms, officers in these grades represent the majority of employees and form part of what had been called elsewhere “the cast of thousands” (Page and Jenkins, 2005): an army of middle-rank officers who have, to various degrees, responsibility to carry out the 'work' associated with public policy-making. To understand what expertise they nurture in their positions, we need first to look at how their biographies intercept the larger picture of government action, and how quickly – listening to their accounts – their tasks change over time. To do so we have again to start from the central characteristic of their working life as “jugglers”: flexibility.

“In my previous role in the climate change unit” – Marcus says while we stroll in the garden on the Thames just outside the DEFRA building – “I calculated I circled the world twenty-two times. The government had taken then a soft approach to sustainability, so was called. Basically they thought the best way to tackle climate change was to convince developing countries not to follow our [the UK] unsustainable path, and adopt a lot earlier green technologies, say... er... wind turbines, waste processors... the ones we wanted us to sell them, of course! [laugh]” (fieldnotes). Marcus' slight stammering contrasts starkly with his bluntness, which instead matches a big build. He had been promoted and assigned to the 'area' only few weeks earlier, and sat not far from my workstation. “My role was to speak with *funcionarios* and politicians” – he continues – “especially in South America and East Asia. Now I do very different things, less exciting if you like. But by September I'll be moving again, and who knows what one can end up doing”. “So you know that you are going to move, but don't know what are you going to do?” – I asked. “I know it has to do with finance, but I am not entirely sure” (fieldnotes).

Marcus' success in the office was evident even to the eyes of someone completely alien to the dynamics of the Department. Soon to be promoted to 'Grade7', the times of 're-structuring', re-allocations and 'voluntary redundancies' meant Marcus had to prove himself in his new 'area', as advisor on 'sustainable consumption'. Clearly, he had ambitions to be promoted to senior ranks. This meant that his finance skills had to be cultivated, which in my mind explained his future assignment. In his effort to characterise the variety of tasks he had in the past as SEO, Marcus illuminates the inbuilt *flexibility* of government action, and the variation in the sort of expertise and dedication required as professionals. “The focus was on soft results at the time” – his voice betrays some nostalgia – “then efficiency and value for money came about, and all changed”. The last ten year's trajectory of the government policy on 'championing sustainable development', from global leadership to a progressive abandonment of the position (cf. Chapter 4), had shaped Marcus' career, as well as other changes in policies had shaped those of colleagues. Marcus' example is illustrative of a more general point: the nature of executives' jobs depends on the very nature of the policies that are pursued, and these, in turn, change with governments and ministerial turnover.

“Sometimes we feel like butterflies, going from flower to flower, from policy to policy” is the way Cary, Marcus' 'line manager', puts it, not hiding some criticism on the way the latest *Change programme* was being imposed on 'policy areas' (cf. Chapter 4). The situation of the 'area' I was observing was paradigmatic of what was happening across the Department. The major 're-structuring' had caused more than one long face in what was once the 'Sustainable Production and Consumption' (SCP) Directorate, and was now re-arranged as the 'Food and Green Economy' one, with large programmes and many smaller projects being dropped or stalled. A lot of work was going on “without much direction”, as Mike, the deputy director, candidly admitted in several occasions. A number of officers left the area, with the ritual 'leaving dos', in the same weeks Marcus arrived. A team of twelve, called the Centre of Expertise on Influencing Behaviour (CEIB), had been wiped out, to leave the remit 'sustainable consumption' in the hands of a team of three: one Grade7 and two SEO, with one position of the two temporally covered by a 'seconded researcher' due to leave soon. Cary, a 'specialist' with a clear inclination for the 'policy side', acted 'ad interim' as 'team leader'.

The rate of turnover in government posts of this kind is notoriously high, with officers at middle-rank grades changing position on average every 18 or 24 months (cf. Page

and Jenkins, 2005; Stevens, 2011), suggesting the situation I found myself in was indeed the norm. By the time I left the Department, very few of the officers I had met at the beginning were in the same posts, and none was working on the same 'strands of work' I had observed when I started. For most officers career trajectories in the service are shrouded in mystery, and as in many other organisations, promotions and 're-allocations' can cause office morale to swing. Many officers complained the new posts they were assigned to as a consequence of the 'change programme' did not match their expertise, or their desires for career development, but others, especially more senior executives, seemed to accept the changes with a shrug of resignation.

“This happens every two years: now is the change programme, before it was called Renew, before... I don't even remember... but that is the way it is, the way the Department works” – Alice, just back from her maternity leave, stated without hiding her bitterness (fieldnotes). Alice had found most of the work she had been 'leading on' for years – 'terminated'. Allocation to new positions, with a consequent change of assigned tasks, is something one soon learns as inevitable. For some, it all feels “like a lotto system [...] where it's just luck of the draw which team you end up in” (internal memo). Others develop a sense of which policy areas are more desirable than others – more 'sexy' say some – and become pro-active in pursuing of their next assignments, as Marcus had done in his solitary upward run in the hierarchy. Charlie, a SEO with a great sense of humour, summed it up in quite cynical terms: “you see we spend two years trying to understand what ministers want, the other two years arguing with them about what we should do, and by the time we are ready to do something, they are gone. We move to another team... and it begins all over again”. Charlie left DEFRA for another government organisation, grabbing a chance for an 'interchange' (a secondment), before he could witness the Secretary of State being 'reshuffled' after only two years and three months in power (Quilty-Harper, 2012). The cycle had recommenced earlier than scheduled.

The flexibility required by middle-rank officer mirrors a more fundamental point around the role of executives in 'delivering' government action. Lucy, an experienced director well above the ranks under consideration here, was emphatic of what the latest 'change programme' meant for the executives I sat with. She understands well the frustration of those who have been 'moved around' after the CEIB closure and the reduction of size of the SCP policy area, and when I asked her to comment on the situation, she captured

some of the facts of life of 'working for government' at junior level:

Lucy: It's an area, sustainable consumption and production, is an area that has just been cut back [...] And so it's gonna get shaded off more and more. The focus of what you are trying to do has to change, and you got to accommodate that change and you have to bring people with you. And it's just... you know it's kind of "Vroom!" it's very imposing... in the air [Laughter] hoping that they don't land in the wrong place. And you just... it feels like you don't have that luxury of... being able to do things in a quite planned and measured way. It's a... it's rare that you get that opportunity these days.

LM: Hum... more junior people I've been talking to, feel some frustration, that's the word they used...

Lucy: Yeah, exactly. Because often, I think we... more junior people feel, "OK so, what am I going to be working on?" and hum... you know, so this thing that they are going to be working on from the beginning of the year... they have objectives and then they are half way through, and suddenly... puff... their boss tells them, "you're not going to be doing as much on that now, we've got this problem". And that's how it looks to them. For me, being more senior, I know it's because... I mean I can pass that information through, but for the junior people it's quite frustrating because you think "well, but I had a project... I could see where that project was going, and it looked like it was going in... you know... a good direction, for the bigger picture, the outcome. And then my boss tells me that because the secretary of state has changed his mind or we had to change the secretary of state... suddenly this is out of favour, and you know... we are gonna stop doing it or we are going to do something different. I think it's hard for people [...] It's the nature of change, but I think it is harder for more junior staff, because it doesn't feel like they have a choice... And actually they don't have a choice. You-you know? It's imposed. And you know... not just by me but by more senior people: by the secretary of state, by the programme secretary... you know, by the direction generals saying "actually that area is a low priority now". And it just feels a bit round...

LM: Yes

Lucy: And not been thought through really. And no one's really... you know... really researched whether it was a good decision or not. And actually they are right, in a way. It hasn't been researched, it's just their feeling. The director general doesn't really think it's a very useful area, so get rid of it. When something is as slight as that...

LM: Hu-hum

Lucy: it can have such a big impact. And it's not just, you know... it's really difficult.

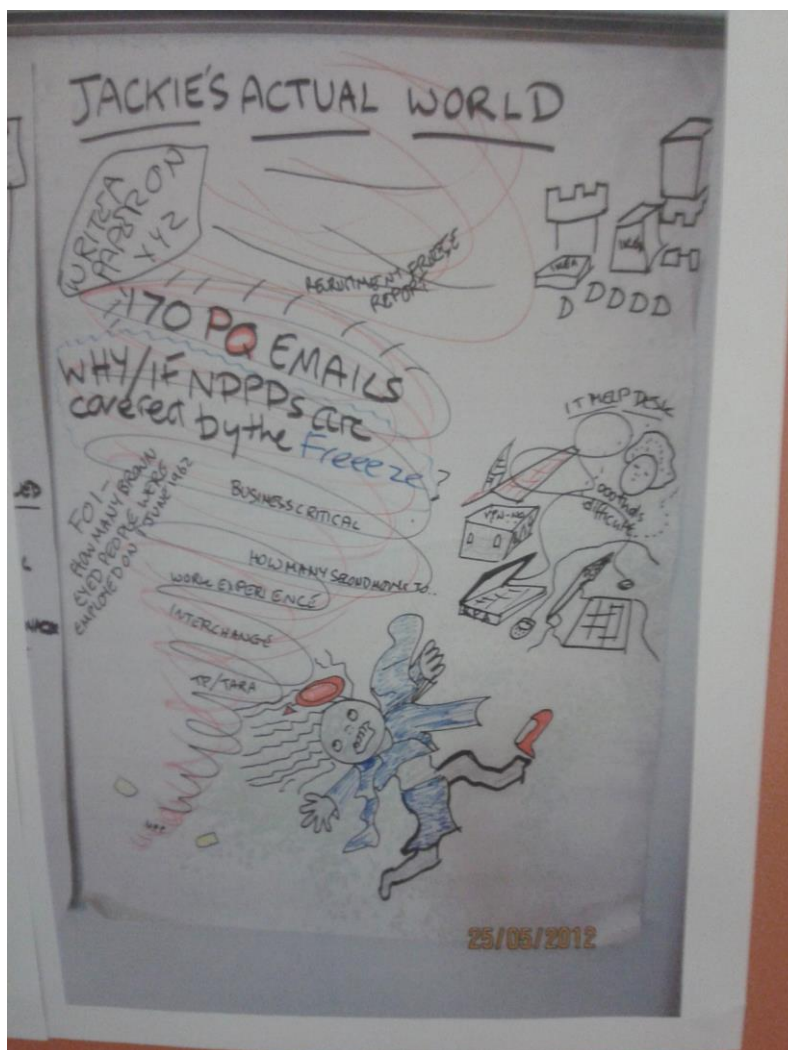
Paraphrasing Lucy's words, executives most of the time perceive change as sudden: they do not attend in person to the 'high level' politics, and therefore cannot see the reasons for 'doing things differently'. But they must. Flexibility is first and foremost what is required in the job. Middle-rank officers' perception of the 'bigger picture' of policy-making is therefore limited and such limitations seep through some of the answers I was given when, in interview mode, I asked colleagues how they thought their work was organised:

I have minimal knowledge of the reasoning/rationale behind why I'm doing the work I'm doing (email exchange, 08.05.12)

I am too embarrassed to show you how little I do and in what a haphazard way (email exchange, 21.07.11, cf. Ch.3)

At the end of the day, I do what Ministers want me to do (fieldnotes)

From the individual officers' point of view – in particular for those who have not been in the civil service for long enough – flexibility translates, to a certain extent, in confusion. For several weeks, reflecting on my fieldnotes, I had doubts pinning this down as a recognisable feature across part of the workforce. I thought it could be the coincidence of my fieldwork with an unfortunate period in the 'cycle', or that my informants had mistaken me for someone eager to listen to their complaints. Then one day, wandering well beyond working hours around the floor where the human resources staff were based, I found hanging on a board covered with work-related papers and graphs a picture that confirmed to me feeling confused is not uncommon in the working lives of policy officials.



Picture 5.4: An officer's drawing of how she sees herself at work

Titled “Jackie's Actual World”, the drawing came from a focus group of officers asked by Human Resources managers to discuss how they saw themselves in the job. It shows a female officer caught in the hectic work in the middle-ranks of the civil service: 'writing a paper on XYZ', responding to '170 emails', one of which was a complex Freedom of Information request ('How many brown eyed people were employed on June 1962?'), finding obstacles in the form of unanswered questions and an IT officer ill-inclined to solve her problems ('Noooo, it's too difficult!'), reports to read and acronyms to untangle. A vortex that makes Jackie's hair stand on end, while there, in the background (top right of the picture, below), the real world waits for her work 'to have an impact'. Juggling, after all, is not that easy.

Executives report their world at work to be based on thin foundations. Their objectives are shifting, the 'ways of working' change over time, their sense of purpose can evaporate from one day to another. Flexibility has its dark side. Ending in the “wrong place”, as Lucy mentions in our exchange, could mean being assigned to tasks that are perceived as useless, or be left, as an administrator recalled talking of his past experience, “without even knowing what we have to do” (fieldnotes). Executives must live with the fact. Some voice their complaints, other may even enjoy such circumstances, and engage in time-fiddling activities (cf. Mars, 1982) to look busy. Computers with Internet-browsing tools, as those of the Department, lend themselves easily to practices of this kind in ways that Mars (1982) could not probably predict. Watching videos of motor races, browsing travel agencies websites, and online shopping – all of which I witnessed on isolated occasions – did not seem to me work-related activities.

Some personal histories become topic of gossip, with one officer reportedly transformed from “enthusiastic and upbeat, to a miserable soul” (fieldnotes). A more general understanding was well expressed by Lydia, a SEO, when talking to colleagues: “whether or not your work is in favour makes the difference on you”. And “work”, as one officer I did not know said at his leaving do, “changes you as a person” (fieldnotes). Officers find their individual ways to cope, and develop strategies to do so that become, to an extent, traits of their personalities. When asked to reflect on what they do, they characterise themselves, as a director put it, as “a very peculiar species”. With time, they learn that those thin foundations are the very stuff of their work, and that uncertainty around the usefulness of what they do should not discourage them from doing it, and

even “feel passionate” about things that “may end in nothing” (fieldnotes; cf. Dale, 1941). Their resilience in this sense is a measure of their reliability. While they may well remark on their sense of frustration, they soon learn that that is only one of the difficulties that the job entails, and that they had to get over it quickly. They become aware that they deal with massive problems – climate change, biodiversity, depletion of resource, only to name a few – but that they also need to see things in perspective: “most of the time only microscopic changes can be achieved, and these are important” (fieldnotes). They also learn that the very nature of their work is *tentative*: what is attempted in the civil service can be, at times, even more important of what is done. As a consequence, officers must live with the fact that “most of the work [they] do never sees the light” as Lucy, in the same interview, admits (cf. Feldman, 1989).

Despite the frailties of these premises, officers retain a sense that what they do contributes, in one way or another, to produce “a proper impact on the world”. They are aware that, by serving their ministers and providing them with advice – their stated mission (HM Treasury, 2007) – they are “working on behalf of the population” (interview data) to 'make things happen'. Officers see themselves as “influencers of key decisions” (interview data): they are aware that by contributing to draft 'submissions' and 'papers' (and all the other documents we have seen earlier are used to 'progress work'), by devising 'projects', implementing 'programmes' – no matter how small their contribution can be – they are making a contribution to 'how the country is run'. Generally, they take *pride* in this. Those with more verve talk about 'having an impact' – a refrain in the local language – and have that as their working objective. Whatever it is they end up working on, they want their observations known and respected. They 'fight their corners' to have their views recognised as authoritative, their voices heard 'in the Department' and, potentially, across Whitehall and in the Cabinet Office, should their 'strand of work' end up being discussed there. They want to see their 'strands of work' progressing, and they know that, in the words of a SEO addressing his colleagues, “doing policy is bloody difficult” (fieldnotes). They also know that only a minuscule percentage of the 'strands of work' that are initiated achieve 'recognition'. Only few 'pieces of work' end up 'informing policy', and not being 'sidelined', 'delayed', or forgotten. Humbly, and with what I perceived as an extraordinary deal of perseverance, they are equally ready to 'take a stand' on what they believe is 'the right thing to do', or to surrender to the ever-changing nature of government action: the reasons changes happen is entirely outside their control.

Understanding the work of executives: project work-in-the-making

This section examines in detail what 'project work' entails for executive officers, and how this contributes to the operations of the Department. The nature of work associated with 'projects' is often reduced to the 'management' of contracts between the Department and its suppliers, otherwise identified as 'contractors'. I argue here that this assumed dyadic relationship is part of more complex dynamics, whose investigation is useful in order to grasp more fully the kind of understandings and reasoning officers are called to deploy in accomplishing their everyday activities. My starting point is that the supervision of the operations necessary to ensure the running of contracted work is one of the testing grounds for middle-rank officers' ability to *get things done*. Assignments related to 'projects' start in the early phases of executives' careers, and amounted to a consistent part of the activities I witnessed being carried out by HEOs and SEOs. Officers were expected to be able to dedicate (and prioritise) their time overseeing several projects at once. In other words, executives are first of all 'project managers'. This label, however, glosses over a number of activities officers carry out day by day. On these I shall place analytical attention, in order to shed light on specific 'ways of working' officers are progressively required to master, and use consistently to 'make things happen' in an orderly and accountable fashion.

Funding projects

Departments have considerable freedom around how they re-direct the resources at their disposal (HM Treasury, 2007). A 'project' is the practical means through which the stated objectives of the Department are transformed into attempts to intervene into the portion of 'real world' understood as falling under its 'remit'. Projects are thus defined in the local language as the essential 'actions' to 'deliver against commitments' or – to use more informal officers' words found in internal emails – project are run when “we start do things for real with stakeholders”. The commissioning of projects is obviously tied to available funding. The choice of which 'commitments' are pursued with more vigour depends, as we have seen, on what becomes in and out of 'favour' among the many commitments listed in the 'delivery plan' ('business plan', after the Change Programme; cf. Chapter 4). More 'vigour' translates, quite simply, in more money, more officers and consequently, more opportunities to commission, fund and

manage projects. In practical terms, directors and 'high level' staff in contact with ministers proceed to what are called 'prioritisation exercises', where expenditures allocated by the Treasury are portioned out to fund initiatives in the remit of the Department. Every financial year, directors are thus allocated part of the overall resources – 'pots' as they are sometime called – to fund their deputy director's 'projects portfolios'. Individual projects are then managed by executive officers, supervised by their 'team leaders'.

The process of budget allocation works through a system of bidding for proposed expenditures. The key players are finance officers, directors and their deputies, and 'team leaders' (or 'policy leads'). These latter engage in early 'planning' well ahead of the start of the financial year (generally over the summer) to prepare 'policy areas' or 'directorates' spending plans. Plans are then assessed by members of the management board, directors (with their deputies), and, if approved, returned to policy leads to be finalised over the autumn to be ready by the end of the calendar year. Budgets are then allocated against the plans in April, for the cycle to start again. Projects have variable time spans – some of them well over one year – which means that a consistent portion of each director's budget is allocated on a non-discretionary basis on projects already ongoing under contractual terms. The difference between the allocated budget and non-discretionary spending determines funding available to initiate new projects. Policy officers 'bid' against this sum of money to secure 'initiation'. This means each policy lead must ensure they have the necessary budget and permission to spend it (granted by the director) *before* reaching agreement for any contractor to start a project, or to extend funding to existing ones. Once the estimated cost and expected timing of spending have been agreed, policy leads are responsible to ensure the 'work' – most of the times a project commissioned through 'procurement' – takes place on time and on budget. These responsibilities are in turn cascaded down to executive officers assigned to 'lead' or 'contribute' on this and that project. Opportunities to bid for more funding can arise outside the financial year schedule, usually to coincide with the calculation of quarterly data. This can reveal an 'under-spend' which, at discretion, can be made available for further bids.

Heclo and Wildavsky (1974) saw in the Treasury allocation of budgets against proposed expenditures by Departments the foundational principle through which decisions around policy are made by governments. Through bargaining around expenditure margins, they

argued, civil servants and ministers have their “say in the kind of prisons, roads, universities, housing, hospitals, pensions [and] every conceivable public good” (p.359). The principle for funding decisions is exactly the same forty years later, and we can see it (see tables below) at play at a microscopic level on the selection of environmental policies on 'sustainable consumption and production'. Once budgets are allocated to Departments by the Treasury the bargaining continues, with directors negotiating the size of their 'pots' to fund more projects that 'deliver' against 'commitments' in their specific 'policy areas'. In each 'area', then, 'projects' (and the officers to whom they are assigned for 'management') compete for the allocated funding. A senior officer explained to the executives in his team that they should look at project proposals as “horses running in circle at the stable. You are training them and looking at which one is your ace” (fieldnotes). The metaphor describes the process of 'prioritisation' of projects against expenditures, which amounts to a “natural selection” (Heclo and Wildavsky, 1974:359) of the initiatives that are granted funding. 'Commitments' set by ministers are usually translated into 'programmes', which are managed by directors. Programmes arch over projects, and this means executive officers in charge of projects are also in charge of checking that the *sense* of projects' ongoing activities *aligns* with programmes' objectives. An 'assignment' executives carried out regularly was to produce short written reports that proved to seniors that the projects they were supervising 'hooked up' with stated 'commitments'. Statements in such reports read:

The focus of this project is [X]. Defra's commitment to this is included in the [name of programme], which is due to be published at [date]

Commitment for this project stems from [name of programme]'s commitment number X

Project links to [name of Programme]. Also fits with [name of programme] hooks X and Y

The executives' judgement about how strongly projects align with programmes provide seniors with the basis for assessing the 'priority' of the projects. They assign to projects a 'priority score', from 'low' to 'high'. When ministerial commitments change, for example as a result of a reshuffle or following announcements of new government's intentions, officers proceed to re-assess projects' alignment against new programmes' objectives. New scores can then emerge, with the consequent selection of which projects get funding and which do not under the new conditions. The tables below are examples of project financing documentation available to officers in the SCP 'policy

area' to consult and 'populate' with new data on projects at their inception.

SCP 12-13 Budget Overview		
Budget for 12/13	£	1,840,000
NMO Funding	£	500,000
SCPE Allocation	£	1,340,000
Total Currently Allocated	£	416,003
Additional Planned Allocation	£	965,000
Overall Planned Spend for 12/13	£	1,381,003
Outstanding Budget	-£	41,003

Table 5.2: 'Sustainable consumption and production' policy area annual budget calculations (extract of internal 'tracking' Excel spreadsheet, unpublished)

Proposed Projects 12/13																				
Status	Priority	Code	Title	Estimated Cost	Procurement Progress							Contractor	Project Officer	Start Date	End Date	Total Cost	Payment Profile	12/13 Spend	13/14 Spend	14/15 Spend
					Chosen Route	Spec Drafted	Advertised	Awarded	Omnicon Updated	Contract Issued	PO Raised									
Planned	High	SCP7	Identification of Which Products are Furthest From their Optimum Lifetime to Minimise Environmental Impacts	£ 50,000																
Planned	High	SCP8	Focussing on the Above Projects, Identification of Opportunities to Promote Sustainable Design of Products to Last Longer Through Existing Product Standards	£ 60,000																
Planned	Medium	SCP13	Assessing Technical Approaches of Carbon Footprint Measurement	£ 50,000																
Planned	Conditional High	SCP17	If they go Ahead, Potential Budget for the Natural Value Ambassadors	£ 200,000																
Potential	-	SCP21	Measuring Flows of Critical Resources																	

Table 5.3: breakdown of budget into proposed project financing. In the first and second columns from the left projects are marked in a 'status' and 'priority' scale. Surplus budget can cover for 'potential' projects, which otherwise would remain unfunded, and consequently not 'initiated' (selection of rows from internal 'tracking' Excel spreadsheet, unpublished)

The expenditures on projects and their 'progress' are 'tracked' in Excel spreadsheets, of the kind shown in Table 4. These are produced electronically by a software application, called 'Omnicom', whose basics functionalities (cf. Garrett, 2007) officers learn to command. How to 'create an Omnicom', 'update the Omnicom', 'log in the payment to Omnicom', were frequent questions asked to administrators, who helped and explained to first-timers how to use the application and its functionalities. In use in DEFRA since 2009, Omnicom updates an older version of the software system that automates the storage of all information on 'contractors' and ongoing transactions, creating an electronic database with several consulting and monitoring tools. Once data on 'projects' are logged in and processes 'initiated', the application provides tools for tracking the timelines, log-in the transactions, and control schedules and 'milestones'. Custom searches can be performed on the database to check contractors' history (e.g. how much funding was provided to contractor x in a timespan?)³⁷, create graphs and text reports, produce automatically documentation tailored to queries. The application is integrated with other officers' desktop applications, so a system of e-mail notifications and reminders is in place to synchronise officers' activities to the ongoing 'projects' processes. The 'Omnicom' database is used to track projects' activities, and monitor the 'delivery' of 'actions' against plans.

Since 2012, and under new rules of transparency (HMG, 2012), Business Plans are published every year, complemented by quarterly data summaries. This is done, according to the annex explanation to the data³⁸, “to show the taxpayers how the Government is spending their money”. It is worth noting that these detailed data are aggregated in such a way that prevents a detailed re-construction of expenditures against projects' budgets, except (to a certain extent) for the 'top five major projects'. This means that the rationale, requirements and specifications of most of the 'projects' commissioned by the Department remain accounted for to the public only in terms of overall 'actions' being pursued (cf. DEFRA, 2012, and following year and mid year reports): the responsibility for 'delivery' and 'performance' of middle-size and small projects rests in the hands of executive officers and their (public) managers. Whether the newly introduced publication rules do in fact augment 'transparency' of the projects or not is source of much contention. From the point of view of the officers, as we shall

³⁷ For an example of practical use of Omnicom information by Defra ministers in written question and answer in the House of Common see Mr Paice gave details regarding the funding provided under HortoLINK programme from 1997 to 2009 (HC Deb 28 Feb 2012 column 196W).

³⁸ See e.g. Defra (2012) *Quarterly Data Summary (Quarter 1) 2012/2013*

see, it amounts simply to more 'externally oriented' paperwork to process. Data on the handling of smaller projects, and for instance the 'products' they deliver, can also be pursued by the public through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Officers have the responsibility to coordinate and draft answers to these.

Running projects

In the settings, 'projects' are the preferred management device used to mobilise resources and coordinate the work associated with government 'action'. While formal 'commitments' and 'actions' remain vague and ambiguous in their formulation, 'projects' outline with some degree of precision what is it that is attempted ('commitment'), what is it that is going to be done and how ('action') and what is expected to happen as a result ('outcome', or 'output'). In other words, in the idealised language of management, 'projects' are the tools for *planning* a course of action in the future in concert with 'contractors' and for *controlling* its realisation in time. As Suchman (1987) has brilliantly demonstrated, with a metaphor that fits officers' work, plan are however only *maps* for navigation: the practical sailing may well run smoothly to destination, *but* it may also encounter unexpected perils, require deviations and 'U-turns', or lead to re-consider all together whether the trip was worth the candle in the first place. Many of the projects one could hear about in the office, never left the port. The 'management' of changes of direction is delegated to middle-rank officers who, in the local language, are said to 'own' this or that project – meaning they have 'responsibility' to monitor projects' activities, and 'steer' them when necessary. We shall dedicate this section to analyse what 'owning' and 'steering' can entail.

Executives can be seen to think about the *parts* involved in a 'project' in terms of three elements. The first one is the 'contractor': this is the person, the company or the companies 'in partnership' who is to provide a service or perform the 'job'. The second is the 'customers', i.e. those within the Department *and* within government and its agencies who are the sponsors and the beneficiaries of whatever 'product' is provided. The third is the category of 'stakeholders' – a large label encompassing whoever may have *an interest*, financial or otherwise, in the development of the 'action'. The activities associated with the various 'stages' of projects in their temporal unfolding occupy a large chunk of executive officers' time and consist, at a broad level of abstraction, in

'managing' the relationships between the parts in each project. In practical terms, this amounts to a number of related tasks. As executive officers do not necessarily follow a project from beginning ('inception') to end ('sunset') – on the contrary it is rare that they do – the presentation of such activities in the coming sections avoids following the idealised version of project trajectories as described in internal guidance, but is organised around my understanding of what is deemed important by the members of the settings. Often officers are asked to 'take on' projects when they are well under way: they have to learn what they 'are about', some times from scratch. How quick and effective they are in grasping the fundamentals and getting along well with the 'contacts', is a measure of their *competence* as 'project managers' (and, metaphorically, sailors). The next sections describe how this competence is achieved, demonstrated and socially constructed.

Contractors

The most obvious set of tasks is meeting and communicating with the contractor(s), either face-to-face or by phone or email, to ensure the project 'delivers' along the lines agreed in the commissioning phase, when the 'plan' was devised. This may involve, and in most cases does involve, visiting and meeting the contractors in venues other than the Department. From the point of view of the individual officer, and for the less experienced, these tasks can be problematic as, under this hat, officers interact *on behalf* of the Department with 'external' contacts. In other words, they speak (or write, in case of electronic communication) *in their capacity as government officials*. In the local language, what they can do with contractors is called 'steering'. In the words of a policy leader in the area where my observation was based, 'steering' means “let [contractors] do what we want them to do for us, rather than letting them tell us what they would like us to do” (fieldnotes). Relations with contractors require project managers' attention, and a great dose of tactfulness is necessary when tensions develop.

Lydia, a SEO with enough years of service to be considered well versed, still 'struggled' with “setting the tone” of emails. “Is your research about what we do here, isn't it?” she once asked me, rather rhetorically, while we were both absorbed in silence in our screens on adjacent workstations, the end date of my fieldwork fast approaching. “Yes indeed”, I replied turning my head towards her. “Can you please say how difficult it is

to do this?”), she continued still staring at her screen, typing irregularly and frequently hitting the backspace. “I am trying to write this email for the project and it's taking me ages... you know setting the tone, is really difficult... I should say you must do this but that's rude isn't? So I must say you must do this without saying it” (fieldnotes). Other colleagues of the same rank as Lydia's shared her preoccupations with setting the tone, and used their own personal style. Gustav, a tall, bald officer in his forties, preferred conducting his 'project management' business by phone. When he did, many in the office (and myself) could not help but noticing it. Gustav had a deep, orotund and extraordinarily loud tone of voice: whenever he was at the phone with a contractor (or a potential one) his voice resounded through the whole floor: “it would be helpful if you did this in the way I am telling you”, “the board would appreciate if...”, “we'll like you to address this problem in this way rather than...”, “just saying... you'll have a lot more chance to progress in the bid if you addressed these risks first...”. Gustav seemed to have mastered successfully the art of politeness and phone conversation etiquette, only, at times, to abandon understatement all together once the handset went down to close occasional troubling exchanges. “Idiot!”, “I am telling you! Are you dumb or something?” (fieldnotes) were all part of the menu of imprecations Gustav mastered equally well and did not spare us from hearing once contractors could not anymore.

The individual officers' styles of 'steering' can indeed vary. Less so the messages that need to be delivered. The officers' individual discretion in dealing with prospective and existent contractors is in fact limited by the need to 'share', 'discuss' and 'agree' with other officers the 'direction' of the 'steering'. Sharing, discussing and agreeing is what officers 'do' in series of internal meetings arranged recurrently across a project's 'timeline'. They are called 'steering groups' ('steering panels', or 'steering committees'), and they are aggregations of the 'customers' of projects. To understand 'steering', we have to look at what 'customers' do, and how they coordinate their activities.

Customers

The choice of the word 'customers' (preferred to 'sponsors', 'buyers', 'clients' etc.) is to remind officers of a simple fact: in 'projects' the government buys goods or services from a provider, and the highest possible level of satisfaction must be pursued, as a 'customer' would usually do. The general use of the plural form – 'customers' – mirrors

another fact of life in the dynamics of 'procurement': it is very rare for projects to be commissioned on the basis of a single policy area's interests. Decisions are usually taken on a collegial basis, once all 'customers' of projects aggregate and agree on potential courses of action. Part of the work of the officers in the early phases of commissioning ('scoping'), in fact, consists in assessing who else could 'be interested', both within the Department *and* in other areas of government. Once potential interested parties are identified, they must be 'consulted'. The aims of such internal consultations, a burdensome task at times (more emails, more meetings) are manifold. First, it must be ensured that the same kind of 'project' is not going on elsewhere ('avoid duplication'). Second, having a large number of 'customers' raises the 'profile' of the project, which means augmenting its prestige and publicity within government. Third, and probably most important, other 'customers' can 'chip in' – meaning contributing financially to the project budget from other 'pots'. Increasingly, from what I was told and what I could witness, co-financing projects across departments was becoming more common practice than in the past. This was another requirement of the Civil Service Reform Plan (HMG, 2012), to address the well-known problem of departments working as “silos” – each in its own direction.

'Customers' aggregate in groups to 'steer'. Orchestrating the formation of such groups, with all the associated inquiries and requirements in terms of distributing officers' time (a lot of emailing and tentative meeting scheduling), constitutes in itself a set of tasks officers have to master, and one that occupies a large chunk of 'project management' duties. What would really cause disappointment, for example, is to be told that customers “should have been included in the first place” (fieldnotes), something a project 'lead' would say when there was 'obviously' someone who needed to be informed ('kept in the loop') of a project developing. The leader's ability to 'bring in' the 'right people' is another measure of how good one officer is at 'project management', and one that is considered essential when it comes to get projects practically under way.

Steering groups meetings are occasions where officers who are managing projects decide “if the project can deliver worthwhile outcomes”, which some times amount to take “go/no-go decisions” (internal email). More often, however, 'steering groups' assess departures from the original plans – these could be delays, widening of 'scope', requests for additional funding, inclusion of additional 'partners' and any other deviation from what was previously agreed. Officers' discretion intervene heavily in the latter cases.

The extracts from the email thread below document an instance of project 'steering' decisions, and the associated CMC-talk recording them. A contractor involved in a project on experimental green manufacturing writes to Marcus, who is leading on the project for the Department, informing him that a business not included in the original project had expressed interest in joining “at their expenses” to run a “production pilot” (internal email), but this would require some changes in the project's direction and length as conditions. The contractor proposes that the new business should present a proposal to be integrated into the overall project, and suggests a phone call to 'discuss' this. Marcus, in the first extract, replies giving his “first reaction”. In the second extract, two weeks later (when the proposal had been put together, and more had been said), he writes to members of the steering group to inform them of developments and to schedule a meeting to make a decision on the matter. The emails point to some of the *tools* officers need to use to both make decisions and keep records of them while 'managing projects'. The 'management' entails here mitigating the tensions between contractors and customers, and proposing satisfactory solutions that draw together the interests of the parties. This is a creative process, which may require changes in the plan. Such changes, if 'agreed', *need* to be recorded in accountable ways.

[email communication, 29052012]
Hi [contractor],

[...] My first reaction is yes, the suggestion in your last email of a proposal to integrate a production pilot seems a good idea. We'll need a call asap when we have drafts of this. [...] We are of course keen to avoid delay, but as you suggest equally keen to get the best project so won't compromise this for deadlines set before the opportunity arose.

[email communication, 14062012]
Hi steering group,

the good news is that the project we are steering [name of project and contractor] has made significant progress engaging industry, to the extent that they would like to work up an expansion of the project. One of the manufacturers has asked that the project be extended to include [x and y] and lengthened to test [z] (3-4 years), they are proposing to fund parts of this but [project name] have identified additional [European] funding sources that could add further value. This would sit alongside the work we have already proposed to fund on [a and b]. [...] To help assess these potential changes we asked [project name] to provide a revised risk register and set of questions, which I attach here.

We need to confirm to [project name] if we would like to take forward this potential expansion asap – our feeling here in [policy area] is that it could be very valuable and strengthen the project [...] as it would actually do [experimental manufacturing] for real in addition to [a] so we are pretty comfortable with what they are proposing.

It would be good to meet next week [...] we'd probably need an hour to do this and [other

project].

[Name of officer in steering group] – can you please send over any comments / thoughts on the attached docs

[Name of other officer in group] – I tried to give you a call to see when might work. Please see times below and let me know asap.

Slots that would work for my self and [fourth officer in group] next week:

[Days and times]

Officers learn that 'projects' are used to limit the complexity of organisational undertakings in 'scope' and time, and that their role of 'managers' consists in attending to, understanding and solving when necessary the contingencies of unfolding situations. While officers appeal to *plans* as devices that set expectations (“we are keen to avoid delay”), they also know there are *leeways* they can use to 'steer' in the direction “they'd like to”, and play their cards. The toolbox of 'steering' consists in casting judgement against original expectations, and endorse or oppose proposed changes with the steering group. The tool to accomplish variations and account for them is the *risk register*, a document that is used to track *in writing* the potential *future* dangers seen by 'customers' in implementing changes. The “raw material” of the officers' work here is the spelling out of what *might* occur (cf. Weick, 1969; Orr, 1996). The risk register offers an accounting technique to record, account for, and potentially 'mitigate' the tensions developing in the customer-contractor relationship. To be able to hypothesize 'risks', and word the questions, officers must draw from their knowledge around the 'project' itself, and think about 'scenarios'. When project documentation is heavily technical in character, this can become a difficult task. In the case of the green manufacturing project, Marcus and Cary decide to go for very “vague questions” (fieldnotes), listed in the first column on the left:

1. Risk Assessment (Revised)

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation	Risk owner
1. Failure in recruiting manufacturers, intermediaries, etc.	2	The project might be deemed unworkable and unworthy	Seek additional funding wherever possible to shoulder any concern of stakeholders.	[contractor]
2. Failure in engaging with multipliers stakeholders, e.g. NHS, nurseries	2	Difficulties in recruiting consumers / users	Consider alternative avenues for recruitment	[contractor]
3. Failure in recruiting consumers / users	2	The project would be unworkable	Reduce scale to match number of users recruited	[contractor]

Table 5.4: Extract from 'risk register'

'Contractors' respond to these “sets of questions” and persuade 'customers' of the bona fide of their requested changes. Contractors must provide more information around how the dangers flagged by customers would 'impact' the destiny of the 'project', and what they would do in case they materialised. The 'likelihood' of problems arising is scored on a numerical scale, which allows bargaining and commenting upon. The register also records in writing statements around what contractors *would do* if problems did materialise. In this fashion, potential scenarios are spelled out, and a record for the 'management' is created. 'Mitigation' occurred: the scenario is accounted for.

Risk documentation of this kind accompanies most of the operations of the Department, both at project and programme level. In some instances, the numerical scale to measure the magnitude of concerns is substituted by a system of colours – red, amber or green – known and referred to as 'RAG status'. Risk documentation works practically as a “technology of accountability” (Suchman, 1995:59), and as such it affords several things. First, it creates an objective negotiating space that can be used by workers to bargain and manoeuvre within the realm of prescriptive 'plans', by taking into consideration the actual contingencies of plans' operations. Second, it works as a heuristic device: the officers' imagination and talk become tuned towards thinking about the future. They need to be able to hypothesise 'risks', 'scenarios', and assess how they would potentially impact upon the destiny of whatever 'projection' of action is under consideration. Third, it creates an audit trail: by spelling out the potential problems,

managers can track the development of negotiations as, typically, successive versions of registers are retained. Fourth, risk documentation affords a formal monitoring of the distribution of responsibility: 'risk owners' are identified and in charge of enacting 'contingency plans' should a specific risk materialise. Once risks are externalised to contractors, as in the case of the specific project under analysis, should something go wrong blame can be effectively transferred from customers (that is to say from government and ministers) to them.

Whilst officers know that every project is different and has a history of its own, they have to develop specific sensibilities to assess the situations they are called to 'manage'. Such sensibilities develop over time, project after project, and provide the foundations to ground their judgements. To understand what these sensibilities consist of, we have to look at what we have defined earlier as the third, after 'contractors' and 'consumers', of the three parties involved in any project: the 'stakeholders'.

Stakeholders

The word is a loose label to identify the constellation of interests around initiatives. The basic point is that no 'project' runs in a vacuum. Rather, officers are taught that 'actions' (delivered through 'projects') will *inevitably* cause some sort of reactions. And this is precisely the reason details of 'projects' *must not* end up in the public domain before it is time to do so: reports are at drafting stages, controversies must be assessed, ministers must be informed, all before 'release'. 'Managing stakeholders' becomes the centre of backstage activities, where the timing and the nuances in delivering information around 'projects' become paramount to their 'success'. Building up a sense of who are the 'stakeholders' of any particular initiative is the first step towards being able to anticipate reactions *ahead* of any practical action taken. The contact with stakeholders is selective. Time is scarce, as most of it is taken by managing relations in between customers, and between customers and contractors. The officers' imagination around who the 'stakeholders' are is aided by what in the office were sometime called 'stakeholder mapping exercises', an activity, however, that officers were expected to be able to perform in solitude, and routinely, to become a sort of *mindset*. In such exercises, 'stakeholders' are 'mapped out' against criteria of 'interest' and 'influence': how much interest could they take around the project under discussion? Are

they 'powerful' actors? How likely are they to react to 'actions'?

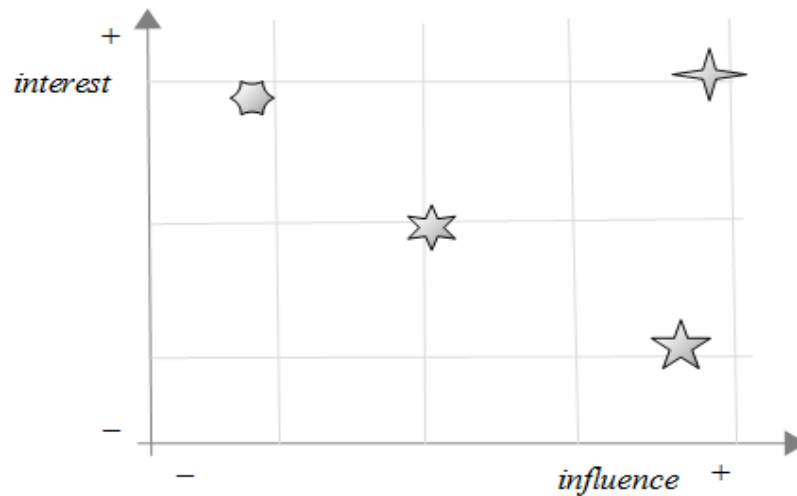


Table 5.5: An illustration of a 'stakeholder mapping exercise'

Most of the time, the exercise presented in the picture is taken for granted, and does not need spelling out. Officers are aware of the existence of pressure groups, and they know 'government action' is closely followed. Several strategies are in place to deal with stakeholders, according to whether they are perceived as being of the 'positive' or 'negative' kind, i.e. whether they are likely or not to voice criticism and oppose proposed courses of actions. Officers involved in 'projects' proceed then to attune their strategies in order to 'manage stakeholders'. Classic strategies, in this idealised form, range from 'early inclusion' and 'release of information', to simply 'ignoring'. Customers in the right side of the table are of course those requiring more careful consideration. Stakeholders with high interest and high influence are likely to be 'brought in' in the early phases of the project development ('scoping'), and they may well be 'included' to the point of becoming 'customers' to be consulted on the project and being included in the steering group. Another common strategy could be that of 'contracting' work directly to them, as high interest and influence will probably mean they have the 'know-how' to contribute to run part of the project, or all of it. Both strategies of including stakeholders as 'customers' or 'contractors' lower the risk of opposition, as in the former case they will feel empowered by the opportunity to 'steer' the project, in the latter they will take some (or all) responsibility for 'delivering' it, therefore changing their position all together to one where they will have to defend 'actions' themselves. 'Inclusion', I was

informed, is the most effective of these strategies, as “sharing, in principle, avoids risks” (fieldnotes).

'Negative' stakeholders with high influence (bottom right of the table) are the most problematic, and therefore require in most cases the creation of carefully crafted 'communication plans'. Likely to oppose the project, its associated 'actions', and the possibility of inclusion into something they see in a negative light, they must be somehow persuaded of the value of projects, and their criticism addressed *before* it materialises. “This is why you must know them and listen” (fieldnotes) very carefully: the territory of their criticism is the same territory on which projects must be ready to *be defended* once details are released. Officers therefore use projected negative reactions to ground their own perception of 'risks', and in turn can forward questions and requests for more information from 'contractors' to check whether this or that potential 'controversy' is covered. In case officers 'feel' controversies are not settled *ab initio*, further 'steering' can be deployed, including 'delaying' the release of the project's details, or, in other cases, taking the side of negative stakeholders and recognising, publicly or just behind the scene, that the project had been tainted by this or that 'bias'. Recognising the 'bias' of project reports becomes part of the *expertise* officers are required to develop.

In general terms, the central objective of 'project managing' is “not to upset the stakeholders” (fieldnotes), or “avoid criticism by major stakeholders” (internal guidance). The 'press' is considered the vehicle of stakeholders' reactions and often a measure of the magnitude of criticism, although troubles can escalate further into legal challenges threatening financial liabilities: 'managing stakeholders' it is not just a reputational matter. Projects can be 'disrupted' and 'fail', with consequent negative impacts on 'business plan targets'. Worse, they can attract 'parliamentary or ministerial scrutiny and criticism' not to mention the attention of the National Audit Office. In the worst case scenario, they can be the subject of a Public Account Committee hearing. Ideally, officers must be able to *foresee troubles*, so to never be told: “how could you not see that coming?”

“How could *they* not see that coming?” says Cary in undertones, as usual when he wanted to say something extremely serious. Marcus echoed him, taking a lighter tone: “who-whoever it was, must find a nice place to hide”. “In the library, downstairs, where

there are no windows”, they end up joking, their sandwiches for lunch eaten in rush to get to a meeting in time. The decision to consider the proposal to destroy a percentage of buzzards' nests to favour the survival of other species of birds (BBC, 2012; Monbiot, 2012) had stirred what Marcus called a hornet's nest. On the way to his bus stop later that afternoon he was furious: “that's exactly what I don't want the Department to do... by now you understand what we are here for... this is a disaster”. The 'press', Marcus explained, had turned a project of relatively low budget into a national 'story' “of social class and all the rest of it”. The reputation of a DEFRA minister was on the line, with a prominent commentator accusing him of “using public money to provide services for his aristocratic friends” (Monbiot, 2012) and asking for his head. The outcry reflected the mood of a range of stakeholders fighting for 'biodiversity'. “We work hard to do things properly”, Marcus continued, “and this is what the public sees. Can you understand now the frustration?” he sighed. “Explain me something Marcus” I said, carefully choosing my words, “if the policy was what the minister wanted to do, what could one have done to prevent this to happen? What would you have done, for example?”. “I had taken a stand”, Marcus rushed to answer. “I'd said that that would have infuriated people, and that... definitely wasn't the right way forward!” “What if they hadn't listened to you?”, I insisted, half puzzled, half provoking: “after all one does what the minister wants him to do, isn't?”. “You can take a stand, that's what we are for, I'd said that we had to look at evidence more carefully, that we had to wait, I'd strongly advice against...” “Ok, but what if they hadn't listened to you?” “I don't know the details, but this was way too obvious... I'd considered *resigning*”. The officers in charge had not taken that line: a call for 'contractors' to assess the option of buzzards' nest destruction was written and published. Criticism came in thick and fast, ruining a minister's reputation in the eyes of part of the public, and that of a few officers in the eyes of their colleagues.

This war story (Orr, 1996) tell us much about the 'risks' of ignoring 'stakeholders', and went down as yet another controversial episode in the history of DEFRA. Marcus' comments, in parallel, are important for us to understand the importance of 'scoping' – the technical term used to describe the activities *preliminary* to the commissioning of projects, when the needs of 'stakeholders', 'customers' and 'contractors', are discussed and negotiated against each other to devise “concrete actions” (internal email) against government's 'commitments'. Most of such 'actions', when “done well” (interview data), do not make it to the national press. They do not become war stories – but just one

more policy story, one of normal administration. We should now turn to ask what this 'normality' is made of, and what it is that 'projects' and the activities carried out around them contribute to, as part of the running mill of 'policy-making'.

Chapter 6: Policy Work

Introduction

This chapter continues the task of describing the activities of the DEFRA's officers I observed by focussing on 'Grade7s': these are middle managers who supervise the work of executives and are tasked with directing activities related to the development of policies. Some general considerations about the duties of officers at this rank, in particular around team management and the allocation of working time, are offered in the opening sections. The development of the chapter is structured around an analytical device I use to distinguish between the kind meetings officers attended, and the nature of knowledge I saw mobilised in the conversations that went on. Meetings, as we shall see in more detail, provide an allocation of officers' time against matters of interest for their work. The analysis builds upon instances of meetings when policy work on sustainable consumption and other policies was carried out, and offers insights into the nature of considerations officers make to achieve 'progress'.

Grade7s

Marcus walks me through the lines of workstations on a floor in the building I have never visited before, on our way to an internal 'workshop' he was invited to. I managed to convince him to allow me to 'shadow', meaning I could accompany him to meetings to which I was not invited in order to be able observe and take notes. 'Shadowing' is current practice in the Department, and considered "a great learning opportunity" for juniors or 'newcomers', as well as a "useful networking exercise building up contacts" (internal documentation). For my research purposes, it offered occasions to gather unique insides, and enlarge the pool of my informants. The obvious advantage was that in a 'shadowing' position there was no expectation for me to intervene in the proceedings, as there was in other occasions when I was assigned tasks to report on. Marcus was particularly keen on letting me follow him during his working days (and beyond), and act as my 'mentor', a kind of work relationship recognised in the settings. In the long conversations I had with him, I gathered a sense that he was happy to explain things to me as the questions I was asking around the work of civil servants

consistently overlapped with what the general public often ask: what is it that civil servants really do? And, is it useful? This (increasingly) welcoming attitude seemed entirely genuine, and extended to some of our common work colleagues. In my interpretation, their openness was possibly a consequence of the fact participants felt their own work was deemed unimportant, and consistently undervalued. These feelings coincided with a recent history of “denigration” (Foster, 2005:213) of what was once a respected profession (cf. Dargie and Locke, 1999) – a denigration that was kept alive by press campaigns well into the days of my secondment. Routinely, civil servants were described by national tabloids as lazy, over-privileged, or ineffective³⁹. The claims, while mostly without substantiated evidence, took their toll on the officers' morale. An internal memo for instance, outlining the results of a survey of the Department staff, included the following complaint collected during an internal focus group of 'Grade7s':

there [is] a sense that the external perceptions of Defra by ministers/others MPs, the press and by friends and family could often be negative and when this was the case there was no strong mechanism within the department to reassure employees of their value (internal memo, 2011)

Especially in the last months of my residence at DEFRA, when, according to Marcus, they had “become accustomed to [my] presence”, the working relationships with participants built up on the mostly unstated understanding that I could with my research offer a challenge to those perceptions. It became thus not unusual to some of the more experienced officers, including Marcus, to play the part of the cicerone, as was happening that morning: “there are two kinds of people who work here” – he said, not prompted by any question, but probably reading in my eyes some dismay at seeing in succession dozens and dozens of officers at work – “those who come here at nine, do what they are told to do, leave at five. They don't ask many question, they don't take an interest. They may be very good at what they do, but that's all. There are then others who do take an interest. They ask what's going on *in the wider*, they question *the big picture*. These people are those who may end up having a word on bits and bolts of policy”. The distinction Marcus was stressing roughly marks the difference in sensibilities in between executive officers and those either with the ambition, or already promoted, to a 'Grade7' rank, the one just below the 'senior civil servants' in the formal hierarchy of the Department (cf. Chapter 4).

³⁹ Plenty of these kinds of claims are easily found in online tabloid articles, and associated comment sections to them. For one of many examples see Martin (2012).

At this level officers have a role in the proceedings and the discussions accompanying the formation of new policies in the Department, and gain access to and voice into the shaping of these. In other words, whilst executive officers can be content with carrying out assigned tasks, and many of them feel comfortable within the delimited organisational environment of projects (cf. Sharrock, 2008), at the higher level of the hierarchy 'Grade7s' play a substantive part in discussing 'new directions', 'progress', or 'taking' some work 'forward', as the development of policies is identified in local terms. Following such developments and 'doing policy' is – in the words of a senior officer – a “bloody difficult” task (fieldnotes). Analysing the reasons this is the case will help us sketching a description of the intricate world of a Department of the British Government, and what 'Grade7s' – defined elsewhere the “key players” (Stanley, 2000:22) and those “doing the heavy-lifting of policy” (IfG, 2014) – need to know to navigate it.

The basics: teams and teams' meetings

By shadowing Marcus and observing other 'Grade7s' during their working days it was immediately clear that the distribution of time of officers at this rank differs substantially from that of 'executives'. While the latter spent most of their working days at their desks busy with computer-based tasks such as reading, emailing, 'logging cases' in spreadsheets or dealing with project-related assignments, 'Grade7s' were more likely to be found behind the closed doors of meeting rooms. Marcus and his manager Cary, for instance, spent some of their days without sitting at any desk, but attending 'back-to-back' meetings for the whole of their time in the office. “Meetings, meetings and more meetings” – another officer sighed in the early days of my secondment once I asked her, perhaps naively, what she did “in practice as a policy-maker”:

the first thing and most important, is meeting people (...) You take an issue you know very little about (laugh) and you meet colleagues who, like you, know very little about it. (...) usually meetings end with recognising what we still don't know, and to whom we can ask. So (laugh) we set up another meeting... (informal conversation)

In my observations, as well as in this description delivered half-seriously, it is possible to retrieve one of the most fundamental facts of life officers doing 'policy-making work'

have to live by: one of the reasons multiple 'meetings' are necessary is because administrative activity is group activity (cf. Simon, 1957), and groups – or 'teams' as they are called in the settings – are the basic units through which work on policy and administration progresses⁴⁰. What is true for decisions around projects (cf. above), it is true for all the 'business' of policy-making: action is inexorably *concerted* and *collegial*. The trope used in the settings in these regards is: “in the Department, nobody works alone” (fieldnotes). Making such collegiality work in practice requires a considerable amount of working time and effort⁴¹, a great part of which is consumed to make a 'team' work together (cf. Weick, 1969; Schwartzman, 1989). 'Team management' is 'Grade7s' duty, and a measure of their effectiveness as employees. 'Teams' are, in essence, 'aggregations' of executive officers in groups structured around 'policy areas', in which they are assigned collective 'responsibility' and 'ownership' of associated projects and tasks. The 'team leader' is usually an officer at 'Grade7' rank, and s/he reports to a deputy director ('DD'), in most cases a senior civil servant (at 'Grade5' rank or above). The 'areas' are decided either by incipient ministers following planned funding approved by the Treasury, or by seniors civil servants and the 'management board' for those policies and operations the Department deals with independently from ministerial 'direction' – the so-called 'ongoing functions'. Officers, as well as external observers, learn that a first, thumbnail, indication of whether a 'policy area' is regarded as important and therefore there is some 'momentum' for progressing policy is the *size* of the team dedicated to it.

Usually a higher budget for a given 'area' means more people are needed to manage the resources. Staffed with a system of 'flexible resourcing', teams' size can in fact shrink when 'programmes', i.e. portfolios of projects, are abandoned or rescaled, or can be bolstered when resources allow and initiatives and new 'projects' are started. It created some political outrage for instance, when in early 2013 the Department's team dedicated to 'climate change adaptation' was cut from 38 to “just six” officers (Harvey, 2013), triggering accusations that government's commitment towards the environment had

⁴⁰ It is significant to note here that one of the best sociological reflections on “teamwork” – Erving Goffman's chapter on “Teams”, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) – is based empirically on Dale's (1941) account of the working of committee meetings in the British Civil Service.

⁴¹ It is very easy for outsiders to underestimate the magnitude of such time and effort. As Helen Schwartzman has convincingly argued in her *The Meeting* (1989), this happens mostly because there is a tendency, particularly in Western societies, to take meetings for granted and to overlook the enormous amount of 'work' that goes on in them. Subjecting meetings to ethnomethodological analysis, Schwartzman manages to illuminate just that. Unfortunately, this book remains a rare, almost forgotten, text.

been abandoned. On the other hand, however, experienced officers become aware that oversized teams can easily lead to projects stalling and a loss of control, as it was regarded the case with the teams in charge of the roll-out of smart meters⁴² in the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), DEFRA's 'sister Department', where several dozens officers all dedicated to the same policy were “stepping on one other's feet” (interview with DECC official). Team sizes and information on resourcing remain confidential to the public⁴³. Inside Departments, 'Grade7s' need to keep an eye on which teams are expanding and which are being resized: this will get them an idea of where things are 'moving forward' and where, instead, very little is and will be happening.

Teams meet for several hours a week in routine encounters – called 'weekly', 'fortnightly', 'monthly team meetings' – which occupy a considerable share of 'Grade7s' agendas, although by no means, as I shall discuss soon, are these the only kind of meetings they attend. During 'team meetings' and for most of the business, executive officers take turns to speak ('go around the table') to report and account for ('keep each other up to speed') the developments in the projects they are 'managing', either as ongoing, or at early 'scoping' stages. 'Grade7s' act as 'team leaders', i.e. *middle managers*: they collect information and updates from executives and report to seniors, while in turn they pass instructions and 'directions' from seniors down to executives. 'Grade7s', thus, are in charge of maintaining those fundamental streams of communication on which any large organisation rest on (cf. Simon, 1957; Boden, 1994). They need to know both about the projects assigned to the executives they supervise, and about – as Marcus put it above – “what's going on in the wider”. The 'wider' glosses a complex system of relationships each 'policy team' is embedded in – a system composed of several layers of groups and operations. Getting to know this system and how it works – learning the special rules of Whitehall, as I called them earlier – is what 'Grade7s' do in other kinds of meetings, other than those with their own teams. In these – mostly thanks to Marcus, Cary and other few officers that entrusted me with the chance of 'shadowing' – I had the opportunity to collect more insights on the workings of the Department.

⁴² The Smart Metering Implementation Programme.

⁴³ Although obtainable through tailored Freedom of Information (FoI) requests, as in the case of Harvey's article (2013), informed by a request by the environmental group Friends of the Earth, a 'stakeholder' of climate change policy (cf. Chapter 5).

The negotiated nature of 'change': process-related meetings

While executive officers as well as outsiders can be often bewildered by the fact that the rules of the game are constantly changing, 'Grade7s' usually have enough experience of government offices to live with the fact, and to realise that 'change', 'adapting to change' and 'driving change' – all typical expressions in the local language – are part of the nature of what they do. Where others, academic observers for instance, see “transformations” (Rhodes, 2000a), “changing patterns” (Marsch *et al.*, 2001), or “revolutions” (Foster, 2005: 157), experienced 'Grade7s' and with them senior civil servants (SCS), see a normal, ongoing and “repetitive” (cf. Weick, 1969) process of reception of given historical and political conditions – one to which they are called to adapt and respond (cf. March and Olsen, 2008). The most visible changes of conditions are the turnover of ministers and governments, and the associated, seemly inevitable, attempts to 'reform' the administration – the latest being, at the time of the observation, the Civil Service Reform Plan (HMG, 2012). Officers with enough years of service sooner or later adjust to this rhythm. It is paradigmatic that in the local language of the administration all names of politicians and political parties are neutralised: whatever its flag, in officers' talk, the government is 'the government-of-the-day', and the Prime Minister, the Deputy, or other ministers are invariably identified by acronyms – 'the PM', the 'DPM', etc. While this is also a consequence of the ban on any talk in the office that can be suspected to be 'political' – in fact officers should hide their political orientation all together (cf. Chapter 5) – it also indicates a sense that the administration, while directed by democratically elected politicians (the ministers), has a life of its own. A life that is separated from the straightforward enactment of political 'directions' or 'visions'. It is this life that is subject to 'changes'.

'Grade7' officers must be able to see such life unfolding more clearly than 'executives' do. While 'change', from the point of view of the 'executives', is indeed imposed (cf. Chapter 5) – cuts are made, expenditures are modified, programmes are abandoned or initiated anew – for 'Grade7s' 'change' is itself a *gradual* and *constant* business that requires attention, time and work. For analytical purposes I will term this time and associated tasks *process-related*, to highlight a fundamental characteristic of such activities: they have to do with the set of circumstances under which work must be conducted, rather than with work itself (cf. Simon, 1957; Button and Sharrock, 1998).

This point is very important and deserves more explanation. The trope officers tell each other to explain the point, almost a cliché in the settings, is that “policy-making is *all* about the process” (fieldnotes). What they mean by this is that a great deal of their time is occupied by matters that are distant from practical and specific decisions on policies, 'projects' or 'programmes' – rather, what concerns them is the very way through which those decisions must be arrived at, or to use the words of a classic organisational theorist, a composite set of “decisions' premises” (Simon, 1957:xii). These “premises” have to do with a number of features of the organisation of the work of the office that 'Grade7s' must learn to know. The most immediate ones are related to the so-called 'high-level structure': questions that must be asked with respect to current projects, for instance, are what is my boss' stance on the work my team is doing? Will the current management board be endorsing our current 'line'? Who is on the board, following the 're-structuring'? What could the (new) minister expect from this particular 'strand of work'?

In the practicalities of everyday life in the office, this means that 'Grade7s' must pay attention to – and participate in – discussions around what 'the minister said', or around the meaning of 'the recent letter by the permanent secretary', or on the importance of latest 'Cabinet office paper'. All of these can be read as triggers for the introduction of new procedures, new 'ways of working', or a new attitude towards some 'strands of work'. These must be learnt, because in turn they can have consequences on the current work on policies – including switching 'momentum' from some 'areas' to others. Such 'changes' – no matter how “slight” (cf. interview with Lucy, Chapter 5) – need therefore to be constantly monitored. There are several ways for 'Grade7s' to do so. First, they attend discussions with superiors (typically 'DDs' – 'deputy directors'), who inform them of the latest developments happening higher in the hierarchy – these are typically in the form of short (half an hour) 'one-to-one' meetings, scheduled to occur at least once per week. Second, they are invited to attend *ad hoc* meetings organised by managers: their agendas become thus busy with 'workshops', 'presentations', 'lunchtime seminars' during which they learn, for instance, “what does the [latest] budget mean for the government and for DEFRA” (internal presentation by Treasury economist, June 2012, two hours) and “how to approach the science-policy interface” (internal seminar by a 'research programme manager', July 2012, one hour and a half), or “what does the Civil Service Reform Plan mean for policy delivery?” (half-a-day conference facilitated by general director, July 2012) and, for a last example, “what is the new high level structure from

April 2012?” (monthly 'area' meeting, March 2012, two hours). Third, they rely on talk in and at the margins of 'policy team' meetings, when officers update each other and point to the latest significant 'news' and, informally, pass on the latest gossip with regards to 'directions', appointments, departures, promotions and so on.

The outsider, once able to observe officers at 'Grade7' rank behind closed doors, realises how great an amount of working time is spent in discussions and tasks accompanying, for instance, what the local language calls 'streamlining': the activities 'Grade7s' carry out to become aware of 'changes', and, as middle managers, make sure these are passed down, explained properly, and taken up by executives. Grade7s are in fact called to be 'the actors of change': a measure of their 'performance' is the extent “they make change happen” (internal performance appraisal document). Here is an example of how an email exchange in between officers ran after the permanent secretary emailed them with a message presenting the latest announcement on the Civil Service Reform Plan (email communication, June 2012):

Officer 1: in some ways this [the new requirements of the Plan] bodes well for [what we do] – emphasis on basing policies on what really works / can be implemented. But there are risks too – it would be good to debate first impressions and how we can get ahead of the curve in the [team] meeting tomorrow if there is room on the agenda? [sent to all team members]

Officer 2: thanks [officer1] think we have the next [team] meeting next Wednesday (so maybe that will allow us to digest and reflect, leisurely...) Good to be enthusiastic about change and opportunities arising...

Officer 3 [team leader]: thanks [officer1]I'll put that on the agenda

While occasionally officers at 'Grade7' rank keep expressing, as I have reported executives typically do, frustration at the number and the pace of process-related discussions, most of 'Grade7s' know that process-related questions are important: if executives can be in the position of ignoring them or can just be tangentially interested, 'Grade7s' who wish to be effective and maintain hope for further promotion⁴⁴ must learn to recognise the nuances and the significance of the novelties introduced at the so-called 'high-level' and the consequent “political and administrative cues” (Page and Jenkins, 2005:165) sent through the hierarchy. To be able to do so – and read the changes 'in the wider' – 'Grade7s' must be able to adopt an inward looking and self-referential stance

⁴⁴ On the difficulties encountered by officers when attempting to obtain of promotions to grades above see Page and Jenkins (2005).

with regards to the very matter of their own 'tasks': their working objective becomes learning what the *conditions* are under which they, and the executive they supervise, must carry out the tasks they are assigned (cf. Simon, 1957).

With experience, 'Grade7s' develop the ability to recognise 'drivers of change' that are likely to be successful, that 'cut the mustard', and those that are not, or are little more than 'red herrings' – to use fashionable idiomatic forms often heard in officers' talk. They must thus develop a particular kind of expertise, based on knowledge and experience of the 'process': this makes them, in the local language, 'generalist officers', i.e. experts in the ways policy work is carried out (cf. Page and Jenkins, 2005). Such expertise depends on the ability to participate to a constant and time-consuming exchange of information with colleagues in order to bring their knowledge of the state of affairs of the organisation up to date. This amounts to a constant, ongoing, training and retraining (cf. Simon, 1957): officers need to be able to grasp what is – each time after the latest 'change' – the 'new normality of the big picture' (fieldnotes), as Marcus called it.

More features of the 'process': 'overarching agendas'

While important in order to get an idea of the 'big picture', the 'organisation structure' is only one of the features I earlier referred to, with Herbert Simon, as the “decision's premises” relevant to 'Grade7s'. There is much more to learn and monitor. There are, for instance, what in the office talk are sometimes called the 'wider issues': these are usually 'directions' coming from the Cabinet Office, 'No.10', and the Treasury – these three considered the sources of all things 'cross-departmental', i.e. principles overarching the work of single departments and that “we all have to comply with” (fieldnotes). During my placements in 2012, Marcus, Cary and Alice, as well as many other officers at their rank or above, spent a great deal of their time discussing the 'changes' the Department was called to make following the election of the Coalition Government in May 2010, despite the fact that more than one year and half had passed since then. According to the managers in charge of Change Programme kick-started shortly after the government inauguration, these were 'very ambitious' (fieldnotes), and were meant to deliver what a senior figure in the Treasury defined “the new controls [to] deliver [...] a seismic shift in Whitehall's spending culture” (Cabinet Office, 2011a).

The 'wider issues' officers needed to take note of ranged from a 'significant reduction of resources', amounting to an overall budget cut of 30% in the 2011-2015 period, to changes to the very way the government operated. In parallel to a 're-structuring' – a re-allocation of officers at all ranks to modified, re/named or newly-created 'policy areas' – 'changes' entailed a number of developments officers needed to understand and apply to their own work. Observing the tasks officers performed, and listening to the discussions at some of the meetings they attended, it became clear that some of the 'changes' were more significant and far-reaching than others. These were linked to so-called 'overarching agendas'.

First, the reduction of the overall budget of the Department translated into what was known as a 'marketing freeze' – a measure that limited, or cut all together, 'activities' classified as 'advertising' and 'marketing'. While most of the press reported the initiative as covering mostly “advertising”, for example all media and billboard ads, including for recruitment (see e.g. Sweney, 2010), officers in Departments soon realised that the 'internal guidance' distributed by the Cabinet Office (2010b) covered a much longer list of potential initiatives. In meetings organised ad hoc, officers learned that for instance, 'partnership marketing' included all money once used to grant sponsorship to companies for the promotion of Department's activities. This limited the use of a range of instruments of support, in particular for social enterprises and charity organisations (fieldnotes). As a consequence, in the meetings with the representatives of such categories with historical links with the Department, officers had to warn that “there [wasn't] money for sponsorships of any kind” and that “on the money side, hands [were] tied” (fieldnotes). A consequence of the marketing freeze, my colleague Charlie once admitted as he explained why in his opinion my placement coincided with a “bad moment”, was that “most of the things we used to do aren't possible anymore” (fieldnotes).

Second, there was a call for 'less regulation', meaning that whenever discussing new initiatives, officers had to consider all a different range of policy instruments (or 'levers', as officers call them) *before* advancing any proposals requiring a new law or regulatory mechanism⁴⁵. This commitment, outlined in the document *The Coalition: our programme for government* (HMG, 2010b:9), was reinforced by two provisions: the

⁴⁵ In the intricate prose of 'official' definitions, 'regulation' is: “a rule or guidance with which failure to comply would result in the regulated entity or person coming into conflict with the law or being ineligible for continued funding, grants and other applied for schemes” (see DfT, 2012).

introduction of the 'one-in, one-out' rule (OOIO) “whereby no new regulation is brought in without other regulation being cut by a greater amount” (ibid.) and a 'cross-government programme' named The Red Tape Challenge, a review of the entire corpus of governmental regulations with a view to simplify, merge or scrap altogether regulations deemed obsolete or ineffective (cf. Hickman, 2012). The initiative was supervised by a new Cabinet sub-committee, tasked with reviewing all regulatory measures, and enacted by a newly formed team in the Department called the 'Better Regulation team'. These measures – considered the pillars of the new government's strategy – resulted in a series of new procedures that modified the 'process' to see policy proposals 'going ahead'.

Third, officers had to come to terms with what took the name of the 'Big Society agenda', another pillar of the Conservative Party general election manifesto (cf. Conservative Party, 2010). Beyond the official 'line' advocated publicly – “put more power and opportunity into people's hands” (Cabinet Office, 2010a) – the agenda meant a commitment for officers to a new 'ethos', described in internal documentation as one where “the role of government (...) is to act as enabler (...) devolving power and responsibility to the individual and local level (...) and only involving government if necessary” (internal documentation). Officers had to recognise that 'fewer levers [were] available to [them]' (internal documentation), and were faced with more mechanisms of approval for policy proposals. Increasingly – officers agreed when asked – as a consequence of the 'Big Society agenda' proving the intervention of government right or reasonable in internal talks or papers became more and more difficult (fieldnotes).

Furthermore, the Civil Service Reform Plan (HMG, 2012) pushed ahead what was internally termed 'the behavioural approach' with associated 'new tools and techniques now available' (internal documents). This referred – in managers' words – to “new approaches to policy delivery in a changing policy context” (internal documents) where traditional government intervention 'levers' were progressively sidelined in favour of 'influencing behaviours' strategies – these latter based on “behavioural sciences” (HMG, 2012:17) and 'streamlined' to officers in all Departments through publications such as MINDSPACE (IfG, 2010), and Test, Learn, Adapt (Haynes *et al.*, 2012). Through reading and discussing these documents – the first “suggesting more innovative interventions [that] draw on the most recent academic evidence” (IfG, 2010:4) to instruct officers on how to incorporate persuasion techniques into public policy (cf.

Marvulli, 2011; IfG, 2010; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008); the second establishing that “randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are the best way of determining whether a policy is working” (Haynes *et al.*, 2012:4) and “should be [...] routinely used to test the effectiveness of public policy interventions in the UK” (ibid.) – officers learned what were the new requirements to design initiatives, i.e. the properties initiatives should have to succeed in the tests of a newly-instituted, and continuously 'reviewed process' (cf. Jirotko and Gougen, 1994). Typically, requirements are specified in a negative way (cf. Simon, 1957), setting constraints on undesirable action in the form of further authorising mechanisms.

Taken all together, 'overarching agendas' delineate what some officers called the 'ideology of administration': the overall direction given by the 'government-of-the-day'. The most important aspect of a 'Grade7' work, an officer with several years experience in the rank explained me, is to be able to “sense the fitness of the initiatives” with such 'ideology', and relate that to the specific policy area they have 'responsibility' for (fieldnotes). Missing a connection in between the 'high-level' changes and evolution of small projects under 'Grade7s' supervision would be considered a failure on their part, given the risk that the miss could come to haunt one of the projects later, for instance at the first 'project board' meeting when developments are discussed (see above). Officers need therefore plenty of 'team meeting' time to ensure every possible aspect of the novelties introduced is taken into consideration, the consequences grasped, and 'action(s) taken'. Sometimes this will mean dismissing potential projects all together, or, if they had already secured funding, accompanying them to 'sunset' (the local term for 'closure'), knowing well that there will not be any more 'momentum' in that area.

To arrive at these kinds of decisions, many times and for many hours, process-related meetings mean officers' tasks become associated with a re-discussion of the very sense of their own work: the 'role of the government', or 'how DEFRA is changing', 'what are our new ways of working'. These discussions can cause 'projects' to be put on hold (cf. Button and Sharrock, 1994). Many times the problems 'Grade7s' face are more complex, for instance: should the framework that is used to assess policies be updated in the light of the latest request by the Cabinet Office? Does the fact that the Treasury requires a new kind of analysis in the x paper mean we should stop adopting the old y model? As the new minister is against introducing new pieces of regulation in the x policy area, does it mean we should rule out regulation from our area too? These matters are

addressed in lengthy assemblies, with the dual objective of both delivering messages from the higher hierarchy ('this change needs to happen'), *and* collecting 'feedback', 'ideas', 'thoughts' on what would be the best way to 'achieve' that very same 'change'.

Only by picturing 'Grade7s' work within the context described so far, taking into account the dynamics of the teams, policy areas, and the constant, emerging and evolving “institutional change” (March and Olsen, 2008) one can get a sense of the complexity and the difficulties “policy development” – as a matter of everyday work – entails for those who carry it on. 'Grade7s' in fact learn that difficulties derive not just from the actual work of developing policies in their substantive matter and material referents: they stem from the coordination necessary at various levels of the organisation (again, Marcus' notion of the “wider”) to make progress happen. As the context is continuously changing, a significant part of 'Grade7s' work is to become aware of changes and coordinate adaptation to the new conditions at executive level – operations that may take several hours of meeting time. To use terms dear to students of management and leadership these discussions are for the greater part about “framing” (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996), or perhaps more precisely about “frame-breaking” and “re-framing” (Whittle *et al*, 2015) officers' own work in the light of new organisational contexts, each time a significant 'change' appears on the horizon – pushed by this or that political 'direction'. Process-related meetings make clear to officers *what* has to 'change'. The *how* becomes 'Grade7s' business (cf. Simon, 1957).

Policy-related meetings

Taking in consideration the analysis above, it will not sound surprising to discover that when 'Grade7s' finally engage in activities that have as their subject the substantive development of policies or any other kind of organisational action, most of the time what they do is *contemplative*, rather than operational. This means that in many meetings whose matter *is* policy, the observer will note – and 'Grade7s' do admit when asked – very little is decided, but a lot is *pondered*. The skills required by effective 'Grade7s' in these occasions are a sophisticated version of those they have developed as executive officers: in the same fashion they have been accustomed to think about what *might* happen to projects (cf. Chapter 5), those in higher-rank roles are often called to reflect – during 'workshops', 'team meetings', or other gatherings among officials –

about what the 'big picture' landscape *could* mean for the current 'projects' and 'programmes', and therefore 'review' their current position, or as it is termed, review the organisation's 'line' on this or that matter. While no decision is operationally taken while work is being done to settle such 'line' (cf. Goffman, 1959), officers, usually led by 'deputy directors' and 'Grade7s', engage in activities in preparation for such decisions. These *policy-related* meetings are referred to by managers as 'exercises': meeting rooms and officers' time, in such cases, are used for rehearsing *potential* future courses of action. Questions officers are asked to 'think about' collectively are typically: what could happen if any 'momentum' was given to your work, and what initiatives/policies *would* you 'take forward' if given further resources? Or, in advance of 'prioritisation exercises': in what way the new 'priorities' are reflected in the current projects? Are there projects' features that 'hook' in what is novel? Written notes are usually taken on the results of such group discussions – typically developed in the form of 'brainstorming' sessions. These written notes – many times taking the form of *conceptual maps* obtained with the classic managerial and consultancy tools of “model building in teams” (see Eden *et al.*, 1983) – do not usually provide the definitive advice to ministers. Rather, they inform similar meetings at more senior level. It is then the senior officers' duty to filter, summarise and communicate to the minister the outcome of policy-related meetings.

To illustrate and document these working practices I will report on the proceedings of one of the two 'all-staff area meetings' of the 'Sustainable Products and Procurement policy area' I observed in my months of residence at the Department. These meetings were scheduled to occur every six months, and were named 'away days' because were usually held in locations other than the office buildings in central London – generally, from the officers' memories I was able to collect, at conference venues in the countryside (fieldnotes). 'Away days' were usually associated with visits to farms or other locations of interest for the DEFRA employee (food processing plants, science laboratories or similar), and they offered, together with the time necessary to complete working tasks, leisure time of some sort, conducive of 'team-bonding'. The 'away days', however, were among the first to fall victim of the cuts imposed on the Department under the current 'government-of-the-day' spending regime. Rather than having officers travelling away from London, with the associated transport and venue fees, meetings were held either in cheaper venues at walking distance from the office, or just in the Department's building – as in any other day of the year. Ironically, the meetings kept the

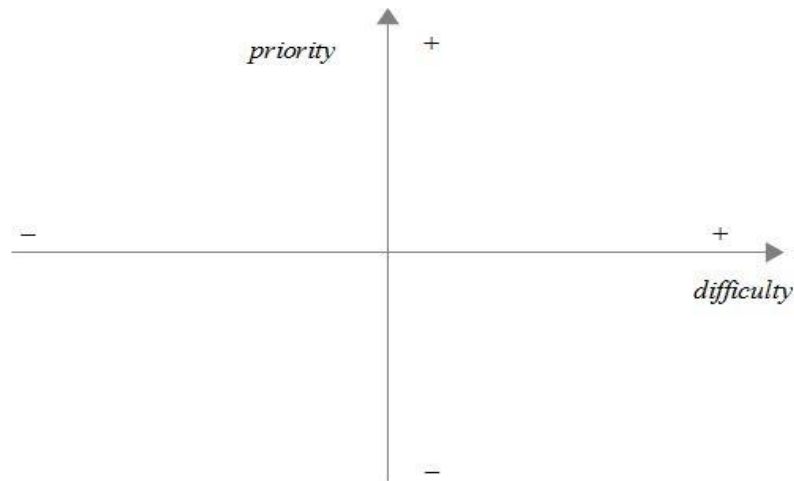
'away day' denomination. On that particular occasion, the location chosen was two medium-size rooms on a building floor which was unusual for the meetings of the 'area', each big enough to host around fifteen officers invited to attend.

The officers convened at 1pm for a schedule of work of three hours and a half. The two 'deputy directors', supervisors of the 'policy area', chaired a parallel meeting each. The one I attended opened, as I had witnessed in other similar occasions, with 'round-the-table introductions' followed by an 'icebreaker': this latter was an activity aimed at getting the officers talking on matters other than work-related ones, with the objective of making participants comfortable talking and at ease with the other attendees (cf. Eden *et al.*, 1983). The 'icebreaker' consisted in splitting the group into two smaller groups selected at random, invite the officers to stand and to take up a position at each side of the long table at the centre of the room and, invited by the chair, in turn, say something around their personal plans for the upcoming summer holidays. Once the routine was over – some twenty minutes later – the chair took a long turn of speech to introduce the proceedings: he talked of the 'potential work of the policy area', the necessity of 'change', and the 'expectations to deliver', before stating that the gist of the meeting was to “give sense to what we are trying to achieve” and “through which tools” (fieldnotes). Then the chair gave detailed instructions for the organisation of the 'exercise'. The group (of fourteen) was again split in two halves, this time respecting roles of the 'teams' composing the 'policy areas'. The two 'Grade7s' in the room were designated as facilitators of each group, with the executives they supervised composing the rest of the sub-groups. Each sub-group was provided with large-size paper flip chart (of conventional A1 size) on an easel, and each participant with Post-It notes.



Picture 4.1: Officers at work during the meeting

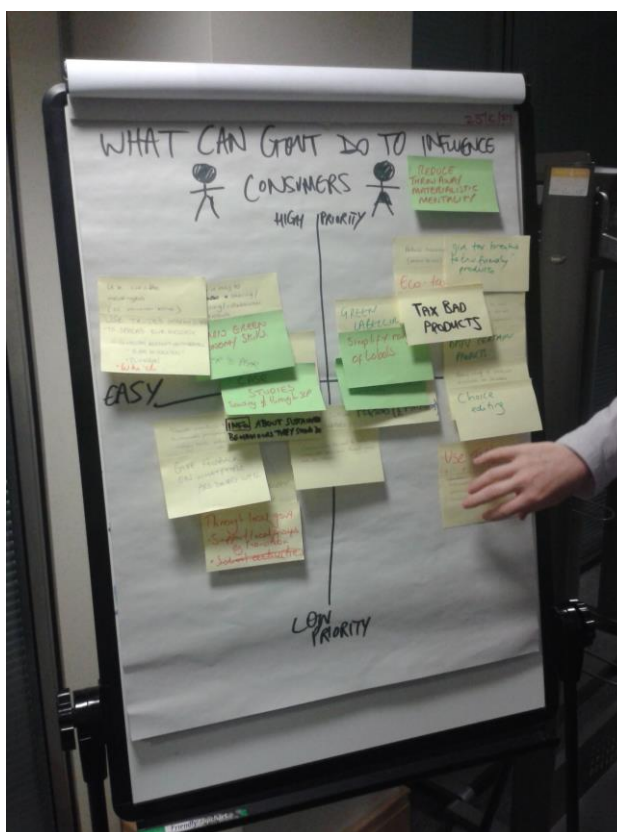
The two sub-groups of officers were instructed to 'focus on', respectively, the following questions: 'what can government do to influence consumers to behave sustainably?' and 'what can government do to influence businesses?' In the first part of the 'exercise', officers worked individually: each of them wrote the potential policies they had “at the top their mind” (fieldnotes), i.e. the 'policy levers they could use to achieve the policy objectives' – to use participants' words. Each officer wrote her/his 'levers' on a series of sticky notes. In the following stage of the 'exercise', the officers re-convened as a sub-group and compared the notes. Exact duplicates were discarded, while notes with slight differences were kept. Then, directed by 'Grade7s', officers were invited to attach the notes to the flip chart. On the paper, in the group I was working with, the 'Grade7' facilitator had drawn a Cartesian coordinate grid with 'priority' as vertical axis and 'difficulty' as horizontal one, as below:



Deciding the positioning of the Post-It notes on the grid took a long chunk of the time allocated for the 'exercise' – around one hour and an half. For each of the sticky notes, in fact, officers had to determine an apt position on the “conceptual map” in conversation with each other. By moving the sticky notes along the horizontal axis of the grid officers were indicating how difficult was to develop each of the 'levers' (or 'policy options'). For instance, levers such as 'tax bad products' (i.e. create a financial disincentive for consumer to use unsustainable products) and 'ban certain products' (a straightforward ban) both ended up the right side of the grid. For the officers this meant, as they could all agree on the collocation, that obtaining the approval for such measures would have been hard – they knew that by experience. However, notes had to be placed in regions adjacent to each other, and therefore it had to be decided which one had to go on the further right side. These subtler allocation decisions provided material for long exchanges. It was for instance discussed how the banning of a product by the government (for example as obtained in the past for leaded fuels, for example) was definitely more arduous than deciding a tax.

One by one the sticky notes found their places. 'Softer' policy instruments were on the 'easy', left side of the grid. Officers agreed that 'using trusted intermediaries to deliver credible messages' was easier for the government to do, as it was 'to provide feedback on [green policies already in place] doing well'. A complementary task was to decide, again in conversation, the positioning of the notes on the vertical axis, i.e. the officers' understanding of the Government's scale of priority for sustainability policies directed to 'consumers'. This added a further dimension of conceptualisation, and therefore material for further discussions, and associated negotiations on where exactly to stick

the notes on the grid. On one of them an officer had written: 'reduce throw away / materialistic mentality'. After an exchange of views, officers agreed that the best collocation for it was on the highest point of the priority scale – after all “the minister had mentioned it several times in public” (fieldnotes) – but also on the hardest side of the difficulty axis. In such a fashion, officers agreed with each other that while there was little chance to 'do something' in that direction, that 'line' remained 'high priority'. A rather intricate way to say: this is a perfectly valid and urgent piece of rhetoric – let's use it – although we all know it will be almost impossible to do anything practical about it. The matter was settled for all practical purposes.



Picture 6.2: the chart with associated sticky notes, result of the 'exercise'

In such digressions, officers were clearly achieving moment-by-moment agreement on a number of matters, and, contextually, instructing the less experienced officers on what was possible/impossible given the current political situation (or 'policy context'). All so to speak interventionist measures found their way onto the 'difficult' side, reflecting the generally neoliberal, laissez-faire inclination of the current 'ideology of administration', a matter, after all, explicitly stated in the office (although not in these political theory

terms). Notwithstanding, more subtle nuances emerged in between 'levers', while finding them a 'position' on the conceptual map. For instance, in my group, a long debate took place to decide the relative positioning of two Post-Its: the 'tax bad product' one and another one reading 'give tax breaks to environmental-friendly products'. The dispute involved deciding which one was more difficult to have authorised in between the two measures – imposing a tax, or allowing a tax break. It was the 'Grade7' officer – the facilitator and the most experienced of the group – partially to resolve the issue by mentioning and explaining the difference in between 'push' and 'pull' mechanisms of taxation and informing the others about what was the current 'preferred option by the Treasury' (fieldnotes). If any proposal of that kind were to be put forward by the Department, it became vital for officers to know the terms of the distinction, and the 'right answer' so to avoid failure in obtaining approval.

In occasions such as these, together with achieving a good deal of 'team-bonding', 'Grade7s' pass on relevant knowledge on what would be the interventions most likely to 'pass the tests' of the 'process'. In practice, they prepare in a collegial fashion to get 'approval', *if* any of the potential intervention was given 'momentum'. Furthermore officers reinforce, or learn for the first time (in the case they have just joined the 'policy team') the established, local, conventional ways through which team members organise and understand the social world they are called to influence or act upon. An example of this in the 'exercise' described above is the commonsensical categorisation of social groups in terms of 'government', 'businesses', and 'consumers' – categories which are taken for granted throughout the three hours and a half of the meeting. Each category, as any category used in conversation to describe people (cf. Sacks, 1992; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998:213), is charged with members' commonsense sociological reasoning – a reasoning that becomes practical for the purpose of organising team members' thinking around the world they are talking about *together*. The fact such categorisations are not discussed as such means that they are both *taken for granted* and *agreed upon*, and thus constitute the members' local, available cultural resource for describing the world. As we shall see in the coming sections, acquiring, validating and using descriptions of the realities officers are called upon to change or influence through policy is a foremost preoccupation in the everyday undertaking of their work.

Legacy and agreement

It was Cary, Marcus' manager, to put to me in simple terms what is probably the most important lesson officers learn once they are assigned to 'policy development' tasks, either as a progression of their career or because they are freshly employed to do so. Passing on an adage of a retired director general he said: “we don't build policy on greenfield sites” (interview data). To reinforce the point he used a metaphor of a car: “when you are building a policy you're usually taking in an old car, and all you do is changing the wheels, or some other part”. In the occasion, Cary was criticising the so-called “policy cycle model”, the ideal representation of the policy-making process very popular in the academic study of public policy (cf. Chapter 1) which was recently imported in the internal guidance of the Department to instruct officers – mostly the 'newbies', as juniors are sometime called in the settings – on “how to think about the work we do” (internal documentation). Experienced officers regarded the model as an unfaithful representation of the work of 'policy development' and often dismissed it as a mere presentational device, a simplification, “not even that useful” (fieldnotes). “Idealistic stuff, you could probably do that policy cycle if you were saying – Cary continued in sarcastic tone – you had a completely new idea for what you wanted to do and no one had ever done anything like it before and everyone was new and fresh and you could just do it”. Once abandoned this simplistic idea of 'policy' as single act of creation following discreet stages (cf. Page and Jenkins, 2005), the concept officers use to explain how they had learnt not to sound totally incompetent is 'legacy'.

Legacy refers to the past occurrences in any 'area' of policy: all ongoing projects and programmes, for a start, have one. Getting to know well the legacy of existing and past projects when taking over a 'strand of work', was, accordingly to Amelia – an officer with almost two decades of service – the most important and urgent thing to do. When taking over any 'policy job', the activities associated to acquiring knowledge on 'legacy' are commonly referred to as 'finding one's feet'. Typically, this entails one or more rounds of meetings with the 'relevant people' in a 'policy area'. These activities can be described as a process of socialisation (cf. Rose, 1984; Dargie and Locke, 1999) into existing networks of those officers who, for one reason or another, can provide relevant information on the 'current thinking'. Retrieving such information is not always a simple task. On the contrary, listening to officers' accounts, it can accrue to one of the biggest 'challenges' of the work. Understanding 'legacy', a 'Grade6' explained in an interview,

means “understanding the history and the context of a policy development area... where battles may have been won and lost”. That learning is necessary to avoid to being seen as one of those “naive people who come in to suggest something that has just been given up in order to allow some other thing, even if the idea is valid” (interview) – a very annoying occurrence (fieldnotes).

Officers with enough experience warn juniors that “it takes a little time to understand what is significant and what is not” (interview) and the main reason for that is that by its very essence, finding one's way through the internal procedures for 'policy development' is a matter of knowing “the right people”, and, on the top of that, knowing *how* and *when* to engage with them (cf. Harper, 1998). According to Dylan, a senior who dedicated many hours of his time to describing his work to me in exchange for some help with an internal study he was running, the very “civil service kind of questions” are exactly related to matters of how, and from whom, to get the information they required:

at the general level of Grade7... so you are doing all the late work, they are the ones who are there on the top of the issues [...] It's not just about knowing what skills I have, but knowing who they can approach, how they approach, what the process is to get advice. That is something that's bawled out in the civil service... this kind of dependence on... being collegial

The peculiarity of what happens in government Departments in comparison to other large organisations, Dylan explained, is that the channels of communication officers must navigate are not at all “formalised”: “there are not structural relationships – he said once – but points of contact are developed [mainly] through historical [personal] relations”. This constituted an important practical concern for those officers involved in 'policy development'. Many lamented, on several occasions, difficulties in retrieving records of what had been done before and, consequently, delays in understanding what was really required. Recalling past experiences, different officers stated that

Nowhere was it written down what the process was and we who should talk to (interview)

People come and go and when they are gone their knowledge is gone with them (interview)

Doesn't feel like there is any process or steps that set out what needs to be done (informal conversation)

There is no clear record of what needs to be done and when and what does exist seems to be changing week by week (interview)

There is a lack of guidance and any guidance is unclear and no one has a definitive answer

and then when the policy team chose a course of action they are told they shouldn't have done it that way (interview)

Invariably, officers admitted that the only way to go was to 'learn by doing' (cf. Maybin, 2013). A strategy for juniors or freshly appointed 'Grade7s' was to recognise who the "helpful individuals" (interview) were after a lot of tentative contacts – these helpful individuals being those who are "good at knowing the right people to go [...] and at getting people together" (interview). Contacts within these networks, officers reported, happen mostly by word of mouth: the key is getting the right instructions from seniors, and secure a good introduction in advance of the first contact. Much of the talk in the office, as a consequence, becomes oriented to 'find out' or 'list' the 'people that need to be asked' (fieldnotes) – building on one's, or one's team, knowledge and experience of the 'process' (cf. above): who is who? Who are the people 'leading' on that overarching agenda that we can consult to get advice on the implications for this particular 'strand of work'? Who can tell me about what the Department did in the past in this 'area'?

Through such inquiries, officers identify the 'right people', and engage in tapping into their 'organisational memory' (fieldnotes). While officers maintain a certain degree of autonomy in doing their own research, and often rely on "Googling stuff" and "consulting Wikipedia" (fieldnotes; cf. Stevens, 2011), they soon realise that the only reliable sources to gather 'relevant' information are either seniors or officers with more experience of a 'policy area'.

Through such contacts, once appointed to a position, learning the 'legacy' of the 'area' will usually rest on understanding the status of ongoing 'projects' and 'programmes'. This can become a tricky business when changes of ministers, or of governments, happen: "government can or cannot buy into old programmes of policy, for instance... this government didn't buy Food 2030" offered Amelia, one day over lunch (cf. HMG, 2010a). 'Projects' and 'programmes' by their own nature are ongoing endeavours: as I showed in Chapter 5, they can have recently taken a certain 'steer', or they maybe stalling due to an insuperable problem. They may be 'on hold' because some pieces of research have been commissioned to inform them, or they may be close to 'sunset' because some 'overarching agenda' overrode them. All this information is most likely not to be yet clearly explained on paper (or on digital files) and even when they are, access to such documentation must be granted (cf. Maybin, 2013). Knowing in person who 'leads' on this or that project is the only way to go: a meeting to 'catch-up' on the

'latest thinking' become a working objective, as it does 'getting invited to that particular meeting to grab a copy of the latest draft on X' (fieldnotes). Sometimes these objectives are not easy to pursue. As Dylan explained:

Often we assume that people would just call people, but they don't. Lots of people reported on not picking up the phone, not just because it's a senior issue but also these people have their jobs to do. [They think] I am a burden on their time, what right do I have to just give them a call? What expectations can I have to get any help from them just by flinging them an email? Because they know from their own world that they got their linkers on their things, their priorities. Someone pins something random – hi there, I noticed you know about X, can you tell me something? They are just gonna go: I'd love to, but I've got to write a submission, bye now.

While the word “linkers” points at more established relationships with rights and obligations, problems of co-ordination of this kind, while seeming mundane, were perceived as a major problem of efficiency for the Department and for government in general, and one requiring attempts at reform (cf. HMG, 2012). For Dylan, many times

they [seniors and ministers] are going not to do things because of information that is lost in this way... lots of our [of the civil service] stuff, is stuff you wouldn't normally think of when coming from outside, seen how it [the civil service] gets described.

What is significant in this quotation is the contrast in between the 'outsider' perception, that of the of well-ingrained and established processes of work in the Departments – a perception that is purportedly fuelled in government documentation and self-descriptions – and the everyday life in the office seen through the eyes of participants. There is an element of surprise, Dylan stresses, in discovering that operations are not that well-oiled, and that 'progress' or 'success' are many times determined by unexpected elements of the life in the workplace, including fortuity, or serendipity: “you need to be able to get to the right meeting at the right time, sometimes is a matter of luck, sometimes of determination”, a 'Grade7' officer stated.

Such features are not denied by officers at higher ranks, where one would expect a more solid perception of order. Lucy, the most senior officer I interviewed and 'director' of a key DEFRA 'policy area', perceived the difficulties of learning about 'legacies' as a worsening problem, and was not happy with the digital system of filing in place to store and retrieve internal documents. Again the element of 'randomness' emerges.

Lucy: actually that's [losing organisational memory] got a lot worse since digitalisation. Once we got computers things just get forgotten. 'Cause in the older days, a long time ago, you had a big file and you went back in the file to find out what happened before. These days, you know, the filing is just... bears some common memories but very difficult to really see things through. We're doing hum... work at the moment on the next rural development programmes, this is the big cap for an agricultural policy, rural development programme. Three billion pound funding. And we are looking at the design of it and we are looking at how successful is the current programme. And of course, one of the problems was the rural development agencies, which was set... you know... were abolished two years ago, with this government. They ran the programme for five years. So they've got all the evaluation and data, we've got it, but people forget about it! And actually that's five years of data on a really big programme that nobody is analysing at the moment. I mean, I've made a big fuss about it and they are now going to do it...but it was only me making the fuss that actually made sure that the whole programme was looked at properly. So, do you see what I mean?

LM: Yes

Lucy: is that lack of institutional memory means that... and it's just there lying forgotten, and they are really major! You know it's important that we have that five years of data used to evaluate what we did and might have worked well or went well to the next programme. But you know it's so... it's such a close... it's so close between finding the data and use them and missing the data all together. It was very... random [...] it's-it's too hard to find things through other people's filing. It's just... and the volume of paperwork, the volume of information that you are storing, means that is very difficult to find the key pieces of paper. You know, sometimes, with a policy, you're doing things, and then you need to do a submission to the secretary of state about it and it's just got all the right nuggets in there, all the little bits. But when you file it, it's just another... another bit of electronic data. Do you know what I mean?

LM: Hu-hum

Lucy: It's lost... and it's... I remember the brief we did for that meeting in October, was... had it all in one place, but when you are looking at an electronic filing system, you can't see that [...] Whereas when you are looking through the paper-files you-you probably expect slightly longer, cause you can flip through much more easily and you can get that information much better. So I do think that it made a really big difference, actually. And we haven't really sorted it, we haven't really got... I don't really know what the answer, because there are all sorts of systems we have to follow. When we change staff, we have to follow systems by handing over the files and showing them where the system is and actually finding that key piece of paper, with the key facts on, it's really quite hard.

LM: Which in the past was just on the top of the file

Lucy: Yes, which was really on top of the file, yes exactly [...] I mean you... yeah, I don't know, it just seem to be a lot more difficult in the last fifteen years doing that, yeah... getting that memory, the institutional memory really.

As for all matters constituting an organisational 'problem' flagged by seniors at Lucy's rank, the Department had invested in a 'project' to try to solve it: an intranet database of internal papers with an 'innovative tagging system' was at 'advanced design stage' – I learned in a two-hour internal seminar ('Knowledge Exchange lunchtime seminar', 21 June 2012). From the very tone of the presentation, and from the disillusioned faces of those composing a meagre audience, it did not look like it was going to be a very popular tool.

Towards valid descriptions

Either by a thorough assembling of 'relevant information' or just by gathering what is available and making-do with it (cf. Button and Sharrock, 1998), 'Grade7' officers and their teams find their own way through the process of achieving what is commonly referred to as 'making their own minds around the issue' (fieldnotes). Understanding the 'legacy' of past projects and scrutinising the origins of ongoing ones, amount – in the local language – to gather 'input' on the 'background' of the policy, and start to 'set out the scope' of the 'work' (fieldnotes). In the eyes of those officers more enthusiastic about their jobs, this is the “most exciting part... as it is often technically challenging and intellectually stimulating” (conversation with Amelia). This is where officers are called to “translate” (Dylan's term) the desiccated and impersonal language (cf. Jackall, 1988) of 'ministers' priorities', 'directions' and 'visions' into 'real world' interventions, and as Cary put it, “find out a concept for the ideal, and then, sort of work in all the pragmatic elements of how it works in practice”. To do so, officers need, for a start, *descriptions* of, as they often call it, the 'world out there':

[policy development] is about really understanding the world in such a way that... say the gas emission reduction, how do you do that, given how the world is? There are whole range of reasons both technical, physical, economic and so and so, even cultural [...] and that extends to farming, households, the industrial structure, the towns... they lock themselves to certain practices because of what is considered normal [...] and actually local authorities are not too dissimilar. You can't really see a local authority, so just by using their data you are trying to understand how they actually operate, not only local authorities but communities, or populations or other structures [...]

Officers lend their cognitive and analytical abilities (Alvesson, 2004) to read through the information available for each 'strand of work' and prepare to assess the potential 'impact on the world' (fieldnotes) of interventions, given those descriptions. This is problematic: “we are so far removed from out there, we are here, and we can't see, or we get detached from it”, an officer acknowledged. 'Making their own mind' correspond thus to a process of “mundane reasoning”, as described by Pollner (1987), where diverse sources of knowledge are treated as “facts or likelihood” (p.41) to compose a “version of reality” (p.35) of the specific material referents of the 'policy'. While this descriptive matters are considered preliminary, by their own admission officers recognise that it is where many times 'progress' gets stranded: “the problem”, for a 'Grade7' interviewed, “is actually writing down the problem... there's an awful lot of

background to the problem, so how well someone would be able to pick it up?” Such preoccupations are the matter at stake in policy-related 'team meetings' discussions: questions that are asked are typically 'why are we here really?', 'what is the background of what are we trying to do?', 'what is the 'scope'? At length, officers thus assemble elements of what they 'know' and analyse the opportunities of building 'a case for action' (fieldnotes). The 'legacies' existing in any area of policy mean that “you never start from a white sheet of paper” to tell it with Martin. Cary, taking to its consequences his similar metaphor of the car (cf. above), explained that “your [of the team] ability to define the issue and then move into it, is actually incredibly constrained”. The starting point, at any time, is what is called the 'settled line' – the 'current thinking' on any 'policy' matter. The descriptions officers are after must be, in the local jargon, 'validated', meaning that there must be a sufficient degree of *agreement* on the version of reality that can be taken as a foundation for 'action'. Such basis is commonly referred to as the 'evidence base' – usually 'data and models the government owns' (fieldnotes). The pre-condition for building an 'acceptable case for action' is that policy development builds *both* on a solid-enough 'evidence base' *and* along the lines of the requirements dictated by the features of the 'policy context', i.e. the political environment (cf. Button and Sharrock, 1998) with its 'overarching agendas'. It never escapes officers that

The important thing to bear in mind is the political landscape that we are operating under too. So, whereas we might think that there's a brilliant idea or there's real potential, we have to take into account things like the government's priorities, priorities for DEFRA as a whole and all of those types of things (interview with SEO)

Another officer at Cary's grade interviewed echoed his impression of having little leeway when it comes to importing 'valid' descriptions. He stated that “the really tricky issues are usually high-level things that people really want to talk about are already locked down”. A case in point can be made with relation to the 'policy area' on 'sustainable consumption', the one I was assigned to in my residence in the department. In the early talks I had with officers, I was effectively introduced to the 'high-level issues' that did constitute a 'problem' of definition in the past, and that had been settled:

Officer: they are challenging policies yes, especially at a time with the economic backdrop that there is at the moment, where sustainable consumption policies are often seen to be anti growth, and things like that... there [was] a lot of controversy between some... what could be seen as sustainable consumption policies, which are encouraging people to spend less money, and therefore the economy to shrink, which would not be a good thing [...] it's one of

those things, you sort of go through the, you've got to buy less, it's about, instead of buying a steak that is that big [indicates with fingers], it's buying a nice tasty steak which is this big [gets fingers slightly closer] It might cost the same amount of money, so I'm not spending less money, I'm reducing my consumption in terms of the size of the steak. But I am... I am...and there's other benefits. I'm eating more healthily, I'm choosing a farming production method that is better for the environment, and lots and lots of other things. So it's not necessarily about consuming less, it's about consuming differently, and consuming better. So it's... there's a lot of... misconceptions in other departments about, you know, DEFRA being anti-growth...

LM: so it's about pushing people to consume less in ways that doesn't go [overtalk]

Officer: It's... well, I think it's one of those thing that everybody kind of goes through, but it's.. it was quite a dilemma.

In this attempt to 'fill me in' on the 'legacy' of years of work of the Department in the 'policy area' (DEFRA, 2006; 2008; 2011b; 2011c) the officer resorts to two archetypal strategies of talk used in the setting. The first is to ground the explanations of “what a policy is about” bringing into play examples from the everyday life officers experience. This is in order to reify, or to tell it with Kenneth Liberman, “objectify” (2013:243) the 'concepts' and have an available depiction of the 'world' policies intervene on. The second is to refer to problematic matters solved in the past in the form of *collective realisations*: “you go through the”... “things everybody goes through”. The officer reports on the fact that there are conflicting versions of what 'sustainable consumption' could mean, and guides me through the selection of the one that is the accredited in the 'current thinking'. While she acknowledges the existence of a “dilemma”, she informs that a choice has been made – one that is definitive, and valid for all (cf. Pollner, 1987). She elaborates characterising what the valid alternative involves (“consuming differently”, “farming production”, and a “lots and lots of other things”): this is the territory where the discourse on 'SC policy', as for instructions, must be based on the basis of a reported consensual resolution.

When Cary talks about such territories being “incredibly constrained” (cf. above) he refers to the fact that those who choose not to adhere to the accredited versions are likely to incur sanctions. In particular in the case of 'high-level' issues – as in the 'sustainable consumption' case above – there is an expectation that the versions seen as faulted, and collectively rejected, must not be used as grounds for further inference (cf. Pollner, 1987): this would be seen, as Amelia one day spelled out, as “fostering conflict”. A practice, she reports, seen as “being extremely dangerous, because it's your reputation that becomes at stake”. The risk is to be labelled as someone “not helpful”: someone not useful in 'taking things forward' and therefore someone that will not be

found on anybody's list of the 'key contacts': isolation from the 'relevant' circles, then, will inevitably impair chances of recognition, and therefore promotions (cf. Rose, 1984:154)

'Doing the rounds'

After Marcus, I characterised earlier the policy 'teams' and 'areas' as embedded in a system of relationships composed of several layers of groups and operations. After 'making their own mind' on a 'policy problem', the task at hand for 'Grade7s' is that of recognising, within that complexity, which relationships are effectively 'relevant' and must be taken into account for 'development'. The work in question proceeds with a scanning and analysis of where 'obligations' lie (internal documentation) and what sort of 'process' it would be necessary to follow to 'progress' policy. This business is usually conducted through 'rounds of meetings' – a series of activities also known as 'doing the rounds'. Under the guidance of deputy directors and directors, 'Grade7s' engage in what is known as the 'consultation stage'. This amounts, in the words of one of them, to 'doing due diligence': the working objective is “to specify everything at the beginning, otherwise you may end up with a very poor outcome” (interview). The basic mechanism of 'consultation' was spelled out by Amelia:

you realise very soon that any policy, without exception, will have consequences in several other areas of the work both of your department and of government. Therefore you need to ask opinions to many different people who know details of those areas, mainly because you want to make sure the policy you are developing will not create problems elsewhere. Your aim is to be aware of potential problems and address those well in advance.

The first port of call for those 'leading' on 'development', after preliminary agreeing the 'line' within one's team, are other government officers, either in one's own Department, or in other government agencies. The procedures are at times identified as 'working across desks' (interview). Policy 'ideas', or 'issues' are said to 'bounce around': usually officers with some experience of the 'area' will be asked for 'thoughts', either by circulating by email a quick outline of the 'issue', or at a more advanced stage, making available a preliminary 'draft' in writing for 'comments'. In many occasions, in particular when 'issues' are considered particularly 'sensitive', such consultations happen exclusively in person, in meeting rooms, and an explicit request “not to write anything

down, as it can be used against the Department” (interview) can be made by seniors. The alternative course of action, and the most common, is to work up a draft document, outlining the 'issues' – this is often called a 'narrative'. 'Grade7s' are usually in charge of the initial drafting.

Officers are instructed not to consider 'policy areas' as insulated from each other. On the contrary, they learn that they can heavily overlap. A 'policy' such as an intervention on farmers' practices for irrigation, to give a quick (and uncomplicated) example, will fall under several of the 'areas' composing DEFRA. Officers sitting in the 'rural development programme' area, 'water availability and quality', 'farming', 'crops', 'EU agriculture', 'soils' *may* all have a say on whether the proposed change in the practice can encounter 'problems'. If such intervention, to follow the example, entails the adoption of a new pump technology, the 'case' will also fall under the remit of 'energy-using products', so the 'team' with such 'responsibility' in DEFRA will have to be consulted, as well as the team covering a similar remit – this based at DECC, a different Department. Situations when officers need to get involved with other Departments are not unusual. Furthermore, some of such 'responsibility' for some specific features of the irrigation technology can lie in the hands of one of the many 'executive agencies', 'non departmental public bodies', or 'public corporations' that form the so-called 'delivery network' of DEFRA (cf. Chapter 4). In the specific case, both the Environment Agency (an 'executive agency') and British Waterways (a 'public corporation'), may well need to have a say around the fitness of the practice with the existing system of water management. The bottom line, for officers, is that there is a number of potential sources to 'consult' in order to define, and refine, the original 'policy idea' on 'encouraging innovative methods of irrigation for rural areas with water scarcity problems' (internal documentation). The preliminary phases of 'developing a policy idea' in this sense lie on the ability of the officers to recognise where to go to find 'appropriate evidence' and who to involve to obtain it (cf. competency framework document). 'Grade7s', or whoever 'leads' on the 'strand' of policy development, are in charge of 'starting the conversations' and 'investigate' each 'policy issue' on its own right. Their work entwines the need to gather technical knowledge from the 'experts' and work out problems in a puzzle-solving fashion (Button and Sharrock, 1998), and the need to 'doing the rounds' to determine the sources of expertise available to them.

The way to go about these preliminary stages are first in the form of 'informal' contacts

with colleagues: officers use their networks to tap into existing 'knowledge' of the issues. 'Obvious' problems to 'clear' before proceeding any further is whether the 'idea' is being taken forward by someone else ('duplication'), or if a precedent in that 'direction' exists, and if it does, where that led to (see 'legacy'). As noted earlier in the chapter, these preliminary tasks do not follow, and cannot follow, a pre-existing step-by-step procedure. By its own nature, the 'developing' of 'policy ideas' is *iterative* (cf. Edwards, 2001), as the potential problems are *emergent*. The selection of sources proceeds through a sort of snowball effect, where initial informants – usually colleagues 'across the desk' – nominate 'people they know' who could potentially contribute to refine 'what is known' (fieldnotes). Marcus, confirming Dylan's view, instructed me on the fact there is not a clear-cut 'model of engagement', rather, there are 'key relationships' that cannot be ignored (informal conversation).

The 'conversations' are usually entertained with the objective of gaining access to specific information ('data') and promote 'collaboration'. Meetings are organised to meet such objectives. A 'policy idea' that is seen as a 'progress' by separate policy 'areas' has more chances of being 'taken forward' – it has found, in the local language, 'allies'. By doing 'consultation, the 'team' who 'owns' the work increasingly refine the 'idea' and gauge its 'fitness' with other areas' 'commitments'. Necessary condition for proceeding further is the approval of the 'deputy director' (DD) who supervises the team. By routine, this is sought every time 'allies' are found: officers need permission to establish contacts that go beyond a 'quick chat', and that lay the grounds for a 'collaboration'. As executives know very well, many 'ideas' are abandoned at this early stage. Directors are different in their style of leadership (fieldnotes), but the general sense officers convey in interviews is that seniors are a very 'cautious' specie (cf. Dale, 1941): “there is reluctance at senior level to make decisions and the reasons for that is not always clear” (interview with 'Grade7'). Given that interventions, and with them the work for their 'design', will need to be funded, seniors have a clearer idea than 'executives' and 'Grade7s' of the availability of resources: some policy 'ideas' – no matter how original, or convincing – may not 'fit' the 'spending commitments' for the year to come. One must be ready to accept that explanations are not always due: “it just wasn't the right time” (fieldnotes), commented swiftly an officer whose work was sidelined, before moving onto her next assignment, in a totally unrelated area to the one he had spent several months. Many 'ideas', nonetheless, do meet the appetite of seniors. Generally this happens either when a 'commitment' for 'development' stems from ministers, or from

seniors themselves. In the latter case, 'development' is said to follow the Department 'strategic direction'. This comprehends initiatives that are prompted by other sources, to which the Department is accountable. The European Union is one example, but there are many other sources of 'momentum', such as the National Audit Office and Parliamentary Committees, or pressure groups whose voice becomes prominent (cf. Rose, 1984). Many 'strands of work' are also initiated because they are scheduled to (cf. Feldman, 1989). In the settings, all of these are considered legitimate 'drivers for policy' (internal documentation). Officers learn that "the government works in a very fluid environment: you need to respond to a variety of sources" (interview data). In many cases, officers 'develop policy' that needs 'approval' from the ministers, but that is not pivoted by them (cf. Edwards, 2001). Wherever the 'momentum' comes from, the work proceeds in the fashion outlined above: 'across desks', thus mobilising different sources of 'organisational memory' and 'evidence'. To be able to proceed, officers need to understand the 'profile' of the issue, or its 'scope': this is the likely impact on the Department in terms of work required to move towards the following stages of the 'process'. Again, as Amelia commented above, the practical work entails understanding the prospective *implications* of the intervention. This is done in order to avoid disputes either within the Department, or in between Departments, or at Cabinet level (cf. Rose, 1984), and indeed when interventions are announced in the public domain. It is, listening to officers, where things can become seriously complicated (fieldnotes). In general terms, complications are most likely to arise when the proposed 'line' of intervention diverges substantially from what is 'already being done', or from 'what we were going to do anyway' (fieldnotes). Extending for instance the funding for an ongoing 'pilot' – i.e. the trial of an intervention on a limited population – needs a far easier 'case' to be assembled to justify the request. Specifications are already in place, as are the 'reasons' for why the pilot was initiated. There may be a piece of 'evaluation' confirming the efficacy of the intervention. This would be what is considered 'low-level stuff' (interview). In these cases, a 'Grade6' explained:

the policy is developed within the team, submitted to ministers, ministers decide whether they want to do it or not based on the teams recommendations and it either gets done or not.

A number of 'strands of work' begin and end within these premises. On the basis of the 'narrative', officers draft a 'submission' – this being the most common method to communicate with Ministers – a short document of, according to internal guidance:

no longer than 4 sides of A4 outlining a brief, clear and concise summary of the issue... a succinct explanation of exactly what [officers] want the Minister to do, including whether he needs to clear or sign something... and a brief and relevant background that is relevant [sic] to the decision that is being taken.

Submissions reach the 'private office', then the famous 'ministerial box' (see Rhodes, 2011). Within a specified time-frame, proportional to the 'urgency' of the matter, the minister(s) respond with a decision and comments, these latter usually transcribed in writing by secretaries and 'fed back' to the officers. Officers are well aware that the ultimate 'decisions' do not rest with them (cf. Rose, 1984): all they do is providing 'informed advice', based on a 'critical scrutiny' (fieldnotes).

By contrast, the process of initiating, specifying, and gaining 'approval' for a 'line' that diverges from previously undertaken actions presents a number of further tasks officer need to carry out in preparation. The tasks augment in number and sophistication the deeper the implications of the proposed policy, as well as in relation to “the complexity of the regulatory and policy framework in place: the higher the complexity, more manpower is needed” (interview). The nature and the organisation of this 'manpower' is what I address in the following chapter.

Chapter 7: Through the Process

Introduction

This Chapter considers the nature of the problems 'generalist' officers at 'Grade7' rank must address in order to develop policies, or to assess the potential to do so in the typical tentative fashion that, we have seen, characterises policy work. Central to their task is the knowledge of the procedural requirements in place, in particular with regards to the legal and the economic analyses forming the basis of proposals and 'narratives'. In order to proceed through the 'process', officers consult colleagues with specialist expertise. The Chapter focuses on the considerations officers must draw upon to determine the feasibility of courses of actions. Typically, officers proceed to draw together the threads of arguments in support of a 'line' or another, these in turn based, primarily, on legal and economic assessments. Some elements of the documentation needed in support of proposals for policy development are described by proposing actual examples from the office's activities. Finally, attention is placed on what happens, and what steps are taken, when further problems come to light.

'Lawyers'

As we have seen, complex interventions require officers to gather more detailed information around the potential problems courses of action could be confronted by. 'Grade7s' and their teams, in such cases, must consult 'widely', meaning that they need to 'bring in' further sources of knowledge: as 'generalists' it would be difficult for them, otherwise, to gather a 'full picture'. Their first port of call is the so-called 'specialists'. These are officers employed to overview the 'strand of works' from specific disciplines' 'perspectives'. In 'core' DEFRA, the major 'specialist professions' were the 'legal teams' composed of 'lawyers', the 'social researchers', the 'economists', the 'statisticians', a small number of 'operational researchers', and the 'scientists'. A typical 'process' of early 'consultation' would involve at least some of these sources: particularly important, according to officers' accounts, are the contributions of 'lawyers' and 'economists'.

Lawyers' 'advice' is usually the first to be sought (fieldnotes) as 'legal' matters have deep consequences for the determination of the 'scope' of potential measures. Key information for officers designing measures is in fact the status of existing legislation, which must be understood in detail. Past 'Acts' and 'Codes' are usually the starting point for further considerations, as well as 'legally-binding agreements' with particular agencies or bodies, either domestic or international (e.g. the EU, or the United Nations). 'Lawyers' are perfectly placed, for instance, to assess whether regulations that are part of European Union policy have or have not binding legal force for the UK as member state, and whether or not the UK may incur in fines in case of non implementation. 'Lawyers' are also able to inform officers on which 'legal form' policy measures can (or must) take: given the 'problem', are there 'regulatory positions' that be may need to be amended? And if there are, are these 'primary' or 'secondary legislation'? Is new legislation required, or is the new policy of a 'deregulatory' nature? If new legislation is required, is a 'statutory instrument' necessary, or can the policy be implemented through a 'code of practice issued under statutory powers'? Are there any other 'contractual issues' with other agencies? Is the policy going to cover the whole of the UK, or has the area of regulation involved been delegated to the 'Devolved Administrations'? 'Grade7s' learn that the 'legal issues' must be assessed 'very early in the process' as the nature of the 'process' itself will vary according to the answers to the questions above. An example in point can be made contrasting measures that get to be considered 'regulatory' or 'deregulatory'.

Officers describe the 'process' as a system of “hoops that have to be jumped through in order to move a policy ahead” (interview), or a “series of 'gates' which must be passed through successfully, before the activity can proceed to the next stage” (internal documentation). Typically, a 'regulatory' measure requiring new legislation, before being implemented, goes through 'stages' of 'formal external consultation', 'impact assessment', and other required 'clearances' (on which, more below). Lawyers' advice is key to determine the status of a potential policy measure: lawyers can assess, using their 'specialist' knowledge, the likelihood of 'compliance' and the 'present state of the law' (fieldnotes). As a result of the implementation of the Coalition government commitment towards 'less regulation' (cf. Chapter 6) new policies that were considered 'deregulatory' – i.e. removing or reducing existing legislation – could be 'fast-tracked'. This meant that many of such 'hoops' or 'gates' could be bypassed. Lawyers' opinion on the possibility of achieving policy objectives by scrapping legislation, rather than creating

new laws, was key to taking a shortcut through the 'process', avoiding *both* the requirement of a formal consultation, *and* of an 'impact assessment' – as for the newly-introduced 'process' requirements.

This was the case of the reform of the so-called 'animal welfare codes', whose initial policy proposal, and associated 'narrative', was circulating in the Department at the time of my placement. The proposal sought to revoke statutory codes of recommendations providing guidance to farmers on how to comply with the welfare rules in the pig, meat chicken and laying hen industries (internal documentation). The deregulatory approach under consideration at the time (2012) was the revocation of statutory codes “in favour of non-statutory industry drafted guidance”, meaning that the 'codes' should be re-drafted by the industry under DEFRA officials' supervision, and the old 'codes' scrapped. According to the documentation outlining the proposal, this was the minister's favoured approach at the time, “as it aligns [with] the wider governmental deregulatory approaches” (internal documentation). As for *all* new policy under consideration, the 'lead official' (a 'Grade7') of the animal welfare 'policy area' drafted a 'Policy Appraisal Statement' (PAS), a form constituting the first step towards the 'making' of a policy confronting a more complex 'framework'. This, according to the heading on the form itself

records the initial options identified for [the policy under consideration] delivery, the existing evidence available to appraise those options (including evaluations of existing policy) and any further evidence required to reach informed final proposals for considerations by Ministers.

In the example, the advice of lawyers gains prominence halfway through a 10-page document outlining a “do nothing option” and a “non-regulatory” one, providing the justification for moving ahead with a potentially controversial proposal. The 'Grade7' acknowledges in writing the 'risk of criticism', and uses a 'legal' angle to justify the policy 'rationale':

*Revocation of statutory codes could leave the Government open to criticism from welfare organisations that our stance on farm animal welfare is weakened. However, the advice from lawyers is that the impact of the change from statutory codes to non statutory guidance on enforcement of animal welfare offences will, in reality, be limited. It is not a legal requirement to be compliant with the provisions laid out in the current codes, despite their statutory nature. Therefore no offence is committed by not complying with a specific provision of the code. However, it is a legal obligation for farmers to be acquainted [...] with the statutory codes. No equivalent obligation, to be acquainted with the **voluntary** non-statutory industry drafted guidance, will be placed on farmers. In a prosecution for breach*

of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 or farm animal welfare regulations made under it, a failure to comply with relevant provisions of the current codes can be relied upon by the court as tending to establish liability for that offence. Equally, compliance with such a provision can be relied on as tending to negative liability. Compliance or non-compliance with non-statutory guidance would also be considered by the court but could result in less evidential weight being placed on it – although in practice we do not believe this will be critical. Where a statutory code no longer reflects the present state of the law it will have a much reduced value in any prosecution and could even be counterproductive where there is a conflict with current legislation. Therefore, on balance, we conclude that criticism from welfare organisations relating to the change to codes would be limited. A process to ensure the quality of the guidance though will mitigate any risk⁴⁶.

The explanation of the preference for a non-regulatory option is here grounded in legal language, in stark contrast with the rest of the document where a plainer English is used. The officer in charge of drafting the PAS resorts to legal technicalities, such as the difference between “being liable for an offence” versus “tending to establish liability for that offence”, and the “evidential weight” violations of codes results “in courts”. Legalese, in this 'case', provides the vocabulary for the description of what “in reality [...] will be critical or not”: the view expressed in the PAS form follows thus the “lawyers' advice”, endorsing and proposing to 'move forward' with the deregulation of the 'animal welfare codes'. This, as shown below in a screenshot from the document, qualifies for 'fast track', and *therefore* would not be required to follow all the 'process' in place to 'scrutinise' proposals.

⁴⁶ Bold formatting in the original.

Regulatory options (Considering the current regulatory landscape)*:

We will need to revoke the statutory codes as they are replaced by non-statutory industry guidance. However, this is deregulatory rather than regulatory.	
Would these options result in additional costs to business?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Could such costs exceed £1m per year?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

iii) Options that have been ruled out (Why have these been ruled out?):

None

3. Initial data to be transferred to the Regulatory Management Tool

Unique policy identification number	
An Impact Assessment will be required	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
A formal consultation will be required	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
For legislative options - The type of legislation will be	Primary <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Affirmative <input type="checkbox"/> Negative <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
For legislative options - The impact on existing statute will be	New <input type="checkbox"/> Amending <input type="checkbox"/> Deregulatory <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Repealing <input type="checkbox"/>
For legislative options - Its status under OIOO will be	Out of scope <input type="checkbox"/> An Out <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> An In £1m- <input type="checkbox"/> An In £1m+ <input type="checkbox"/>
For legislative options - The following will be required	A sunset <input type="checkbox"/> A review clause <input type="checkbox"/>
Fast track Policy clearance is available	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
Target date for call for evidence consultation	
Target date for call for consultation on proposals	

4

Extract 7.1: An extract from a Policy Appraisal Statement (PAS), a form 'Grade7s' fill at early stages of policy development to determine the further step in the 'process'.

Lawyers' 'scrutiny' is also sought (and required) to receive 'assurance' that the proposed measures will not run into the 'risk' of 'judicial reviews', a procedure by which UK courts can challenge government policies *after* their administrative approval (cf. Oliver, 2003; Foster 2005:272) and quash them if found unlawful. While officers are not required to master technical legal matters in depth (cf. Page and Jenkins, 2005:49) they must familiarise with what concerns the 'strand of work' they have at hand. In many cases, in particular when policies are concerned with complex architectures of contractual relationships, the 'legal issues' are burdensome to untangle. A 'generalist' in DECC with responsibility for the 'development' of options on energy policy on what are known as 'district heating' or 'combined heat and power (CHP)' described his work in these terms:

there are lots of legal issues about it, if you actually wanted [CHP] to become a mainstream technology, about how you actually do join these schemes together, who owns them, who owns the pipes, who is your customer, who is your relationship with, is it the supplier of the heat who is the end customer or is it the person who actually distributes it [...] there's no hard and fast rules about how you do that on heat networks.

“Hard and fast rules”, officers learn, rarely apply. In fact, each 'strand of work' – each policy at 'development' stage – is a 'case' on its own right. Each must find its way through the 'process', and the 'process' itself is a changeable entity. Each 'strand' requires an *ad-hoc* gathering of information from a combination of sources. 'Lawyers' are often only one of them.

'Economists'

'Grade7s' and 'generalists' at all ranks know as fact of life that their activities of 'developing options for policy and reform' accrue to generate 'proposals' that are "underpinned by sound economic analysis" (HM Treasury, 2011a:9; see also Foster, 2005; Spackman, 2013) and that the core of the decision-making in government relies upon "methods, models, tools and analytical procedures" that are grounded in "the application of economic theory" (internal communication). To put it more simply, as Amelia and Cary did on separate occasions but conveying the same sense: "after all, policy making is about money". Invariably, all 'policy proposals' must demonstrate "that any proposed intervention is likely to be worth the cost" (HM Treasury, 2011a:4). Drawing from private sector terminology, 'policy proposals' are thus presented as 'business cases' based on, at least, an analysis of costs and benefits of 'options' as "formal criteria" (Foster, 2005:39). 'Specialist' officers identified in the settings as the 'economists' play a central role in providing both 'advice' and 'analysis' to the 'policy teams' on how to structure a 'case', and what 'techniques' can (or must) be used to 'justify' a line of action. The main point 'economists' are called to address is whether or not there is a case for 'government' to 'do something', or just let the 'market cover naturally' a potential 'area' of intervention (fieldnotes). Such considerations constitute the backbone of all 'narratives' (fieldnotes).

As for legal issues, 'generalists' do not need to have a detailed and 'academic' understanding of economic theory. They must, however, be familiar with 'basic economic concepts' and understand 'how markets work' (fieldnotes). Routinely, officers are invited to attend 'training workshops' titled 'economics for non-economists', where the most important of such concepts are presented. These courses usually last two working days, and promise to provide staff with "simple yet reliable conceptual toolkit for economic analysis" (internal communication). Central to the 'toolkit' and to the working knowledge at play in internal discussions is the distinction between "markets vs. command (that is government control) as alternative organizing mechanisms" (internal documentation) and the associated question: "when should governments intervene and when is it best to leave things to markets?" (idem). The general expectation for officers, at least at 'Grade7' level, is that they fully grasp the 'current thinking' on how to reply to such question, i.e. they must be able to discern the circumstances in which markets are 'economically efficient' as by Treasury definition

(cf. HM Treasury, 2011a:11), and others cases “where 'market failures' may call for state action” (internal documentation). They recurrently apply such reasoning to the 'strands of work' they 'own'. As part of such reasoning, 'generalists' need to be able to *think* about measures in terms of “the groups who will be affected by the proposal”, assign these into the categories of 'business', 'public sector' (or 'government'), and 'consumers' (cf. Chapter 5), and address economic questions such as: “how will proposals impact on the market and specifically consumers and businesses?” (BIS, 2013:para 2.3.23). These questions are considered the first, basic and unavoidable “level[s] of analysis [that are] a minimum requirement [to] apply to all cases” (BIS, 2013:para 2.2.7), and open the way to the following steps: the 'quantification' and 'monetisation' of 'effects' and impacts' (cf. HM Treasury, 2011a; BIS 2013). The 'economists' expertise must be 'brought in' to answer the questions and therefore to 'validate the issues'. This is essential to proceed with further stages of 'clearances'. Central to the technique is the 'estimate' of what are known as Equivalent Annual Net Cost to Business (EANCB) – how much, in simpler words, businesses or other 'civil society organisations' will have to pay as result of introducing a regulation or measure of other kinds. This is obtained discounting the monetised estimate of benefits from the estimate of cost on annual basis (including the so-called transitional costs), following a “standard method used in finance” (HMG, 2011a:10). The determination of EANCB numbers is one central component of documents known as 'impact assessments' (IA) (cf. Radaelli, 2009; Gibbons and Parker, 2012), a form 'policy team' are required to prepare for all measures other than 'deregulatory' ones (cf. above) and those that have a negligible 'additional cost' to businesses (internal documentation). As for lawyers' input, the economists' one becomes paramount to assess the 'scope' of the proposed measures, which in turn, as we have seen, determines 'what's next' in the 'process'.

Summary: Analysis & Evidence

Policy Option 1

Description:

FULL ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

Price Base Year	PV Base Year	Time Period Years	Net Benefit (Present Value (PV)) (£m)		
			Low: Optional	High: Optional	Best Estimate:
COSTS (£m)		Total Transition (Constant Price) Years		Average Annual (excl. Transition) (Constant Price)	Total Cost (Present Value)
Low		Optional		Optional	Optional
High		Optional		Optional	Optional
Best Estimate					
Description and scale of key monetised costs by 'main affected groups' Maximum of 5 lines					
Other key non-monetised costs by 'main affected groups' Maximum of 5 lines					
BENEFITS (£m)		Total Transition (Constant Price) Years		Average Annual (excl. Transition) (Constant Price)	Total Benefit (Present Value)
Low		Optional		Optional	Optional
High		Optional		Optional	Optional
Best Estimate					
Description and scale of key monetised benefits by 'main affected groups' Maximum of 5 lines					
Other key non-monetised benefits by 'main affected groups' Maximum of 5 lines					
Key assumptions/sensitivities/risks					Discount rate (%)
Maximum of 5 lines					
BUSINESS ASSESSMENT (Option 1)					
Direct impact on business (Equivalent Annual) £m:				Score for Business Impact Target (qualifying provisions only) £m:	
Costs:	Benefits:	Net:			

Extract 7.2: The section of the Impact Assessment (IA) form where costs and benefits of each option are reported, with the calculation of the EANCB numbers (bottom section of the page).

Economists' guidance and advice thus become necessary when decisions have to be made around how to proceed with 'quantifying' and 'monetising' the “likely magnitude of costs and benefits” (internal documentation) and which 'techniques' and 'modes' of analysis should be used, or are considered “most appropriate” (internal documentation).

Officers consistently refer to the *Green Book* (HMG, 2011a) – a Treasury 'guidance' document for officers also available to the public – as the 'framework' they use to prepare the economic 'appraisal' underpinning 'IAs'. 'Economists' themselves rely on a larger set of sources, most of which circulate as internal literature, part of which is published. 'Specialist' textbooks detail the available methodologies used to develop cost-benefit analyses, the “bible” (Spackman, 2013:5,n.2) of which is considered a manual by Bateman *et al.* (2002) with its associated “summary guide” (Pearce and Özdemiroglu, 2002). Here 'economists' find instructions on how to apply “stated preference techniques” (idem), a method to “value good and services which don't normally have prices” (para 05) based on assessing “people's willingness to pay (WTP) or willingness to accept compensation (WTA)” (para 2.01) through a range of “survey methods” (para 7.01) – mostly “questionnaires [where] respondents are asked directly for their WTP ('What are you willing to pay?' or 'Are you willing to pay £X?)" (para 1.06). This methodology allows for the creation of “hypothetical *payment scenarios*” (para 07) that “can be directly compared, and specific actions can be compared with doing nothing (i.e. the base case scenario)” (para 2.01). To learn such strategies, part of a menu of available methodologies⁴⁷, 'economists' attend 'specialist training', usually in the form of 'conferences' and 'workshops' provided by the 'cross-Whitehall' Government Economic Service (GES), a 'section' of the Civil Service which defines itself “the professional body for economists in the UK public sector” (gov.uk, no date). They also 'learn from each other and from senior economists' (fieldnotes) while working on specific 'strands of work'.

'Impact assessment' documentation, once prepared by 'policy teams' with the 'economists' advice, enters further stages of 'clearances'. Which route the documentation takes is again proportional to the 'scope' of the measure or 'project': the higher the overall resources needed by the Department the more complex is the system of 'sign-offs', with thresholds at 250k, one million and 20 million pounds (internal documentation). In general terms, 'sign-offs' are required first 'internally', by 'senior economists' in the Departments, and 'externally', by a committee of eight members independent from the Civil Service, called Regulatory Policy Committee (RPC). Since 2010, the RPC reviews all the IAs produced by all UK government Departments under a

⁴⁷ A more recent overview of these is a publication by Fujiwara and Campbell (2011), two economists from the Department of Work and Pensions, considered internally a more detailed and effective guidance than the *Green Book* (HM Treasury, 2011a), and consequently cited as useful “supplementary guidance” to follow when drafting an 'IAs'.

new mandate of the Coalition Government (2010-2015). This in order to make operative the 'overarching agendas' requiring the reduction of regulative measures to a minimum, by implementing the policies of 'one-in one-out' and the 'Red Tape Challenge' (cf. Chapter 6; see also Gibbons and Parker, 2012).

Tensions existed at the time of my placement in DEFRA between 'policy teams' and the management with regards to a number of 'negative opinions' received in response to 'IAs' presented to the RPC, and the role of 'economists' in the process of drafting them. The email exchange below documents such tensions. It circulated in June 2012 in between managers and 'seniors' in occasion of the organisation of a 'workshop on how to do Impact Assessments' aimed at 'senior officers', and cascaded down to officers at lower rank 'for their information'. A manager wrote:

[Senior officer]

We're having a workshop on 22 June about Impact Assessments. As I'm on leave next week, could we pin down the agenda? It seems to me that the burning issues are:

IA and other scrutiny processes

As you know, we're proposing to streamline the way we manage the Government's regulatory scrutiny process, including IAs. This is designed to reduce the burden on policy teams and give them a clearer direction of travel, but also to ensure that policy teams involve my team, economists and other experts much earlier in the policy development process. Typically, when things go wrong, it's because we've been engaged too late in the process. Also, a lot of policy teams are not considering alternatives to regulation properly but, again, it's difficult to influence them if we're not involved at the start.

[Officer] is currently thinking through what this might look like and we can present that at the workshop [...] it would be good if we could agree a joint story. We can demonstrate benefits to policy teams but some may regard our wish to be involved earlier as an unwelcome interference.

The email received long responses from a number of 'seniors' and 'Grade7s', highlighting several 'problems' with regards to the “burning issue” of the economists' contribution to policy development. Particularly interesting with regards to their role and the associated 'clearance process' with the 'RPC' are the following points, summarised by a 'senior officer':

[Manager]

A few thoughts (with thanks to [name of three officers]) in advance of the workshop:

RPC

It's important to recognise where the RPC are coming from on IAs. Their job is to bear down on regulation so they are not looking to do Dep[artmen]ts any favours. On the contrary they are looking for reasons to thwart and delay regulation. They have 3 people looking at each

IA (economist official/policy official/committee member) so they are going over them thoroughly but of course they don't have knowledge of policy area. We need to draft IAs with this audience in mind.

Engaging analysts

The problem is that evidence/analysis are not integrated well enough into the policy development process. The IA is regarded as a hurdle to be overcome rather than a useful tool to identify gaps in evidence and evaluate alternative policy options. Costs and benefits should be driving policy right from the start whereas we only start thinking about what costs and benefits look like towards the end of policy development.

More generally, policy teams' view of economics is too narrow. What economists bring to policy assessment is a way of thinking about a problem in its entirety which focuses on rationale for intervention, resource use, incentives and efficiency.

[...]

The tensions come to light as increasingly, and by contrast, officers in 'policy teams' claimed that the work of 'economists' was taking precedence over any other consideration. This constituted an issue for 'Grade7s', who were called to tackle 'issues' from several different 'disciplines' and 'perspectives', including those of 'scientists' and 'engineers' with a technical knowledge of whatever the 'policy' measure under consideration involved. A 'generalist' at 'Grade7' rank who had just left a post in the Department claimed in an interview:

There's much more economic input now, I mean, almost to the point where that seems to be driving the agenda. Just before I left that definitely seemed to be the case. Whereas before it seemed to be the other way around, it was the policy first, you know, there was more of a strategic outlook or what we were trying to deliver and then the economics came after that, the input delivered the rationale, now it almost seems [...] the economics just come first and then the policy afterwards.

This view of 'economists' "running the show", as the same officer had it later in the interview, was echoed by others, for instance the officer involved in the work on 'combined heat and power' (CHP, see above), who claimed the same sort of dominance of the economic 'discipline'. After describing in detail the 'issues' he had to tackle, mostly 'legal' and engineering-related (cf. above), he concluded the description of his work on the 'strand of work' by stating:

I think one of the problems I had with this towards the end was because [they were] just looking from an economics basis: "Should we support gas CHP?", and it seemed to come down to the economics.

Policy proposals being sidelined, delayed, or simply abandoned in the early stages of internal discussions on the grounds of economic considerations seemed in fact common occurrence. To give an example of how these matters become central to the internal

discussion of 'policy development' I report, with my fieldnotes, an episode I witnessed at a 'project board' meeting in preparation of the Water White Paper (HMG and DEFRA, 2011) – a document outlining government measures to tackle the problem of “pressures on water resources caused by climate change and population growth” (Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 2012:6). The 'policy background', as officers call it, was the need to address the problems of water scarcity and droughts that, increasingly, were putting water supplies in some part of the country under stress (cf. HMG and DEFRA, 2011). I attended the meeting few days after my arrival at DEFRA.

I can shadow Alice at the project board on water efficiency. It is the highest level meeting I have attended so far. The atmosphere is quite formal. The aim of the meeting is to define what will go into the water white paper and what will be left out. There is a sense of urgency and the chair makes it clear soon into the proceedings. There are nine people attending (excluding me) plus two people are connected via spider phone [...] The chair makes a point about the overall theme of the white paper, which boils down to whether putting the narrative in economic terms would be perceived as inappropriate, given that “people perceive water as a right” [...] “In a perfect world” the chair explains “if there exist s a benefit for customers the market will cover it naturally, but the water market is full of imperfections, so there is scope for steering” [...] Alice presents a paper on an initiative to convince people to save water in their domestic use through engaging plumbers in providing advice on water efficiency devices⁴⁸ [...] The paper is praised, but the officer over the phone points out: “on the practical side is important to ask a general question: is promoting water efficiency a good thing? And on which grounds? Is it going to pay-off?” Another officer reinforces the criticism: “what is the interest of water companies? Where is the financial incentive for water companies to get involved in this?” Alice offers only a vague reply, saying this need more work and they should have a more detailed discussion. [...] The next point on the agenda is a discussion of a paper on technologies for rain re-use systems (in practice devices that collect water from roofs and treat it in a way it can be re-used for gardening or other uses). The officer presenting the paper explains the proposal saying the use of such technologies could be extended to the entire population, and an incentive could be offered in the form of a tax break. The chair makes again his point around market eventually “covering this naturally”. The tension is against his argument, with another officer arguing that “it is the government structuring the market”. The paper asks “what is the line the government should take on this?” The officer over the phone, an economist, says in a rather heated tone: “Why if the government haven't got a line on how I should listen to my music, on CD or on mp3, or on how I should watch movies, on DVD or Blu-Ray, it should have a line on this?” The chair thanks the officer for having put his point “so clearly”. He asks a further question on whether the technology saves the customers money. The author of the paper admits “it will take years and years before customers get to the breakeven point” [...] “So should we bring this forward?” “We can say evidence is equivocal, and definitely further research is needed, so [long pause] I wouldn't rush to it...” Another officer makes a point about the usefulness of the use of such systems for farmers, because “farmers have large roof dimensions” and “they have much more confidence with machinery anyway”. So it is decided that if the government has to have a line on this is it will be that of “encouraging businesses to think about it”.

48 The associated project, 'led' by Alice, was named Plug-It. Online documentation about the project (piloted, then abandoned) was still available at the time of print. See <http://www.waterwise.org.uk/pages/plug-it.html> [Accessed: 24 April 2017].

We see here the interplay between the economists' 'way of thinking' and more technical considerations underpinning two proposals for policy measures. Both are quashed, or delayed, on the grounds that the water companies' interests would be affected and that it did not exist an 'economic' case to support government intervention. Even before more detailed calculations of the kind I described above are made, it appears clear that, as in the case of 'sustainable consumption' measures discussed earlier (cf. Chapter 6), any proposal endorsing interventions in the 'market' would find resistance. This view recurred in officers' statements in the following months of my placement, with one, for instance, stating during a team meeting that “the core problem is that policies can do little when it comes to impose or suggest businesses which products they should sell. We can do nothing” (fieldnotes). The 'way to go' in pursuing 'sustainability' and 'environmental measures' had to take a different route, one that 'boded well' with the current economists' arguments: “you could compel local authorities, you can give VAT breaks, but the best thing to do is that businesses volunteer for signing up deals. Some policy intervention are simply unacceptable at the moment” a 'senior' explained in another meeting (fieldnotes). The general sense, shared (willy-nilly) by officers in the various teams working on 'promoting environmental sustainability', was restricted to a non-interventionist 'line', summarised by one officer in this way: “we must say businesses are becoming a lot more sensible to environmental problem than in the past. However it is quite difficult to think about how to push a business to sell a particular product. At the moment we should work with businesses on rectifying misconceptions, and convince them they should care” (fieldnotes). 'Voluntary agreements' seemed to be seen as the preferred (and perhaps the only) policy instrument at officers' disposal (cf. Taylor *et al.*, 2012) in the 'policy context' of the time.

'Scientists' and 'evidence'

The activities discussed so far comprise what officers experience as the preliminary stages of 'developing policy'. Caution, as we have seen, is an important component and one that is deeply-rooted in officers' thinking (cf. Dale, 1941): without the careful analyses at this early design stage potential policies are likely to get stranded even before casting off. The grounds to 'move forward' with a proposal must be *solid*

enough to pass a series of tests: first the internal processes of clearance that checks on initial requirements, second the objections of the groups interested in the interventions, third (if contemplated by the 'process') a Parliamentary scrutiny, and then the potential criticism of the press and the public. All these matters, at design stage, *must* be considered in advance. The 'Grade7s' drafting the 'narratives' thus ask themselves, and colleagues, questions around what they see as *potential* impediments to the implementation: "will the intervention be effective? "Will it demonstrate value for the (public) money we will spend on it?" (email exchange). Will it touch on matters that are considered sensitive by the public, or by some particular groups? How can the successfulness of the intervention be measured? What would be an appropriate 'metric' to do so? (fieldnotes). Whenever the answer to these questions is "we don't know", or there exists internally a divergence of views, officers classify the lack of information as a 'problem': that is to say a matter that requires further investigation. In such fashion, in the local language, 'policy needs' become 'evidence needs': some 'data', 'model' or 'evidence-base' is called upon to uphold the rightfulness of the policy design. A 'Grade7' officer becomes thus in charge of assembling a body of 'relevant', adequate and explanatory materials to underpin, generally in writing, a potential rationale for a policy intervention. 'Narratives' can thus develop in 'option papers', and face the tests of the 'clearance' system. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to describing some of the methods in place to assemble further information to support 'cases', and what officers' are required to do to progress their quests for 'evidence'.

To understand how officers deal with the 'problems' of policy development it is useful to introduce two concepts often mentioned in the settings, both in talk and in internal documentation: they are *capacity* and *capability*. In the terminology of the Department management, 'capacity' refers to the amount of work that existing staff is able to take on, while 'capability' refers to whether or not the same staff have the skills to deal with the work necessary to solve the 'problems' emergent from the ongoing activities. Whenever 'evidence needs' are identified by policy officers, the ordinary 'next step' for the policy teams is to interrogate existing staff resources in these terms: 'is there the capacity to solve this problem?' (i.e. can some officers be assigned to the task?) and 'do we have the capability to solve it?' (i.e. do they have the skills necessary to carry out the task?) More commonly referred to as 'skills analysis', and most likely to form part of discussions held during policy-related meetings, this activity can lead to several outcomes. If the 'policy team' and its deputy director deem that the existing staff has both the capacity

and the capability to carry out the tasks necessary to solve the problem, the 'evidence research' is assigned 'in-house'. If, on the contrary, officers recognise that there is a lack of capacity or capability, or both, two options become open to them "to ensure relevant expertise is acquired" (fieldnotes): they can either hire new staff 'specialised' in the 'area', or they can commission the research through 'evidence procurement'. This latter option, the external commissioning of research, was, according to managers' estimates circulated internally, the one followed in the vast majority of the cases, with around 70% of research projects sourced from external providers, and most of the remainder assigned to executive agencies (DEFRA, 2012,*1)⁴⁹. The Department's 'evidence spend' for 2012 accrued to around the 10% of the overall budget (DEFRA, 2011a). It was subdivided into 35 'evidence programmes', each complementing the 'policy programmes' of the 'policy areas'. The role of the Department's 'scientists' can be understood by considering what is entailed in the 'management' of this portion of budget.

While unpacking the officers' lexical choices in referring to their own collective sense-making, I noted earlier their need to arrive at agreed (and therefore 'validated') descriptions of the world(s) they plan to reform under the direction of ministers. When generalist officers' knowledge of the technical aspects of policy proposals is not sufficient to proceed, in particular when interventions are complex, or when they target technologically advanced or highly specialised 'policy areas' (interview with 'Grade6'), 'Scientists' are 'brought in' to help policy officers to 'validate the issues'. The 'generalist' officers can thus delegate to 'scientists' (or more commonly in the language of the office, 'specialists') the task of assessing and judging the 'evidence' to support the resolution of identified 'problems'. The gathering, assessment and validation of the 'evidence' is arrived at through commissioning research, with the 'specialists' taking first the role of advisers to policy officers and then that of 'research managers' for 'projects' falling into the areas of their own specialisation⁵⁰. The procedures followed by officers to 'commission' and 'manage' evidence activities were codified in several hundred pages of internal guidance on 'how to commission research'. The main principle of operation to commission research from external providers is competitive tendering.

⁴⁹ References marked with '*' refer to unpublished DEFRA internal papers. A full description of these sources is provided in a separate section of the bibliography, at the end of the list.

⁵⁰ The 'evidence disciplines' recognised in DEFRA were, at 2012, economics, engineering, natural sciences, operational research, social research, statistics, and veterinary science.

Chapter 8: Research Needs

Introduction

The officers' quest for analyses that come to be considered valid for the purposes of policy development continues with the gathering of information – often identified as 'evidence' – that inform, or attempts to inform, the arguments in support of plans for government action, collectively agreed and generally summed up in internal papers called 'narratives'. 'Grade7s' officers ground their advice to ministers and senior officers, who, in turn, will have the last word on whether to proceed or not with the formulation of plans. This Chapter provides an overview of the activities carried out when research is commissioned, and it details the *menu of options* officers have at hand to proceed with their inquiries. The analysis highlights some of the tensions that can arise when officers are called to integrate 'evidence' and 'policy', and some of the negotiations involved in resolving such tensions. Like the activities related to project work considered in earlier chapters, policy officers are called to make a number of specific recommendations around what is required, and they need to work out how to arrive at arguments that, on the one hand, meet the specifications of overarching agendas and political 'directions', and, on the other hand, can stand the critical scrutiny that stakeholders, the press and the public will inevitably place on the plans. As for project work, research commissioning entails a careful, and *creative*, management of internal expectations, handling of the relationships with contractors, and consideration of stakeholders' interests. Within these territories – the Chapter shows – officers retain an extensive degree of discretion over the selection of their sources of information. They can buy relevant information from providers, but they can also take advantage of their position of control over the knowledge markets created by the Department's research budget and take free rides. Furthermore, as documented in the final section of the Chapter, officers can draw relevant knowledge from 'models' and 'information packages' stemming from the so-called 'policy paradigms' promoted within government circles. Imported with the promise of helping officers to ground their understandings on available 'evidence', these 'paradigms' consist of conceptual and heuristic tools officers can choose to 'validate' their descriptions and to justify plans for action. These tools, we shall see, work as shortcuts towards policy solutions, informed by peculiar 'ways of

thinking' around policy problems. Officers, as part of their attempts to make sense of the issues emerging out of their specific 'strands of work', are called upon to test the tools – with no guarantee of success – in their own 'policy areas'. With the presentation and the analysis of the current 'paradigms' in use at DEFRA at the time of my secondment, the Chapter concludes the examination of the activities associated with 'policy development', before moving on to consider, in the last two chapters of the thesis, practical examples of policy work in the sustainable consumption 'policy area'.

'Writing the specs'

On the back of a double-decker taking us from Whitehall to Charing Cross after work, Marcus alternates chatter on trivial matters to comments about the workings of the office. I welcomed his invitation to follow him to a conference at the headquarters of a think-tank he frequented occasionally, eager to witness what sort of gatherings civil servants attend in their own time. While the conference – we agreed later that evening at the pub – was “barely interesting”, what he had to say on our way to the venue illuminated much of my subsequent understanding of the DEFRA research activities:

you see there's so much talk around evidence-based policy-making these days, but, from our point of view, from the inside, that's a distorted idea. What we do is policy-based evidence-making, which is a very different business... (fieldnotes)

Marcus elaborated on this remark some days later when, on my request, he instructed me on which routes officers could take to source the information necessary to craft the kind of 'policy papers' and 'narratives' that constituted much of the work of 'policy development' they did. “In short – he said – the activities are based on having research groups and research councils and putting funding there”. He pointed out that, similarly to the interactions among officers in government, “there is no standard model of engagement”, but rather, several options at disposal to advance the officers' inquiries. What is most important, he continued, is commissioning “pieces of research that are valuable to us in terms of what we are trying to do in the next year or two”. The local concepts of 'legacy' and 'scope', described earlier, are again relevant here. Officers are after materials that fit with the existing 'policy context': as for policy ideas, also in research activities “you never start from a white sheet of paper”, as Marcus remarked in

the same exchange. “Policy-based evidence-making” identifies thus for this officer the activities aimed at directing research efforts towards fields of inquiry determined *a priori* by the Department's interests:

we have a long history of commissioning reports and then not doing anything with them because what they say is that what you need to do is actually change the way you are doing things [...] but this is policy-making so you don't get to change things in a day... when you are looking at a problem and we are asking to do some analysis on what you might do to improve you'll tend to look at incremental changes from where you are.

The practical means for guiding 'research' towards the directions deemed of interest for the Department or for the ministers, and thus make it usable to solve officers' 'problems' in developing policy, is the crafting of detailed 'research projects' specifications', or in short in officers' talk, the activity of 'writing the specs' – the first and key formal procedure to engage external, non-governmental, agencies into the 'process'. The 'specifications' are documents advertised externally that communicate to potential suppliers the opportunity for a service contract, most of the time aimed at the provision of information. Very similarly to the 'policy projects' described earlier, 'research projects' offer to contractors a budget to produce 'outputs' in line with officers' requests. For all intents and purposes, the Department's research budget opens what have been called “knowledge markets” (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Simard, 2006), in which officers act as “brokers” (cf. Meyer, 2010). Policy officers, with the help of their 'specialist' colleagues, hold the reins of these markets' dynamics: they need to know that there are several kinds of potential contractual relationships that can be established, as well as several kinds of information providers available. They also need to know how to set up the tendering processes, when and how this can be bypassed, and what to do to ensure the contractors deliver what they promise. They also develop strategies to explore and test the market in advance of committing resources, and learn how to take free rides, such as in those cases when information and solutions to 'problems' are made available without spending commitments.

The first point to make about the work of obtaining evidence for policy work is that while individual officers report to experience a relatively high degree of autonomy when sourcing data and information and when they establish their connections, such freedom is restricted by the same kind of constraints that apply to the other activities of policy work described so far. First, the need to be *collegial* and coordinate the individual understandings and resolutions with others. The methods to make such

coordination work in practice are similar to those applied to other processes in the office. In the words of Cindy, an officer seconded for one year to the Department from an executive agency to explore the 'evidence needs' in the 'policy area' of 'flood risk management':

what we do is mapping what we already have, we plan for what we need, and we negotiate what is best to inform a programme of [evidence] spending in the years to come. This is done by organising meetings to discuss, while a paper is sent around for comments to write down what we think

Cindy was in fact tasked with assembling a paper of this kind, and remunerated at a 'Grade7' level of pay. When she described her work to me she immediately pointed out that the description above “sounds very clear, but it is not”. She hints at the large amount of work necessary to make collegiality work:

I need to merge in a single evidence plan what the policy team colleagues think, what other three policy teams connected to my policy area think, what at senior level they say it must be included, and maybe what I think should be included. This means that I could easily spend my entire [full-time] year in DEFRA meeting people, which is what I am expected to do anyway

The need to arrive at a collective understanding of what would constitute useful, appropriate 'evidence', prolongs the process of officers' reasoning around policy interventions and the worlds they target. In the kind of meetings Cindy describes, officers discuss how to demand 'evidence' in certain ways but not others. A requirement for the task, officers report, is that the quest for evidence respects the kind of expectations and assumptions that are already embedded in the description of what is already known and held as 'official line'. Here is the “policy-base” for the making of evidence: one that uses questions that are *already* and *collectively* framed in the officers' terms and requirements.

Proposed ownership of Intellectual Property (contractor or Defra):	Defra
Proposed start-date (if known):	Jan 2012
Proposed end-date (if known):	End of March 2012

1. Introduction and aims

The Green Food Project Report¹ (July 2012) conclusions commit the Steering Group “to facilitate a wider, more sophisticated debate across the whole food chain about the role diet and consumption play in the sustainability of the food system.”

1.1. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) wishes to commission research to explore opportunities for increasing consumer uptake of **sustainable** food-related behaviours. The research will assess critically and summarise evidence around two key objectives:

- What are the ‘hotspots’ (i.e. UK consumer behaviours that have the greatest impact on the global environment) along the consumer’s food journey?
- What mechanisms are available and most effective (including cost effective) for reducing these negative environmental impacts?

1.2. This research will start by identifying the UK based food-related consumer behaviours that have the highest environmental impact. There

¹ Add ref to GF final report

1

Comment [m1]: Tony to check he is ok with policy context

Comment [m2]: Sustainable spans environmental, social and economic attributes – this project is only looking at environmental aspects – I assume this is because the time frame will not allow a full analysis of all 3 attributes? – its a question to pose to the gp whether they want to only look at environmental or these wider aspects

Extract 8.1: A snapshot of 'research specifications' at drafting stage circulating in the office, related to the 'sustainable consumption' of food. Officers use digital comments (on the right side) to the text to question each other on the meaning of terms used and to find agreement on what is required.

In the example above – a research project specifications at drafting stage – officers use comments to inquire from each other the meaning they want to convey with the word “sustainable”. This comes into question in the longer comment on the right hand side of the page: officer [m2] asks colleagues what they think prospective readers (the potential bidders) will understand by it. The Department 'official line' on what should be considered the meaning of “sustainability” is settled: the accepted meaning derived from ecology (that is “able to conserve an ecological balance by avoiding depletion of natural resources”) has been enriched with two further “attributes”: “social and economic”. These attributes mean that officers *have learned* to define something “sustainable” *only if*, together with the ecological stipulation, it makes financial sense to pursue it (“economic sustainability”) *and if it* does not impair a generalised capacity to create well-being (“social sustainability”). The officers composing the text claim with ontological security that “sustainable spans [...] all 3 attributes”, but their assumptions are not necessarily shared by the prospective reader of the text, and officers know this.

Hence, officers feel the need to discuss the degree of precision required by the wording of the text, and will spend time in meetings assessing various options (“only look at environmental or these wider aspects”).

Officers report that composing the text of 'specifications' is often cause of difficulties: “at times – a Grade7 stated in an interview – the language we use is so specific and charged with our assumptions around what we mean by certain words that potential contractors don't even understand them” (interview). The negotiation of meanings 'writing the specs' entails is thus very important and constitutes one of the *objects* of the officers' work (cf. Gherardi, 2000; Alvesson, 2004). When talking about these tasks, sometimes officers report disappointments experienced on a personal level: when officers' individual and subjective opinions are moulded into a definitive line of inquiry, not all officers necessarily agree on what should be done. Dylan, who had developed a particular sensitivity to the issue as he was tasked by his own Department (DECC) to study the process of decision-making behind his colleagues' choices around which evidence to commission, commented in an interview:

officers develop, because they must develop it, the kind of doublethink George Orwell wrote about [...] this idea of having two completely contradictory concepts in your head at same time. Take the example of the economists in government: mainstream economics proposes this idea of the rational and totally maximising individual, who has perfect knowledge of the market to make their choices, to maximise utilities. [Many officers] know that is probably one of the worst models of human behaviour that you can make up. Even economists know. But nevertheless it's a dominant paradigm in policy making, so while thinking it is wrong at the same time we are using it as basis on why we should do any policy.

The process of internal negotiation on what 'evidence' should be searched, in Dylan's opinion (one that strongly resonated with other colleagues), alienates officers from thinking about their descriptions of the world in theoretical or epistemological terms:

policy officials don't care, briefly, they don't care about the theories and all that, they don't really care about the economics model. They are just doing what is going to get through the process. So if the process is an impact assessment, an impact assessment rests on... it uses some evidence. And the impact is assessed by mainstream economists, you must get a story that is all mainstream economics. But if you got someone to say the model doesn't work, we know because of sociological or behavioral studies etc. the impact would be... economists would go: this isn't evidence, this just doesn't fit, this has not been recognised.

Individual officers are thus “caught in the middle”:

they probably don't care, whether it is a sociological model, or a behavioural or an economic model, as long as they can get it through. They probably care, this is probably unfair [...] but it becomes then the case of personal survival, which becomes then the case of

adopting whatever the mainstream work is to get things done. There's a lot of self-editing going on. The embedded cultures and structures determine what kind of models, what kind of science, what kind of evidence therefore is acceptable. As an official your drivers are to be official, not really to think about it critically.

Thus, through a process of determining and realising, collectively, what kind of 'evidence' is effectively needed to pass the tests of the 'processes', the 'specs' are crafted in rounds of drafting and comments, so that “bidders should have a very clear understanding of what you [officers] are trying to achieve” (DEFRA, 2011,*2:56). Despite some officers' reluctance, often dampened by seniors (“after all, I do what the Department and my manager tell me to do”, some officers admit) questions are framed, and the search for what would be possible to consider acceptable, reliable and defensible answers can begin (cf. Foster, 2005:53).

In the statements above, both Cindy and Dylan point at a second important aspect of all research activities: the need to *align* to the instructions coming from ministers and seniors, and therefore to respect the hierarchical order of the office. Without the approval of seniors, those in direct contact with the management board and ministers, proposals for 'research projects' have little chance to 'get the nod' to proceed (cf. Maybin, 2013). The last word over decisions on research spending, for instance, rests with the Chief Scientific Officer (CSA) and with those senior officers called 'Heads of Professions' (HoP), the highest in rank for each 'specialist' discipline. The features of research commissioning activities, seen through the eyes of officers dealing with 'research management', point at a specific configuration of the relationship between policy-making and the expertise required to underpin policy decisions (cf. Jasanoff, 1990; Renn, 1995; Jasanoff, 2012).

Officers, like Marcus (cf. above) are overwhelmingly critical of the so-called "evidence-based policy-making" model (cf. Chapter 1). They point out that the “relationship between policy and evidence is actually not linear” (email exchange) and that is “difficult to evaluate precisely the impact of research on policy outcomes” (idem). When in 2012 managers agreed to publish plans on the Government website detailing the research priorities for a five years period (to 2017/2018)⁵¹ – an operation set out, according to an internal communication, to “avoid the perception that evidence is

51 Thirty-one documents, one per 'policy area', were still available online at the time of print. See gov.uk/government/publications/evidence-plans [accessed: 21 September 2016]

disconnected from policy or that policy should be formulated without evidence” – one of the 'chief economists' of the Department voiced her concern in series of email exchanges with colleagues, stating, in brief, that managers

ha[d] misunderstood the role of evidence in policy making. [The evidence plans] seem to imply that the impact of evidence should always be visible in policy-making, but this appears to me to be based more on a technocratic than a democratic government and could be against the underlying idea of the UK political system.

This economist's remarks are paradigmatic of the way officers come to conceptualise the role of research in policy: their everyday experience is that 'evidence' must always be weighted against the political will of elected ministers (cf. Campbell *et al.*, 2007; Wilkinson, 2011), and by doing so they defend a principle which they deem 'democratic' by nature. The so-called “evidence-based policy-making” model (see Young *et al.*, 2002) is seen, at times, to be working against the grains of such principle. Dylan, in a long interview, explained to me:

one could argue that there is a democratic moral imperative that officials make the best use of available research, because they are acting on behalf of the population [...] but even if you devise this perfect world on how evidence might be used, you still note that ministers have a very powerful role in the way civil servants act. This is where you get the politics, and is about leadership, and [ministers'] vision. The ministers do what they do. The better they grasp the whole range of technical, physical, economic even cultural reasons the more successful they will be as ministers, but at the same time there are a lot of other things they lay on, for example they are going to do their damn interests to make sure they get elected... so they get detached from the sources and the knowledge... it becomes only some group of people telling their things. So it becomes [for them] a sort of privileged perspective, where you must be reinforcing previously held ideas they have been voted for, and randomly drop some other ideas. If they change now, because scientists tell them so, they are going to look like flip-floppers.

As a result of direct experience, while the evidence-based policy-making “ideal” (Campbell *et al.*, 2007:12) is something that all officers accept as established, “at least since 2002” (fieldnotes), they do so ironically, knowing that there is much more at stake, and that a “logical, rational connection between policy and evidence simply doesn't hold” (interview with 'Grade6'). Rather, there exists a range of strategies to 'manage' evidence in ways that work positively for both the ministers' and the Department's interests, while protecting reputations in the eyes of the public and the press. Such 'management' starts on the very moment officers realise there is 'uncertainty' over policy development 'problems' and they need to decide to whom to ask their

questions.

'Commissioning research'

A range of scenarios is open to officers, 'generalists' and 'specialists', to find potential answers to their queries. The first thing they need to check is whether other officers in the Department or in other government agencies 'own' data or models that offer ready-made solutions or cues on how to arrive at them. Officers thus, as for policy projects (cf Chapter 5), 'do the rounds' to avoid 'duplication' and survey the field. The internal 'scientists' are the preferred contacts as, in theory, they have a clearer map of the "knowns and unknowns" (fieldnotes). 'Specialists', for instance, should be aware of the current 'models' in place, or of those 'longitudinal studies' that are currently running. The Department's 'statisticians', for example, monitor the results of the surveys or 'surveillance' activities commissioned in the past and recurrently running, and can provide the latest 'data' on request. There are several reasons for which existing information can be deemed unsatisfactory. The most common is the 'timing' of data collection, also referred to as 'the age of the evidence'. Officers are typically interested in up-to-date information that refers to contemporary times, and only few years lag may invalidate data because "the world has changed in the meantime" (interview with 'Grade7'; cf. Maybin, 2013). An example of this situation, used in the settings as explanatory 'story', was the swing in the results of the environmental attitude surveys run by DEFRA before and after the 2008/09 financial crisis, when it was observed the public re-prioritised their concerns placing financial preoccupations before environmental ones (fieldnotes), a move that had to be reflected in the Department's priorities and consequent policies. Another reason to consider research necessary, less common but acknowledged nonetheless, was the loss of 'organisational memory' due to staff turnover or poor record management: "sometimes policy questions have been asked, but records were not made, or the people in charge of them have moved on and their expertise lost" (interview). Another subtler reason revolves around the so-called 'ownership of evidence' and the turnover of governments: "it is not well-seen to use evidence commissioned by a previous government" was the way Amelia, with her two decades experience in the service, put it.

A glimpse of the politics behind research commissioning came alive for the policy team

I was part of during my secondment, when a 'freedom of information (FOI)' request was forwarded to my colleagues asking to detail all the spend for a number of research projects related to the Framework for Pro-Environmental Behaviours (DEFRA, 2008; cf. Chapter 4) in the years 2008 to 2010. The request prompted a few busy days when Cary, Lydia, Alice and others, all officers who had 'managed' some of the projects under inquiry, tasked themselves with composing a report with all the information needed to answer the FOI: what was the status of each project, which reports had been published and which not and why, what were the findings etc. When finally Cary went to discuss the report (of some thirty pages, DEFRA, 2012,*3) with seniors and with the staff in charge of drafting the response, he came back visibly upset. Usually a phlegmatic man, he stormed into the meeting room we had gathered in to wait for him. “What the SPAD⁵² is basically suggesting – he said without much preamble – is that we drop all these details and we say these projects are a typical example of the money the previous government wasted in useless research” (fieldnotes). The times had changed since the projects were commissioned, the government had changed, and also the value placed by seniors on those 'strands' of research had changed with them. For Cary, it was a bullet hard to bite: he considered many of those projects a success that had marked positively his career in the Department and the reputation of his team. Cary objected to the SPAD's idea, and obtained the criticism expressed by the SPAD remained “in between the lines” of the response (fieldnotes).

On the top of confirming my understanding of the process of organisational change with its sweeping consequences for the work of the office (cf. Chapter 5), the episode also provided a real-time occurrence of those delicate situations, of which to that point I had only heard in interviews and read in the literature (e.g. Rhodes, 2011:86), when the advice provided to seniors and ministers, based on the results of commissioned research, *conflicts* with the policy options preferred by them. For the officers who accepted to talk to me about such situations, these constituted their “worst experiences” in the service:

I found at times that special advisors [on behalf of ministers] were pushing for things that weren't evidence based at all and all they wanted to do was to score political points. Very often they came up with stupid ideas and we knew that they wouldn't work but basically sometimes they were desperate to introduce new political initiatives. That was very very

⁵² “SPADs” is the acronym in use for Special Political Advisors. These are political appointees Ministers take with them when assigned to Departments. In practice, they help the ministers to communicate with civil servants. In the eyes of officers they speak *on behalf* of the minister therefore their remarks and instructions must be taken seriously.

frustrating. It happens more or less in the same way with people from Number10 as well. Basically you got people coming up with stupid policies because they want the next headlines on the newspapers and you say to them, you try to push them back and say why is not going to work, what are the problems with it and they still think is a nice, shiny idea they would push through [...] they say we want you to think about this – an idea – and you would do the analysis and say this is not going to work [...] They will ignore you basically. They would announce something. And then you will be left with their thesis basically and [sighs] create something reasonable out of their stupid ideas. This happens especially close to elections. Obviously sometimes politicians need to make some choices which are not always very evidence based because they need to think about the political cost of something, but civil servants work on a different basis, they commission reports, consultancy, internal work. Sometimes civil servants give the evidence but politicians don't go with it. That's not current practice, but it's the reality of politics: political costs are what count, as politicians want to be re-elected (interview with 'Grade7')

Another officer I interviewed, who had been contracted from the private sector three years earlier, described a similar situation, and noted what happens when the analyses offered by officers at lower rank contrast with what more senior staff want to believe:

Officer: Sometimes some senior people listen to external people, rather than to their own staff, which is a bit frustrating. So I don't know why that is. Perhaps there is a history of not believing in people within the civil service up to skill to do [the analyses] therefore you rather believe to your friend who works in industry or academia... The problem is that that friend who speaks to the senior is believed and won't be expected to provide any degree or burden of proof so then at lower level [you'll find that situation when] there's a meeting with a bunch of people saying this is all wrong, it should be done this way and they talk like this for a number of minutes and then I'd say where is your evidence your analysis to back up your assertions and they say: well, that's your job.

LM: so what are you options then?

Officer: Well if it is senior you basically have to go away and help them to destroy your work. No way out. You have to work with the grain rather than against it in that instance.

Other officers had a more nuanced perception of the ways conflicts in between available 'evidence' and ministers' or seniors' plans get resolved. A 'Grade7' stated:

you reach a point where you have to start compromise between all these various things and come up with something is probably not ideal to any of the areas originators of the ideas and concepts, but gets as much as possible of the good points in a form that is acceptable and will make progress.

These last remarks, less drastic than the views presented earlier, echo a now classic conception of “strategy formation” in bureaucracies and other organisations (cf. Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985), where solutions that are actually realised are an unpredictable selection of muddled “deliberate” and “emergent” (p.162) strategies, created *ad hoc* case by case. Even adopting this perception, nonetheless, officers can not ignore the power dynamics at play when 'evidence' is called upon to complete the

descriptions of the world used to justify the design of policy interventions. Many times, such power dynamics become evident in the activities of 'evidence' provision.

Within these constraints imposed by internal politics, the work of officers proceeds with the selection of the most viable route to obtain the information necessary to formulate their descriptions. As we have seen, 'policy questions' are framed as usual in 'collegial' fashion. If no satisfactory answer, or 'evidence-base', can be found in what 'is already known' and 'owned' internally, other sources are sought after: officers become problem holders in search of solutions providers (cf. Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Once the basis of a 'research project' is laid down, officers are generally tasked with refining the terms of the 'specifications' by engaging with “experts [they] can talk to about the proposal” (DEFRA, 2011,*2). The stage is known as 'pre-tender discussions'. As for the proceedings of 'policy projects', in many cases in the first instance officers rely on informal networks: more experienced officers or seniors can point at “people [one] should talk to”, or officers can use (and are encouraged to use) “personal contacts” (fieldnotes). The objective is to receive further reassurance that the project does not overlap with ongoing work elsewhere, or that the answers to the 'policy questions' can not be obtained without proceeding to the 'tender process', therefore without a spending commitment. This stage extends to checks on whether the field of inquiry overlaps with initiatives other funders are undertaking at the same time, which would open either the possibility to “tap into their in-house expertise” in those cases when such expertise is available for “sharing” (DEFRA, 2011,*2:29); or the opportunity to “develop partnerships”, for example setting up a co-funding of the necessary research, an operation that ensures, according to the internal guidance, “reduced management costs” and “good uptake of results”. Officers engage thus in exploring whether their 'policy questions' can be taken up by existing networks of research bodies, typically domestic 'research councils' or research programmes instituted at European level, such as the EU's Research and Development Framework Programmes, in which they can 'chip in'. The officers' room for maneuver in both cases includes entering existing arrangements by making funding available to address questions of interest for their purposes. This is done by “influenc[ing] the final selection of topics included in the calls for proposals” (p.32), which in turn entails engaging in networking activities, these themselves funded by the Department's research budget. Some of the major problems officers face when considering these options are the usually extended 'timescales' required and the need to reach agreements with the rest of the partners about the 'scope', 'scale' and 'requirements'

of the research to be commissioned. These matters often convince officers who are arranging 'research projects' to follow other procurement routes. Officers, in many cases, find for instance that their 'policy questions' need defensible answers in much shorter time frames (usually dictated by the 'policy needs'), or that the 'scope' of the work covers only a limited geographic area or a section of the population – the ones that would be subject to the policy intervention under design – and it would be difficult to impose such detailed requirements to research endeavours collaborative by nature.

In the case these options are discarded, the following stage consists in deciding how to approach the market of research providers. Officers maintain, within the system of senior approvals and checks, a degree of discretion in designing the 'tendering process'. Their options range from an 'open competition', when the call for bids is advertised publicly on Internet platforms and any supplier can apply, to a 'single tender action', when only one supplier is approached on the assumption that “only one party can perform the contract” (DEFRA, 2011,*2:52). The latter case can be justified on the grounds of technical reasons (only one enterprise has the expertise to do the work) or exclusive rights (due to intellectual or industrial property rights such as patents, trademarks or copyright)⁵³. Intermediate options are 'limited competitions', when only a limited number of suppliers are approached to submit proposals, and 'expressions of interest followed by limited competition', when a shortlist of suppliers is selected following a public call for an 'outline proposal', and those invited to submit a 'full proposal'. Within the limits imposed by budget thresholds, officers utilise their judgement and their knowledge of the existing markets to design the process. Such judgement is guided, among other factors, by the need to assess the time and the resources available to evaluate the bids: a tendering process that attracts too many bids for a project with a low budget is considered poorly designed. Officers can also use some tricks of the trade, such as not disclosing in full the allocated budget in call for tenders, with a view of make savings or use the full budget only “if this offers good value for money” (email exchange), or, in the case of single tender actions, to let “the supplier believe that they are in competition for the work” (DEFRA, 2011,*2:45).

In the eyes of officers, especially the juniors, the setting up of a tendering process for a

⁵³ Another case that allows 'single tender action' is the engaging of an artist or performer (artistic reasons).

research project represents a culmination of their office activities, and the publication of a call for tenders a reason to celebrate. First, they know that if they have received approval from seniors it means they are content with their work: they are 'making things happen', to use the language of the performance management system in place. Second, the allocation of a budget for research in a given 'policy area' and the kick-off of the tendering process signals the potential opportunity to soon 'move forward' in the formulation of interventions in that 'area' on the basis, in the best of hypotheses, of the results of the research activities. While a feeling of anticipation could be felt in the office once 'the specs were out', there was much more officers needed to do next to accompany the process of 'research management'. Preliminary activities include: dealing with enquiries from potential bidders, logging all bids received and do a pre-check on the consistency of the suppliers' offers against the requirements of the 'specs'. Officers then are selected to compose a 'tender evaluation panel' where each proposal is firstly scored by individual officers and then the scores are combined to reach a final verdict. Criteria for the evaluation vary across competitions, although some of them recur: typically, proposals are scored against 'the soundness of the rationale', the 'approach', the 'capacity' (i.e. the confidence officers have the supplier is able to deliver the required work in terms of experience, expertise, and research team size), the 'methodology', the 'legacy' (i.e. the successfulness of previous projects delivered to the Department by the same supplier). Over a given budget threshold, usually £250k of expected project cost (DEFRA 2011,*2:77), the evaluation panel is also required to integrate their judgements with those of 'external peer reviewers', selected again mostly through informal networks and personal recommendations (p.78), to ensure the selected proposals are fit for purpose, and are “based on sound and robust science” (idem). All the files produced in the proceedings are stored for records, composing some of the fattest paper folders in the office, sooner or later to be sent to the archive.

Generally, the bids evaluation activities were considered burdensome by officers, as they weighted heavily on their working time (fieldnotes). Furthermore, despite the detailed guidance on how to make the process of evaluation of bids as neutral as possible, officers felt that biases existed, the most common of which was known as the problem of the 'usual suspects' (fieldnotes). This, according to their complaints voiced to each other in my presence, flagged the tendency of assigning research work to a circumscribed number of suppliers, either intentionally, because they were initially shortlisted in the tendering process design, or as a result of the application of criteria for

selection, skewed, in their opinion, towards suppliers who already have a history of projects delivered to the Department. Officers also reported to be undergoing pressures from some of the suppliers, for instance, as Lydia once explained in a meeting, “[by being told] that if we change contractor now the methodology [of the research] will change and this will invalidate any attempt to give a longitudinal value to this strand [of research]” (fieldnotes).

From the explanations I was given, the management had resolved (partially) some of such tensions instituting the so-called 'framework agreements', taking advantage of provisions allowed by the European Commission since 2004⁵⁴. These 'frameworks' entitled the Department to strike long-term contracts (up to four years) with preferred suppliers at pre-arranged pricing, making possible for officers to by-pass the tendering process all together. The 'frameworks', according to internal documentation, “speed up the contract negotiation stage” (DEFRA, 2011,*2:44) and included “organisations that had been selected for their expertise” (45). At the time of my secondment, specific 'frameworks' were in place for some of the Department's 'policy areas', namely 'sustainable production and consumption', 'waste', 'food' and 'farming', thus covering a large part of the policy remit. While officers could still decide not to use them, the 'frameworks' provisions externalised *de facto* most of the activities of tendering design and evaluation, including the administration of tenders and payments. Officers could use this procurement 'route', “at no cost” to their research budget, to interrogate a list of relevant organisations selected and managed by external agencies contracted at the beginning of the 'framework agreement'. The 'framework' in place for the 'policy area' of sustainable consumption allowed officers to access “experts in waste management, social research, life cycle assessment in food, clothes, low carbon impact analysis” (idem) through an energy and environmental consultancy firm, the AEA Technology.

In a similar fashion, the Department co-funded and helped set up university-based research 'groups' or 'institutes' on topics of interest for its research activities. Usually spanning several years, such agreements provided a further source of potential 'research findings': individual officers were required to monitor the 'outcomes' of these academic activities and explore the opportunities of importing research results into their analyses. Officers, as in the case of other long-term research enterprises, reported complications

⁵⁴ See directive 2004/18/EC “on the coordination of procedures for the award of public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts”.

associated to such approach due to difficulties to synchronize 'policy needs' with 'research outcomes'. The differences in the timescales of research production, coupled with the typical Department's officers turnover rate (cf. chapter 5) and the pace of changes of priorities due to the variation of the 'policy contexts', in many cases made the exchanges with academic research groups problematic, with a certain degree of dissatisfaction registered by both parties involved. Numerous attempts at reform, with the associated commissioning of government studies on how to improve the relationship 'between policy-making and academics', were ongoing at the time of my secondment (see e.g. Rutter, 2012; Government Office for Science, 2013). 'Timing', according to the officers I interviewed on the subject, was seen as a major problem: “policy makers haven't got the luxury of seeing a project going on for years, as academic projects usually do” said to me a 'director general' (cf. Campbell *et al.*, 2007:26). Research managers at 'Grade7' rank also mentioned feeling uncomfortable with the style of writing of reports filed by academics, with those “long sections dedicated to list the limitations of the research” (interview with Alice), typically discarded when officers edited the final versions for publication under the Department trademark (fieldnotes; cf. Stevens, 2011). The general impression I registered, confirmed by published reports (see Government Office for Science, 2013:10), was that the methods for commissioning research in place offered a systematic competitive advantage to large for-profit companies, such as consultancies or private research providers (the 'usual suspects'), which make the answering of Departments' calls for tenders their main business operation: they placed therefore “bids quickly and impressively, while academics may not have the time or the experience to do so” (idem). Complaints of this kind were offered by academics to a DEFRA 'head of profession' in my presence, when a university professor claimed during a meeting that “five weeks to put together a research proposal on climate change adaptation [was] ridiculous... a time frame deliberately set in place to favour your private consultants” (fieldnotes). The senior officer answered by inviting him to “continue the conversation privately over the phone”, and that “anyway, [he could] call [her] anytime when problems of this kind arose”. The guidance DEFRA officers followed (DEFRA, 2011,*2:57) indicated “3 to 5 weeks” as “reasonable time for proposals to be developed”, but the episode provided an hint that the officers' discretion in designing tender competitions extended to allow for more time in particular cases, or for creating exceptional conditions for bidders with close, informal connections with the competition designers.

'Strands of research' of interest for the ongoing policy teams' inquiries could also be identified by individual officers, on the basis of their own individual initiative and judgement. Marcus for instance, while giving me instructions on how to progress our 'policy team' work in the early days of my secondment, informed me of the existence of 'models of engagement' that went above and beyond the 'routes' formalised by the internal guidances:

one of the advantages of working in a central government department is that when you are responsible for a bit of policy academics, consultants, and a range of other people are really interested in talking to you because they are trying to come up with the ideal world solution and we are trying to do something in the real world... so another standard for engaging [suppliers] is spotting something that looks really interesting and starting conversations that will help you to progress.

In the following months, while I was gaining more access to ongoing 'strands of work' and consequently to these kind of 'conversations', I realised how often officers and 'policy teams' relied on associations and contacts that lay outside the codified research commissioning activities to source 'valid' information and 'evidence'. These 'routes' took usually the form of exchanges happening within “a mix of formal and informal networks and fora (...) which brought to the attention of 'policy officials' the activities of industry, NGOs, learned societies, etc.” (internal documentation). It was current practice, for example, to exchange 'data', 'models' and 'research' that could inform policy with “major businesses”, in particular with those the government had struck “strategic relationships” (internal documentation; see also Lawrence, 2010). The rationale behind this modus operandi, elaborated at length in internal papers, was the recognition that much of the expertise the 'policy teams' needed was already in possession of businesses and the voluntary sector (cf. Lawrence, 2010; HMG, 2012). The Department, to give an example, regularly hosted 'workshops', 'meetings' and 'stakeholders' engagement exercises' with representatives of such organisations. In these, officers were presented to the strategies used to deal with consumers, or, in the case of businesses, their policies on products development. Officers were prompted to “be inspired” when designing their 'policy delivery strategies' by what some selected businesses were doing (“New approaches to policy delivery”, Civil Service Live conference presentation, Olympia exhibition centre, 2nd of July 2012). In the 'policy area' of 'sustainable consumption and production' for instance, the 'sustainability plans' of the largest British multinational consumer goods company (Unilever) and of a major national retailer (Marks & Spencer) were presented to officers as blueprint for 'policy delivery': the 'thinking' behind the

initiatives was that if the businesses marketing strategies (for instance in terms of segmentation and communication) worked successfully in influencing consumers, the same strategies could be used in public policy. The 'evidence' in such areas could thus be imported by 'entertaining conversations' with the 'sustainability' or 'marketing officers' of such companies and organisations, who, in some occasions during my placement, were invited to speak and present their work in the Department's building.

Officers could also share information with companies whose research and development programmes overlapped with those of their 'policy areas', although the practice was perceived as a borderline and 'highly sensitive' matter, with papers documenting proceedings marked as 'commercially sensitive' or 'confidential' and not distributed on the internal email system. Closed connections with 'industry', it was explained, on the one hand could be seen as controversial due the opaque rules for lobbying, and, on the other “were to some extent inevitable, in particular in those 'policy areas' dealing with cutting-edge technologies, where there are actually very few companies operating, or just one” (interview with 'Grade6'). The requirement for officers to be able to “understand the politics of industry” (interview with 'Grade6') glossed over a series of practices of engagement which were most likely to remain secret and discussed only behind closed doors at senior level, on the one hand to protect 'commercially-sensitive' information, and on the other hand not to leave the Department and the ministers vulnerable to accusations of engaging in unfair practices, usually made by opposition parties, pressure or protest groups.

At junior and middle-rank level, officers pursue external research activities that they found 'interesting', and potentially informing their work of 'policy development'. Officers were routinely invited to attend events organised by universities, learned societies, think-tanks, NGOs, business groups and other kinds of associations, and regularly entertained email and phone exchanges with the members of such groups who were most successful in the harsh competition for officers' attention and time. Selected potential informants, or 'evidence' providers, could be invited to 'showcase' their 'research' to officers in internal 'seminars' or 'presentations' – occasions that pointed the officers' daily agendas. Establishing this sort of relationships seemed to work best in those cases which offered a “mutual benefit” (internal email exchange), in particular when research groups could present their findings in the form of 'implications for policy' and 'recommendations' in exchange for receiving input into the 'direction of

future work'. Receiving a sense or indications around the “research interests [officers] would like to encourage next” (internal email exchange) meant for suppliers gaining a competitive advantage on the upcoming call for tenders, giving extra time to put proposals together. The practice was not seen to be against the rules. Officers received regularly correspondence around the lines of the email below:

Dear [Officer]

[...] We are currently considering ideas for new policy projects, and wondered if you, or someone else in the office, might have time to talk to me about possible new projects ideas? I would be happy to come to you, or alternatively, to talk over the phone. [...] No topics are too big or too small, as we have a range of possible vehicles for their exploration from major reports to one-off meetings. [...] I would therefore very much appreciate your views around the following:

- What are likely to be the pressing issues in the areas of science, innovation or policy you are most familiar with during the next 6-24 months?
- More generally, what are the burning or emerging science/policy issues that [our organisation] should be thinking about?
- Who else should we be talking to at this early stage?

Any thoughts you have would be gratefully received by [date]
(internal email exchange, May 2012)

The activities associated to 'research management' thus entailed dealing with this correspondence and attempted contacts, singling out potentially fruitful associations, informing colleagues and seniors of the development of such relationships and, if approval was gained, organise meetings, 'workshops' or 'presentations' to consolidate the links and potentially import 'evidence', 'data', 'models' or whatever on offer. Officers in such cases could take advantage of free rides in markets of knowledge of their interest, obtaining information in exchange for prestige, trust, or when successfully lobbied to consider some 'evidence' and not others. Perhaps ingenuously, when 'knowledge', 'expertise' or 'advice' is obtained without spending commitments junior officers have the impression that they are “stealing others' ideas”, as Lydia, a SEO colleague in my 'policy team', once said in a fleeting exchange. Missing from this perception are the common dynamics of “knowledge markets”, where the price system is not the only mechanism of operation for securing exchanges (cf. Davenport and Prusak, 1998:31). I shall dedicate the last chapters of the thesis (9 and 10) to document further the activities associated to the specific case of sustainable consumption policies, which will offer a vivid example of how these dynamics played in real time.

The officers' quest for 'evidence' or for 'valid' and defensible information to underpin and justify the design of policy interventions also extended beyond the search of specific answers to 'policy questions' tied to a single 'strand of work'. Officers were in fact exposed, and in search of, more comprehensive and holistic methods to 'think about' their activities associated with 'policy development'. These methods were sometimes referred to in the local language as 'philosophies' and 'paradigms', or more simply as 'approaches' and 'tools', and consisted, in general terms, in conceptual models to help officers involved in analytical tasks to make sense of the 'world' prospective policies target. In fact, these 'models' were seen as able to provide the grounds to construe 'descriptions', or worked as heuristic techniques and devices that could be applied across 'policy areas' to 'validate evidence'. The casual and occasional characterisation of these models as 'paradigms' effectively echoed the classic Thomas Kuhn's notion [2012 (1962); cf. Hall, 1993], transposing to policy-making professionals those dynamics of circulation of knowledge that were originally intended to describe the practices of scientists and scientific communities. A parallel can in fact be drawn to the extent to which 'policy paradigms' identify grounds for officers' reasoning and arguing that are accepted as solutions by other members of their professional circles, and that create a 'normality' of reasoning and interpreting reality similar to the Kuhn's notion of "normal science" (p.24). As for Kuhn's normal science, what officers identified as 'policy paradigms' provided intellectual tools that isolate criteria for selecting problems and limited the search for solutions (p.37), allowing for the possibility of taking for granted the concepts and theories underpinning the paradigm itself (p.40), these in turn not deserving discussion given the circulating, socially-shared acceptance of the paradigm's premises, metaphysical and methodological. Differently from Kuhn's notion however, 'policy paradigms' did not seem to go through processes of revolutions, as political and scientific developments do (cf. Kuhn, 2012:94), nor through debates between paradigms, or processes of "falsification" (p.146). Rather, 'paradigms', in this peculiar 'policy-making' sense, are to be intended as pre-packaged knowledge organised around themes, topics or ways of understanding the world. The emergence and the disappearance of such 'paradigms' seem to be linked to intellectual fashions (cf. Hall, 1993; Hood, 1994): officers, for instance, often talked about the latest 'buzz work', 'buzzwords', or more simply, the latest 'thing' they need to be aware of and incorporate in their 'thinking'. The main process of emergence of such 'paradigms' among officers

seemed to be the endorsement of ministers or senior officers in influential governmental agencies, while the elaboration of them into 'tools' for officers to use in their everyday activities more often pertaining to the operations of think-tanks, niches of academics, consultants or other professionals claiming to work “at the science-policy interface” (fieldnotes; interviews with a DEFRA consultant; intranet dispatches). Peculiarly, and exactly like fashions, 'paradigms' can fade away and go out, can come back years after being abandoned, can be followed in some circles within some Departments but not some others, and, consequently, can create impromptu associations between officers across formal institutional boundaries. Elements of old 'policy paradigms' can also be retained in some quarters, and elements stratify, blend together or become re-arranged to fit the needs of those operating with them. The examples below should help clarify some of the characteristics of 'paradigms in use' at the time of my secondment. I'll also offer some of the officers' commentary around the reasons they found them useful, and exemplars of 'strands of work' carried out within the boundaries of these knowledge packages.

Behaviour change

When I started studying the Department in 2011, the 'approach' named 'behaviour change' had established itself as the latest wave of 'thinking' in government's 'policy development' (cf. Chapter 4), being in effect *the* 'paradigm' of the period. In the eyes of junior and middle-rank officers, proposals for policy interventions based on the 'approach' seemed to have with seniors and ministers what officers call 'currency': the language of the 'approach', its theories and associated assumptions (cf. Chapter 4; Marvulli, 2011) enjoyed 'recognition' and a degree of acceptance as the new Departmental 'way of working' when it came to design and experiment with policy initiatives. A number of publications attested the popularity of the 'approach': first a series of DEFRA reports on how to influence citizens' behaviours to adopt 'sustainable lifestyles' (DEFRA, 2006; 2008; 2011c); second the best-seller *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), a book that, as a senior 'specialist' officer reported in an interview, “had got everybody in the office excited”; and third, *MINDSPACE* (IfG, 2010), an adaptation of *Nudge* to suit British policy-making collated by a think-tank directed by the Cabinet Office. To complete the picture, there had been a much-advertised endorsement by

David Cameron, the newly elected Prime Minister in 2010, who set up a Cabinet Office “nudge unit” (see e.g. Wintour, 2010). Perhaps more importantly for officers working in Departments, also Treasury officials had adopted 'nudge' techniques, for example when designing HM Revenue and Customs tax letters to encourage tax debtors to pay tax owed (Cabinet Office, 2011b:16). The tenet of the 'approach' was that, in one way or another, all public policy aims at changing people's behaviour (fieldnotes). The reason it fitted the requirements of the practical activities of 'developing policy' was that officers could draw fully from the 'body of evidence' associated to the 'approach': the *Framework for Influencing Behaviour* (DEFRA, 2008; 2011c), *Nudge* (2008) and *MINDSPACE* (IfG, 2010) all came with lists of “the most robust [...] influences on behaviour” (IfG, 2010:8) and all claimed, at times subtly at times quite boldly, to instruct officers on “why people are acting and why they are not” (DEFRA, 2011c:slide19). The usefulness of such materials for officers consisted of the provision of grounds for a description of 'how people behave' *already* 'validated' for the purposes of policy design. If officers could demonstrate in their papers that the intervention appealed to one of the “drivers of behaviour” (IfG, 2010:15; DEFRA 2011c:slide 9), or “behavioural triggers” (IfG, 2010:75) made explicit in the 'approach', they would not have needed any further proof or discussion of the potential effectiveness of the proposed intervention: the 'body of evidence' of the “evidence-based” Framework (DEFRA, 2011c:slide 2), the “behavioural economics” (IfG, 2010:17) and the “profound insights of neuroscience” included in *MINDSPACE* (p.83), would have warranted for that. In this sense, the 'approach' worked as a 'paradigm' of, so to speak, “normal policy-making”.

Preliminary interviews with officers and my first visits to the Department (cf. Chapter 3) confirmed that attempts to proceed with practical applications of the 'approach' constituted a significant part of the 'work' going on at the time, and that substantial resources were being invested in 'streamlining' it. A 'special unit', called the 'Centre of Expertise in Influencing Behaviour (CEIB)' had been established in DEFRA and it was reported to be working “across policy areas” (fieldnotes). In practice, officers with membership of the 'Centre' were promoting – 'raising awareness of', in the local language – the techniques of policy design possible thanks to the application of the 'behaviour change approach', by organising presentations, meetings and workshops with officers in other 'policy areas' to explore the opportunities for policy design the 'body of evidence' allowed for. CEIB officers called it a “process of education” and explained

that the Centre of Expertise "[wa]s acting almost an expert interpreter of the research for...specifically for policy teams" (interview). By the time the second phase of my fieldwork had started in 2012, (cf. Chapter 3), the "models used to develop policy [had been updated] to reflect the new tools and techniques now available" (DEFRA, 2011c:slide 7). The 'approach' had also been 'streamlined' to those with the responsibility of designing interventions in *all* Departments, for example through the circulation of early drafts of the Civil Service Reform Plan in late 2011 (then published in 2012, HMG). At page 17, the reform read:

All policy makers [are] expected to undertake at least five days a year of continuing professional development to ensure they have the right skills, including in new areas such as behavioural science

"New tools such as behavioural insight – the text of the reform continued – should be considered more readily". The 'behaviour approaches' had gained the status of 'policy paradigm' for "all public policy in the UK" (idem). However, adding to my own difficulties and confusion in interpreting the office dynamics for the purposes of this study, in the very same months the Civil Service Reform Plan was published I was witnessing a mounting scepticism towards the 'behavioural approaches' reported by those who were supposed to be applying it. A scepticism that would have led, shortly after, to the 'winding down' of the CEIB unit (November 2012), a change of attitude in considering so 'readily' policy proposals based on the 'evidence-base' of the approach, and consequently, a dismissal of the 'paradigm'. While I was proceeding with my early inquiries to officers and field observations, signs that enthusiasm was running out emerged at the various 'levels' of the office hierarchy. Executive officers in charge of running projects were expressing doubts and difficulties when applying the 'approach' in practice. Perhaps more importantly, officers were also realising the DEFRA ministers were backtracking on their endorsement of the 'approach'. The fieldnotes below were taken at a 'monthly meeting' of CEIB officers:

[officers] talk about the behaviour goals. [CEIB officer] defines a member of the ministerial board "really keen on" the behaviour approach. [Senior officer] interrupts her: "I wouldn't define him as really keen. I would say tolerant, yes tolerant is the right word" and smiles. This becomes a point for a long discussion. [Officer]: "I don't think ministers want to push this as a government agenda". The debate becomes quite inflamed. The problem is that ministers "don't want to hear anything that suggests the government wants to change people behaviour". Another officer: "Yes but that's the whole point!" and the "same thing happened with water", after a lot of work ("a lot of action going on in the policy teams") "we found a lot of resistance". [Senior officer]: "Yes, but ministers have signed off this project and we make things happen". Officer: "When ministers hear of consumer behaviour they get

nervous”, “they are uncomfortable with the idea”, or “timid”. [...] “the ministers’ attitude ends disappointing stakeholders, because high expectations have been created”. If a process starts then it is a negative thing to interrupt it. [...] [CEIB senior officer] takes a turn of speaking and spells clearly “Ministers’ views are to be respected, but we need to know exactly what it is in and what it is out, because this is becoming detrimental to a lot of work. I mean we need to know what are the rules of the game. This is all becoming very frustrating”.

In these exchanges the CEIB senior officers warn juniors of 'high-level' discussions being entertained on the status and the future of the 'approach'. These would have soon concluded that the 'work' on 'behaviour change' and the environmental policies and interventions developing under its auspices did not 'bode well' with the 'overarching agendas' set up by the 'government of the day'. In particular, as my colleagues (and I) would have soon understood, the attempts of steering consumers' behaviour towards 'more sustainable lifestyles' (cf. DEFRA, 2011c) jarred with the objectives and 'directions' of the government's plans for a “transition to a Green Economy” (HMG, 2011), an agenda that placed “growth in the economy” (p.4) as pre-condition for the design of environmental interventions (cf. Chapters 6 and 7). An example of the developing tensions, as documented in the fieldnotes, was the 'work' going on on 'water efficiency' policies. While officers had received positive 'evaluations' on the effectiveness of 'pilots' on the installation of 'water saving devices' as well as 'water smart meters', the proposals for a national roll-out of the measures had become, in Alice's words, “controversial, to say the least” (fieldnotes). Officers in fact had commissioned and collected 'evidence' to prove that devices and metering technologies effectively decreased water consumption (and changed consumers' behaviour), but could not demonstrate that such measures produced 'economic growth' *as well*, one of the 'overarching agendas' requirements (cf. Chapter 5), by for example not damaging the water companies' interests (fieldnotes) and reduce their profit margins⁵⁵. A planned roll-out of 'smart water meters' was delayed as a consequence, and limited to newly-built houses (fieldnotes). The wind had changed 'direction'. A number of 'policy proposals' and 'strands of research' set up to run for some years (for instance with research groups, or under 'frameworks', as above) developing under the 'paradigm' would have either “led to nothing” (Dale, 1941:94; cf. Chapter 5), or to those “classic situations” – to tell it with Marcus – “when we [the government] must be *seen* to be doing something”. What Marcus, Cary, Dylan and others also taught me in the following months was that recognising which 'strands of work' had this cosmetic character, accepting the

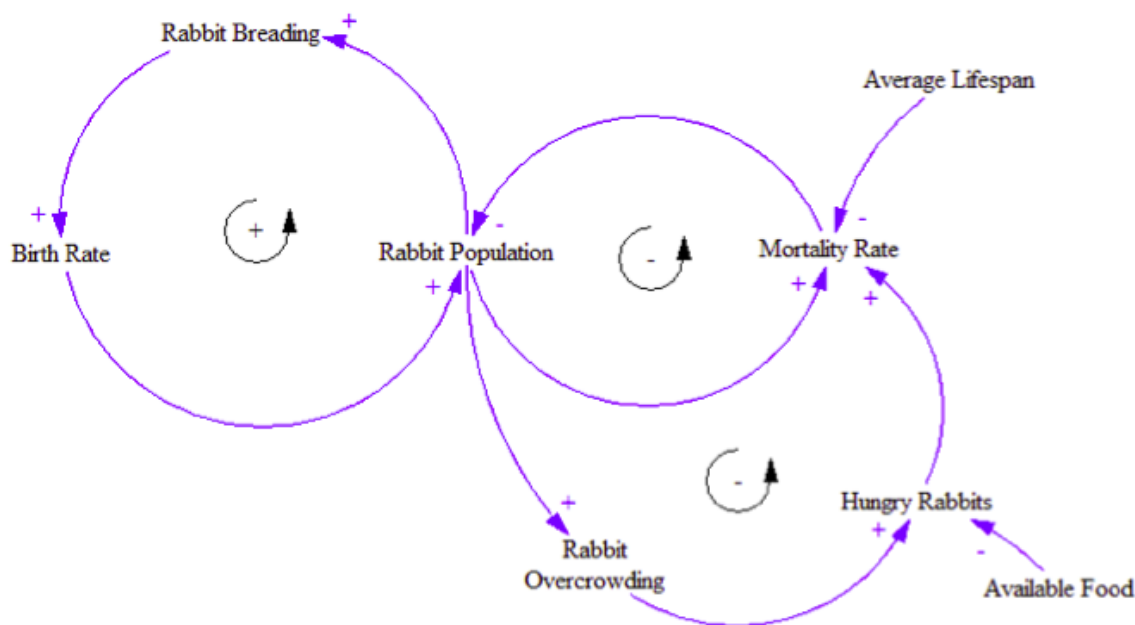
⁵⁵ Water companies in England and Wales are private limited companies since the 1989 Water Act.

“situations” and, nevertheless, managing them as 'official line' for 'government action' was an essential trick of the trade a civil servant at that 'level' had to learn, part of a *professional cynicism* they developed on the job. Overall, the 'behaviour change approach' was not entirely condemned to oblivion, as some techniques did enter the menu of possible 'policy levers' at officers' disposal when developing proposals or searching for evidence. However, officers increasingly and collectively came to the conclusions that the 'paradigm' had over-promised, and that – as seniors wrote in an internal email – “we all know that 'nudge' interventions take time”.

System thinking

While the officers' enthusiasm for the 'behaviour change approach' was fading away, officers in some sections of the Department were exploring the potential of other ways of managing 'evidence', using different methods offered by what I have called knowledge organisation packages. One such attempt consisted of training officers to use “basic system thinking skills to structure problems and define goals [...] to gain a much better understanding of the relevant systems and interactions to support policy development” (internal email). Following an 'open competition' funded by the research budget, the Department awarded a contract to a consortium of two consultancy firms and a British university “to provide the expertise in system dynamics modelling” and deliver training sessions and workshops in the Department's building tailored to policy officers. The sessions consisted in three full days of lectures and presentations, each followed by 'brainstorming exercises' and demonstrations. During these, officers received instructions around how to develop 'models' that could have allowed “system thinkers to come to terms with complex real world problems” (Freeman *et al.*, 2014:2). Developing a 'system thinking approach', colleagues and I learned in the sessions, meant applying a 'type of thinking' that used 'mechanisms', the most basic and common of which are called 'causal loops', to create “specific mental models that work as structural accounts of real world” (idem, adapted). The promise of the 'modelling process' was the creation of “prox[ies] for the real system so that it can be understood better and the possible impact, or consequences, of possible interventions can be explored before implementation. The model can be used to inform action” (idem). The promoters of the 'approach' claimed that, though “not easy”, the techniques could potentially address the complexity of the world, and be useful in tackling those problems that some literature

on public policy had defined “wicked”, i.e. situations that could not find solutions as they escaped description in the first place, given they presented too many complex interdependencies of contributing factors at play (cf. Rittel and Webber, 1973). The solution offered by the method was a focus on breaking down complexity into simple relationships in isolation, usually cause/effect ones. As we were shown during the workshops, these are represented on paper as pictures containing words and arrows connecting those words. The arrows define the direction of the causal influence and positive or negative signs (+/-) associated to each arrow specify whether the effect is a positive or negative change. When two or more words could be connected to each other forming 'causal loops', these constitute 'archetypes', i.e. relationships describing observable 'real system behaviour' with stable characteristics. According to the presenters, this meant that concurrent causes or explicative factors could be described and handled simultaneously (fieldnotes; cf. Rosenhead, 1992), addressing what the consultants considered the gravest problem of other traditional 'approaches' to policy design: the use of an oversimplified mental model of linear relationships between cause and effect (fieldnotes).

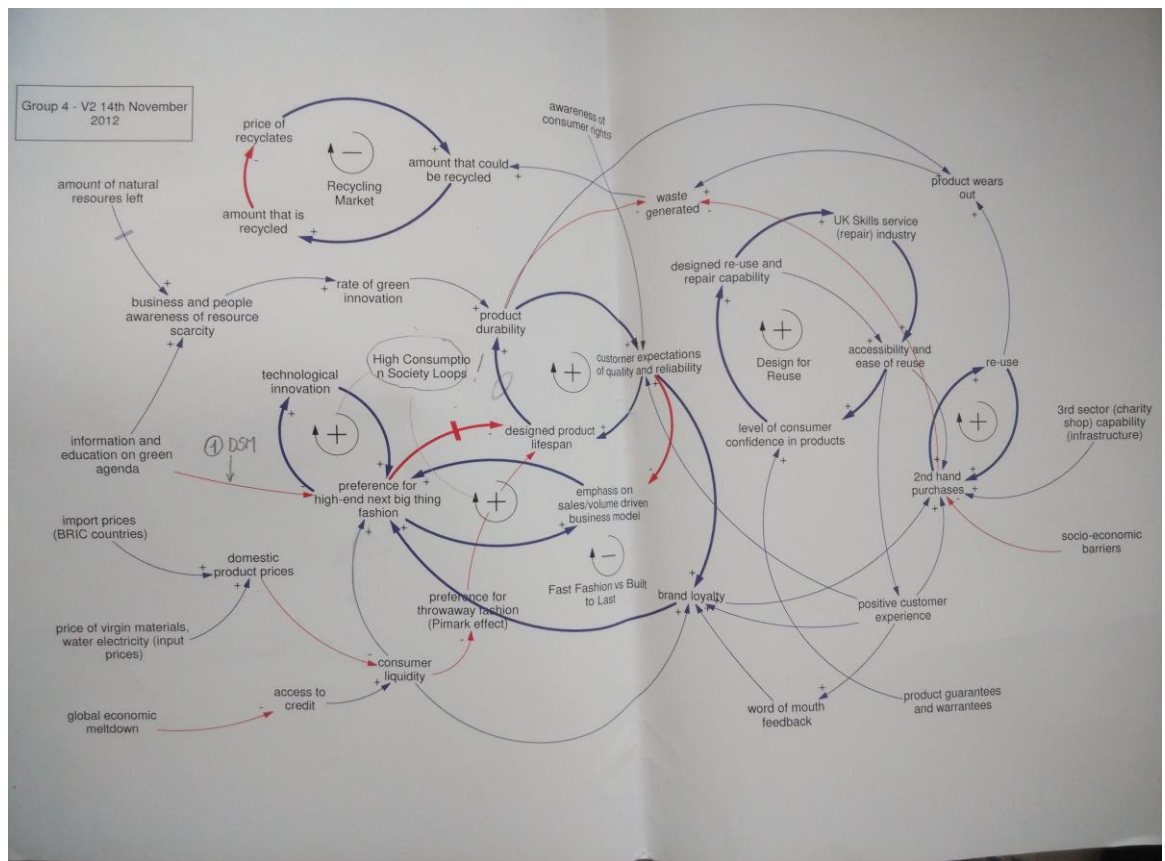


Extract 8.2: An example of 'causal loops' obtained through 'system thinking'. The diagram was part of a Powerpoint slide shown to officers during the training days at DEFRA

The consultants claimed the same kind of 'system thinking' was currently in use in other Departments, in particular the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Health,

whose officers they advised in the past. They also informed the techniques were established practices used by engineers in industries of a range of sectors, including pharmaceuticals, aerospace, manufacturing, automotive, banking, construction and petrochemicals. Practical demonstrations included applications to existing policies such as in the 'policy areas' of 'waste management', 'epidemic models' and issues of health policy, such as the management of ambulance services. Part of the package was a 'software tool', a computer program aiding the creation of such conceptual 'models' in the form of 'causal loop diagrams', installed on officers' machines to let them experiment with the technique once the training part of the 'project' was over. The last two days of training consisted in instructions around how to use the software, and how to add through it levels of sophistication to the 'models', including the addition of 'quantitative data' to the causal relationships, which allowed to perform calculations of a 'what if' kind. These meant that the 'model' drawn could be interrogated in its 'dynamics' over time, providing the grounds to perform checks over future scenarios manipulating the variables included in the 'model', and by doing so, providing 'evidence' that a policy intervening on that variable would have worked or not, and to what extent.

The 'system thinking' training sessions were concluded with an extra half-day 'workshop', when officers from 'policy areas' were invited to apply the 'approach' to 'problems' they were grappling with. 'Sustainable consumption' was selected by officers and consultants as worthy of exploration, being considered a 'wicked problem' par excellence (fieldnotes). Split into four groups, around twenty officers drew separately four potential 'models' to describe what they saw as the elements of the 'system' at play. One of the 'models' is shown in the picture in the next page.



Extract 8.3: The 'system diagram' describing 'sustainable consumption' as a result of the 'exercise'. Picture of an A3 hard copy

Talking to some of the participants at the margins of the workshop and, in the following weeks to the member of the 'sustainable consumption' area, I registered a widespread dissatisfaction with the results of the 'exercise'. The main 'problem' officers flagged was a difficulty in defining the limits – or 'boundaries' in the language of the 'approach' – of the imagined 'system'. Which factors should have been considered 'external' to the system, and which included? What would have been the discerning criteria to decide? The risk, they found, was to engage in an 'infinite task' of agreeing what should be in and out, how to measure it, and how to be sure they did not forget something vital for an 'accurate' description. The fact that each group had designed a very different model from the others worked, in the words of one participant, as 'proof' that the 'approach' left the 'problem' intractable. Another officer reported feeling “more confused than before” (fieldnotes). When my secondment to the Department ended a few weeks after these attempted applications, I had not registered any sign that the 'strand of work' would have progressed any further. By the time I left, however, the tentative nature of much of the work of the officers had become clear to me (cf. chapter 5), and I was content with having been able to witness and document the attempt to apply yet another potential

'paradigm' to the policy area of interest for this study. Elsewhere in other government Departments, the 'system thinking approach' was reported to be having better fortunes.

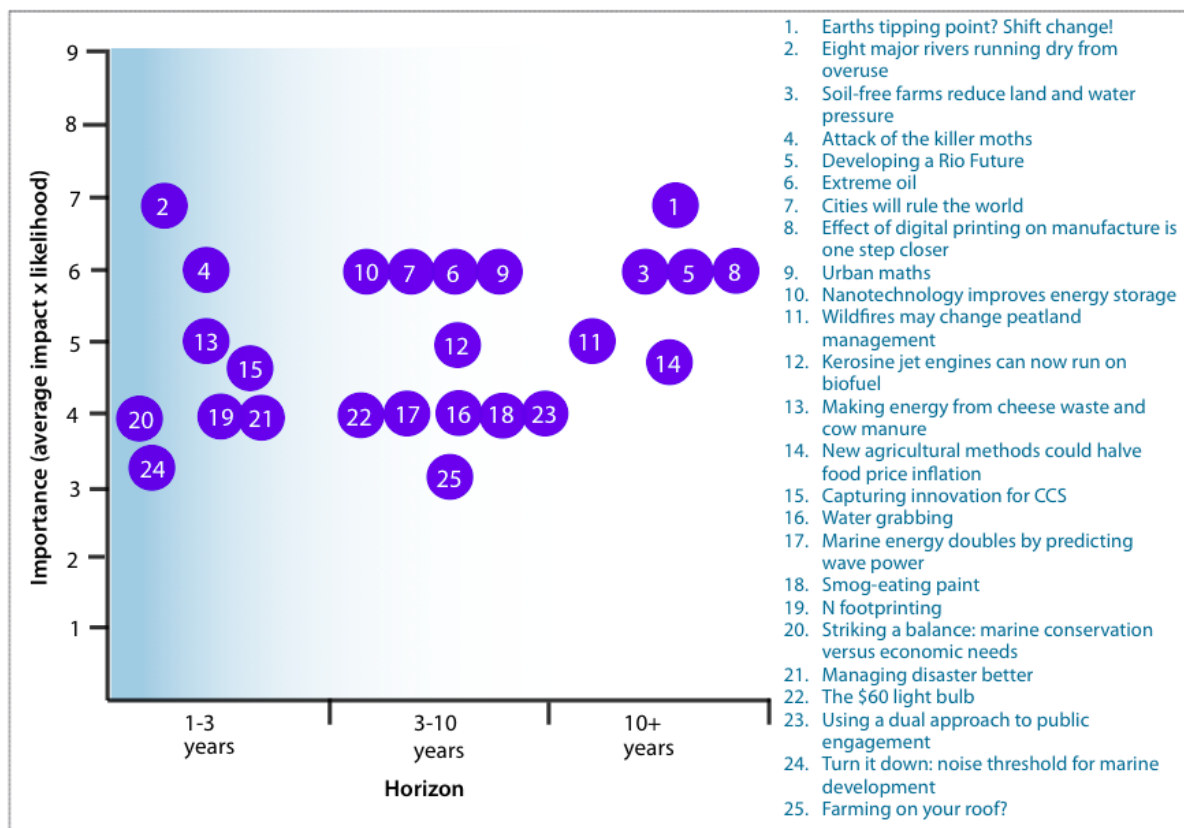
Horizon scanning

As for most successful fashions and 'new' ideas, the up-take by the majority of the members of a community follows a process of diffusion from early innovators to the majority (cf. Rogers, 2003). By the time I left the Department, there were only few indications of what would have become the next wave of fashionable 'thinking': in DEFRA, the words 'horizon scanning' were only beginning to creep into officers' exchanges in talk and by email. Increasingly however, as documented by a House of Commons Science and Technology Committee inquiry in 2014 (HC 703), two years after my departure, the techniques suggested by this 'new approach' were starting to “enjoy much popularity in government” (p.3), and 'horizon scanning' was gaining ground in Departments as policy-making 'paradigm', driven, as it often happens (see above), by the most influential of the government agencies (the Cabinet Office) with the assent or backing of the most senior officers in the Service (cf. Cabinet Office, 2013). This temporal unfolding meant that I had occasion to witness only the very first attempts by DEFRA officers to apply in practice the precepts of such 'approach', and thus only the beginning of their 'learning' about how to use it to structure their activities. In essence, 'scanning horizons' meant officers' had to develop further their practices of 'thinking' about what *might* happen in the future (Science and Technology Committee, 2014:8; cf. Chapter 5). Such practices, conducted through officers' brainstorming 'exercises', were already inscribed into the process of defining potential threats and risks, with the associated filling in of 'risk management' documentation, always required to progress 'projects' and 'programmes'. Elements of the 'approach' were also included in the long-standing activities known in the office as 'scenario building' – an 'exercise' mostly undertaken by senior officers – when, given the 'risks' (what *could* go wrong) in the implementation of a 'plan', officers elaborated responses and 'actions' should those risks materialise (what we *would* do if things went wrong). These were known as 'contingency plans' and constituted, as we have seen earlier, the normal practice of 'project' and 'programme management'. 'Horizon scanning', in a sense, reversed one of the principles on which the construction of 'contingency plans' had been undertaken to that point: the temporal order under which the officers' 'thinking' had to be based.

Rather than starting from a description of the present and then project the government 'action' in the future and prepare for the potential 'scenarios' resulting from the consequences of the 'action' – essentially in a reactive fashion – the techniques of 'horizon scanning' tuned officers 'thinking' towards *anticipating* the future independently from present descriptions and policy 'plans' and, *on that imagined basis*, elaborate the 'policy needs' and 'evidence needs' (cf. chapter 5) of the present (cf. Science and Technology Committee, 2014:8). The early applications of the 'ways of working' stemming from the 'horizon scanning approach' steered a part of the DEFRA research budget towards a kind of research activities defined as 'anticipatory' (internal documentation) where, in practice, officers sought to collect likely descriptions of what the *future* of any given 'policy area' could look like. Much of the 'evidence needs' identified by officers in each 'policy area' for the period to 2017/2018 were tested through early applications of the 'horizon scanning' discipline. On the wave of the growing popularity of 'anticipatory research', the 'priority' questions my colleagues in the 'sustainable consumption' policy area were asking themselves, their contacts, and through which they interrogated 'evidence' changed. Whilst before questions revolved around the lines of: 'what do we mean by sustainable consumption?', 'what a successful government intervention would look like to pursue or promote it?', in the new 'strands of work' initiated in late 2012, just before the end of my secondment, the wording had changed in: 'how consumption could be sustainable in 5, 15 and 25 years?'. Internal 'workshops' to proceed with a collection of preliminary 'descriptions' of such kind, during which officers were split into groups to 'think' and 'brainstorm' answers to these questions, were organised to such effect.

Some similar initiatives, albeit more structured, were going on at the same time, in coordination with other governmental organisations and under the direction of the Cranfield University's Centre for Environmental Risks and Futures – one of the 'centres of excellence' established by the government to involve 'academic expertise' in the development of the 'paradigm'. DEFRA had 'chipped in', together with devolved administrations (Wales and Scotland), other Departments (DECC, Department for Transport) and executive agencies (Natural England, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, etc.), to a 'project' set up to provide routine 'scans' of potential “threats, opportunities and likely future developments” (Cranfield University, no date) and received “insights” obtained through 'workshops' to which officers regularly took

part. By sharing their 'thinking' around potential descriptions of the future, officers contributed to generate “semi-quantitative assessment[s]” (Cranfield University, 2012, 1) of the likelihood and potential impact of future events. An example of 'horizon scanning' documentation read and discussed by officers is shown below.



Extract 8.4: Example from 'horizon scanning documentation', obtained through brainstorming 'exercises' involving DEFRA officers, then circulated in internal emails potentially to inform policy development

These 'exercises' helped officers “to identify emerging issues” and “to prioritise evidence needs” (email exchange), and constituted the new 'style of thinking' officers were required to adopt while engaging in the business of 'commissioning research'.

Advising ministers and 'publication'

The principle at work in the activities of 'evidence' provision for 'policy development' is that officers “need to find the best available evidence” (fieldnotes). This principle entails learning how to 'manage' the contacts with other Departments' officers and with representatives of other professional communities, these in turn interested in

participating to the knowledge markets created by the 'research budget' of the Department. Once information relevant to the creation of policy proposals is gathered, either by paying for it or by acquiring it in alternative ways, the officers' role becomes that of handling what they call 'research products'. Usually, these take the form of 'reports'. Officers proceed to scan 'research results' or 'findings', and – as they say – engage in the process of 'distilling' evidence for their 'policy development' purposes. The reception of a commissioned report constitutes a critical time in the everyday life of the office, with officers on one occasion asked to “brace themselves” for a report that was due on the day. Officers are given a time frame to read individually the reports, and then gather in meetings to discuss the 'research outputs'. A number of issues need to be considered. The most urgent is whether the 'evidence' obtained is 'robust enough' (fieldnotes) to inform projections of policy courses. The principle at work is to

assess that what we are drawing on is robust from a technical perspective and that we are making decisions based on correct information and not on selectively quoted information or biased perspectives (interview with Grade7)

'Specialist' officers play a vital role in such assessment, operating what they call a 'translation' from the technical language of the reports into the 'civil service language' (interview; cf. Maybin, 2013): generally, this entails a synthesis and a simplification that 'boils down' the 'research outputs' into manageable bits of information tailored to reply the original 'policy questions'. Officers recognise the ability to produce these syntheses as one of the most important skills they need to develop when working as 'analysts' for government Departments:

is the ability to interpret a 200-page report into one page. That is really, really important. Sometimes [suppliers] expect us to go home with a pile of papers that's that thick [indicates with fingers] and read all night. What officers can read is one... one piece of paper, they won't read the 200 page report. So my job is very often, I will get given [a report]... “we know there's something in there, we don't know what it is, can you tell us what we need to know?” And so then [building on my specialist expertise] I'd go, okay, you need to know that, that, that. (interview with 'social research officer')

The expectation is that the 'evidence' provided by commissioned research satisfies the generalist officers' 'policy needs'. When reports are highly technical in character, generalist officers rely – in the words of one of them – on their [of 'specialists'] "judgement of judgement". 'Results' are thus 'translated' into information that suits the form and the requirements of 'advice to ministers', or in 'data' and 'models' that

constitute usable material to compose 'policy papers'. The fact that such 'evidence-base' – as it comes to be called – has been obtained through the processes described so far, in effect 'validates' the 'outcomes'. 'Commissioned research', in a sense *by default*, ends up being considered more 'trusted' and 'authoritative'.

Information of this kind are generally passed first to seniors. 'Research officers' and the 'generalists' they support are after the seniors' 'nod', which is obtained, in turn, by consulting the minister interested in the 'strand of work'. In some cases, a 'submission' (see above) can be drafted and presented. The requirements in terms of style and form vary according to which minister is being advised: officers in fact need to develop a sense of ministers' personalities and approach to what and how is being told to them (interview; also cf. Rhodes, 2011:120ss). Some ministers – officers report – want “a black and white description of the world”, while others accept more nuanced versions, usually when they are “trained to understand science”. One example offered to me to elaborate on the point was the opportunity to present 'evidence' in probabilistic terms:

you could go to [name of minister] and tell her: there's the 70% of probability this is happening, and she would understand and approve the way you presented the facts to her. If you did the same with [another minister] he'd look at you like you were fooling around
(interview)

Senior officers, who spend more time in meetings with ministers and get to know them better, pass on to juniors instructions on how to tailor 'advice' around the ministers-of-the-day's preferences. Officers are expected not to take issue with the required style of reporting and advising, nor with the preferred kind of 'evidence-base'. During a policy-related meeting I attended, for instance, a 'social research officer' presented the following problem to her director (fieldnotes):

[Officer] presents a piece of research she is working on: “I have very good data of qualitative research, very good data. But the supervisory board wants to see quantitative data... actually I found difficult to distil data and get to what they want.

The director answered (fieldnotes):

this [research] is about what people think about a certain issue. This is [the information] we need. It is rather cheap with [market research company specialised in surveys], only 200 pounds for the odd question on a survey. If we think people are really concerned with this and is worth doing it, then you have to commission it [in that form].

The officers' role, importantly, extends to assessing and anticipating whether or not 'research products' are going to create controversy if and when they are released into the public domain. The 'publication' of commissioned research reports constitutes in fact the last stage of 'research management': the uploading of a 'final report' on the Department's website closes formally a 'research project' for all parties involved. In the period in between reception of the reports as for 'research project specifications' and the actual publication, a number of activities take place. These go under the name of 'research clearance'. Officers must decide, among other things, whether or not the report can be published in the form they received it, or if it is more appropriate to publish only a "shorter summary version" (DEFRA, 2011,*2). Officers can also deem 'reports' unsatisfactory, or find they contain "sensitivities" or "issues [that need] handling" (DEFRA, 2012,*3). 'Sensitivities' are generally associated with 'findings' that are deemed as 'highly risky' for the Department, most of the time in terms of reputation. Cases in point are when the 'findings' conflict with the ministers' 'directions' or contravene their preferred 'policy options' and 'overarching agendas', or when 'reports' contain 'critical views' on current government action. 'Issues to be handled' are also identified when 'negative feelings' towards governmental agencies are reported, or when current policies are interpreted in ways officers find contentious. Officers can also take issue with the appropriateness of reports' language, as in one instance when a discussion had to be held on whether or not a report could contain the word "bloody", this pronounced by a participant in an interview composing the research and reported verbatim (DEFRA, 2012,*3). In all these cases, should officers agree amendments need to be made, reports are returned to the supplier "for re-drafting" (DEFRA, 2011,*2:99).

Tensions may arise on these occasions. Officers and managers reserve the right to ask for edits or changes, and can consider a refusal to proceed with them a "breach of contract" (idem) on the part of the 'evidence' supplier. The Department can first warn and then take legal action if "in Defra's view, the report is unsatisfactory" (idem). While officers were reluctant to discuss with me their approach when dealing with 'reports' that turned out to be 'controversial' or 'unsatisfactory', some members of supplier organisations were readier, on condition of anonymity, to share their point of view. One of them, for instance, in response to my request to comment around the experience of providing 'evidence' to the Department wrote:

I have never thought about it before but it also seems that there is quite a strong power dynamics in many of these contexts [the interactions in between officials and evidence suppliers] i.e. that the power lies with the policy officials... they generally call the tune about the nature of the relationship (email exchange, July 2012)

When I asked the informant to elaborate further on the expression 'calling the tune of the relationship' she replied:

*one observation [...] is around pragmatic issues like deadlines – there are (rightly) deadlines for those delivering the research but in terms of feedback on that by the policy official the commitment to deadlines is not so often evident... there can be delays in getting comments back on drafts of reports for example.
I have also experienced situations where the policy side request[s] changes in the report that play some things down and play other things up in ways that clearly serve a particular policy agenda but can feel to the [supplier] that this distorts the results... Sometimes it is not until then that you really realise exactly why is it that the work was needed and the purpose that it was envisaged that it would serve [...]*

Another supplier, questioned on the same matters, wrote:

I think that when comments are given on reports etc. that rather than this being something that you can think about and then adjust or not having considered it – there is a sense in which is rather, 'please make these changes'. It is not an invitation to have a conversation about it.

At times, these kind of requests are not necessary. Officers, after consulting seniors and ministers, may find the 'final reports' and 'findings' deserve the largest promotion and attention of the press and the public. This is usually the case when 'findings' corroborate the current proposed policies, or are seen to be reinforcing the Department's reputation. In these cases, officers proceed to organise public presentations where the press is invited, in some occasions arranging for a minister to deliver a speech. Activities associated to the organisation of such events entail: arranging for the venue and for a list of invitees (usually forwarded to the communication and press offices), writing the text of the minister's speech, decide the allocation of time slots during the event, taking care not to place the minister, if involved, into the uncomfortable position of answering questions s/he not able to provide, as too technical in character (fieldnotes). The 'specialist' officers who had managed the 'research' must thus attend and step in when the occasion requires.

The officers' 'research management' tasks extend to making decisions on all such range of matters. For some 'reports' they must promote the maximum possible publicity, for

others they must engage in lengthy negotiations to avoid negative exposure. Delaying tactics can be employed. Officers can judge the 'research projects' have not led to a definitive conclusion, and prolong the search for answers either by extending the time frame of an ongoing 'project', or by commissioning 'further research' (cf. Weiss, 1979; Campbell *et al.*, 2007). The publication of 'projects' final documentation can also be delayed appealing to several reasons, for instance that it contains 'commercially-sensitive' information, that it did not reach the 'standards required' (DEFRA, *2), or that a 'review of the available evidence' is necessary before proceeding to make it public. While the Department operations in terms of publishing 'research' must respond to the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act, some of the 'reports' may fall into oblivion, as there is no obligation to publish documentation unless the Act is not explicitly invoked with reference to a specific 'project'.

Another tactic, well-known to political journalists to the point of becoming proverbial (cf. e.g. Clover, 2001; Hanlon, 2012; Sparrow, 2015), is to release a large number of publications on the same day, generally coinciding with either the beginning of summer and Christmas Parliamentary recesses, or with days when breaking news are likely to deviate strongly the public attention. These are known as “good days to bury bad news”, when the objective becomes taking advantage of the information overload created by the concurrence of several stories journalists need to follow at once. 'Specialist' and 'policy' officers at 'executive' and 'Grade7s' ranks seemed however not to have much power in making decisions around the timing of announcements and publications, with such events most likely to be decided by seniors in coordination with the Department's press office. On the contrary, at times I registered the officers' dissatisfaction with the processes dealt by the 'e-com people', as the press and communication officers were often called. Colleagues, for example, complained of 'delays', and used sarcastic tones when informing each other that something had “finally been announced” (fieldnotes), or that they “did not know what they are waiting for”, given “the report was cleared months ago” (fieldnotes). The officers' shrugs and the rolling of eyes that accompanied these conversations on the work floor indicated to me these matters were out of their hands.

CHAPTER 9: The Briefing

Introduction

The ethnographic account proposed so far has covered quite a lot of ground. The description began with considering the physical settings and technologies constituting the background of the professional life of the officers I have observed. Then I noted how the working days of officers involved in policy development are set by the rhythm of meetings. I proposed a broad typology of these encounters, and illustrated examples of the pressing concerns, the matters at stake, and the kind of activities that are discussed or take place during this time in meeting rooms. I also noted the intersection of officers' activities with the progress of written documents responding to specific 'organisational' purposes. I highlighted the importance of risk accounting in the delivering of 'projects' and 'programmes', and the specific requirements of other documentation that is produced to 'progress' public policy ideas and initiatives. The drafting of 'narratives' and 'impact assessments', the scrutiny of 'research reports', and the updating of files recording ongoing projects constitute some of the objects of the work 'executives' and 'grade7s' do (cf. Harper, 1998). Officers refer to these processes as 'strands of work', and handle the tasks associated to their development. Documents are generally drafted *ad-hoc* to address the emerging of contingent organisational needs, these in turn emerging from the exchanges officers have with managers, with other 'customers', and with 'contractors' and 'stakeholders'.

As meetings and tasks are emergent, officers attend to a continuous re-shaping of activities and discussions. Their work is to accompany ongoing issues through contingent developments, of which they are given, and take, responsibility. Among these features, I have stressed the importance of the work involved in the constitution of 'policy teams' around policy domains, the work associated to the unfolding of 'projects' and 'programmes' and their relation to official political commitments (the 'official line'), the use of documents to record progress and the methods used to accomplish some of the functions carried out by the Department as governmental agency. The description has touched upon some of the peculiarities of the work carried out by officers: the etiquette of 'networking', the difficulties encountered by research participants in retrieving records, the tasks involved in the attempts to achieve 'progress'. I have also

unpacked some of the competences and expertise required, by exploring the language used by officers to characterise to each other what they do, and of what they need to be aware. The description dipped into their competence system, or more precisely in what I had apprehended about it. My interest, which I hope should be clear to the reader by now, was in finding out and display instances of “practical reasoning”: the way officers attend to activities and make sense of the world of policy development.

It is now time to focus the attention on a specific 'strand of work', and sharpen the analysis towards considering more closely the talk and interactions of the officers involved in it. The object of analysis of this Chapter is the progressing of one document, specifically set up and developed to agree – 'drawing together' in the language used in the final draft of the resulting document – the department's position – or 'approach' – to 'sustainable consumption'. The drafting of this internal document, to which officers refer to as 'narrative', was processed during a period of four months, from May to September 2012. The data on which the Chapter draws takes the form of extracts of transcribed recordings of meetings, excerpts of email exchanges and first-hand experience of what was involved in getting the job done, filed in the form of fieldnotes. My report is organised to respect as much as possible the temporal order of events and to give “material demonstration” (Lynch, 1985) of practical examples of the work under study, with associated activities. This means, following the methodological commitments of the study (cf. Chapter 2), that I am particularly concerned with showing in details what is entailed in the *work* carried out to compose the document. Central to this are the practical ways participants come to agree, as a team, what will be included and therefore what will be the focus of potential policy initiatives. In practice, what the work of the officers is about is the narrowing down of a political commitment – 'promoting sustainable consumption' – into 'actions': a vague declaratory intent is interpreted in specific ways so to allow a definition of grounds for the development of policies. This process – which could be seen as a *translation* – builds on the very vagueness, or *ambiguity*, of the original, unspecified, policy commitment. Officers, within the *background expectancies* described so far (cf. Chapter 3), deal with the problem of translating the ambiguous commitment to 'promote sustainable consumption' into organisational action. The Chapter narrows down the focus of the analysis onto the activities necessary to manage this translation. Research participants, as detailed in Chapter 7, are occupied by this sort of task as a matter of everyday work. Defining *what* they do in these terms however, tells us little about *how* they do it, and it is precisely to

the detailing and the description of this *how* that I now turn. Through the display of data and accompanying commentary, the analysis the Chapter presents seeks therefore to reconstruct the unfolding of events in the office in such a way some of the properties of the “situated rationality” (Suchman, 1987) at play will come to light.

Two aspects are worth noticing before introducing the data. First, the drafting of the document by no means represented a particularly remarkable chain of events for the Department. The officers involved in the work treated their activities as 'business as usual' – one among several others in their day-to-day working life. Second, those who were practically in charge of the drafting (and 'owned' the 'strand of work', to use the native language), dedicated only a small part of their time in the office to the activities described. Only at some points, namely right at the beginning of the process and in the days preceding one of the key meetings, there was a sense the activities speeded up in some way, but the general sense one could perceive on the work floor was rarely of frenzied engagement with this particular process. Taken individually, officers displayed, in other words, the usual juggler's disposition – the ability to deal with an array of activities, often unrelated to each other (cf. Chapter 5). Drafting the 'SC narrative', in the eyes of officers, did not constitute a particularly exciting and dramatic turn of events that led to a surprising ending. Rather, it was yet another 'strand of work' going through 'process'.

The Chapter documents and analyses the operations of the 'SC team' during a period of around three weeks. It details the inception and the first developments of the work related to the drafting of the 'sustainable consumption narrative', an internal paper commissioned to outline – in the words of the officers – the 'Department's vision' on SC. The first section of the Chapter retrieves the inception of the paper's trajectory. It displays data in relation to what prompted the paper, and follows the operations of the officers in dealing with the associated earliest tasks. The 'narrative', as we shall see, is a spin-off of a different document – a 'briefing' requested by the office of the Deputy Prime Minister during the building up of an international conference on sustainable development. What is entailed in assembling the briefing and what the officers do to respond to the request offers first hand insights in the activities associated with policy development. A discussion focussed on these activities closes the section. In the second part of the Chapter, analysis of policy work on sustainable consumption gets under way. Officers meet to discuss the outline of the paper and decide what should be included.

Transcripts of what was said in one of the meetings when officers meet up to 'discuss the narrative' will be subjected to detailed analysis, with the objective of highlighting the modes of reasoning officers employed to move forward in their task of writing the draft. The analysis will begin with pinpointing what they consider *relevant* to the task at hand, and will develop offering observations and insights in the way officers display alignment to the requirements of the specific task.

At work in the office

(Week 1 – end of May)

As we have seen in Chapter 6, the rhythm of team work is generally set by weekly, fortnightly or monthly meetings. In these, team members update each other on the status of their work, agree on 'action points' to 'bring their work forward', and on the basis of such points, individually carry out the tasks decided collectively. External events can disrupt, or more appropriately, can set a different pace, to the usual rhythm (cf. Wilkinson, 2011). Two such events were the triggers for initiating the series of activities and tasks I set out to describe. The first event was the lead up to RIO+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, to be held in late June 2012 in Brazil. The Department had set a specific 'Rio+20 International Team' to deal with the preparation, on which the team under observation had no responsibility. Things changed suddenly when a communication from the Cabinet Office reached first the private secretaries, then the leader of the newly-formed RIO+20 team, and finally the senior officers formally in charge of the work on sustainable production and consumption policies for the Department. The email informed of interest on the part of the Deputy Prime Minister's office to have a 'briefing' on sustainability policy development as a result of a 'RIO workshop' (internal email). A thread of email was initiated, and this brings us to the second related event, namely a letter sent from the CEO of a large multinational company to the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg. Titled 'CEO Round Table on Responsible Business' the letter reads:

Dear Nick, I greatly enjoyed our recent telephone discussion and was interested to hear about the initiatives you are developing. As you know [name of company] remains a strong supporter of the need to develop new sustainable business and economic models. I would certainly welcome the opportunity to host and organise a high level roundtable event centred on this theme with like minded CEOs and other appropriate stakeholders. [Three names of CEOs and relative companies] have already expressed an interest in participating in the roundtable. We should aim to organise this prior to the summer recess so that it could inform

your thinking for the Rio+20 process in June in which I also plan to participate [...] Warm regards, [letter signed] (digital scan of the letter to DPM attached to internal email)

The email circulating among senior officers, titled 'DPM attendance at business roundtable', sparked enthusiastic reactions. The senior officer responsible for the policies on sustainable production and consumption (SCP), wrote:

This is a good opportunity from our point of view; a chance to get senior business leaders focusing on new business models (one example is the wider use of 'product service systems', such as Streetcar, as more sustainable alternatives to traditional outright ownership), and to engage the DPM in our agenda. [...] I'll call [name of DPM's officer] for an update and to discuss how we might make the best of the opportunity. (internal email)

The same senior officer contacted on the floor one of his 'team leaders' to offer her the role of 'co-ordinator', which was promptly accepted. Later in the day, another email informed the roundtable would have to be postponed of one month, 'to July, the other side of Rio+20' (internal email). One of the other recipients wrote a single line in response:

Excitement over (internal email)

Surprisingly, three days later, the same officer informing the SCP senior officers of the CEO roundtable wrote again, by an email flagged with an 'high importance' mark:

I have just got off the phone with the DPM's office. They have decided to hold a stakeholder group in the Cabinet Office on Thursday 7th of June on SCP [...] (internal email)

More detailed information followed:

It's very short notice, but perhaps a good opportunity to get CO [Cabinet Office] on board with some of your work? I think it's more for you than for us... there are some Rio elements to it but it's mostly about SCP more generally ([name of DPM's officer] ran through ideas around definitions of SCP – the 'vision' around what it means, expectations for Rio (us), but beyond – what are NGOs and businesses doing, what should government be doing) I said I'd talk to you and we'd feed back any comments on all of this [...] they want briefing (as always) and an official to attend.

Briefing likely to be around what's the UK doing, good examples of things businesses are doing, what are other countries doing, any background reading? [...]

The email, received in the late evening of Tuesday, prompted a long response in the early morning (08.12am) of the following day. The text indicates a number of 'actions' to take place immediately: we see here the machinery of the office working at its full

potential, with all ranks, from an administrator to a minister, mobilised in some way. The officer replies to the sender only, but adds a long list of secondary recipients, to which in fact the email is directed. These include both officers at higher ranks (including the private secretary of one minister) and the 'executives' and 'Grade7s' composing the sustainable consumption and production 'policy areas':

I am in later than usual today, but I'll discuss with [name of director] at my one to one at 10am this morning, then I suggest a group of us briefly brainstorm later this morning what's required and who'll do what [...] Top priority is commenting on the proposed meeting plan (later today?); the briefing/background reading due by tomorrow – which while tailor made I'd hope we can draw on existing materials to prepare it.

The text goes on instructing his personal administrator to book the meeting room, forwarding official invitations to all the recipients, and proposing a volunteer to chair it. All the names of those that need to do something are highlighted in bold characters. The email goes on to address the sender, who sits in the office of the permanent secretary:

[name of officer] do you know the timing of the event please? I'm due to be on leave, but we clearly need to be there! Can you guide us at all on where SCP currently sits in the negotiation text for Rio+20, and where expectations realistically lie? And to whom should we speak as necessary to prepare input [two names of DPM's officers mentioned as possible contacts]? It would eg be helpful to discuss the background, including the input from a Rio workshop referred to; whether materials are needed to be sent to all participants (as opposed to just briefing within Government); and possible additional participants (eg [name of company]), who recently suggested something similar – see attached [scan of the letter to DPM as above].

The email closes with two further instructions:

We'll need to inform more senior colleagues and Ministers, although I assume there's little chance of clearing briefing with Ministers before it goes ([name of private secretary officer] any steer?)

[name of personal administrator] please print for me thanks.

The tasks are set. It is Wednesday morning. Waiting for the meeting to happen I meet one of the Sustainable Consumption team officers. On the way to the room booked at very short notice for the meeting I ask him to comment on the developments and he starts by criticising the time frame:

Officer: The DPM decided that he wanted something published on SC and SP [Sustainable Production] by next week. You know this is typical of the Central Office... they were briefed last week and they want things done by next week! It seems is going to be a busy day. There are [names two different projects on which he has to 'take action'] plus there is this DPM thing. It's in the context of Rio, they had a conversation and they came up like... oh SC and

SP... this is a great idea! So we should have a workshop on it...

LM: Are you going to organise this?

Officer: No, actually [name of director] asked [name of officer, same grade of the speaker] to do it as you know she is in better position to draw out the words used in the last six months, and pick pieces of text from all the different documents because you know you don't want to write the all thing from scratch... (fieldnotes, Vol.2, p.175ss)

The meeting starts with the chair's apologies for 'disrupting diaries'. Eight people attend including me, plus one officer remotely, via the phone. There are at least two attendants I have never met before, so I had to refrain from asking permission to tape-record the one-hour meeting. The re-construction below has to rely on a summary of re-elaborated fieldnotes and on a resulting document, circulated by email by the officer in charge of co-ordinating the operations. The email was composed by the coordinator immediately after the meeting (referred to as 'brainstorm' by one officer, 'workshop' by the attendant I spoke to), and sent to all those involved in the composition of the 'briefing' in the early afternoon, around three hours after the end of the encounter (02.50pm). The coordinator was not physically in the office: her participation in the meeting happens remotely through a speakerphone link up, and she will be working on the resulting document from home.

The chair opens the discussion restating (as in the email above) the importance of the forthcoming meeting, stressing the existence of “opportunities for pushing forward” work in the SCP domain. He also admits, however, that such work is “quite underdeveloped I suspect”. He proposes to address “the issues for briefing by tomorrow” first and sets, as “absolute priority”, the need to “make contact with the relevant people” during the rest of the day. The coordinator, through the phone, says that she “wonder[s] if this is about business models rather than SCP as a whole”. The officers around the table skim through the list of the confirmed organisations for the meeting [a mix of representatives of think-thanks, associations of companies, single large multinational companies, one local council of a large city] and agree that is “certainly businesses that are central to deliver, not [name of a NGO]”. The remark sparkles some laughter in the room. It is resolved to forward the invitation to further companies' representatives, who would “expect” to be involved. The topic of the discussion switches to whether it will be “CEOs” or “sustainability managers” attending, and the need to “ask the organisers”. Officers thus agree that in the former case the Department will need to send a minister, in the latter a very senior person will suffice. The more senior person in the room informs the others that one minister could

be available, and gives a name of an alternative high-rank possible candidate. The conversation moves on what “needs to be mentioned” in the briefing. One by one, a list of documents are brought to our attention by each officer. 'Three pager narrative', a 'roadmap', 'the department work on behaviours', a 'concept note', a 'summary of an Audit report' are discussed in turn. The point is about establishing whether such documents should be included or not in the briefing. The discretionary rule seems to be whether or not each of these 'overlap' with what the SCP teams are doing. One of the talk exchanges in this part of the meeting goes as follows:

Chair: we need to establish a credible line on vision on SCP, and select the nuts and bolts that make that critical

Officer1: well I think SCP and the Green Economy narrative overlap an awful lot

Officer2: in saying businesses have a critical role

Officer1: yes, also the roadmap says so

The discussion starts addressing some details of what one SCP officer defines as “ongoing work on stepchange business models”. The chair, however, notes that “we are working on a broad scope” and that “there is no time to propose a carefully crafted position”: “it would probably not be the right time for the country” he spells, noting, however, that “given the DPM is involved, who knows what is possible”. It is agreed therefore to consider the inclusion of “only a broad statement” on business models. Moving on, a proposal to include some lines on “mandatory emission reporting” is accepted, because “the Treasury lifted a block on it”. In the rest of the meeting, the documents to be used in the briefing are agreed (see resulting email below) and officers name in turn who must be contacted to do the work of selecting and summarising relevant bits: 'who leads on this? Is he around?'...

The officers leave the meeting room. I follow two of them in the corridors and in the lift, on our way to our desks. Their exchange follows these lines:

Officer1: I wonder how what came up in the Guardian... what the [name of secretary of state] said about green growth and how does this fits into all this

Officer2: Yes I think is also a question of terminology and whether people know what they are talking about: green economy, green growth, sustainable consumption and production... they are in fact the same thing!

We come back to the area where our desks are, just to find out that the next meeting has just started. This is an area meeting: it is held on the work floor rather than in a room. In

a circle, some of them standing, other keeping their position sitting at the desk, officers in turn talk quickly about salient features of the 'work strands' they are following, selecting aspects that maybe possibly relevant to others. These meetings, held every fortnight, are called 'birdtable assemblies'. At their turn to speak, none of the officers who attended the meeting on the DPM event mentions what just went on. They talk about “the boring task of deciding what we are going to do with the budget”, some “new interesting research products”, “something I'd love to see its profile raised, as people around don't know about it” (fieldnotes). Many of the officers (some twenty-five people are present) do not seem to be particularly attentive: some keep staring at screens, others nod occasionally in between glancing at papers. The gathering lasts half an hour, after which the officers I followed from the meeting come back to their desk. I do the same. One of them looks at me over the partition between our desks and say triumphantly: “I can finally eat my breakfast!” He does so over his keyboard, while checking emails and starting to compose a message addressing some delay in one of the projects he is managing. It is quarter to one.

Two hours later, the coordinator's instructions on what needs to be done to put together the briefing for the Deputy Prime Minister's office lands in the email inbox of thirteen different officers, six of them as primary recipients, seven e-copied in (cc:). By the end of the email the text reads:

If you're in the To box then I'm hoping you will provide either comments on the agenda or briefing tomorrow or both. Copyees are welcome to help out, but not obliged.

The email delivers information that were flagged as necessary in the meeting:

I've found about a bit more about this event including where it is, background, and have put together all the inputs I've gleaned so far in the attached.

The text in the email anticipates two points – the more urgent bits which needed to be clarified. The first is that “the DPM will [not] be there in person [...] so don't think we need Ministerial attendance”; the second is that “the focus seems to be more on sustainable consumption than on production, and on identifying how we can work together to change consumption behaviour, and Government role in this”. A further sentence clarifies the reason the meeting has been set up: “it has come about because of

comments made by [name of company] and [name of company] at a workshop on Rio⁵⁶, but it seems as if the DPM office interest goes wider than that". The plan for 'action' follows to close the email's text:

Anyway, I'd like to go back to the DPM's office with some initial **comments on the agenda today**, before providing **briefing tomorrow**. And [name of officer] agreed to sort out [Department] attendance. I've put my initial comments on their draft agenda in red on the attached and asked for input from specific people highlighted in green. I've also allocated bits of the briefing to different people. (internal email, original emphasis, the words 'red' and 'green' in corresponding colour fonts).

The email did not have any file appended. It arrives thirteen minutes later with apologies for being hopeless

The structure and the contents of the file provide an extraordinarily detailed insight into the practicalities of the activity of 'briefing' – a substantial component of what I have referred to as 'policy work'. The work being described is fundamental to understand what provided the 'momentum' (cf. Chapter 7) to develop further activities, which occupied (part of) the working time of the research participants in the following three months. Central to this is of course the first drafting of the 'Sustainable Consumption narrative', one among a number of other documents which became salient for the progressing of the Department's operations following the 'DPM event'.

The file is a four-page document that includes five further embedded text documents. The writer organises the text in sections, and the different colours in the text guide the readers through detailed instructions on what needs to be done. The opening section – titled 'background' – clarifies who the originators of the upcoming events are, and how it all fits with the political scene:

This meeting came out of a roundtable meeting with stakeholders [...] At that meeting [name of company] in particular, and also [name of company] were arguing that Government

⁵⁶ The officer refers to one of the meetings organised earlier in 2011 and 2012 to “act as the leading engagement mechanism for development of new green or green growth policies, providing input in order to improve the effectiveness of policies” (internal document). The existence of this group, known as Green Economy Council, was made public by the secretary of state in a letter to the *Guardian* (Spelman, C., 'Britain is rising to the challenge of greening our economy' May 16, 2012). The list of members was made public after an MP's question to the House of Common (question 110668, 11 June 2012). The answer reads: 'The Council's role is to advise Government on policy development and copies of minutes and papers have not been placed in the Library or on the Department's website'. The full terms of reference for the constitution of the group are not in the public domain, but were circulated in the Department, together with meetings' minutes, to guide the following actions of civil servants, as documented in the remainder of the analysis.

should be doing more on sustainable consumption. They believe there has to be a shift in consumer behaviour and production – and that we have to do this with consumers on side, and in ways which don't inhibit growth. Their view was that the Government has a role and should be doing more – but not necessarily in a public facing way, but convening.

The businesses weren't denying that business has a key role to play, but saying that we needed to have behaviour change from consumers not just businesses, and that Government had a role in helping deliver that.

Everyone seemed to agree with the point and the DPM's communication team have picked up on it as something they want to take forward. They think it fits well with the “*Rebalancing the Economy*” narrative⁵⁷. It seems as if they are looking to use it not so much for negotiation of Rio, but more genuinely interested, perhaps in longer term work, and looking for an angle on why this is important for consumers in the UK.

Here is the letter which followed up that meeting (see bullet 7 on the list from table A) [internal email, yellow highlighting rendered in italics]

An icon in the document follows. By clicking on it a further document can be consulted. This is a letter dated three weeks earlier sent to the members of the Green Economy Council⁵⁸, and signed by the Deputy Prime Minister and by two Secretaries of State in charge of coordinating the council's operations. The bullet indicated by the email writer is part of a table titled 'Summary of main points raised', reads:

There is a need to drive business sustainability practices and to change consumption patterns through consumer engagement. Capital markets need to think and work in the longer term.

We identify here some of the fundamental features to which actors will need to orient to in reasoning practically about what they will need to do next. The writer discovers 'what the meeting is about' and displays to the other officers her understanding (rendered in writing) and her recognition of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the case to be elaborated further. In the temporal order of the text, several steps involving judgements on the part of the officer can be recognised. These entail: firstly, she assigns to the proponents of the meeting the status of 'stakeholders', qualifying them as relevant, and indeed legitimate, 'customers' of the Department (cf. Chapter 5). Secondly, she assesses the relevance of their 'arguing' for 'doing more on SC' against what the SCP teams are

⁵⁷ 'Rebalancing the economy' refers to one of the strategies indicated by the Conservative Party to pursue 'wealth creation' (cf. Conservative Party, 2010:11-13). A key document setting out details of such strategy (to which arguably the writer refers to) is *The Plan for Growth* (HM Treasury and BIS, 2011). Here, in a framework of interventions mainly aimed at public debt reduction and encouraging private enterprise, figure “increased investment in low carbon technologies” (p.6). The reported statement in the email seems to suggest that one of the outcome of the referred meeting is the identification of SCP with new business opportunities in non-traditional UK sectors, and therefore some potential for policy development exists 'not so much for negotiation for Rio', but 'for more longer term work'.

⁵⁸ See footnote 53.

responsible for. This happens literally at level of headlines and nouns (SC as part of SCP), and may seem obvious. However, as we have seen in earlier chapters, headlines and nouns matter in policy work much more than they do in appearance. Thirdly, she provides an explanation of the properties of the stakeholders' argument, anticipating responses to possible criticisms (“the businesses weren't denying”), and providing for grounds on why the Government should go along with the request – it indeed “ha[s] a role in *helping* deliver that”. Fourthly, she *accounts* for the fact that “everyone seemed to agree with the point”. It is worth noticing that neither the writer nor any of her colleagues to whom the email is directed were physically present at the meeting, so could warrant personally the claim. This calls for the need to defend the claim against the rules and the ways the business of the organisation is conducted. This is achieved by aligning the grounds for the supposed general agreement with two pieces of evidence: one in reported speech (“they think it fits well with”), the other pointing to a precise line (among several others) of the minutes of the meeting, which is presented (arguably for the first time) to the attention of the officers. Being signed by the minister, the minutes displayed by the coordinator operate as satisfactory conditions to allow the case to be considered, by all involved and for all practical purposes, an organisationally normal state of affairs to which is necessary to engage and respond. In attaching a further document and in pointing to 'the relevant bit', the coordinator is displaying to others the knowledge of such requirements, and she is creating the conditions for herself, her text and of course for all the group of workers involved, to be able to defend the operations against the rules of the organisation, to which all these steps are, of course, *accountable*. She sustains, line by line, that the discovery of the further properties of the 'background' of the meeting satisfies the condition of relevance, of what-has-been-agreed-previously, and finally what-the-minister-wants ('she signed-off to this', officers would say), to ground the appropriateness of the decision to proceed with further action. The case under analysis could be considered particularly cogent if we consider that, as documented earlier in the text, there will be not “chance of clearing briefing with ministers before it goes”, breaching therefore the literal application of the procedure⁵⁹.

Let us come back to the data. To avoid cluttering the text with more excerpts from the email I will summarise the next 'moves' done by the writer, mainly and provisionally to open up the unfolding of analysis in relation to the need to create 'further work on SC'.

⁵⁹ And this is perhaps just *because* the procedural rule is being breached that as observers we can see on which grounds the rule is based. See Bittner (1965) and Zimmerman (1974).

This is done in relation to the immediate necessity to compose 'the briefing' on the following day, but also to create the conditions for 'longer term work', as stated previously. Such possibility has to be explored (“investigated” is the verb used in the text). I wish to get closer to the “readily recognisable formats and structures embedded in the pattern of activities as a flow of work tasks unfolds” (Sharrock and Anderson, 1987:252). In order to be able to do so, I highlight what is considered *relevant* by the author of the text.

More information about the upcoming meeting are provided by the next section of the coordinator's text composition. In three paragraphs titled “Event details” date, time, names of who will chair (“the DPM special advisers”) and who will facilitate (a named marketing company) are listed. The officer then comments on the list of invitees, adding to some of the names of organisations a headline with a characterisation (“NGOs umbrella”, “overseas development institute”, “think-thank?”). She notes that attendees “won't be CEO, more likely sustainability managers”, defending her claim, delivered urgently as first line of the introducing text to the file, “don't think we need Ministerial attendance”. The next section of the coordinator's text is titled “Department objective for the event” with a list of five bullet points listed under a line reading: “This is an opportunity for us to”. The points open with words such as 'raise profile of', 'reinforce the DPM's presumed support for', 'encourage follow up work on'. All the objectives listed point at different domains of activities on which officers are *already* working. The principle at work is the need to take advantage of the prospective resources made available during the upcoming meeting to achieve whatever could be possibly at stake in the occasion⁶⁰. The pursuing of appropriate outcomes from the point of view of the teams of officers at work here is sustained throughout the rest of the text. In particular, the following section titled 'Draft plan for event', which proposes a version of text to be sent to the receiving office, reads:

3. Discuss whether there is a compelling/meaningful vision of what sustainable consumption/production means for people's lifestyle, and whether it is important to develop it *Useful discussion to have, very interested to hear their views. Don't think we have an agreed vision. Might be interested to develop one – perhaps worth discussing what we would do with vision if we had it, to be clear on purpose? Maybe need to talk about what it means not just for UK lifestyle but also lifestyles in other countries?* [original in red font, meaning the italics is the writer's comment to the first two lines, which come from the original

⁶⁰ Conversation analysts have called this the 'principle of opportunism' (cf. Sharrock and Anderson, 1987) and recognised it at work in talk-in-interaction in several instances of bureaucratic practice. At more abstract level, Karl Weick writes about “transforming means in ends” (1979:91) as essential property of the structuring of collective action in organisational settings.

agenda. The final sentence that follows is highlighted in green meaning additional comments pursued] **Names of three officers** [bold font in the original] – does this sound worth doing? Any thoughts on approach?

And:

5. Discussion about what role NGOs/businesses and Govt should play in shifting consumer and business behaviours, how we could work together in the future *Could be a useful and interesting discussion. We need to clarify our thoughts on what we want to come out of it. Maybe encourage follow up work with businesses and NGOs on agreeing the vision for sustainable consumption and production, and articulating the changes we need and what this means for individuals, and communicating it to consumers.* [**Names of three officers**], **others** – do we want to push for this to happen? Any particular activities we should we steer them to/away from?

The text then moves onto allocating specific parts of the briefing to single officers. The headlines respect, one by one, the order of the requests received by the commissioners (the 'DPM office'). Each headline is associated with a name in bold characters (a conventional way in email exchanges to indicate urgency of response), with an opening line stating that the text is due the following day, and does not “need to be lengthy”.

The final briefing document that officers will work up on the day and that will be sent to the DPM office will include concise statements about the following headlines: the “definition of SCP (and how it compares with green economy)”; “references to SCP in the negotiating text for Rio”; “Government position on SCP for Rio, and strong rationale”; “What's Govt doing domestically on SCP [policies/strategies/spending/engagement/NPBD⁶¹ etc.]”; “exemplar countries already doing good stuff”, “Examples of companies either influencing consumer behaviour or improved production practices” and “Who from Department will be attending”. To each of these headlines corresponds a name of one or more officers, in bold characters, indicating 'action points' to be delivered “by tomorrow”. In practice, the named recipients involved in the composing the briefing will become the person responsible for delivering the specific paragraph, or paragraphs (“doesn't need to be lengthy!”). The co-ordinator at points suggests quickly possible solutions to the undertaking of the allocated tasks, e.g.:

⁶¹ Non Departmental Public Bodies (see Chapter 4)

What's Govt doing domestically on SCP

[Name of officer] [highlighted in yellow]

Mention EU SCP Action Plan?

Extract from Green Economy narrative?

[.doc file titled 'GENarrative' follow as icon, double click opens document]

This allocation of tasks points at further properties of the naturally accountable character of the writer's situated action (cf. Suchman, 1987), and also at further displays of judgement work. Some considerations on these two are developed in the remainder of the Chapter.

On the collective activity of 'briefing'

The data above provide an exemplar of the activities involved in the composition of a briefing. There is little reason to believe that other occasions of 'composing briefings' could differ substantially from the temporal 'steps' evident in the presented re-construction. The organisation of step-by-step moves flows naturally: a request of briefing is made, the work of a team of officers is mobilised, a co-ordinator is chosen, a text is assembled together responding point by point to the original request, tasks and deadlines are set on the basis of a shared understanding of what needs to be done, such shared understanding is arrived at both in person during the meeting, and in the first draft of the co-ordinator's text. We see clearly, and have noticed in the commentaries, how officers rely on each other, and account to each other, on constructing, together, what needs to be done next. The activities flow naturally, in what looks a "seamless construction"⁶² (Sharrock and Anderson, 1987:252). Capitalising on the policy of analysis, it has been possible to discern features of the rationality at play, which are grounded in the "seen-but-unnoticed" (cf. Garfinkel, 1967) ways of 'doing things' in the Department. These are self-evident, and never discussed explicitly by members (unless prompted by a somehow naïve question of the ethnographer): they are "what everybody knows" about assembling the text of a briefing. Such features can be interrogated further by re-reading the data and asking the question of how it is that what

62 By 'seamless construction' I mean, after Sharrock and Anderson (1987), the routine character, or 'ordinary orderliness' (259) that characterise the organisation of what is done by the officers. The temporal unfolding of the tasks, in other words, happens *without* participants questioning what they are doing and why. At the same time, however, officers are clearly doing what needs to be done, skillfully and in concerted fashion.

happens appears to be so familiar to those involved? (cf. Silverman and Jones, 1976). What is it that amount to that obviousness, seamlessness, naturalness, in the unfolding of events and practices which allows participants to avoid questioning what it is that are doing? Following such policy of analysis, we noticed earlier how officers need to align to the feature of what-the-minister-wants, or in another way of putting it (closer to civil servants' jargon), to the *political imperative*. This became evident, and object of discussion and negotiation, just because (or so I imagined) there was no time to clear the briefing with the minister due to time constrains. But what other features of the local rationality are at play?

First let us consider the nature of the text being assembled and how its assembling is accomplished. This is inherently a *cooperative* effort, sustained through a fairly large amount of *articulation* work (cf. Strauss, 1993; Schmidt and Bannon, 1992). This becomes evident in the fragments of the co-ordinator's text where, *artfully*, tasks are allocated to other officers. The co-ordinator demonstrates, through her text, knowledge of what all the others are doing: she knows *who* would be the person to ask to fulfil the specific task; she knows that that specific person will be able to access the latest version of the relevant document (and if she is in doubt, she will provide the document herself as shown in the data); she assumes, relying on some unstated *trust* on the selected officer's capacity and knowledge of procedures, that the *appropriate* 'extract from' a given document will be selected; and she knows that the chosen officer will do what she asks, at high standard and on time, because 'he is around' (as opposite to be on holiday, too busy, moved to some other job, etc.) None of the abilities necessary to get the work of assembling under way, nor of course the specific information about who, what level of quality, how long it takes, etc. at any given time can be located in any of the numerous 'handbooks' or 'how to' instructions circulating in the Department, nor in any organisational chart: they are entirely based on the social skills of the individual officers, on their ability, borrowing from Hecló and Wildavsky's (1974) way of putting it with reference to the work of Treasury officers, to "know all the chaps"⁶³.

A corollary of this is that neither policy officers as individuals nor as members of the teams they compose can ever work in isolation. They need constantly to work out how

⁶³ I am of course pointing here at the *social organisation* of policy work. However, I shall refrain from considering this a concluding remark, or a resource for the analysis. Rather, the dynamics of such social organisation and the 'coordinating mechanisms' underlying is being treated as *topic*, and for this reason developed at length in the unfolding of the analysis.

the materials they handle and the matters they discuss fit with the larger picture of 'what goes on in the Department'. A substantive aspect of the work of policy development, therefore, has little to do either with the specifics of the policies themselves, or with the material referent which the policies in question address. Rather, the rationality at play becomes to establish what is needed to 'bring forward' work through the complex web of social relationships composing the Department, and – in more advanced stages of policy development – the government at large. One can think about this as a transformation, a re-formulation from 'what to do', to 'whose views must be taken into account', and to 'who to inform, or persuade'. In the everyday activities of policy officers the questions of 'what would be the possible options to improve a situation' and 'which option is the best', readily become questions of 'who needs to be made aware policy is developing in a certain way' and 'how can we persuade actors about the efficacy and appropriateness of the course of action we may possibly pursue'. This is absolutely not an accessory condition for policy development. Rather, it is an inescapable pre-condition, and in a sense the very essence, of what policy officials do. We can recognise here, again, the well-known recurring trope in the organisation, commented upon in previous chapters, that "policy-making is all about the process". Officers (arguably) do not recognise that orienting to the complexity of such 'process' is exactly to which most of the talk they do at work is dedicated⁶⁴.

A second order of considerations, related to the above, can be made about the data with regards to the nature and the sources of the information needed to 'do briefing', and how these data is obtained. Officers in charge of assembling the text must report on, and *only on*, the *latest* documents circulating in the office (cf. Maybin, 2013). The means to provide the most 'up-to-date thinking' – as spelled in the data – about the policy under discussion are all unpublished, internal documents at drafting stage. In fact, of the ten documents that are mentioned in the coordinator's instructions email two are reports published by government Departments in the immediate months before the composition of the briefing and are used in passing as general reference; but, crucially, seven are internal drafts in progress, which must be obtained 'live' from officers in various other teams in the Department. The body of the briefing will be composed almost in its entirety on the basis of summary of text contained in such drafts. We shall note how part of the work of the coordinator rendered in the email text under analysis is in fact to

⁶⁴ This is why 'gossip' and other discourses around personal circumstances of officers (holidays, illness, personal relationships, promotions and departures, etc.) become so important.

obtain the drafts (or part of them), from other officers: e.g. “International Green Economy Narrative 3 pager – asked [name of officer] for it”; “Reporting – got from [name of the officer]”). In the everyday language of the office, workers refer to the relationship between documents and officers in terms of 'ownership', or more broadly in terms of 'leading' ('who is leading on x?'). This refers to a process of *identification* of officers with the 'strand of work' they are managing: the coordinator – as we have seen – must know who 'owns' the developing draft and ask that specific officer, and not another, to select and provide 'the relevant bit'. In the following Chapter more attention will be dedicated to analyse this aspect of the social organisation of policy work, which will lead us to consider what exactly the work of officers entails when they are called, or they try, to – as the officers themselves will say – 'to bring policy forward'. The data we draw upon are based on what happened in the weeks following the announcement of the 'DPM event', when it became clear that “further work in the long term” on SC was necessary, and the officers dutifully engaged in the task of accomplishing what needed to be done.

Conclusion

The Chapter documented how the officers of the Sustainable Consumption team recognise the request from the Deputy Prime Minister as 'momentum' for potential policy development in their 'policy area'. They qualified the reception of the communication from the DPM office as 'political appetite', and this in turn provided the grounds for them to establish the need to do further work on 'sustainable consumption'. As the data displayed, the input came from an expression of interest of a group of business leaders, endorsed by the DEFRA minister, to which officers promptly responded by crafting a 'briefing' on what “the Department was doing” in that domain. The request and the composition of the briefing, however, were interpreted not as an end in itself, but as potential room to “develop a vision on SC” and “clarify thoughts” on what they wanted “to come out of it”. They proceeded to identify the network of relevant contacts to be informed of the developments, and assessed, together, what was next in terms of practical action. The assembling of the briefing became occasion to establish, once again, what was the 'official line' of the Department on sustainable consumption policies. Officers also assessed whether there was 'scope' to develop initiatives or new policies given that 'momentum'.

The analysis focused on the natural, “seamless”, flow of officers’ activities, and asked what was necessary to proceed with each of the 'next step' in such flow. By interrogating further this “seamlessness”, I have argued with ethnomethodologists, it is possible to discover elements of what Ergon Bittner (1965), famously, called *organisational acumen* – the socially recognised competence which constitutes the grounds of organisational membership and that underpins the ability to accomplish, methodically, actions appropriate to the tasks at hand (cf. Garfinkel, 1967; Lynch, 1993; or see, for a more recent treatment, Tolmie and Rouncefield, 2008). In the next and last Chapter of the thesis I shall dedicate some more time to unpick what this acumen achieves *in action*, specifically, when the officers move on to discuss the consequences of the new 'directions' for the sustainable consumption policies, and what follows from them.

CHAPTER 10: The Meeting and the Draft

Introduction

In this Chapter, the last of the empirical section of the thesis, I report on the work carried out as a consequence of the developments discussed in Chapter 9. The objective is that of documenting further instances of policy work in-the-making. The analysis focuses on what happens in the office in the aftermath of the request for a 'briefing' from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and on how activities unfolded in the following weeks. The materials I work on are the transcriptions of the officers' talk during a team meeting that takes place after the composition of the 'briefing', and data documenting the practices of production of an 'internal paper' – called by the officers the sustainable consumption 'narrative' – initiated in order to report to senior officers how the officers' 'thinking' developed as a consequence of the new 'momentum' prompted by the Deputy Prime Minister's interest. Of particular importance for the analysis that follows is the consideration of what is relevant for the officers and what is considered by them appropriate to process the case at hand (cf. Schegloff, 1992; Boden, 1994), together with an attention to the ways officers draw inferences (cf. Levinson, 1992) about states of affairs germane to their tasks. In order to ascertain these, I propose in the first part of the Chapter a fine-grained analysis of the natural occurring talk recorded during the meeting. The examination invokes here the conceptual apparatus of conversational analysis, in order to retrieve from the exchanges further elements of the working methods officers deploy to accomplish a 'policy development' task. In the second part of the Chapter, I move on to consider some instances of production of the resulting 'narrative', and I offer some considerations about what officers consider relevant, necessary and appropriate to establish an organizationally-adequate line of argument in the text. The Chapter pursues two parallel objectives: firstly to notice what are the institutional constraints to which workers orient to to define what is required to move to the 'next step' of the natural flow of the work; and secondly, to follow the development of the talk-in-interaction (Cf. Chapter 2 and 3) and notice what features of the context are taken into consideration, what sources of knowledge are invoked, which are selected as relevant, and according to which criteria. In order to do so, the analysis – following the methodological commitments of this inquiry – will address the ways

officers, *in interaction*, engage with the work at hand, and consequently sustain the activity of 'discussing' and composing the 'narrative', live and with no audience⁶⁵, behind the closed doors of a departmental meeting room.

*The 'SC narrative' drafting and 'setting the scene' for policy development
(Week 2 – beginning of June 2012)*

The director in charge of the Department operations under analysis, during the same week the tasks relative to the composition of the 'briefing' were executed (see *Week 1*), assigned to the officers with responsibility for SC a further task, as the email exchange below illustrates:

SC Officer 1 (on Friday late afternoon):

[Names of officers],
As discussed in a catch up with [name of director] yesterday, I have put down some early thinking on a narrative for this policy area. It's very rushed I am afraid as I've been clearing things before I go on leave, but hopefully it gives some ideas to work with. [.doc file titled Sustainable Consumption attached]

SC Officer 2: (on the next Thursday)

[SC officer 1, SC officer 2; director cced]
I have put down some more ideas, in particular on the narrative and how we set SC in the context of green growth and counter the usual resistance to anything seen as environmental [...] - it's a bit of a mish-mash at the moment but hopefully food for further thought and discussion. I will put something in our diaries for the w/c 11th. Will be interesting to see also what comes out of the DPM's SPADs' meeting next week – will it bear any resemblance to our thinking here??

[name of director] – this is very much a work in progress but any thoughts are very welcome.

Thanks. [.doc file titled 'Sustainable Consumption Skeleton' attached]

A new document, referred to as 'narrative', is thus initiated. It is important to note that the inception of the document happens *before* the outcome of the 'DPM event' is known, and *before* any minister of the Department is informed. The decisions to 'put down some ideas to work with' and assign the task of composing a 'narrative,' are therefore strategic rather than tactical moves: the officers sense the opportunity to produce a text not as

⁶⁵ Other than an ethnographer disguised as a 'colleague'

response to a carefully planned course of actions driven by ministers (as in the detailed Action Plan of the Department, cf. Chapter 4), but as actions which seems to be pursuing, tentatively, a Departmental agenda. What requirements and constrains apply to such course of actions will become clear in the following extracts from conversations which took place in the officers' meeting announced in the email (“in our diaries for the week commencing 11th”), organised by those in charge of composing the text to decide what line of argument the narrative will take.

Talking policy

Week 3 – June 2012

Eleven working days have passed since the first request of an early thinking paper' was made by the director (J) to the lowest in rank of the 'SC team' (E). Two 'versions' of a document that gets to be called 'narrative' in the email exchanges have been produced, incorporating text produced by two officers (E and M). The draft has been circulated to two further officers (A and L), who agree to meet on M's initiative (as in the email above) to 'discuss', and, among other things, to establish to what extent the 'thinking' delivered in the draft “bear any resemblance” with what was said at the 'DPM event'. Both officer A and officer L have attended the event in the week preceding the meeting, and L has produced a two-page 'summary of notes' to inform the rest of the workers in the office about salient points which were discussed. The four officers (E, M, A and L) meet in the late morning for one hour and a half. The encounter could be classified as *ad-hoc*, as one-off encounter focussed on the developing of the 'narrative': there is not a formal agenda for the meeting, but clearly the unstated purpose of it is the decision of what the SC paper should and should not contain.

Around the table there are officers who already know each other: they have clear ideas about what all the others are doing, what are their responsibilities, and which projects they are 'leading'. The relative small number of attendants and their mutual familiarity means the encounter is sustained on a quite relaxed basis: there are not pre-allocated turns of speech (as there would be in other meetings in the Department such as board meetings, presentations, all staff meetings), and there is not a clearly recognisable chairperson role. Earlier studies of talk in institutional settings have recognised the

pervasiveness of such *informal* basis in organisational talk (cf. Boden, 1994), and noted a number of features through which “institutionality” (Drew and Heritage, 1992:28) is nevertheless sustained and managed. These features are highly specific to institutional contexts (Arminen, 2005) and to the recognition of their uniqueness the analysis will orient. As we shall see by considering the transcripts in detail, the institutionality of the encounter materialises itself through the conditions for gaining and retaining the right of speech during the encounter. These seem to include the knowledge, or the attempt to produce “good reasons” (cf. Dingwall, 1980), of why certain things should be included in the paper and others should not. In the unfolding of the speech exchanges, participants thus align each other to potentially adequate lines of argument, and tentatively agree on what constitutes such adequacy. These dynamics, as Sacks (1963) suggested, can be interrogated analytically, and retrieved, by consulting how speakers respond and make use of prior utterances (cf. Lynch, 2000).

On the day, I am invited to attend the meeting as member of the 'SC team', and all four officers are aware of the nature and the purposes of my presence in the Department. They have all taken time in the preceding weeks to talk to me about their work and two of them in particular have demonstrated interest in helping me pursue my research objectives. With all of them I had extended work-oriented informal conversations, based on tasks I was assigned to do to help them. The request to audio-record the talk was delivered as my opening remark, and obtained in turn approval from all the officers. I switched the recorder on immediately after the fourth officer's (A) turn to respond to my request, and received her agreement (“I have no problem with that”). The first lines caught on tape⁶⁶ are delivered by M, the author of the latest draft of the narrative, and directed to A herself:

⁶⁶ The transcriptions of the audio-recordings use a selection of conventions based on the standard Jeffersonian Transcription Notation. See Appendix A.

1	M:	((officer)) this version is (.) ahm (.) I'll very briefly go on I'll I'll try to answer your first
2		question (.) in very poor terms ahm and I <tried to> ahm (0.5) have a quick look at the
3		business plan and the ministerial priorities and the coalition priorities and just in a very
4		crude (.) which ones of those are (0.3) we're potentially addressing in this work but it's quite
5		it's quite broad and the I-I mean the the ministerial projects particularly are very narrow (.)
6		they are quite specific actually ahm=
7	L:	=yeah=
8	M:	=I mean the business plan they got this sort of
9		headlines indicators and some of the >overarching< headlines fit quite nicely but then the
10		specific actions that (are highlighted) in the business plan >that sort of< things that we knew
11		we're engaged with anyway cause [>they are in the business plan<]
12	L:	[yeah they should really constrain= (what we are really)
13	M:	[YEAH] I will (have) I
14		guess that's my kind of working assumption is that (0.2) those are the things that we <u>knew</u>
15		we will be doing already for the business plan and those <u>headline</u> items (.) are kind of <u>key</u>
16		(.) key things but I don't think they are an <u>exhaustive</u> list [of everything] the department is
17	L:	[yeah]
18	M:	going to do (0.5) 'hopefully'
19		(2.0)
20	L:	yeah eh[m hang on (unclear)
21	M:	[OTHER otherwise (I don't know what we are actually going to do)= ehm
22		(3.0)
23		I don't know where the most helpful sort of place to start is I guess (.) to my mind the thing I

Extract 10.1: The meeting's opening

The topic of discussion switches to the 'version' of the draft (line 1-2) and to the stated objective of the encounter ('answer A's question'), signalling the 'discussion' is under way (cf. Boden, 1994; Atkinson *et al.*, 1978). A's question, delivered before my request of permission for recording, addresses M and asks to account for the 'fitness' of the 'strand of work' M and E have initiated. What immediately emerges from the transcription is the distinctive institutionality of the encounter, that is to say the existence of a well-defined organisational goal and an orientation of the talk to the limits to the possibilities of action (cf. Levinson, 1992). M's reply works as description of his moves to establish the alignment of the strand of work, acknowledging he 'had a quick look' to 'the business plan, the ministerial priorities and the coalition priorities' (line 3) with the objective of establishing 'which one of those we [a]re addressing in this work' (line 4). The talk is geared towards the local, organisational requirements for the potential acceptability of the work on 'SC', and M displays his *professional* knowledge of the set of properties that need to be fulfilled.

Such acceptability is therefore assessed against three *relevant* and *distinct* frameworks:

1) 'the business plan', i.e. the objectives and the list of actions the department has

agreed, funded and are ongoing; 2) 'the ministerial priorities', that is the list of objectives ministers circulate at the beginning of their mandate to officials; and 3) the objectives of the Cabinet Office: the larger aims the government in office has set. These frameworks are juxtaposed with the self-assigned institutional identity exemplified by the pro-noun 'we' (cf. Drew and Heritage, 1992) and, as such, define what is the *relevant context* that provides for the sources of institutional authority to which officers need to align (cf. Schegloff, 1992:110; Arminen, 2005:107). The three-element distinction provided by the speaker is significant as it distinguishes between diverse organisational *agendas*, to which officers must orient, but that in fact work on separate time frames, and often, objectives. I adopt here Boden's definition of "agenda" (cf. 1994) where the term is used (after Everett Hughes' concept of "going concern") broadly to define the shared sense of current needs or pressing issue around which organisational talk and activities are oriented. What happens next in the talk helps understanding to what extent the aforementioned alignments to such agendas can become objects of negotiation.

The following lines of the extract (5-23) can be analysed as a Trouble-Telling Sequence (cf. Jefferson and Lee, 1992). This kind of sequences in conversation have shown features of loosely recurrent design, where a trouble-teller indicates to co-participants departures from ideal-type situation, and trouble-recipients have options to attend to the trouble and prompt repair of perceived inadequacies, or facilitate an exit, which usually happens by starting some altogether new topic (Sacks, 1992; Jefferson, 1984) or entry into a closing (Button, 1987). M identifies, beginning from the 'but' in line 3, difficulties in making the SC work fit with the organisational constraints just mentioned ('quite broad', 'very narrow', 'quite specific' in line 5 and 6) and a slippage from the ideal position where the three organisational agendas at play coincide. The delivery of trouble talk is followed closely by L, who appears to produce first an acknowledgement token (line 7) showing attention to the trouble, and second a combination of what have been called (cf. Jefferson, 1988:428; Jefferson and Lee, 1992:531) an "affiliative formulation" ('yeah') and a "trouble work-up", where in the former L shows empathy with the situation and in the latter he intensely focuses on the trouble ('they should really constrain', line 12). The conditions for an escalation of a dispute are produced (cf. Jefferson and Lee, 1992:525). M's response is produced in overlapping talk and in higher volume talk (line 14) invoking, in arguably an emotionally heightened fashion, the possibility of considering the constraints of the business plan 'headlines' not

'exhaustive' (lines 15 and 16), and therefore alluding to consider working *beyond* the departmental stated objectives a possible option. M obtains a *détente* from L ('yeah', line 17) and offers three, increasingly long pauses (lines 18, 19, 22) for others to take the floor and intervening on the significance of the trouble. The dispute fails to materialise. In other words, the trouble seems to get resolved by a recognition that the 'business plan', while counting indeed as accounting device for the assessment of the officers' work, at the same time allows for a loose alignment: in the final analysis, the fit wouldn't have to be perfect. A further skirmish seems to happen with L (lines 20-21), synchronously (cf. Jefferson and Lee, 1992:531) accompanying M's close-implicative (cf. Jefferson, 1988) and distinctively resolving statement: 'otherwise I don't know what we are actually going to do' (line 21). Despite not being able to understand and transcribe what L actually said in line 20, the absence of further remarks on L's side in the longest pause offered (3 seconds, line 22), and, crucially, the silence on the part of A, to which the M's turn of talk was originally directed, signals the trouble has become a topic on which nothing more needs to be said. M resists the further proliferation of potential troubles by holding the floor. No one, then, offers a counter-point. In line 23 one of the most common devices used to achieve exit from trouble-talk in ordinary conversation is used. M produces a stepwise transition of topic (Sacks, 1992; Jefferson, 1984; Jefferson and Lee, 1992), i.e. a next item which disengages from the gist of the trouble by introducing ancillary matters: *given* that the alignment is problematic, the next topic M presents provides for materials in support of the activities of "doing alignment". M's reacquisition of the floor after his long pause (line 23) is achieved in a fashion that is both topically-disjunctive ('a place to start') and interactionally cohesive/affiliative ('most helpful').

The officers' talk, from this point of the meeting on, will address the task at hand – together – with a recognisable sense that what needs to be done is to tackle the nature of the problem in relation with *the alignment to ongoing agendas*, which is made problematic right at the beginning of the meeting. The following extract displays and documents how this is obtained in practice, for all practical purposes.

23	I don't know where the most helpful sort of place to start is I guess (.) to my mind the thing I
24	have been trying to sort of grapple with following that meeting with ((name of director)) is
25	how do we (.) reconcile what we are trying to do with the growth agenda given what
26	((director)) was saying about >the sort of you know< the reactions to the prosperity without
27	growth [and=
28	L: [mmh
29	M: =the sort of (.) (immediate) reaction that consumpt-sustainable consumption just
30	means (0.2) <u>less</u> activity and I guess <u>that</u> thing goes to the (.) relationship between
31	consumption and economic activity and what we are talking about is trying to (0.7) (rake) a
32	link between a sort of linear model of consumption and (0.3) being directly related to how
33	much economic activity we have=
34	L: =[yah
35	M: [which is then why I ended up (.) getting quite enamoured
36	with this (.) the whole circular economy concept cause I think it's a quite nice way of
37	expressing in very <u>economic</u> terms (0.4) the benefits of doing things more sustainably [it's=
38	L: [yeah
39	M: =an economic argument rather than an environmental one anyways=
40	L: =I-I think you are right I
41	mean I wouldn't this is gonna sound probably >everyone feels that we are now< desperate
42	and awful <u>but</u> (0.3) I mean I sort of think that it would be useful to define (.) what we mean
43	by sustainable consumption [you know and I know that has gone been around for years=
44	M: [I think yeh <u>no no</u> yeah I completely agree]
45	L: =but there are <u>doubtless</u> certain (.) you know that's a very <u>complex</u> concept and includes
46	possibly ehm people consuming less=
47	M: =yes=
48	L: = but it <u>also</u> includes the other elements you were
49	talking about and some of that within the circular economy about (.) actually (.) using fewer
50	resources while still consuming (.) and you know there is loads of stuff actually so start
51	[listing

Extract 10.2: Doing alignment

In this extract, which follows the opening of the meeting, officers engage fully in 'doing alignment' with ongoing agendas, and pursue their organisational goal. This is stated explicitly in line 25. M starts scrutinising the shared knowledge of the small group by offering a description of states of affairs which he considers relevant and to which the potential actions for 'alignment' must be accountable (lines 23-39). In conversational analytic terms, the exchange runs as an "assessment sequence" (Pomerantz, 1984:77). This sort of sequences is very common both in ordinary and institutional conversation (cf. Pomerantz, 1984, 1988; Bergmann, 1992; Arminen 2005) and is characterised by a speaker's evaluation which are sequentially received by a recipient (L) with further evaluations (or 'second assessments'), in agreement or disagreement with the prior turn of speech. A necessary condition for the realisation of the sequence is the intersubjective display of what is assessed, which means that the participant to the exchange claim sufficient knowledge of the referents of the talk to be able to produce an assessment of them. In the extract under analysis, M produces a long speaking turn to which L reacts with acknowledgement and agreements tokens (lines 18, 34, 38), and finally produces in the second part of the extract (lines 40-51) a particular form of

second agreement called an “upgrade”, where a further – stronger – evaluation is made on the grounds of, and in agreement with, the prior (cf. Pomerantz, 1984:65). The rather simple and fundamental design of the conversation sequence contrasts with a delivery of arguments about the object in question that is extraordinarily dense and informative for our purposes, and deserves attention, in particular for the way in which the work of *defining* sustainable consumption *is achieved* by pointing at contextual sources of knowledge. M is interested in narrowing down the account of what the team of officers ('we', line 25) should consider 'SC' given a number of past occurrences that re-shaped what *legitimately* could be included under this category. Crucially, the source of such legitimisation does *not* reside, and is *not discussed as*, what M and L think or judge as internal properties of SC, but it resides in the knowledge that whatever is the 'right' meaning of SC it must be inferred from 'what the director said' about the reactions to a certain existing version of SC ('given [...] the reactions to prosperity without growth', line 25-26), and from the fact that that 'economic arguments', rather than 'environmental ones' (lines 38-39) are needed to sustain any claim of 'rightness' about what SC *really* is about.

Officers here explore the properties and the constraints of the institutional framework under which they operate. These properties and constraints are invoked, as in the previous extract, and they *transform* the object under officers' consideration. Again, the institutionality of the encounter and its distinct, local character stands out, and characterises what happens in the talk in ways that are different from ordinary conversation⁶⁷ (cf. Arminen, 2005). The judgement work of officers *consists of* interpreting what the institutional constraints mean practically *for* the work they are doing: in the case in point it is agreed that, 'given the (minister's) reactions', a version of SC which 'means less activity' (line 30) would be totally unacceptable, as it would be any version of SC sustained by 'environmental arguments'. And this is how the speakers, knowledgeable about what 'prosperity about growth' and 'the circular economy' are, 'ended up quite enamoured' (line 35) with the latter 'version' of SC, a

⁶⁷ Let us think about an imaginary exchange in between two persons commenting on a film they saw. In an ordinary conversation, i.e. free from institutional constraints, their agreement or disagreement on the value of film will be achieved with references to whatever properties of the film they liked/disliked (say the photography, the cast, some exceptional scenes, its political significance etc.) The assessments in the extract are of a very different nature, as they invoke exogenous factors, in fact institutional. Hypothetically, they would work in our example of ordinary conversation about a film as clearly awkward remarks such as: 'I liked it because my father did', or 'Tell me why you liked it, but you can't say anything about the actors'...

version that, in the officers' agreed assessment, avoids encountering both obstacles. Of course, 'prosperity without growth' and the 'circular economy' are headlines given to large bodies of evidence about how SC should be implemented. The former is the result of the work of an academic research centre, led by the author of the book with the same title (Jackson, 2009); the latter is a more recent research initiative of an increasingly influential think-tank, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (cf. EllenMacArthur Foundation, 2012) informed by discourses and policy proposals promoted in the international policy arena (e.g. the World Economic Forum) and supported by large multinational companies, the representatives of which sat at the table with the ministers on occasion of the Rio+20 negotiations mentioned in Chapter 9. The two bodies of evidence, of course, point at diverse policy solutions.

Back to the extract, L's upgrade assessment, in agreement with M's ('I think you are right', line 40) draws the institutional consequences of their shared judgement, and, as relevant next action, calls for some *definitional* work ('define what we mean by sustainable consumption', line 42), in other words, to articulate the vague noun 'sustainable consumption' into a meaning that suits the political imperatives of alignment to agendas (namely the 'growth agenda', line 25). L wraps his statement into a self-deprecating argument (line 41-43) which places M in the position to continue the sequence of agreements by strongly confirming the self-deprecation, a strategy in conversation that amounts to stating that the deprecating attributes are less negative than the prior speaker had proposed (Pomerantz, 1984:90), and continuing de facto the agreement sequence. L is referring to the long history of engagement of the Department with SC ('has gone around for years', line 43), which M has summarised in his prior turn of speech⁶⁸, and starts in the remainder of his turn bringing to the table further 'elements' of SC which should be taken into consideration invoking the 'complexity' and inclusiveness of the 'concept' (line 45). Here, officers agree that the definition of 'SC' came with a familiarity that was not useful for the team's practical purposes – accounting for their work – so they need to produce a 'new' statement.

⁶⁸ The body of evidence labelled 'prosperity without growth', in fact, has developed and aimed at informing policy development at least since 2004, when the Department funded the Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, a group of experts, led by Prof Tim Jackson of the then influential Sustainable Development Commission, called to 'advise government on how to create consumer choices that stay within environmental limits' (cf. SCR, 2006). The Commission, set up by the Labour government, felt out of political favour with the election of the Coalition government in 2010 and ended its operations, following withdrawn of funding, in 2011 (cf. Chapter 4).

Orienting to what previously said by M, a list ('listing', line 50) of now relevant aspects ('loads of stuff', line 50) which could define SC, *appropriately* for the task at hand is initiated. The officers are pointing at the *ambiguous* character of the object of their discussion, an ambiguity which can be explored and used to shape an institutionally valid interpretation. The scrutiny of different aspects, in the light of expert policy officers' assessment of appropriateness, becomes what the rest of the meeting is about. L opens the floor for the definitional work by hinting at a version of SC which means 'actually' (line 49) 'using fewer resources while still consuming' (line 50). As the following extract shows, the hint finds the other officers in agreement, and they draw the significance of what just said for the work of deciding, together, what to include in the 'narrative' and what to keep out.

50		resources while still consuming (.) and you know there is loads of stuff actually so start
51		[listing
52	M:	[I-I suppose the crackliest to my mind is that is the (.) the difference between consumption
53		as a concept of (.) the amount of stuff that you get through and consumption in terms of
54		[actual () and utility in the economic sector=
55	L:	[the economic activity=yeah =yeah=
56	M:	=you know you get the
57		same amount or more <u>utility</u> with (.) <u>less</u> =
58	L:	=yeah=
59	M:	= use of resources from to avoid the word in
60		same ways is >probably better to try to< <u>avoid</u> the use of the word consumption (.) when we
61		are explaining it=
62	A:	=yeah I think I think just saying anything about consuming <u>less</u> (.) is
63	A:	proba[bly bad=
64	M:	[yeah yep
65	A:	=so it's kind of is gonna have to be about [rather than saying what is sustainable=
66	M:	[(reduction of resources)
67	A:	=consumption what are we trying to achieve on sustainable consumption and then you can
68		kind of leave out (0.2) the consuming <u>less</u> (.) [bit of it AHM= sort of heh-huh-heh=
69	L:	[yeah heh YES BY IMPLICATION heh=
70	A:	=sort of by you know just not saying it because otherwise [you know] there's no point
71	L:	[yeah]
72	A:	=in this battle (0.3) and the we could (1.0) and then we can get to the (.) the sort of

Extract 10.3: Re-defining 'sustainable consumption'

In lines 52-61, M and L elaborate on the argument presented by L in his previous turn of speech. M is arguably interested in having the terms of the argument spelt out because he is the one charged with the task of writing down the draft 'narrative'. Orienting to the definition proposed by L 'using fewer resources while still consuming' (line 49-50, extract 2), he offers an extended definition drawing from a vocabulary of economics ('utility', 'use of resources'), to which L aligns and agrees first in overlapping talk (line 55), recognising and projecting the completion of M's words (cf. Jefferson,

1983; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998) and then marking the prosody of M's talk with tokens of approval (lines 55-58). In line 67 a third officer, in her first intervention to the meeting, draws the conclusion of the extended exchange in between M and L which run since the opening, and as we have seen, has been oriented at solving the trouble of alignment with the 'growth agenda': the word 'less' must be avoided, SC 'is gonna have to be about' something else (line 65) 'otherwise there is no point in this battle' (line 72). Her turn of speech is interrupted by a humorous remark by L, delivered in higher volume (line 69), to which she aligns joining briefly to L's short burst of laughter. As noted by Jefferson and colleagues (1987), who have studied in depth the systematic features of laughter production in conversation, laughing *together* can be seen in a number of instances as a way to arrive at some specifiable outcome, accommodating breaches to some sort of conventional standards. This is what seems to happen here, when A proposes to circumventing the trouble of using 'the less bit' by not defining SC directly, but defining what it wants to achieve (use of less resource), which 'by implication' (line 69) will not mention, at any point, the possibility that policies will aim at a reduction of economic activity. The officers know that any policy proposal with such objective, or even alluding to such discourse, is doomed to failure, and elaborate on how to avoid this happening. Their potential way out of the trouble must be found in the interweaving of 'elements' of what else SC could possibly and appropriately 'be about', with other orders of considerations. The job of scrutinising their options is initiated by A herself whom, keeping the turn of speech after L's joke, moves on the topic of so doing.

72	A:	=in this battle (0.3) and the we could (1.0) and then we can get to the (.) the sort of
73		(2.5) what are we (0.4) what are we trying to <u>do</u> (1.5) where I am <u>not</u> (2.0) >having a little
74		wonder about< is this all about materials because I think the circular economy stuff is all
75		about materials (.) isn't [that
76	L:	[mmh yeah there's a lot of that there's a strong
77	A:	[AND
78		(2.0)
79	A:	is (0.6) things like (2.0) energy (1.0) efficiency (0.5) [which (3.0) which is heh=
80	L:	[yeah
81	A:	[we know (.) <u>which is another dimension</u> it is not is not circular economy=
82	L:	<u>[which is another dimension</u>
83	A:	=but is another part of sustainable [consumption

Extract 10.4: Candidate answers

The officers, discovering the potential alignment of the object 'circular economy' with the constraints of the political imperative, get to the business of deepening their mutual

understanding of how 'what are we trying to do' (line 73) fits the internal properties of the object. The speaker A does so by offering what have been called “candidate answers” (Pomerantz, 1988), those conversational devices used to build intersubjective understanding on shared knowledge domains. A speaker proposing candidate answers displays relevance for the situation and invites the recipients to use them as sources of inferences (Arminem, 2005:93). In this case, A designs her utterances inviting agreement ('isn't it', line 75; 'we know', line 80) and produces what could be seen as two possible *diagnosis* on the object under scrutiny. A's utterances are delivered with long pauses in between words, giving a sense of the uncertain character of her knowledge (cf. Bergmann, 1992): she is testing the recipients' perceptions against hers ('I am having a little wonder about', line 73; 'I think', line 74) using professional cautiousness (cf. Arminem, 2005). On what criteria the kind of diagnosis that is produced is based on can only be discovered analysing what comes next in the talk. The fragment shows already, however, a first attempt to 'produce descriptions suitable for the institutional framework' (Arminem, 2005:93): while 'materials' (line 74) seems to be received positively ('yeah, there is lot of that', line 76), both the offerer and the recipient (L) of the candidate answer 'energy efficiency' (79) find this second item immediately problematic ('we know [...] is another dimension', lines 81-82). The source of trouble becomes clear in the extract below.

114	L:	[I think that's right I mean I sort of feel the <u>trouble is</u> we would like something
115		that is very neat and coherent=
116	M:	=yeah=
117	L:	= ahm and so the circular economy could be the but I
118		think that actually we can't <u>deny</u> that there are two sides to this there's the actual
119		consumption that would (fall) and that's the dangerous term as we just ignore [this=
120	M:	[mh
121	A:	[yah
122	L:	=but what we mean actually is actually that the products that people are buying and what the
123		configuration is of those products=
124	M:	=yeah=
125	L:	= and the embedded emissions in actually <u>producing</u>
126		those products and the energy that's used > in producing those products< and that's all things
127		that are there but then there is also this <u>all</u> other issue about (.) that we'll got to deal with
128		which is (.) certain products will be use > <u>will use</u> energy< in their use=
129	A:	=mh
130	M:	=mh=
131	L:	= <u>beyond</u> the
132		point of purchase (.) and so has got to be a focus as well on (0.3) on <u>consumption</u> of energy
133		[when you got a product and [those are=
134	M:	[yes [and =yeah >no that< <u>one thing</u> I'm sort of struggling with
135		on that side is there is obviously there's a lot of work going [on (.) in ((name of officer))'s=
136	A:	[mh-mh
137	M:	=team looking at energy using products and energy efficiency [standards and all of <u>thats</u> sort
138	L:	[mh
139	M:	of things and I guess I mean (.) I guess on your side as well ((pointing at A)) you are looking
140		at t-t-the t-t-the efficiency of the products in use as part of t[he <u>production</u> [standard=
141	A:	[mh
142	L:	[yeah

Extract 10.5: Avoiding duplication.

What is at stake here is the decision of what, among the potential 'dimensions' of SC, is *policyable*. Orienting to what said earlier, L excludes that SC is 'about' reducing consumption as a whole, as 'that's the dangerous term' and will be 'ignored' (line 119), so what is left to consider ('deal with', line 127) are two further 'sides': essentially, one relative to the 'configuration of products' and their 'embedded emissions' (lines 123-125), the other the use of energy of 'certain products' (line 128) 'beyond the point of purchase' (line 132). The fragment can be seen as another Trouble Telling sequence, where L delivers in his turn the reasons behind the fact that 'energy efficiency' is problematic, and M, as trouble recipient, focuses on the trouble and, after announcing his orientation to it ('mh', line 130), appropriately introduces a next matter (cf. Jefferson, 1984). M mentions that 'there is a lot of work going on' in some other officer's team (line 135) and also A is *already* 'looking at the efficiency of the products' (line 140). The topic of discussion has switched towards the need to “preserve organisational consistency” (cf. Tolmie and Rouncefield, 2008: 49), or to put it with Egon Bittner (1965), to adhere to the organisation’s “stylistic unity”. Officers are thus assessing whether aspects ('sides' or 'dimensions') of potential policies would 'duplicate' work

going on elsewhere in other Department's 'policy areas'. This must be avoided (cf. Chapter 5), and what follows addresses directly an assessment of how to do that. Such assessment is made by taking into consideration and move “stepwise” to discuss the latest paper on SC which has been circulating in the office⁶⁹. As the meeting proceeds, L summarises in an extended turn of talk the points the paper deals with regarding which policies are currently in place on energy-using products. His explanation is directed to E, the fourth officer in the room, who admits she has not read it. The paper touches on three 'areas of focus' for policy: first, the elimination of the 'minimum standard so getting the rid of the worst energy products', second 'driving through (technical) innovation' which means 'developing more energy efficiency products', and a third dedicated to 'labelling stuff', that is 'informing the consumer so they may choose more energy efficient products'. The latest part of L's turn of talk is reproduced below. What follows in the talk-in-interaction starts determining what the newly proposed 'official line' on SC, given the premises discussed that far, will be about.

183		choose >more energy efficient products< but the <u>there isn't really</u> that much work on when
184		the consumer gets it home (0.8) <u>how</u> (0.5) th[ey actually the interact with that so once you
185	E:	[mmh
186	L:	got your eco appliance your eco washing machine how do you get people to wash on an eco
187		heh-heh wa[sh you <u>know</u> and perhaps not wash their clothes so often and that kind of thing=
188	M:	[mh-mh
189		= well <u>glad</u> you said that's the <u>gap</u> cause one of the sort one of the [thoughts
190	L:	[well my perception is=
191	M:	= well well (what) kind of moves the mind is that one of you know maybe <u>the gap</u> for us is
192		around (0.7) and obviously it fits with our sort of (.) with our having one for in the in the
193		<u>centre</u> (.) is around <u>actually</u> the consumers behaviours around accepting the new business
194		models and (.) the use of (0.5) products (2.2) <u>by</u> the consumer themselves and <u>that's</u> seems
195		to be an area (0.4) maybe that is a territory that we can (2.0)

Extract 10.6: The policyable territory.

In this fragment, the target of potential policy development is identified. Earlier in the analysis, we noted how the object 'SC' has been transformed on the grounds of the need to align with the political imperative. The order of consideration the officers seems to make here (and agree upon) are of a different nature: their 'territory' (line 195) is determined by what others are doing, and, by exclusion, they move to find their 'gap' (line 189 and 191). An alignment to the Department agenda is thus obtained. Again, the

⁶⁹ This is an unpublished, internal document produced by officers in the Defra 'sister' Department, DECC, replying to the question of what 'the Government is doing' on energy-using products. For the sake of brevity I will sum up in the text what officers say about it, and what information they select, with the objective of moving on to fragments of talk more emblematic of the practical reasoning at play.

target of policies have been narrowed down to fit a larger, institutional framework, whose relevancies for the work at hand are topicalised in the course of the meeting and agreed together. It is probably worth noting once again that such relevancies pertain to locally-specific organisational constraints, rather than endogenous – or to put in other way – “technical knowledge” (cf. Button and Sharrock, 1998) about what sustainable consumption policies can or cannot achieve, say for example in terms of the quantity of emissions avoided. I will return to this point in the final discussion of the Chapter. For the moment is important to stress again how organisational constraints, to which officers must align out of a moral obligation inherent to their profession (cf. Garfinkel, 1967), define the potential grounds of policy development. In the extract, taking such constraints in consideration, the officers operate an *ambiguity reduction*: the vague noun 'sustainable consumption' becomes practical actions of ordinary citizens dealing with their washing machines (lines 184-187). The target of the policies officers agree on, and that make vivid in the talk through an example of their own mundane experience (cf. Chapter 6), is 'about' how 'people' may use 'eco appliances' (line 186) differently, 'and that kind of things' (line 187).

Achieving an adequate argument, for all practical purposes

In the extracts above, officers have discussed how to align the 'strand of work' on sustainable consumption with the Department agenda, and determined, among other things, the unsuitability of one body of evidence over another. They agree, through policy talk, that any initiative for further development of policy will have to target citizens' behaviours 'after the point of purchase' of products, rather than intervening on, or influencing, their choices before that point. Also, they determine that what government policies could potentially do is to facilitate citizens' acceptance of new business models, these in turn promoted by businesses themselves. These agreements in principle will find their way in the text of the 'narrative' officer M is in charge of drafting. Assembled in the aftermath of the meeting, M writes down the potential troubles anticipated during the meeting, and proceeds to identify what officers came to see as candidate solution. A paragraph of the 'narrative' will read:

[Potential political risk - we are seen as antigrowth] The way we present our argument for sustainable consumption and the language that we use is therefore very important - we need the right formulation that conveys the complementarity between promoting sustainable

consumption and promoting economic growth and wellbeing, without risking interpretation as anything other than a pro-growth policy. But we need to be honest about the uncertainties and the fact there will be winners and losers (internal document titled Draft Sustainable Consumption narrative, version 4/110712, p.4)

The problem had become a topic of discussion among officers during the second part of the meeting I analysed earlier in the Chapter. The transcript below shows how officers came to find a reasonable way out of what they consider the “very difficult problem of how [sustainable consumption] fits with the growth agenda” (internal email).

436	A:	I was mh I don't know kind of what >where actually are we doing but< (2.0) I am quite ahm
437		(0.5) enamoured with the (2.5) wellbeing agenda a[and these consumer (1.5) ahm (1.0)=
438	M:	[mh
439	A:	=↓how do they call it (.) <u>empowerment</u> agenda (0.5) as being allies (1.5) in terms of=
440	L:	[mh
441	M:	[yeah I yeah
442	A:	=ahm trying (.) trying to show (0.3) trying to <u>push forward</u> aspects of sustainable
443		consumption which we think (1.8) will we'll be able to sell as (.) empowering consumers and
444		(0.5) building [well-being <u>and</u> quite particularly wellbeing is you [know Cabinet Office=
445	M:	[I sort of yeah
446	L:	[mh
447	A:	=[is quite central and consumer empowerment is BIS which (.) is good because there may=
448	L:	[yeah
449	A:	=be a chunk of these which is going ((in falsetto)) <i>this is antigrowth this is antigrowth</i>
450		<i>behave you behave you so</i> >is good to have a bit which says< AHA this is ↓(incredibly
451		empowering) [so
452	M:	[I'll give another thing which is even more (unclear) BIS and I think is the
453		other reason why we have quite a strong basis to go with <u>business</u> is the people who will get
454		the message across more powerfully are (.) Unilever the Unilevers the Caterpillars Kingfish
455		wasn it so if they stand up and say (.) this is probusiness is quite <u>hard</u> for these to go like <u>oh</u>
456		is antibusiness erm well actually we <u>are</u> the businesses and we <u>are</u> telling you this is the right
457		thing to do (.) [ahm I think that's you know=
458	A:	[↓yes
459	L:	=mh=
460	M:	=we I don't think we get anywhere if we
461		stand up and <u>bang</u> on defra [(problems)
462	A:	[no no ((continues joke in falsetto, inaudible)) hheheheh-heh
463	M:	=(responds in
464		falsetto)) [<i>this is good for business (.) honestly talk to [name of CEO]=</i>
465	A:	[heh-heh-heh-huh-heh =yes heh-[heh-he

Extract 10.7: Fitting the agenda

The conversation, halfway into the one and half hour meeting, had stalled somewhat around providing examples of products which SC policies could potentially address, namely 'mobile phones', and 'fashion items'. After a long pause (6 seconds), officer A takes her turn to talk to return to the central objective of the meeting – the provision of a reasonable argument in the draft on the subject. In the extract, it is again a joke, as in

one instance before, which characterises the pursuing and the affiliation (cf. Jefferson *et al.*, 1987) of officers around an adequate response to the problem their developing argument faces. In the sequence, two strategies to establish alignment with the government 'overarching agendas' are mentioned and agreed. The first is the appeal to the 'well-being agenda' (line 437), which is seen to overlap with the 'empowerment agenda' (440). These are key commitments of the Coalition government (2010-2015), to bring about greater devolution and to empower communities. The key document outlining this political programme in consumer policies is *Better Choices: Better Deals* (BIS and Cabinet Office, 2011). The agendas come to be considered 'allies' (cf. Chapter 6) in 'trying to push forward' SC (lines 440-444), and their inclusion in the draft is agreed. More interestingly, A provides an ironic sense of why the proposed solution might work. Mocking in falsetto voice the potential challenge to the argument (lines 450-451), she proposes what she sees – and what the group of officers come to see together – as a valid counter-argument: 'AHA, this is incredibly empowering' (lines 451-452). The joke is produced by ridiculing a potential allegation on the part of the authoritative sources (BIS and Cabinet Office colleagues), by whom the draft will have to be evaluated. The officers are anticipating the line of criticism of the 'customers' of the 'strand of work' (cf. Chapter 5), and shape the argument in a way that it can pass. Like in other instances of improper talk (cf. Jefferson *et al.*, 1987), recipients (in this case M) are offered a space in turn-taking to expand on the impropriety and opt for an escalation, which is usually of affiliative nature. The option is in fact attended by M in line 452, who starts producing an utterance resembling the structure of A's joke, accepting her invitation to laugh together. From line 453 to line 466, M lays down the grounds for the argument of the sustainable consumption 'narrative' draft: the government *will endorse* the businesses' proposal to develop SC policies in a certain way, because those same companies will be able to warrant that 'this is pro-business' (line 456) – providing, simultaneously, alignment with the government 'growth agenda'. Mocking again likely counter-arguments by those who will be in the position to accept or reject the 'narrative' (i.e. the Department of Business and the Cabinet Office, and the DEFRA senior managers), M asserts that there exists 'a strong basis to go with businesses' (line 454), because once challenged on the point of whether 'this is good for business' (line 465) or not, they can count on the backing of the largest and more profitable companies operating in the country, which are named in the extract (line 454). Despite the light-hearted way in which agreement is achieved in this instance, the talk does shape the final argument the 'narrative' will propose. A decision had been

taken. The officers' work of 'doing policy development' has been done.

Writing policy

The next task officers perform to progress the draft of the SC 'narrative' – or to 'bring it forward', to put it in their words – is the updating of the 'version of the draft' on the basis of the discussion they had during the meeting. The practicality of the task consists of putting in writing those judgements expressed and agreed upon in talk, and compose a policy proposal to be considered by seniors and ministers. Despite the fact that the task of updating the draft is formally assigned to an individual officer (a 'Grade7') the progress of the text in the document needs to be understood, again, as an inherently collaborative affair (cf. Chapter 9). Officers will spend around seven weeks in crafting the definitive text of the SC 'narrative'. In between updating the versions, they exchange long email inquiring from each other about developments, they share notes, and they add comments to successive digital 'versions' of the text. The 'narrative' also becomes a frequent topic of conversation on the office floor. To facilitate such exchanges, three of the four officers in the sustainable consumption team chose to sit close to each other on hot-desk workstations, something unusual in other periods. Sitting close together facilitates and speeds up the exchange of information. In close proximity to them, I could witness exchanges on the lines that follow. There are three examples: each conversation on the work floor is then related to what appears in the text of the developing paper.

Example 1.

OfficerL comes back from the DPM meeting (on SC) and report to officerE on what has been said. Without big preambles, he says that the 'gist of the meeting' is that 'we should get the rid of this idea that people should consume less... people should consume differently, but with less impact' (Fieldnotes, Vol.2, p.216)

<p><u>Sustainable Consumption Policy</u></p> <p><u>Background –why do we need to think about sustainable consumption?</u></p> <p>Consumption patterns and historic links to waste policy</p> <p>Two strands to consumption 1) volume of consumption 2) product impacts across lifecycle (<u>relate to sustainable consumption and sustainable production – post and pre retail</u>)</p> <p><u>These strands combine to give overall 'footprint' of consumption (and production) – not sustainable level at present, (4 planet living, population expansion, climate change, resource conflict, etc) 2 crude solutions – consume less stuff and/or make the stuff with less resource.</u></p>
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Extract 10.8: SC narrative, version 1 'skeleton', p.1 (internal document)

The 'skeleton', that is to say the first version of the draft, opens with a broad identification of the policy problem ('not sustainable level of consumption'). The talk exchange above directs the text to consider 'two crude solutions to address it: consume less stuff and/or make the stuff with less resource' – as in the last line of the extract. Of the potentially infinite ways of conceiving the problem 'SC' and proposing solutions, the document proceeds to narrow down the form of the object to the one formulated at the high level meeting (hosted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) one of the officers attended. Officers here *need* to align to the latest rendering of the issue at governmental level, and elaborate a (Departmental) position on that, *and only that*, rendering. In this way the policy direction indicated by the DPM office, in turn informed by the business leaders who prompted the 'DPM meeting', becomes a contextual feature of the policy proposal. The officers' work is that of importing the 'crude' notion of what SC should or should not be, by considering the preferred option as relevant element that is pulled into the conversation *and* the drafting in order to make the decision about how to proceed. The practical reasoning of officers here involves the selection of the relevant features on the basis of the political endorsement of the position, rather than a discussion of either the origins or the implications of the 'notion', perhaps framed in theoretical or evidential terms (cf. Chapter 8).

Example 2.

OfficerM and officerL sit together and read aloud a paragraph from a report.

OfficerM: That's bang on!

OfficerL: [Senior officer] wrote an essay some time ago about this and there was a nice paragraph... we look to extend this approach [consume the same, but with less resources]

OfficerM: Yes. Can you add that line? (Fieldnotes, Vol.2, p.206)

Sustainable economic growth is achievable if the impacts of production and consumption can be reduced whilst retaining the value that consumers seek. One may enjoy a cold beer⁵ from an energy efficient fridge powered by renewables and manufactured from materials reclaimed from waste just as much as one would enjoy a cold beer from an inefficient fridge powered by coal and manufactured from raw materials that will ultimately go to landfill. The value derived by the consumer from the cold beer is not dependent on the resource inputs that created it. Sustainable consumption gets a bad press when it is presumed that the only way to reduce impacts is to reduce value and often when people talk of 'unsustainable levels of consumption' they also make this assumption, implicitly or otherwise.

Extract 10.9: SC narrative (version2, p.5)

The argument takes shape on the 'line' decided collectively: 'sustainable consumption' becomes about reduced impacts 'whilst retaining the value consumers seek'. To illustrate the point the officers use in the text a point from a document crafted in the past, which in turn uses an example from mundane experience ('a cold beer'). Examples of this kind, where complex problems are reduced to everyday experience of the officers themselves and are easy to remember and re-propose in talk, are common in the settings (cf. Chapter 6). Officers adopt a style they know is accepted and sought after. The text thus is able to steer the direction of the argument further away from the idea that SC could mean in any way 'consume less': sustainable consumption drifts towards becoming part of the policy strategy to achieve 'sustainable economic growth' – as in the first line of the extract. An alignment to a further governmental agenda (the 'growth agenda') is thus achieved in the text of the draft. The officers' reasoning around the object of their writing invokes a symbolism that they know will appeal to the perspective readers of the text (senior managers). The example of the “cold beer” is validated by the fact that it existed in an essay already written by a senior – and re-proposed on the basis that was already part of a stock of accepted knowledge. The 'legacy' of past collective realisations (what 'SC' is 'really about', cf. Chapter 6) is imported, somewhat uncritically. The example illustrates the kind of economic reasoning that officers rehearsed and agreed in talk. It achieves to provide more details of the elements of the

proposal. Using creatively materials at hand, the text begins to construct a line of reasoning that aligns with the selected notion of 'sustainable consumption'.

Example 3.

OfficerA: How do we frame this to make sure we go along the Treasury and the growth agenda?

OfficerM: Have you seen this [name of think tank] slide with that graph on circular economy?

[Point to the slide on screen with the back of the pen]

OfficerL: This thing is absolutely brilliant! We recognise both growth and sustainability, because we need to say something about that

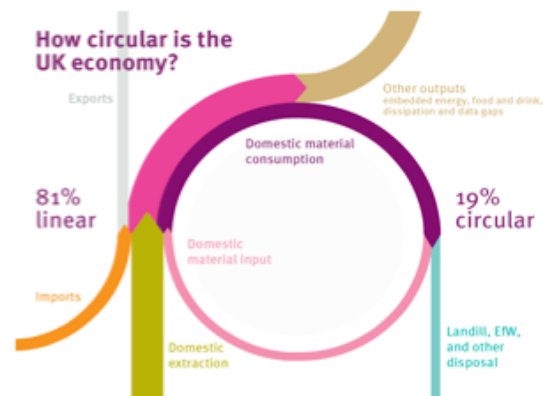
OfficerM: are you thinking about 2-3 paragraphs...

OfficerL: yes

OfficerM: oh, great (Vol.2, p.204)

Not all change is bad. The move towards sustainable growth and development presents an opportunity for UK businesses and consumers to benefit in both the short and the long term. It is estimated that UK businesses could save around £23bn per year by making simple changes to use resources more efficiently. The idea that we can move from an economy based on using and then disposing of inputs towards one where value can be extracted from inputs more than once (with commensurate gains in resource efficiency and decreases in environmental impact and exposure to increasing resource scarcity) is embodied in the concept of the circular economy. Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which the UK economy relies on a linear flow of resources which must be

Figure 2³:



continually replenished. At present only 19% of the inputs to our economic activity are reused. The estimated potential savings from moving to a circular economy are £55bn for the UK and £211bn for the EU⁴. A number of leading businesses are beginning to implement a 'circular' approach to their business models.

Extract 10.10: SC narrative (version 2, p.3)

This exchange is particularly interesting as officers achieve several things by importing an eye-catching graphical representation of the issues they are handling. The 'slide' officers are scrutinising comes from materials received by a think tank recognised by

officers as an authoritative source. The source is acknowledged in a footnote, but the materials do not provide a detailed analysis of the data in the slides. In the talk, it can be noted, officers are not really concerned where it comes from – their purposes, as discussed before, are to produce a coherent ‘narrative’. Nor do the officers question explicitly the provenance of the graph. Rather, the fact that the think tank in question has the endorsement of the companies in 'strategic relationships' with the Department (cf. Chapter 7) provides the grounds to consider the argument, the analysis and the estimates *valid* for the officers' purposes. Crucially, officers can and do select the numerical estimates to work up the proposal: adopting the 'circular economy' – an 'idea', or 'concept', that 'embodies' a particular notion of 'sustainable use of resource' – it is possible for businesses to save billions of pounds, while 'decreas[ing] the environmental impact'. The 'idea' aligns to the requirements of the 'overarching agendas' officers have to consider as relevant context of their work. They consider the think tank's proposal and analysis relevant and valid for the reasons they discussed in talk: arguably, they draw on the knowledge that the proposal will be viewed positively by seniors, ministers and by 'stakeholders'.

Another strength of the think tank 'slide' is that it quantifies the potential saving assigning numerical estimates – a move that matches the style of evidence preferred by managers and ministers (cf. Chapter 7). Also, officers know that framing the argument in these economic terms has the potential to convince them to endorse what the text proposes in the following pages. The aesthetic and the semantic elements of the think tank's materials embody that potential (“this is absolutely brilliant”, officerL says), therefore officers proceed to select them as important resources, and decide to include them in the proposal's text. The rigour in the drafting process does not come from a testing of the economic estimates against further body of evidence, but it stems out the projection that seniors will recognise those numbers as valid, as result of the *trust* the Department places on the work of the originators of the numbers. Officers do not need to examine the econometrics behind the calculations: what is important for them is that ministers and seniors will recognise the source as one they confide in. It is the *social organisational practices* behind the acquisition of the estimates that affirms their validity, not the technical process of economic calculation the source has used to arrive at them (cf. Harper, 1998). Those 'potential savings' are accepted as a matter of fact: their existence is taken as the basis to elaborate future actions. These, in turn, can be delegated to those 'leading businesses' that are adapting their 'business models' to the

'circular economy'. The resulting 'narrative' will propose just that. Key passages in the definitive form of the text read:

What should Defra do? Some leading businesses are exploring how they can reduce the impacts of their goods and services, both during production and after the point of sale. It is clear that much of the expertise, knowledge and activity necessary to achieve sustainable growth lies outside of Government but is not shared equally by all UK businesses. By working in partnership with businesses and other stakeholders we are better able to respond to their needs and develop policy that is effective, and in line with the call in the Civil Service Reform Plan for Open Policy Making.

(Extract 10.11: SC narrative, version6)

Here further alignment to 'overarching agendas' is achieved. The officers' text invokes a government publication to justify the fact that the core of future policy development can be entrusted to non-governmental agencies: this is the 'new policy direction' for sustainable consumption, and the one the Department will follow by reducing the budget for that particular 'policy objective', by disbanding the sustainable consumption and production team, and by not providing further funding to sustainable consumption projects. The outcome of these developments was summarised by a general director, whom, some weeks after the presentation of the 'narrative' to ministers, wrote in an email directed to all of those in the 'policy area':

discussions to date [also] suggest a relative reduction in Defra policy interventions on our 'sustainable economy' work (including sustainable development and what used to be called sustainable consumption and production), potentially aligned with greater expectations that the business community and others in the economy should by now be able to take on more of this themselves. (internal email, 5 December 2012).

Discussion

Goodwin (1994:626) wrote that "central to the social and cognitive organization of a profession is the ability to shape events in the domain of its scrutiny into the phenomenal objects around which the discourse of the profession is organized". He noted how different professions – doctors, lawyers, police officers, archaeologists – have the ability, and indeed the power, to legitimately see events and objects and categorize them in ways that are relevant to the accomplishment of their jobs. The

competence necessary to be able to see the world in certain ways and not others is what constitutes their “professional vision”. In this Chapter, I have investigated the practices and the discourses through which policy officers realise, in action, the particular requirements for 'doing policy work', by referring to, and analyse in details, the tasks required and carried out to draft a key document for the policy development on SC. In the text, I have highlighted and discussed several aspects of their work that point at unique features of what is necessary to 'do policy briefing', and to 'do writing a policy paper' for policy development. These, I argue, are distinctive features of the policy officer profession, and are deeply interwoven with the local, unique, circumstances in which workers find themselves.

The examples of email exchanges and talk in meetings show that the capacity to get their work done involves an extraordinarily extended and detailed awareness and knowledge of the organisational context in which their work takes place. Given the pace of organisational change, this knowledge is never static, but it is produced, deployed and modified *in situ*, moment by moment (cf. Tolmie and Rouncefield, 2008). The determination of what SC 'is', for instance, refers to a range of contingent organisational considerations: first officers need to know what is already 'ongoing', and strive to keep up with the latest internal papers in circulation, knowing that the wording – and indeed the issues – they need to use in their next piece of writing *must* take these in consideration. Second, they demonstrate in the observable features of their talk a constant orientation to what 'others are doing': they need to find their 'territory', their 'gap' – and this is determined *not* by the internal properties of the policies they are discussing, but entirely by assessing what is going on elsewhere in the Department, and in the government at large. Third, they do make assessments about the knowledge bases potentially informing policy, but again, what provides for the sources and the means for tackling the problems are locally-specific conditions related to matters of hierarchy, 'political appetites' and imperatives – all *exogenous* to the material referents of the policies in questions. This is highly significant for the understanding of how evidence is used in the development of public policy, as the use of different evidence-bases can transform radically the possibility of action in the development of policies, both in terms of what sort of policy initiatives will be proposed, and in terms of what chances such proposals will have to progress through the complex set of reviewing procedures in place to check whether they are 'organisationally fit'. It is “all about the process”.

The policy officers are expected to be able to make these sorts of considerations: it is an essential part of what it means to be a policy officer, and it is to these professional standards that the officers are accountable to each other. In the Chapter, I have highlighted how the ability to see relevant events (for example the 'reactions' to a potential knowledge base to inform SC policies) mutually inform, and constrain, officers in the constitution of their activities.

Conclusions

Introduction

This thesis began with noticing how most of the approaches to the study of public policy are concerned with a range of wide theoretical problems, for instance, the nature of relationship between politics and administration, the description of the policy process in stages, the search for heuristic devices, or principles, for description, reform and prediction of potential outcomes. My starting point has been rather different, unusual, and somewhat more modest. The intention has been that of discovering and retrieving the practical work of public policy development. In the empirical Chapters of the thesis I have proceeded with presenting the observational data collected in the settings where these activities took place. I placed a great deal of effort in ensuring that I made no assumptions about why the officers I had occasion to observe behaved in the way they did. I have been concerned instead, more simply, with describing their work, and with noticing what they consider relevant when they proceeded with the work assigned to them. I left aside, intentionally, the building up of a theory of public policy development: I refrained from generalising statements, conscious that, firstly, the scope and the time frame of the data I was able to collect did not warrant the development of a general theory, and secondly, that there is much to gain from setting aside the elaboration in abstract of the subject of public policy, in favour instead of an investigation focussing on the local and practical methods in and through which instances of activities related to policy-making are organised and accomplished by a community of public administrators.

By sidelining the orthodox procedures of theory-building, the analysis could concentrate on unpacking the practical experience of policy officers. The analysis has considered the ways they deal with problems, the ways they understand work situations, the ways they go about 'doing their job'. While the description I provided can be considered only preliminary, I believe some light has been shed on the complexities, the uncertainties and the matters at stake that officers deal with on a daily basis. This concluding Chapter collects some more general observations to answer the research questions I have presented at the beginning of the inquiry: what is the lived detail of working for

government in a ministerial Department? How do officers proceed with organising working activities? Do they use peculiar kinds of reasoning around problems? The generalisability of my statement is inevitably limited, and the reason that is the case should be clear to the reader by now. I hope I have provided enough evidence of the pace, and the sweeping consequences, of the changes to the nature of the work policy officers do, day by day. I shall therefore start my final discussion of the work of these professionals from this distinguishing trait: the need to define, each time and for each 'strand of work', what is necessary to achieve progress and to get policy work done.

Organisational change

The investigation of the work of middle-ranking DEFRA employees started by considering what I called the formal programming of the organisation: an overall design of the operations carried out by its workers as presented to the public in official records. In Chapter 4, I discussed how this programming cannot be considered only a presentational device, but how it serves the purpose of setting the mandates for officers: these are the territories of legitimised organisational action, and the space within which officers are called to elaborate their doings. The origins of mandates reside in the formal objectives set out by elected politicians: ministers set lists of 'priorities', they initiate 'programmes' and determine 'visions' and 'directions'. The characteristic of mandates is the lack of determination about practical interventions: ministers dictate overall objectives, civil servants elaborate on the potential means to achieve those ends. The observation of what the research participants did in the office, however, has led me to consider this transformation – or 'translation', in officers' words – as being far from a straightforward business, as a reductionist view of the relation between politics and policy would suggest. Rather, a great part of what constitutes policy work in the first place is the understanding, negotiation, and determination of what this process of transformation entails. I set out my inquiry as an exploration of how tasks and activities are carried out to produce appropriate outcomes, and noted the wide range of considerations officers need to make in order to proceed and accomplish appropriate and competent policy work. Central to the analysis have been the ways in which organisational action is channelled towards certain ends and not others, and more specifically what sets of constraints, relevant to the officers, are imposed on the tasks associated with elaborating policy, and on the reasoning necessary to accomplish it (cf.

Orlikowski, 1991). To use a powerful concept elaborated in the field of ethnomethodological analysis of organisations (cf. Strong and Dingwall, 1983), my interest has been that of retrieving elements of the accounting frameworks (Heritage, 1984:127) in action in this setting. These, as Garfinkel (1967) explained, are sets of ad hoc devices that bind members to a specific design of actions which represent institutionalised, “normal” or “life as usual” features of the actions in question. I have argued that the analysis of these devices is fundamental for the understanding of the nature of the work undertaken by policy officers.

The starting point has been that of noticing, with officers, that a distinctive quality of the 'strands of work' they carry out is their precariousness. In fact, the legal principles underpinning the public administration operations and the turnover of government and ministers mean that the very nature of officers' work can suddenly change, and with it, the associated tasks and activities required on their part. The trajectory of the policies on sustainability in one decade of DEFRA existence, detailed in Chapter 4, is, in this sense, paradigmatic: officers reported a wide range of different approaches being promoted and then abandoned, of 'policy teams' being created and then disbanded, 'programmes' started and then modified in due course to the point of becoming unrecognisable. Officers are required to be flexible, accommodating the changes and adapting to what become, each time, the 'new ways of working', new ways of conceiving 'sustainability', new ways of pursuing mandates that had evolved with time and staff changes at the 'higher levels' of the organisation's hierarchy. Whilst newcomers to the Department can feel, in fact reported to feel, confused about the pace of organisational change, those with years in the service and high enough in the ranks recognise that such pace is a fact of life in the workplace, and furthermore, changes underpin the operations associated to the devising of public policies and policy initiatives. Making changes in the organisation and to its operations is the work to carry out. The policy officers I observed were the interpreters of the changing conditions under which policy-making on sustainability was being taken forward, and the agents of change for the strands of work that had been initiated in the past but, because of the changes, had to be modified, adapted, re-formed.

Surveying the work of 'executive officers' (SEO and HEO) in Chapter 5, I provided examples of how such adaptations can take place, and how they take place in accountable ways for specific projects. 'Projects' and 'project management'

documentation provide officers with the tools to oversee and control the operations associated to the officers' 'strands of work'. Far from being a routine work of “maintenance”, as it is characterised by Page and Jenkins (2005), the management of projects facilitates the channelling, administering and accomplishing organisational change through time, and the accounting for it, orderly, in the records. The work of officers consists of making practical judgements around what the changing conditions and requirements mean for each project, and act in consequence to confirm, modify, or in some cases give up with the original project plans. Whilst 'project management' provides officers with an accounting platform for the office procedures – or a “technology of accountability”, as Suchman (1995) has it – there is very little that is procedural, or routine, in project work. Each project must be considered in its own right and, in each officers must be able to recognise, identify, liaise and 'manage' the groups, or the “parts” as I called them in Chapter 5 constituting the constellation of relevant parties interested in each single 'strand of work'. Even projects with small budgets, as I have documented, can create huge reputational damage, or risk being singled out by the press and the public as evidence of failure in administering public funds. Project work thus trains junior officers to use extreme caution – a trait that becomes a distinctive part of their professional expertise – when assessing the consequences of selecting courses of actions to transform mandates into organisational action. As the senior executive who became my mentor during my placement at DEFRA put it: “the government works in a very fluid environment”. The work of middle-rank officers is that of getting to know this environment, and assessing carefully which strategies are the most appropriate to pursue the 'policy objectives' set out for them by seniors and ministers. Officers work on each project considering the particulars of the case in hand. As they often stress, there are procedures in place, but not step-wise instructions to follow. There are instead modes of practical reasoning officers employ to monitor, control and modify courses of actions through time, and strategies to engage with those they identify as “customers” (the groups of government agents who are interested in the development of projects), “contractors” (the agencies carrying out the practical work of the project on the ground), and “stakeholders” (whoever share an interest in each project). The professional competence of officers consists in deploying practices of negotiation, reassurance, and deliberation to 'manage' the relationships with these groups, and ensure projects do not fail, or are not seen as failing. 'Project work' is accompanied by the requirement of producing accounting documentation, but such production is a reporting exercise that

follows the production of decisions, this latter accomplished in talk during meetings, or through exchanges by email or phone.

A collegial effort

The inquiry into the nature of officers' work has also touched on the tremendous amount of resources that need to be mobilised to coordinate tasks and activities. While it is not surprising to note that administrators work in concert with each other (cf. Simon, 1957), the analysis has investigated some of the ways in which collegiality is achieved within a quite complicated system of contacts and relationships. The way patterns of interaction are structured is in fact recognised by officers as peculiar and troublesome. For each 'strand of work', officers need to engage in lengthy explorations to find out who constitute relevant contacts for them, when and how to proceed with their inquiries, and they also need to understand how different sets of relevant actors depend on one another. Policy work requires thus the development of particular sensitivities in making the coordination of activities possible. The research participants' accounts highlight the centrality of these social skills over pure technical, problem-solving, expertise. Technical problems can find solutions only by respecting the key processes for cross-checking that projects and policy interventions will not have consequences for other 'policy areas', and that established patterns of operations are not disregarded, replicated or violated all together. It is easy to see that it is through these processes that historical and political forces – instantiated, each time, in relationships of influence and power – are produced and re-produced. A line of argument that this thesis has been pursuing is that the study of the creation of public policy cannot prescind from considering these dynamics. On the contrary, through my preliminary analysis, I have shown that this is a fruitful avenue of research. This can be pursued, however, only by considering in detail, case by case, what are the conditions under which this consensus-based style of policy-making, peculiar to the British government also according to other literatures (cf Chapter 1), becomes instantiated in action.

Following this methodological lead, the analysis has considered how the individual officers organised in 'policy teams' are perpetually called to make sense in working groups of processes of institutional change: understanding and respecting the existing

state of affairs of each policy issue becomes the work at hand. Officers must proceed, each time through (cf. Garfinkel *et al.*, 1981), with gathering a sense of what is the contemporary and legitimated 'way of thinking' about policy issues, and construct the potential development of policies on the basis of that, and on the basis of that sense alone. As the discussion in Chapter 6 has uncovered, much of what constitutes work in policy development consists of the discussion, determination, replication and transmission of accepted arguments, working definitions, and understandings of the 'real world out there' that need to be considered settled, and therefore established as 'true', indisputable, taken for granted as grounds for future courses of action. In general terms, officers refer to these features of their work as the 'process': the ongoing, emergent, and at times burdensome updating of the contextual conditions under which their activities must be carried out, and the outcomes adapted.

The assemblage of organisational action

The ways in which some facts are established as given in the discourses around policy issues became clearer when my analysis focussed on the work of 'Grade7s', the officers who work as middle managers and as such coordinate the activities of executives in the light of instructions received by seniors and ministers. While officers at this grade do not have the last word on initiating action, the observation of their activities has shed some light on the dynamics through which the work of policy development is carried out, day by day, in the office. I proceeded with unpacking the language these officers use in the settings to characterise what they do, and inquired into the modes through which their activities are accomplished. Some of the 'strands of work' I considered could thus be understood from their point of view, and a description of their work could build upon their own conceptualisations. I placed particular attention on ascertaining in more detail how they arrive at descriptions of the worlds that they can consider, for all practical purposes, valid. I reported on some of the ways organisational action is triggered, and considered the sets of constraints that limit what they can contemplate as thinkable, doable, and (allowing myself a neologism) *policyable* (cf. Chapter 10). The ability to become aware of organisational changes, and arrive at agreed, valid, and acceptable resolutions is what makes officers at 'Grade7' rank 'generalists' – middle managers with the competence of producing a synthesis of the multifaceted types of issues that need to be brought into consideration when

developing proposals for organisational action. This characterisation is strikingly different from the view, extensively accepted in the literature on British policy-making (cf. Hood *et al.*, 2002; Page and Jenkins, 2005, p.165ss) that these public managers rely solely on a sort of “improvised expertise” – itself mostly seen as dysfunctional.

The range of issues 'Grade7s' must take into account has been, instead, itself a topic of my analysis. I proceeded to identify and detail further features of the 'process': the relevance (and inescapability) of 'overarching agendas', the need to know which 'policy levers' were considered more acceptable than others, the ability to read through what officers call the 'policy context', as well as to take into account past action and its 'legacy'. Officers' also need to work up the feasibility of their 'strands of work' on the basis of their assessment of the organisational resources they have at their disposal: are there enough people, enough funds, enough technical skills to carry out plans of action? In order to produce these kind of assessments officers must familiarise themselves not only with to the technicalities of the 'policy issues', but also to what they call the 'wider issues': the availability of budgets, the preferences of seniors and ministers, the 'capacity' and 'capability' of the existing composition of 'policy teams', the plans for future reconfigurations of the workforce. Policy work, I have noted, moves within a territory where none of these considerations can be considered ancillary. Rather, the fact that all of them must be taken into account at once is what is distinctive about the work itself.

Observing officers in action has also led me to characterise many of their activities as exploratory in nature. Many of the working methods officers employ and act upon pertain to the domain of the what if questions. Their reasoning is speculative, their writings conjectural, their actions often little more than tentative. Officers, together, ponder over courses of action rather than devising operative plans. Their work is tuned towards investigating potential future consequences of projections of action: the officers' work often consists in envisioning the future. Their professional training in the exercise of caution is made to work in the direction of avoiding 'problems': their working objective is that of specifying the elements of perspective courses of action to the utmost level of detail. The more complex the proposed policy intervention, the more burdensome the work of contemplating the implications. A consequence of this, and an important finding, is that a remarkable volume of what is discussed, of what is produced, of what is deliberated never sees the light of the day. So many 'strands of

work', officers report, lead to nothing. This is different from claiming that these activities are useless, or that there are grounds to characterise policy work as inherently inefficient, or the procedures in place irrational. Rather, it leads us to appreciate that much of the competence required to design social programmes or policy projects resides in anticipating the potential consequences of taking action in order to be prepared to do so.

Officers, we have seen in actual instances of practice (cf. Chapter 6), monitor the full range of 'policy options' that could be implemented, and assess the fitness of each with the (changing) 'policy context' through time. A precondition for the success of proposals is the prospective alignment of options with the requirements that are imposed on the 'process'. 'Overarching agendas', we have seen, modify the 'policy context' with the effect of requiring yet another assessment of what is possible, and what becomes feasible and unfeasible, under new conditions. Each change of government, each change of ministers ('reshuffle'), each change of 'priorities', or 'U-turns' on specific matters, are likely to prompt re-assessment, or 'reviews', officers are in charge of carrying out. It can be said that this work remains mostly invisible to outsiders and to theory. It is rarely mentioned in the specialised literatures on public administration. Yet, for what I could observe, it occupies a considerable share of officers' working time and organisational resources. A corollary of these observations is that political 'agendas' that are announced, streamlined through the administration, and then not pursued carry with them an amount of hidden costs that are rarely acknowledged. The same applies to programmes of organisational 're-structuring', or, at a larger level, to the merging and creation of Departments – operations that governments in Britain have the power of enacting without a Parliament vote (cf. Chapter 4). Even cuts to budgets, with the associated re-discussion of priorities, alignments, re-distribution of resources against existing 'programmes and projects' are, as officers know very well, inherently and quite paradoxically, costly. Yet, in this fluid, ever-changing environment, officers manage to assemble the elements necessary to make policy and devising organisational action. Central to their activities, I have documented, is the gathering of valid information – organisationally accepted 'facts' – to ground the cases to select some optional courses over others. The basis to proceed is the formation of consensus over which 'evidence-bases' constitute acceptable descriptions of the worlds upon which policy will intervene.

Evidence management

The discussions in Chapter 7 and 8 have turned the analytical attention towards the activities necessary to secure specialist knowledge in support of policy proposals. Policy development accrues to a process of design that respects and meets requirements set out to check whether there exist the grounds for accepting a case for action. Learning the criteria for acceptability and gathering the kind of information necessary to pass the (administrative) tests of 'clearance' constitute much of what is practically done in the office when policy workers engage with research-related policy development tasks. As for many other activities, progress is achieved by consensual resolutions around what can be considered feasible courses of action, given requirements that are themselves object of organisational change. Arriving at a consensus, it has been observed, involves the coordination of several actors, and the inclusion of inputs from multiple sources. Such coordination is a substantive aspect of policy development work and has often little to do either with the specifics of the policies themselves, or with the material referents the policies in question address. Rather, the rationalities at play become the need to establish who needs to be consulted, whose voices must be selected as relevant, which groups must be considered the prospective audience of potential 'developments'. The territory where officers operate to source, select, manipulate, and mobilise information – and therefore establish what constitute valid information ('evidence') – does not emerge as a neutral discursive space in which policy matters are discussed in conceptual, evidential or theoretical terms: officers admit that most of the times they are not required to 'think' about policy problems in these terms (cf. Chapter 8). Differently, officers report that often reasoning in purely theoretical or evidential terms can be counterproductive for their working objectives, and seen as 'unhelpful', 'naive', and at odds with the established working ethos, the established 'ways we do things around here'. In other words, officers report to be not necessarily in search of the “best available evidence” as the so-called evidence-based policy movement conceives and envisages them doing (cf. e.g. Young *et al.*, 2002). Rather, their inquiries privilege 'evidence' that 'best fits' both the accepted, valid and current 'thinking' on policy issues and the requirements of the clearance process in place. From the officers' point of view it is exactly the requirements imposed by that process that determine the nature of the problems handled and the kind of evidence that is necessary to gather to offer potential solutions and valid, fit-for-purpose advice around their implementation. As the

requirements of the process can be manipulated to suit the 'overarching agendas' of the government-of-the-day, what officers call their 'research needs' can and do evolve accordingly, creating a demand for freshly-framed research questions and avenues of investigation. The insertion of the Regulatory Policy Committee's cross-checks of policy proposals, for instance, with the associated additional stress over the provision of evidence justifying government interventions in terms of economic costs and benefits (cf. Chapter 7), was considered by research participants at the time of the observation the latest and most vivid example of the changing nature of information that they had to pursue, and to which – inevitably because of the very nature of their profession – their work had to adapt. The Coalition Government's (Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition, 2010-2015) commitment to pursuing economic growth (cf. Chapter 6) emerged as another example, imposing new procedural benchmarks for the acceptability of environmental policy proposals: without demonstrating that proposed interventions did not impair the profitability of businesses in the short-term, officers learned, their policy projects at 'scoping' and design stage would have not 'got the polls'. Process requirements, like in these cases, direct (or impose) the search for 'evidence' in specific domains, these in turn requiring freshly-produced information tailored to the requirements of such domains.

As Chapter 8 detailed, the practical process of developing policy proposals and plans creates the conditions for the establishment of a knowledge market, fostered and funded by the Department's research budget, whose mechanisms of operation are controlled by officers. The competitive bidding for funds can involve universities' departments, large and small consultancy firms, think-tanks, non-governmental organisations, charities and all manner of organisations in the business of providing expert knowledge, including those specifically set up to influence the government decision-making, like lobbyists. The thesis has explored the procedures in place for, and the tasks associated with, the making of decisions around the selection and exploitation of sources of information and expertise. Some peculiar dynamics have emerged, some of which are considered problematic by the officers handling the work of designing and assigning research projects. From their point of view, for instance, a key requirement for importing potentially valid knowledge (in the form of data or models) is what they call the timing of the evidence. Given, as we have seen earlier, that there exist expectations that commissioned research tend both to align to the current 'thinking' on policy issues and

to address questions stemming from emerging problems, what becomes paramount is the synchronisation of demand and supply. This creates, officers report, systemic biases. The constant evolving of the frames cast over policy issues cause studies and reports to become quickly obsolete. Research commissioned in the past, officers report, may have relevance for contemporary policy development, but it is very often sidelined on the grounds that “the world may have changed in the meanwhile” – to put it again with a Department's experienced research manager. Unwritten rules apply, in particular with reference to the colour and the political 'directions' of the government in office when research was conceived and commissioned in the first place: “it is not well-seen to use evidence commissioned by a previous government” was an accepted instruction officers followed, although at times reporting it with reluctance. The knowledge market created to serve the Department's research interests, they also (hesitantly) acknowledge, is not a level playing field. The timeframes to commission research, to make another example, seem to create competitive advantage for some providers, as it does the existence of privileged contacts and the opportunity for providers to get, in confidence, insider knowledge of current and future 'research needs'.

Officers' tasks associated with evidence management, consequently, have to do with the design of tendering processes that facilitate the synchronisation of research demand and supply, and with the defending of the choices made. As the criteria for the validation and acceptability of information are themselves changeable and politically-driven entities, they need to be elaborated upon, worked up, or in the DEFRA offices' jargon 'fleshed out'. This requires officers to spend time elaborating ideas, mostly in writing, and above all to spend time clarifying the meaning of words and discourses to assemble a tendering design that facilitates the acquisition of information. This must tally with the current 'official' line and must do so in a timely fashion. Central to this work is the drafting of documents detailing the specifications of required research – the 'specs', in office jargon. If I really wanted to understand what officers and government were doing and how the 'policy ideas' around sustainable consumption were evolving, I was told during my fieldwork, I “really need[ed] to have a look at the specs”. The analysis in Chapter 8 went somewhat beyond that, and looked at examples of the practices of production of such documents.

The examination of the procedures in place to commission research and the analysis of

instances of associated practices highlighted the degree of discretion officers enjoy when selecting sources of information. Whilst complex procedures of accounting for research spend exist and are followed, officers retain the opportunity to waive procedural requirements in specific cases. Their menu of options (cf. Chapter 8) ranges from opening tendering processes when any supplier can apply, to selectively choosing a provider and assign commissioned work. Within budget constraints, the two options (and all the possibilities in between) are part of the organisation's legitimised action, with accounting practices in place to record the undertaking of courses of actions. Besides, officers report that it is acceptable and current practice to import bodies of 'evidence' that are offered to the Department not through exchange of money, bypassing altogether the formalities of competitive tendering. Policy work becomes what is involved in the negotiations behind these choices, and involves the practical tasks of making cases to justify them, usually in writing while composing internal documentation. The officers' expertise applied to the management of evidence involves the knowledge of the procedural system in place, and the very ability to justify decisions, in many cases ex-post. It also entails the ability to prioritise organisational considerations over strictly technical judgements: as 'everybody knows' in the office, and as some officers report, the political imperatives trump evidence-based considerations (cf. Chapter 10). This means that officers learn and adopt methods of acquisition, selection and manipulation of information that are contingent upon the work at hand and respect peculiar, local and changeable criteria for 'validation'. Some corpuses of knowledge are made 'relevant' to the activities of middle-rank officers for reasons that are exogenous to technical judgements – the most cited examples (cf. Chapter 8) are cases of selections made by senior officers, managers or ministers, who can indicate preferences for some corpuses over others (cf. Maybin, 2015). Justifying choices becomes work for middle-rank officers, who prepare documents elaborating the 'line' – a set of argumentations (or a 'narrative' in office talk) that must “stand critical scrutiny”. The work of officers, in such cases, becomes that of preparing the selected 'evidence-base' to be defended, rather than assuring or discussing its intrinsic validity. This working method, officers report, requires individual workers to accommodate views that may not bode well with their own judgement around technical problems. Consequently, a defining trait of the profession, an informant and colleague noted, is the individual officers' ability to develop a capacity to accept opinions or beliefs around descriptions as 'true', even in those situations when they do not personally think they are. Telling it with Orwell's neologism – officers need the ability to “doublethink”. “You

have to work with the grain rather than against it”, a colleague cogently explained when he found himself in disagreement with the 'official line'. After all, another colleague noted, “[the officers'] drivers are to be official, not to be critical”.

Sometimes, officers report, these working methods prevent evidence from being managed and to be drawn upon for policy-making in a cumulative fashion: valid descriptions, that is what is considered 'true' in a given 'policy context', can change as a result of the modification of the 'context', rather than as a consequence of a challenge to those descriptions. This fact of life for research managers in government seem to be mirrored by the difficulties, readily identified by research participants at different levels of the hierarchy, in retrieving orderly records of past investigations and research projects (cf. Chapter 5) despite efforts to create internal accessible archives. Casting and re-casting policy issues in different terms and under different assumptions makes forgetting instrumental in bringing about policy change. To aid in creating a constant (and unchallenged) renewal of 'research needs' with the consequent fresh demand for research provision there is also the often-reported (cf. Page and Jenkins, 2005; Stevens, 2011) and confirmed by this investigation (cf. Chapter 6) quick turnover of both research managers and policy officers – this itself a powerful amnesiac.

The trajectory of policy work on 'sustainable consumption'

In the final Chapters of the thesis, the analysis considered more closely instances of work related to the development of 'sustainable consumption' policies, with the objective of highlighting the conditions under which officers worked to achieve 'progress'. Specifically, I have been interested in identifying the boundaries – or “constraints” – that, endogenously, defined the scope of the particular 'strands of work' associated to the policy area. The objective was that of documenting how these constraints paved the way to the making of some choices of government action over others. Capitalising on the insider perspective pursued by the design of this research (cf. Chapter 2) and respecting a strategy of analysis that suspended judgement over the value or validity of the observed policy choices – an application of what Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) called “ethnomethodological indifference” (Cf. Introduction; Pollner and Emerson, 2001) – the objective has been that of tracking and *describing* the trajectory of

policy change in the 'sustainable consumption' policy area over the period of the observation. Particular attention has been placed upon recovering (or discovering) how the development of such trajectory was achieved in situ, interactionally and intersubjectively (cf. Chapter 3; Strong and Dingwall, 1983) by the observed officers, specifically, in the work circumstances of exchanging emails, meeting, and talking about the tasks at hand on the work floor. Before reconsidering these findings, it is worth recalling the state of the art of the policy development on 'sustainable consumption' before and at the point of my joining the Department in late 2011, a task I pursued in more detail in Chapter 4.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, the very existence of a 'sustainable consumption policy team' composed of around fifteen officers, and the associated budget assigned to elaborate on potential interventions demonstrated the acknowledgement of and the engagement with the policy issue itself. Conforming to 'policy directions' settled by international institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union, in particular along the lines of the Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy (SCP/SIP) Action Plan (European Commission, 2008), the Department's officers were tasked with developing policies addressing the questions of whether and how to intervene on the national population's consumption patterns in order to make these more environmentally sustainable (cf. Jackson, 2006; Giddens, 2009; DEFRA 2006, 2008, 2011c). Officers managed, when my secondment at DEFRA began in late 2011, a 'portfolio' of ongoing projects inherited by the previous administration, the Labour government 2005-2010 (cf. Chapter 4). The policy rationale behind these plans of action, as described by both officers in official documentation, was the devising of a mix of interventions (DEFRA, 2008; 2011c) based on an analysis of the target populations, including both groups of consumers and businesses. The Department worked on the premise that the government had a role in promoting 'sustainable development', and therefore needed to elaborate strategies of intervention tailored to classes of products and segments of citizens (cf. DEFRA 2008; Giddens, 2009; Marvulli, 2011). In order to do so, DEFRA funded a series of 'research projects' to investigate the environmental impact of citizens' behaviours, and devised small-scale pilots to test interventions to promote "more sustainable lifestyles" (DEFRA, 2006) and new business models conducive to sustainable supply chains. The 'mix of interventions', official reports stated, included the use of different policy tools, or 'levers' in the office's jargon: new regulations (such as mandatory emission reporting for businesses and bans

for the most polluting products), forms of subsidies and incentives (for example tax breaks for 'green products'), voluntary agreements with businesses (European Commission, 2008), and information campaigns (such as the ActonCO2 campaign, cf. Chapter 4). Furthermore, the Department claimed to be exploring the possibilities of more effective persuasion strategies, mostly directed to consumers, based on the application of behavioural science and social psychology to policy design (cf. IfG, 2010; Marvulli, 2011) – a “policy paradigm” that came to be known as 'behaviour change' framework (cf. Chapter 8). In late 2011, while none of the ongoing DEFRA 'policy projects' initiated under these auspices had developed in established national policy, officers reported that a number of pilots were undergoing 'evaluation', with a view of proceeding to 'national roll-outs'. Inter alia, 'projects' encountered during the early phases of my observation (cf. Chapter 3) and reported in the thesis included the plan to instruct plumbers to advise their costumers to install water-saving devices ('Plug-it' project); the plan to make the installation of water and energy 'smart-meters' compulsory to all households ('Water Metering' and 'Energy Metering' implementation programmes); the creation of government-funded community websites to create online platforms for the lending or the renting of DIY tools or other household items ('Ecomodo' project); the promotion among manufacturers of the so-called product-service systems, a business model that included in the design and manufacturing processes of products (for examples prams, photocopying machines, etc.) the elements to allow easier repairs and maintenance, with a view to renting products for a period of time or for a number of uses, rather than selling them (what I called the 'green manufacturing project' in Chapter 5; see Lindley et al., 2013). The officers of the sustainable consumption policy team dedicated part of their time and resources to the management of such projects, which entailed, among other things, and as the thesis reported in early Chapters, the tasks of discussing, agreeing and producing project documentation and 'risk registers', the tasks associated to commissioning, editing, approving and publishing project-related reports, and the discussion, held in team meetings and at 'project board' level, of what 'came next' in terms of actions.

By the time I had gained a sustained access to the meetings of the sustainable consumption team in the spring and summer of 2012, and by the time I could witness first hand the officers' operations and practices of office work, the approach to the policy development of sustainable consumption outlined so far was in the process of being 'reviewed'. New challenges to the proposed plans of action and projects emerged

as a result of the institution of new “process requirements” (cf. Chapter 6), laid down by the incumbent administration – for the officers the new 'government-of-the-day' – which took office in May 2010 (Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government 2010-2015). Relevant for officers, and requiring intervention over the ongoing policy development, were a number of provisions put in place in the form of 'cross-government programmes', to which the Department had to align. The work assigned to officers, consequently, shifted towards tasks to be undertaken in order to figuring out what such provisions, known in the office as 'overarching agendas' meant for their own 'policy area'. Some of these 'exercises' have been mentioned and analysed in Chapter 6. The most significant 'agendas', according to the officers' accounts and my observations, were:

– the so-called 'marketing freeze', a measure that limited the opportunity of granting sponsorships, advertising, and producing information campaigns under the banner of the Department (Cabinet Office, 2010b). As a result of the measure, implemented across all Departments with the intention of reducing government spending, the ongoing projects that sought to design campaigns based on the provision of environmental information to the public had to be dropped, or delegated to intermediary agencies that had to fund the campaigns themselves.

– the 'cross-government programme' named The Red Tape Challenge, a review of the entire corpus of governmental regulations with a view to simplify, merge or scrap altogether regulations deemed obsolete or ineffective (cf. HMG, 2010b; Hickman, 2012). Implicit in the programme, officers learned, was the requirement to consider regulatory policy options only as last resort, only after have discarded the full range of alternative 'policy levers' available to them. The behind the scenes effects of the provision were a number of “negative reactions” (fieldnotes) on the part of ministers to those 'submissions' (cf. Chapter 7) advising them to establish new laws or regulations, and the creation of freshly-designed paperwork procedures for officers to demonstrate that interventions alternative to regulation would have not been effective. Officers in charge of projects and initiative that pointed to the creation of new regulations, in particular aimed at businesses, reported that they found increasingly difficult, or outright “impossible” (fieldnotes) to see their 'strands of work' progress through the newly-instituted system of 'clearances'.

– the 'Big Society agenda', a pillar of the Conservative Party general election manifesto. The agenda meant a commitment for the government to a new policy 'ethos', based on the idea that the power and responsibility of societal change rested in the hands of individuals and communities, rather than in those of the central government (cf. Conservative Party, 2010). Officers had to recognise that the new ethos translated in “fewer levers available for government intervention” (fieldnotes and internal documentation; cf. Chapter 6) and reported that arguing in meetings for the intervention of government – for instance in the attempt of influencing consumers' choices or businesses' practices – became more and more difficult. The ministers' view was that the government had not to take, and had not be seen to take, a “interventionist/nanny approach” (internal email), neither in environmental matters, nor, arguably, in other areas of consumers' lives.

– the Plan for Growth (HM Treasury and BIS, 2011), the government outline of the Coalition's economic plans, which, most importantly for the DEFRA officers, set out the intended strategy to pursue a “low carbon path” (p.80ss) for the UK economy. The 'agenda' effectively re-framed the approach of the Department to 'sustainable development', 'sustainable production' and 'sustainable consumption' on novel terms and premises, which the officers of the corresponding 'policy areas' had to adopt and elaborate upon both when devising new plans, and when reviewing ongoing ones. A resulting, core modification of the policy discourse on which environmental policies had to be developed involved the working definition of 'sustainability'. The agenda charged the concept with further attributes: namely, the need to preserve, together with natural resources, the opportunity to create economic value and to provide benefits for the society at large. As for all the other 'overarching agendas' that officers had to consider relevant to the progress of their work of planning (or 'scoping') future action, the Plan for Growth translated into procedural requirements. These called for the need to demonstrate, at policy design stage, that potential government initiatives not only did not impair the profitability of businesses – the premise under which officers had worked on that far (cf. Chapter 6) – but also that they provided the opportunity for wealth and/or jobs creation. Proposal for environmental policies with a chance to succeed, officers collectively realised, had to generate business opportunities, and be conducive to economic growth. These new requirements led to the institution of tighter checks in the procedures of assessing the impact of policy options (such as IA documentation), and a renewed centrality of the role of the Department's economists.

Chapters 9 and 10 thus displayed, by analysing officers' talk at meetings or in email exchanges, how a re-definition of the working concept of 'sustainable consumption' was obtained in practice, and showed the kind of knowledge work such re-definition required. This instance of policy development work entailed the transformation of the very meaning of 'sustainable consumption', and resulted from the officers' (collective) realisation of the consequences of the new policy discourse set out by the Coalition government's (2010-2015) 'overarching agendas' listed earlier in this section. Drawing such consequences was one of the officers' task. Government action, officers discuss in the meeting described in Chapter 9, had to be re-directed, and align to the new 'directions'. Neither attempting to influence citizens' consumption patterns or intervening at any point of the production chains could be seen as an acceptable, feasible policy course. Ongoing pilot interventions and projects at 'scoping' stage that were pursuing such policy objectives had to be de-prioritised, and, also due to the Department's shrinking budget, did not make the cut-off line for securing funding. Research that recommended interventionist policies could be ignored, and considered outdated (cf. Chapter 8).

The working concept of 'sustainable consumption' was to be superseded by one that made the consumers' behaviour after, and only after, the point of the purchase of products a policyable territory. Delineating this new concept was another task for officers, to be put on record through the work of drafting a 'narrative', another officers' practical task. The overall new 'role of government' in environmental policies had also to be discussed, and ascertained. The 'official line' became a hands-off approach, one where government delegates to businesses the responsibility to develop models and initiatives able to match the public policy commitment to 'sustainability' and deliver more environmentally-friendly modes of production, and by consequence, consumption. As the general director of the 'sustainable consumption' team I had been observing succinctly put it near the end of my secondment: "businesses will do the work for us". Embracing this new 'official line' also meant a further task officers undertook was the decommissioning of their own 'policy area'. In December 2012 the general director announced the policy area had "lost its portfolio" (cf. Chapter 10) and the remaining 'sustainable consumption' officers were to migrate in a new 'policy area', re-named 'sustainable business'. The active pursuit of 'sustainable consumption' policies, as for the

2013 DEFRA official records, was not to be considered within the official government mandate, and therefore the small policy team still in place did not receive funding for further work. Following the advice of the Green Economy Council, an advisory body composed of representatives of multinational companies who saw themselves at the forefront of the development of a 'green economy', the government set itself simply as “convenor” of businesses' and consumers' groups and interests, opening a new chapter in the trajectory of the 'sustainable development' policies in England. Whether this new approach turned out to be more effective than the one pursued in the past has never been an objective of this study. Rather, I focused on describing its genesis, and the behind-the-scene work entailed in its development. The hope, however, is that researchers interested in environmental policies and sustainability will find in these pages useful elements to further these considerations, and tell where to the trajectory of policy development has actually led.

Final remarks

This thesis has been concerned with producing a study that documented in extensive empirical detail the unfolding, the practical politics, and the lived order of office settings where the work of devising environmental public policy is done. To address this concern, I have focused on describing the constraints and the choices, the requirements and the options of which policy officers were aware of and to which they had to concern themselves to be considered competent members of their workplace, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs of the UK Government. I have inquired into only some aspects of the working lives of policy officers. In particular, I placed and limited analytic attention to the work associated to the development of a set of specific policies, and I proceeded to describe what officers' competence is made of when they engage in tasks associated to this work, arguably the most important one policy officers do. By no means do I claim the study has achieved any sort of completeness with regards to what policy work can entail: my approach has been necessarily selective, and bound firstly to the instances of work I was able to witness and record, and secondly to my own understanding and capacity to make sense of “what was going on” on those occasions.

Yet, I believe the study engaged in something new and important: a productive approach to the study of public policy-making – one that manages to respect the reality of the activities actors engage in when producing policy work, and therefore one that is able to locate the phenomena of policy-making (or one can read bureaucracy) within the realm of the actions and interactions of those involved in producing the phenomena in the first place (cf. Silverman and Jones, 1976; Strong and Dingwall, 1983; Sharrock and Button, 1991; Boden, 1994; Heath and Button, 2002; Button *et al.*, 2012). I am aware I am exposed to the criticism that the study did not involve explicit and extended consideration of the standard and classic themes that permeate the policy-making literature. To such criticism, I want to respond with the argument that there are both pragmatic and strategic reasons to prioritise the analysis of work itself, to engage with the real experiences of working in a large governmental agency, with dealing with office problems, with going about the minute-by-minute organisational work of doing a “policy-maker” job.

The most important of these reasons, on which I elaborated at length in the Introduction, is the increasingly urgent need to provide empirical reference to the study of bureaucratic work (or “post-bureaucratic”, for some organisational theorists) in the 21st century. This is key to understand the evolution of public administration agencies, as in Britain as everywhere else in post-industrial societies. Public administration is an evolving, ever-changing, entity. It would be at least ingenuous, and certainly insufficient, to keep relying on conceptual and theoretical frameworks that have had their time, and that can only contribute to reproduce “petrified images of work” (Barley and Kunda, 2001, p.82). The search for new concepts, explanations, and perhaps theory has much to gain, I can argue once again, by the observations of the real world of practitioners. What I did in the first part of this thesis was to suggest some fruitful methodological grounds on which this particular avenue of research can take place.

Ethnomethodology has given direction to my analysis. Rather than consider it a method or a theoretical framework, researchers who wish to engage with it should use it as a thinking resource and as a basis for the analytical stance that can inform the analytical work required by ethnographic observation and ethnographic writing.

Ethnomethodology seems to offer a unique way of understanding the social world, one that inextricably binds the analysis to the circumstances the same analysis wishes to describe. It offers a means of accounting for the diversity of practices and phenomena

and, as Garfinkel and Sacks wanted, it offers the basis for an observational discipline for sociology. The principle for this kind of analytical work rests on the requirement to let the data set the terms of the analysis, rather than surrender to the orthodox need to cast conceptual frameworks over data themselves. In a sense, the stance works as a heavy limitation to what can be said about data, but the upshot is that the analytical rendering of lived experience acquires vividness, and respects the true-to-life experience of work, no matter how subtle, or miserly, this may be. Applied conversation analysis, with its stress on reporting instances of talk and language, complements the quest for snapshots of actual practices, in particular when, differently from what “pure” conversation analysts envisage, one allows the context of occasions of talk to enter the analysis – provided it is demonstrably relevant to speakers. Providing such demonstrations is a challenging task, but one that, I hope to have demonstrated, is worth pursuing.

Many critics will still find the ethnomethodological stance based on a circular argument, and will ask what more it might offer for scholarly examination beyond the detailed studies of organisational and orderly practices. In the realm of sociological studies of public administration, what my inquiry demonstrates is that there is an extraordinarily prolific ground for policy research. The investigation of public administrators' actual practices lend itself to the discovery of the *rationalities*, of the practical thinking, and of the contingent circumstances through which public policy decisions are made. These are, each time, different. It will not be the umpteenth scholarly discussion around the grand themes of Rationality, Ideology, Power, Governance, etc. that will tell us what and why “policy-makers” decided in given historical and geographical circumstances, and with which worldly consequences. Rather, inquiries that concentrate on the exploration and explication (rather than explanation; cf. Sharrock and Button, 1991) of the grounds for the making of decisions – the how of the decisional process – have more chances of succeeding in tracking the trajectories of policies through time, at least by providing a document of actual historically-situated decision-in-the-making. To pursue this objective, researchers need to focus more on pursuing an understanding of how policy work is done from the perspective of those that do it, rather than to speculate about how it is supposed to be done, or according to which 'administrative principles'. This requires a switch of perspective: from one aimed at development of the theories around the 'policy making process', of 'public management', 'rationality', 'governance', etc. to one that takes time and effort to unpack the real world in which policy is made.

Where all this is leading is to a very simple conclusion. In contrast with what the grand theorists suggest in the mainstream literature on the “policy process” and “public administration” (cf. Chapter 1), a research agenda that prioritises empirical description over theoretical explanation is not impossible. On the contrary, it is urgently needed in order to gather a fine-grained sense of how public policy progresses towards certain directions and not others. A place to start, this thesis has proposed, is a programme of disinterested study that first pins down what kind of work actually goes on in government offices, and then moves on, potentially, to prescribe, criticise or, indeed, theorise. This means that basic organisational research based on qualitative field studies can form a stronger basis both for the design of better public administration procedures (therefore being of interest for managers) and for various kinds of sociologies, for instance an empirically-based political sociology, or a better-informed critical one. These are of important, and difficult, research challenges. They are difficult because access to the work of government agencies is often restricted, and because there is indeed an element of complexity in unpacking the knowledge work on which administrative tasks rest. The pace of change, as we have seen, seems also too fast for the requirements of scholarly work. Yet, these problems should not deter researchers from investigating in-depth government action and, as it seems to be happening, leave the task exclusively to investigative journalist and political commentators. Secondments to government offices are now routinely offered to academics in all stages of their career. Also, the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 make acquiring government records, within limits, much easier than in the past. There is also a renewed government commitment to more transparency in public affairs, which means, for example, that the hearings of many Committees are televised, and retrievable from digital archives. The image of the faceless bureaucrat working in the dark, the “*eminence grise*”, as Michael Hill has it (2013; cf. Chapter 1), is fading away, and certainly does not justify anymore the need to take theoretical shortcuts to characterise and understand administrative work. The invitation to other researchers interested in policy – sociologists, political scientists, ethnographers of various sorts – is to pursue similar empirical endeavours to that this study did. The hope is that this thesis demonstrates it is worthwhile undertaking.

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- *1. The Evaluation of Evidence in Core Defra, by the Defra Internal Audit and Assurance, July 2012.
- *2. The Evidence Handbook, version 2, June 2011.
- *3. Defra Publications for Research Clearance – Current Status and Key Issues, September 2012.

Appendix A

Transcription conventions

- [**text** / Square brackets indicate the start point of overlapping speech
- = / Equal signs at the end and at the beginning of turn of talking denote continuation of a single interrupted utterance
- (0.4)** / Time, in seconds, of a pause during speech
- (.)** / Micropause
- >**text**</ Utterance delivered faster than usual for the speaker
- CAPS** / Increased volume speech
- ° / Decreased volume speech
- text** / Underlined text denotes words emphasised by the speaker
- :::** / Indicates prolongation of an utterance
- ()** / Inaudible or unclear words
- ((*it*))** / Italic text within double parentheses notes non-verbal activity
- heh-huh** / laughter particles