Never so close, but never so far away?
Exploring perceptions of trust and transparency in Wales

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Introduction

• Trust & transparency lie at heart of contemporary debates on governance & democracy
• Devolution characterised as promising a ‘new politics’ & distinct ‘devolved policy style’ (Bradbury & Mitchell 2001)
• More collaborative/consensus-driven approach driven by scale & tight-knit policy networks (Keating et al. 2009)
• Key questions:
  - How can we characterise the development & role of trust within policy & decision-making in Wales?
  - What role do formal & informal transparency mechanisms play in underpinning trust?
Analysing Trust & Transparency

• Conceptions of trust: ‘strategic’ (Hardin 2002); ‘moralistic’ (Uslaner 2002); ‘deliberative’ (Fisher et al. 2010)
• Forms of trust: ‘particular social trust’; ‘general social trust’; ‘political trust’ (Zmerli & Newton 2011)
• Multidimensional – perceived competence, perceived benevolence & perceived honesty (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012)
• Direction & forms of transparency: upwards, downwards & sideways; ‘process’ vs. ‘event’ (Heald 2006)
• Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch (2012) - i) decision-making processes; ii) policy content & iii) policy outcomes
Trust & Transparency in Wales

• Wales = ‘a relatively small country, with a tight knit policy community, a strong tradition of partnership working, and an unusual degree of continuity of political leadership at the national level’ (Connell et al. 2019, p.5)

• Partnership-based policy style but questioned (Entwistle 2006; Bristow et al. 2009; Entwistle et al. 2016)

• Relative weakness of civil society creates ‘stratified’ environment & risk of cosy relations (Day 2006; Royles 2007)

• Benefits of trust: reducing transaction costs, improving investments & stability in relations, stimulating learning & the exchange of knowledge, & stimulating innovation (Klijn & Koppenjan 2016, p.116-119)
The role of trust in policy & decision-making

- Trust in a range of relationships discussed by interviewees:
  - ...with Welsh Government – ‘open-door’ or ‘cosiness’
  - ...with & between local authorities - variations
  - ...within & across policy communities – collaboration but recognition of interests & knowing organisational limits
- Range of factors identified as shaping these relations:
  - Scale – double-edged sword, all actors in the same room *but* lack of fresh-thinking & critique?
  - ‘Merry-go-round’ of policy officers & interpersonal trust
- Are the full benefits being realised? ‘sometimes we have never seemed so far away’
Exploring the role of Transparency

• On decision-making, responses varied from full confidence to a ‘black hole’
• Transparent for policy insiders but not the general public & peripheral members of policy communities
• Weakness of media a key factor
• Formal mechanisms seen as problematic:
  - Removal of decision reports by Welsh Government in late 2015 – decision reversed but now ‘virtually worthless’
  - FOI described as a ‘blunt tool’ & ‘pain in the arse but needed’
    - concern was being misused & often seen as a last resort
Emerging Conclusions

• Overall, picture of relatively mature levels of trust built on strong interpersonal & organisational links
• Transparency higher than pre-devolution context & favourable when compared to England
• But there are caveats:
  - Problems disentangling interpersonal & organisational trust
  - Key strengths = key weaknesses (everybody knows everybody else)
  - Variations across policy fields & levels of governance
  - Are the full benefits of trust being realised?