Soft Steering in Variable Geographies: How is Whitehall managing localism?

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Hard & Soft Steering

• The rise of governance has drawn attention to the ‘soft’ laws guiding policy
• Informality raises questions about the nature of decision making
• Martin & Guarneros-Meza (2013) make the distinction between hard & soft
• Soft steering can be productive in conjunction with local capacity
• Questions:
  • How is Whitehall seeking to manage localism?
  • What are the consequences of ‘soft steering’ for decentralisation?
Hard steering under regionalism

• Including:
  • Public Service Agreement Targets
  • Government Offices
  • Regional Development Agencies
  • Un-elected Regional Assemblies
  • Regional quangos
  • Regional Strategies
  • Regional submissions to spending review decisions
  • Regional Funding Allocations
  • Audit & evaluation
  • Regional Ministers
  • Regional Select & Grand Committees
Hard(ish) steering under localism

• Mechanisms for inter-governmental relations:
  • Six Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) Teams
  • Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) LEP leads
  • Three Department for Transport (DfT) ‘hubs’
  • Cabinet Office & Number 10 Teams

• Policies & funds
  • LEPs
  • Enterprise Zones
  • Retention Business Rates
  • City Deals
  • Growing Places Fund
  • Regional Growth Fund
  • DfT funding on major transport schemes
Soft Steering under localism

• Evidence of soft steering:
  • 16 Director leads in DCLG - locality relationships
  • DCLG/BIS teams with ‘a number of days in localities’
  • Commitments to helping build relationships
  • Whitehall teams are learning to ‘trust’ localities
  • The role of key individuals - agency - is paramount
  • Loose arrangements for departmental support
  • Whitehall is still working out its relationship - critical friend or enforcer?
Conclusions

• Preliminary findings indicate that:
  • Whitehall is using more soft steering than under regionalism
  • This may be helpful (or essential) in a context of spending cuts, complexity & uncertainty
  • But, informality presents a challenge for government in assuring accountability, transparency & spatial equity
  • A lack of accountability & transparency could threaten attempts to devolve, especially public funds