

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