

# The story of Stroud District Council and Transition Stroud working together

Presented at the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) Positive Future Conference, 5 May 2009

Presented jointly by Councillor Fi Macmillan and Simon Allen (Transition Stroud)

*Simon opens:*

Our story is one where you don't need big budgets. You don't need grand plans. You don't even need member buy-in to get started. What you do need is energy, commitment and ideas. Let's tell you how we did it. In our story there are three players. I'm Simon Allen of Transition Stroud's Local Government Group.

*Fi speaks:*

I'm Fi Macmillan, also of Transition Stroud's Local Government Group. And first I need to introduce you to our third player, Nigel Riglar, no 2 at Stroud District Council. He can't be here so we're telling his story.

We are here to show you why you want to work with Transition. And we're going to do this in three stages –

**First** we are going to tell you how we developed the relationship in Stroud

**Second** we are going to describe the joint work we have done

**Third** we'll give you some top tips about making this happen.

So let's start with Nigel. To our great surprise two weeks ago the latest Transition Stroud report, written for our Local Strategic Partnership (Inquiry 5 – Food <http://community.stroud.gov.uk/general.asp?pid=34&pgid=1532>), was featured in a Sunday Times article. This was ground-breaking work on local food supply and we were keen to get it round to Council members and officers to move things forward. Not sure how to do it so I whizz it across to Nigel any way. In a few moments an email back 'Fi, this is an excellent article. Would you like me to send it round to Members and Key Officers?' Fantastic. He's my Max Clifford! So how did we get to this point?

*Then Simon and Fi present alternate paragraphs:*

It all started in a crowded café one January evening in 2007, 60 people met to form Transition Stroud. It was buzzing. We put up our hands and volunteered – and we are all volunteers – volunteered ourselves into working groups. Five of us joined the Local Government Group with no idea how any connection with the council was possible. We scratched our heads.

At that point – serendipity. A local philanthropist paid for Richard Heinberg – a leading peak oil academic – to speak to both our community, and Stroud District Council Cabinet. Here was our golden opportunity.

Weaving peak oil into council policies would be overwhelming for officers and unattractive for members. How could we support them in this? At that time Portland City Council in Oregon produced a Peak Oil Response Plan. So we sent this to the officers as an example of what could be done and asked them to join us in a practical response to the doom and gloom of Heinberg's predictions.

So I went to the Cabinet Meeting to see their response to Heinberg.

What did I see? Imagine a spaceship landing, and aliens getting out. Oil supplies finite? Surely not! The look of surprise was palpable. Now I see one officer, concentrating very hard, sat forward in his seat. This is Nigel Riglar. In his mind, he is going back to his university days and his memories of Limits to Growth. It is making sense to him.

So what was happening for Nigel? Now in 2007 two things happened. One, the people of Stroud tell the District Council that Climate Change is a key spending priority.

Two, the Council launches a 20-year Environment Strategy, part of this was to raise the profile of Climate Change amongst the Local Strategic Partnership. Nigel wonders ‘How am I going to make this happen?’

And at Transition Stroud - We’ve had Heinberg. He’s spoken to Cabinet. How are we going to make this happen? Views within Transition Stroud polarised. Some said “We need to give the council a **hard** time about this!”. “We need to say – What are you doing about climate change and peak oil? Not enough!” Conversely in the Local Government group we saw the need for dialogue. We need to understand what might block the Council’s way forward. To find out what they needed. We invite Nigel to a meeting.

He is keen. We meet in the same café. He fires questions at me ‘What are your strategic objectives? What is your structure? What can you bring to the table?’ Inside I freeze. How can I begin to explain - we are a broad church, full of energy but a bit unfocused. I am not even sure what we can do. Here we were - two very different cultures. I fumbled something about ‘building low carbon communities’ and glossed over the bit about structure.

Quickly I move him on to producing a Peak Oil Response Plan. A long silence .... I like him but a match does not look likely. Then the surprise – he says ‘I’ve just set up an LSP Think Tank on Climate Change adaptation, would you like to join us, Fi? We could examine Peak Oil alongside Climate Change. It’ll be an inquiry format, taking evidence from specialists. I will be the Secretary. You could sit on the Think Tank with LSP members. And how about Transition Stroud contributing some specialist knowledge?’

But then I am thinking what can Transition bring in terms of specialist knowledge? Are we specialists? Well we have got three things. First, we know about global oil supply. Second, we know how this will affect daily life. Third, in local Transition Groups we know how these changes are going to affect our area.

We know about our water supply. We know about our local travel patterns. We know about our agricultural land.

So it’s December 2007 and the Think Tank meet for the first time with LSP members and two from Transition Stroud. Our inquiry? ‘How the planning framework would need to change to accommodate climate change and peak oil?’ What was this to do with daily life? Very dry ... but important for Nigel because he needed evidence for the Core Strategy. So there’s Nigel talking about physical assets - road networks and land use; and we are talking about people, community enterprise and social cohesion – weren’t those assets too? So the cultural differences start to emerge.

We continue to meet through 2008 working on housing and transport. After each inquiry, we write a paper for LSP members, and this includes Stroud District Council.

But Transition Stroud is not visible.....Transition Stroud is **not** visible.  
Lets have a look at that ....

During 2008 I am increasingly impressed by Nigel's work at Stroud District Council, and I jump at the chance to become a District Councillor in May. So wearing my District Councillor hat here, what is my perspective on Transition Stroud? Well, as a Councillor I've never heard of them. Surely I must have? I've been back to my Council papers. And over the past two years, there is not one reference to Transition Stroud. So there may be Transition Councils out there but we are not one of them.

How can this be? Our LSP work has been passed by Cabinet. It's being used to shape the Core Strategy. It informed the Sustainable Communities Strategy – adopted by council last month. And Transition Stroud is not visible.

Well, it might be that the Council weren't quite ready for Transition Stroud – remember the spaceship at the Heinberg talk? Transition Stroud were able to work behind the scenes with the LSP but we hadn't earned our place at the table yet. From Nigel's point of view he took a gamble with us.

- **Could** we engage with the Council?
- **Did** we speak the right kind of language?
- **Were** we too radical? Were we too home-knitted?

So that's how it looks from the Council Chamber.

How did it look back in our Local Government group? We have also taken a gamble and we're not sure it's working out. The Think Tank sessions are dry – are we producing documents to sit on shelves? Where is the action? We ask Nigel to meet around my kitchen table. Meeting informally is helpful. Nigel had anticipated our concerns and put forward a plan of consultation.

Better, but by Autumn 2008 we still weren't happy. We wanted **more** action, **more** inputs, **more** ideas in the Think Tank – actually we want engagement. We were looking to the LSP – but several of the LSP members had stopped coming and the energy had gone out of it.

Another golden opportunity for Transition Stroud. For the next Inquiry – Food - We would do the research and analysis, we would lead on the content. There are no specialists on Food supply in the Stroud District and we know as much as anyone. Now it was our turn to gamble – to step up to the plate. Remember the Sunday Times article I mentioned? This is how it started. The food report is born.

We weren't leading food experts but we **did** understand peak oil and climate change, and we **did** know our area. **We** had the determination to find out.

- We asked a Transition colleague to model the agricultural productivity of the district.
- We read all the current food reports on agriculture, food policy and energy.
- We put a huge amount of time and energy into this report – remember this is on top of the day job.

Payoff ? Nigel said it proved to be a turning point in our relationship with the LSP and the Council. Because we had approached it with such determination and professionalism, the LSP accepted this paper as the only evidence to the Think Tank.

This was then presented to the full board of the LSP and generated a lot of excitement and enthusiasm.

We had **become** the specialists.

So why is this Food report so powerful? Two ways:

Firstly, we have a voice and respect in the LSP, with the connections to engage more widely.

So how can we do this? Let's take three ideas.

One, we can work with the Primary Care Trust on obesity and social exclusion through grow your own food projects. Two, we can work with the National Farmers Union on oil vulnerability audits for local farmers. Three, we can work with the Federation of Small Businesses to do business energy audits.

Secondly - and why else was the Food Report powerful? Because we have launched four pieces of work around the crucial issue of food supply:

1. We now have local food businesses working together.
2. In June we have a conference in June bringing to develop a local food strategy
3. This means we can make a joint funding bid to the RDA to develop our local food distribution structure
4. We have got LSP members – such as the Primary Care Trust – working to support local food

So here we are, we stand at a threshold. There are now possibilities. It has taken two years and it is solid, we have good relationships, we have earned our credibility. Now is the time for action.

Time to get more mainstream bodies thinking about carbon reduction. Thinking about how will peak oil impact our lives? How can we build resilience?

Just two years ago this kind of engagement seemed impossible. Remember the head scratching in the newly formed Local Government Group? We're not a Transition Council and we don't have our Energy Descent Plan yet.

It may not be as much as we wanted but it is bringing carbon reduction front of mind. It is normalising what was whacky and radical.

Now - I'm imagining you're sitting there thinking:

- "Well - I'm not engaged with my LSP like that". Or
- 'Food's OK for you! But we're in the city'

Well let me tell you about some other Transition initiatives that have happened at the same time. One-off projects that have taken place alongside the more strategic work.

- **Bikes** – Changing Gear, a week-long campaign to get kids cycling to school. The Council put in a few hundred quid. Transition made it happen. Small money - big impact. 4 other community groups and businesses have now come onboard. Inspired, the Council then launch a Green Travel Month for all ages.

- **Second – Open Homes.** Like Open Gardens, but this is open ‘eco’ homes? Last year, 12 energy efficient homes and a village hall open over one weekend and are visited by over eleven hundred people. This year the Council are funding it. Open Eco Homes shows practical measures in use, and you can talk to the home owners. Transition got it started and the Council get to publicise their energy efficiency offers.

So we’ve taken you through our story, we’ve told you about our work – what are our top tips?

- Don’t worry if your transition group look ‘home-knitted’ – we’ve got energy, commitment and great ideas.
- Focus on what you want to achieve and not what sets you apart.
- Look out for the people in your Transition groups who are up for collaboration
- Start working on something – *anything*- to build that relationship – take some risks and learn to trust each other.
- Careful communication, review and reflection build that trust.
- It won’t be an easy fit first off. You have to work at the relationship – find the kitchen table scenario that works for you.
- It won’t happen overnight. Be patient.
- Remember internal concerns have to be managed.
- Don’t get hung up on the outcomes because outcomes might change, just work on shared agenda.

Many of you working on sustainability will undoubtedly have too little time, too little budget and far too much to do. The challenges for you are enormous. At the same time, there is great enthusiasm for the positive engagement of Transition – witness the viral spread of Transition initiatives. It is not doom and gloom.

Communities want to build a better low carbon future. You can help them. You can be the key in the lock and at the same time do your job.

And, after my two years experience, I can promise you you’ll enjoy doing it.

Thank you.