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

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**Welsh Policy and Politics in Unprecedented Times**

**24th May 2019, Swansea University**

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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?*