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Local Occupy Group

University of Warwick

Author(s) | Phil Mizen
Field researcher(s) | Phil Mizen
Data analysts | Phil Mizen
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1. Introduction

This report presents an ethnographic case study of a local Occupy movement in England.\(^1\) To introduce this study, the following section provides contextual information on the Occupy movement that gained international prominence from late 2011 onwards. In doing so, the intention is to outline the key initial questions that guided this research and which underline the value of Occupy as a case study. Prominent in these is Occupy’s widespread influence beyond the high profile demonstrations that gained significant publicity across the winter of 2011-12. The emergence of smaller, more localised movements proved to be numerically much more significant than the more high-profile demonstrations, but there is little record, knowledge or understanding of how or why they came into existence. There has also been little attention to the motives, understandings and experiences of the people that comprised these Occupy movements. Thus, a further key issue informing the research was the need to examine in some detail the experiences, aspirations and understandings of those who became involved in Occupy protests and what moved them to take such courses of action. These are especially important questions given Occupy’s association with young people. Never simply a youth movement, the young nevertheless came to be identified as prominent among Occupy’s key participants. Thus, in selecting Occupy as a case study, it was anticipated that questions governing the mobilisation and activism of young people, together with how young people relate to and influence patterns of adult political activism, could be explored.

This is then followed in the next section by a brief account of the research. Here, considerations influencing the selection of the case study are explained together with an account of what the fieldwork comprised. Like all research claiming an ethnographic sensibility, the research for this project involved a sustained period of fieldwork and looked to utilise a range of fieldwork methodologies. In doing so, the aspiration was to create a dialogic and iterative fieldwork process capable of producing data that is ‘rich and thick’ enough to satisfy the research’s key concern to explore the meanings and experiences held by Occupy activists and the detail of their political activism. In the next section, significant findings from the research are discussed. In particular, focus is given to the emergence of a local Occupy demonstration and the dilemmas and practices involved in the movement’s formation around the siting of Occupy encampments. A second, related, theme address the motivations of those involved. This report then finishes with some concluding comments and suggestions for future analysis.

1.1 Occupy: The Emergence of a Movement

Why, then, a case study of a local Occupy group? The context for this case study is the Occupy movement that emerged globally in late 2011. Its diversity, fluidity and breadth means that there is no simple genealogy for Occupy, but its precursor was the financial crisis of 2009 and the crisis of political and economic authority that followed. Prominent among

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\(^1\) The researcher would like to express his profound thanks to all those involved in Local Occupy who gave up their time to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences with him and who welcomed him into their camp.

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Occupy’s key points of reference were many of the popular movements that proliferated in this post-crisis world. Notable influences included the popular uprisings in Tunisia and the democratic overthrow of the discredited two-party system in Iceland following the near-collapse of the country’s financial system. Further inspiration came from the popular uprisings that spread outwards from Egypt early in 2011 and the large-scale public mobilisation of the Indignados in Spain. Nonetheless, even taking into consideration this historically significant upswell in popular political protest, Occupy’s appearance as a global movement in the early autumn of 2011 seemingly came out of nowhere.

It is this spontaneity and broad appeal that make Occupy an interesting case study. ‘No one expected it. … it just happened’, is how Castells (2012: 1) opens his exploration of this momentous period. ‘Spontaneous’ is Todd Gitlin’s (2013: 5) favoured description for Occupy Wall Street’s (hereafter OWS) appearance on 17th September 2011. Significantly, for a mass social movement, Occupy came into existence already in possession of a large base of support, one that extended well beyond the involvement of more seasoned anti-capitalist protesters, and a rejection of many of the more established forms of social movement organisation and protest (Gitlin 2012). Central to both was the creation of the Occupy camps that spread outwards from OWS during what Calhoun (2013: 27) describes as ‘an extraordinary 6 weeks in 2011’. In little more than a week after the creation of the Zuccotti Park encampment, at least 600 spontaneous occupations had broken out in cities and other locations traversing the entire landmass of the United States. Following the call for a worldwide day of action on Saturday 15 October 2011, Occupy went global, with spontaneous demonstrations recorded in more than 950 cities in 82 countries, including across the United Kingdom.

The breadth of Occupy’s influence and the diffusion of its appeal are thus further reasons for its value as a case study. In the UK, attention was mainly focused on Occupy London Stock Exchange\(^2\) (hereafter OLSX), and the creation of a large tented encampment outside St Paul’s Cathedral (see Figure 1), but a significant number of other demonstrations invoking the Occupy mantle also took place throughout the UK. The spontaneity and lack of coordination that made these demonstrations so distinctive also makes gauging their scale and scope problematic. Some 15 October Occupy protests were over in a matter of hours, others lasted no more than a matter of days. Other Occupy protests were confined to university campuses or buildings\(^3\), although Occupy was never a student (dominated) movement, and many small-scale or fleeting Occupations received next to no attention\(^4\). Nevertheless, one sympathetic attempt to map Occupy’s presence in the UK conservatively estimated the number of groups and demonstrations at 52, including four in London. As Figure 2 demonstrates, these stretched from Aberdeen in the north of Scotland down to

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\(^2\) And, to a lesser degree, its sister Occupation in Finsbury Park north London.

\(^3\) For instance, University of Warwick students formed a tented Occupy camp on a central part of the campus on 15 October 2011, where they maintained a presence for the next seven weeks.

\(^4\) For instance, Occupy camps were created near to Hinckley Point nuclear reactor in Somerset and the communications and intelligence base at Menwith Hill in north Yorkshire. Neither achieved much publicity.
Falmouth in the south of England and from Belfast in Northern Ireland to Norwich in the east of England, by way of Swansea and Cardiff in Wales.\(^5\)

\[\text{Figure 1. Occupy London Stock Exchange, St Paul’s Cathedral. (Source: Phil Mizen)}\]

\(^5\) http://www.occupyuk.info
It is this dispersal of Occupy’s influence and appeal that further influenced the selection of the case study. Occupy has attracted considerable attention and comment, but this has mainly focused (in the English language) on the high profile Occupation encampments that appeared in many major world cities, such as New York (Gitlin 2013, 2012; Calhoun 2013; Chomsky 2012), Los Angeles (Uitermark and Nicholls 2012), Boston (Juris et al 2012) Madrid and Barcelona (Abellán et al. 2012; Castells 2012) and Amsterdam (Uitermark and Nicholls 2012). This interest is understandable given that these protests were large and vociferous, and often sited adjacent to major centres of political, economic and media power; sometimes quite literally on their doorstep. Prominent intellectuals and cultural commentators were also frequent participants or high profile supporters, thus further raising their visibility and status. One consequence of this, however, is the lack of attention to those smaller, yet numerically more significant, local Occupy demonstrations that

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7 Many of the larger Occupy tented encampments had the resources – human and otherwise – to create universities or other similar educational spaces. The Tent City University at OLSX, for instance, ran a very interesting and invigorating course of lectures that attracted many prominent speakers.
appeared overnight outside of these major urban centres. Indeed, one of the principal problems they faced was attracting (media) attention; a problem that is perhaps also reflected in the dearth of published research on these more local movements.

Important questions about the nature of popular involvement and processes of grassroots mobilisation in these local Occupy demonstrations also remain unanswered. Precisely who these activists were and why and how they became involved also requires further attention. These are important considerations given that the extant writing points to Occupy’s primary constituents as those usually associated with social movements; the young and relatively well educated. The then BBC journalist Paul Mason, for instance, writing about the upsurge in political protest immediately prior to Occupy, began his explanation of *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere* by claiming that, ‘At the heart of it all is a new sociological type: the graduate with no future’. In a similar vein the onetime veteran of the student movements of the 1960s and OWS participant, Todd Gitlin, notes that, ‘By inspection, they are largely young …’ (2013: 15). Elsewhere he writes of ‘... the thousands of mostly young divergent activists in the inner Occupy movement’ (2012: 167). Manuel Castells (2012: 167) also cites empirical research on OWS showing that, ‘... as in similar movements in other countries, the Occupy participants appear to be relatively young, educated people whose professional expectations are limited in the current economy’. What these authors do not claim is that Occupy was a political movement of the young, or that it lacked in composition significant social, ethnic and gender diversity. Rather, what has been asserted is that young people formed a significant constituency among those attracted to Occupy’s passionate indignation.

Why and how these young (and older) people came to identify so closely with Occupy are similarly neglected questions; ones that take on added significance given the ostensibly unpredicted and spontaneous appearance of the movement. A large amount of comment on Occupy is concerned with unravelling its politics (or its absence), pinning down its programmatic content (or criticising the opacity of this) and assessing the pitfalls and promises of its horizontal organisation and direct democracy. One of the most nuanced and sophisticated of these (Gitlin 2013: 3), for instance, stresses the uneasy and sometimes tense relationship between OWS’ passionate and dedicated smaller ‘inner movement of core activists’ and the larger number of ‘respectable citizens’ (22) that turned out regularly on demonstrations. He further notes the brilliance of the Occupy encampments as a political strategy that gave tangible form to the popular right to assembly (so significant in the US) and the often painfully slow deliberative democracy that they championed as a pre-figurative form of political and social life. He is also not shy in pointing to the inwardness of the camps as ‘a community relating to itself’ (2012: 68), or how their participatory democracy and decision-making by general assembly slipped into the preserve of those with

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8 Examples of research that does examine ‘local’ Occupy groups, includes Pittsburgh (Smith and Glidden 2012), El Paso (Smith et al. 2012) and its influence across Israel (Alimi 2012).

[Accessed 19th December 2013]
a surfeit of free time (e.g. students). He similarly points to the contradictory and destabilising influence in the camps of the socially marginal and the street homeless, and their significance as a source of tension, both within Occupations (see also Smith et al. 2012; Uitermark and Nicholls 2012) and between Occupiers and their efforts to generate a wider constituency of support.

These are important and perceptive arguments, but the perspicacity of those like Gitlin does not extend into a detailed consideration of what Occupy meant for those involved. More specifically, while researchers and commentators have looked to clarify Occupy’s objectives – a simple question that has been notoriously difficult to answer – and the political and organisational lessons of the movement, a central concern of this case study was to examine the experiences of those individuals that made up the movement. In this respect, this case study was informed conceptually by an explicitly humanistic perspective, one that identifies in the agents of political and social movements profoundly different properties and powers from the structural and cultural forces with which they are interdependent (Archer 2000; Callinicos 1989). It therefore begins from Castells’ (2012) castigation of scholars of social movements for their categorical neglect of the human agents of which they are a product.

To know that Occupy as a global movement had its origins in the fallout from the crisis of 2009 does not answer questions of how its multitudinous and varied constituent parts came into being, or what moved those who formed its ranks to join the camps and then sustain the demonstrations. To answer these questions requires attention to the lives of those whose actions were responsible for Occupy’s existence in all its diversity, to those ‘persons in their material flesh and mind’ as Castells’ (2012: 13) puts it. ‘And so a key question to understand is when and how and why one person or a thousand persons decide, individually, to do something that they are repeatedly warned not to do because they will be punished’. It is on furthering such an understanding that this case study is primarily focused.

2. Researching Local Occupy

2.1 Negotiating Access

These questions provided the initial focus for a case study of a local Occupy group (hereafter Local Occupy10). The selection of the case study emerged following the 15 October (2011) Occupy global day of action and the creation of the impressive St Paul’s Cathedral encampment (Figures 1 and 3). During three field visits to OLSX shortly after its creation, the scale and breadth of Occupy’s impact outside of London became further apparent, particularly through awareness of the parallel Occupy demonstrations that had sprung up across the UK. Several of these local demonstrations presented themselves as a possible

10 It is recognised that the term Local Occupy is in some respects misleading because all Occupy demonstrations, including in London, were by their nature very local in substance and focus. However, the term is used here simply to differentiate the case study Occupy from the national and international movement of which it was a part and to highlight its existence as a smaller and more localised example of the more high profile demonstrations taking place in major world cities. The term Local Occupy is also used to refer to the case study in such a way as to safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.
focus for case study research, judged in terms of their geographical accessibility and what could be learnt about their scale, size and, if possible, their likely longevity from secondary sources. Prioritising these local Occupy demonstrations in terms of these criteria, a first visit was paid to Local Occupy on 4 November 2011 and a further visit took place one week later.

The purpose of these initial visits was two fold. First, the intention was to gain direct knowledge of Local Occupy, especially its scale, organisation and level of activity. Second, the visits were aimed at exploring possibilities for research. With this in mind, tentative inquiries were made about the possibility of writing a history of Local Occupy, whose purpose was the creation of a ‘record of the ordinary people who make up movements like these but who are often then written out of the historical narrative’ (Field Diary, 4 November 2011). Information was also provided about the MYPLACE project and contact details liberally distributed via the researcher’s business card. On both occasions these solicitations for help with the research were received with warmth and hospitality. What was also clear was that identifying someone with the authority or influence to grant access would be difficult. No one spoken to would claim ownership of or responsibility for Local Occupy and spokespeople, in any capacity, official or unofficial, proved difficult to locate.

To state that there were no leaders or individuals with authority, as both Vince and Andre explained at some length during these first two visits, is not to be confused with the absence of self-organisation. To exist as a social movement, especially one Occupying prominent public space, requires the capacity to negotiate and make decisions, as well as individuals ready, willing and capable of taking on some degree of responsibility for this. It may have been that the longer the demonstration remained the more the activists responded to the practical, organisational and political demands of sustaining the Occupation. In any case, on a third visit at the end of November, timed to coincide with a national day of public sector trades unions strikes, a conversation was struck up with a young man who, it was learned, had been involved in Local Occupy from its first day. Clive informed the researcher that the desire to research Local Occupy was common-knowledge and that as far as he knew no objections had been raised. After all, ‘we’re here to talk to anyone who will listen to us’ (Field Diary, 30 November 2011), he said. Clive further reported that his ‘fiancé’ had taken on some responsibility for the group’s Facebook Wall, blog and wage page, and that I should contact her via email. A few days later Laura replied suggesting that I visited the camp again the following weekend where I should ask for a young man called Joe who, she stated, would be willing to help out with the research. Joe indeed proved true to this word and turned out to be an extremely helpful and thoughtful research participant. Not only did the researcher have the pleasure of coming to know Joe during the many hours of talking together, but he willingly acted as gatekeeper by making suggestions, providing advice and validating the research.

11 All participants have been given pseudonyms. All references to places, names, events and organisations likely to identify the case study and its participants have also been removed.
2.2 Local Occupy: A Dialogue With a Purpose

The period that elapsed from the first contact with Local Occupy through to the final activist interview was just under two years. Across this time the research was conceived of as comprising a dialogue with a purpose, a term that borrows from Burawoy’s (2007: 5) commitment to dialogue as the ‘essence’ of a reflexive ethnography. This dialogue was pursued through attempts to create an iterative relationship with the case study Local Occupy that comprised of regular visits, repeat observations, attendance at a variety of actions and events, and continual and recurring discussion and interviewing. Rather than prioritising breadth of coverage, the intention was to develop this dialogue through reconciling the need to involve enough respondents to ensure the research’s viability, but at the same time to facilitate where possible the repeat interviewing necessary for depth and detail of insight. The latter proved more difficult than anticipated, however, not least because of the fluid organisational structure noted above, and the seemingly loose ties that bound many activists to Local Occupy. Nevertheless, a significant programme of fieldwork was completed that went some way towards meeting this objective. In all, 14 visits were made to the Local Occupy camp, ranging in duration from four to eight hours, and including its very last day in the late winter/early spring of 2012. The fieldwork further involved attendance at five protests either organised or actively supported by Local Occupy. These comprised protests against the ‘bedroom tax’, copyright laws, animal vivisection and two...
demonstrations opposing public expenditure cuts. The researcher also participated in a one-day workshop approximately one year after the Local Occupy camp had been dissolved. The aim of this workshop was to ‘re-energise and re-discover the momentum of the Occupy movement’ by means of ‘occupying the debate’ (Field Diary, 22 June 2013).

Throughout this fieldwork much time was spent in conversation. This ranged from informal, unrecorded conversations and interviews with ardent supporters and core activists of Local Occupy, through to those with a less engaged relationship and on to those who were there by chance or as a consequence of curiosity. These conversations were noted in the Field Diary and some were followed up with requests for recorded interviews. Requests were also made to a number of key participants identified during the course of the fieldwork to participate in recorded individual interviews and/or group discussions. From very early on, a decision was made to target these recorded discussions and interviews at those who were either living at the camp, slept regularly there or who visited almost daily while their participation lasted. This interview strategy continued long after the camp was dissolved as snowballing techniques and purposive sampling strategies were used to expand the breadth and depth of the interviewing process. Most of these post-camp interviews took place within a commutable travelling distance from the site of the Local Occupy camp, but on four occasions it necessitated travelling to towns and cities much further afield to track down participants and to conduct further follow-up interviews. These interviews were conducted on an open-ended and very loosely structured basis.

Figure 4. Local Occupy Social Tent/People’s Café. (Source: Phil Mizen)
Observational material gathered at the camps and protests, and from the informal conversations and non-recorded interviews, were recorded in a Field Diary, together with a record of all those encountered. This indicates significant conversations (i.e. conversations/discussions lasting for more than a few minutes and which addressed issues pertinent to the research) with 36 people. Among this figure were 19 individuals who participated in recorded interviews/discussions at least once. From this figure of 19, 9 respondents participated in two or more recorded sessions, four in three or more and Joe who participated in five. The shortest of these interviews/discussions lasted for just under 30 minutes and the longest, a group discussion, continued for just under three hours. In total there were 31 recorded interviews and group discussions. It is the socio-demographic characteristics of these 19 individuals who participated in the 31 recorded sessions that is presented in the table of participants in this report’s Appendix.

This fieldwork produced a sizeable data set. In sum, it comprises approximately 290,000 words of typed verbatim transcripts of the recorded sessions; and approximately 25,000 words of Field Diary entries. The researcher also took 110 photographs during the fieldwork and collected many more of relevance from Internet sources, such as Local Occupy websites and Facebook walls. Several hours of video that the group, its supporters or causal visitors had uploaded to YouTube or elsewhere on the Internet was also viewed, and observations and reflections on these are recorded in the Field Diary. Various ephemera linked to (Local) Occupy, such as posters, pamphlets, flyers and leaflets were collected routinely also.

### 2.3 A Young Movement?

Local Occupy was selected as a case study with the expectation that it would allow access to significant numbers of young people and this appeared to be confirmed by the initial visits. Here, young people were observed to be significant participants in Local Occupy; their involvement turned out to be more complex than these first impressions allowed, however. Many young people frequenting the camps (n.b. plural – see below), assumed important roles in Local Occupy’s organisation and development, and remained passionate supporters, but their participation took place within a social and demographic milieu that proved to be much more diverse than originally expected. Young people were also well represented around Local Occupy’s fringes, turning up as occasional visitors or well-wishers, offering moral support or stopping by to drop off provisions. Other young people, seemingly in their teens, often came to Local Occupy to enjoy its relatively unregulated space. Empty time would be spent riding their BMX bicycles and throwing tricks, catching up on news, smoking cigarettes, spending time with friends and partners, or talking with the activists and listening to their debates and discussions. Thus, young people continued to be a central focus of the case study both as key participants and as more marginal supporters. However, this was a case study in which young people participated in politics alongside adults of varying ages and this varied socio-demographic of Local Occupy is reflected in the composition of those involved in the recorded fieldwork sessions.
This diversity also included women activists and those of non-European descent. In relation to the former, it was clear from the outset that males outnumbered females in Local Occupy, but it was also evident that women of all ages were closely involved. Few females, however, participated for any length of time as camp residents and as the winter of 2011-12 deepened this number declined further, as did the volume of women attending the camps on a regular basis. Reasons for this progressive disengagement seemed to be a consequence of ‘activist burnout really kick[ing] my arse’, as Laura put it, but she also accounted for her own disengagement as a consequence of being the young mother of a small child. Heather, too, spoke of the difficulties that young (females) experienced in convincing their parents to let them sleep out at such an in situ protest, although this did not prevent her from sleeping at the camp each night over the course of several months. It is for these reasons that attempts to record interviews/discussions with (young) women proved especially difficult. The Field Diary records significant conversations with only 11 women, from which only four participated in recorded interviews/discussions. Importantly, however, each of these women did have a significant involvement in Local Occupy, including two founding members, one who had assumed responsibility for the group’s social media campaign, one who slept at the camp for its entire duration, one who had slept there for a number of months and two who were still present on the day of the camp’s dissolution.

People from black and minority ethnic groups also appeared to play a significant role in the genesis and development of Local Occupy. Black people feature prominently in the YouTube videos of Local Occupy’s first days, as participants and representatives, and field notes from this study record the frequent presence of black people, often in significant roles. Almost all of these were of African-Caribbean descent, which was explained by one black respondent as a consequence of ‘the rich history of migration to the area’ (Steve). Interestingly, however, this ‘rich history’ included the migration to the area by many south Asians but few seemed to be active supporters of Local Occupy. In fact, only a small number of observations of south Asian people involved in Local Occupy are recorded in the field notes, although the encampment area was often used by the occasional young south Asian couple to take up residence on one of the park benches hidden from view by the tents, where they would pass the time in the close company of one another. Thus, the researcher’s field notes record conversations with six black people at Local Occupy, all of whom were of African-Caribbean descent, and of whom five agreed to recorded interviews/discussions. The white, male ‘graduate with no future’ (see footnote 7 above) thus proved to have only a marginal presence within what came to be Local Occupy’s key participants.

2.4 Ethics

The research was explained to all and verbal consent to their participation was secured as far as practically possible. Given the fluid and open nature of Local Occupy, together with its rather informal practices, the negotiation of written consent seemed contrary to the ethos and practice of the case study. Most respondents responded to the researcher’s explanations of the project with a dismissive wave of their hand, raised eyebrows, a tut, or by giving my comments short shrift. Nevertheless, efforts were made to explain the research to participants as far as possible and each was left with a business card in case they
required further information. It was also explained that all recorded material would be transcribed and then made anonymous before being made available for further analysis. All respondents were allocated a pseudonym and all names and references to potentially identifiable places and things have also been removed from the transcripts.

3. Key Findings

In the following section some significant findings from the research are presented. This in the main draws on material from the transcripts of the recorded individual interviews and group discussions and, less frequently, from observations recorded in the Field Diary. It is also directed towards two of the research’s principal concerns raised in the literature: first, those processes through which the Local Occupy encampments came into being and the trajectory of development over time; and, second, the motivations of those who joined Local Occupy.

3.1 Creating An Occupation

3.1.1 The Making of an Occupy Camp

It has been remarked upon how Occupy’s basic act of creating camps was the making of the movement. As a ‘medium of action and at the same time a desired state of being’ (Calhoun 2013: 29), intrinsic to the act of Occupy, it was claimed, was ordinary citizens’ spontaneous claims to public space and the threat this posed to power. As re-appropriated spaces the camps came to be regarded as a vigorous assertion of the popular right to participate in public life, visible points of spatial and symbolic cohesion, and a living testimony to the people’s capacity for self-regulation and spontaneous order. In a further sense the Occupy camps also came to be regarded as revolutionary acts, particularly in the US where they were interpreted as attempts to give substance to the right to assembly; the realisation of a democratic aspiration in which government by and for the people necessitated face-to-face assembly (Gitlin 2013; Chomsky 2012). And, yet, curiously little is known about how or why these camps came into being or those forces that influenced their development.

For Local Occupy, the creation of the camp held a number of meanings, ranging from a practical means of protest through to the expression of deeper ideals. For Alex, as for most of those the researcher spoke to, the camp was indeed felt to be an expression of both the form and content of Occupy’s protest, a precipitate source of its activism and energy but also simultaneously a manifestation of its ideals and a basis for their valorisation. ‘I think, I think without Occupy nobody would have, nobody would have made any connections and the, and the, and the, and the movement wouldn’t have catalysed’ (Alex). Others pointed to what they regarded as the novelty and innovation of Occupy’s approach and to the role of the camps as a political device or tactic capable of grabbing the public’s attention. Describing Occupy camps as a ‘gimmick really, but err, it was ... definitely a good gimmick’,
Jake spoke of how ‘... the tactic of Occupying itself, is like, it’s a bit, it’s a bit out there, you know’. He continued that this novelty, Occupy’s left-field framing of political action, marked an important innovation over ‘A to B marches’, a critique of demonstration marches that the researcher came to hear often: ‘... you’re sitting there and you’re going “we’re not moving until we see change”, is pretty like, wow! And like people look and they’re like, “oh look, there’s tents there” and you know it’s a talking point’ (Jake). For Laura, too:

... it’s for everyone and that sustained you will see us every day, we are staying, we will not move, we are part of your everyday life now and having just a visual representation of people being upset with the situation and the way it is, I just, I really liked that. I liked that it was visual, it was a place you could be. Online you had a lot of, you couldn’t go out in the real world and just show, you know, 'hey, we think this and you know the world’s going to shit. [She laughs]

![Figure 5. Slogans from Local Occupy. (Source: Phil Mizen)](image)

### 3.1.2 From Uncertain Beginnings

Yet, in the case of Local Occupy, the emergence of the camp was much more tentative and uncertain than this narrative allows. As the global day of action unfolded, people gathered at a pre-designated location having been alerted to the call to Occupy via Facebook, word of mouth or, like Alex and Robbie, simply coming across the demonstration when walking
through the area. Most of those who arrived at the outset where hitherto strangers to one another or were connected only loosely through friendship, acquaintance or their shared participation in other demonstrations. Few had arrived that first day in possession of the certainty that something of enduring significance might be unfolding. As Laura recalled, ‘As far as we were concerned at that point it was just a day of everyone getting together and, you know, expressing their points of view … [later] we left and kind of expected that to be the end of it …’. Clive agreed, ‘… we left it sure that, you know, maybe, maybe they’ll do it [i.e. camp] for a night …’ and in the belief that once having made their point then the protestors would return to their homes. Others, in contrast, turned up in the hope that something more lasting might be taking shape. As Joe recalls, ‘So, I turned up, on that first day, and when I left the house after watching the news, sort of having this idea what was going to happen, I says, I said to my mum and dad, I took a [sleeping] bag and I said I gonna, I’m gonna be camping out all night’.

Estimates also differed on the scale of the initial protest. At its height ‘it was a big protest, there may be three, four hundred people, may be more’, Joe said, although in all the growing excitement he conceded that he sometimes found it difficult to differentiate Occupiers from members of the public who had stopped to find out what was going on. Malcolm, in contrast, estimated that ‘… between 50 and 80 people turned up …’, while for Clive, ‘I’d say about 40 people with signs. And they brought kids and they were, they were chalking messages all over the floor’. None, however, disagreed with Laura’s description of what unfolded on that first day: ‘It was a very happy, nice atmosphere. I kind of expected a bit like, [she makes a growling noise], rage, like but it was … bubbly. Yeah’. As the day wore on more people arrived and attention from the passing public grew. A game of ‘war and peace’ Ping-Pong was started on the pavement, the air buzzed with conversation and laughter, politics was discussed and the participants grew palpably more excited. ‘Armed only with chalk, paint and peace’ (Field Diary, 4 November 2011) scavenged cardboard boxes were flattened and then decorated with slogans proclaiming ‘I want to be free!! From debt’ and ‘we are the 99%. Occupy Britain’, and asking ‘where’s our bailout?’ Others chalked their slogans on the concrete walls and paving slabs, proclaiming ‘time for a change’ and ‘peace’, or declaring that ‘we are here because humanity demands change’. More and more people stopped to ask what was going on. The police, also growing in number, kept a respectful distance. Photographs were taken as mementos, others were uploaded for immediate circulation on social media. A video maker came by to record the protest and to film to camera the testimonies of some of those involved.

As the day progressed the question of Occupation assumed greater significance. Far from being a deliberate and premeditated action, to begin with at least, ideas of Occupation seemed more like a loose, possibly vague, aspiration. The idea was openly discussed, recalls Alex, but both concrete proposals and individuals willing to take them forward seemed conspicuously absent. Laura too recalls the prospect of Occupation as more of a low-key element to the day’s proceedings than its principal strategic aim: ‘there were a few discussions about, “oh, a couple of us had brought down tents but we’re not sure if we’re going to camp, it depends on how many other people are doing it”’. But as far as we were concerned’, she continued, ‘at that point it was just a day of everyone getting together and,
you know, expressing their points about certain things …’ (Laura). With sleeping bag in hand, Joe cut a more determined figure. He recalls the question, ‘“is anybody gonna camping out tonight? Is anybody staying here?” going round … [I]t was sort of like there was an anticipation that there could be a camp’ (Joe).

This tentative beginning of Local Occupy as a demonstration is further underlined by the fact that it was only towards the end of the day that this question received a definitive answer. As evening fell, Felicity, the originator of one of the Local Occupy Facebook walls that sprung up either side of the day of action, declared that she was going to pitch the tent that she had brought along. By the time she had made her decision, however, the only other person who was known to have arrived with a tent had already decided to leave. With darkness falling and with most of the other protestors already departed, Felicity, Joe and three or four others took it upon themselves to erect the tent and proclaim a formal Occupation.

If spontaneity of association is regarded as one of Occupy’s defining characteristics then its flipside is the difficulty of holding such unregulated associations together. As with Laura and Clive above, most people left at the end of the first day feeling that this was the end of the matter. Interestingly, however, the momentum behind Occupy’s spontaneity remained significant enough for many to return during the course of the next few days. Word that an Occupation had started spread through social media, the internet and via more
conventional means, so that numbers at the camp remained respectable over the next few days, swelling significantly during the early evenings and at weekends. ‘... [B]asically for the first four weeks’, Joe recounted, ‘all and sundry came, homeless people came, conspiracy theorist nuts came, Marxist, lefties came, people that just were interested came, people, it, it was such a, like a mixing pot of people that there was no discrimination’. They brought with them an unmistakable excitement and sense of possibility, Joe continued, ‘... there was a real sense that they could, there was, change was possible’. Such was the infectiousness of Occupy that a second and a third tent appeared in subsequent days after Joe and Robbie self-consciously decided to commit themselves to the Occupation.

Then me and Joe sat together in a tent and I said, ‘sod this, Joe, we’re going to sign off’. I was signing on [for unemployment benefits], Joe never signed on, I never signed on [after joining the Occupation]. Joe went and bought a tent out of his last Giro, two Polish geezers came along and donated a tent to me and I went, right, that’s it, if we’re getting it from the universe, that means we’ve got to stay ... if we’re getting it all, all that we want, everyone time we say something, that means we’ve got to see it through ... if we get it then it means we need to be here.

From this nucleus of core activists backed up by an ever-present if somewhat unpredictable body of wider support, within a few more days a tight cluster of around a dozen small igloo style tents had been assembled. Alongside these appeared the supporting paraphernalia of deck chairs, picnic tables, camping stoves and windbreaks. A sofa was also brought from somewhere to be placed invitingly outside one large tent equipped as a kitchen-come-communal space; in the spirit of Occupy this was later named ‘The People’s Café’. The public response was a further factor that strengthened the encampment as cooking equipment was donated, and gifts of food and money arrived in significant quantities. Other signs of more permanent habitation also took shape around the tents: clothes and sleeping bags were aired in the open, rubbish and litter were carefully collected, plates and cups were stacked for washing and someone produced an African drum. Banners were made proclaiming the Occupation and placards and posters welcoming visitors festooned the camp. The beginnings of a cooperative social organisation also were evident. Duties like shopping and collecting provisions were distributed, working groups formed, a night watch was constituted to allow the Occupiers to sleep in safety and thoughts turned to a PR strategy in response to approaches from local and national media. At the centre of this, a General Assembly was constituted as the focus of Local Occupy’s commitment to direct democracy.

3.1.3 Space and Place Contested

If Local Occupy’s origins involved tentative first steps, the choice of location on which to pitch the camp was more calculating and emphatic. Taking up one small corner of a large area of publicly owned land in the heart of an urban area, the camp constituted a striking
point of contrast to its surroundings, on which the visible influence of political and economic power was writ large. As Joe explained:

So the camp was at, within very close proximity of many big banks, financial institutions, they were just in front of us, in front of [civic building], and we knew that was going to attract attention and if you’re not being listened to and you feel disempowered … sometimes you’ve got to take it right to the heart of where the decisions are made and make a, make a protest there … This way we attracted the attention from the press, national, local press and we could get the message out.

Taking over such space was as much about the message of Occupy’s politics as it was a form of its commitment to the development of an open and inclusive social movement. To camp on land of such symbolic, commercial and political significance was to necessarily invite a response and, as anticipated, the lure of the location for Joe and the other Occupiers correlated inversely to its appeal for the authorities. Its centrality, prominence, the high footfall of people passing through each day, the area’s civic and commercial significance; all of these factors gave substance to Local Occupy’s desire for impact and visibility while underscoring its intention to confront directly power and authority.

This confrontation developed in subtle ways, however. One of the distinctive aspects of Occupy in the UK was the ostensibly low-key response of the police and the authorities. They may not have welcomed Occupations, but many were treated with a degree of measured cordiality that extended to the persistence of publicly benign forms of policing and control for some time. As far as Local Occupy was concerned, both the council and the police received the Occupation amiably enough to begin with; on one of the camp’s first mornings the Mayor even brought out coffee to greet the protestors. Relations with the authorities and the police indeed remained benign throughout, but it rapidly became clear that the continuing Occupation of this location would not be tolerated. The situation was made more urgent for the authorities by the impending arrival of a large retail event in the same area in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Talk among the Occupiers thus quickly turned to the threat of removal, something that seemed a reality when the council appeared to begin the eviction process. Negotiations involving the council, the agents responsible for managing the space and the police continued in a cordial and constructive fashion, but within 10 days or so after the camp’s creation, the authorities were now explicit that a prolonged Occupation was no longer tenable.

The prospect of eviction in turn exposed tensions within the Occupation. As Joe points out above, Local Occupy was composed of many different people holding a diversity of views and some of these differences were exposed by the authority’s insistence that the Occupation had to move from the site. To smooth this, the council and police had responded to the protestors’ insistence that they had a right to use public land for democratic protest, by suggesting that other locations could be made available for them to use. The suggestion that they might like to move to another location that was more acceptable to the authorities, however, was not well received by all. Jake recalled how ‘the
debate was fairly heated’, while Laura recalled how, ‘There was a massive deal about us moving places’. Simply put, some felt the growing possibility of eviction to be the first real test of Local Occupy’s capacity and determination to confront head-on their belief that money and commerce held a corrupting influence over public life, and to give real substance to their espousal of popular democracy. Others were not so sanguine. Staying put and forcing a direct confrontation so early and over an issue few believed had a chance of winning would, it was felt, lead to a Local Occupy’s premature and inglorious end.

I mean, you know, we were given an eviction notice to move sites but then there were certain people saying, ‘Oh, we’ve got to stay here and wait until they drag us away and ‘cause this is where we’ve chosen to stay.’ And we had General Assembly after General Assembly saying, ‘yes but if we stay here they’re not going to stop the [retail event], they’re just going to move us or even if we do stay here it’s going to be loud and full of drunk people so we don’t need to stay here’, so there was a bit of a kerfuffle about that, really. (Laura)

So, if you stayed and fought that would have been the end of the camp. We had to move. So we lost a few people … There were people that were very committed to ‘we will stay here and we will make them drag us off because we will not bow down to the police’ … Yeah, we had to do the best for the camp. (Clive)

It is in some respects a remarkable testament to the durability of such a spontaneous and loosely organised political demonstration that it survived the pressures of relocation. Doing their best for the camp meant that, in the end, the majority of Occupiers, who favoured voluntary relocation to another site, prevailed. Eighteen days after the first tent appeared, Local Occupy moved to one of three alternative outdoor sites that had been presented to them. To further aid the move the authorities had also agreed to Local Occupy’s request that they could erect a sign close to the first location to serve as a reminder of their previous presence and give directions to the new encampment. They were also offered space for an Occupy stand in the Christmas retail event: ‘They did offer us a stall but no one seemed to take that up after conversation after conversation …’ (Laura).

### 3.1.4 Remaking an Occupation

At one level it was clear that the location of the second camp was much more conducive for prolonged Occupation, but at another level it also posed significant strategic problems. For a start, the camp’s reconstitution in a small garden area around a quarter of a mile from the first site meant that a physical Occupation of public space could be consolidated and more systematically organised. There was also more flexibility for the 12 to 15 tents that now made up the camp and these were arranged at the new location into a neat horseshoe formation with a sizeable gazebo at their centre (Field Diary, 30 November 2011). As a garden, the site itself was also much more pleasant than the unyielding concrete and stone of the first location, although it proved to be equally as windy when, ‘… most of the tents just blew away and got destroyed because the wind was so strong’ (Heather). The site also
offered a degree of seclusion from unwelcome attention and was more convenient as far as access to toilets and other essential amenities was concerned.

The downsides, however, were also considerable at both a practical and political level. The camp had now, for all intents and purposes, been removed from public view or at least from the direct line of sight or travel that had attracted so many casual visitors during the first few days. As Malcolm noted, ‘I just felt as though the move from [the first site of Local Occupy] actually took away the, the, the high profile of the camp, really’. Opportunities for spontaneous contact with the public – part of the raison d’être of Occupy for many of its activists and one they felt amounted to its biggest single achievement – were thus significantly curtailed. Even with banners secured to the garden’s boundary fences, to find the camp, let alone make contact with it, now required actively seeking it out. Furthermore, given that most of those individuals who habitually traversed the area of the gardens were either business people moving between meetings, revellers in search of a good night out or casual visitors, the cost of having a better organised second camp was its more solitary and isolated profile.

... when we moved to the second site it was only the Sunday walkers, you know, dog walkers that live around town, just normal people walking by or going to work that would see it, but not a lot of youth got to see it unless the youth would again just go to the park just for a cigarette or something, I don’t know. But accessibility is a big thing, big part of the protest … (Heather)

Even taking into consideration such reservations, the Local Occupy proved remarkably successful if measured by its longevity. Following the move in early November Local Occupy maintained the second camp throughout the winter of 2011-12 until the combination of fatigue, small numbers and another looming threat of eviction led to the striking of the camp some five months or so after the first tent had been erected.

3.1.5 Doing it for Themselves

If the move to the second site saw significant changes to the camp’s physical form and organisation, it also produced discernible shifts in composition and political tenor. Unhappy with the decision to relocate, a number of those vigorously engaged at the outset, as Clive notes above, slipped away quietly, disheartened with what they regarded as ‘capitulation’ to the police and the authorities. Others expressed their dissent more vocally, like Mannie, whose story was recounted several times. A young man who had joined the protest from day one, Mannie had cut a conspicuous presence at the first camp, not least as the groom at an ‘Occupy Wedding’ conducted with some ceremony in the autumn sunshine two weeks into the Occupation (Field Diary, 2 February 2012). Mannie was recalled as resisting vociferously all arguments favouring relocation and when the day came to move he duly refused to leave, preferring to stay on in his sleeping bag for a few more days before moving on to join another Local Occupy group. Opinion was divided as to whether this was a measure of his commitment to the principles of Occupy, his conspicuous drink problems or
his bouts of anti-social behaviour. Either way, Mannie’s stance was explained as one indication of the strength of feeling that arose around the issue of relocation and a measure of the costs they bore by departing voluntarily from the first site.

Even among those who supported the decision to move or who followed the camp when it was relocated, the change affected Local Occupy’s political drive and focus. At a basic level, the move required considerable attention and energy, shifting tents and possessions and establishing the basics that any prolonged Occupation would require: warmth to combat the cold weather\(^{12}\), fuel for the wood burner, itemising then procuring essentials, creating cooking and cleaning rotas, the maintenance of sanitary conditions, protecting perishable provisions from the rats and insects, security, power to keep a laptop charged, resources for a wireless internet connection. Other challenges proved less easy to anticipate, like the realisation that the relative seclusion of the camp’s location made it attractive for sex workers and substance mis-users: ‘... as far as I could see, there was a sort of rough element around the camp, with prostitution and drugs and people. It was already prior to that an area of, you know, where prostitutes would go and do their business’ (Malcolm).

\(^{12}\) The winter of 2012-13 was a particularly cold one. Snow was frequent as were sustained periods of sub-zero temperatures during the day, as well as at night.
Concerns about safety were addressed by the formation of a camp security working group and the organisation of a night watch, underpinned by those like Robbie whose own experience of homelessness was seen as the source of his formidable prowess at defusing potential trouble. The camp, however, still attracted trouble, although most of this was relatively low key. Instances of name-calling and verbal provocation were quite frequent, as were empty threats of violence. The occasional drunk would come into camp to shout abuse or relieve himself, the odd missile was thrown and a budding marksman, as the researcher discovered, would sometimes take aim and fire ball bearings from one of the surrounding buildings (Field Diary, 2 January 2012). In a more serious example, however, one young Occupier was assaulted by five men laying in wait and wielding a baseball bat, after leaving his tent one night to relieve himself in nearby bushes.

These practical demands of staging a more permanent Occupation also contributed to a discernible shift in Local Occupy’s political tenor. This was more a gradual redefinition than an abrupt or conspicuous change, and it was detected in subtle and sometimes barely perceptible changes in practice and ethos, rather than a radical dislocation. Nevertheless, the move to the second site was accompanied by a reframing of Local Occupy’s initial energy, openness and tolerance and some identified the move to the second camp with the growing influence of a small number of people who were now identifying the camp as a basis for meeting their primary living needs. Clive, for instance, explained to me that he had supported the relocation and continued to be heavily involved in the second camp well into the New Year of 2012. It was during the latter stages of this involvement, however, that he detected subtle shifts in Local Occupy’s character and mode of operation, a change that he identified with the growing influence of a ‘few core members’ in gradually reshaping the initial commitment to open and inclusive forms of protest. For Clive, the growing influence of this group over proceedings and their determination to make it a more durable place to live was progressively usurping Local Occupy’s origins as a protest movement. ‘… [T]hey were always there in the GAs [General Assemblies]. And then we’d go away for a day or two and come back and it, nothing would have been done.’ (Clive). Discussions were had and decisions then taken but to his mind little of political substance was achieved outside of the need to respond to the pressing requirements of surviving in the gardens.

[I]t seemed people were all about planning and they were really good at planning and they would put a lot into it but, but in the execution it just, just wouldn’t happen, it would get fobbed off to like more important problems would take over like, you know, all the washing up needs doing. (Clive)

Others also commented on the appearance of a more exclusive quality to Occupy at the second site that seemed contrary to Local Occupy’s avowedly inclusive political stance. For Jake, a young man who had joined Local Occupy within a day or two of its creation, the simplicity and sincerity that he valued during Local Occupy’s first weeks were progressively diluted by the emergence of a palpable exclusivity. ‘It become, it became more closed in and more kind of, it wasn’t as accepting’, is how he put it. ‘Like it came to that point where it was like, like a member’s club, you know what I mean ... I think people stopped doing it for
the world and started doing it for themselves ... Well, for some of them, a place to live’ (Jake). Local Occupy had become a ‘community looking after itself, but not like, not being able to apply that to the rest of the world’ (Jake). For Heather, another early Occupy activist and long-standing resident, ‘In [site of first Local Occupy camp] it was like, it was simple because you were just out there in the open, and it looked like you were for the reason, you were there to protest, you were there to get people in ...’ She, too, had supported the decision to move to the new location, but living there on a daily basis she began to detect a hitherto non-existent narrowness of spirit and organisation that she felt had tainted Local Occupy’s initial, defining spirit.

When it moved to the other place, it became, forgive my use of words, but it became more cultish ... It was like you were involved or you weren’t involved and if you were the outside person, it became more that you would prove your way in, you would have to. You’d be invited in if you seemed like an important person but just random people walking round the streets, like youths, I think they had a less of a great reception from certain people ... that sort of, sort of turn to egotism .... but in [site of first Local Occupy camp] I don’t think that would have been possible ... (Heather)

3.2 Occupy: Who?
To understand some of the complexities and nuances that both created and shaped the development of Local Occupy is, however, to presuppose what is in need of explanation. Namely, what is it that brought these people, often hitherto strangers, together to stake a claim on public space in such a spontaneous, dramatic and explicit defiance of authority? In answering this question we would do well to follow Manuel Castells’ (2012) suggestion to attend to the human emotions that necessarily underpin the formation of social movements. To regard protests like Occupy as social movements has clear value, he argues, but there is also a danger that by conceiving their existence in categorical terms – as movements rooted in categories of class, gender or ethnic relations, or the collective affirmation of identities of ‘race’, nationality or sexuality – we lose sight of what brings together those individuals that actually constitute these movements. Here there is much to be learned by drawing on the insights of social realism. It is by giving attention to the emotional qualities of human beings that we can discern, in the words of Archer and Tritter (2000: 6), the ‘shoving power’ necessary to animate human behaviour. It is this emotional dimension to human being that furthermore refutes understandings of human agency as the means-end rational calculus of \textit{homo economicus} that has colonised large parts of academic thinking or which explains why individuals act outside of the normatively constituted behaviour of \textit{homo sociologicus} (Archer 2000). Elsewhere emotions are identified by Sayer (2011: 140, 113) as furnishing the ‘force of ought’ necessary to transform abstract notions of the human capacity to act in meaningful ways into understandings of why one would want to do so. ‘Our relationship to the world is one of concern’ is how Sayer puts it, where our necessary involvement in the (natural and social) world may give rise to understandings and assessments of our own well-being and of those we care for that so move us to seek escape or protection from, or control over, what is it that we encounter.
3.2.1 The Fear Factor

To explain why the people that constitute Local Occupy came together thus requires drilling down and examining their concerns and what moved them to participate. Castells’ (2012) own suggestion is that to do so we should begin with fear, since it is fear that holds great significance as a source of inertia and a powerful threshold over which people must cross if they are to mobilise against the unjust exercise of power.

For Local Occupy, fear indeed was a tangible presence in the deliberations of individuals as to whether or not to become involved. For some, these fears were expressed as concerns that their participation would mark them out for surveillance and scrutiny from the police...
and the security services. By protesting in conspicuous ways and allying themselves to radical causes, the fear was that they would literally place themselves in the sights of the authorities, with all its risks of close-up (and illegitimate) scrutiny. As anarchists engaged in previous demonstrations, for instance, Clive and Laura had witnessed, ‘... snipers [i.e. police sharpshooters] trained on us as we walked past ... the police came over with their cameras, filming our group, so we put a flag in front of their cameras and they ran around us about to kettle us’ (Laura).

Fear of surveillance was not necessarily dependent upon such first-hand experiences. A more abstract conviction that involvement in radical causes would lead to surveillance was also strongly felt; a belief undoubtedly strengthened by the widespread coverage of (illegal) police infiltration into protest groups and the use of *agent provocateurs* that was much discussed in the media during the course of the research. During the second recorded interview with Joe, for instance, he immediately began by raising concerns about the possible implications of his activism and how, without being ‘frivolous in the way I go about trying to present the way I feel about the world ... It’s getting worse ... [I can] imagine someone might try and hurt me’. Heather was more explicit, declaring that, ‘[T]hey’ve always got hidden agendas’. She continued, ‘... if you become a profound member of a, a protest then you’re going to be looked at more, scrutinised, and any wrong thing that they’ll find about you they’ll try and infiltrate you and they’ll try and break you down from the inside, divide and conquer’. This process of ‘breaking you down’, she continued, could include the possibility of physical violence. ‘If you’re going to start a protest then you’ve got to bear in mind that you might get hit by a police officer, you might get hit by a normal person ... And that’s one thing that might put people off as well ...’ (Heather).

How, then, were fears like these transcended? What moved these individuals with sufficient weight and intensity to overcome any fears of taking part in Local Occupy? Here, too, fear appeared once again, but this time as a motivating influence rather than as source of inertia. In this respect Castells is wrong to see fear as only a negative force hindering the development of social movements, since anxiety can also provide a powerful impetus for action. For Laura, the fear of attracting close monitoring and surveillance had been negated by a greater dread; passivity and compliance in the face of overweening power. ‘Fear’, too, was the closest description that Malcolm could find when searching for the words to explain what made him turn up on the 15 October day of action. ‘Pissed off’ with the ‘monetary system’, political corruption, the venality of bankers and the corporate degradation of life, it was above all the fear of war that had stirred him to action.

... and the fear, it’s not, it’s not even a fear anymore, is it, it’s just a, err, it’s hard to find the, find the right words, I suppose, but, but it’s not a fear, it’s, it’s the realisation that, you know, this, this possibility of a third world war is, is there ... it’s right on, on, on, the, you know, verge of happening really or it could happen, and, and, and, err, it’s not a fear, the, err, [pause while he searches for words] it’s just the, knowing that there is nothing, nothing I can do to prevent, nothing at all, but with Occupy there was the feeling there that if we could get more people to wake up ... then something might change. (Malcolm)
3.2.2 Overcoming The Fear Factor

Any fears of becoming active were further qualified by what was felt to be Occupy’s compelling force. Here, their involvement in Local Occupy was explained in terms of necessity, the consequence of being gripped by an inevitable and powerful compulsion to participate in what was unfolding before their eyes. It was a compelling concern about humanity’s future that had produced in Robbie an absorbing need to participate in Local Occupy which he continued until the camp’s very last day: ‘I was just compelled, really, I just knew this was the right thing to do’. Heather’s initial anxieties, too, were gradually submerged under ‘this urge to be there’, this feeling of ‘… not being able to do anything else. Like, I, I, I don’t think I could have done anything else than be at Occupy’. For her, the alternative of ‘cowering back’, of ‘shielding’ herself behind a ‘mask’, was not a viable alternative because almost instinctively, ‘I knew it was the right place for me to be, like, I, I couldn’t have thought of doing anything else, I couldn’t have shut my mouth …’. As she continued, ‘I, I forget, like to, to be fearful, like I literally have a drive and I’ll just do it’ (Heather). So, too, with Malcolm, who also described his experience of Occupy as the consequence of an inexorable force: ‘Oh no, it was just I knew that, you know … I knew I just had to do something really … I couldn’t stop myself from doing it really, because, because we had to be a world movement’. This feeling that the Occupy movement potentially possessed a power great enough to lift the deadening effects of fear was indeed something expressed by Steve when he equated his own ethos and spirit with that of Malala Yousafza:

I like the fuck you Taliban approach, yeah, that’s what I prefer, yeah, fuck you, yeah? [He laughs] Fuck you Al Qaeda, fuck you CIA, fuck you MI5, yeah, you know? You might be able to kill the body but you cannot destroy the soul, that’s where I’m coming from. And that’s, and I think to a certain extent that the whole Occupy movement is lifting the fear, yeah? It was the removal of fear, Adbusters\(^{13}\), removed, helped remove the fear factor… (Steve)

Fear thus plays a more complex role in the formation of social movements that Castells allows and this is further complicated by experiences of anger and indignation. Occupy’s lifting of the ‘fear factor’, as Steven puts it, was also closely allied to individual Occupiers’ strongly held feelings of anger and indignation, emotions that are also clearly evident in Steve’s emphatic outburst. The indignation that Occupy possessed as a political force and as a principle of organisation has been well documented (Mason 2012), but less evident is the role of anger and indignation as a motivation for the involvement of individuals. And, yet, many of participants in the research clearly linked their anger about the direction in which they felt the world was moving to their decision to participate in the Local Occupy demonstration. As Steve continued, ‘We are governed by evil people, it’s not a democracy …

\(^{13}\) Adbusters was one of the immediate precursors to OWS, registering the domain name occupywallstreet.org in June 2011 and calling for a protest on 17 September the same year to reassert democracy in the USA.
This is, this is, this is outrageous, it’s just very outrageous and the Occupy movement was a manifestation of that outrage ‘...’ (Steve). So, too, with Heather:

... I think a lot of people are depressed because they don’t understand how it works, they don’t understand why it works, all they understand is that they must live in this way ... but Occupy, I think, was just that, it was residual, it was like everyone stopped, they said ‘no’, you know, ‘I can’t go on ...’. (Heather)

3.2.3 Enjoyment, Excitement, Elation

Fear, anger and outrage also co-existed with feelings of excitement and enjoyment as important factors that initiated and sustained participation. Here, the lure of Occupy was identified with its challenge to the deadening effects of contemporary culture, a way to express their feelings of optimism in the belief that this could be the beginning of a better way of living. As Laura elaborated, ‘It was nice just to feel like, oh, some other people saw there was more than that [i.e. rampant consumerism] ... and having that place where you felt quite like at home in a town that usually I feel really like out of place in ...’. Being involved in Occupy, she continued, was pleasantly affirming, ‘... a place you could go to feel that community vibe that you get from protests and be able to sit and just talk about, you know, why is the world going to shit and what could we possibly do.’ (Laura). There was something about Occupy that stirred feelings of hope and optimism in her, emotions that that took on even greater force when contrasted to how she understood what the world had become: ‘It [i.e. Local Occupy] was all quite optimistic ... [knowing about the scale of social problems] can be quite distressing but it was always optimistic, well, we are going to change something, this is going to be the start of something.’ (Laura).

The understated optimism that brought Laura to Occupy contrasted markedly with the strength of feeling displayed others. In recalling their first sensations of Local Occupy, some described themselves as experiencing completely euphoric, feelings of joy so powerful that they threatened to become overwhelming. Thoughts about their initial involvement in Local Occupy would be recalled with intense excitement, a momentously pleasurable experience that for all continued to have a lasting significance. ‘But yeah, when I was 17, when I was first introduced to Occupy, it was like, it was the best thing ever’, was how Heather recounted it. As she continued, ‘And it was, it was really exciting at the start because you know here were all these people who had no reason to be together other than what like they’re angry, but they also want to be together, they want to be joined by something’ (Heather). As Malcolm explained:

... you wanted to know, I can’t actually remember [much else], apart from feeling overjoyed, you know, on October 15th, when I saw the people there, I can’t remember anything else about it, really ... it was just, it was beautiful, there’s no other way of, of expressing what happened ... [He takes a deep intake of breath and pauses] I don’t, I don’t think there are, there are words that can
express it really. To actually, ‘cause I walked up, err, [road name] and there were people there when I arrived and it was just amazing ... (Malcolm)

### 3.2.4 Negating Fear Together

Brought together by these shared emotions, the realisation of ‘togetherness’, as Heather astutely notes, could serve to further strengthen the initial impetus for involvement. If social movements like Local Occupy are predicated on emotional movements, then the awareness that others too possess comparable feelings and experiences constitutes a powerful confirming force. The realisation that others could feel, experience or think about the world in similar ways was often expressed to me as palpable relief that the world-views they held were now justifiable, particularly where such views had previously been dismissed as foolish, naive or irrational. For example, a statement about the world or an assessment of contemporary politics or economics from one of the respondents would frequently be concluded with the question, ‘or am I crazy?’ (for instance, Sean). The significance of the question was largely rhetorical, however, a stylistic flourish that was used to underscore the rationality of their intensity of feeling by pointing to Local Occupy as proof of the existence of many others who clearly thought in similar ways.

It felt like, yeah I guess I felt like vindicated because, you know, I’m not crazy, you know, this world is in this fucked up state and like I’m not the only person who can see that ... I felt empowered, I felt at home, like, um, and it felt good to not be alone, you know what I mean? (Jake)

The fear of seeming ‘crazy’, therefore, was also closely linked to anxieties about hitherto feelings of isolation. By joining together with others through Local Occupy, not only could accusations about the foolishness of their experiences and opinions be rebutted, they were also able to draw comfort and strength from the affirmative qualities of like-minded others. As Heather explained, ‘... because before that [i.e. Local Occupy] I thought I was alone ... My family thought I was nuts ... Um, to know that there was more people out there, like me, who thought the same and even knew more and who I could learn off’ was, for her, a deeply sustaining experience. As she continued, ‘... like before I thought I was just alone and that drives you insane. As soon as you latch on to the idea of the outside, out of the box, if there is a box at all, but you know, the outer edges of understanding, you become insane’ (Heather).

This feeling of ‘togetherness’ were, however, not simple or straightforward and fear once again re-entered the equation. To come together with erstwhile strangers, to spend significant periods of time with them, possibly even to live alongside them for a period of time, also meant, for some, overcoming their fear of strangers. In Robbie’s case this anxiety about strangers was considerable; significant doubts and uncertainties that he had accumulated from his time at work and then again from his more recent experiences of being homeless. Like many others he too was immediately moved by what he encountered, but at the outset remained concerned that others might not share these feelings. ‘I was
afraid’, he told me, ‘because I didn’t trust anybody ... [in the past] I wanted to be part of something like this but nobody could be trusted ... But when I met Joe and I met Rose, and I met a few people that was instantly relatable, I thought to myself I’m going to check this out ...’ (Robbie). For Heather, too, ‘... I had no idea of who these people were but I’ve never, I’ve never been scared of wandering in to the unknown because, what, what are we here for other than to learn from each other, to learn things?’ (Heather). By coming together this fear could be removed, as Robbie again made clear: ‘I think the Occupation is a sense of heaven on earth’, the spontaneous coming together of strangers and that ‘... gives me more hope in everything that I’m supposed to be as a human being. And this is why I’m here, on that fringe of that hope.’

4. Conclusion

Occupy has proved to be one of the most significant social movements of recent times. Its spontaneity, breadth of appeal, novel forms of political organisation and distinctive forms of protest have all been discussed at length, but what has been conspicuously missing from these are the systematic and detailed testimonies of those involved. This absence is all the more significant given that understanding and knowledge of Occupy has been derived in large part from attention to its most prominent examples. By focusing on one Local Occupy group in England and by prioritising the meanings and understandings of some of those who were centrally involved in its formation and development, this case study has addressed questions of how one Local Occupy movement came into being and then changed over time; and of what forces moved its individual members to participate in the movement.

Of significance, therefore, is the finding that Local Occupy’s origins were far from certain and that the source of its force as a spontaneous gathering also involved considerable uncertainties and tensions. Following the call for a global day of action, people arrived at the appointed time and place as hitherto strangers to one another, deeply uncertain about the significance of the demonstration and with little sense of how it was likely to develop. Some came with plans to stay for a night or two, perhaps, but a more permanent presence was rarely anticipated. Others, however, appeared with little sense of how the day might end and certainly no sense that they would be the originators of a local demonstration that would sustain a more enduring presence. What they encountered that day was deeply affirming, however; qualities of pleasure, comfort and delight at what seemed to be unfolding in front of their eyes that were strong enough to persuade a few to stay on and many more to return on subsequent days. It was from such tentative beginnings that the creation of a Local Occupy encampment slowly began to take form. A tent or two at first, within a relatively short period of time a dozen or so tents and their supporting accoutrements had been assembled, together with the practical means and political organisation capable of sustaining an Occupy presence. Importantly, the camp was relocated in the face of the threat of formal eviction, a moment in its development that disturbed what some regarded to be its defining inclusive and open ethos. As the winter hardened and Occupy took on significance for some as a place of residence as well as an
expression of their political ideas, others detected in Local Occupy the emergence of a new exclusiveness and less tolerant demeanour.

If the emergence of the Local Occupy protest had tentative beginnings, why then did so many people come to participate in such a loosely organised and unfocused demonstration? What, in other words, moved people to come together on such imprecise and ill-defined terms of association? In answering these questions the research pointed to the presence of fear as a powerful source of stasis: of surveillance and monitoring, violence and physical threats, existing in such an unregulated space, strangers and the unknown, the censure and castigation of parents, friends and family members. Why, then, did people come to Occupy with such conviction and what allowed them to overcome these fears? Here the research again points to the power of fear, but this time as a motivating force for action: the fear of doing nothing, anxiety about the effects of the concentration of power, the threat of war and environmental degradation. The overcoming of fear in these ways also finds an ally in the force of anger at the way the world is, what it has become and its implication for themselves and others. What also emerged was the considerable force that the joyousness, excitement and sheer pleasure at what their understandings of Occupy could evoke. And when combined with the realisation that others too possessed such feelings and experiences, the sentiments and understandings constituted a further powerful sustaining force for participation.

5. Future Analysis

The discussion of these findings only addresses a small part of the case study findings, but they are suggestive of three significant areas of future analysis. These areas are suggestive of further analysis of Local Occupy in their own right but each also have potential for cross case study analysis as themes of potential interest for other studies. These are in addition to the potential for cross case study analysis to allow triangulation with other Workpackages. First, the concern that political activism, especially allied to radical movements or focusing on controversial issues, will expose protestors to close monitoring and scrutiny, touches upon deeper concerns that activists have about surveillance and infiltration by the police and the security services. Preliminary analysis suggests that there is valuable data that would allow protestors’ understandings and perceptions of surveillance and infiltration to be explored in further detail. Second, and potentially related to this first line of further inquiry, is the role of conspiracy theories in protestors’ understandings and accounts of the world. These conspiracy theories were held by some of the protestors in both their looser and more comprehensive forms, where the former expresses the perception that vested interests were capable of manipulating events in significant ways through to the latter’s representation of the extensive and near total control of social and political life by powerful organisations and their agents. The substance of these conspiracy theories is similarly interesting, since they address many different facets of public and private life. These range from direct manipulation of or influence over what we eat, drink and wear, through to the
exercise of direct control over the global political, economic and communication systems, together with the means to pacify disorderly populations and the (controlling) presence of non-human, extra-terrestrial life forms. A third potential future line of analysis is the apparently non-standard sociological composition of the Local Occupy activists. Some were certainly drawn from the ranks of the middle class and well educated, but many of the key activists in Local Occupy were working class, unemployed, homeless and possessed few qualifications. A potential line of analysis would not simply provide a descriptive sociology of these characteristics but could explore further how points of intervention into these activist’s lives – around points related to work and unemployment, social services, the benefits system, problems with family, relationships and housing, the police – influenced their politicisation and contributed to their involvement in Local Occupy.
6. References


### 7. Appendix: Socio-Demographic Profile of Key Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psuedonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Educational Status</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Family Status</th>
<th>Residential Status</th>
<th>Relationship to Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Joe</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>White European</td>
<td>Did not complete secondary education</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Living With Parents/Homeless</td>
<td>Active Member/Regular camper</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Robbie</td>
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<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>Regular camper</td>
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<td>3 Malcolm</td>
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<td>Completed general academic secondary education</td>
<td>Long-term sick</td>
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<td>Live Independently with own partner/children</td>
<td>Active Member</td>
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<td>4 Heather</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>Single</td>
<td>Live with Parents/Homeless</td>
<td>Regular camper</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Sean</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Completed University</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Live Independently with Friends</td>
<td>Active Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Scott</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>White European</td>
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<td>Live Independently with own partner/children</td>
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</tr>
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<td>White European</td>
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<td>Live Independently</td>
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<td>Clive</td>
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<td>Employed</td>
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