

How is evidence used in collaborative policymaking?

A case study investigation of
West Midlands Combined Authority (England)

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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November 2024

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ABSTRACT

Recent decades have seen both an increasing recognition of the need for collaboration across different tiers of government and sectors to address complex policy issues, and an increasing expectation for policymakers to make effective use of evidence in developing public policy. Inter-Municipal Collaboration (IMC) has become common across Europe and constitutes an important international phenomenon. The aim of this thesis is to deploy policy studies and evidence utilisation theory to enable policymakers and academics to understand how evidence is used in inter-municipal collaborations.

Extant research has neglected to account for the effects of local collaborations on policymaking and the use of evidence, although recent studies suggest that collaboration has a significant impact on evidence use. We ask how evidence is used in policymaking in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations, and how this use is understood by participants. We examine the types and characteristics of evidence used and investigate why evidence is used in these ways.

Combined Authorities (CAs) are a significant example of IMC which by 2023 covered over 30% of the population of England outside London. Using a qualitative case study of an English CA, we examine how evidence was used in policymaking in the collaborative context. The thesis captures a range of empirical data to illuminate the detail of policymaking in this setting, including 25 elite interviews, analysis of 60 documents, and participation in almost 80 meetings. A theoretically informed conceptual framework is developed, which is then refined through analysis of the case study data and further literature, to produce a final conceptual framework for use in future research.

The case study shows that creating a collaboration brought together new groupings of diverse policy actors from a range of institutions, often developing policy in informal backstage settings. Three key empirical and theoretical insights from the case study are presented. The first concerns **how evidence is used in backstage settings**. The case study data identified a frequent category of evidence use ‘to enhance debate and dialogue’ in repeated interactions between elite policy actors in private, backstage settings, a type of evidence use that is seldom found in the literature. The second important finding concerns **how evidence is used in creating and maintaining narratives**. The thesis contributes to the investigation of the relationship between evidence and narrative by identifying three distinct applications of narrative in the case study. Finally, the case study demonstrated **opportunities for the use of new types of evidence through collaboration** which was found to both ‘open up’ and ‘close down’ the types of evidence used in policymaking. The thesis develops a conceptual framework which explains evidence use in the collaborative context as influenced by four key factors: policy actors, institutions, governance and the type/characteristics of evidence itself.

The significance of the study is that it contributes to the field of evidence utilisation studies by informing theoretical understandings of evidence use by introducing a focus on local collaborative and informal, backstage settings which has previously been lacking. It also informs our empirical understanding of evidence use in this novel but increasingly important context. The research provides insights for policymakers on how the initiation and design of inter-municipal collaborations can influence their approach to policymaking and the use of evidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have contributed to the successful completion of this doctoral research.

First and foremost, I extend my sincere appreciation to my supervisors, Professor Vivien Lowndes and Dr Stephen Jeffares, whose expert guidance, good humour, and unwavering support have been invaluable throughout this journey.

The University of Birmingham's School of Government has been a vibrant intellectual community that fostered stimulating discussions and debates. Heartfelt thanks are extended to my colleagues and fellow PhD candidates who have provided support, encouragement, and friendship.

I am indebted to the participants of my study, whose willingness to share their experiences and insights has been the foundation of this research.

I must acknowledge the financial support provided by my employers, Birmingham City Council and the University of Birmingham, without which this research would not have been possible.

My family deserves special mention for their encouragement and understanding throughout this demanding process. Their love, support and faith have been my anchor, and I am profoundly grateful for their sacrifices. Sally, you have inspired us all with your love of learning. My thanks to you and to our children, Joel, Toby, Kirsten and Elsa, for all your encouragement.

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PREFACE

This PhD started as a result of reflection on my involvement with local public policymaking over the last three decades.

I studied 'Mathematics, Operational Research, Statistics and Economics', followed by an MSc in Operational Research. Most of my training advocated a rational approach to problem and decision analysis. It was therefore something of a surprise to find that the actual world of policymaking was more complex.

I've had the opportunity to work in many different policy areas in my career to date. My first role was with the Metropolitan Police, in an internal management consultancy unit. I found police officers felt comfortable talking about 'evidence', often viewing this as defensible ways of establishing facts, reflecting their interactions with the legal system.

I then had a short spell in the private sector, implementing statistical credit scoring models in decisions on car loans. Whilst senior managers welcomed the demonstrably improved profitability offered by these approaches, local sales people were highly resistant to the idea that an algorithm could outperform their experience in assessing whether a customer was likely to repay their loan.

Back in the public sector, I joined the Audit Commission. The Commission had a national team which used academic and practice research and statistical analysis to identify opportunities for more cost-effective delivery of public services. At the local level, I helped public agencies to implement the recommendations. Officials often found that benchmarking their activity against other local agencies was particularly illuminating.

After an enjoyable decade with the Commission, I moved into a senior role with Birmingham City Council. As Assistant Director of Strategy, I was responsible for the council's research and policy development (among a long list of other corporate functions). I became much more aware of the role of elected members, and how their political beliefs and direct contact with citizens affected what they considered as evidence.

Over my 14 years with Birmingham City Council, the importance of partnership working increased dramatically. In the 2000s, these often involved public, private and third sector agencies within the city. I was interested to see new types of evidence enter policy debates. For example, health partners talked about 'evidence-based programmes' and faith groups brought videos of children explaining what it feels like to go to school hungry with rain filling worn-out shoes. But, in general, the council was seen as *prima inter pares* in all these partnerships, so decisions often followed a similar logic to internal council policymaking.

In the 2010s, alongside significant budget cuts, the focus increasingly shifted to partnerships across the wider region. In this new 'combined authority' arrangement, councils and partners from various sectors would develop policy, including some contentious areas such as housing supply, largely on a consensus basis. I was intrigued to see how this would affect the use of evidence. I undertook a secondment working on the developing West Midlands Combined Authority, which gave me experience in this new setting.

This PhD is my attempt to understand how this new context impacts on the use of evidence in policymaking.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The need for collaboration across different sectors and tiers of government has been increasingly recognised in recent decades (e.g. Head and Alford, 2015), particularly in tackling complex policy issues which are beyond the capability of any single agency (Daley, 2009; O’Leary and Vij, 2012). At the same time, policymakers have been encouraged to utilise ‘evidence’ (variously defined) in order to develop effective public policy and practice (Nutley *et al.*, 2010). Discourses of ‘evidence-based’ or ‘evidence-informed’ policy have become prevalent in several countries including the UK, the USA and Australia (Boaz and Davies, 2019; Head, 2010). Policymakers are therefore increasingly expected to deploy evidence in collaborative settings. Although there has been limited research on the topic to date, some recent studies suggest that policymakers use evidence in particular ways when working in collaborations (e.g. Purtle *et al.*, 2022).

The aim of this thesis is to deploy policy studies and evidence utilisation theory to enable policymakers and academics to understand how evidence is used in inter-municipal collaborations. Whilst the existing literature provides many models of evidence use in policymaking, it lacks a conceptual framework of evidence use in IMCs. The case study informs the empirical and theoretical understanding of evidence use in IMCs through three main findings, and the

development of a conceptual framework to inform research design in future studies.

This chapter begins with an examination of inter-municipal collaboration, focussing on the example of Combined Authorities in England. The following section investigates the use of evidence in policymaking and identifies several limitations of the extant literature. Section (1.4) sets out the research questions, and the research design and methodology. Section (1.5) outlines the academic and policy contributions of the thesis. The final section explains the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Inter-municipal collaboration

To help understand the use of evidence in collaborative settings, this thesis investigates the context of inter-municipal collaboration. Since the 1970s, there has been a trend in many economically developed countries to reduce the number of local authorities (Zardi, 2017) and create new Inter-Municipal Collaborations (IMCs) around policy areas such as economic development (Boyle, 2016) . Over that period, IMCs have become increasingly widespread throughout Europe and an important phenomenon internationally (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007).

The thesis provides a detailed qualitative analysis of a Combined Authority (CA) in England. CAs are an important example of IMC. They represent a voluntary approach to IMC, where a new mid-tier of government is added consisting of

the existing local authorities, while the original authorities remain in place (Boyle, 2016; Parr, 2020). By 2023, over 30% of the population of England outside London lived in areas covered by CAs (ONS, 2023).

There has been significant academic interest in the development of CAs, which have been seen both as part of the government's approach to devolution within England, and as a response to global competition and shifting local economies (Shutt and Liddle, 2019). The approach has been criticised as being 'fragmented' (Shutt and Liddle, 2019, p. 196), 'inconsistent' (Wall and Bessa-Vilela, 2016, p. 655) and a continuation of the traditional transactional relationship between central and local government in England (Ayres, Flinders and Sandford, 2018). The first CA, in Greater Manchester, has been the subject of many studies (e.g. Kenealy, 2016), for example concerning the selective use of evidence to support a clear regional narrative (Haughton *et al.*, 2016). There have been a few studies of CAs in other regions (e.g. Lemprière and Lowndes, 2019; Liddle and Shutt, 2019). Areas of academic interest have included CA leadership (Fenwick and Johnston, 2020; Roberts, 2020), the 'deal-making' approach to Devolution Agreements (Bentley and Pugalis, 2016) and the associated widespread adoption of informal governance approaches (Ayres, Sandford and Coombes, 2017).

1.3 Evidence use in policymaking

There has been substantial scholarly interest in the use of evidence in policymaking for at least six decades (Boaz and Davies, 2019). Insights from

several areas including policy studies and wider political science (Davies and Nutley, 2000) have resulted in a rather disparate literature (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015). This thesis refers to two influential accounts of evidence utilisation: 'Evidence Based Policymaking' (EBP), which espouses the rational, instrumental use of evidence, and 'Knowledge Utilisation' (KT), which explores the pathways by which evidence enters policy (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015). An important stream of research has identified a fairly consistent set of barriers and enablers of evidence utilisation in policymaking (e.g. Oliver *et al.*, 2014). Attempts to map the various ways in which evidence is used in policymaking have resulted in a number of typologies, such as the concepts of 'instrumental' (direct), 'conceptual' (complex and indirect) and 'political' uses of evidence (Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2007). Whilst there are difficulties in applying typologies empirically, the thesis uses the typology developed by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019), which was built by comparing the predictions of four policy theories with the perspectives of policymakers.

The thesis addresses several apparent limitations of the extant literature: the lack of detail concerning how evidence is used in policymaking processes (e.g. Kneale *et al.*, 2017), the limited attention paid to the specifics of evidence use in policymaking at *local* level (e.g. Durrant *et al.*, 2023), the paucity of studies relating to evidence use in early-stage IMCs and the collaborative context in general, the absence of an overall conceptual framework which can be applied to analyse evidence use in this context, together with the limited research on the relationship between evidence use and policy narratives.

Responding to these limitations, the thesis develops a synthesis of key factors influencing policy development identified in policy theories. These factors are used to construct an initial conceptual framework of evidence use in collaborative policymaking which is then deployed in the analysis of the case study. This framework is later refined in the light of the case study data and further literature, resulting in a final conceptual framework for use in future studies. The thesis provides a detailed account of evidence utilisation in policymaking processes in the case study, an early-stage IMC, and an analysis of the explanatory factors which influence these uses of evidence. Three key empirical and theoretical insights from the case study are presented: how evidence is used in backstage settings, how evidence is used in creating and maintaining narratives, and opportunities for the use of new types of evidence through collaboration.

1.4 Research Questions, Design and Methodology

The thesis examines the use of research in policymaking in the context of inter-municipal collaboration, addressing three sets of research questions.

The first area of interest is *how* evidence is used in collaborative policymaking, examining how evidence is used in the context of an early-stage IMC. Evidence use itself can only partly be observed, so it was important to investigate how this was understood by participants in the policy process. Therefore, the first set of research questions are:

RQ1 How is evidence used in policymaking in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How is this understood by participants?

As well as examining how evidence is used, it is important to understand the nature of the evidence used in policymaking in this context. The thesis therefore investigates the types of evidence, such as academic research papers, and the characteristics of evidence used in policymaking, such as its form of presentation. Hence, the second set of research questions are:

RQ2 What types of evidence are used? What are the characteristics of this evidence?

As well as the rich description developed in response to the above research questions, the thesis aims to deploy policy studies and evidence utilisation theory to enable policymakers and academics to understand why evidence is used in these ways in inter-municipal collaborations. The third set of research questions are therefore:

RQ3 Why is evidence used in these ways? What factors affect how evidence is used in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations?
How can a conceptual framework help in analysing this use?

Addressing the above research questions required an in-depth examination of the processes, events and perspectives involved in policymaking during the early stages of developing an IMC. In the context of informal governance approaches frequently adopted by CAs, the processes involved may 'have no trace beyond the recollection and perceptions of the actors involved' (Ayres,

2022, p. 23) . The thesis therefore adopts an interpretative approach to appreciate the perceptions and understandings constructed by the people involved (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009). The case study approach is a well-established research strategy in evidence utilisation studies (Oliver *et al.*, 2014) and is particularly helpful when the researcher aims for a detailed understanding of phenomena where context is important (Yin, 2013, p. 18).

The thesis is based upon a detailed case study of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) in central England, whose constituent members are the seven metropolitan borough councils in the conurbation. The WMCA was selected for three main reasons. First, CAs represent an important example of inter-municipal collaboration which is interesting in academic and policy terms. Second, the timing of the formation of WMCA fitted well with that of the fieldwork for the thesis. Finally, the researcher was able to negotiate extensive access to WMCA due to their status as a senior officer in one of the constituent councils at the start of the PhD; the issues of positionality arising are discussed later (4.9). The case study covers the period from initial local elite actor discussions on the possibility of creating a CA in 2014, to the election of the area's first metropolitan mayor in May 2017.

An initial conceptual framework is developed, based on a critical review of the policy studies, evidence utilisation and governance literatures. This identifies seven potential explanatory factors of evidence use in the collaborative context. This framework is reviewed and updated in the light of the case study data, resulting in a final version for use in future research.

Using the initial conceptual framework to address the research questions, the issues identified in the literature are linked to relevant case level questions and data sources. Qualitative data was captured from 25 semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of elite policy actors, analysis of around 60 documents, participation in almost 80 meetings, and a research journal. The data was analysed thematically using the Framework Method (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Issues of reliability and validity are discussed later (4.8), as well as the approach to research ethics (4.10).

1.5 Contributions

The thesis contributes to the field of evidence utilisation studies by informing theoretical and empirical understandings of evidence use in policymaking in local collaborative settings. It also provides insights for policymakers on how the initiation and design of IMCs may influence their approach to policymaking and the use of evidence. The thesis makes significant and original empirical, theoretical, methodological and policy contributions.

The empirical findings contribute to the understanding of the use of evidence in policymaking in IMCs. The thesis provides a detailed account of evidence use in policymaking within an early-stage IMC, including the processes involved and the influences of actors, institutions, governance arrangements and the types/characteristics of evidence itself.

Three key empirical and theoretical insights from the case study are identified. The first concerns **how evidence is used in 'backstage' settings** (3.4.6). The case study data identifies a frequent category of evidence use 'to enhance debate and dialogue' in repeated interactions between elite policy actors. This use of evidence appears to be particularly linked to policymaking in private, backstage settings in the case study. This type of evidence use has seldom been noted in the evidence utilisation or policy studies literature. The second important finding concerns **how evidence is used in creating and maintaining narratives**. Whilst narrative is recognised as important in policy studies literature, general conclusions on the use of evidence in narratives remain cautious and the function of evidence in framing policy arguments has seldom been explored. The thesis contributes to the investigation of the relationship between evidence and narrative by identifying three distinct applications of narrative in the case study. Finally, the case study demonstrates **opportunities for the use of new types of evidence through collaboration** which was found to both 'open up' and 'close down' the types of evidence used in policymaking. This aligns with recent studies on the effect of collaboration on evidence use in specific policy areas.

A further theoretical contribution of the thesis is the development of a conceptual framework for analysing evidence use in collaborations. Building on a synthesis of policy, governance and evidence utilisation study findings, the final version of the framework identifies four explanatory factors which are particularly relevant to the IMC context: policy actors, institutions, governance and the type/characteristics of evidence itself. The framework provides a clear

working definition of each factor and categorises the mechanisms at work. The final conceptual framework provides a useful building block for future research relating to evidence use in policymaking in the collaborative setting.

Methodologically, the thesis responds to calls in the literature for evidence utilisation research to make use of a diverse range of data capture methods to capture empirical data about ‘the actual processes and impacts of research and other evidence use in policy’ (Oliver *et al.*, 2014, p. 8). The methods adopted in the thesis include developing an interview topic guide encouraging participants to tell their story to better understand policy actors’ activities, context and influences (Oliver, Lorenc and Innvær, 2014), and supplementing interview evidence with data from documentary analysis and observation. The adoption of a range of data sources facilitated effective engagement of participants and provided valuable information to support the analysis of evidence use in policymaking.

Finally, from a policy perspective, the thesis provides empirically based recommendations for understanding and influencing the use of evidence in collaborative policymaking. There are policy implications both for local and central policy actors, which also have potential wider relevance internationally.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 discusses the policy context for collaboration in England and internationally. Inter-municipal collaboration has become increasingly important

internationally over recent decades and IMCs are responsible for significant areas of public policy, such as economic development and transport issues. How they develop policy, and specifically how evidence is used in this context, are significant research questions in academic and policy terms. The chapter begins with a brief critical analysis of the literature on collaboration. It then provides an overview of the policy context of inter-municipal collaboration, internationally and in England. The chapter next provides an overview of England's CAs since 2011, summarising the academic debates, policy background and the development of Devolution Agreements. These processes have frequently involved the adoption of informal approaches to governance, so the relevant literature on informal governance is reviewed. Finally, the chapter provides a brief description of the first CA established, in Greater Manchester in 2011, which has not only been the subject of considerable research attention but has also influenced the development of later CAs (Kenealy, 2016; Kenealy *et al.*, 2017).

Chapter 3 establishes the conceptual framework for the thesis by critically reviewing the relevant literatures and scholarly debates. This chapter provides a critical analysis of the academic debate on how evidence is used in policymaking, examining the purposes for which evidence is employed and the factors affecting this utilisation. The chapter considers the difficulties in categorising the use of evidence in policymaking, and the relationship between policy narratives and evidence use. The literature review highlights seven factors that may influence the use of evidence in policymaking in the collaborative context: policy actors, institutions, networks, ideas, context,

governance, and the types/characteristics of evidence itself. Finally, the chapter presents an initial conceptual framework for analysing evidence use in collaborative settings. This model is later tested and refined through analysis of the case study data and further literature, and developed into a final version for use in future research (8.6).

Chapter 4 sets out the methodology for the primary research. The chapter explains and justifies the research design and methodology, data collection activities and analytical approach. The selection of the case study of West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) is explained. The challenges and ethical considerations facing research in this area are discussed, including issues identified in the relevant methodological literature and difficulties around examining the use of 'evidence' and the identification of 'informal' governance and 'backstage' settings. This chapter reflects on the researcher's positionality and explains how issues relating to validity, reliability and research ethics were addressed.

Chapter 5 provides an account of the case context, providing detailed information on the background to forming the WMCA, a short overview of the history of relationships between councils in the West Midlands, a map of the areas covered and a timeline of the process of establishing the CA. This chapter also examines the governance arrangements for the CA and its financial context. It then summarises the development of two major policy areas which are examined in the case study: the Strategic Economic Plan and

the Mental Health Commission. Finally, the chapter provides an analysis of evidence capability in the region during the period addressed by the case study.

Chapter 6 presents the empirical data on how evidence was used in the WMCA, contrasting public statements identified in the documentary analysis with the more nuanced perception of evidence use revealed in interviews with policymakers. The typology of evidence use in policymaking developed by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019) is deployed to analyse the case study data. Surprisingly, this analysis identifies the frequent use of evidence to ‘enhance debate and dialogue’ which has not been widely noted in the literature. The chapter examines four examples of evidence use in the case study in detail. First, the development of a regional narrative concerning the region’s economy and the CA’s contribution to future economic success is analysed. Evidence was used in developing the narrative, and later the presentation of evidence was influenced by the narrative. Second, the chapter analyses the use of economic analysis in key decisions on the CA membership and geography, where evidence was deployed in convincing central government to accept a wide geographic footprint for the CA. Third, the frequent ‘political’ use of evidence to bolster the legitimacy of the CA and its policy positions is investigated. Finally, the chapter briefly examines examples of the instrumental use of evidence.

Chapter 7 examines the types and characteristics of evidence used in the WMCA. The chapter first presents a detailed analysis of the various types of evidence used in the case study, contrasting how some types of evidence were

widely used in CA policy development whereas others were used in just one policy area. The collaborative context appears to have both 'opened up' the use of evidence types which were novel to some policymakers, and also to have 'closed down' the use of some evidence which was potentially problematic to influential stakeholders. The chapter then examines the characteristics of evidence which were particularly valued by policymakers in the case study. Key features included the timeliness and concise presentation of evidence, reflecting the findings of previous evidence utilisation studies. Policymakers only considered the formal 'quality' of evidence in one policy area.

Chapter 8 analyses the empirical findings making use of the initial conceptual framework developed from the literature review, discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature, and develops a final version of the conceptual framework. The case study data are analysed and considered in the context of the literature, for each of the factors in the initial framework. The chapter then identifies refinements and develops a final version of the conceptual framework for use in future research, which reduces the number of explanatory factors and specifies the relationships between them. Finally, the chapter discusses the three key case study findings in the context of the literature.

The final chapter provides an overall conclusion of the thesis. This chapter returns to the earlier literature, specifying and reflecting on the original contributions of the thesis. The chapter includes practical recommendations for CAs and central government regarding evidence use, looking at the implications for policy and practice. It considers the limitations of this work as a single case

study of an early-stage IMC, and reflects on how data capture from participant observation could be developed in future studies. Limitations are linked to ideas for future research using the conceptual framework created in the thesis, including longitudinal studies that trace evidence use over time and comparative research covering multiple cases of IMCs.

2 INTER-MUNICIPAL COLLABORATIONS

2.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the importance of collaboration, specifically inter-municipal collaboration, as a setting for policymaking in the UK and internationally. Policy is increasingly being developed in collaborative settings in order to address complex issues (e.g. Sullivan, 2022). Although there has been limited research on the use of evidence in policymaking in such settings, recent studies in specific policy areas suggest collaboration has a significant impact on evidence utilisation (Hyde *et al.*, 2016; Palinkas *et al.*, 2014; Purtle *et al.*, 2022).

The chapter starts with an examination of how collaboration has become critical in addressing complex policy issues which require joint endeavour across sectors and/or between tiers of government (2.2). Faced with policy externalities such as the effect of transport infrastructure on the regional economy, many states have encouraged inter-municipal collaboration which has now become a widespread phenomenon internationally (2.3). Within England, decades of almost constant reconfiguration have left a fragmented structure of local government, with a 'missing middle' (Harding, 2001, p. 1) between central and local government increasingly identified at the city-region level (e.g. Beel, Jones and Rees Jones, 2018) (2.4).

Since 2011, English devolution has focused on the development of ‘Combined Authorities’ (CAs). CAs are an important example of inter-municipal collaboration which involve the voluntary creation of an additional layer of governance constituted from existing local authorities, while the existing local authorities remain in place (Parr, 2020). In 2023, CAs covered over 30% of England’s population outside London (ONS, 2023).

Section (2.5) critically reviews the academic literature on CAs before exploring the policy background and the ‘deal making’ approach to devolution adopted by the UK government, expressed through a series of ‘Devolution Agreements’. Finally, the chapter reviews the literature on the first CA, created in Greater Manchester in 2011, which has had significant influence on the development of later CAs (2.5.4).

2.2 Collaboration

There is a broad and varied literature on collaboration as a public management and governance phenomena, which is beyond the scope of this thesis to review in detail (see for example Ansell and Gash, 2008; Durose and Rummery, 2006; Head and Alford, 2015). The literature provides a range of definitions of ‘collaboration’ - broadly it is seen as a goal-oriented strategic activity which is iterative, multi-organisational and requires the adoption of formal and informal rules (Osei-Kojo, Bawole and Sakyi, 2020). A highly cited definition of collaborative governance was provided by Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 544):

A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making-process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets.

The expectation in this definition of a 'formal' decision-making process and the requirement to involve non-state actors does not feature in all definitions of collaborative governance. For example, Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh (2012, p. 2) define collaboration as:

The processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished.

Collaboration has been increasingly viewed as important in tackling complex policy issues, which are beyond the capability of a single agency to address (Costumato, 2021; Daley, 2009; O'Leary and Vij, 2012; Weber and Khademian, 2008). Such, often ill-defined, policy issues have been labelled 'wicked issues' (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 155), requiring collective action across different sectors and/or across different tiers of government. Sullivan (2022, p. 1) argues that the increasing prominence of collaboration reflects the interdependence of tiers of government and policy issues, the diversity of citizens and localities, and the hybridity of policy institutions, describing collaboration as 'a ubiquitous yet contested feature of contemporary governance'. Whilst collaboration has

become prevalent across many areas of public policy, the empirical evidence of collaboration improving socio-economic outcomes remains limited (Sullivan, 2022).

The collaborative agenda can be seen as a response to changes in the organisation of the state, government, and the wider socio-economic and political environment (Durose and Rummary, 2006). Sullivan and Skelcher (2003, p. 223) provide a 'framework for understanding public policy collaboration' concerning its imperative, forms, capacity and evaluation.

Identified imperatives for collaboration include a complex, multi-level context and the need to acquire resources. Collaborative forms concern the approach to constitution, membership and power relations. Capacity includes individual and organisational factors. Finally, evaluation concerns outcomes, stakeholders and governance aspects.

Huxham identified the concept of 'collaborative advantage' as the development of synergies between collaborating organisations, where outcomes are achieved which no one organisation could deliver alone, and the collaborating organisation can also better achieve its own objectives (Huxham, 1993, p. 603). In the context of public sector collaborations, the wider outcomes were linked to a public interest 'meta-mission' (p.608). Common bases of collaborative advantage include access to resources, shared risk, efficiencies (such as economies of scale and avoiding duplication), co-ordination and learning (Huxham and Vangen, 2013). Learning in collaborations has been a topic of significant research interest. This can involve both the exchange of knowledge

and information between organisations in a collaboration, and the creation of new knowledge within a collaboration itself (Hardy, Phillips and Lawrence, 2003). A collaboration brings together varied experiences, information, expertise and knowledge which can lead to 'shared meanings and insights' (Lotia, 2004, p. 38) through a process of social and political interaction leading to 'the emergence of common knowledge' (p.39).

The literature on collaborative governance identifies a number of critical factors for successful collaboration including 'face-to-face dialogue, trust building, and the development of commitment and shared understanding' (Ansell and Gash, 2008, p. 543). Trust involves the perception by the trustor that the trustee has ability, goodwill and integrity (Ran and Qi, 2019). Both at the interpersonal level and interorganisational level (Brie and Stölting, 2012), trust is produced through interactions over time and can be strengthened and institutionalised throughout the collaborating organisations (Zaheer, McEvily and Perrone, 1998). Trust building requires time and effort through repeated interactions (Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh, 2012; Henneman, Lee and Cohen, 1995).

Collaboration can be used to distance policy decisions from community involvement. The issue of public participation in collaborative governance was explored by Newman *et al.* (2004). They reviewed a range of forums for deliberative citizen engagement and highlighted the need to understand such initiatives in the context of government policy, and in the perceptions of local strategic actors, such as public sector officials, as well as the members of the forums themselves. The paper highlighted how different sources of legitimacy

(such as a political mandate or professional knowledge) were used to distance public involvement from 'strategic' policy decisions.

In summary, collaboration has become increasingly important as complex public policy issues have required joint working across tiers of government and sectors of society. Whilst the definition of collaborative governance is contested, the empirical literature suggests that successful collaboration depends on trust building through repeated interactions over time. An important potential benefit of collaboration is the generation of new knowledge and shared insights.

2.3 Inter-Municipal Collaboration (IMC)

Inter-municipal collaboration is an important response to pressures on local governments such as policy externalities around the functioning of regional economies. Pressure on local governments has increased in recent decades due to factors including the increased scale of production of services, the increased mobility of populations and fragmentation in social participation, increases in the externalities of local policymaking, and market pressures (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007). Nation states have responded to these pressures broadly in four ways: limiting the scope of local government, the involvement of private companies in service delivery, territorial reform, and inter-municipal collaboration (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007). The first approach involves redistributing responsibilities between different levels of government, often attributing powers of planning and coordination of local policies to upper level governments (Sharpe, 1993). The second approach, the participation of private

companies in service delivery, was an important element of New Public Management (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994; Hood, 1991; Hood and Peters, 2004). Both the amalgamation of local governments and inter-municipal cooperation have been viewed as ways to address policy externalities and to improve efficiency, lower costs and build capacity in local government (Allers and Van Ommeren, 2016; Swianiewicz, 2018; Tavares, 2018).

There has been a trend in many OECD countries to increase the cooperation and strategic collaboration between local authorities (Boyle, 2016), with inter-municipal cooperation growing in Europe since the 1950s (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007) and becoming a widespread phenomenon internationally (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007; Warner, 2006; Yurisch, Soto and Fuenzalida, 2019). Such collaboration takes many legal forms but usually involves municipalities working together towards some common objectives through some type of formal agreement and incurring some 'cost', such as less freedom to act unilaterally or a financial commitment (Hertzog, 2010). Partnership governance can change and develop over time (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998).

Cooperative arrangements differ in three key dimensions: the scope of cooperation in terms of types of activity (e.g. the delivery of specific services or wider policy coordination); their national context in terms of legislation, incentives, etc.; and the degree of organisational integration (Hulst and van Montfort, 2012). The degree of integration can vary from informal, loosely coupled consultative networks, through more formal cooperation and knowledge sharing, to the transfer of functions to a new standing organisation which takes

on activities formerly undertaken by individual municipalities and enjoys formal decision-making powers (Hulst and van Montfort, 2012; O'Donnell, 2012). Hulst and van Montfort (2012, p. 127) refer to organisations governed by municipalities that coordinate local government policies as 'quasi-regional governments'. Usually these are governed by an executive board of municipal members and accountable to the local authorities. Their responsibilities frequently include economic and social development, and spatial planning. International examples of this kind of collaborative approach include the Eindhoven City-Region, where 21 municipalities developed a joint fund to develop the economic structure of the area, and the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Advisory Board, which provides a strategic steer for a range of activities including transport and economic development (Boyle, 2016). Other examples include the German *Verbande* in urban areas, metropolitan authorities in seven urban clusters in the Netherlands, the *communautes d'agglomeration* and *communautes urbaines* in France, and Finland's regional councils (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007). CAs in England are an example of a voluntary approach to collaboration, where a new mid-tier of government is created consisting of the existing local authorities (Parr, 2020) and the existing local authorities remain intact, rather than necessarily being merged or subject to boundary changes (Boyle, 2016).

2.4 Inter-Municipal Collaboration in England (1974 to 2024)

Despite a measure of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Lupton *et al.*, 2018), the UK retains a fragmented structure of sub-national government with limited constitutional protection (Copus, 2006; Sykes and

Nurse, 2017) and an unusually high centralisation of power in the national central government compared to other economically developed countries (Bailey and Wood, 2017; Lupton *et al.*, 2018).

English local government has been subject to almost constant reconfiguration and rescaling since the 1950s (Ayres, Flinders and Sandford, 2018; Garside and Hebbert, 1989). The Local Government Act 1972 established a comprehensive two-tier administrative structure in England for the first time. Six upper-tier urban areas in England were designated Metropolitan County Councils (MCCs) working across metropolitan district councils (figure 2.1). MCCs and the Greater London Council were subsequently abolished in 1986 (The Local government Act 1985), leaving districts in these areas without an intermediate tier of government between the districts and central government.

Figure 2-1 Metropolitan County Councils in England (1974)



Source: Author's annotation of Ordnance Survey data analysis (Nilfanion and Dr Greg, 2010)

National governments in the UK since the 1990s have entered power promising to devolve power to local government and communities, although in practice the demands of centrally driven policy have led to a series of unstable top-down settlements (Nurse, 2015). Table 2.1 summarises the key developments in devolution in the UK in the last 27 years.

The Labour government (1997-2010) progressively devolved some powers to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Executive (Scotland Act 1998, Government of Wales Act 1998, Belfast Agreement 1998). The process of national devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland led to 'the English question' (Hazell, 2006) which asks how citizens in England may also be given greater political voice, and what devolution arrangements should be within England. The lack of an effective intermediate tier of government led to debates on whether there is a 'missing middle' in English governance (Harding, 2001, p. 1), between central government and local authorities.

Table 2-1 Summary of English devolution policy developments, 1997-2024

Period	Key devolution policy developments
1997 – 2010 New Labour	National devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Creation of Regional Development Agencies (1998) Creation of Greater London Assembly (2000) Rejection of elected regional assembly for North East in referendum (2004) City-region agenda (2006-) Local Area Agreements (2004-2010) Multi-Area Agreements (2008-2010) Legislation enabling CAs (2009)
2010 – 2015 Coalition	Abolition of Regional Development Agencies (2010) Creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships (2011) Greater Manchester CA established (2011) CAs established in West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, North East and Liverpool (all April 2014) Greater Manchester Devolution Agreements signed (Nov 2014 and Feb 2015) Devolution Agreement signed for Sheffield City Region (Dec 2014) and West Yorkshire region (Mar 2015)
2015 – 2024 Conservative	Referendum decision to leave the EU (2016) CAs established in Tees Valley (Apr 2016), West Midlands (June 2016), West of England (Feb 2017), Cambridgeshire and Peterborough (Mar 2017), North of Tyne (Nov 2018) Devolution Agreements signed in 16 areas (2015-2024) Trailblazer Devolution Agreements in Greater Manchester and West Midlands (2023)

Source: Author's analysis building on Durose and Lowndes (2021, p. 1778)

In response, the Labour government established a network of Regional Offices and Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) whose remit included economic development and regeneration; business efficiency and competitiveness; employment; skills, and sustainable development (Regional Development Agencies Act 1998). In 2002, the government issued a white paper offering 'to provide for directly elected regional assemblies in those regions that want them' (Department for Transport Local Government and the Regions, 2002, p. 4).

The establishment of regional assemblies was subject to a positive referendum result in each region, and required a restructure of local authorities in the region to a unitary model (Department for Transport Local Government and the Regions, 2002). The first referendum was held in the North East in November 2004. The region was chosen on the basis that it was seen as most likely to return a positive result (Lemprière and Lowndes, 2019). The postal ballot achieved a turnout of 48%, delivering a "no" majority of 78% to 22% (The Electoral Commission, 2005, p. 10). The government subsequently withdrew proposals for further referenda.

The 'missing middle' in English governance has increasingly been seen at the city-region level, rather than historic or administrative region (Harding, 2001, p. 1). Moves to focus decentralisation on functional economic geographies draw on literature on economic activity clusters, entrepreneurship and innovation systems (Bentley, Bailey and Shutt, 2010; Broadhurst, 2018; Garcilazo, 2011; McCann and Van Oort, 2019). The economic argument is that the city-region is a better fit to economic growth within functional economic market areas rather

than administrative areas (Broadhurst, 2018; Copus, 2006; Shaw and Tewdwr-Jones, 2017). The concept of city-regions refers to:

A strategic and political level of administration and policy-making, extending beyond the administrative boundaries of single urban local government authorities to include urban and/or semi-urban hinterlands; this definition includes a range of institutions and agencies representing local and regional governance that possess an interest in urban and/or economic development matters that, together, form a strategic level of policymaking intended to formulate or implement policies on a broader metropolitan scale.

(Tewdwr-Jones and McNeill, 2000, p. 131).

Academic interest in city-regions has existed since the 1950s but accelerated in the early 2000s with international evidence on the significance of cities in driving economic growth and as a practical scale for policy interventions (McCann and Van Oort, 2019). Urban economic agglomeration theory suggests that clustering in locations leads to cost savings for firms through proximity to other suppliers and facilities (Puga, 2010), and that major city-regions both benefit from economic growth and in turn can foster economic activity, for example by improving transport connectivity or housing provision (Giersch, 2012).

Research on the performance of European urban centres suggested that the most successful matched their political and administrative boundaries to the local economic area (Bartolini, 2015), although research conclusions on the economic growth added through governance at this level are mixed (NAO,

2017; Shutt and Liddle, 2019) and the agglomerative model of economic development has been scrutinised by critical scholars (Beel, Jones and Rees Jones, 2016; Haughton, Deas and Hincks, 2014).

The case for a city-region focus to economic policy in England was strongly pushed by the Core Cities Group which lobbies for greater autonomy, funding and powers for the (then) eight largest UK cities (including Birmingham in the West Midlands) (Harding, Marvin and May, 2002). This emerging consensus was accepted by HM Treasury in 2006 and reflected in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 (*The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009*; Cheshire and Magrini, 2008; HM Treasury and DTI, 2006). In April 2009, Greater Manchester and Leeds were established as two 'pilot city regions' in England (HM Treasury, 2009, p. 83) to develop proposals around adult skills, economic development, housing and employment programmes.

The Coalition government (2010-2015) announced in its first (June 2010) budget that the RDAs would be replaced by new 'Local Enterprise Partnerships' (LEPs). LEPs were non statutory and chaired by the private sector. They lacked the legal powers previously available to RDAs and initially had no direct government funding, although they were later awarded funding totalling £45 million from September 2012 to 2014/15 (Pugalís, 2010). The Coalition government pursued a 'deal making' approach to devolution, inviting chosen areas to negotiate 'deals' for greater local autonomy over financial and planning matters. This led to a series of 'tailored' City Deals focussed on economic

decisions and projects in local areas. The first wave (Dec 2011 – Jul 2012) covered the eight biggest English cities outside London, including Birmingham (Ward, 2023).

The Coalition government (2010-2015) enabled the establishment of statutory 'Combined Authorities' (CAs) and elected 'metro mayors', and negotiated a series of 'Devolution Agreements'. CAs are corporate bodies formed of two or more local government areas in order to exercise (initially mainly economic and transport) functions on a greater geographical scale than a single authority permits, using legislation inherited from the Labour government (The 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act). The Greater Manchester CA (GMCA) was established in April 2011, with four further CAs established in April 2014 (Sandford, 2023). The first 'Devolution Agreement' (with GMCA) was announced in November 2014 and included significant powers and new governance structures, including a directly elected CA mayor (HM Treasury and GMCA, 2014). The Greater Manchester experience encouraged other areas to seek to capture similar powers (Kenealy, 2016) and further Devolution Agreements were concluded during the coalition government (HM Treasury, 2014a; HM Treasury, 2015b). The Conservative government (2015 – 2024) continued this approach to devolution in England with a further 17 Devolution Agreements agreed by 2023 (Sandford, 2023).

2.5 Combined Authorities

2.5.1 Academic literature

There has been considerable academic interest in CAs. Shutt and Liddle (2019) suggest CAs are a response both to changing economic circumstances and to the 'English question' (Hazell, 2006) regarding devolution arrangements and political voice within England. The approach to devolution through CAs has been characterised as 'fragmented' and lacking a coherent framework, with a complex arrangement of geographies and some CA boundaries mismatched to their functional economic area (Shutt and Liddle, 2019, p. 196). Rather than representing a systematic devolution of powers, the process has been described as 'top-down, prescriptive and inconsistent' (Wall and Bessa-Vilela, 2016, p. 655) and resembling 'a contractual process with central government determining the terms' (Sandford, 2017, p. 63). This could be seen as continuing the traditional transactional approach to central-local relations in England (Ayres, Flinders and Sandford, 2018), with central government holding onto power over CA governance, funding and policy agendas (Shutt and Liddle, 2019).

Several authors have investigated in detail the process of development of the CA and Devolution Agreements in Greater Manchester. Studies trace the purposeful development of local collaboration and a clear regional narrative in Manchester over several decades; this narrative is located in the dominant economic paradigm of agglomeration economics and is supported by the selective use of evidence from think tanks and commissioned research

(Haughton *et al.*, 2016). Research has characterised the development of the GM Devolution Agreements as elite-driven and secretive, whilst also acting as a template for later agreements (Kenealy, 2016; Kenealy *et al.*, 2017).

The CAs of other areas, which were established a few years after Greater Manchester, have so far been the subject of less academic attention. For example, scholars have investigated the reasons behind the development of separate CAs in North East England, identifying local political tensions (Liddle and Shutt, 2019) and a range of issues around leadership, governance and historic legacies (Lemprière and Lowndes, 2019; Lowndes and Lemprière, 2018).

The leadership of CAs has been a further topic of research interest (Roberts, 2020). An elected 'metro mayor' was a prerequisite set by central government for the devolution settlement agreed with Greater Manchester, and this 'set a path for other areas' (Gains, 2015, p. 425). The principal argument for a mayor suggested that international experience showed they implant dynamic local leadership more effectively than other models (Deas, 2018; Glaeser, 2011; Katz and Bradley, 2013). Studies have therefore examined the establishment of directly elected mayors in CAs, with some questioning whether they offer an effective governance solution (Fenwick and Johnston, 2020) and arguing that in their early years CA metro-mayors have prioritised maximising grants from central government over developing local strategy (Sandford, 2020a).

The 'deal-making' approach to developing Devolution Agreements, through separate and confidential negotiations with each local area, has been accused

of being 'opaque' and lacking democratic accountability (Bentley and Pugalís, 2016, p. 19). Studies have consistently identified a somewhat limited approach to public engagement in the development of CAs and Devolution Agreements (e.g. Ayres, 2016; Blunkett, Flinders and Prosser, 2016; Prosser *et al.*, 2017; Randall and Casebourne, 2016). Democratic concerns include the lack of clarity on the roles of councillors and citizen engagement (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016), with associated consultation processes described as 'unhealthily limited' (Prosser *et al.*, 2017, p. 12) where 'efficient' decision-making has been prioritised ahead of democratic engagement (Sandford, 2020b). Despite the identified weaknesses in the approach adopted by the government, Ayres, Sanford and Coombes (2017) found that the adoption of informal, backstage approaches had helped key actors to build trust and to quickly develop innovative policy proposals in an uncertain and complex context. Subsequently, (Ayres, 2022) argued that politicians and policymakers must manage the trade-offs in informal governance arrangements if they are to promote democratic legitimacy.

In summary, despite their relatively recent establishment, a significant body of academic literature has already accumulated regarding CAs. Whilst CAs do not represent a systematic or coherent approach to devolution in England, they appear to have enabled the development of some innovative policy proposals through the (elite-driven) Devolution Agreement process.

2.5.2 Policy context

This section examines the arrangements for CAs, including the process for establishing a CA, their characteristics, governance arrangements, financial context and funding.

The power to establish CAs was created by The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 (LDEDCA), as amended by the Cities and Local government Devolution Act 2016 (CLGDA). CAs are formally established by the relevant Secretary of State through a Parliamentary Order following the request or consent of the councils concerned (LDEDCA section 103(1)). The area covered by a CA consists of the whole of two or more local government areas in England (LDEDCA section 103(2)); authorities can only be part of one CA (LDEDCA section 103(5)). In the 2009 Act there was a requirement for a CA's area to be made up of local government areas that have contiguous boundaries, but this requirement was removed by the CLGDA. CA functions initially related to transport (LDEDCA section 104) and economic development (LDEDCA section 105), but CLGDA extended this to 'local authority functions generally' (CLDGDA section 6(2)).

There are four stages to the creation of a CA (LDEDCA). First, the constituent councils carry out a governance review to test whether the CA would improve the exercise of relevant functions. Second, the councils publish a proposed governance 'scheme', including the area that will be covered, the constitution and functions. The third stage is a period of public consultation. Finally,

following approval by the Secretary of State, the CA is formally created by a statutory Parliamentary Order.

CAs were initially established in large urban areas, similar to the 'Metropolitan County Councils' established by the Local Government Act 1972. The first CA was established in Greater Manchester in 2011 (Greater Manchester Combined Authority Order 2011). In 2014, four CAs were established in South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Liverpool City Region and the North East. In 2016, the West Midlands CA and Tees Valley CA (the first CA outside a metropolitan county) were established. The existing CAs vary in population from 0.67 million (Tees Valley) to 2.34 million (West Midlands). A map of current CA areas can be found in figure 2.2. Table 2.2 summarises the constituent local authorities, the date each CA was established, and population estimate for each of the current CAs.

The Conservative UK government argued that CAs should adopt a directly elected mayoral governance model, based on the 'strong' mayor form of leadership (Heinelt and Hlepas, 2006, p. 31) where an individual is seen as personally and visibly accountable for decisions. The creation of the office of a directly elected mayor was a pre-condition for CAs to be given significant powers and funding, to the extent that local councils were 'being effectively held at ransom over the issue' (British Academy, 2017; Deas, 2018; Gains, 2015; Richards and Smith, 2015; Wall and Bessa-Vilela, 2016, p. 666). The government argued that only a directly elected mayor can provide the 'visibility, legitimacy and accountability' required for significant devolution (HM Treasury,

2014b). The use of direct election is unusual internationally in the context of inter-municipal collaborations (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007). Although the role of locally elected councillors in the context of the new CAs was not made clear in legislation or government guidance, to be effective mayors need to work closely with the leaders of the constituent councils (Gains, 2015; Lowndes and Gardner, 2016).

Figure 2-2 Map of CA areas (2021)



Source: Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open government Licence v.3.0. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2022

Table 2-2 Characteristics of CAs (2020)

Combined authority	Local authorities	Date established	Population (2020)
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	Cambridgeshire	02-Mar-17	859,800
	Cambridge		
	East Cambridgeshire		
	Fenland		
	Huntingdonshire		
	Peterborough		
Greater Manchester	South Cambridgeshire		
	Bolton	01-Apr-11	2,848,300
	Bury		
	Oldham		
	Manchester		
	Rochdale		
	Salford		
	Tameside		
	Trafford		
	Wigan		
Liverpool City Region	Halton	01-Apr-14	1,564,000
	Knowsley		
	Liverpool		
	Sefton		
	St Helens		
North East	Wirral	15-Apr-14	1,164,100
	Durham		
	Gateshead		
	South Tyneside		
North of Tyne	Sunderland	02-Nov-18	839,500
	Newcastle		
	North Tyneside		
South Yorkshire	Northumberland	01-Apr-14	1,415,100
	Barnsley		
	Doncaster		
	Rotherham		
Tees Valley	Sheffield	01-Apr-16	667,200
	Darlington		
	Hartlepool		
	Stockton-on-Tees		
	Middlesbrough		
West Midlands	Redcar and Cleveland	16-Jun-16	2,939,900
	Birmingham		
	Coventry		
	Dudley		
	Sandwell		
	Solihull		
	Walsall		
West of England	Wolverhampton	09-Feb-17	950,000
	Bath and North East Somerset		
	Bristol		
West Yorkshire	South Gloucestershire	01-Apr-14	2,345,200
	Bradford		
	Calderdale		
	Kirklees		
	Leeds		
	Wakefield		

Source: CA membership and dates from relevant Parliamentary Order, population estimates from Office for National Statistics population estimates (ONS, 2020)

The financial situation in which the first CAs were created provides important context for the case study. CAs were created in a setting of austerity. The National Audit Office estimated that English local authorities' spending power decreased by 28.5% from 2010–11 to 2016–17, in the context of significant increases in demand (Murphie, 2019, p. 96). Devolution Agreements, where agreed, provided CAs with significant new funding, most often an investment fund of around £30m per year for the next 30 years (Shutt and Liddle, 2019).

CAs were also given some powers to raise funding locally, although these have so far been used only sparingly. Available options to raise additional income included elected mayors' power to raise a levy on constituent local authorities under the CAs (Finance) Order 2017; power to levy a 2% precept on local business rate under The Business Rate Supplement Act 2009; and, in some Devolution Agreements, power to retain additional growth in business rates, with some areas piloting full retention of business rate revenue under The Non-Domestic Rating (Rates Retention) and (Levy and Safety Net) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 (table 2.3). Rather than using these powers, the six metro mayors elected in England in 2017 mainly concentrated on the distribution of central government funding and maximising funds from central government (Sandford, 2020a). In some respects, CAs developed into grant coalitions focussed on accessing central funds (Sandford, 2019).

Table 2-3 Availability and use of financial freedoms, by CA (2021)

Instrument	Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	Greater Manchester	Liverpool City Region	North East	North of Tyne	South Yorkshire	Tees Valley	West of England	West Yorkshire	West Midlands
Business Rates Retention Pilot	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Business Rate Supplement	Yes – not used	No	Yes – not used	No	No	No	No	Yes – not used	Yes – not used	Yes – not used
Mayoral Precept	Yes – not used	Yes – in use	Yes – in use	No	Yes – not used	Yes – not used	Yes – not used	No	Yes – not used	Yes – not used
Investment Fund Grant ¹	£20 million	£30 million	£30 million	N/A	£20 million	£30 million	£15 million	£30 million	£38 million	£36.5 million

Note: ¹ Investment Fund Grant is per year for up to 30 years

Source: Adapted from (Oakley, 2022, p. 35)

2.5.3 Devolution Agreements

The first 'Devolution Agreement' (with Greater Manchester CA) was announced in November 2014, including significant powers over transport, housing, planning, skills, business support and welfare in exchange for creating new city-regional governance structures, including a directly elected CA mayor (HM Treasury and GMCA, 2014). Kenealy (2016, p. 577) provides a detailed account of the events, actors and ideas involved in the process in Greater Manchester which, he says, 'lit a fire under other CAs and larger metropolitan councils', prompting other areas to want to capture similar powers.

On 21st July 2015, the recently formed Conservative government set out its approach to the 2015 Spending Review including inviting local areas to submit devolution proposals:

The government is committed to building strong city regions led by elected mayors, building on the ground-breaking Devolution Agreement with Greater Manchester in November 2014. The Chancellor has asked all relevant Secretaries of State to proactively consider what they can devolve to local areas and where they can facilitate integration between public services. City regions that want to agree a Devolution Agreement in return for a mayor by the Spending Review will need to submit formal, fiscally neutral proposals and an agreed geography to the Treasury by 4 September 2015. The Treasury and DCLG will work with city regions to help develop their proposals.

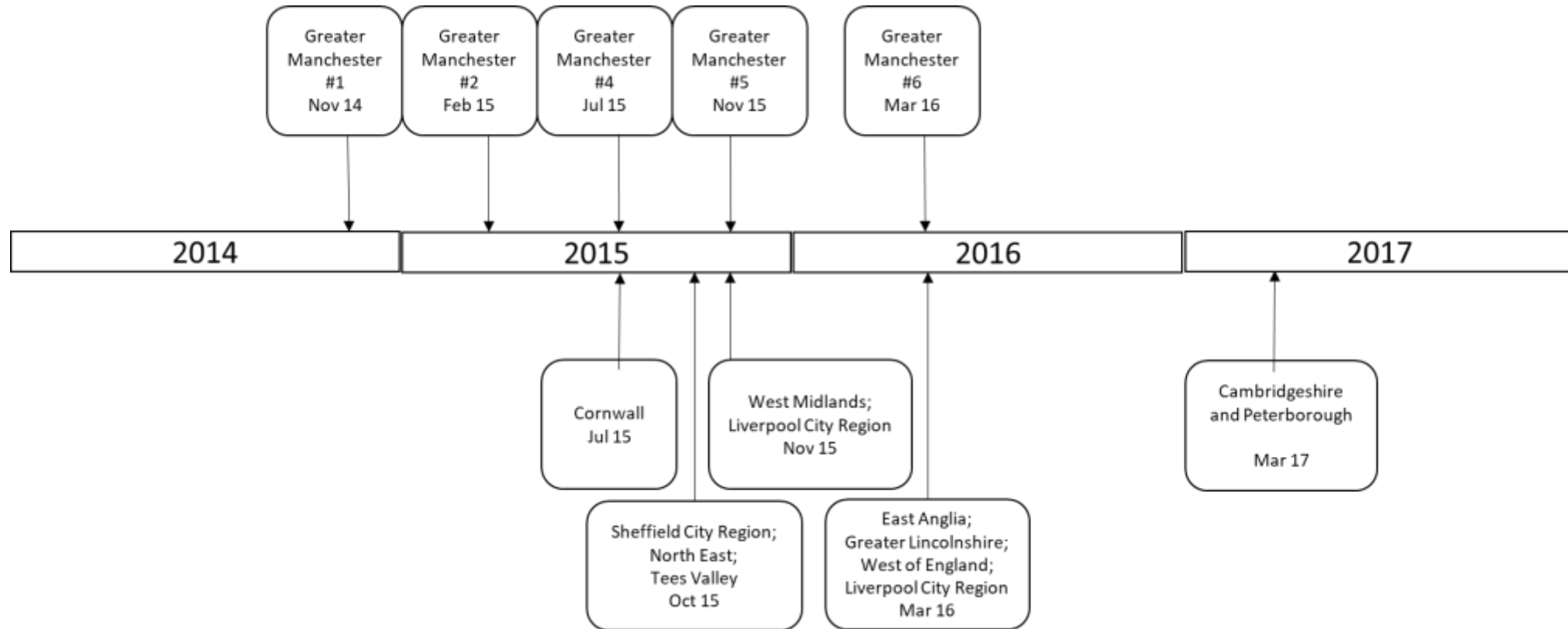
(HM Treasury, 2015a, p. 3.15)

Despite the short deadline for proposals (45 days over the summer holiday period), 38 bids for Devolution Agreements were received by the Treasury and within four years agreements were agreed with twelve areas. The government developed a

series of bespoke, bilateral agreements with CAs with directly elected mayors, covering a range of programmes and funding (Sandford, 2017). Figure 2.3 illustrates the timing of Devolution Agreements during the case study period (2014-2017). The Devolution Agreement themes commonly included adult education, business support, employment support, investment funds, transport and planning powers, and fiscal powers such as the retention locally of business rates revenue; less commonly incorporated themes included housing and health issues (Sandford, 2023).

In some Devolution Agreement negotiations, most councillors and members of the public did not know about the agreements until they were published (Blunkett, Flinders and Prosser, 2016). The process has been described as ‘opaque and largely secret deal negotiations’ (Ayres, Flinders and Sandford, 2018, p. 855). Critical scholars have highlighted lengthy times taken from announcing to implementing deals, unclear ground rules and assessment criteria, inadequate evaluation of progress, uneven outcomes in terms of resources and powers devolved, and the overarching context of severe cuts to public expenditure limiting both central and local capacity (Ayres, 2016; Lowndes and Gardner, 2016). CAs have generally not discussed matters of scrutiny, public participation or inclusivity (Sandford, 2019). Reflecting on the process in Greater Manchester, Ayres (2022, p. 31) concludes that ‘democratic legitimacy, transparency and public scrutiny were purposefully sacrificed to drive the devolution agenda forward’ and questions whether this prioritisation of elite decision making over the view of citizens will generate problems of ‘buy-in, public support and implementation challenges’ in the future.

Figure 2-3 English Devolution Agreements between 2014 and 2017



Source: Adapted from (Sandford, 2023, pp. 9-10)

2.5.4 Greater Manchester CA

As the site for the first CA, the first Devolution Agreement, and the most advanced level of devolution in England, Greater Manchester has been subject to extensive examination by scholars (for example Deas, 2018; Haughton *et al.*, 2016; Holden and Harding, 2015; Kenealy *et al.*, 2017; Lazo, 2019; Lazo, 2018; Lowndes and Lemprière, 2018; Rose *et al.*, 2016; Walker, 2017). It is important to review this research as GMCA has had significant influence on the development of later CAs.

In Greater Manchester, when the Metropolitan County Councils were abolished (2.4), political leaders from the ten constituent districts agreed to continue co-ordinated management of almost all its functions (Leach, 1991). The Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) was established and continued to bring politicians and officers from the ten districts into regular contact over a wide range of functions (Hebbert and Deas, 2000, p. 7). Greater Manchester maintained cohesive intergovernmental relations, a collaborative culture, and effective political/business engagement, whilst incrementally building key inter-authority institutions (Harding, Harloe and Rees, 2010; Kenealy, 2016). The GMCA agreed its first Devolution Agreement with government in November 2014 (HM Treasury and GMCA, 2014). The deal committed the GMCA to a directly elected mayor including the powers of the Police and Crime Commissioner. The proposals also included devolving further powers to the GMCA including business support and skills development. In February 2015 a 'memorandum of understanding' brought together control of health and social care budgets of £6 billion (Greater Manchester Health & Social Care Partnership, 2015). To date, GMCA has negotiated a series of seven major Devolution Agreements, six with central government and one with the NHS.

Holden and Harding (2015, p. 2) concluded that Greater Manchester has ‘pioneered a practical, evidence-based approach to local economic growth policies and programmes’, although Haughton *et al.* (2016) highlighted the somewhat selective use of evidence to support a clear regional narrative. Policy learning from Greater Manchester by subsequent CAs has been widely identified in the literature (Blakeley and Evans, 2018; Deas, 2018; Haughton *et al.*, 2016; Kenealy *et al.*, 2017; Shaw and Tewdwr-Jones, 2017; Walker, 2017).

2.6 Conclusion

Policymaking is increasingly conducted in the context of collaboration, as governments seek to address complex issues which are beyond the capacity of any single agency. This chapter has established the importance of inter-municipal collaborations as a setting for policymaking, across Europe and internationally. Inter-municipal collaboration is now widespread throughout Europe and an important phenomenon internationally (Bel and Warner, 2016; Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007).

By international standards, the UK remains a highly centralised state (Bailey and Wood, 2017). A series of attempts at decentralisation since 1974 has not led to a stable configuration for sub-national government. Since 2006, the geographic focus has shifted from historic regions to functional economic areas (city-regions) and the political approach has been increasingly through bilateral negotiations between central government and individual local areas.

The CA model establishes a statutory body, entered into on a voluntary basis by constituent local authorities. The model involves the creation of an additional tier of government constituted of local authorities without removing the existing authorities. The remit of CAs has expanded over time through a series of negotiated 'Devolution Agreements', from an initial focus on transport and the economy, to wider public policy areas such as housing and (in Greater Manchester) health services. The negotiation of many of the early Devolution Agreements was completed under a tight deadline imposed by central government. A range of grant funds have been devolved to CAs, although local tax revenue raising has been limited.

The development of the Greater Manchester CA has been seen as a template for future CAs; however, its context is highly specific and has involved long term inter-municipal collaboration and noticeable investment in capacity for research and evidence use. The empirical literature on CAs has not explored evidence use outside the somewhat atypical case of GMCA.

Having established the collaborative setting as an increasingly important setting for policymaking in the UK and internationally, the next chapter examines the literature on how evidence is used in policymaking and develops an initial conceptual framework which informs the research design.

3 THE USE OF EVIDENCE IN POLICYMAKING

3.1 Introduction

In order to develop a conceptual framework to address the research questions, this chapter analyses the relevant literatures and scholarly debates relating to the use of evidence in policymaking. Two important accounts of evidence use, empirical evidence on the characteristics of evidence which are ‘useful’ for policymakers, and typologies of evidence use are introduced. The literature lacks an overarching conceptual framework to explain the use of evidence in collaborative policymaking, and so the chapter reviews policy studies, evidence utilisation and governance literature to identify potential explanatory factors and synthesises these into an initial conceptual framework.

The approach to identifying relevant literature consisted of a mixture of keyword searches on bibliographic databases and snowballing from these identified sources and authors (Ridley, 2012). The wide range of terminology used around evidence utilisation meant that a variety of keywords were needed to identify relevant literature (Contandriopoulos et al., 2010b). This included ‘evidence-based policy’, ‘evidence-informed policy’ and ‘knowledge utilisation’. Searches were conducted on The Web of Science Service for UK Education (using the ‘all databases’ option) and Proquest (using the ‘scholarly journals’ and ‘books’ options), supplemented with Google Scholar. Automated weekly updates on the bibliographic databases were established to identify new relevant articles during the PhD. Finally, to identify further relevant papers, ‘snowballing’ searches were completed in two directions: reviewing the references in each of the identified papers; and then using the ‘cited

by' function in electronic databases to identify subsequent papers which themselves referenced the identified articles.

The first section of this chapter examines theoretical and empirical studies of evidence utilisation (3.2). It provides an overview of the academic debate on how evidence is used in policymaking, exploring the purposes for which evidence is employed and the factors affecting this utilisation. Two major accounts of the use of evidence in policymaking are introduced: the 'Evidence-Based Policymaking' (EBP) account, which became a normative model in much of the Anglophone academic and practice literature from the 1990s, and the 'Knowledge Utilisation' account, which points to the complexity of policymaking and the importance of social interaction, context, and narratives in understanding the role of evidence in policymaking (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015). There follows a discussion of the use of typologies in analysing the use of evidence, which introduces the typology used in analysing the thesis case study data. The section concludes by examining the use of narratives in support of policy arguments and the relationship between evidence use and policy narratives.

Section 3.3 summarises the limitations of the extant literature which this thesis aims to address. Previous studies often lack a detailed description of how evidence is used in policymaking, and there are limited studies of the use of evidence making at the local level or in the context of developing collaborative institutions and policy. Existing studies provide only cautious conclusions on how evidence is used to construct, test, enhance and communicate policy narratives, and the function of evidence in framing policy arguments has rarely been explored.

The next section examines findings from the literature to find key factors identified in policy studies as influential on policymaking, this leads to an initial conceptual framework which guides the analysis of the case study. The framework is used to inform the case study research design (4.4) and to structure the analysis of findings (chapter 8). The framework is later revised in the light of the case study findings, providing a tool for future research in this area (8.6).

3.2 Research on evidence utilisation

3.2.1 Evidence Based Policymaking and Knowledge Utilisation accounts

There has been considerable scholarly interest in the use of evidence in policymaking, in various disciplines, for at least sixty years (Boaz and Davies, 2019). An early (and still influential) analysis of the utilisation of research in policy (Weiss, 1979) recognised the multiple direct and (mainly) indirect ways in which research influences policy. This analysis has been deepened and expanded by later authors from policy studies and the wider political science discipline (Boaz and Davies, 2019; Nutley and Webb, 2000; Nutley, Davies and Smith, 2000).

The evidence utilisation literature is rather broad and disparate, producing several theories and using a range of concepts to explore links between evidence and policy development (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015). Two particularly influential accounts which are helpful to this thesis are the 'Evidence Based Policymaking' (EBP) account (Davies, 2004; Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2007; Pawson, 2006) which posits a

rational, instrumental use of evidence, and the 'Knowledge Utilisation' account which considers the interaction of research evidence and policy by focussing on 'ways of using research findings in policy and the pathways through which they get there' (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015, p. 18).

EBP has been subject to a wide range of definitions (Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2007). Echoing its roots in the Evidence Based Medicine movement (Young *et al.*, 2002), this account privileges an empirical 'scientific' epistemology (Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2007; Nutley, Powell and Davies, 2013; Pawson, 2006). Advocates argue that policy should be based on evidence developed through specific methods of data capture and analysis (Nutley, Powell and Davies, 2013). The quality of evidence has generally been assessed through study design, often privileging particular study designs such as randomised controlled trials (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015). Critics suggest that research design should follow from the specific research questions which are being addressed and their context, and that evidence hierarchies valuing one type of study design over others may neglect important issues (Nutley, Powell and Davies, 2013; Petticrew and Roberts, 2003).

The trend towards science and investigation as a contributor to social policy dates back at least to the middle of the 20th century, with political recognition of the potential value of the social sciences increasing during the 1960s and 1970s in the USA and UK, before waning somewhat in the 1980s (Bogenschneider and Corbett, 2011). Internationally, during the 1990s and 2000s, discourses on the use of evidence in policymaking became prevalent in the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Netherlands and across OECD countries (Bekker *et al.*, 2010; Lavis,

2006; Tham, 2018; Umbach, 2020). The UK New Labour government from 1997 espoused a technocratic approach to government (Cabinet Office, 1999; Labour Party, 1997). The concept of a rational, 'evidence-based' approach to policymaking reflected the downplaying of political ideology and class-based politics (Coote, Allen and Woodhead, 2004; Sanderson, 2009; Smith, 2013b; Solesbury, 2001). The focus on evidence-based policy 'depoliticised' (Standring, 2016, p. 1) state management, seeing issues more as technical problems to be addressed and less as part of public policymaking and political conflict (Diamond, 2015). The EBP account also aligned well with the principles of New Public Management (Greenhalgh and Russell, 2006; Hood, 1991), and the 'utilitarian turn' in social research from the 1980s (Solesbury, 2001, p. 4). The UK coalition government from 2010 to 2015 and Conservative governments from 2015 to 2024 continued an explicit commitment to the use of evidence in policymaking (Bristow, Carter and Martin, 2015; Cabinet Office, 2023).

Whereas the EBP account assumes an instrumental and linear link between evidence and policy, the 'Knowledge Utilisation' account considers the interaction of research evidence and policy by focussing on how evidence enters the policy process (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015). In this perspective, policymakers adopt a negotiated and relational problem-solving approach, with evidence sometimes deployed as part of political debate (Head, 2008; Head, 2010; Jones, 2009). Policy knowledge is created through interactions between actors in the policy process (Greenhalgh and Russell, 2006; Maybin, 2013) in line with the conceptualisation of policymaking as 'collective puzzlement' influenced by learning and interactions among policy actors (Heclo, 1974, p. 305). Here, knowledge use is seen as dependent on processes like sensemaking (Weick, 1995), developing collective

understanding (Contandriopoulos *et al.*, 2010), interpretation (Sanderson, 2004), rhetoric (Russell *et al.*, 2008), persuasion (Majone, 1989) and the institutionalisation of ideas (Radaelli, 1995).

3.2.2 Characteristics of useful evidence

A significant number of studies examine the characteristics of evidence that sometimes make it useful to policymakers. Clark and Majone (1985, pp. 11-17) identify four criteria of useable knowledge/evidence: its 'adequacy' (i.e. that it includes all relevant knowledge relevant to the issue), 'value' (it contributes to further understanding), 'legitimacy' (it is accepted by policy actors) and 'effectiveness' (it advances the state of the debate).

The literature consistently identifies similar facilitators and barriers to the use of evidence in policymaking. The researcher undertook an analysis of five systematic reviews which demonstrated the consistent identification of certain characteristics as facilitating the use of evidence in policymaking. These factors include the relevance of research, its timeliness, the provision of a concise and readable summary, and the existence of academic / practitioner professional relationships. The systematic reviews analysed here concerned the use of evidence in policymaking in government (Nutley, 2003; Oliver *et al.*, 2014; Van der Arend, 2014) and in health policy (Innvær *et al.*, 2002; Rutter, Hawkins and Parkhurst, 2013). Table 3.1 summarises the identified barriers and facilitators of evidence use in each systematic review.

Table 3-1 Facilitators and barriers to the use of research evidence in policy

Study	(Innvær <i>et al.</i> , 2002)	(Rutter, Hawkins and Parkhurst, 2013)	(Nutley, 2003)	(Van der Arend, 2014)	(Oliver <i>et al.</i> , 2014)
Policy area	Health	Health	Government	Government	Government
Identified facilitators	Relevant research Timely Summaries Personal contact Policy recommendations	Relevant research Timely Accessible Relationship building	Translation Enthusiasm Contextual analysis Credibility Leadership Support Integration	Relevant research Relationships Track record Policy knowledge Commitment to policy relevant research	Research characteristics Contact and collaboration Organisation and resources Policymaker characteristics Policy characteristics
Identified barriers	Opposite of above Mutual mistrust Power and budget struggles	Complexity		Nature of the policymaking process Differences in orientation and priorities	Lack of access to relevant research

Source: Author's own analysis of cited studies

3.2.3 Typologies of evidence use

Typologies are often used in evidence utilisation studies to help categorise the evidence use identified (National Research Council, 2012; Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2007). There are, however, significant difficulties in applying such typologies empirically. First, typologies relating to the social world do not generally 'meet the standard criteria of scientific typologies in which each category consists of an internally coherent set of variables, with the value of each variable predictably correlating with the values of each of the other variables in that particular category' (National Research Council, 2012, p. 39). As a result, the boundaries between different types of use are often blurred. Second, it is not possible directly to access policymakers' cognitive processes to assign a particular incident of the use of evidence to a particular category of the typology. Instead, the researcher has to interpret this based on information from the participants. It may be easier to identify some types of use than others, for example more direct, instrumental uses of evidence (Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2007).

Researchers often make a distinction between 'instrumental' and 'conceptual' uses of evidence (Caplan, 1979; Webber, 1991). Whilst instrumental use implies a direct impact of evidence on policy, conceptual use can involve more complex and indirect ways in which evidence impacts on policymakers' understanding of an issue (Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2007). In general, research finds that the conceptual use of evidence is more common than instrumental use (Albæk, 1995; Caplan, 1979; Innvær *et al.*, 2002; Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2007).

In her seminal paper in 1979, Weiss investigated the use of research by mental health policymakers in USA and found officials used evidence in a variety of ways

(Weiss, 1979). The resulting typology identified seven categories of research use and the processes by which evidence can influence policy. The 'knowledge-driven' model involves the development of research knowledge which leads directly to policy change, which Weiss sees as unlikely in the social sciences. The second model is the 'problem-solving' model, where research provides direct evidence to help solve a social problem. This model represented the 'prevailing imagery' of research use but, according to Weiss, happens rarely in practice. Weiss's third model is the 'interactive model' where social scientists and others inform policy decisions. Under the 'enlightenment' model, ideas from research gradually influence how social issues are seen by policymakers and wider society – Weiss saw this as the most widespread impact of research on policy. Weiss suggests that research can also be seen as 'part of the intellectual enterprise of the society' (Weiss, 1979, p. 430).

Finally, Weiss identified a category of evidence use which she labelled the 'political model' (Weiss, 1979, p. 429). This highlighted that research is sometimes used as 'ammunition' to support a pre-existing viewpoint, Majone (1989, p. 10) calls this the 'argumentative' use of evidence, which he defines as 'information selected from the available stock and introduced at a specific point in the argument in order to persuade a particular audience of the truth or fallacy of a statement'. Here, evidence is used to frame perceptions and demonstrate competence (Reid, 2003); policymakers value evidence in supporting their political control, rather than informing effective policymaking (Weiss and Gruber, 1984). Policy is seen as the outcome of a politically driven process, where evidence is sometimes commissioned to 'establish a point, rather than in the spirit of disinterested enquiry' and 'the core beliefs of policymakers are unaffected by information, as policy change is driven by external factors, not by ideas and analysis' (Young *et al.*, 2002, p. 218).

This thesis makes use of the typology of evidence use developed by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019). These authors compared the perspectives of policymakers (specifically legislators in Wisconsin and Indiana) with the predictions of four theories concerning the interface between researchers and policymakers. The study found that the theories were relatively consistent with the experience reported by policymakers, but also identified some apparent gaps in the existing theories around 'the contributions of research to relationships and to the policy process' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 790). The four theories considered in the study were, first, the politico-administrative decision-making model (Albæk, 1995), which argues that research becomes part of a policymaking discourse leading to practical actions. The second theory concerned the three categories of research use identified by Nutley, Davies and Walter (2007): instrumental, conceptual and strategic use. Community Dissonance Theory (Bogenschneider and Corbett, 2011) was the third theory considered, a development of the 'two communities' concept from Caplan (1979) which concerns the relationship between the policy community and research community. Finally, the agenda-setting theory of Kingdon (2011) was used to explain how research influences policy agendas dependent on the political and economic context.

This typology was used in the thesis for four main reasons. First, it is theoretically informed, based on the analysis of four different policy theories. Second, it makes use of recent empirical research with policy actors, although the subjects are state legislators rather than the local elected members and officials who are the subject of this thesis. Third, it was developed relatively recently and therefore benefits from accumulated research knowledge. Finally, the categories of research use were considered by the thesis researcher as directly relevant to policymaking at the local

level. The contributions of research to policymaking identified in the typology are summarised in table 3.2. The 14 identified types of contribution are categorised by the authors in relation to policy issues, individuals, relationships and policy processes.

Table 3-2 Typology of evidence use (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 789)

Policy issue considerations
Defining problems and raising awareness of why action is needed
Designing good legislation and stopping bad legislation
Offering new and emerging ideas
Assessing the political and economic feasibility of policy decisions
Individual considerations
Changing one's position on an issue
Explaining a vote on an issue
Informing one's position on an issue
Justifying a preexisting position on an issue
Providing a larger context for thinking about issues and an enlightened understanding of the complexity of issues
Relationship considerations
Earning the trust of colleagues as a knowledgeable and credible information source
Educating others
Policy process considerations
Persuading others by developing arguments that support one's view or anticipate and counter opposing views
Improving the decision-making process by enhancing debate, dialogue, collaboration, and compromise
Asking important questions for policy or political purposes

Source: Adapted from Table 2 in Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019, p. 789)

In summary, considerable scholarly interest has led to a number of models and accounts exploring the links between evidence and policy development. This section examined two major accounts, contrasting the rational assumptions of the EBP account with the relational focus of the KU account. A number of typologies of evidence uses were explored, including that developed by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019), which is deployed in this thesis.

3.2.4 Policy narratives and evidence

This section examines the character of narrative and its relationship to evidence use in policymaking. Policy actors use narratives to link evidence to policy issues in ways that support their preferred policy outcomes. Narrative is a category of communication and an important means by which humans organise and convey information (Herman, 2004; Jones and McBeth, 2010). A narrative is ‘a story with a temporal series of events unfolding in a plot that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols and archetypal characters the culminates in a moral to the story (Jones and McBeth, 2010, p. 329). To advance their desired policy outcomes, policy actors seek to demonstrate how evidence supports their preferred course of action (Fisher, 2003). Narrative perspectives have a long history in policy research, particularly since the late 1980s with major works of Stone (1989), Majone (1989), Hajer (2002) and others. An increasing number of studies concern the use of evidence in narratives, although general conclusions remain tentative (Shanahan *et al.*, 2018) and the function of evidence in framing policy arguments has rarely been explored (Stucki and Sager, 2018).

The capacity of narratives to influence belief and action is supported by literature in a range of disciplines including political science, marketing and psychology (Jones and McBeth, 2010). Dudley (2013) suggests that policy narratives have the potential to open (and close) policy windows and to influence whether a policy idea is (or is not) adopted. By providing a story convincingly connecting elements of the past, present and future, a narrative presents a version of the future which (it suggests) will happen if actions are carried out as described (Dudley, 2013; Roe, 1994). Dudley (2013, p. 1142) suggests that ‘the story can typically have the capacity to paint a picture of moving through logical steps from a problematic past, through a transforming present, towards a better future’. Narratives are important in policy studies for several reasons, for example they carry values, hold keys to agency (such as framing problems and selecting which evidence to consider), and provide a point of intervention in policymaking (Lowndes, 2016).

Narratives are most likely to be successful when they are ‘cognitively plausible, dramatically or morally compelling and, importantly, they chime with perceived interests’ (Boswell, Geddes and Scholten, 2011, p. 1). Policymakers ‘create persuasive policy stories’ by making selective use of evidence (Stevens, 2011, p. 237). Policy actors rely on ‘cultural frames’ (Schon and Rein, 1995), values systems and ideas, to guide this process. They emphasise certain aspects of the available evidence and de-emphasise other aspects, constructing plausible accounts of ‘what is and what they believe ought to be going on’ (Jones, Shanahan and McBeth, 2014, p. 209). Policy narratives are therefore used as arguments in a collective process of sense-making (Fisher, 2003; Weick, 1995). Policy narratives also use emotion to influence stakeholders – for example, by seeking to arouse anxiety (for example by the use of symbolic language) about a situation in order to gain support for a

suggested solution to the threat and tap into listeners' ability to reimagine the future (Wolf and Van Dooren, 2017). Narratives are also used by political elites to promote favourable interpretations of complex and contentious issues (Boswell, 2013, p. 630), as a key part of 'political manoeuvring' to construct particular problem definitions in the minds of citizens (Stone, 1997, p. 156).

Narratives can be seen as stories whose structure consists of four key elements: a 'setting' or 'stage' consisting of some consequential features of the relevant policy area (such as geography or economic conditions), a set of one or more 'characters', a 'plot' which 'situates the characters and their relationship in time and space', and a 'moral of the story' which 'gives purpose to the characters' actions through a policy solution' (Shanahan *et al.*, 2018, p. 176). Stone (1989) categorises characters as heroes (the potential fixer of the policy problem), villains (those who are causing the problem) and victims (those harmed by the problem). Characters can be individuals or anthropomorphised abstractions such as 'the environment'. Story types include the story of decline (telling a tale of how things are getting worse), stymied progress, and helplessness and control (focussing on how a bad situation that is out of control may be controlled and improved) (Jones, Shanahan and McBeth, 2014; Stone, 1997). Studies have rarely elaborated the role of evidence in the policy process, although some studies suggest that policy narratives supported by evidence may be more persuasive than those without (Smith-Walter *et al.*, 2016)

Evidence is important in developing and deploying narratives. Evidence is used in constructing, testing and communicating narratives (Rickinson *et al.*, 2019) and to enhance the perceived authority and legitimacy of policy narratives (Wolf and Van Dooren, 2017). Mosley and Gibson (2017) suggest that evidence is 'embedded

within a narrative that explains why the evidence matters and what should be done about it' (p.702), whereas Schlaufer (2018) argues that scientific evidence is 'always' embedded in narrative stories when it is used in policy controversies (p.108). The degree of influence of scientific evidence compared to narratives in persuading policymakers has been disputed, with claims by some authors that narratives have a greater influence (e.g. Jones, Shanahan and McBeth, 2014) being disputed by other researchers (e.g. Jones, 2014).

A recent attempt to provide a systematic account of how evidence is used in narratives was provided by Schlaufer (2018) through an analysis of the use of results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in direct-democratic votes on school policy that took place in Swiss cantons between 2000 and 2012. This research found that evidence plays different roles in narratives depending on which narrative element it addresses. Evidence was most often used to demonstrate a policy problem, such as poor academic achievement; in these cases, evidence was associated with the narrative setting, introducing a narrative of decline. Where evidence was used to support a preferred policy solution it was linked to the moral of the story, as part of a narrative of control (most often regarding supposedly effective policy interventions demonstrating positive impact in other countries); conversely evidence was also linked to the moral of the story when used to refute alternative proposed policy solutions. Evidence could also be associated with a narrative's characters, for example presenting evidence as an 'instrument of the villain' suggesting that the story of decline was actually an intentional deception, or it could be associated with the narrative plot, for example by focusing on the evidence itself and portraying this as unconvincing.

This section has introduced the importance of narrative in policymaking, and outlined the results of recent research examining the role of evidence in policy narratives. Existing studies show that evidence is used to construct, test, enhance and communicate policy narratives, although general conclusions remain cautious and the function of evidence in framing policy arguments has seldom been explored.

3.3 Limitations of the extant literature

Several limitations of the extant literature can be identified, when considering the research questions (1.4): (a) understanding in detail how evidence is used in policymaking; (b) examining evidence use locally rather than nationally; (c) investigating evidence use in early-stage collaborative contexts; (d) the lack of an overall conceptual framework for analysing the use of evidence in this context; and (e) how evidence is used to with policy narratives and its function in framing policy.

First, the literature identifies the lack of detail in past studies regarding *how* evidence is used, for example the politics of evidence use and the complexity of political and official policymaking (Parkhurst, Ettelt and Hawkins, 2018b). For example, a study by Kneale *et al.* (2017) examined 21 studies relating to local evidence use in public health decision making and found that few studies provided descriptive accounts of research evidence use, which prevented the development of models explaining how research evidence influenced local public health practice. Past studies have often used methodologies designed to track the journey of research evidence from universities to policymakers, such as interviewing policymakers about their use of research or tracking research citations in policy documents (Yanovitzky and Weber, 2020). A systematic review by Oliver *et al.* (2014) examined research on the use of

evidence across all policy fields, examining 145 studies. The most common research method was semi-structured interviews (79 studies) or surveys (44). Eleven studies used observations in their data collection, and 37 used documentary analysis (although only 14 reported the results of this analysis), representing less than a quarter of included studies. However, a recent study suggests some increase in the use of documentary analysis: a systematic review of 319 qualitative health studies (Verboom and Baumann, 2022) found that a large majority of studies drew on interviews (88%) and/or documents (50%), while observational methods remain less commonly used (10%). Parkhurst, Hawkins and Ettelt (2018, p. 223) noted the need for further attention to be given to 'policy processes, the actors involved, the forms of contestation associated with policymaking, and the institutions that shape these processes and, by extension, evidence use'. This thesis contributes to the body of studies by using documentary and observational methods alongside semi-structured interviews to understand in detail how evidence was used in policymaking in the case study.

Second, existing studies provide only limited understanding of the process and politics of evidence use at *local* level. Most studies of evidence use have focused on the international or state level rather than local-level policy or practice (Durrant *et al.*, 2023). A recent systematic review of qualitative studies relating to the use of evidence in health policymaking found that only 24% of 319 published studies concerned policymaking at the local level (Verboom and Baumann, 2022, p. 893). This is significant because evidence utilisation at local level appears to exhibit distinct characteristics. For example, examining evidence use around health policymaking, Petticrew *et al.* (2004, p. 814) found that 'local compared with national needs for evidence were different, and so evidence at a local, micro level was often

required in addition to evidence that provided a national picture'. The relationship between evidence and policy at local level has been described as political, contested and nuanced (Boaz and Davies, 2019), as well as values-driven (Cairney, 2019). Local Government requires specific approaches to the use of evidence (Cheetham *et al.*, 2022). Evidence that aligns to the local political beliefs and could support cross-organisational goals is viewed by local decision makers as most useful, and political considerations and public perceptions influence elected members' policymaking (Kneale *et al.*, 2017). The extant research on the use of evidence in policy activities also tends to focus on appointed officials rather than politicians (Verboom and Baumann, 2022). This thesis therefore explicitly considers the policymaking processes, institutions and actors involved in local policymaking, including politicians.

Third, there is little research concerning how evidence is used in the *collaborative* setting, specifically in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations. No existing research on evidence use in inter-municipal collaborations was identified in the literature review. However, results from two areas of related research suggest that the collaborative context significantly impacts on the use of evidence in policymaking. First, 'implementation research' has suggested that inter-organisational collaboration can promote evidence-based practice. Implementation research has been defined as 'the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of proven clinical treatments, practices, organisational, and management interventions into routine practice, and hence to improve health' (Eccles *et al.*, 2012, p. 2). Implementation researchers have developed a range of conceptual frameworks describing the various factors impacting on the successful adoption of evidence-based practices and programmes. For example, Greenhalgh

et al. (2004) identified an 'outer context' of the implementation process, where inter-organisational collaboration and networks can promote the adoption of an evidence-based innovation. Similarly, Aarons, Hurlburt and Horwitz (2011) identified an 'outer context' of implementation and suggested that inter-organisational networks between agencies which employ evidence-based practices can increase the likelihood of adoption of such practices. The second indication that the collaborative context influences the use of evidence comes from studies in specific policy areas which have highlighted significant relationships between collaboration and evidence use. In child mental health, recent research found that the frequency of policymakers' use of research evidence was associated with the frequency of inter-agency collaborations (Purtle *et al.*, 2022). In child welfare policy, Hyde *et al.* (2016, p. 59) concluded that collaboration 'opened up the door to many different types of evidence being acquired, shared, and debated among child welfare policymakers and other key stakeholders'. Similarly, in youth services, research suggests that the availability of an inter-organisational collaboration influenced whether research evidence and evidence-based practices were used (Palinkas *et al.*, 2014; Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Taken together, these studies suggest that the collaborative setting has a significant impact on evidence use in policymaking which is underexplored in the available literature. Existing studies also highlight specific governance and organisational issues affecting partnerships at an early stage in their formation (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998), however the effect of these issues on evidence use has not been examined.

Fourth, whilst there are dozens of models explaining all or part of the process of evidence utilisation, no overarching theory has been developed and there is no overall conceptual framework which can be applied to the context of early-stage

collaborations. The remainder of this chapter constructs a theoretically informed conceptual framework to aid analysis of the use of evidence in inter-municipal collaborations.

Finally, existing research provides limited conclusions on how evidence is used in relation to policy narratives and the function of evidence in framing policy arguments.

3.4 Analysing evidence use in Inter-Municipal Collaborations

This section uses insights from policy and governance studies to establish an initial conceptual framework on the use of evidence in policymaking in the collaborative context. The framework is designed to help structure analysis of the primary research in the thesis, to better understand the application of evidence in the setting of inter-municipal collaboration. The initial framework will be tested and refined through the analysis of the case study and further literature, resulting in a final conceptual framework (8.6) which can be used in future research.

To build a conceptual framework for this thesis, it was necessary to identify key factors which are likely to affect the use of evidence in the policymaking process. There are a number of similarities in analyses in the literature comparing theories of the policy process (e.g. Cairney, 2011; Heikkila and Cairney, 2018; John, 2003). These three reviews of major policy theories identify five common factors in each of the theories, although these are variously labelled 'processes', 'pillars' and 'elements' in different theories. The five factors are policy actors, institutions, networks, ideas, and context. Given the focus of this thesis on evidence use in collaborative settings, governance and the type/characteristics of evidence are also

included in the initial conceptual framework. Care is required in combining elements from different policy theories, which may be based on conflicting assumptions (John, 2013). For example, the understanding of policy actors varies between policy theories (Tosun and Workman, 2018): actors are variously seen as having important beliefs which affect how they develop policy positions (Sabatier, 1987), as policy entrepreneurs in influencing the agenda and affecting policy change (Kingdon and Stano, 1984), or as influenced by policy narratives (Jones and McBeth, 2010).

In the subsections that follow each factor is discussed in turn as it bears on the use of evidence in collaborative policymaking, based on a critical review of the relevant literature.

3.4.1 Policy actors and evidence use

Policy actors, individuals or collectives who may be affiliated to a government or non-government organisation with an interest in the given policy issue (Weible and Sabatier, 2018), affect how policy is developed and how policy problems are approached (Colebatch, 2020; Howlett, McConnell and Perl, 2015; Sabatier, 1991). Psychological research suggests that individual capabilities and personal characteristics affect policymaking processes (Hart, 1991). This includes the beliefs and world views of key actors (Cottam, 2019; Lau and Sears, 1986), their cognitive approaches and capacity (Axelrod, 1976; Nutt, 1989), as well as their emotions and motivations (Cottam, 2019; Etheredge, 2013). Different policy actors make use of different kinds of knowledge in different arenas (Brechin and Sidell, 2000; Freeman and Sturdy, 2015; Maybin, 2016), for example actors may prioritise knowledge which is empirical, theoretical, tacit or practical (Maybin, 2013). Evidence utilisation studies

also frequently identify policymakers' characteristics influencing the use of evidence, including their (lack of) familiarity with research and skills in its use, their beliefs about the usefulness of evidence in policymaking, and individual values and experience (Oliver *et al.*, 2014).

Policy is seldom developed by an individual policymaker, particularly in the collaborative context, and the range of policy actors involved may vary at different stages in the policymaking process (Howlett and Cashore, 2014). Research highlights the influence of policy elites and intergovernmental policy communities (Sabatier, 1991). Policy decisions, particularly for complex and cross-cutting problems, emerge from politics, negotiation, and debate; decision makers adopt a negotiated and relational problem-solving approach, with evidence often deployed as part of political debate (Head, 2008; Head, 2010). In this process of collective problem solving, evidence is perceived and used in different ways by policy actors who view it through what Head (2008) describes as different 'lenses' such as political know-how, systematic research, and professional practice. Social settings which foster recurring interaction and communication among a small group of participants may be particularly favourable to developing conditions for collaborative problem-solving and the development of trust (Checkel, 2001; Contandriopoulos *et al.*, 2010; Elgström and Jönsson, 2000; Reh, 2012). People develop shared understandings through inter-personal interaction, especially when exposed to diverse points of view over prolonged time periods, and this shapes their use and interpretation of evidence (Coburn, Honig and Stein, 2009).

There are potential disadvantages to collective policymaking. When policymakers form a closely knit group, they can be subject to a negative form of consensus

seeking which Janis (1973) described as 'Groupthink'. He described a process of collective thinking which, given antecedents such as a cohesive in-group, can reduce the policymakers' capacity to assess alternative courses of action (Hart, 1991; Janis, 1973). The groupthink theory suggests that members of the group come to value the group and their membership of the group so highly that they seek unanimity on issues by suppressing doubts in themselves and others. Later research identified further antecedents, such as time pressure to reach a decision, which could be added to the model (Aldag and Fuller, 1993; Moorhead, Ference and Neck, 1991). Some empirical studies on groupthink have been criticised for including only limited variables and using inappropriate modes of measurement (Park, 1990). Approaches to mitigate the effects of groupthink have been suggested, such as adopting "devil's advocate" roles in discussions, where designated group members advocate oppositional positions thus encouraging other group members to avoid premature conclusions through engaging in greater debate (Akhmad, Chang and Deguchi, 2021; MacDougall and Baum, 1997).

In summary, policy actors affect how policy is developed through a range of mechanisms, and have different approaches to the use of evidence. Particularly in the collaborative context, most policymaking involves considerable interaction between actors, and in this process of repeated interactions, shared understandings are developed, and evidence is viewed through various 'lenses'. The group of actors can become overly cohesive, reducing policymakers' capacity to assess alternative policy options, although this can be mitigated by mechanisms to avoid premature conclusions.

3.4.2 Institutions and evidence use

The thesis adopts Olsen's definition of an institution as 'an enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and changing external circumstances' (Olsen, 2007, p. 3). Although historical institutionalism has become an influential theoretical perspective in the social sciences (Béland, 2005), until recently relatively few studies examined institutions in relation to evidence use in policymaking (Ettelt, Hawkins and Alvarez-Rosete, 2013; Liverani, Hawkins and Parkhurst, 2013; Lorenc *et al.*, 2014). Analysing international experience in the use of research in health policy, Parkhurst, Ettelt and Hawkins (2018a) argued that political institutions are crucial in understanding evidence utilisation in policymaking including 'which evidence is used, when, by whom, and to what ends' (p.230). They suggested that institutions shape which policy actors are engaged in policymaking, provide direction to both thinking and action involving evidence use through institutional norms, provide venues where debates on framing policy issues take place, and set boundaries on how actors can utilise evidence. Liverani, Hawkins and Parkhurst (2013) conducted a systematic review of 56 empirical studies examining the influence of institutional mechanisms on evidence use but found that 'our understanding of such influences remains piecemeal given the limited number of empirical analyses on this subject, the paucity of comparative works, and the limited consideration of political and institutional theory in these studies' (p.1).

Institutions and organisational structures affect the normative context of practice (Boswell and Smith, 2017; Lowndes, 1997; March and Olsen, 1989; Sanderson, 2004); constrain policy actors through formal and informal institutional rules, practices and narratives (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013); develop networks of actors

(March and Olsen, 1989) and can facilitate the social learning process in organisations (Lowndes, 1997; March and Olsen, 1989; Sanderson, 2004). Institutions give stability to shared beliefs, structure meaning, and constrain perceptions of the possibilities of change and understanding of different interests (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013; March and Olsen, 1989). Institutional norms act as filters and direct attention towards (and away from) certain topics (Daviter, 2015; Smith, 2013b). Organisational structures affect how evidence is used (Boswell, 2009; Daviter, 2015) and can offer opportunities for veto players, defined as actors whose agreement is needed to establish new organisations or policies (Tsebelis, 2002). Evidence which supports existing institutionalised paradigms and cultures is encouraged, whereas more challenging ideas are institutionally blocked or revised (Daviter, 2015; Ettelt, Hawkins and Alvarez-Rosete, 2013; Smith, 2013b). Information that diverges from current organisational assumptions is often rejected (Daviter, 2015; Smith, 2013b).

The temporal focus of the case study for this thesis is the stage of institutional formation. Lowndes and Lemprière (2018, p. 229) view the process of institutional formation as 'animated' (influenced by individual actors' interventions), 'embedded' (influenced by temporal and spatial effects) and 'nested' (influenced by multi-level relationships). The formation of institutional rules is constrained by path dependence, higher level institutional rules and the context of geographically proximate institutions (Lowndes and Lemprière, 2018). Historical institutionalists use the concept of 'path dependence' in the development of political institutions (Hall, 1986; Lowndes, 2001; Pierson, 1996), although there are a variety of definitions of this concept in the literature. A broad definition was suggested by Sewell Jr (1990, p. 15): 'that what has happened at an earlier point in time will affect

the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time’.

The key features include that path dependent processes are sensitive to events occurring in the early stages, with subsequent sequences marked by ‘relatively deterministic causal patterns’ (Mahoney, 2000, p. 511). Commitment to an approach over time produces ‘increasing returns’ and it becomes increasingly difficult to take an alternate path (Pierson, 2000).

When new institutions are forming, and more generally as institutions compete economically and socially for political power and institutional legitimacy, there is pressure for those in a particular organisational ‘field’ (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 148) to become more similar to each other. Such a ‘field’ is defined as ‘those organisations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life...[e.g.] other organizations that produce similar services or products’ (p.148). According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 150), ‘institutional isomorphic change’ occurs through three mechanisms: coercive (responding to pressures from other organisations), mimetic (responding to uncertainty through copying existing models) and normative (responding to pressures from professionalisation). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggested that in uncertain situations, such as establishing a new type of organisation, there is a particular tendency for organisations to be modelled after other organisations which are perceived to be successful. In later work, they argued organisations often borrow institutional rules from bodies that are seen as coping well with change (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991).

In summary, institutions to some extent shape and constrain the behaviour of policy actors, affecting the normative context of practice through formal and informal rules, practices and narratives (Lowndes, 1997; March and Olsen, 2010; Sanderson,

2004). In the collaborative context, institutions can also facilitate or constrain the development of networks of actors and facilitate social learning processes (Lowndes, 1997; March and Olsen, 1989; Sanderson, 2004). Organisational preferences act as filters, directing attention and suppressing evidence that conflicts with the organisational premises, so that actors in different institutions view issues and problems (and evidence) in diverse ways (Daviter, 2015; Smith, 2013b). The formation of institutional rules in collaborations is constrained by path dependence, higher level institutional rules, and the context of geographically proximate institutions (Lowndes and Lemprière, 2018). Institutions may experience pressure to 'isomorphic change' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 150), borrowing institutional rules from other apparently successful organisations.

3.4.3 Networks and evidence use

This factor concerns the relationships between policy actors and participants such as interest groups who are involved in the policy process (Jordan, Halpin and Maloney, 2004). The literature on policy networks conceptualises them in three main ways: as configurations of individuals or organisations engaged in a policy sector, as a mode of governance, or as a metaphor for the reality of governance (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992). In the first of these conceptualisations, networks refer to the relationships between policymakers and the stakeholders with whom they engage. Policymakers seek information, advice and legitimacy from interacting with interest groups, who in turn exchange information for potential influence on policy decision. Government may have operational processes which advantage some participants, and hence some sources of evidence, over others (Heikkila and Cairney, 2018).

A range of studies have identified the role of policy networks in the use of evidence for policy. Oliver *et al.* (2014) noted that one of the most frequently reported facilitators for evidence use was collaboration between researchers and policymakers. Social relations are influential in the use of evidence in terms of the assessment of the credibility of evidence and its interpretation, which involves 'a process of meaning making between a range of participants' (Pearce, Wesselink and Colebatch, 2014, p. 161). Researchers have analysed policy communities using network analysis, for example around climate change policy (Ingold and Varone, 2012) and to understand how networks of policy actors influence evidence use (Contandriopoulos *et al.*, 2017). Other researchers have examined the structure and meaning of networks to understand conditions affecting evidence use and have explored network design interventions using social structure to spread health messages (Oliver and Faul, 2018). Smith and Weishaar (2018) analysed the operation of networks around two case studies (European policy on second hand smoke and English policy on tackling health inequalities), concluding that policy networks provided a useful analytical framework. They identify the frequency of interaction and communication between network members as leading to 'high levels of intra-network trust' (p.427). Finally, analysis of three health policy networks in a low-income country highlighted the diversity of networks as influential on the variety of evidence and ideas encountered by participants, with more diverse networks linked to more innovative policy development (Shearer *et al.*, 2018).

In summary, networks are viewed as relationships between interested groups and stakeholders with whom policymakers consult and negotiate (Rhodes, 1990). Policymakers interact with interest groups in seeking information, advice and legitimacy, and in turn the interest groups exchange information as they seek to

affect policy decisions (Heikkila and Cairney, 2018). Networks influence the perceived credibility of evidence and its interpretation, and diverse networks enable participants to encounter a variety of evidence.

3.4.4 Ideas and evidence use

An early acknowledgement of the important role of ideas in policymaking was provided by Max Weber, who used the metaphor of ideas serving like railway switchmen who ‘direct interest-based action down one track or another’ (Gerth and Mills, 1946, p. 280). Unfortunately, subsequently the contribution of ideas to policymaking was under-theorised (Friedland, 1991) and for several decades little was learned about the role of ideas in the policy process (Hall, 1993). However, since the 1990s, political science research has further examined how policymaking behaviour may be influenced by ideas as well as self-interest (Campbell, 2002). Three categories of ideas are particularly relevant to policymaking: overarching paradigms, policy frames, and specific policy initiatives (Béland, 2005; Smith, 2017). The first category, overarching cognitive paradigms, ideologies or worldviews, provide a coherent set of theories about how the economy, politics and society operate – for example neoliberalism or Marxism (Campbell, 2002). The second category, drawing from ideas of social movement theory, concerns the ways in which policy problems are framed or constructed in order to legitimise certain perspectives and solutions (Riker, 1986; Schon and Rein, 1995). The final category involves ideas presented as specific policy solutions, programmes or initiatives (Kingdon, 2011).

The Knowledge Utilisation account suggests that the acceptance of policy ideas (and evidence) to some extent depends on their match to the existing values and norms of an organisation (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015). The policy studies literature highlights that potential policies are built within constraining policy ideas (Campbell, 2002), including the preferences of higher tier governments. Prinja (2010) argues that belief systems are structured at three levels: a 'deep core' reflective of an actor's underlying philosophy, which tends not to be susceptible to change, a 'policy core', and 'secondary aspects', which are more likely to change (p. 65). Ideas shape the frame within which policy actors understand a policy issue, so evidence that does not fit a policy actor's framing of the issue is likely to be rejected, and some types of evidence may be viewed as superior to others (Prinja, 2010).

An important contribution to understanding the role of ideas in evidence use for policymaking was provided by Smith (2013a), who adopted a discursive institutionalist approach to analyse health policymaking in the UK. Smith's analysis demonstrated that ideas from research about health inequalities which supported existing institutionalised policy ideas were encouraged, whereas more challenging ideas were blocked or significantly altered. For example, whilst psychosocial ideas relating to health inequalities, such as the impact of social capital, were often reported in policy documents, these documents ignored the linked effects of material and social inequalities since the latter contradicted the dominant individualistic paradigms of the time (Smith, 2013b).

In summary, established ideas are seen as influencing policy actors' and institutional framing of issues. In turn this framing influences the response to evidence, rejecting or significantly altering evidence which challenges existing perspectives.

3.4.5 Context and evidence use

The context within which policymaking takes place covers a wide range of features of the environment which can influence policy decisions (Heikkila and Cairney, 2018). Leichter (1979) identified four categories of policy context: situational factors (such as political instability), structural factors (such as demographics), cultural factors (such as expectations around democratic participation), and environmental factors (such as the role of companies). Features of the wider policy 'environment' which policymakers may consider when identifying and addressing policy issues include demographic, economic, social, legal and technical factors (Cairney, 2011), alongside policymakers' interpretation of the national 'mood' and pertinent conditions for given policy issues (Heikkila and Cairney, 2018).

Research has identified a range of contextual issues which may be relevant to policymaking. Previous commitments such as policies, rules, programmes etc inherited by policymakers on entering office may influence future policy (Rose, 1990). For example, an existing programme of collaborative research development might be inherited by a new collaboration. Policy Feedback Theory (Skocpol, 1995) highlights the effect of previous policy decisions, for example where these affect how future problems are defined and shape future governance arrangements (Mettler and SoRelle, 2018).

In summary, context affects policy in several ways. Collins, Green and Hunter (1999) identify four main mechanisms. First, context influences agenda setting and whether issues enter political debates. Second, socio-historical context helps to understand the contingent nature of policymaking. Third, context influences the nature of the policy process and interacts with policy actors, for example policy

actors may ignore aspects of the policy environment whilst highlighting others. Finally, context influences the political feasibility of policy proposals. Whilst their research considered health care reform, these categories are also relevant to other policy areas.

3.4.6 Governance and evidence use

This section critically examines the literature on governance and its relationship to evidence use. After introducing the key governance concepts and theories, the section examines governance in the context of collaborations which highlights the importance of informal governance approaches in this context. The remainder of the section this section discusses to the concept of informal governance and its impact on policymaking in collaborative contexts. The section provides an overview of definitions in the literature, which later influence how informal governance is identified in the case study (4.7). It then introduces the concepts of ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ and applies this to the context of policymaking. The section then critically reviews the literature on the reasons for the apparent rise in the use of informal approaches to governance in recent decades, and the potential advantages and disadvantages of this approach. Next, it examines how the negotiation of English ‘CAs’ and ‘Devolution Agreements’ has involved the development of public policy and resource decision-making through ‘informal governance’ (Peters, 2006) to an unusually large degree (Ayres, 2022). Finally, the section explores some of the inherent difficulties in studying informality and some of the approaches adopted in the literature.

The concept of governance does not have a definitive definition in public administration (Wang and Ran, 2023) and is used in various ways in other disciplines (Kjaer, 2004). The term has been variously used to refer to international governance through supranational bodies, effective public administration, and governance through networks and other non-hierarchical mechanisms (Fukuyama, 2016). Often in political science literature the term relates to the increased involvement of a range of non-state actors in governing (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009). Within the context of collaborations, governance has been viewed as a 'means to steer the process that influences decisions and actions' (O'Leary, Gerard and Bingham, 2006, p. 7) and as 'set of coordinating and monitoring activities that must occur in order for collaborations to survive' (Bryson, Crosby and Stone, 2006, p. 49). This thesis adopts the definition of Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh (2012, p. 2): 'the act of governing, be it in the public and/or private sector'.

Rhodes saw governance as concerning the changing role of the state, arguing that the British state had transformed from a unitary state into a 'differentiated polity' involving a range of policy networks, sets of (in)formal institutional links between government and non-government actors constructed around shared interests in public policymaking (Rhodes, 2007, p. 7). Rhodes defined governance as involving 'self-organizing, inter-organizational networks characterized by interdependence, resource-exchange, rules of the game, and significant autonomy from the state' (Rhodes, 1997, p. 15). However, this has been criticised by other scholars as unduly restrictive due to its reference to specific governing structures (e.g. Kjaer, 2011).

The theory of governance was further developed by Stoker (1998), who viewed governance as concerned with institutions and actors both from and beyond

government, blurring responsibilities for tackling socio-economic issues, identifying the power dependence in relationships between institutions involved in collective action, and opening up the potential for government to use new tools and techniques. Stoker saw governance as relating to 'autonomous self-governing networks of actors' (Stoker, 1998, p. 18), which again has been criticised as an unduly restrictive definition (e.g. Peters, 2018).

Collaborations can adopt a variety of modes of governance and organisation, and these can change over time (2.2). Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) characterised the first stage of partnership development as a 'pre-partnership collaboration' stage. Here, partnerships typically adopt a network mode of governance based upon 'informality, trust and a sense of common purpose' (p.321), although resource differences can lead to some actors becoming side-lined. In this model, the subsequent stage is the 'partnership creation and consolidation' phase characterised by hierarchy based upon the formalisation of procedures, decision making processes, and the authority of the partnership board and related staff. The next stage, 'programme delivery', may introduce market-like contracting arrangements. Finally, 'partnership termination and succession' may re-introduce a network mode of governance as a means to maintain relevant programmes (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998).

Informal Governance

There are a range of definitions of informal governance in the literature. Informality can be viewed broadly as 'the absence of written rules' (Ayres, 2022, p. 23).

Adopting a new institutionalist perspective, Van Tatenhove, Mak and Liefferink (2006, pp. 14-15) define informal practices as 'those non-codified settings of day-to-

day interaction concerning policy issues, in which the participation of actors, the formulation of coalitions, the processes of agenda setting, (preliminary) decision making and implementation are not structured by pre-given sets of rules or formal institutions'. Key elements of this definition are (a) non-codified settings and (b) the fact that rules are not pre-given. Building on these insights, this thesis adopts the definition of Harsh, who emphasises aspects of rules, institutions and relationships in defining informal governance as 'a means of decision making that is un-codified, non-institutional and where social relationships and webs of influence play crucial roles' (Harsh, 2012, p. 489).

In analysing policymaking it is helpful to consider the policy setting. This thesis uses the terms 'frontstage' and 'backstage', which stem from theatre. Goffman (1959) compares human life with the theatre, arguing that human behaviour has an expressive as well as a practical element (Van Tatenhove, Mak and Liefferink, 2006). Goffman viewed the social world as separated into 'frontstage' and 'backstage' areas. Frontstage, actors perform before an audience, whereas backstage they can relax and let down the requirements of their particular role. Adopting such a dramaturgical perspective, policy discussions can be viewed as taking place 'frontstage' or 'backstage' (Friedman, 1994). Klijn (2014) applied this analogy of performative drama to explore the tensions between formal frontstage politics, and the informal backstage negotiations required for complex decision making in networks of interdependent but relatively autonomous actors. Usually, public officials are accountable as office holders and are expected to follow established bureaucratic rules and codes of conduct. However, backstage public officials are obscured from public scrutiny and can engage in policy discussions less constrained by formal rules. As Friedman noted concerning trade union and

company negotiators, 'backstage, actors can relax from their roles, step out of character and work with their dramaturgical teammates to prepare for the front stage performance' (Friedman, 1994, p. 17). Van Tatenhove, Mak and Liefferink (2006) conceptualise 'frontstage politics' as policymaking in rule-directed arrangements and 'backstage politics' as a setting where actors' roles and the rules of the game are not given beforehand. The flexibility afforded to policy actors by the backstage setting may enable the development of creative and innovative policy solutions. This may include offering an 'innovative space' (Ayres, 2017, p. 94) to inspire and nurture new ideas (Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997), enabling management of which actors are involved (Torfing *et al.*, 2012) and developing trust, which in turn encourages the development of innovative solutions (Lane and Bachmann, 1998).

There are many explanations of the increasing use of informal governance. As public managers address complex policy issues, policy can no longer be managed by the nation state alone but requires the involvement of multiple actors at various spatial scales (Bevir and Rhodes, 2016). As a result, political decision-making has become less centralised and in places has created an 'institutional void' (Hajer, 2003, p. 175), where politics is conducted outside established rules and norms. Backstage policymaking has been associated with these changes, offering policymakers more co-operative and relational approaches (Ayres, Sandford and Coombes, 2017; Blomqvist, 2022). Functional delegation theorists argue that restricting the number of decision makers and making decisions in a secluded setting can reduce the transaction costs of decision making and provide an efficient approach to reaching agreement (Bendor, Glazer and Hammond, 2001; Miller, 2005; Pollack, 2003). Reh (2012) suggests this implies that informal approaches will be

particularly attractive in contexts of uncertainty and intense conflict between multiple decision makers.

Informal governance approaches may therefore be particularly prevalent in collaborative contexts which often involve a large number of decision makers.

Research has shown that the development of CAs and the negotiation of Devolution Agreements in England frequently adopted an informal approach to governance.

Studies suggest that adopting an informal governance approach in policymaking around devolution increased efficiency and facilitated the exploration of otherwise inconceivable policy options made possible through high trust relationships (Ayres, 2016; Ayres, 2017). However, Ayres, Sandford and Coombes (2017) found that whilst high levels of complexity and uncertainty were tackled effectively using backstage processes, once the Devolution Agreements were published their ratification and delivery occurred frontstage, and the transition of the policymaking process from back to front stage was problematic due to the lack of engagement and buy-in from key stakeholders.

The literature identifies both advantages and disadvantages of informal governance. Considering first the potential advantages, informal approaches are seen as making negotiations faster, more efficient, innovative, and streamlined (Ayres, 2022; Klinke, 2016). Restriction of participation may improve problem solving since social settings that foster repeated interaction among a small group of participants are particularly conducive to problem-solving and persuasion (Checkel, 2001; Elgström and Jönsson, 2000). It can also prepare the ground for accommodating agreements (Reh, 2012). In some situations an informal approach could enhance political legitimacy, improve problem-solving capacity, and offer a way to advance difficult

and contentious decisions in complex networks, by facilitating the development of high-trust inter-personal relationships (Ayres, 2022; Klinke, 2016). Trust has been identified as an important element in governance (Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh, 2012; Huxham and Vangen, 2013) because it can build joint understanding and improve performance (Child, 2001; Lyon, 2006; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Thomson and Perry, 2006).

The literature also suggests that operating informally can lead to challenges in securing transparency, accountability and legitimacy (Ayres, 2017; Ayres, 2022; Klinke, 2016). Informalisation can have negative impacts on democracy (Lauth, 2000) by reducing opportunities for open debate and public scrutiny. Reh (2012) suggests that, rather than reducing transaction costs, informal approaches may simply shift these to later in the policy cycle by making policy implementation more difficult due to more limited acceptance of decisions reached in this way.

Reh (2012) explores how the apparent advantages of informal approaches may be maximised whilst minimising the potential disadvantages. She concludes that democratic disadvantages can be mitigated by ensuring that restrictions on participation are clearly defined and protect political representativeness, and that there exists institutionalized feedback into the formal decision-making process. These two measures could safeguard a minimum level of deliberation and accountability, and may also reinforce the effectiveness of the decision itself.

Researching informal governance arrangements can be challenging because of the lack of formal documentation such as meeting announcements, participant lists, or minutes. It is 'an attempt at studying the invisible or at least the opaque' (Christiansen and Neuhold, 2012, p. 2). Historically, there was limited empirical

research on the role of informality in policymaking (Ayres, 2022; Jitske van Popering-Verkerk and van Buuren, 2016). Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that it is possible to research informality through approaches such as elite interviews. For example, Ayres (2017) used semi-structured interviews with senior Whitehall officials involving a series of questions about formal and informal procedures for negotiating devolution deals. The study confirmed that informal governance can be researched within the nation state, including distinguishing between formal and informal governance arenas. Ayres (2022) found that inviting interviewees to ‘tell their own story about their rationales and motivations for using more informal ways of working’ (p,32) enabled respondents to communicate the day-to-day activities of informal governance.

In summary, the approach to governance is seen as affecting how evidence is used in collaborations. In particular, the adoption of informal or formal approaches to governance, and whether policy discussions are held in public or private, may affect how evidence is considered and used in policymaking. Studying informal approaches presents inherent difficulties, however recent scholarship has shown that this is achievable through the use of appropriate qualitative approaches.

3.4.7 Types and characteristics of evidence used in policymaking

This thesis adopts a broad definition of ‘evidence’ incorporating a range of types of knowledge, including formal academic research, economic and cost-benefit analyses, and information on the views and perspectives of people with lived experience. Previous studies have identified that policymakers make use of a range of types of evidence, which Petticrew *et al.* (2004, p. 813) described as a ‘mixed

economy' of evidence applied to policy issues. An early categorisation of the types of evidence that policymakers use was provided by Bowen and Zwi (2005, p. 601): 'research, knowledge/ information, ideas/interests, politics, and economics'.

Research evidence included the results of randomised controlled trials, cohort and case control studies, and qualitative studies. Knowledge and information included the results of consultation exercises, policy evaluations and statistical analyses.

Ideas and interests included expert knowledge and knowledge from lived experience. Politics included analysis of political risks and government agendas.

Finally, economic analysis included cost-effectiveness analysis and financial analysis.

In terms of the characteristics of evidence itself, as discussed in (3.2), the research on facilitators and barriers to the use of evidence in policy suggests that evidence is most likely to be used when it is relevant, clear, timely and accessible (Innvær *et al.*, 2002; Oliver *et al.*, 2014; Rutter, Hawkins and Parkhurst, 2013). For example, Innvær *et al.* (2002) found that the facilitators of research use most commonly mentioned by health policymakers were personal contact with researchers, the relevance and timeliness of the research, and the inclusion of a summary with clear recommendations. The results of Oliver *et al.* (2014), which included policymakers from some non-health policy areas, confirmed that 'contact, collaboration and relationships are a major facilitator of evidence use' (p.4).

Some studies suggest that evidence produced at the local level is used more frequently in by local policymakers than research derived evidence (e.g. Oliver and de Vocht, 2017), although much of this research relates to policy development around public health issues.

The 'quality' of research evidence, usually assessed in terms of study design and its application, is viewed as important in the evidence-based policymaking account (3.2.1). Oliver *et al.* (2014, p. 6) found that the 'quality and authoritativeness' of research affected its uptake. However, the quality of research is identified less frequently than other research characteristics in studies of policymakers' views. For example, an earlier review by Innvær *et al.* (2002) found research 'quality' noted as a barrier or facilitator in only 10 out of the 24 studies reviewed.

3.4.8 Developing the initial conceptual framework

Conceptual frameworks can be useful in providing a frame of reference through which reality can be examined and can prompt theoretical development (Lowndes, 2001), serving as an 'organising instrument' (Ravitch and Riggan, 2016, p. 8). The social sciences literature presents a variety of perspectives of conceptual frameworks (Van der Walldt, 2020). The perspective adopted in this thesis views conceptual frameworks as representing a study's key theoretical concepts and the relationships between them (Jaccard and Jacoby, 2019; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Ravitch and Riggan, 2016). This thesis developed the conceptual framework to provide a point of reference to help make sense of the research process, adjusting the framework as new insights were developed.

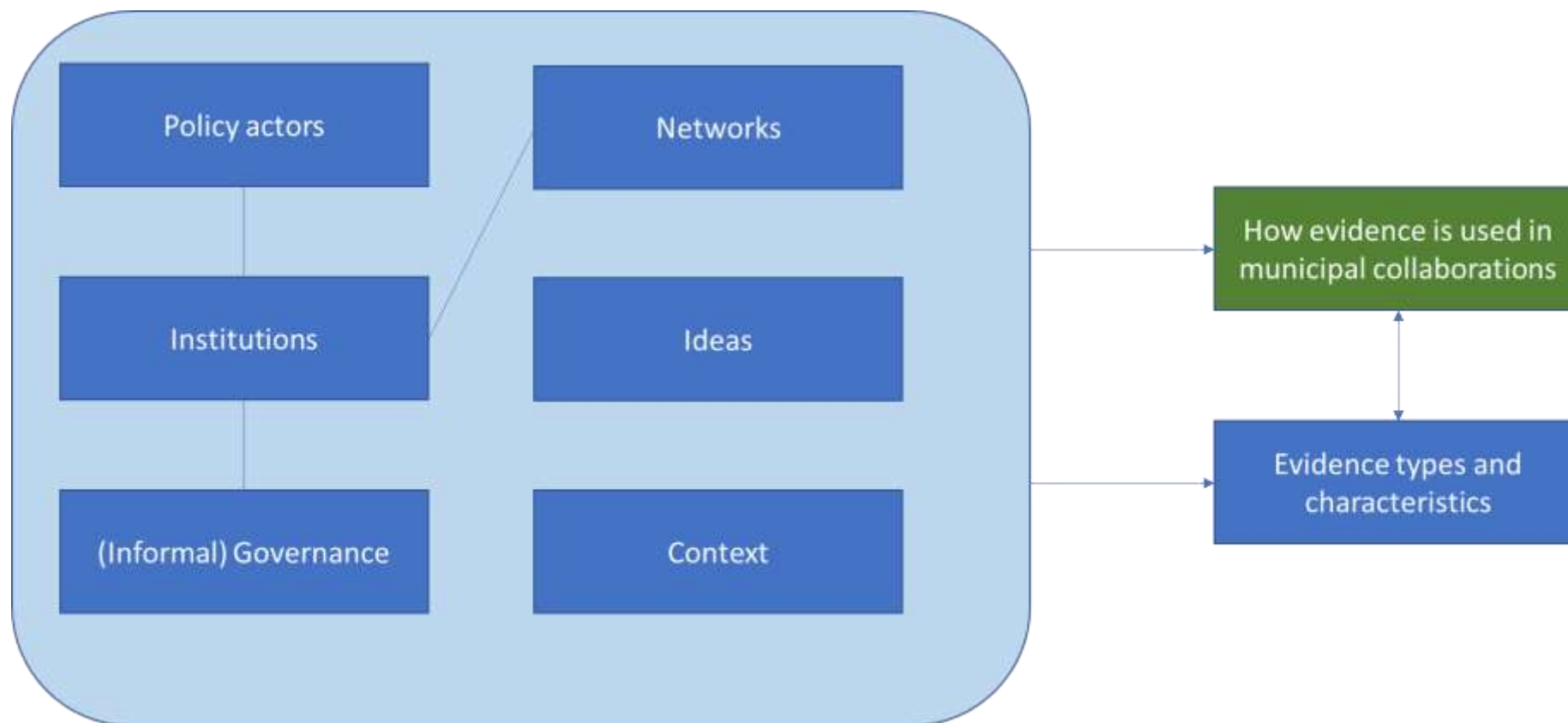
There are risks constructing frameworks that are either too simplistic or 'overly specified and burdened with long lists of variables' (Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh, 2012, p. 5). The initial conceptual framework developed here therefore consists of a relatively small number (seven) explanatory 'factors', where 'factor' means key elements that influence the phenomenon of interest. The explanatory factors are

policy actors, institutions, governance, ideas, networks, context, and the types/characteristics of evidence used. The 'dependent' factor concerns the first research question of the thesis: "how evidence is used in policymaking in the context of early-stage inter-municipal collaborations".

Figure 3.1 illustrates this initial conceptual framework. The seven explanatory factors are shown in blue boxes and the dependent factor in a green box. At this stage in the thesis, the relationships between the explanatory factors themselves and their impacts on the dependent factor are not fully understood. From the literature review, policy actors may affect evidence use through their personal characteristics and inter-personal mechanisms (3.4.1). Institutions also influence the use of evidence, both directly through path dependence and isomorphic change, and indirectly by to some extent constraining and influencing the behaviour of policy actors. Institutions also facilitate or constrain the development of networks in the collaborative setting (3.4.2). Approaches to governance likewise affect how evidence is used in collaborations, particularly through the adoption of informal approaches. The approach to governance is affected by institutional norms (3.4.6). Similarly, the literature review identified potential impacts on the use of evidence in collaborative contexts from networks (3.4.3), ideas (3.4.4) and context (3.4.5). Finally, the types and characteristics of evidence used in policy making are influenced by the above explanatory factors, and these evidence attributes themselves affect how evidence is used in inter-municipal collaborations. The literature review showed that institutions to some extent influence the behaviour of policy actors, the development of networks, and the approach to governance. These initial relationships are shown in figure 3.1 as lines. The relationships between the

factors are refined and developed subsequently from analysis of the case study data and further literature (8.6).

Figure 3-1 Initial conceptual framework



3.5 Conclusions

This chapter has critically reviewed the literatures and scholarly debates relating to policymaking and the use of evidence. Whilst there is no overall theory of evidence use in policymaking, there are several useful models and accounts. The Evidence Based Policymaking account is sometimes presented as a normative model for public policymaking, preferencing a rational, instrumental use of evidence from 'high quality' research studies. In contrast, the Knowledge Utilisation account conceptualises policymaking as a complex social activity which is influenced by the nature of policy institutions.

The empirical literature identifies a fairly consistent picture of the enablers and barriers to the use of evidence in policymaking, including the characteristics of evidence itself which make it 'useful' to policymakers such as the timely publication of concise summaries. Interestingly, whilst the 'quality' of evidence is a key consideration in the EBP account, only around half of published empirical studies highlight evidence quality as an important factor from the perspective of policymakers.

Typologies have proved helpful in analysing evidence use, although in empirical studies the researcher has to interpret policymakers' cognitive processes based on information from the participants. This thesis makes use of the typology which Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019) developed based on policy theories and input from policy officials.

Policy narratives are recognised as important in policy studies, and the chapter highlighted the use of evidence to develop, test and enhance the perceived authority of policy narratives in support of policy arguments. An increasing number of studies

concern the use of evidence in narratives, although general conclusions remain tentative and the detailed functions of evidence in the development of narratives around inter-municipal collaboration has not previously been examined.

The literature review identified several limitations of the literature: the lack of detail concerning how evidence is used in policymaking processes (Kneale *et al.*, 2017); the limited attention paid to the specifics of evidence use in policymaking at *local* level (Durrant *et al.*, 2023); the lack of studies relating to early-stage IMCs and the collaborative context in general; the lack of an overall conceptual framework which can be applied to analyse evidence use in this context; and the lack of detail on the relationship between evidence use and policy narratives. The thesis addresses each of these limitations.

The literature review identified several factors which may influence evidence use in policymaking, and the thesis deploys these to develop an initial conceptual framework that can be used to analyse the case study. Some aspects of these factors may be particularly relevant in the collaborative context. The initial framework will later be refined in the light of the case study findings and additional literature to create a final conceptual framework for use in future research (8.6).

The next chapter presents and explains the thesis methodology, including how the conceptual framework was used in addressing the research questions (4.4).

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This thesis investigates how evidence is used in policymaking by early-stage inter-municipal collaborations. In this context, how is evidence used and how is this understood by participants? What types and characteristics of evidence are used? And why is evidence used in these ways? This chapter first outlines the thesis research design, explaining the approach to investigating the research questions and the rationale for the adoption of a qualitative case study design (4.2). The next section explains and justifies the selection of the case of West Midlands CA (4.3). The initial conceptual framework developed in chapter 3 is then operationalised to investigate the research questions (4.4).

Responding to the literature highlighting the limited range of data often reported in evidence utilisation studies, and the resulting lack of detailed analysis of evidence use, the case study captured data from a range of sources including documents, interviews, and observations (4.5). The next section provides an overview of the approach to data analysis which involved qualitative thematic analysis using a constant comparative approach, the Framework Method (4.6). Section 4.7 explains how (in)formal governance and back/front stage settings were identified in the case study data. The following sections explore the issues of validity and reliability (4.8), and discuss the treatment of researcher positionality (4.9). Next, the chapter examines the approach to ethics and reflects on the experience of formal ethical review (4.10). Finally, the chapter summarises the limitations of the thesis (4.11).

4.2 Research Design

The research questions concern how evidence is used in policymaking in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations. The first area of interest is how evidence is used in policymaking. Since evidence use can only partly be observed, it is important to examine how this use is understood by participants in the policy process. The focus on the collaborative setting of inter-municipal collaborations is critical and, given the changing nature of collaborations (3.4.6), the thesis investigates a specific temporal stage: that of early development of the case including early policy development. This also responds to the identified limitations of the current literature around the detailed process of evidence use and the lack of attention to local, early-stage collaborative settings (3.3). Therefore, the first research set of questions is:

RQ1 How is evidence used in policymaking in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How is this understood by participants?

As well as examining how evidence is used, it is important to investigate the nature of the evidence itself that is used in policymaking in this context. The term evidence has been broadly defined in the thesis to capture a range of types of evidence. As well as the type of evidence, for example academic research papers, the thesis also examines the characteristics of evidence used in policymaking, such as its form of presentation to policymakers. Hence, the second set of research questions is:

RQ2 What types of evidence are used? What are the characteristics of this evidence?

The first two sets of research questions are descriptive, examining how evidence is used and what evidence is used in policymaking in the collaborative context. As well as this rich description, the thesis aims to deploy policy studies and evidence utilisation theory to enable policymakers and academics to understand how evidence is used in inter-municipal collaborations. The third set of research questions is therefore:

RQ3 Why is evidence used in these ways? What factors affect how evidence is used in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How can a conceptual framework help in analysing this use?

This thesis adopts a critical realist ontological position. Critical Realism examines reality at three levels: the ‘empirical’ domain of reality as observed and experienced through human experience, the ‘actual’ domain of events regardless of human experience, and the ‘real’ domain of causal mechanisms (Bhaskar, 2008, p. xvi). In explaining socially significant regularities, critical realist researchers seek to construct causal mechanisms which concern the interplay between structure and agency, involving social actors’ thinking, their motivations, and how their actions are influenced by the rules they adopt (Blaikie and Priest, 2017). They recognise the importance of historical or institutional contexts on the workings of underlying mechanisms which might generate the regularity, such as the characteristics of the group or the prevailing socio-cultural conditions (Pawson, 2000; Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

Addressing the exploratory research questions required an in-depth examination of the processes, events and perspectives involved in policymaking during the early stages of developing an inter-municipal collaboration. The analysis needed to

recognise the potential effects of different contexts of policymaking, for example policymaking in private discussions versus public debates. A case study method was adopted to meet both requirements. The case study approach is particularly helpful when the researcher aims for a detailed understanding of phenomena where context is important (Yin, 2013, p. 18). The case study design's distinctive attributes which were particularly helpful in addressing the research questions are that it is focussed on a particular situation and enhances the reader's understanding by providing a rich description (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009). The approach is particularly helpful in exploring the interaction of context, structure, actions and events (Avenier and Thomas, 2015). This case study is considered revelatory, instrumental and intrinsic, in the terms of the distinction developed by (Stake, 1995). It is 'revelatory' in providing the opportunity to observe and analyse a phenomenon (policy development) usually inaccessible to social science enquiry. It is also 'instrumental', providing insight into and refining theory around the use of evidence in policymaking. Finally, it is itself of intrinsic interest, in policy and academic terms (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). The use of case studies in empirical studies on evidence use in policymaking is well established, for example Oliver *et al.* (2014) identified over 50 such studies.

The thesis adopted an interpretivist epistemic position since the 'how' research questions require the researcher to understand and interpret the meanings in human behaviour, to appreciate the understandings constructed by the people involved (Neuman, 2014). The thesis therefore involved a qualitative study to develop 'an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world' (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013, p. 3) of the actors involved in policymaking. Using quantitative methods, such as a survey of policy actors, may have generated data from a wider range of actors, however this method would not allow the detailed exploration of contexts and perspectives which

is needed to address the research questions and can be achieved using qualitative methods. An important aspect of the case study context is the use of informal governance which involves 'structures and processes that are un-codified, undocumented and have no trace beyond the recollection and perceptions of the actors involved' (Ayres, 2022, p. 23). It would be impossible to access information on these structures and processes without investigating the perceptions of the actors involved.

There are two main potential disadvantages in adopting the case study method in this thesis. First, the issue of generalisation. A case study is not able to produce what Yin called 'statistical generalisation' (Yin, 2017, p. 39) relating to the inference made about a population based on data captured on a representative sample of that population, such as in a survey or an opinion poll. Rather, the aim is to develop 'user generalisability' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009, p. 256) reflecting the specific context but which others may find relevant to their situations and contexts. It is also possible to develop what Yin (2017, p. 37) labels 'analytic generalisation', that is developing generalisable findings based on advancing theoretical concepts from existing literature and the case study findings. A second important issue in adopting a case study approach is ensuring sufficient rigour in undertaking the work. The approaches to addressing this issue are explained in detail throughout this chapter, and particularly in the sections on validity and reliability (4.8) and researcher positionality (4.9).

4.3 Why West Midlands CA? Selection of the case

A case study is 'an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009, p. 40). This section explains rational for the selection of the case study and the boundaries of the case.

There were three main reasons for selecting the case of the West Midlands CA (WMCA). First, as Chapter 2 established, inter-municipal collaborations are increasingly important internationally, with the most significant example in England being the recently developed CAs. The UK government approved ten CAs in the period 2011 to 2023, covering a population of around 14.4 people (ONS, 2023). It seems likely that the number of CAs will continue to increase under current government policy. Therefore, English CAs are an important example of the phenomenon under consideration.

The second reason for the choice of case was the timing of the thesis (from 2016). The aim of the thesis was to deploy policy studies and evidence utilisation theory to enable policymakers and academics to understand how evidence is used in an inter-municipal collaboration. In the case of WMCA, informal discussions between council leaders took place during 2014 and the CA was formally established in June 2016, so the start of the thesis was less than two years into the CA formation process. Only two CAs (WMCA and Tees Valley) were at the early formation stage in 2016.

Finally, the WMCA was chosen as the case study because of its intrinsic interest to the researcher and the pragmatic benefits of being able to negotiate timely access in order to undertake the research. The researcher was interested in the West Midlands both as a resident since 1992 and as an officer in one of its constituent councils since 2004. As a senior employee at Birmingham City Council (a council in

the WMCA area) at the start of the PhD, it was relatively easy to gain access to key informants and to participate in relevant meetings; issues this raises around the positionality as a researcher are discussed later in this chapter (4.9). In contrast, the researcher had very few contacts in the Tees Valley so it would have been significantly more difficult to negotiate and manage access to informants.

The possibility of using a multiple case design was considered and rejected. The use of multiple case studies could explore how various factors and processes are affecting the use of evidence differently in different CAs. At the start of the fieldwork there were five other CAs in existence (Greater Manchester, Tees Valley, Liverpool city-region, Sheffield city-region, and West Yorkshire). One or more of these could have been examined alongside the WMCA. However, the assessment of the researcher was that access to the other CAs would be significantly more difficult than to WMCA. To obtain access in the other CAs would have required significant time and resources, meaning that much less detailed fieldwork on the WMCA case would have been possible, limiting the 'revelatory' value of the case. The increase in breadth of coverage of CAs would be at the cost of a loss of depth of investigation and understanding. The researcher chose to make use of the high quality of access available at WMCA to develop an in-depth case study. The empirical part of this thesis therefore focuses on WMCA, although future research in other CAs will be recommended.

In terms of the time period covered by the research, it is important to recognise that CAs are relatively recent and rapidly evolving institutions. It was important to specify a time frame to provide boundaries for the data capture. This research focussed on the first three years of development of the WMCA, specifically from the initial

discussions between civic leaders in 2014 to the Mayoral election in May 2017. The start of this period coincided with the beginning of policy development concerning a potential CA and the end of this period coincided with an important new phase in the WMCA's development, with the election of a directly elected mayor for the CA region.

It is important to be clear on the boundaries of the case (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009; Stake, 1995). Summarising the above discussion, this thesis concerns the case of the West Midlands CA (WMCA) between 2014 and May 2017. Chapter 5 provides detailed information to improve understanding of the case (Stake, 1995), including the geographic, institutional, political and socio-economic context.

4.4 Operationalising the research questions

In order to operationalise the initial conceptual framework developed above (3.4.8), the issues identified in the literature for each of the factors of the framework were linked to relevant case level questions and sources of data, as suggested by Yin (2017, p. 100). For each factor of the conceptual framework, table 4.1 sets out the relevant questions to be answered in the research, the sources of evidence to answer each question, and the main sections of the thesis which report the related findings. The following section explains how these questions were addressed in data collection for the thesis.

Table 4-1 Operationalising the conceptual framework

Factors	Case level questions	Sources of evidence	Findings chapter(s)
Actors	• How was policy developed? When? • Who was involved in this process? • How did the various actors engage with the policy process and the use of evidence? What behaviours did they exhibit?	Documents Observations Interviews	6.3 / 8.2
Institutions	• How did actors in different institutions identify / generate / use evidence and bring it into the policymaking process? • How did the design of the collaboration impact on how policy was made? • How did the nature of collaborative working impact on how policy was made? • What was the effect of institutional history and of other existing CAs?	Documents Observations Interviews	6.3 / 8.3
Governance	• What was the policymaking governance setting (e.g. informal/formal, front/back-stage, public/private)? • Did this influence the approach to policymaking and the use of evidence?	Observations Interviews	6.3 / 8.4
Networks	• What were the important stakeholders in policymaking? • Which institutions and actors were engaged the process? How did this impact on policymaking and the use of evidence?	Documents Observations Interviews	6.3 / 8.5
Ideas	• Did certain ideas or paradigms influence policymaking and the use of evidence? Which, and in what ways? • Are certain ideas are associated with particular actors or networks?	Documents Observations Interviews	6.3 / 8.5
Context	• How did the surrounding policy environment influence policymaking and the use of evidence? • Where there key policies inherited by the collaboration?	Documents Observations Interviews	6.3 / 8.5
Types and characteristics of evidence	• What types of evidence were used? • How was this affected by the policy area and the above factors? • What characteristics of evidence were important to policymakers? What made the evidence 'useful' in the given context? • Was the 'quality' of the evidence used assessed? Did quality affect its use?	Documents Observations Interviews	7
The use of evidence in policymaking	• How and when was the evidence used? • How was the use of evidence described in official statements? • How did informants perceive or understand the use of evidence? • How did the use of evidence fit established typologies of evidence utilisation?	Documents Observations Interviews	6

4.5 Data collection

This section explains and justifies the approach to data capture. The methodological literature recognises the benefits of using multiple data sources to encapsulate the case under study in its intricacy and wholeness (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2013). The thesis research design made use of three main types of data: analysis of documentation such as policy documents; interviews with elite policymakers and advisers; and observation of meetings. In addition to these sources, the researcher kept a 'research journal' noting thoughts, informal discussions, queries, observations, ideas, and plans relating to the study. The major tasks in collecting data included gaining permission from the organisations involved; accessing the relevant documents, meetings and interviewees; scheduling data collection activities; responding to unanticipated events, such as multiple meetings scheduled at the same time or changes to interviewees' job roles; and protecting interviewees through measures such as arrangements for informed consent and data protection.

The section explains in turn the use of data from documents, interviews, observations and a research journal.

4.5.1 Documentation

The decision to incorporate the analysis of documentation and observations in the case study was influenced by a widely cited systematic review of the literature around the use of evidence by policymakers in a variety of countries (Oliver *et al.*, 2014). This review found that only 8% of reported studies used observational

methods and only 8% reported on documentary analysis, resulting in limited empirical evidence about the processes of evidence use in policy. This thesis responds to their suggestion to gain new insight into the conceptualisation of evidence in policymaking through more detailed understanding of the activities of policy actors and wider influences on this process.

Analysis of documents is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies (Bowen, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). Bowen (2009) highlights five specific functions of documents in research: providing data on context, suggesting key questions and observations, providing additional research data, tracking change over time, and as corroboration of evidence from other sources. In this thesis, some of the documents analysed were key policy outputs in themselves, such as the Launch Statement (WMCA, 2015a) and Mental Health Commission report (Lamb *et al.*, 2017) – these documents gave a public narrative on how policy was developed (and evidence used), as well as presenting actual policy decisions. Documentation also proved helpful in providing context (for example, regarding the history of past attempts at collaborative working in the region, or the way decision making powers were setup in the CA) and substantiating other sources (for example, in terms of the timing of key meetings and announcements). Yin (2017, p. 115) describes this as using documentation to ‘corroborate and augment evidence from other sources’. The analysis of documentation and meeting notes were initiated first, followed by the semi-structured interviews.

There are several advantages and disadvantages to the use of documents compared to other data sources. In terms of advantages, document analysis is time-

efficient and cost-effective, with many documents now being readily available on the internet (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009). Documents are 'unobtrusive' and 'non-reactive', in other words they are not affected by the researcher (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009, p. 173). Documents are stable over time, can provide broad coverage and often include exact details (names, dates, etc) which may not be so easy to identify for example through interviews. At the same time, documents have some disadvantages. They can provide insufficient detail for research purposes, some may be difficult to access, and they are created for specific purposes which may lead to bias (Bowen, 2009). It was important to be critical in analysing these sources, for example by being conscious of potential bias and examining the original objectives of the writers of published reports (Yin, 2017, p. 116).

Several different types of document were included in the analysis. First, public announcements, policy statements and supporting documents relating to decisions and policy relating to the WMCA. Second, administrative documents such as progress reports, financial accounts and minutes of meetings relating to the WMCA decision making and accountability. Third, press releases, media and journal articles relating to the development of the CA. Relevant documents were identified by searching the WMCA website, searching the Nexus database of media articles, reviewing minutes of relevant meetings, snowballing references from these initial documents, and discussion with interviewees. The main documents analysed in the thesis are listed in Appendix 11.1. Around 80 documents were downloaded, saved to the project database, and analysed thematically (4.6).

4.5.2 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with key actors involved in both providing evidence and in developing policy in the CA. Elite interviews are recognised as ‘the most efficient way to obtain information about decision makers and decision making processes’ (Burnham *et al.*, 2004, p. 231). Interviews can provide focused information and insightful personal views and explanations. However, they can suffer from response bias, inaccuracies due to poor recall, and reflexivity issues where the interviewee answers what they think the researcher wants to hear (Denscombe, 2014). In practice, response bias did not seem to be particularly significant: interviews were completed with all the chief executives and consultants requested and there was no clear pattern to the three council leaders who were not available to interview. Inaccuracies due to poor recall were mitigated by triangulation with data from multiple interviews and other sources such as documents and observation. Reflexivity issues were minimised by adopting an open and non-judgemental approach in the interviews.

The thesis adopted a purposive (Chein, 1981) or purposeful (Patton, 2015) approach to sampling, selecting a sample ‘from which the most can be learned’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p. 96). The sample involved those who could give most insight on how local policy was developed, divided into five groups. The first group consisted of the seven leaders of the metropolitan district councils. These elected representatives were influential decision makers, particularly around the early discussions on a potential CA, and played critical roles engaging other councillors as the plans for the CA developed. The second group was the seven chief executives of the metropolitan councils. These appointed officials undertook important roles in

developing the CA and were involved in almost all the key decision-making meetings. The third group consisted of the chairs of the three LEPs. These private sector business leaders were significant actors in the development of the CA and had particularly important roles around developing economic strategy and developing the Devolution Agreement. The fourth group were other council officers involved in developing the detailed policy around the CA, for example legal and policy lead officials. Finally, the fifth group were external consultants who provided management, project management, research and economic analysis input to the process. This list was mainly developed at the start of planning fieldwork, although in a few instances additional interviewees were suggested during interviews, mainly in the fourth and fifth categories above, and these were added to the invitations. Invitations were sent to the 28 people in the identified roles and all the target sample interviews were completed except for three council leaders; two leaders declined interview and one unfortunately died. The sample did not include central government civil servants as the focus was on local policymaking, however this would be useful to include in future research to give another perspective on the process. Appendix 11.2 provides a list of interviewees and the areas of policy development with which they were involved.

Potential interviewees were provided with a written 'participant information sheet' explaining the research and the arrangements for their involvement, reporting, and so on (11.3). They were asked to sign a written consent form (11.3). Interviewees were able to offer at least one hour for the interview, with follow up interviews where necessary. This was encouraging, and perhaps indicated that participants recognised the importance of the thesis topic. Interviews were conducted at the

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interviewee's preferred location; the main requirement was to find a relatively quiet and private area – in most cases this involved the researcher visiting the interviewee's office. After re-confirming participant consent at the time of the interview, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into a Word file which was then uploaded to NVivo 12 for analysis. Information from interviews was held in line with UoB practice guidelines. Transcripts were anonymised using a code linked to a password-protected list of interviewees.

The interviews were developed using a semi-structured format incorporating a range of more or less directive questions (Richardson, Dohrenwend and Klein, 1965). Alternative interview designs were considered and rejected. A structured interview, where 'the researcher has a predetermined list of questions, to which the respondent is invited to offer limited-option responses' (Denscombe, 2014, p. 186), was inappropriate since the research was partly inductive and it was important to give interviewees opportunity to develop ideas and elaborate on the topics covered. On the other hand, a wholly unstructured interview may not yield the information needed to answer the research questions. In the semi-structured interview, there is a clear list of issues to be addressed but these are addressed flexibly in terms of their order of consideration and 'answers are open-ended, and there is more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest' (Denscombe, 2014, p. 186). One potential drawback of this compared to more structured formats is that interviewees might spend too much time on topics of marginal relevance to the research questions. The researcher mitigated this by diplomatically drawing interviewees back to the areas of research interest.

The interview topic guide recognised the difference between what Yin (2017, p. 100) calls 'Level 1' and 'Level 2' questions. In Yin's terminology, Level 2 questions are case level questions or 'lines of inquiry', whereas Level 1 questions are 'questions verbalised to specific interviewees' (Yin, 2017, p. 100). For example, a Level 2 question may be 'How was policy developed?' The interviewer holds this question in mind to help ensure that interviews are purposeful and address the research questions whilst conversing with interviewees. In an interview with an informant involved in developing mental health policy, this might be translated into Level 1 questions such as 'How did the Mental Health Commission decide on its areas of focus?'. The interview questions were initially developed based on the literature review and initial conceptual framework, and were amended during the fieldwork in the light of the emerging analysis, for example to investigate emerging issues such as the importance of 'narrative'.

Reflecting on the difficulties in observing the use of 'knowledge' in policy, Freeman and co-authors adopted a phenomenological approach and found it useful in interviews to guide respondents 'to describe scenes and moments, to tell stories' (Freeman and Sturdy, 2015, p. 211). Responding to this, in the case study interviewees were invited to 'tell the story' of their experience in developing policy in the formation of the WMCA and the thematic policy areas to focus the discussions, the interviewer then probed for information to address the research questions. This approach also reduced the likelihood of the interviewer imposing his perspective, for example by asking about a set list of specific types of evidence. The final interview topic guide is attached at Appendix 11.4.

4.5.3 Observation

Observation can reveal practices which are unconscious or tacit, or which may be un-discussable in the culture of the organisation (Denscombe, 2014). The disadvantages of his method of data capture include the necessary selectivity of coverage (e.g. if two meetings occur at the same time a lone researcher must choose which to attend) and reflexivity (people may act differently because they are being observed).

As part of his professional role at Birmingham City Council from 2004 to 2017, the researcher regularly interacted with officials and politicians involved in local and regional policymaking, including discussions about the WMCA. He participated in and was able to observe a wide range of officers, members and consultants engaged in policymaking, and their use of evidence in this process. This gave the researcher access to groups and events that would normally be inaccessible to study, and to 'perceive reality from the viewpoint of someone "inside" an organisation rather than external to it' (Yin, 2017, p. 124). In total, the researcher took part in around 80 meetings where policy relating to the CA was discussed and developed between Nov 2014 and Aug 2017 (listed in Appendix 1.5). For example, these included the WMCA Programme Board, WMCA Public Service Reform Working Group meetings, and Birmingham City Council "Leader's Update". The WMCA Programme Board consisted of the chief executives of the WMCA partner agencies and met fortnightly; these were private sessions which the researcher frequently attended as they were relevant to his job role. The WMCA Public Service Reform (PSR) Working Group held private monthly meetings of the PSR lead chief executive, four sub-programme lead officers, and a number of functional lead officers

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(e.g. finance); the agenda was developing and implementing the WMCA public service reform programme, in particular taking forward four thematic programme areas around mental health, criminal justice, employment and skills, and support to people with multiple complex needs. Finally, the Birmingham City Council “Leader’s Update” meetings involved weekly Monday morning confidential discussions between the Council Leader, Deputy Leader, chief executive, Director of Finance, Head of Cabinet Office, Head of Communications, and the researcher as Assistant Director (Strategy).

The participants in these meetings (and indeed the researcher, prior to the start of the PhD fieldwork) were unaware that these meetings and discussions might form part of the information used for this thesis. This raises ethical issues, particularly around the principles of researcher non-maleficence and participants’ self-determination or autonomy (Beauchamp, Faden and Wallace, 1982). The first issue concerns the avoidance of participant harm, and balancing the potential benefits and risks of the study (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). The greatest risk of harm to participants from this thesis arises not during the study but after publication, through the reported findings being presented (directly or indirectly for example through media reports) in ways that might cause participants embarrassment or distress. This risk is to some extent mitigated by the adoption of anonymity in reporting the findings. This second main ethical issue (self-determination) relates to the rights of research participants to privacy, respect and autonomy. Critics of covert research argue that such studies disregard participants’ rights to autonomy. Bulmer (1980), for example, argued that covert observational studies violate the principle of informed consent and constitute a betrayal of trust. Bulmer’s piece was in response

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to a study which involved the researcher presenting falsehoods to participants by pretending to be part of two faith communities in order to study them, arguably involving active deception rather than simply a lack of disclosure of certain facts about the researcher as in this thesis. A frequent argument in support of covert research adopts consequentialist reasoning, arguing that the benefits of such research outweigh the impact on participants' rights.

In addition to the issue of consent, the researcher's notes of these meetings were designed to record key points relevant to the researcher's professional role rather than to capture data to answer the thesis research questions. As is routine practice in local government and the civil service, and specifically for the researcher, the notes were written contemporaneously and were intended to provide a detailed personal record of the meetings. They usually included many relevant details, such as the meeting time, location and layout; participant names and job roles; agenda and topics discussed; decisions and actions agreed; and key information/evidence discussed in the meetings.

However, there was no attempt to systematically capture data relating to the research questions for this thesis or to subject the notes to checks of validity such as 'member checking', where the researcher asks participants' views of the credibility of his interpretations (Creswell, 2016, p. 208). Merriam and Tisdell (2009) note that as a research tool, observation needs to be systematic, to address a research question, and to be 'subject to checks and balances in producing trustworthy results' (p.118). In response to these issues, the thesis adopted a cautious approach to use of information from the researcher's notes and recollections of these meetings. This

information was not directly reported in the findings, instead it was used to inform the direction of inquiry, as contextual information, and to triangulate other evidence in testing the validity of the assessments. For example, the contemporaneous notes from the BCC Leader's Update meetings confirmed interview and documentation data on the roles adopted by these key actors and the dates of critical events in the creation of the WMCA.

4.5.4 Research journal

A research journal was maintained through the thesis from initial planning in 2016 to the write up in 2024, noting thoughts, informal discussions, beliefs, queries, observations, ideas, and plans relating to the study (Janesick, 1998, p. 10). The journal proved helpful in navigating each stage of the work, for example in capturing critical ideas that might otherwise have been lost, but particularly during the write up stage as it brought back to mind the details of the process and reasons for taking key decisions. For example, after the first few interviews the researcher noticed a recurring theme regarding the perceived *esprit de corps* amongst council leaders and chief executives during the early stages of the formation of the CA. One chief executive affectionately called the emerging collaboration 'our' CA. The researcher found these perceptions surprising and intriguing in the light of the history of poor relations between councils in the region, so the research explored whether they would be shared by others and what effect they might have on the collaborative exercise of sense making and policymaking. By referring to this section in the research journal, the researcher was able to reflect on this perception as further

interviews were conducted, and to contrast it to some of the perceptions of relationships later once the CA was more formally established. More prosaically, the research journal acted as the memory for items such as ‘remember to read this article’ and ‘consider merging these two thematic codes for these reasons...’.

4.5.5 Summary of study data

The interviews, documentations and observations provided distinct types of data and were also complementary of each other. The main documentary analysis and observations took place first, which helped to identify issues to address in the interviews. As an example of the complementarity of the different types of data, interviews gave opportunity to explore issues which were difficult to observe, such as a participant’s objectives in making a particular intervention during a meeting, or what discussions took place before and after the formal meeting. Documentation was particularly helpful in identifying key dates and the details of participants in meetings. Table 4.2 summarises the data sources for each of the main areas of policy development investigated in the case study. The policy areas are the overall process of developing policy in the WMCA, the formation of the WMCA itself, the development of the Strategic Economic Plan, and the Mental Health Commission (see 5.4 for further details).

Table 4-2 Summary of study data

Area of policy development	Interviews	Documentation	Observations
Overall process	18 interviews	52 documents	77 meetings
Formation of WMCA	19 interviews	37 documents	30 meetings
Strategic Economic Plan	8 interviews	12 documents	18 meetings
Mental Health Commission	5 interviews	9 documents	48 meetings
Total	25 interviews	60 documents	77 meetings

4.5.6 Timeline of engagement with the research site

The researcher was employed by Birmingham City Council from 2004 to 2018 as Assistant Director of Strategy, and attended meetings relating to the combined authority as part of his role in the period 2014 to 2017. At this point, his role transitioned to directly supporting the development of the West Midlands Combined Authority including work on public service reform around mental health and criminal justice, and data analysis. In January 2019, he moved to WMCA as Head of Policy and Programmes, and in August 2019 to the University of Birmingham as Director of the Institute of Local Government Studies.

The researcher became a registered PhD student in October 2016 on a part-time basis, sponsored by Birmingham City Council and later the University of Birmingham. Final formal ethical approval for the PhD was received from the university in February 2017. Analysis of documentation started in 2017 and continued through 2019. Fieldwork interviews started in November 2017 and completed in August 2019. The case study covers the period 2014 to April 2017.

Figure 4-1 provides a visual illustration of the above timeline.

Figure 4-1 Timeline of engagement with the research site

Year	2004-2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Case study timing		Period covered by the Case Study (2014 to Apr 2017)										
Employer	Birmingham City Council (Apr 2004 to Dec 2018)						WMCA (Jan-July 2019)	University of Birmingham (Aug 2019 - current)				
Attendance at CA related meetings as part of professional role		CA related meetings (2014 to 2017)										
PhD student status				Registered PhD Student (Oct 2016 - Oct 2024)								
Ethnical approval					Ethical approval (Feb 2017)							
PhD fieldwork: documentation					Review of documentation (2017 to 2019)							
PhD fieldwork: interviews						PhD interviews (Nov 2017 to Aug 2019)						

4.6 Data analysis

Data analysis concerns ‘the process of making sense out of the data...consolidating, reducing and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). The data from the research consisted of transcribed interview notes, fieldnotes and documentation. These were captured in NVivo 12 to help with data management and analysis. Data analysis commenced alongside data collection to help focus the enquiry (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009).

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis strategy using the constant comparative method (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009, pp. 175-193). This process involved ‘making sense out of the data...consolidating, reducing and interpreting...making meaning’ (p.176). The analysis adopted the Framework Method for two main reasons. First, the method was designed for use in applied policy research, although subsequently used in a range of social sciences (Gale *et al.*, 2013; Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). Second, the researcher felt that the Framework approach intuitively ‘made sense’ and provided a helpful structure following a training and workshop session on the approach. The Framework Method involves a ‘systematic process of sifting, charting and sorting material’ (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994, p. 177). The method ‘employs a hierarchical thematic framework that is used to classify and organise data according to key themes, concepts and emergent categories’ (Bonello and Meehan, 2019, p. 484). The five stages are: familiarisation (immersion in the data), identifying a thematic framework (the issues, themes and concepts to which the data can be examined), indexing (applying the framework to the data), charting (reviewing data

against each thematic area), mapping and interpretation (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). These are described in detail later in this subsection.

The analysis was supported by the use of NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software or CAQDAS (Lee and Fielding, 1991), to help with data management and analysis. CAQDAS methods offer speedy handling of large amounts of data, facilitate navigation and linking of data, and can assist with 'conceptualisation of data and theory building' (Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor, 2003, p. 207). Some researchers, such as Coffey and Atkinson (1996), expressed concern around the use of CAQDAS, for example that the functionality to extract segments of text can remove them from their context and impair the analytic process. However, NVivo can provide the text of the full interview transcript or document to contextualise quotations, so this is not necessarily a weakness. The description of the analysis below illustrates how NVivo assisted at each stage.

The first stage of data analysis, familiarisation, started by conducting and transcribing the interviews, reading the documents, and re-reading the notes from the various meetings and discussions. Transcription involves judgements such as the level of detail to capture (Bailey, 2008). The transcriptions were completed by the researcher themselves as part of the analysis process (Bailey, 2008; Davidson, 2009). In transcribing from the audio recordings of interviews, a 'naturalised' approach was adopted (Bucholtz and Du Bois (2006) quoted in (Davidson, 2009, p. 38)) where the transcript incorporates features of written language (such as commas and paragraphs). Distinctive verbal elements (such as pauses and umms) were captured only where these seemed significant, which simplified and reduced the data

from the interview. On reflection, with further experience there would be value in noting more of the verbal elements to help record a more detailed understanding of the perspectives of the interviewees.

During the data analysis process, the researcher repeatedly read interview transcripts, reviewed documentation, and reflected on notes from meetings. The aim was to step back and reflect on the totality of the data collected during the research, becoming immersed in the overall discourse, and noting recurrent themes and issues. In this stage, interview transcripts, notes, and documents were uploaded to the NVivo database together with demographic details of interviewees (such as organisations and job roles). NVivo has facilities to link these sources, for example to identify different attitudes or behaviours by people from different organisations, supporting exploratory coding by 'providing storage areas for references to coded text' (Bonello and Meehan, 2019, p. 488).

The second stage, identifying the thematic framework, involved looking for patterns and key themes from the data through a process of data triangulation, and noting both commonalities and divergence in perspectives. Adopting what Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor (2003, p. 204) term 'code and retrieve methods', the researcher viewed the data in 'textual chunks' and categorised them into themes or issues which were represented as 'codes' (or, in Nvivo terms, 'nodes'). The initial codes were taken from the conceptual framework developed during the literature review. As the process of data capture and analysis progressed, additional issues became apparent which had not been identified in the original framework. Examples of these additional issues included the 'policy setting' (whether frontstage or backstage),

approach to governance (informal or formal), 'blocking' of evidence which challenged existing paradigms, the impact of time pressures in developing the WMCA and Devolution Agreement, and the importance of developing and supporting a 'regional narrative'. These issues are explored further in the findings and discussion chapters. The thematic framework was further developed to incorporate these emergent issues. This coding process was highly iterative, travelling repeatedly between the data and the analytical concepts expressed as nodes (categories of meaning). Using the 'constant comparative method' (Maykut and Morehouse, 2002, p. 126) the researcher compared each segment of text to the other categories of meaning and associated this with the appropriate node(s), exploring similarities and differences, and grouping similar issues or themes. In the early stages of analysis, it sometimes proved difficult to recall the nuances of difference between nodes, and so the researcher adopted the practice of annotating these with the coding rationale, thoughts and ideas. Over time, some key themes, issues and concepts emerged from the data. NVivo helped here by enabling easy access to the data from transcripts and documents, and the annotations associated with different nodes.

The third stage of the Framework Method, indexing, involved systematically applying the theoretical framework to the data and developing the basic thematic framework into a framework that more closely addressed the research questions. This process involved some nodes being renamed, merged with or split from other nodes. Theoretical patterns and important contextual factors became apparent. NVivo assisted the researcher to develop and check these ideas by interrogating transcripts, documents, and other sources to see how policymaking and the use of evidence was understood. The package also enabled a thematic hierarchical (tree)

structure to be developed by grouping nodes under appropriate headings. Finally, NVivo's textual search facility helped in constructing and testing themes – for example, by quickly locating all references to a particular phrase.

The fourth stage, charting, involves building 'a picture of the data as a whole, by considering the range of attitudes and experience for each issue or theme. Data are "lifted" from their original context and rearranged according to the appropriate thematic reference' (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002, p. 182). The data indexed in the previous stage was arranged in charts of the themes with the rows of the matrix representing an interviewee (or document or observation) and the columns representing each theme of the analysis. NVivo has specific functionality to create Framework Matrices, however the researcher chose to produce the matrices by hand as this felt more intuitive and enabled easy re-drawing of the matrix. Reading each row across provided a summarised view of that data source, whereas reading down each column gave a summarised view of each theme, providing an overview of the issues and perspectives from the data.

The final stage, mapping and interpretation, aims to interpret the data as a whole. Ritchie and Spencer (2002, p. 186) describe how the analyst 'reviews the charts and research notes; compares and contrasts the perceptions, accounts, or experiences; searches for patterns and connections and seeks explanations for these internally within the data'. This proved the most difficult part of the whole process, requiring long uninterrupted periods working with the data, and stepping back from the detail of the data, to develop conceptualisations at a deeper level than interviewee's direct

statements. In this stage NVivo's search and retrieval functions were again helpful in developing and testing the ideas.

The analysis also presents a numerical analysis of the number of times codes relating to different types of uses of evidence appeared in the case study data (table 6.1).

4.7 Identifying (in)formal governance and back/front-stage policymaking

It was important to make a clear distinction between formal and informal governance theoretically and empirically in the data collection and analysis. As discussed in the literature review, there are a range of definitions of informal governance (3.4.6).

This thesis adopts the definition of Harsh, who emphasises aspects of rules, institutions and relationships in defining informal governance as 'a means of decision making that is un-codified, non-institutional and where social relationships and webs of influence play crucial roles' (Harsh, 2012, p. 489).

The term 'frontstage' refers to those settings where policy actors are visible to an audience and therefore subject to public scrutiny, for example in a council cabinet committee meeting. In contrast, 'backstage' settings are not visible to the public. Several authors also emphasise the lack of established 'rules of the game' in backstage settings (e.g. Klijn, 2014; Van Tatenhove, Mak and Liefferink, 2006). In this thesis, 'backstage' means settings where policy actors are not visible to the public.

Interestingly, the case study interviews demonstrated that participants were readily able to identify informal approaches to governance and back/front-stage policy settings. This reflects findings in other recent studies (e.g. Ayres, 2017; Ayres, 2022).

4.8 Validity and reliability

The concept of validity has a different interpretation in qualitative and quantitative research. This thesis seeks to assure internal validity (that the findings reflect participants' understanding of the situation) in four main ways. First, by providing transparency on the steps and decisions made during the research process in order to justify the reader's confidence and demonstrate 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Second, triangulation of different types of evidence and sources of evidence, for example findings regarding the importance of the early council leader discussion sessions were confirmed from multiple interviewees together with the notes from meeting observations. The third approach used was participant feedback or 'member checking' (Creswell, 2016, pp. 208-209). A brief (four page) report on initial findings was prepared and emailed to all participants in May 2019 to invite their feedback. Responses from participants supported the analysis, with one suggested amendment: one council chief executive said that the analysis did not acknowledge sufficiently the impact of the central government requirement to base CAs on functional economic market areas, which influenced the use of travel to work data in discussions on the appropriate geography for the WMCA. The researcher reflected on this in further developing the analysis. The fourth element of assuring internal validity involved the researcher reflecting on their positionality, such as the pre-existing biases and assumptions regarding the research (4.9).

The issue of reliability is interpreted in this study in terms of ‘whether the results are consistent with the data collected’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009, p. 221), what Lincoln and Guba (1985) term dependability and consistency. The strategies adopted to ensure reliability are triangulation and reflection described above and reflection on researcher positionality which is described below.

Considering the issue of external validity, the aim in this qualitative study has not been to develop generalisations applicable to all inter-municipal collaborations. Instead, the aim has been to develop ‘user generalisability’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009, p. 256) reflecting the specific context but which others may find relevant to their situations and contexts, and what (Yin, 2017, p. 37) calls ‘analytic generalisation’ (developing generalisable findings based on advancing theoretical concepts from existing literature and the case study findings). Assessments of the transferability of findings to a different context is therefore the responsibility of the person seeking to ‘transfer’ the findings (Schwartz-Shea, 2015, p. 141).

Finally, initial findings were subjected to a form of peer review through presentations of emerging results to faculty and peers in departmental PhD seminars, and to a workshop of the Policy Studies Association’s (PSA) Local Politics Specialist Group in April 2022. The participants at the PSA workshops included academics and practitioners in the field of local politics (including one council leader involved in the WMCA). Participants considered the findings credible, and their feedback was helpful in situating the findings in additional policy literature.

This section has explained the measures taken to ensure validity and reliability in the thesis. An important element of this is the treatment of researcher positionality, which is considered in the next section.

4.9 Researcher positionality

Critical realists recognise that research is not conducted from a neutral position.

How an observer sees and interprets the social world is affected by their socio-cultural background, and their location in space and time (Blaikie and Priest, 2017).

The term positionality 'both describes an individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context' (Foote and Bartell, 2011; Holmes, 2020, p. 1; Savin-Baden and Howell-Major, 2013). The researcher's world view includes ontological and epistemological assumptions, and wider assumptions about human nature. It's therefore important for the researcher to locate their beliefs, values and views about the design, conduct, and output of the research through self-reflection and a reflexive approach. Corlett and Mavin (2018, p. 283) present reflexivity as 'a process of opening ourselves up to scrutiny ... questioning the way we do our research' and how this affects its outcomes.

The researcher was employed as a senior officer in Birmingham City Council, one of the constituent local authorities in the case study CA, from 2004 to 2019. This coincided with most of the design and fieldwork for the thesis. The researcher was then briefly employed by WMCA itself, before moving to the University of Birmingham in August 2019. Further details of the timeline of the fieldwork activities and the researcher's professional roles are provided in section 4.5.6.

Savin-Baden and Howell-Major (2013) suggests researchers can examine their positionality by locating themselves about each of the subject, the participants, and the research context. First, considering location about the subject, on reflection the researcher recognised having become somewhat frustrated at the difficulty in making use of evidence in developing policy in earlier work for local public agencies, for example in accessing relevant and conclusive studies on specific policy issues. The researcher's original professional training was as a statistician and operational researcher, which are both largely quantitative approaches with a strong positivist epistemology, and their assumption entering the council had been that bringing 'reliable' evidence (defined then in positivist terms, such as systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials) would enable improved policy to be developed. It was somewhat surprising when officers and members sometimes appeared to pay lip service to this type of evidence, and then appeared to make decisions based on political beliefs or other less 'reliable' evidence such as anecdotes. Over time the researcher came to understand more the complexity of political decision making and the various pressures and sources of knowledge used in local public policymaking; indeed, part of the motivation for undertaking the PhD was to understand this more formally.

With regard to the participants and context, the researcher had existing working relationships with many of the people interviewed, which may have influenced both how they and the participants viewed each other. For example, this research took place during a long period of continuous austerity in the UK, where council budgets were subject to significant cuts from 2010 onwards (NAO, 2018). This was clearly an important contextual factor for all interviewees and knowing that the researcher

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worked in the sector meant that they seemed to feel reassured that the significance of this issue would be recognised. Whilst this was helpful in building rapport, there was also a risk that participants assume that the researcher would ‘already know what they know’ (Unluer, 2012, p. 8). The semi-structured interview format was helpful here in ensuring that the interviews covered all the issues relating to the research questions, and the researcher used techniques such as introducing a topic with statements like ‘obviously I was involved in some of this work, but please talk me through it as though I was not involved’. Interestingly, many of the interviewees who knew the researcher seemed to recognise the formal audio recorded research interview as a novel setting and made comments such as ‘I know you know this already, but I guess you will want me to tell the full story for the tape?’

The researcher also found it useful to reflect on the insider/outsider status in undertaking the research, concluding that on balance their personal and professional history and characteristics suggested a ‘lived familiarity’ with and prior knowledge of research subjects (Griffith, 1998, p. 361; Holmes, 2020; Mercer, 2007) and that they therefore had a large element of ‘insider’ status. As the research progressed and the researcher left the City Council and eventually joined the University of Birmingham as a staff member, their status gradually moved from ‘wholly insider’ to ‘mainly outsider’. The researcher’s role as a senior council officer is relevant both to their identity and the power relations potentially experienced by former colleagues.

The literature identifies a number of advantages and complications of the effect of insider status on researcher positionality. Chavez (2008, p. 479) argues that an inside positionality can provide a ‘nuanced perspective’ for observation and

interpretation, a more equal relationship with participants, and easier development of rapport, legitimacy and acclimatisation to the field. Greene (2014) summarises the advantages as knowledge (including familiarity with the research environment and participants), interaction (familiarity enabling the researcher to know how to approach participants and to avoid stereotyping), and easier access to participants. There are also a number of potential complications when insider status is 'unchecked' which for Chavez (2008) include an over-identification which can obscure the researcher role, social roles constraining the researcher role, requests to 'take sides' in controversial issues and other role conflicts, compromised professional ethics and the possibility that participants' perceptions might constrain the researcher's role. Greene (2014) considers the potential disadvantages to be subjectivity (due to over-familiarity with the research subject leading to assumptions based on prior knowledge) and bias (projecting one's own views onto the analysis). On balance, the researcher for this thesis found the insider status very helpful in terms of interpretation, access to participants and building rapport with them. The main potential complication was subjectivity; this chapter explains some of the steps taken to recognise and mitigate this issue.

Other potential influences on the research identified through this reflection process included the researcher's personal characteristics, life experiences, beliefs and political stances (Berger, 2015; Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Finlay, 2002; Horsburgh, 2003). The researcher for this thesis is a white, Christian, left-leaning, cisgender, late 50s, married male father of four young-adult children, having grown up and living in a rich Western democracy and working in relatively well-paid professional roles, primarily in the public sector. For example, the researcher recognised that this

context may make them less aware of the exclusion of certain voices and perspectives from policy debates than people from other backgrounds.

The intention is that engaging in a reflexive approach will recognise and reduce bias in the work, whilst acknowledging that (recognised and unrecognised) bias will no doubt remain in some form (Ahern, 1999). Strategies for sustaining reflexivity include 'prolonged engagement, members checking, triangulation, peer review', keeping a research journal and creating an 'audit trail' of the researcher's decision-making (Berger, 2015, p. 222). Over time the aim is to become better able to identify these biases and take them into account, whilst recognising that 'all research will be influenced by the researcher and there is no completely "neutral" or "objective" knowledge' (Ormston *et al.*, 2014, p. 22).

4.10 Ethics

Social researchers must work in a way that protects participants' wellbeing, ensures voluntary involvement based on informed consent, demonstrates honesty and integrity, and is lawful (Denscombe, 2014). Research ethics is concerned with issues including protecting participants, ensuring their interests and rights, assessing risks and protecting confidentiality (Bos, 2020, p. 37); this requires researchers to demonstrate principles such as reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability (Bos, 2020, p. 40). The University of Birmingham's Code of Practice states that: 'responsible ethical conduct is expected in all aspects of research including applying for funding, experimental design, generating and analysing data, using equipment and facilities, publishing results, and acknowledging the direct and indirect

contribution of colleagues, collaborators and others' (University of Birmingham, 2020, p. 3). Formal ethical approval is a requirement of the Code.

Details of the planned PhD project were submitted by the original lead supervisor, Professor Lowndes, for formal approval to the University Ethical Review Committee in November 2016 (reference ERN_16-1382). In response, the Committee requested some minor amendments to the participant information sheet and consent form, together with additional information on the recruitment strategy and the researcher's professional role relative to the study topic, confidentiality issues and data storage. The participant information sheet and consent form were amended to explain that the study was a PhD project by a UoB student, to provide contact details for the researcher and the academic supervisor, and to explain how participants could withdraw after the submission of data. Further information on the recruitment strategy and the professional role was provided to the Committee, together with an explanation of how the risk of disclosure of participant identification would be managed. Finally, data storage arrangements in line with the University's Code of Practice for Research were set out. Full ethical approval was subsequently confirmed in February 2017.

The formal ethical approval process was helpful in providing an independent perspective on the planned treatment of the ethical issues in the thesis, particularly around informed consent, the protection of participants and handling the positionality (Bos, 2020; Denscombe, 2014; Thomas, 2021). For example, because of their closeness to the project the researcher had not made the draft participant information sheet and consent form as explicit as they should have been about

various issues such as their status as a PhD student at the university. In terms of the recruitment strategy, they had not fully considered the potential that participants may feel obliged to take part when requested to do so by a former senior officer. To address this, the participant information sheet and related correspondence were amended to emphasise that participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could withdraw in an extensive time frame without giving a reason. The final versions are provided in Appendix 11.3. It was also helpful to explain in more detail how the researcher would take account of their prior working relationships with some participants, which included a transparent explanation of the research and arrangements for confidentiality, voluntary participation, and reporting arrangements. Although it had always been intended to ensure confidentiality for participants, it was helpful to be more explicit that this risk would be managed by making use of multiple data sources to identify issues, rather than relying on individual interviewees, and by reporting interview data on an anonymised basis.

4.11 Limitations

There were technical limitations to this research, regarding scope, timescale, and generalisation. First, the scope was partly dictated by the nature of the PhD process and resources available for the study. A single case study design was adopted, rather than investigating multiple cases, to enable analysis in sufficient depth to address the research questions. Investigating multiple cases, and perhaps augmenting the qualitative analysis with wider survey data capture, would provide useful additional data to test and revise the conclusions.

Second, regarding timescale, this study inevitably offers a snapshot of a dynamic situation. The approach to policymaking and the use of evidence in the WMCA may well change as the institution develops, for example establishing a dedicated cadre of officials and developing research activities with various universities.

Third, since the thesis is a qualitative case study, the findings cannot be generalised to other contexts. The thesis aims to develop ‘user generalisability’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009, p. 256), reflecting the specific context but which others may find relevant to their situations, and ‘analytic generalisation’ (Yin, 2017, p. 39), developing generalisable findings based on advancing theoretical concepts from existing literature and the case study findings. The final conceptual framework developed through the thesis (8.6) can be used in future research to understand evidence use in different collaborative settings, leading to refinement of the framework.

The thesis also highlighted the conceptual complexities surrounding the meaning of the term ‘evidence’ and the fact that evidence ‘use’ is an elusive, rarely directly observable phenomenon which is seen differently depending on the perspectives brought to it (Gitomer and Crouse, 2019; Neilson, 2001; Rich, 1997; Webber, 1991; Weiss, 1991). There were significant difficulties in applying typologies of evidence use empirically, since the researcher cannot directly access the cognitive processes of policymakers to categorise a specific incident of evidence use so the researcher must interpret this based on information from interviewees (3.2.1).

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter described the research design for the thesis, explaining and justifying the use of a qualitative case study design to address the research questions. The case of the West Midlands CA (WMCA) was selected because CAs are an important example of inter-municipal collaboration, the timing of the WMCA's development was contemporaneous with the thesis fieldwork, and the WMCA offered privileged access since the researcher at the time worked for one of the constituent councils. The case study examined WMCA between 2014 and May 2017 and focused on the use of evidence in the development of the CA itself, the Strategic Economic Plan, and the Mental Health Commission.

A theoretically informed conceptual framework based on the literature review was operationalised to guide the research, develop relevant case level questions and identify the key sources of data. Responding to the methodological limitations identified in the evidence utilisation literature, the thesis captured multiple data sources including semi-structured interviews inviting participants to 'tell their story' of policymaking and evidence use, together with the analysis of documentation and observations. The data analysis adopted the Framework Method of thematic analysis, supported by Nvivo.

The validity and reliability of the research was assured through the use of triangulation, reflection and participant feedback. The chapter discussed the generalisability of the research in terms of theoretical propositions, and its limitations in terms of scope and timescale. Ethical issues and the researcher's positionality in

respect to the subject, the participants and the research context were considered with the aim of recognising and reducing the bias in the work.

5 THE CASE OF THE WEST MIDLANDS CA

5.1 Introduction

The next four chapters present and analyse the empirical findings of the thesis. This chapter provides a detailed account of the formation, functions and governance of the West Midlands CA. Chapter 6 examines how evidence was used in early policymaking in the WMCA. Chapter 7 investigates the evidence used, including the different types of evidence, such as academic research or lived experience, and the characteristics of this evidence, such as its format and 'quality'. Chapter 8 analyses the case study data using the initial conceptual framework and discusses the findings in relation to the relevant literature.

Direct quotes from research participants have been included to illustrate wider findings, to present their views in their own words (Patton, 2015) and to explain the researcher's interpretations of these (Sandelowski, 1994). The format of the interview source is (CXn) for council chief executives, (LEADn) for political leaders, (CONn) for consultants and (POLn) for policy officers. On a few occasions the interview reference is not included in order to protect individuals who may otherwise be identifiable from the quotation or context, these are identified as '(ANON)'. A list of interviewees is provided in Appendix (11.2). Quotations from interviews are shown in *italic text*.

West Midlands councils found it difficult to develop collaborative mechanisms after the abolition of the Metropolitan County Council in 1986 (2.4), with antagonistic relationships between the councils, very limited collaborative infrastructure, and a

series of largely unsuccessful attempts to develop city-regional governance arrangements prior to 2014. The chapter starts by reviewing this discouraging history (5.2) before analysing the background to the WMCA, including the process of informal discussions between council leaders on the potential value of developing a CA, the formal process of forming the CA, the first WM Devolution Agreement, and the financial context (5.3). The following section (5.4) examines two major areas of early policy development in the CA: the production of the CA's Strategic Economic Plan, and its policy commission on mental health. The chapter concludes by analysing the evidence capability in the region during the early stage of WMCA's development. This chapter provides important context for the subsequent chapters which present, analyse and discuss the main empirical findings of the thesis.

5.2 Inter-Municipal Collaboration in the West Midlands

This section examines the history of inter-municipal collaboration in the West Midlands region. The West Midlands Metropolitan County Council (WM MCC) was established in April 1974 by the Local Government Act 1972, and was abolished in March 1986, along with the five other Metropolitan County Councils (MCCs) in England, by the Local Government Act 1985 (2.7). Following the abolition of the WM MCC, in common with most metropolitan county councils, its duties were transferred to a mixture of joint committees and boards. In the case of the West Midlands, future collaboration was lower than in most of the other former MCC areas, because of long-standing poor relationships between councils in the region (Leach and Game, 1991). In preparation for the abolition of the MCCs, the chief executives of the

constituent local authorities in the West Midlands established a co-ordinating committee aiming to minimise county-wide units and, where these were necessary, to ensure clear 'lead district' arrangements (Leach and Game, 1991). Joint decision-making responsibilities were transferred to a number of joint committees, with varying memberships. These institutional arrangements reflected inter-authority tensions and rivalries over many decades, most acutely between the Black Country authorities (Sandwell, Wolverhampton, Walsall and Dudley) and Birmingham City Council (Lowndes and Lemprière, 2018; Spencer, 1986).

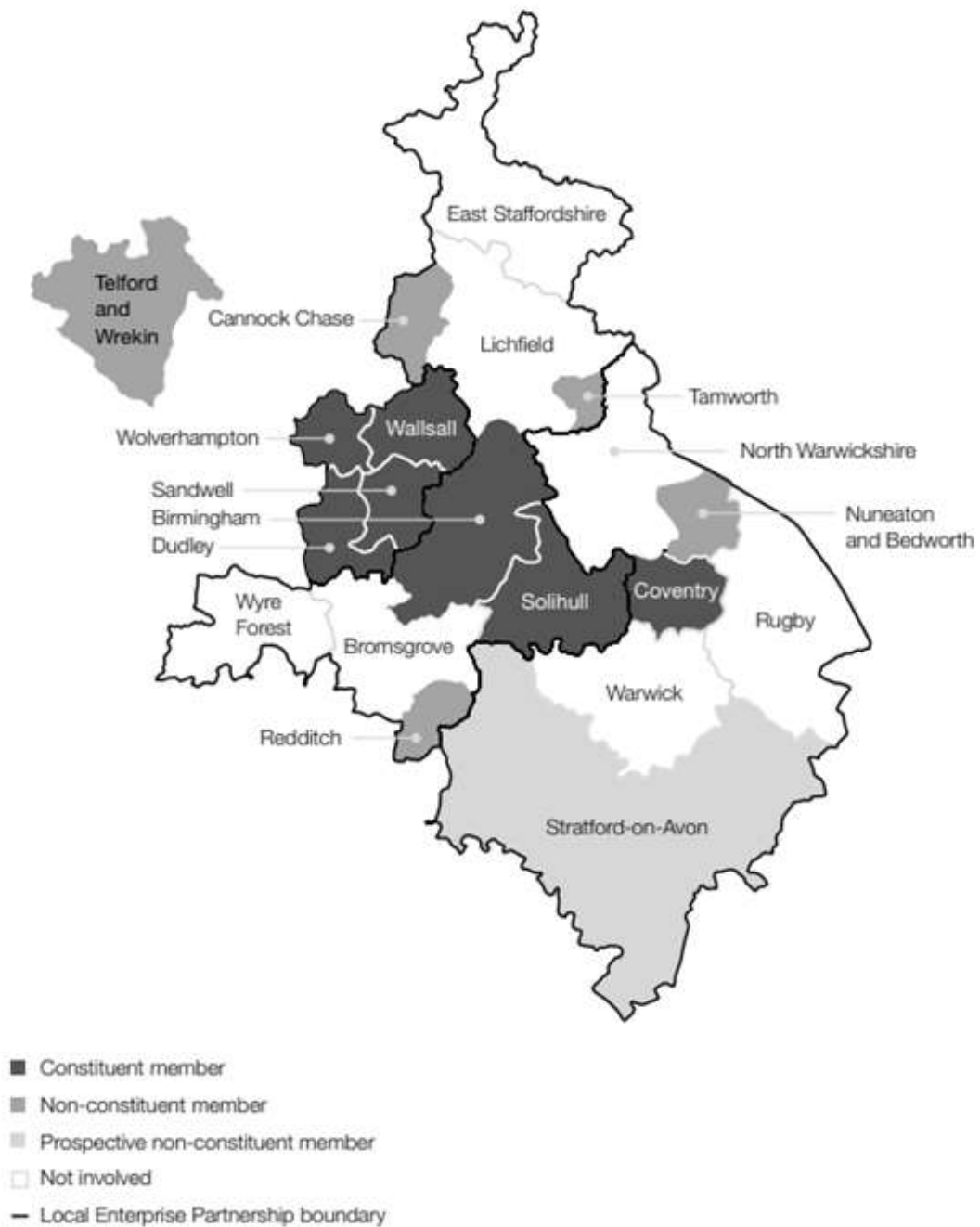
Since 2000, there had been several attempts, led by Birmingham City Council, to establish arrangements for inter-municipal collaboration in the metropolitan county area. In 2002, the 'Birmingham, Coventry and Black Country City Region' partnership was formed with an initial membership consisting of the seven metropolitan councils. In 2003, the partnership produced a prospectus (Birmingham City Council, 2003). In 2006, central government issued a White Paper proposing Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs) (Department for Communities, 2006) as a voluntary process whereby local authorities and partners would agree shared targets based on local and national priorities, with pooled funding used across the sub-region and the potential to explore allowing groups of local authorities to establish statutory sub-regional authorities (HM Government, 2007). In 2007, eight councils in the West Midlands (the seven metropolitan councils plus Telford) developed a 'City Strategy Pathfinder Programme' aiming to reduce worklessness and improve skills in the most deprived wards across the City Region (Coventry City Council, 2009). This developed into the West Midlands MAA which was signed in September 2009, with overall governance of the Multi-Area Agreement sitting with a 'City Region Growth

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and Prosperity Board' (Coventry City Council, 2009). The sub-region applied to act as a pilot city region, but the April 2009 budget instead established pilots in Manchester and Leeds (HM Treasury, 2009, p. 83).

In 2011, instead of building on the emerging city region geography, three separate Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) were established, covering the Black Country, Coventry and Warwickshire, and Greater Birmingham and Solihull (Lemprière and Lowndes, 2019). The West Midlands developed complex institutional arrangements with overlapping memberships and responsibilities (Kerslake, 2014). Figure 5.1 provides a map of this complex geography, showing the seven constituent councils (dark grey), non-constituent councils and the three WMCA LEP areas (plus Telford's LEP area).

Figure 5-1 Map of West Midlands CA



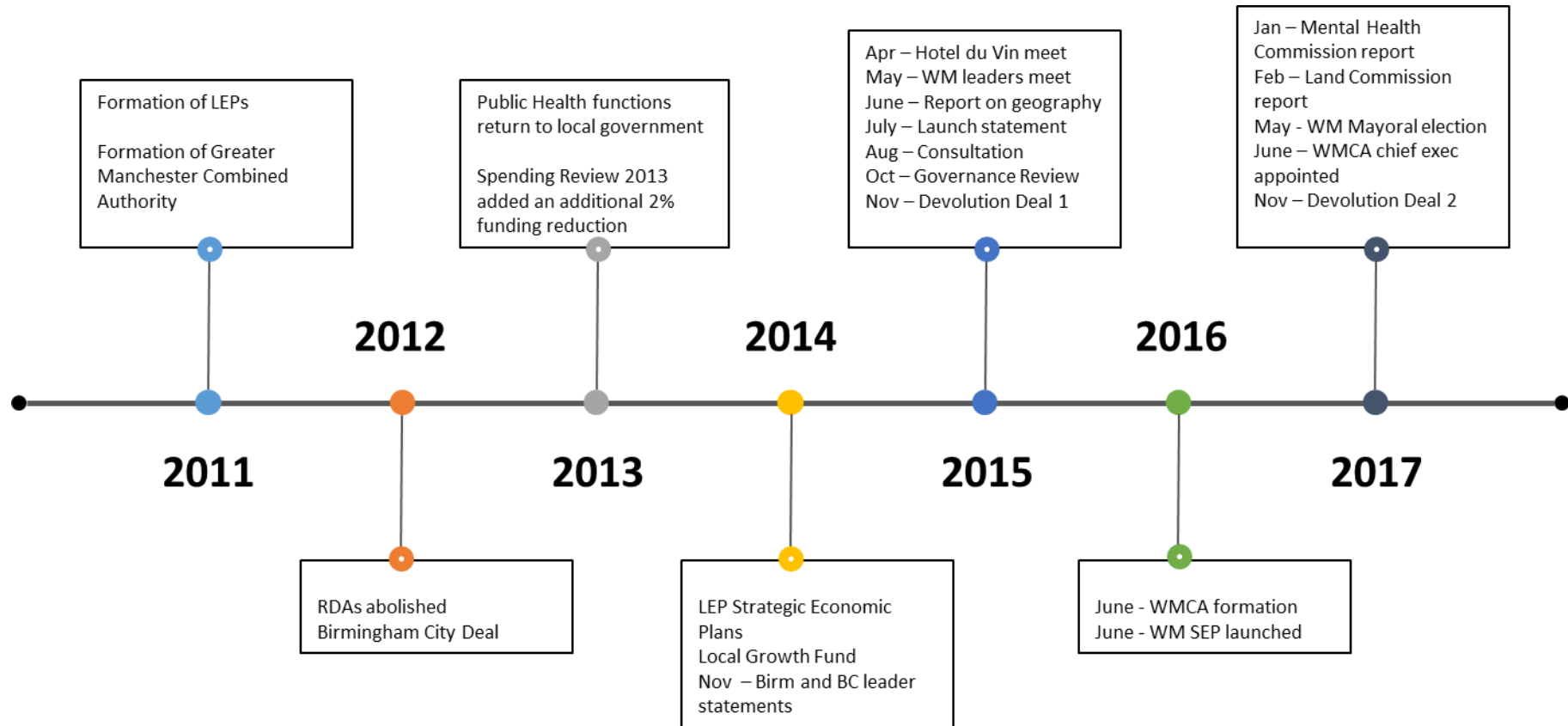
Source: National Audit Office (NAO, 2016, p. 35)

5.3 Background to the WMCA

This section provides context for the detailed empirical findings of the thesis by summarising the development of the WMCA from the earliest discussions between council leaders, through the four formal stages of establishing a CA (2.5.2) and the development of the first WMCA Devolution Agreement (2.5.3), to the outcomes of the first mayoral election. A summary timeline of the key events in developing the WMCA is provided in figure 5.2.

There are two important contextual features to address before discussing the detail of the process of developing the WMCA. First, discussions on establishing the WMCA and developing the Devolution Agreements relied extensively on an informal governance approach. Under informal governance arrangements, public officials make decisions away from public scrutiny and without the constraints of established bureaucratic rules and codes of conduct (3.5). Secondly, the organisation of the WMCA included multiple ‘veto players’ (3.4.2), defined as actors whose agreement is needed to establish new organisations or policies (Tsebelis, 2002). Since local authorities were free to choose whether or not to join the proposed WMCA, each had a veto on their membership. The creation of the CA, and its funding, depended on the agreement of central government departments. The involvement of other partners, such as health, police and business leaders, was at their discretion. Local councils, central government departments, and other partners therefore each had veto powers in parts of all of the discussions around the CA.

Figure 5-2 Timeline of West Midlands CA (2011-2017)



Source: Author's own analysis

The earliest reports of discussions on the potential WMCA appeared in local press articles in March 2014 (Walker, 2014). The leaders of the seven metropolitan council held a series of bilateral telephone conversations to explore potential interest in developing a CA and Devolution Agreement, on the understanding that Birmingham would play a supportive, rather than domineering, role in the process (CX3, LEAD2). These early discussions identified significant interest in devolution to a CA, subject to it having clear role boundaries which did not take powers or funding from existing councils (LEAD3). On 7th November 2014, the leaders of Birmingham and the four Black Country councils published a letter to the Chancellor announcing their intention to form a CA. The letter indicated that other councils, particularly Coventry and Solihull, would be invited to join (Brown, 2014).

Between November 2014 and May 2015, the seven WM metropolitan council leaders and their seven chief executives held a series of conversations regarding the potential to develop more formal collaboration across the councils. There were three key forums where municipal leaders met together and evidence was presented and discussed in the early development of the CA: three informal sessions of council leaders and chief executives at the Hotel du Vin in Birmingham in April and May 2015 (CX1), followed by a series of weekly chief executive meetings, and separate weekly joint council leader/chief executive meetings in council offices (CON3, CON4, CON6, CX 1-4, LEAD3, LEAD4, participant observation). The initial Hotel du Vin meeting was critical in giving leaders time together to discuss the issues around a potential CA and to agree some key principles (CON3, CON4, CON6, CX 1-4, LEAD3, LEAD4). Located in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, the Hotel du Vin has an ornate, early Victorian red brick building. Policymakers met in a private meeting

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room with wooden floorboards, art on the wall, and a doorway onto the sunny courtyard. The timing of the meeting, on 14th April 2015, was contentious since it brought together politicians from different parties in the middle of the campaign for the 7th May 2015 UK general election (CON6). The meeting initially involved all 14 leaders and chief executives from the seven metropolitan councils and two external consultants, however part way through the day the leaders asked others to leave for an hour and held a political discussion between themselves (CON6, CX3, LEAD4). This discussion between politicians led to an initial consensus to set up a CA focussed on economic growth (LEAD4, CON3).

WMCA Launch Statement

On 6 July 2015, leaders of the seven West Midlands metropolitan district councils and the chairs of the three LEPs jointly published the first public statement on the WMCA. This consisted of a 20-page, glossily designed 'Launch Statement' titled 'West Midlands CA: Growing the UK economy through a Midlands engine' (WMCA, 2015a). A foreword by the leaders of the seven metropolitan district councils stated that 'through the work programme the West Midlands CA will develop, we can lead our region to a better future and its rightful place as the engine of the UK economy' (p.5). The Launch Statement set out 'the case for the West Midlands CA' (p.7) focussed on building on the existing economic base, arguing that economic assessments suggested the appropriate footprint for the CA to be the three LEPs in the region. The WMCA was presented as an '*administrative form*' (p.13) enabling constituent councils to collaborate, whilst emphasising that '*CAs do not take power away from local councillors or the individual communities they serve*' (p.13). The

paper set out six '*working principles*' including what became known as the 'balance' objective: '*all communities will benefit from growth, but not necessarily at the same time or in the same way*' (p.13).

The document set out a programme of evidence-informed policy development. Proposals for '*an economic policy and intelligence capacity*' asserted that '*future strategic decisions should only be taken on the basis of the empirical evidence supporting both the problem and the solution*' (p.15). An early priority was the development of a Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) which, together with refreshed economic strategies for each of the three individual LEP areas, would '*clearly establish the economic and investment priorities for the [region's] future*' (p.14). The Launch Document next set out proposals to establish three 'independent commissions' to '*to help us shape the agenda of the West Midlands CA*' (p.16). The first was a 'Policy Commission on Mental Health and Public Services' (WMCA, 2015a, pp. 16-17), which was launched in October 2015 and reported in January 2017 (Lamb *et al.*, 2017). The second was a 'Land Commission' to help '*ensure that the supply of development sites can meet demand*' (WMCA, 2015a). The Land Commission was launched in September 2016 (WMCA, 2017a) and reported in February 2017 (WMCA, 2017b). The third of the policy commissions, the 'Productivity Commission', aimed to examine the causes of low economic productivity in the region, identify solutions and develop appropriate plans and monitoring systems to address these (WMCA, 2015a). This Commission was launched in April 2017 (WMCA, 2017a) and reported in June 2018 (WMCA, 2018).

The formal, statutory process of establishing a CA consists of four stages (2.5.2).

The first formal stage is that the constituent authorities must complete a governance review. At the time, a governance review was required to evaluate whether:

The establishment of a CA for an area would be likely to improve the exercise of statutory functions relating to transport and economic development and regeneration, the effectiveness and efficiency of transport in the area, and the economic conditions in the area.

(The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, s.108)

WMCA Governance Review

The West Midlands Governance Review report was published in October 2015 and concluded that a CA would improve these functions in the area (WM Councils, 2015). As part of the governance review, WMCA partners undertook a programme of engagement with stakeholders, which in general was somewhat limited in extent (7.2.2). Limited public engagement has been identified in several studies on the development of CAs and Devolution Agreements (Ayres, 2022; Beel, Jones and Rees Jones, 2018; Kenealy, 2016; Lyall, Wood and Bailey, 2015; Richards and Smith, 2015).

The Governance Review highlighted that some other regions had already established CAs and warned that *'the West Midlands risks lagging behind areas which have taken this step and will not meet its ambition to support the re-balancing of the UK economy'* (WM Councils, 2015, p. 11). This regional narrative was an important element of making the case for the WMCA (6.4.1).

Echoing the Launch Statement, the Governance Review also emphasised that the potential CA did not involve a merger or take-over of existing council functions. Rather, it would enable the '*enhancement of collaboration, strength of decisions and accelerating growth across the region at a strategic level*' (WM Councils, 2015, p. 11). The report highlighted economic evidence supporting an integrated approach to economic strategy at regional level, stating that economic analysis by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development supported the proposed introduction of an additional layer of regional government (WM Councils, 2015, p. 5). The governance review summarised some key strengths and weaknesses in the region's economy, and presented a detailed economic assessment of the relevant 'Functional Economic Market Area' (FEMA) for the WMCA (WM Councils, 2015, p. 16). The analysis concluded that a FEMA existed across the seven metropolitan district area, but that the 3-LEPs area was 'a stronger FEMA' (WM Councils, 2015, p. 19). The review went on to assess the existing governance arrangements in the area for transport and economic development, concluding that the status quo left the region 'without a single strategic transport and economic development decision-making body at the West Midlands level' (p.25) and recommending the formation of a CA.

Governance Schemes and Devolution Agreements

The second formal stage of establishing a CA is the publication of a draft governance scheme. An initial draft WMCA governance scheme was developed, leading to a draft Parliamentary Order. However, this draft scheme was overtaken by events as alongside the process of creating the WMCA itself, an initial Devolution

Agreement with government was developed following the government's invitation on 21 July 2015 to submit proposals for the 2015 Spending Review (2.5.3). The WMCA proposals were submitted to government in September 2015 and the final agreement was published in November 2015 (HM Treasury and WMCA, 2015). In brief, the Devolution Agreement created a consolidated 'Investment Fund' of £36.5m per year for 30 years, a pilot for the local retention of growth in business rates income, and devolution of some central government functions around adult skills, employment support and business growth. Significantly, the agreement also required the establishment of a directly elected mayor for the West Midlands metropolitan area.

In the light of the commitments in the November 2015 WM Devolution Agreement, a revised Mayoral WMCA scheme was developed (WMCA, 2016b). The Mayoral WMCA governance scheme specified that the main decision-making body of the WMCA was the Board, which was chaired by the Mayor. Each constituent council appointed two members (one of which was the council leader) and each non-constituent body appointed one member, which (together with the Mayor) made a total of 22 members. The Leaders of constituent councils held the office of 'portfolio leads' for areas of the WMCA's responsibilities, and were collectively known as 'the Cabinet' operating with collective responsibility. Portfolio leads were decided by unanimous vote of the constituent members (WMCA, 2016b, p. 3). The Cabinet examined the Mayor's draft annual budget and the plans, policies and strategies, and were able to reject them if two-thirds of the Mayoral WMCA Cabinet agreed to do so. In the event that the Mayoral WMCA rejected the proposed budget then the Mayoral WMCA would propose an alternative budget for acceptance by the Cabinet, subject to a two-thirds majority of those present and voting. The Mayor would not be

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entitled to vote on the alternative Mayoral WMCA proposed budget (WMCA, 2016b, p. 3).

The mayoral governance scheme specified three principal types of decision making: mayoral functions, joint mayor/WMCA functions, and mayoral WMCA functions (WMCA, 2016b). These arrangements are summarised in figure 5.3. First, 'Mayoral functions' were exercised solely by the Mayor; for these functions the WMCA Cabinet did not have a vote or limitation on the function unless explicitly stated. Seven mayoral decision areas were listed in the governance scheme, although most were subject to some form of consultation or agreement. The only decision areas where the mayor may decide alone were the mayoral precept, and the 'functional power of competence' to 'do things appropriate or incidental to, or connected with, the Mayor's functions and in order to aid the delivery of the investment programme' (WMCA, 2016b, p. 12).

Figure 5-3 WMCA functions and governance (2016)

Category	Mayoral decisions	Joint WMCA / Mayoral functions	Mayoral WMCA function
Summary	Exercised by the Mayor, WMCA cabinet do not have a vote or limitation on these functions	Required 2/3 of constituent authorities to vote in favour and the Mayor to vote in favour.	Required 2/3 of constituent authorities to vote in favour and not subject to the Mayor's vote in favour.
Examples	• Devolved transport budget • Mayoral precept • Homes and Communities agency compulsory purchase order powers, with the consent of the appropriate authority(ies) • Grants to bus service operators, where the Secretary of State is to consult the Mayor • Reporting on the West Midlands "key route network", in consultation with the authorities • Raising a business rate supplement, in agreement with the relevant LEP Board(s) and the Mayoral WMCA • Functional power of competence	• The West Midlands "key route network" • Further WMCA transport functions (e.g. bus franchising) • Low emission and clean air zones • Homes and Communities Agency objectives and functions • Employment support and training	• Current WMCA powers and functions: passenger transport executive, economic development and regeneration. • HS2 growth development corporations. • Matters reserved to unanimous constituent member voting (including financial and land use issues).

Source: Author's analysis of (WMCA, 2016b)

The second type of decision were 'Joint WMCA/Mayor functions', these required two-thirds of Constituent Member votes in favour and were subject to the Mayor's vote in favour, for example decisions on the Key Routes Network and employment support. Third, 'Mayoral WMCA' functions required two-thirds of Constituent Member votes in favour and were not subject to the Mayor's vote in favour, for example existing passenger transport executive functions (WMCA, 2016b, pp. 3-4). Finally, a small number of issues were reserved for unanimous approval by constituent members (also not subject to the Mayor's vote in favour). These included the approval of borrowing limits, treasury management strategy including reserves, investment strategy and capital budget of the Mayoral WMCA; the conferral of further functions on the Mayoral WMCA; voting rights for Members of the Mayoral WMCA appointed otherwise than from among the elected Members of the Constituent Councils; and amendments to the standing orders of the Mayoral WMCA (WMCA, 2016b, p. 4).

The third formal stage of establishing a CA is a period of consultation on the proposed CA governance scheme. Despite concerns about the limited consultation on the initial governance scheme (Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, 2016), the final formal stage of creating the WMCA was completed with the approval of a Parliamentary Order on 16th June 2016 (HM Government, 2016). Following agreement by the constituent councils, in September 2016 the government passed a further Order creating the position of elected mayor for the area, setting the date of the first election to be 4th May 2017 and the first term of office of the mayor to be three years, with subsequent elections in 2020 and then every four years thereafter (The West Midlands CA (Election of Mayor) 2016 SI 2016/933). The first WM Mayoral elections were held in May 2017 (*The West Midlands Combined Authority*

(*Election of Mayor*) Statutory Order 933 (2016), 2016). Turnout in the first metro mayor elections in CAs in 2017 averaged 27.8% and varied between 21% and 30%, in WM the figure was 26.7% (Electoral Commission, 2017). In comparison, turnout in the same year in English local government elections was 35.1%, in Scottish councils was 46.9%, in the Northern Ireland Assembly was 64.8% and in the national government election was 69% (Electoral Commission (2017, p. 5); Hatcher (2017)).

Further Devolution Agreements followed after the time period covered by this case study. A second West Midlands Devolution Agreement was published with the November 2017 Budget (HM Treasury and WMCA, 2017), giving the mayor and WMCA a greater role in developing the regional industrial strategy and new funding around transport, skills and housing. Most recently, in March 2023, the West Midlands and Greater Manchester CAs each signed a 'Trailblazer deeper Devolution Agreement' (HM Government and WMCA, 2023) which devolved responsibility for a set of economic policies to WMCA and promised 'a single funding settlement to invest in local priorities' in the next Spending Review. This agreement incorporated proposals for a new long-term funding settlement, including the right to retain 100% of business rates for 10 years, and further devolution around transport, skills, culture and broadband.

Financial context

Turning to the financial context, the WMCA was established during a period of severe restrictions on local authority budgets in England. Government funding for English local authorities reduced by 49% in real terms from 2010-11 to 2017-18, leading to a 29% real-terms reduction in 'spending power' including local tax revenues (NAO, 2018). Metropolitan districts bore the biggest reductions in

spending power because local authorities in areas of higher deprivation relied more heavily on grants from central government (Institute for Government, 2020). During its first year of operation, 2016-17, the WMCA recorded income of £279m and expenditure on services of £252m (WMCA, 2017a). The main sources of income were the transport levy from WM districts (£125m), transport income (£41m), capital grants (£69m) and the Devolution Agreement “gainshare” grant (£36.5m). Expenditure was primarily on transport (£188m, including £68m on concessionary fares), capital grants paid (£46m) and interest payments (£12m). Expenditure on the new areas of WMCA activity was relatively small: £0.9m on policy commissions and public service reform work, and £0.9m on management (programme management, policy, governance and communications) (WMCA, 2017a).

In summary, the WMCA was developed through a series of informal and formal processes over a period of just over two years from March 2014 to June 2016. Initial bilateral discussions between council leaders broadened into a series of informal, private meetings of leaders and chief executives. The WMCA “Launch Statement” in June 2015 was the first substantive public statement of intent. This was followed by the formal Governance Review in October 2015, the first Devolution Agreement in November 2015, and a Mayoral Governance Scheme adopted in 2016. In general, public engagement in the process was limited, as was also the case in other CAs. The creation of the WMCA took place in the context of severe financial cuts to local government funding in England.

5.4 Policy development in the WMCA

The process of creating the WMCA involved policy development in several areas, such as its remit and membership, resulting in key policy documents such as the Launch Statement, the two Governance Reviews, and the first Devolution Agreement. Once the WMCA had been created, the focus of policy development moved to the regional economy, resulting in a Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) for the WMCA region, and a series of Policy Commissions on wider economic and social issues. The first Policy Commission was the Mental Health Commission (MHC).

The Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) was designed to '*clearly establish the economic and investment priorities for the future*' (WMCA, 2015a). The Plan was developed through a committee chaired by a (private sector) LEP chair. The resulting report was launched in June 2016, setting out a vision, objectives, strategy and actions to 'improve the quality of life for everyone who lives and works in the West Midlands' (WMCA, 2016d, p. 5). The SEP made an overarching commitment to evidence based policy, which it defined as: '*ensuring that future strategic decisions are taken on the basis of the empirical evidence supporting both the problem and the solution*' (WMCA, 2016d, p. 27). This commitment was linked to the development and deployment of economic modelling techniques to test the costs and benefits of alternative investment strategies (p.33). There were multiple references in the published report to the use of evidence in developing the SEP, including economic analysis demonstrating the scale of challenge facing the region in terms of an imbalance of public spending and tax revenues (p.20) and analysis shaping policy on economic productivity (p. 27), skills (p.48) and overall economic policy (p.56 and separate Technical Appendix).

Whilst the WMCA initially focussed on economic growth, the Launch Statement included as one of its six operating principles that *‘our pursuit of growth will be accompanied by an agenda of innovation and public service reform that will reduce the overall level of public spending’* (WMCA, 2015a, p. 13). The document promised three WMCA ‘Policy Commissions’ which were planned to *‘work... independently to bring forward initial ideas for consideration... to inform the further development of our proposals for the West Midlands CA’* (WMCA, 2015a, p. 16).

The first Policy Commission, the ‘Mental Health and Public Services Commission’, was established to:

Assess the scale of mental health problems in the West Midlands and their cost and impact across the whole system; examine best practice elsewhere nationally and internationally in both health and other services areas; establish the relative costs and benefits within the whole system of the application of this best practice to the West Midlands; pilot new ways of working to test effectiveness; and make recommendations on how the findings of the Commission can best be taken forward to reform public services in the West Midlands.

(WMCA, 2015a, p. 17)

The (renamed) Mental Health Commission was established with Norman Lamb MP, the former Minister of State for Care and Support, appointed as Chair in October 2015 (WMCA, 2015b). The commissioners included a range of experts in mental and public health, and commission meetings were also attended by representatives of local mental health commissioners and provider trusts (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, pp. 19-20). The University of Birmingham was commissioned to conduct an assessment of

the current position in the WMCA area in relation to mental health and wellbeing, in particular in relation to the economic costs and demands on public services. This evidence synthesis report also provided a rapid appraisal of the published literature around mental health, and analysed demography, prevalence trends, how support and treatment was currently provided, and emerging good practice in the area (Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017).

The Mental Health Commission (MHC) undertook a range of engagement activities (7.2.2). Public listening events took place in three cities. A Mental Health Citizen's Jury was established consisting of people who had current or previous lived experience, or those who were carers. The Citizen's Jury held eight sessions and presented their recommendations to the MHC. The MHC met with the Jury members again in November 2016 to discuss its emerging actions and to get further input from them (WMCA, 2017c). The Commission also issued a call for written evidence relating to the key lines of enquiry. These requests were sent to a range of experts and relevant organisations; the Centre for Mental Health was commissioned to summarise the evidence submitted (Lamb *et al.*, 2017). The Commission's conclusions and recommendations were published in an action plan in January 2017 (Lamb *et al.*, 2017). The Action Plan's recommendations covered six thematic areas: supporting people into work; providing safe and stable places to live; mental health and criminal justice; developing approaches to healthcare; getting the community involved; and working with other cities and regions (Lamb *et al.*, 2017).

5.5 Evidence capability in the West Midlands region

The West Midlands region had significant capability to develop and interpret evidence at the time of creation of the WMCA, but this capability was not coordinated and joined up. The main capability for evidence production and analysis within the WMCA itself during the period covered by this case study was inherited from the former West Midlands Passenger Transport Executive and Integrated Transport Authority organisations. These had developed significant research and analytical capability, particularly around transport and spatial analysis, and a public engagement and consultation function (Transport for West Midlands, 2023).

Further capacity existed in local public agencies such as the seven metropolitan councils, police and city marketing agencies. For example, in 2004 the four metropolitan councils in the Black Country sub-region established the Black Country Consortium, a private company jointly owned by the councils, to provide strategic support and advice about economic development in the sub-region (Black Country Consortium, 2023). In 2009, Birmingham City Council had established a 'customer knowledge' function to understand the characteristics of residents and service users in the city (Birmingham City Council, 2010). West Midlands Police's 'Data Driven Insight' (DDI) project aimed to deliver a single, cleansed and integrated data set, enabling advanced data analysis to inform crime reduction (West Midlands Police, 2019). The Marketing Birmingham organisation provided analysis of research and data around tourism and inward investment, it was renamed the West Midlands Growth Company and established as part of WMCA in April 2017 (WMGC, 2022).

The West Midlands region had 12 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) including two Russell Group research-intensive HEIs, the University of Birmingham and University

of Warwick (Russell Group, 2023; Universities UK, 2023). There were several departments and institutes within these universities undertaking research relevant to the WMCA. For example, the University of Wolverhampton established an Institute for Community Research and Development in 2017 to deliver ‘research driven policy development, promoting social mobility by delivering effective community-based transformational projects’ (University of Wolverhampton, 2023). A particularly significant contribution was the establishment, in 2016, by the University of Birmingham, of a ‘City-Region Economic Development Institute’ (City-REDI) to ‘support regional economic growth policy and practice through engaged and relevant research’ (University of Birmingham, 2023). City-REDI and the Black Country Consortium provided economic policy and research capacities for WMCA to draw upon (Bates *et al.*, 2023).

In summary, the West Midlands region had significant capacity around research creation and analysis, but this was not coordinated at the regional level.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed introduction to the West Midlands CA during its creation and early development. Experience from recent history might have suggested that the WMCA ‘project’ was unlikely to succeed. The region had an historic antipathy to collaborative working between local authorities in the region, and had dismantled the metropolitan county council infrastructure after 1986. Attempts by Birmingham City Council to develop collaboration across the city-region had achieved limited success. Very little collaborative research infrastructure was established in the region. Powerful new institutions with complex sub-regional

geographies had been created in the most recent changes to regional economic development governance. All these local factors, together with the devastating impact of austerity on deprived urban councils, cumulatively made a difficult starting point for the development of a new inter-municipal collaboration in the region.

However, partly in response to the need to identify new funding in the context of severe budget cuts, councils and partners successfully navigated the process together and with central government, leading to the formation of the WMCA. Local leaders and central government adopted an informal approach to governance between formal approval stages. By meeting privately, they were able to tackle difficult policy discussions and navigate the complexity of multiple veto players, developing a shared narrative around the regional economy and the potential benefits of the new CA. The resulting proposals were then brought back into formal processes through published documents and decisions in councils and committees. As in other CAs, wider public engagement was limited.

The next chapter examines how evidence was used in the nascent WMCA.

6 HOW WAS EVIDENCE USED IN THE WMCA?

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how evidence was used in the early policymaking of the case study CA, addressing the first research questions: “How is evidence used in policymaking in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How is this understood by participants?” The chapter starts by analysing how the use of evidence was reported in formal publications, revealing the construction of a rational and logical account of evidence use in line with the Evidence-Based Policymaking account (3.2), which argues that public policy should be based on robust evidence, instrumentally linking policy development to research findings. The chapter then uses other data sources, primarily elite interviews supplemented by observation, to explore in more depth examples of evidence use and how these were perceived by participants. This part of the analysis is structured using the types of evidence use identified in the typology developed by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019) (3.2.3). The analysis reveals nuanced uses of evidence, including its use to ‘enhance debate and dialogue’, which the thesis terms the ‘deliberative’ use of evidence, and its use to ‘justify a policy position’ in line with the ‘political’ use of evidence (3.2).

The chapter then examines four important ways evidence was used in the case study. First, it explores how evidence supported the creation of a regional narrative, which was viewed by policymakers as essential in making the case for establishing the CA. Second, it investigates how economic analysis was used to justify key proposals on the membership and geography of the CA, both in local discussions and in negotiations with central government. Third, the chapter examines how policy actors made use of evidence both to bolster the perceived legitimacy of the CA and

to substantiate their policy positions. Finally, the chapter presents case study data on the instrumental use of evidence.

6.2 Published statements of evidence use

In the case study, key policy statements and publications from the early WMCA consistently highlighted the use of evidence in policymaking and presented the manner in which evidence was utilised as rational, logical and instrumental. This account is consistent from the earliest public statements on the CA to reports setting out proposals in specific policy areas such as the regional economy and mental health issues, and appears to be in line with the Evidence-Based Policymaking account (3.2). Interestingly, this published account of evidence use in the WMCA contrasts significantly with the more nuanced descriptions provided by participants, demonstrating the value of making use of multiple data sources in the case study.

Early publications on the proposed formation of the CA used evidence to make the case for the new inter-municipal collaboration and to support its suggested geographic footprint and membership. The West Midlands CA (WMCA) Launch Statement, published in June 2015, claimed that the proposed WMCA membership was ‘based on’ an economic assessment (WMCA, 2015a, p. 12). The document provided a detailed description of an economic analysis of the region and stated that this analysis ‘*further strengthens our case for the West Midlands to be considered as a Functional Economic Market Area*’ (p.12). Similarly, the WMCA Governance Review report published in September 2015 highlighted economic evidence supporting an integrated approach to economic strategy at regional level, stating that economic analysis by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

supported the proposed introduction of an additional layer of regional government (WM Councils, 2015, p. 5).

The main strategy document published by the early WMCA, the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) published in June 2016, included an overarching commitment to the use of evidence based policy (5.4). This commitment involved 'ensuring that future strategic decisions are taken on the basis of the empirical evidence supporting both the problem and the solution' (WMCA, 2016d, p. 27). Examples of evidence referenced in the SEP include cost-benefit analysis of alternative investment strategies (p.33), together with economic analysis on the imbalance of public spending and tax revenues (p.20), productivity (p. 27), skills (p.48) and overall economic policy (p.56 and Technical Appendix).

Similarly, the Mental Health Commission (MHC) report, published in January 2017, made extensive reference to the use of evidence in developing its proposals. The main Action Plan makes 50 references to 'evidence' in the 78 page report, starting in the Chair's foreword which states: *'To build this Action Plan, we have drawn upon research, evidence, professional opinion and expertise'* (Lamb et al., 2017, p. 6). The document claims the MHC sought to adopt a rational evidence-based approach to policymaking, for example in the following statement (Lamb et al., 2017, p. 34):

As far as possible, our actions are based on evidence of what works, and what will make a difference to people's lives. Where evidence is lacking, we aim to test ideas and to build evidence, which will guide and inform our future actions...Every one of our actions...is informed by the evidence we have received and reviewed.

This claim to rational evidence-informed policy is repeated for individual MHC proposals, three examples are presented here. First, Individual Placement Support is said to *'represent the best-evidenced model of support to enable people with mental health problems to get into work in the world'* (Lamb et al., 2017, p. 38). The Individual Placement Support programme is designed to help people with serious mental illness into sustained employment using a rapid job search and following employment with training and support as needed (Drake and Bond, 2023). Originally developed in the north east USA in the 1990s, the programme has been widely adopted in over 20 countries and has been subject to several randomised controlled trials which overall *'agree that IPS-supported employment effectively increases competitive employment among participants with serious mental illnesses'* (Drake and Bond, 2023, p. 12).

Second, the report advocates the use of Mental Health Treatment Requirements (MHTR) by stating that an on-going trial in Milton Keynes *'is beginning to show evidence of improved mental health and wellbeing, better coping skills and improved criminal justice outcomes'* (Lamb et al., 2017, p. 48). The MHTR is a sentencing option whereby offenders with mental health problems are offered a treatment plan as part of a Community Order (NOMS, 2014).

Third, the report states that (Lamb et al., 2017, p. 54):

Recent economic evaluation based on the OPUS study in Denmark shows that EIP [Early Intervention in Psychosis] has a 97% chance of being cost effective over five years. It shows that EIP is very effective and represents good value for money - for every £1 invested in EIP a return of £15 could be expected over a ten-year period. It has shown that EIP generates costs savings of £2,234 per

person over three years from improved employment and education outcomes...the evidence is clear - EIP works.

Psychosis is a severe mental illness which affects up to 3% of the population and is associated with significant impairment in social functioning and shorter life expectancy (NHS England, 2021). Psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy have been the main forms of early intervention. A highly cited 2007 study concluded 'There is good evidence that this has the ability to limit transition to psychosis at best, and at worst, to ensure that there are minimal periods of untreated psychosis for those who develop psychosis' (Killackey and Yung, 2007).

In summary, the public statements in official publications throughout the case study consistently highlighted the use of evidence and espoused a rational, logical use of evidence in influencing policy proposals. However, this account of evidence use in the case study revealed from analysis of documentary data contrasts with the findings from interviews with participants discussed in the next section.

6.3 Participants' perceptions of evidence use

Whilst the publications issued by WMCA presented one account of evidence use in the developing inter-municipal collaboration, data from participant interviews suggested a more nuanced picture. The typology developed by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019) was used to categorise evidence use (3.2.1). The case study interviews did not directly refer to the typology because of concern that this may limit the range of evidence uses reported. Instead, the type of use was inferred from the descriptions and explanations provided by interviewees. This inference was

inevitably to some extent subjective. For example, in discussing the MHC work around the idea of providing financial incentives for employers to support the mental wellbeing of their staff, one policy officer commented the commission members:

Spent an awful lot of time looking in detail at the evidence and analysing whether this idea is actually right. You know, is it worth incentivising employers to deal with mental health issues better? Is the proposal going to actually work?

(POL1)

This comment was coded as pointing to the use of evidence as ‘informing own position’ and also as ‘assessing the feasibility’ of the policy proposal.

Table 6.1 shows the types of evidence use identified by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019), the number of times this type of use was identified in the case study data, and the number of interviews in which these occurred. It is important to note that a specific instance of evidence use might be captured in multiple interviews, and indeed mentioned multiple times in a single interview.

The next section analyses the types of evidence use in order of their frequency of occurrence in the case study interview data. The three most frequently identified uses are considered individually: enhancing debate and dialogue, justifying a position, and assessing feasibility. The remaining types of evidence use are then considered together. The final part of this section reflects on the use of this typology in the thesis.

Table 6-1 Analysis of evidence use in the WMCA case study data (Bogenschneider's typology)

Type of use of evidence	Total mentions	Number of interviews
1. Enhancing debate and dialogue	43	17
2. Justifying a position	31	18
3. Assessing feasibility	13	9
4. Informing own position	11	10
5. Persuading others	11	10
6. Educating others	9	7
7. Problem definition	5	3
8. Changing own position	4	4
9. Contextualisation	4	4
10. Raising questions	3	3
11. Earning trust	4	4
12. Designing good legislation	0	0
13. Explaining a vote	0	0
14. New ideas	0	0

Source: Author's own analysis using Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019) typology.

6.3.1 Enhancing debate and dialogue

This use of evidence is described by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019, p. 783) as 'improving the decision-making process by enhancing debate, dialogue, collaboration and compromise'. This type of evidence use was frequently referred to in the case study interviews.

Interviewees suggested that, in the collaborative setting, the use of evidence helped to encourage honest debate and '*make sure we had honest conversations*' (LEAD5, CON1) which recognised different policy actors' perspectives (LEAD1). Economic modelling, for example, enabled some policy actors to debate in the SEP Board discussions how achievable potential targets would be in practice (CX1, LEAD5,

LEAD7, CON1). Similarly, in the Mental Health Commission, the academic literature review and evidence summary enhanced discussion by enabling policy actors to '*articulate what we actually knew, rather than a set of assumptions we thought we knew*' (POL4), understand '*what all the evidence told you*' (POL5) and compare the views of experts against the evidence base (POL4). The analysis of evidence sometimes supported debate by challenging previously held positions, for example around the best geography for the WMCA (LEAD4, CX1) and the achievability of some economic targets inherited from earlier plans (CON1). At other times, evidence reassured policy actors that their position or argument was sound (CX2, CX6, LEAD3).

In the collaborative setting, evidence was also used to enhance dialogue with other stakeholders. Council leaders, in particular, collated evidence and debated its implications between themselves and with LEP colleagues, as they sought to develop robust proposals (LEAD2, LEAD4, LEAD5, CON1, CON4, POL5).

Repeated debates during sometimes lengthy Policy Commission processes enabled council leaders and other policy actors to develop shared understandings of evidence from a regional (rather than individual council) perspective (CX1, CX6).

For example, in the Land Commission evidence on future demand for housing land was used in collaborative discussions which led to the agreement of a 'housing deal' between local partners and government which '*could never have happened without that consensus building*' (CX1). In the context of the developing CA, evidence helped policy actors to understand differing perspectives and reach common understandings.

Evidence from the Mental Health Commission's Citizen's Jury served three main purposes around enhancing debate (POL5). First, it enabled people with lived experience to engage with the commission and develop their recommendations. Second, it enabled commissioners to '*test out some ideas*' with people with lived experience. Third, it provided a basis for commissioners to evaluate and respond to Citizen Jury recommendations.

One interesting feature identified by a leading politician was how the same evidence was used differently at different stages. For example, economic analysis of the Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA) initially enhanced the debate on the appropriate geographies for the LEPs and WMCA, and later was used to '*sell*' the proposals to other stakeholders (LEAD5). The first use was an example of 'enhancing debate and dialogue', whereas the second use categorised as 'justifying a position' and 'persuading others'.

In summary, the case study data shows frequent use of evidence in order to enhance dialogue and debate between policymakers. This use of evidence, which this thesis calls 'deliberative' evidence use, has rarely been identified in previous studies (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019). This is an important issue for future research.

6.3.2 Justifying a position

This contribution of evidence to policymaking is described by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019, p. 783) as 'justifying a pre-existing position on an issue'. This use of evidence was frequently identified in the case study interview data.

The use of evidence in justifying proposals in the governance review and Devolution Agreement was highlighted as particularly important by interviewees. The Department for Communities and Local Government was said to require evidence from economic models (POL1) and the Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA) assessment (CX1, CX3, CX6, LEAD3) before supporting the proposed geography of the WMCA. In turn, the FEMA assessment was used by local policy actors to justify their proposals to government (CX2, CON4) and *'give backbone to the decisions'* (CON4), providing *'a powerful argument to government that we were creating a natural economic geography'* (LEAD5) that was *'underpinned'* (CON3, CX4) and *'grounded'* (CON1) in evidence. This also increased confidence of council leaders in their position (CX4, LEAD3) by providing *'justifications'* for their proposals (CX3). Local policy actors similarly used the FEMA analysis to justify their policy positions to other local stakeholders, such as councillors who had not been involved in the policymaking process at that stage (CON3, CX1, LEAD1). Civil servants in HM Treasury were said to demand that Devolution Agreement proposals were justified by robust cost-benefit analysis (CX1, LEAD1).

The Mental Health Commission members particularly used two types of evidence in justifying their policy proposals: the academic *'baseline assessment'* report and the Citizen's Jury work. An important role of the *'baseline assessment'* report summarising extant academic evidence on mental health issues was in helping to provide a *'rationale'*, legitimising the Commission's published recommendations by explaining *'these are the reasons, and this is the evidence for why we've come to the view that we have'* (CON7). This helped to justify and legitimise the proposals to local stakeholders and central government (POL5). The published MHC report particularly highlighted evidence from systematic reviews of randomised controlled

trials and economic analyses because participants felt this type of evidence would be well received by potential funders (Lamb *et al.*, 2017)(POL4). The analysis of the costs of mental ill health '*strengthened the case*' for investment in preventative approaches (LEAD6). Finally, the MHC Citizen Jury work was used in part to provide additional justification or legitimacy to their emerging policy positions (POL5, LEAD6), as well as to assess the feasibility ('*test out*') of these positions (POL5).

In summary, the use of evidence to justify a policy position was frequently identified in the case study data. This aligns well with existing studies where evidence is often used 'politically' to justify a pre-existing position (Weiss, 1979).

6.3.3 Assessing feasibility

This contribution of evidence to policymaking is described by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019, p. 783) as 'assessing the political and economic feasibility of policy decisions'. This use of evidence was identified moderately frequently in the case study data.

The Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA) analysis was highlighted in interviews as providing a test of the economic feasibility of various geographic areas which were being considered at the time of establishing the CA. The presentation of 'travel to work areas' analysis as part of this work was described by one council chief executive as '*probably one of the most pivotal moments to [council leaders] thinking actually there is a case here*' (CX2). The analysis, which showed that the wider 'three Local Enterprise Partnerships [3-LEPs]' geography was the best option in terms of economic self-containment measures, provided '*a basis for [the 3-LEPs*

area] grounded in evidence' (CON1) and reassured councillors that there was a feasible '*economic underpinning*' (CX4) or '*economic foundation*' (CON4) for adopting that geography.

The development of the Strategic Economic Plan involved assessing several potential economic scenarios and interventions. A leader closely involved in its preparation described this as '*quite a hard-nosed analysis of our sectoral strengths and where we genuinely had a competitive advantage that one could stretch*' (LEAD5). This interviewee felt that the use of evidence here had helped to avoid 'just writing a fantasy of what we wanted to believe'. Whilst the more ambitious scenarios were initially viewed as '*daunting*' (LEAD7), actors closely involved in developing the SEP were able to discuss and explore the evidence base for these and their underlying assumptions and, as a result, over time '*everybody started to get more comfortable*' with the feasibility of the proposals (LEAD7). Reviewing the evidence on the feasibility of inherited economic plans from the three LEPs led to changes to a pre-existing economic target (CON1).

Interviewees highlighted preparations for the negotiation of the Devolution Agreement as making extensive use of evidence to assess feasibility of policy proposals. This involved '*bringing together evidence, and rehearsing the arguments with each other...so that the case we presented couldn't be torn to shreds*' by civil servants questioning the feasibility of the proposals (LEAD1). Economic analysis was developed to assess the feasibility and cost/benefits of different investment propositions – to '*look at where would you maximise investment, what would be the impact of putting something into Wolverhampton versus Coventry for example*' (CON1).

In the Mental Health Commission, the literature and evidence review provided by the University of Birmingham provided '*evidence and factual information*' on the costs of mental ill health which demonstrated that taking no action was not a feasible option (CX7). The MHC Citizen Jury work was used in part to assess the feasibility ('test out') its emerging positions (POL5). Finally, in some cases evidence showed that proposals under consideration would not be feasible – for example, the idea of using reductions in business rates to incentivise employers to invest in the mental health of their workforce was discounted after analysis showed that business rates were often highest for businesses with relatively small workforces because they are based on the land footprint of the business (POL4).

In summary, the case study data suggested that the use of evidence to 'assess feasibility' was moderately common, although not observed quite as frequently as the above two uses.

6.3.4 Other categories of evidence use

This section summarises the findings for the remaining, less common types of evidence use in the case study data.

'Informing one's position on an issue' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 783) was identified moderately frequently in the case study data. Examples included various forms of economic analysis informing the interviewees' positions regarding the geography of the WMCA itself (CX1, LEAD2) and the priorities and vision developed in the Strategic Economic Plan (CX2, LEAD5). The Mental Health Commission 'baseline assessment' report (Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017)

provided an assessment of existing research relevant to the commission's remit, informing members' perspectives and in some cases contradicting the initial assumptions of commission members as '*the evidence wasn't necessarily there for everything that we thought was there*' (POL4). The MHC also commissioned new evidence (primarily randomised controlled trials) in order to inform future policymaking, for example a trial on whether fiscal incentives to employers would encourage them to support the mental wellbeing of their workforce (LEAD6).

'*Persuading others* by developing arguments that support one's view or anticipate and counter opposing views' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 783) was also identified moderately frequently. Interviewees spoke about using evidence in persuading both central government and local stakeholders. For example, economic analysis was used to demonstrate to government the potential benefits of developing the CA (POL1), and the rationale of the preferred 'three-LEPs' geography (LEAD5, CX1). Evidence from economic analyses and randomised controlled trials was used to persuade the Department of Health and Department of Work and Pensions to invest in particular programmes (POL4, CX7). In the collaborative context, this included persuading councillors to accept that their council should join the CA (CON3, CX1, LEAD1, LEAD7) and persuading mental health service users and professionals to accept the recommendations of the Mental Health Commission (LEAD6).

The use of evidence to '*educate others*' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 783) was also moderately common in the case study. This use of evidence is quite close to the above '*persuading others*' – in coding, '*persuading*' was used where the actor used evidence to support their pre-existing position, whereas '*educating*' was

used when the actor had no apparent pre-existing position on the issue at hand. In developing the WMCA, economic evidence was used to '*give an underpinning*' understanding in discussions between council leaders and chief executives (CON3). Council leaders in turn used elements of this evidence to explain the rationale to other councillors, educating them to '*bring their councils with them*' (CON3). For example, one council leader highlighted the utility of evidence in educating councillors and senior officers on issues such as housing demand and commuting flows (LEAD1). They suggested that working in the collaborative context, evidence helped some leaders to reorientate their perspective from an individual council area to the wider regional area, '*raising their intellectual capacity to think in broader terms than their own [council] borders*' (LEAD1). Evidence was said to be useful in helping policy actors to understand different perspectives on a policy issue (LEAD1) and to recognise the potential benefits of the development of the WMCA (CX3, LEAD7). In the Mental Health Commission, the academic summary of the available literature and evidence base was used to educate commissioners and Citizen's Jury members, in both developing recommendations and (for commissioners) evaluating the recommendations developed by the Citizen's Jury (POL5). In the WMCA Land Commission, evidence on housing need and land supply was considered in discussions over several months. Interviewees suggested that the prolonged interactive discussion gradually enabled councillors to understand the wider context of land supply and demand across the region, whereas previously most had focussed on specific planning issues in their individual council area (CX1).

Evidence use in '*defining problems and raising awareness of why action is needed*' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 783) was identified less frequently in the case study than the uses discussed above. In the development of the Strategic

Economic Plan, a range of scenarios based on economic modelling of the regional economy were '*fundamental to all the discussions...to determine what we wanted [to do]*' (CON1). The vision of a significantly improved local economy motivated policy actors to improve cross-authority working, with one LEP chair commenting '*the West Midlands hadn't naturally operated very effectively, but if the goal is that big, it's certainly worth another attempt*' (LEAD7). In the MHC, evidence on the use of Mental Health Act sectioning powers on different ethnic groups in the region helped to identify and define problems around the equity of treatment of BAME people in this area (CX7).

The use of evidence to '*change one's position on an issue*' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 783) was also identified less frequently. In the collaborative context, evidence contributed to changing council leaders' positions and enabling them to take a wider and longer-term perspective, to '*try very hard to see everything from everyone's point of view*' (LEAD1). For example, economic analyses demonstrated how some investments in Birmingham which were not initially supported by other council leaders would ultimately also benefit their areas (CX1, CX4, CX6, LEAD4). Some of the evidence presented in the FEMA was described by one chief executive as '*snapping switches in [elected] members' minds*' (CX1), altering these Leaders' perspective on the relative importance of Birmingham compared to the Black Country in terms of jobs for their local residents. This was described as happening '*all of a sudden, in a very simple slide, at a point when minds were focussed*' (CX1). In the Mental Health Commission work, part of the reason interviewees gave for running the Citizen's Jury process was to enable this to challenge policy actors' initial policy positions – '*to be really critical about what we were doing*' (POL4).

The contribution of evidence to '*contextualise issues*' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 783) was identified where the production of economic analysis at regional level (rather than at the smaller LEP or individual council geographies) was described as enabling a better understanding of the regional economy and the rationale for action at the WMCA level (CX1, LEAD7). For example, the Productivity and Skills Commission developed evidence that was used to provide analysis of the future skills needs for the region, enabling education providers to plan to respond to these needs. This was described by a consultant involved as '*very evidence led, really understanding the firms in the area*' (CON1). In the Mental Health Commission, the academic evidence report '*brought together a whole range of different bits of information*' (POL5) including population make-up, the prevalence of mental health problems, the populations most at risk of mental ill health, and the associated economic and social costs. The academics then '*made an overall assessment of what all that told you*' (POL5), increasing commissioners' understanding of the complex context involved in addressing mental health issues in the region.

The next evidence contribution was described by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019, p. 783) as '*earning the trust of colleagues* as a knowledgeable and credible information source'. The use of evidence to be seen as a 'credible information source' was not explicit in the case study interviews, although the wider issue of using evidence to build trust in other stakeholders was identified. For example, economic analysis was seen as legitimising with local politicians the process of developing the CA, as well as enabling council leaders to explain the potential benefits to other councillors, helping to secure trust and '*buy-in*' from key stakeholders (CON3). In the Mental Health Commission, one purpose of the

Citizen's Jury of people with lived experience of mental health problems was described by a consultant closely involved as '*to make sure that they had a good degree of influence in our thinking and recommendations*' (POL5). This process was described as adding legitimacy to the Commission's recommendations and increasing the likelihood of people with mental ill health would trust the policy development process and accept the conclusions as valid (LEAD6).

The evidence contribution of '*asking important questions for policy or political purposes*' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 783) was identified infrequently in the case study data. In developing the Strategic Economic Plan, economic analysis and modelling was used to raise questions about the achievability of a target in one of the constituent LEP's inherited Strategic Economic Plan (CON1). In the Mental Health Commission (MHC) process, commissioners used the 'baseline assessment' summary of extant evidence to inform questions about proposals developed by the Citizen's Jury (POL5). Also in the MHC, evidence on the use of Mental Health Act sectioning powers on different ethnic groups in the region raised questions about the equity of treatment of BAME people in this area (CX7).

The contribution of evidence '*offering new and emerging ideas*' (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019, p. 783) was not specifically identified in the case study interviews, however this type of evidence use was identified in other case study data. For example, the potential value of the innovative use of Mental Health Treatment Requirement pathways in the criminal justice process was identified through evidence from a trial in Milton Keynes in the published MHC report (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, p. 47).

Finally, two contributions identified by Bogenschneider, Corbett and Parrott (2019) were not identified in the case study data: '*designing good legislation* and stopping bad legislation', perhaps because the fieldwork did not include central government officials responsible for developing legislation, and '*explaining a vote on an issue*', perhaps because of the informal nature of most of the early governance of the CA which minimised the use of formal voting procedures in the period covered by the case study.

Reflection on the use of Bogenschneider et al's typology

Reflecting on the experience of interpreting the interviews and categorising them for the thesis, the researcher found Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019) a particularly helpful and relevant framework in addressing the research questions, with a good fit to many of the statements on evidence use in the case study data. There were a few areas where the categories did not quite fit the data, for example the intention behind 'building trust' discussed above. Similarly, research use type #7 ('problem definition') could usefully apply to 'issues' more generally, rather than just 'problems'. Finally, this framework did not consider the situation there was a legal requirement to capture and use specific types of evidence, for example the public consultation requirements for CA governance reviews. Here, an additional research use type category such as 'legally required' or 'enforced use' would have been useful.

In summary, analysis of participant's perceptions of the use of evidence in the case study identified a range of uses. Those most commonly identified in the data were the use of evidence to 'enhance debate and dialogue' and to 'justify a position'. The former has rarely been identified in the extant literature, whereas the latter is often viewed as the most widespread use of evidence in policymaking. Having examined these types of evidence use, the remainder of this chapter examines four examples of evidence use in further detail.

6.4 Examples of evidence use

This section examines four significant examples of how evidence was used in the case study. First, it examines how evidence supported the creation of a regional narrative, which policymakers saw as essential in making the case for the CA. Second, it investigates how economic analysis was used locally and nationally to justify key propositions on the membership and geography of the CA. Third, the section analyses how evidence was used 'politically', both to bolster the perceived legitimacy of the nascent CA and to substantiate its policy positions. Finally, the section presents the case study data relating to the instrumental use of evidence.

6.4.1 Evidence use to develop a regional narrative

Whilst individual pieces of evidence played important roles in some policymaking in the case study, interviewees highlighted the importance of developing an overarching story or narrative which was supportive of the development of the CA, concerning the city-region's past and current economic and social issues, its inter-

connectedness, and future challenges and potential. Policymakers viewed having such a coherent ‘narrative’ as essential in building the case for the new institution of the CA. Evidence seen as contributing to such a narrative was particularly valued by policymakers as it assisted them to ‘tell a story’ to stakeholders in support of their policy position.

In the early discussions on the WMCA, consultants presented analysis of evidence concerning the regional economy including statistics on economic outputs, education and skills levels, employment and so on. Significantly, these statistics and trends were presented in the form of a narrative of the importance of the region in terms of economic development, inter-connectivity across local authority areas, and the importance of its organisation and leadership to future success (CX6, CON3). One of the consultants closely involved in the process explained that a ‘*story*’ was required to get politicians and chief executives to ‘*buy in*’ (CON3). The narrative framing, that improved regional working across different council areas would enhance future economic growth, was critical in developing the case for the CA.

A key element of the regional narrative was the idea of ‘*additionality*’, that by adopting a WMCA-wide strategic approach local growth could be greater than under the existing governance arrangements. Interviewees suggested that the purpose of the WMCA was originally seen in terms of ‘*the additionality it could bring over and above the existing activity...by working together, we could achieve more*’ (CON1), which one leader summarised as ‘*the concept of “economy plus” - what does the CA do, over and above what you can do already? What is the additionality?*’ (LEAD3). An influential LEP chair summarised the issue of ‘*additionality*’ as follows:

The key word was additionality. We had to demonstrate to government that by bringing about this CA and having the cash we would do better than we'd otherwise do - otherwise why give us the cash? (LEAD5)

There were three distinct applications of the narrative in the case study interview data: promoting the WMCA and its policy preferences to central government, promoting these to local stakeholders (particularly councillors), and testing the fit of new evidence to the developing narrative. First, in relation to central government, a LEP chair reflected that the Functional Economic Market Area analysis 'was definitely a brilliant way of us selling, and gave us the evidence to sell, our story'. (LEAD5). In the quote below, a consultant closely involved in the early stages of the development of the WMCA emphasised the value of a narrative (or 'story') of the region's current socio-economic position and the key links between parts of the region, in order to 'sell' the region to stakeholders including central government:

A story needs to be told. And that story of the region - about its economic and social performance, education performance, unemployment, the skills challenge...the commuting links in and across the region and all of that... was never properly understood in a wider regional context. At the time it was really important that we put together a new economic case for this region: how we're going to sell this region to the government, and across this region to other key stakeholders... (CON3)

The end of the above quote links to the second application, which has the same purpose (selling the idea of the WMCA and its policy preferences) but is different in its target audience since it is focussed on key local stakeholders, in particular other

elected councillors, rather than central government. Interviewees spoke of evidence being used to sell the WMCA story to local politicians, such as a Black Country chief executive who noted their council leader used evidence on travel to work patterns for local residents as ‘a *selling point to other local politicians*’ (CX1). In the following quotation a council leader reflects that the evidence was required because the move to the CA was an important decision for senior politicians and officers locally:

What [economic analysis] did was give us evidence...you do need evidence...look, this is a big deal to sell to senior politicians and to senior officers who after all are going to be the ones who make it or break it...

(LEAD1)

The third application of the narrative developed over time and involved checking how well new evidence that was produced fitted with the evolving narrative. Evidence providers were often aware of the political narrative and conscious that new evidence might contradict this. For example, by the time the FEMA analysis was reported, it was clear that the political narrative favoured Coventry becoming part of the WMCA. Whilst most of the FEMA analysis strongly supported this position, one element (regional-level travel-to-work-areas) on first sight might appear less supportive. In interview, it was clear that, whilst recognising the potential difficulty, the consultant’s professional integrity meant that they would present the assessment accurately. In this case, the consultant both presented the regional-level data and ensured that analyses supportive of the narrative were also highlighted, together with relevant caveats in the data.

In summary, the case study revealed the importance of developing a regional 'narrative' in the context of an early-stage collaboration, and that this narrative impacted on how evidence was captured, interpreted and presented. The narrative helped achieve the commitment of key policy actors to the proposal for a CA, locally and nationally. Later, new evidence was tested to see whether it aligned with the narrative.

6.4.2 Evidence use in deciding on WMCA membership

A key area of contention in the formation of the CA was the decision on which councils should be included as members, and hence the WMCA geographic footprint. There were two main areas of political contention: whether the CA should be limited to the seven metropolitan councils or extended to the wider geography of the existing LEPs, and whether Coventry should choose to join the CA. On the former issue, economic analysis was used to convince central government and key local partners to consent to the wider membership. With regard to Coventry City Council, alongside the economic evidence a significant programme of public engagement was used to enhance the legitimacy of the proposal to join the CA.

Central government and Black Country actors initially preferred the WMCA to consist of just the seven metropolitan borough councils, whereas Local Economic Partnership (LEP) chairs and Birmingham and Solihull councils argued for a much wider membership (figure 6.1). The option covering the seven metropolitan district councils matched the historical governing arrangements of the region's metropolitan county council and the rough size of previous economic areas defined elsewhere in England (DCLG, 2010, pp. 9-10). In contrast, the LEP Chairs for Greater

Birmingham & Solihull and Coventry & Warwickshire were ‘very very determined that the districts [outside the metropolitan area] should be in the CA’ (LEAD5) as they had been members of these LEPs prior to the development of the CA proposal, and these LEP boundaries were themselves established two years previously based on identified local functional economic market areas (LEAD5). The latter arguments led to the idea of a ‘3-LEPs’ geography for the WMCA, a position which was supported by Birmingham and Solihull council leaders who saw including these districts as honouring the existing relationships established under the LEPs and as better matching the functioning economic area of the region (CON3, CX3, LEAD3, LEAD5, LEAD7, POL1). The formal economic assessment of whether a given area can be considered a ‘Functional Economic Market Area’ (FEMA) was critical to convincing central government of the viability of proposals for a CA based on the wider ‘3-LEPs’ geography.

Figure 6-1 West Midlands metropolitan councils and LEP areas (2015)

The map on the left shows the seven metropolitan councils, the map on the right shows the three LEP area with the seven metropolitan councils highlighted in dark grey.

Option 1: West Midlands metropolitan councils	Option 2: Three Local Enterprise Partnerships
	

Source: <https://wmliutenancy.org/about/county-of-west-midlands/> and www.wmca.org.uk (both accessed 17/10/23)

External consultants were commissioned to deliver an assessment of the FEMA for the West Midlands, with headline results presented to council leaders and chief executives at the Programme Board meeting on 26th June 2015 (WMCA, 2015c). The analysis argued that broadening the area covered by the WMCA from the 7 metropolitan councils' area to the wider 3-LEPs geography would increase the chosen indicator of its economic 'self-containment', a measure of the degree of cohesion of a functional economic market area. Both central government guidelines on conducting FEMA assessments and the concept of a FEMA itself were sufficiently flexible to be used to justify a range of geographies (CX6), but the analysis demonstrated that the 3-LEPs geography could be considered an even more coherent 'functional economic market area' than the area covered by the seven metropolitan councils (WMCA, 2015c). The FEMA evidence enabled local actors to develop an economic argument for the adoption of the wider geography, presented in the terms set by the Treasury (CX4), and provided a '*rationale*' (LEAD4) and '*logic*' (LEAD2) for the wider area, and which '*gave us the evidence to sell our story*' (LEAD5). In the following quote, one of the council chief executives highlighted the importance of this presentation in terms of it capturing the attention of political leaders and providing evidence to support the case for the CA:

That's where I saw the leaders put down their laptops and look up and listen...they were fascinated by how [the economic market area] worked...That was probably one of the most pivotal moments to them thinking 'actually there is a case here that we can put forward'. The FEMA was crucial. (CX2)

In addition to the debate on the involvement of non-metropolitan councils, there was considerable debate within Coventry on whether its future would be best served

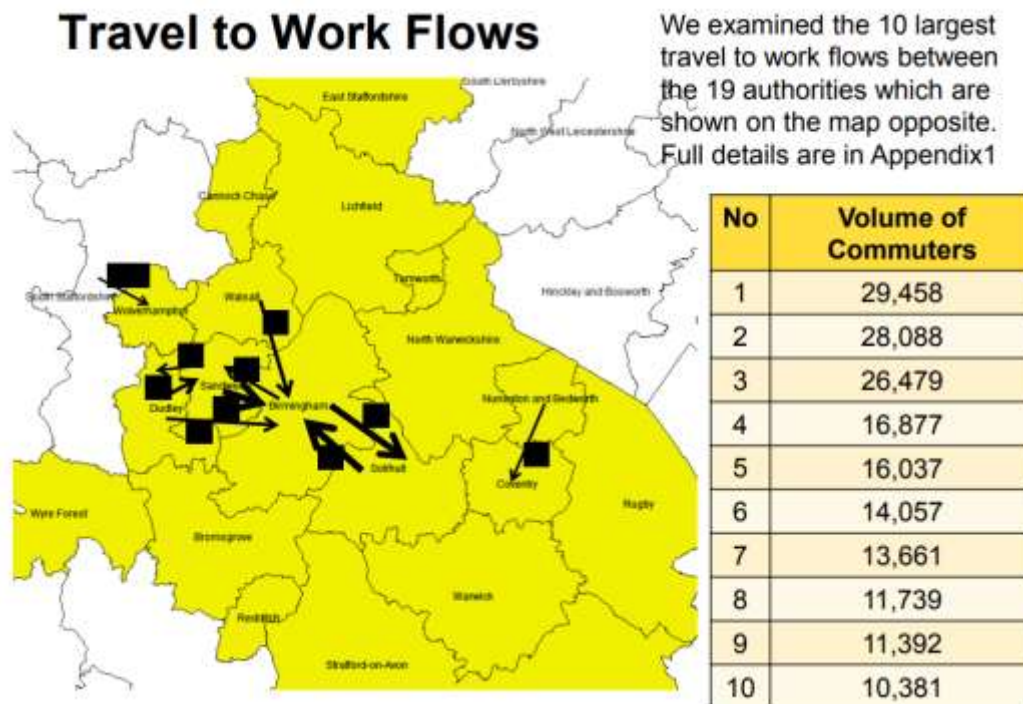
collaborating westward (with the potential WMCA) or eastward (with Warwickshire County). This debate was reflected in the local media. In the case study, data from documentary analysis of press reports showed that there were 65 articles in the local newspaper in Coventry regarding the potential CA between November 2014 and June 2015 (documentary analysis using Nexus database of press articles, includes online articles on coventrytelegraph.net). The early coverage in the local newspaper (the Coventry Evening Telegraph) was sceptical of the CA concept, and highlighted concerns about the likely over-dominance of Birmingham in any regional body. As part of the response to the intense public and political debate in the city, Coventry City Council initiated a significant programme of deliberative public engagement, which was seen as important in establishing the democratic legitimacy of the proposals (CX4, LEAD1). More extensive and interactive public engagement was used in Coventry both to provide evidence on public support for the proposals, and to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the decision-making process itself (CX3, CX4, LEAD1) (7.2.2).

Evidence from the Functional Economic Area Analysis (FEMA) was also used to justify the involvement of Coventry in the CA, both in discussions with central government and within the city itself. Analysis of travel-to-work and internal migration patterns showed high flows between six of the seven metropolitan councils, generally supporting the proposal for the CA area to at least cover the metropolitan council areas. However, Coventry had smaller commuting flows within the metropolitan councils' area, with none in the 'top ten' commuter flows under a region-wide analysis, which could be interpreted as suggesting Coventry should not be part of the CA. Figure 6.2 shows one of the slides summarising the results of the FEMA analysis presented to WMCA policymakers in June 2015, which illustrates

that none of the 'top ten' travel to work flows at regional level were between Coventry and any of the other six metropolitan councils. This slide also showed the economic importance of specific areas outside the metropolitan councils to the regional economy (for example Nuneaton and Bedworth has important commuter flows to and from Coventry), supporting the proposal for some areas outside the 'seven met area' to be included in the CA area (WMCA, 2015c, p. 8). However, when travel to work flows were analysed at the city level (rather than regional level), four of Coventry's top ten flows were to/from Birmingham and Solihull (figure 6.3). Combining this city level perspective with information on industrial specialisation provided evidence which supported the designation of Coventry as part of the WMCA economic market area (WMCA, 2015c, pp. 8, 11). The verbal presentation of the FEMA analysis to council leaders and chief executives in June 2015 highlighted the city level perspective and industrial specialisation data alongside the region-level data, overall supporting the case for Coventry to join the WMCA (interview data, WMCA (2015c), observation).

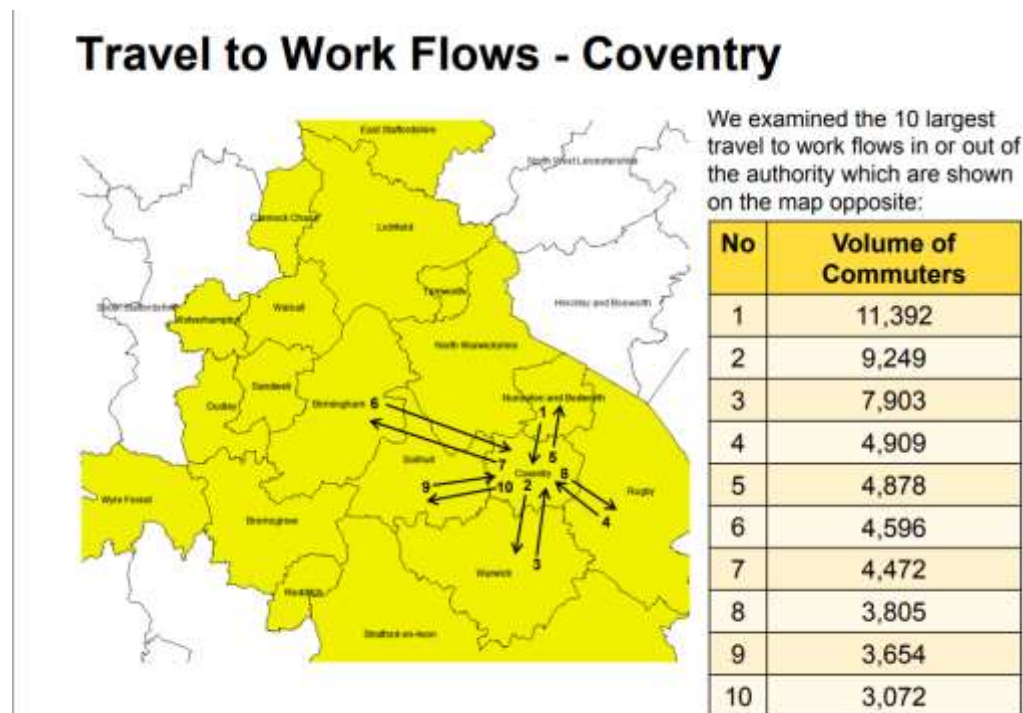
The case study interviews suggested local actors recognised that, whilst the FEMA evidence did suggest that including Coventry and some district council areas in the WMCA was justifiable in economic terms, ultimately this was a political decision where the role of evidence was permissive rather than directive. One consultant involved throughout the WMCA discussions summarised the situation as follows: *'It was a very complicated picture in which the economics basically carried the politics, and the politics were benign enough for economics to prevail'* (CON6).

Figure 6-2 Travel to work analysis (regional level)



Source: (WMCA, 2015c, p. 8)

Figure 6-3 Travel to work flows (city level)



Source: (WMCA, 2015c, p. 11)

In summary, decisions on the geographic boundary and membership of the WMCA were complex and in places politically controversial. Economic evidence provided support for arguments to adopt a wide boundary (covering the 3-LEPs geography), rather than restricting this to the metropolitan councils. These arguments and associated economic evidence were deployed locally in councils, and especially in negotiations with central government. The use of evidence from public engagement was limited outside Coventry; however, in Coventry the process of public engagement and the resulting intelligence was seen as important in establishing the legitimacy of the locally controversial proposal to join the WMCA.

6.4.3 Evidence use to increase legitimacy and credibility

An important priority for local policymakers in the case study was to enhance the perceived legitimacy and credibility of the nascent WMCA and its policy positions. A typical comment in the interviews was made by one senior policy officer who stated that the first challenge was to establish the CA's '*mandate and legitimacy*' (POL4). Evidence was deployed both to legitimise the WMCA itself and to substantiate its policy positions. Two significant examples in the case study data relate to the Devolution Agreement and the Mental Health Commission. These examples are discussed here only briefly as they have already been discussed earlier in the chapter.

In negotiating the Devolution Agreement, local policy actors deployed economic and cost-benefit analysis evidence to help convince central government (particularly HM Treasury) of the credibility of their proposals (CX1). HM Treasury representatives welcomed (indeed demanded) the provision of this type of evidence, requesting progressively more detailed analysis of the proposals (CX1) in line with the Treasury's Green Book which provides 'approved thinking models and methods' to be used in project appraisals (HM Treasury, 2003, p. 1).

The Mental Health Commission established a Citizen's Jury to advise the MHC on the priorities of people with lived experience (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, p. 6), consider the evidence base and comment on the commission's draft action plan (CON7, LEAD6). The final report of the Mental Health Commission presented the Citizen's Jury as part of a fairly extensive programme of public and patient involvement designed to inform the commission's thinking by the lived experience of people with mental health issues and service users (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, p. 6). The case study suggests that, in the MHC, evidence from public participation, particularly the Citizen's Jury, was important in three ways. First, perspectives from the Citizen's Jury were viewed by MHC members as compelling personal testimony (CX7, LEAD6). Secondly, the process of user engagement was seen as giving the Commission itself greater legitimacy (CON7, LEAD6). Thirdly, the Citizen Jury's views on the Commission's recommendations were seen as an important '*reality check*' substantiating particular proposals (CON7, POL4).

6.4.4 Instrumental uses of evidence

The empirical literature suggests that policymakers make direct (instrumental) use of evidence relatively infrequently (Weiss, 1979, Nutley, 2007). The case study identified a few instances where participants perceived this to have occurred, where individual pieces of evidence appeared to have had a significant impact on the perceptions of leaders and the narrative they presented to stakeholders. Again, only a short summary is provided here as the examples have been discussed earlier in this chapter. The first example of instrumental evidence use was the analysis of travel-to-work patterns demonstrating the high reliance of residents in parts of the Black Country on jobs in Birmingham. This directly led a key Black Country council leader to recognise the importance of Birmingham's economy to his residents (CX1). A second example of instrumental use concerned the role of evidence in agenda setting, by drawing attention to particular issues. Statistics highlighted the disproportionate use of Mental Health Act sectioning on Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people, contradicting the perception of professionals in the area who viewed this as an issue which had already been addressed (CX7). This evidence led the Mental Health Commission to further review detentions under the Act (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, p. 13; Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017, p. 64).

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter has examined how evidence was used in the case study. The published reports of the WMCA consistently highlighted the use of evidence in policymaking, suggesting a rational, instrumental process in line with the Evidence Based Policymaking account (6.2). However, case study data from interviews and observations point to a more complex process of evidence use, highlighting the value of adopting a range of data sources in researching the use of evidence. The chapter also acknowledged the inherent complexity and difficulty in directly observing and analysing the use of ‘evidence’.

The chapter provides important insights into how evidence was used in the case study inter-municipal collaboration. Perhaps most surprisingly, interviews highlighted a frequent use of evidence to ‘enhance debate and dialogue’, a use of evidence between policymakers which is rarely noted in policy theory but was also observed empirically in Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019), and is in line with the Knowledge Utilisation account (6.3). Analysis later in this thesis suggests that this use of evidence to enhance debate and dialogue was experienced primarily in backstage policy settings in the collaborative context (8.4). This should be investigated in future research. The case study also identified the frequent use of evidence to ‘justify a position’. This could be considered akin to the ‘political’ use of evidence described by Weiss (1979) which is frequently identified in the empirical literature.

Besides individual pieces of evidence, the case study data suggested that what was particularly important in forming the WMCA was the ability to knit these into a narrative or story of the region, concerning its past and current economic and social issues, its inter-connectedness, and future challenges and potential (6.4.1).

Policymakers viewed having such a coherent ‘narrative’ as essential in building the case for the new institution of the CA. Evidence seen as contributing to such a narrative was particularly valued by policymakers as it assisted them to ‘tell a story’ to stakeholders in support of their policy position. There were three distinct applications of this in the case study interview data: promoting the WMCA and its policy preferences to central government, promoting these to local stakeholders (particularly councillors), and testing the fit of new evidence to the developing narrative.

The chapter explored the use of evidence in politically contentious areas by analysing policymaking on the membership of the WMCA, demonstrating how evidence was deployed by policy actors in negotiations with central government, and how enhanced public engagement and consultation activity in part legitimised policymaking around the decision on whether Coventry should become part of the CA.

The chapter also examined the use of evidence to increase the perceived legitimacy and credibility of both the WMCA policymaking processes and specific policy proposals (6.4.3). As well as the public declaration of having adopted ‘rational’ evidence-based policymaking approaches, the case study data shows policymakers selected specific types of evidence tailored to the preferences of key funders and stakeholders. This points to the ‘institutional filtering’ of evidence (8.3).

Finally, the chapter briefly identified some examples of the ‘instrumental’ uses of evidence in the case study. Although instrumental evidence use is considered relatively uncommon in the empirical literature, the case study examples demonstrate that in some instances particular pieces of evidence appear to have had a direct impact on policy.

The following chapter analyses the evidence used in the case study including the different types of evidence, such as academic research or lived experience, and the characteristics of this evidence, such as its format and 'quality'.

7 WHAT WERE THE TYPES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF EVIDENCE USED IN WMCA?

7.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the second research question: “What types of evidence are used? What are the characteristics of this evidence?” The chapter presents the empirical findings in relation to the types and characteristics of evidence used in the case study.

The chapter first provides a detailed analysis of the types of evidence used in the case study. Policymakers accessed and made use of a wide variety of evidence in developing policy during the formative years of the WMCA. Whilst the use of economic and statistical analysis was widespread, the use of other types of evidence diverged between the specific policy areas. The use of other academic evidence was important in one policy area (mental health) but less so in others. The case study suggests, as expected from previous studies of CAs, that overall public and stakeholder engagement was limited. However, in two cases more extensive engagement was used in part to legitimise the policymaking process. The use of embodied knowledge from consultants was common across policy areas, but evidence from people with lived experience was only identified in one policy area.

The chapter then examines the characteristics of evidence which were particularly valued by policymakers in the case study. Key features included the timeliness and concise presentation of evidence, in line with the findings of previous evidence utilisation studies. The case study data suggests that participants rarely questioned

the quality of evidence; there is evidence that policymakers sometimes self-censored concerns in order to avoid endangering the wider project of creating the WMCA.

7.2 Types of evidence

This section examines the main types of evidence identified in the case study data, which are summarised in table 7.1. The section first examines the use of economic, statistical and academic evidence, followed by the use of consultation and engagement. Section 7.2.3 analyses the use of ‘calls for evidence’ in the WMCA policy commissions. Section 7.2.4 explores the use of knowledge which is ‘embodied’ in individuals, such as consultants and people with lived experience. Section 7.2.5 highlights case study data on the value attached to developing new evidence to address gaps in the available evidence base.

7.2.1 Economic, statistical and academic evidence

Economic and statistical analysis was widely developed and used both to make the case for the formation of the WMCA and to point to its potential future benefits.

There were four main examples of uses of economic analysis identified in the case study. First, evidence on the relative failure of the West Midlands region to attract government regional transport investment. In particular, relatively high government investment in the Greater Manchester (GM) region over previous ten years was considered particularly important in early discussions concerning the potential case to establish the WMCA. GM’s better performance was attributed to its more effective regional-level approach to governance, research-informed strategy, and advocacy to government and private sector investors (CX3, CX6, CX7, LEAD1, LEAD2, LEAD3, LEAD7).

Table 7-1 Types of evidence used (examples)

Type of evidence	Policy area		
	CA formation	Strategic Economic Plan	Mental Health Commission
Economic analysis	Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA) analysis. Travel To Work Area statistics. Industrial specialisation. Government regional transport investment per capita.	Input-output economic models. Regional public spending / tax. Company data. Dynamic Economic Impact Model.	Economic and social costs of poor mental health in the region. Review of cost-effectiveness of MH interventions.
Social statistics	Internal migration statistics.	Skills and qualifications.	
Academic research		Economic theory e.g. agglomeration.	Review of published research.
Public consultation	Formal consultation (two phases) For Coventry: citizen's panel; ward meetings; telephone survey.		
Embodied knowledge from experts / professionals	Management consultants. Local politicians. Economists.	Economic consultants. Local business leaders.	Commissioners. Consultants. Mental health experts.
Embodied knowledge from people with lived experience			People with lived experience workshops. Citizen's Jury.
Calls for evidence			Call for good practice examples (27 replies)
Evaluations			Academic overview report. New RCTs
Policy analysis	OECD governance report.		Review of national policy and legislation.
Service mapping			Audit form (poor response). NHS published data.

Source: Author's analysis of published documents and interviews.

Second, evidence from an econometric analysis of the Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA) of the proposed CA was presented in the discussions on the potential membership and geography of the WMCA, and in the formal Governance Review (WM Councils, 2015; WMCA, 2015c) (6.4.2). Third, the Strategic Economic Plan made extensive use of economic and statistical analysis. The plan pointed to challenges facing the regional economy such as relatively low productivity, a gap between tax income and public expenditure, and deficiencies in employee skills (WMCA, 2016d, p. 20). Economic analysis was presented suggesting that there would be significant increases in the value of the local economy through adopting a strategic regional approach to economic development (WMCA, 2016c; WMCA, 2016d), for example scenarios for future Regional Gross Value Added and employment based on the 'Oxford Economic Model' which models national and regional economies (WMCA, 2016d). The final main example is economic evidence use in the Mental Health Commission (MHC), which included analysis of the economic costs of poor mental health in the region (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, p. 25).

The use of formal academic evidence other than economic and statistical analysis varied significantly between different policy areas. In general, academic evidence was rarely identified in the case study. However, the MHC made extensive use of formal academic evidence through a 'baseline assessment' report which synthesised relevant academic evidence (Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017). This report both influenced policy development and legitimised MHC proposals (CON7, CX7, LEAD6). The MHC commissioned the report from the University of Birmingham and the Centre for Mental Health with the following remit:

...undertake a baseline assessment of the costs of mental ill health and current service provision across the Authority. The main objective of this report is to provide an assessment of the current position in respect of the mental health and wellbeing of adults of working age in the WMCA, in order to inform work of the Mental Health Commission (Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017, p. 12)

The baseline assessment was presented as a 92-page document exploring mental health issues in the West Midlands, the economic and social costs of poor mental health in the region, and an overview of mental health support in the region. The report provided an assessment of published evidence relevant to the commission's remit. In some cases, this assessment contradicted the initial assumptions of commission members as *'the evidence wasn't necessarily there for everything that we thought was there'* (POL4). Evidence from formal evaluations played an important role, with around 40 references to evaluation in the academic overview report (Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017). This contrasts with the economic policy area, where the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) does not reference any evaluations. Within the MHC, there was a focus on recent evaluations as exemplified by the following quotation from an interview with a consultant closely involved in the commission which highlights the attractiveness of new or recent initiatives to policymakers in this area:

We tried to look at things that were reasonably recent. Rather than stuff that was done years and years ago. And we wanted to look at things that were really evaluating good practice or innovation. We wanted to look at stuff that had good outcomes. We wanted to see if there were other examples of approaches to developing mental health improvement (CON7).

In summary, evidence from economic and statistical analysis was extensively used in each of the WMCA policy areas examined in the case study. Other formal academic evidence was used less frequently, with the exception of the Mental Health Commission where an analysis of the extant literature was commissioned from local academics and the resulting report played important roles in policy development.

7.2.2 Public and stakeholder consultation and engagement

Public consultation was a statutory requirement in the process of forming CAs, specifically to consult on the CA governance review and draft governance scheme (2.5.2). The case study analysis suggests that the extent and impact of evidence from consultation and engagement was limited overall, with the exception of Coventry, where the council undertook deliberative public engagement in response to political controversy around the WMCA proposals (CX4, LEAD1), and the MHC, where engagement with people with lived experience was seen as important in developing and justifying the policy proposals (CON7, CX7, POL4).

Two phases of consultation and engagement were undertaken during the development of the WMCA (6.3). The first, in the summer of 2015, mainly involved engagement with stakeholder organisations rather than the general public. This phase of engagement was summarised in a report published in October 2015 (WMCA, 2015b) which identified six elements of the engagement process: writing to a 'representative sample' of 465 'stakeholders' in the private, public and third sectors; an online survey to collate the views of these stakeholders (conducted August-early Sept), which was completed by 305 respondents; representatives of

LEPs and LAs attending regular meetings; public feedback through LAs and the WMCA website; a briefing event for MPs; and meetings with business and third sector communities. The on-line survey asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with eight statements such as, 'WMCA will improve transport in the region by making it more efficient' and 'WMCA will make the way the region works more efficient'. Respondents were not directly asked questions on the major governance changes being considered, for example whether they supported the establishment of a regional elected mayor. The second phase of consultation concerned the formal proposals for WMCA governance arrangements and involved both stakeholder organisations and residents. The results of this phase of consultation, which ran 18th January – 8th February 2016, were summarised in a report from WMCA to the Secretary of State in February 2016 (WMCA, 2016b). The online survey was completed by 1,907 respondents, consisting of 6 key questions, an affiliation question and a free text option, which had 833 responses (WMCA, 2016b).

In Coventry, political controversy around the idea of the city being part of the CA, including widespread debate in the local media and two petitions calling for the issue to be put to a referendum vote, led to additional public engagement activity. The City Council undertook a more extensive programme of engagement than the other six councils (Coventry City Council, 2015). This programme ran from July to September 2015 alongside the region-wide engagement summarised above. The Coventry programme established a 'citizen's panel', a representative set of residents who were taken through a deliberative process with access to expert witnesses, which considered views on the future of the city (although not directly the decision on the WMCA). Coventry City Council also held face-to-face debates at 18 ward forums

(attended by 379 residents), set up an on-line dedicated web engagement portal, arranged extensive media interviews with leading politicians, and commissioned an independent telephone survey of 1,117 residents (Coventry City Council, 2015).

The Mental Health Commission undertook three main types of engagement activities. First, a 'call for evidence' was issued to identified stakeholders such as mental health trusts. Second, a series of public listening events took place in three cities. Third, a Mental Health Citizen's Jury was established consisting of people who had current or previous lived experience, or those who were carers (Lamb *et al.*, 2017).

This thesis analysed the public engagement activities in the case study using the 'democracy cube' framework developed by Fung (2006) which examines 'who participates, how participants communicate with one another and make decisions together, and how discussions are linked with policy or public action' (Fung, 2006, p. 66). This framework has been used in previous research on citizen participation in English devolution (Prosser *et al.*, 2017). Using the framework, table 7.2 provides a summary of the main engagement activity identified in the case study.

Considering 'who participates' (Fung, 2006, p. 66), the findings can be considered in three areas. First, the case study analysis demonstrated that the formation of the WMCA (outside Coventry) and agreement of the Devolution Agreement and Strategic Economic Plan were carried out largely in private by groups of elite actors. Elected representatives, professional stakeholders such as business leaders, and technical experts were the groups most commonly directly engaged. The general public could only engage in these policy discussions through an on-line survey. Second, in Coventry the general public has a much wider range of options available

to engage with the debate on the formation of the WMCA, for example through a telephone survey, ward meetings and the Citizen's Panel. Third, in the Mental Health Commission, as well as elected representatives and professional stakeholders, the public and lay stakeholders (with experience of mental illness) were able to participate in discussions.

In terms of 'how participants communicate with one another and make decisions together' (Fung, 2006, p. 66), generally elected representatives, professional stakeholders and technical experts were the only groups able to 'deliberate and negotiate' in the policymaking process. Most of the engagement activities involved participants simply expressing their preferences – for example, completing an online survey indicating their level of agreement with a set of statements. There were two exceptions: the MHC Citizen's Jury and Coventry Council Citizen's Panel, where stakeholders (respectively, people with lived experience of mental health issues and randomly selected residents of Coventry) were given the opportunity to 'develop' their preferences through learning more about the issues, hearing from experts and discussing issues with others. The background to these two exceptions is illuminating. Coventry City Council's public engagement process responded to a high level of political and media controversy regarding the city potentially joining the nascent CA (LEAD1, CX4). The Mental Health Commission work reflected the value which mental health professionals attached to evidence from people with lived experience (CON7, CX7, POL4).

Table 7-2 Engagement activity in WMCA policy development

Policy area	Activities	Participant selection	Modes of communication and decision	Extent of authority and power
Creation of WMCA (All constituent councils)	Leader/chief executive meetings	Elected representatives, Professional stakeholders	Deliberate and negotiate	Direct authority
	Stakeholder survey and briefings	Professional stakeholders	Express preferences	Communicative influence
	On-line survey	Open, self-selected	Express preferences	Communicative influence
Creation of WMCA (Coventry only)	Citizen's panel	Random selection	Develop preferences	Advice and consultation
	Ward meetings	Open, self-selected	Express preferences	Communicative influence
	Telephone survey	Random selection	Express preferences	Communicative influence
Strategic Economic Plan	SEP Board deliberations	Professional stakeholders, Experts, Elected Representatives	Deliberate and negotiate, deploy expertise	Direct authority
Mental Health Commission	Commission deliberations	Experts, Professional stakeholders, Elected representatives	Deliberate and negotiate, deploy expertise	Direct authority
	Call for Evidence	Professional stakeholders	Express preferences	Communicative influence
	Listening events	Open, self-selected	Express preferences	Communicative influence
	Citizen's Jury	Lay stakeholders	Develop preferences	Advice and consultation

Source: Author's own analysis of interviews and documentation, adapting framework from (Fung, 2006)

Finally, looking at how these engagement activities were linked with policy or public action, elected representatives, professional stakeholders and technical experts were the only groups consistently able to yield direct authority. Most stakeholders could only exert communicative influence, through policymakers being moved (emotionally and/or intellectually) by the views and experiences they expressed. The MHC Citizen's Jury and Coventry Council Citizen's Panel again stand out as the two exceptions, where wider stakeholders were given the opportunity to develop their preferences and actively invited to give advice to policymakers.

In summary, evidence from consultations with the general public played a limited role in the development of the WMCA, except in Coventry where the political controversy generated by the proposals led to a much more extensive programme of community engagement. The general public were again not engaged in the development of the SEP or MHC, although the latter did engage effectively with people with relevant lived experience. Consultation with other stakeholders, notably elected councillors, professional stakeholders (including private companies) and (in some policy areas) technical experts was more extensive, deliberative and linked to more direct authority to impact on policy decisions.

7.2.3 Calls for evidence

Many of the WMCA 'policy commissions' (5.4) undertook a formal 'call for evidence' where interested stakeholders were invited to contribute ideas, good practice examples, etc. to the commission. The Mental Health Commission's call received responses from 27 organisations including third sector organisations such as Mind and the Mental Health Foundation, housing associations and the National Housing

Federation (POL5). The MHC commissioned the Centre for Mental Health to summarise the responses under the thematic key lines of inquiry of the MHC such as employment, primary care and suicide prevention. Later policy commissions received a varied response to calls for evidence: the Productivity and Skills Commission call received 32 responses with most from local authorities and universities (rather than businesses), whereas the Land Commission's call received responses from over 100 organisations (CON1, CON4, CON7, WMCA (2017b); WMCA (2018)).

Calls for evidence were highly valued by policy actors in the case study interviews, because they were seen as providing evidence which was both timely and relevant to the policy discussions. The recency of examples resulting from the calls for evidence was considered important, for example the Mental Health Commission explicitly looked for recent innovations – whilst at the same time recognising that this may mean the evidence base for these innovations was underdeveloped (CON7). This focus could be linked to the political attractiveness of ideas that can be presented as '*new*' (CON2). Academic literature was viewed as sometimes difficult to follow and often somewhat dated by the time it is published. This was contrasted to evidence submitted by service providers and professional bodies in response to the 'calls for evidence', which was viewed as more directly relevant to policy development and more timely (*'much more real time'*) compared to the academic literature (CON7). A typical view expressed by one consultant closely involved in the Mental Health Commission was that '*some of the [academic] evidence is quite old. And therefore, its relevance can be questioned at least to some extent*' (CON7).

In summary, exercises canvassing evidence from stakeholders were common in the development of policy through the WMCA Policy Commissions. Evidence captured in this way was often viewed as particularly timely and relevant to policy development.

7.2.4 Embodied knowledge

A further type of evidence used in the creation of the WMCA was ‘embodied knowledge’, which is knowledge held by individuals, rather than in documents (‘inscribed’ knowledge) or as a result of people interacting (‘enacted’ knowledge) (Freeman and Sturdy, 2015). This related to a range of knowledge and individuals including the professional knowledge of management consultants; the experience of consultants and officials who had recently worked in Greater Manchester CA; expertise in particular policy areas, such as mental health; and the knowledge of people with lived experience of mental illness (CON7, CX5, CX6, LEAD3).

The seven metropolitan councils made extensive use of consultants during the creation of the WMCA, and the case study interviews identified three main reasons for this. First, the limited research capacity remaining in local councils after five years of austerity. Second, the belief that consultants who had experience in developing Greater Manchester’s earlier CA would bring valuable expertise and connections to key central government actors. Third, consultants were seen as providing expert and independent advice which was not biased to a particular council’s perspective (CX2, CX4, CX5, CX6). Three consultancies were extensively used during this period: Metro Dynamics, recently founded by the former chief executive of the ‘New Economy’ consultancy in Manchester (2.5.4), a former

Treasury and Downing Street official who had a central role in the Greater Manchester Devolution Agreements (Kenealy, 2016); PWC, which provided an experienced consultant to facilitate the early discussions; and KPMG, which had worked with Greater Manchester CA and provided WMCA with economic analysis and a cost-benefit analysis model (CON1, CON3, LEAD7, POL3, CX3). As well as the experience of consultants who had worked in Greater Manchester, the newly appointed chief executive for Solihull had recently worked in the region and several other chief executives and council leaders reached out to their connections in GM to learn from their experience (CX5, CX6, LEAD4).

In the MHC and other WMCA Policy Commissions, the embodied knowledge of experts was viewed as important. For example, interviews (CON7, LEAD6) and the Mental Health Commission report (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, p. 6) showed that evidence from recognised individual experts or from recognised expert organisations, such as Public Health England or the Centre for Mental Health, was viewed by the MHC members as adding legitimacy to its recommendations. A particular form of embodied knowledge which was also considered important in the MHC work, but was not evident in the overall development of the WMCA or the Strategic Economic Plan policy areas, concerned the experience of service users or people with 'lived experience' of mental health difficulties through the 'MHC Citizen's Jury' (CX7, CON7, POL4).

In summary, embodied knowledge was important in all of the policy areas examined in the case study. The nature of the knowledge, and the associated expertise or experience, varied between policy areas.

7.2.5 Developing new evidence

The MHC report explicitly identified important policy areas where there was a gap in available evidence, but where there were credible ideas that could be tested through a formal experimental (randomised controlled) trial approach. This was linked to a commitment to '*build the evidence ourselves*' (LEAD6) which the MHC report expressed as follows: '*where evidence is lacking, we aim to test ideas and to build evidence, which will guide and inform our future actions*' (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, p. 34). For example, the MHC proposed to develop new evidence through adopting a randomised controlled trial approach to implementing financial incentives to encourage employers to address mental health issue in their workforce (Lamb *et al.*, 2017, p. 9).

7.3 Characteristics of evidence

This section examines the characteristics of evidence used in the case study. First, the 'quality' of evidence is often highlighted in the literature as an important factor in its use in policymaking, particularly in accounts relating to Evidence-Based Policymaking. However, the case study data suggests that the importance attached to the 'quality' of evidence varied between different policy areas. Second, the clear and concise presentation of evidence to policymakers is often identified as a key facilitator of evidence use in the empirical literature. The case study data confirms that evidence presented in clear and simple language was particularly valued by policymakers.

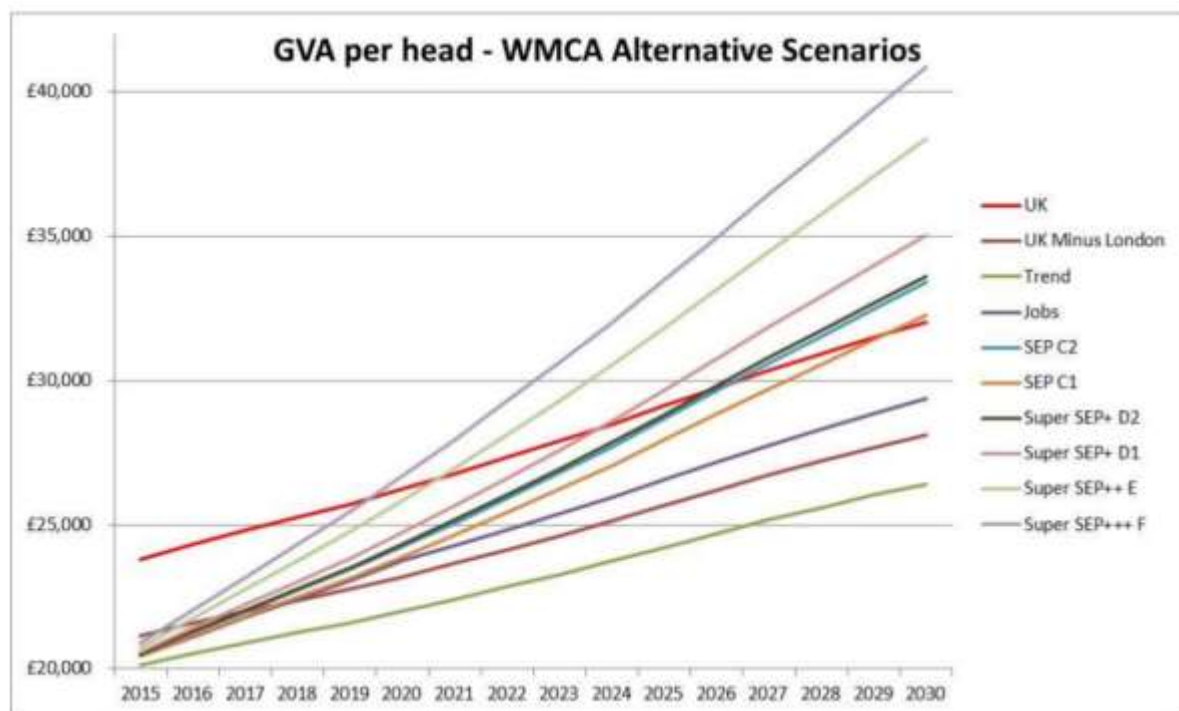
Analysis of the case study data identified one instance of the quality of evidence being challenged during the initial discussions on the creation of the WMCA. This

occurred during a consultant's verbal presentation of the key analysis on the FEMA in June 2015. The economic market area evidence touched on the politically controversial issue of whether Coventry should become part of the WMCA. A superficial reading of the region-level data on commuting patterns could suggest that Coventry was not closely tied to the rest of the metropolitan economy (6.4.2). Recognising the political sensitivity of this policy issue, the consultant was careful to highlight the more detailed city-level data and to explain data quality issues around the timeliness of available census data underpinning both analyses (observation, ANON). The public assessment of quality issues here was prompted by the politically contentious nature of the conclusions which might have been drawn from this evidence.

The Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) claims that its 'vision is based on a robust and realistic understanding of the area's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities' (WMCA, 2016d, p. 15). The SEP Board developed the SEP over a six-month period, discussing both the overall targets that would be presented in the plan, and the strategies and actions that could accelerate economic growth (LEAD7). To develop these targets, the SEP Board considered seven scenarios developed using an economic model commissioned from Oxford Economics (WMCA, 2016c). The published WMCA SEP targets are based on 'Scenario D2' which assumed 'a 1.3% average annual employment rate in all sectors except the public sector, four times the increase in productivity growth rates in all transformational sectors and normal growth rates in enabling sectors' (WMCA, 2016c, p. 8). Participants described an iterative process of consensus building in the SEP Board, with economic analysis being simplified into a series of charts (figure 7.1), demonstrating the theoretical level of growth in the economy, jobs, etc, under various scenarios (CON1, CX4, LEAD5).

Figure 7.1 shows the projected Gross Value Added (GVA, a measure of economic output) per person in the region from 2015 to 2030 under various scenarios ranging from the existing ‘trend’ to a scenario labelled ‘Scenario F - ‘Super SEP Economy +++’ whose assumptions included growth in productivity at eight times average levels in seven ‘transformational’ business areas. SEP Board members debated whether these outcomes appeared realistic, and also whether the resulting outcomes demonstrated sufficient change to justify the case for the creation of the WMCA in terms of its anticipated impact on economic growth (CON1, LEAD5).

Figure 7-1 Economic scenarios considered in the Strategic Economic Plan



Source: (WMCA, 2016c, p. 12)

Interviewees closely involved in developing the SEP stated that the feasibility of these assumptions was tested informally in private discussions at the SEP Board (CON1, CX1, CX4, LEAD5, LEAD7). These informants suggested that economic analysis helped them to avoid ‘*just writing a fantasy of what we wanted to believe*’

(LEAD5) but instead developed targets which they believed were '*based on real world data and what actions could plausibly deliver that*' (LEAD7).

The published SEP documentation does not formally explore the achievability or feasibility of the assumed accelerated rates of future growth in the regional economy and productivity. Hatcher (2017) argued that the targets were 'based on hypothetical scenarios unsupported by adequate evidence and analysis of causal factors' (p.25). Whilst there were several reports to the chief executives' group (the Programme Board), in interviews some chief executives questioned the specific targets contained in the SEP (CX1, CX2, CX6). It is interesting from observations of meetings and analysis of meeting minutes that questions about the SEP targets discussed in the case study interviews were not openly expressed in Programme Board discussions on the SEP.

It appeared from the case study interviews that the pressured collaborative context in the early development of the WMCA limited the degree of critical challenge of evidence and policy proposals. Some local actors keenly felt the need to act diplomatically to avoid derailing the overall CA creation process and to keep its development '*on the road*' - this manifested itself in actors choosing not to confront some issues directly (CON3). Actors appear to have self-censored and kept their concerns to themselves. Reasons for this behaviour suggested in interviews included a lack of confidence in challenging technical (economic) evidence but also, importantly, concern about destabilising the overall process of establishing the CA, which many policy actors viewed as a higher political and professional priority than addressing concerns on individual policy issues (CX2). Interviewees often used travel-related metaphors when describing the development of the WMCA,

highlighting issues of movement and momentum, and the potential for accidents. Policy officers talked of wanting to '*not let the thing [the CA] fall off track*' (POL3) and fearing that '*this could go off the rails any minute - right now someone could just walk out and bring it all tumbling down*' (POL1), whereas one consultant memorably used the metaphor of keeping a vehicle on the road in discussing the need to maintain momentum and cohesion in developing the WMCA by limiting conflict:

... we need to hold this thing together and holding it together sometimes requires difficult issues not to be confronted as honestly, as openly as they might need to be. And that is just necessary to make sure you keep the whole thing on the road (CON3)

In contrast to the case study policy areas discussed above, the MHC Action Plan explicitly recognises that the quality and completeness of evidence varies, and the University of Birmingham report critically assesses the quality and robustness of the extant evidence base on each topic it considers (Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017).

Turning to the presentation of evidence, policymakers stated in the case study interviews that they preferred evidence to be summarised and to avoid being '*bombarded with too much information*' (CON1). The use of clear and simple language in reports of evidence was particularly valued, which was contrasted to the usual formal academic writing style. For example, one policy officer commented '*a lot of the academic work is very dry and it's quite hard to relate to day-to-day experience*' (POL5). Clear and simple messages were often most impactful – for example, slides showing how residents in Sandwell and Walsall council areas were much more reliant for jobs on Birmingham than on the neighbouring Black Country areas (WMCA, 2015c) had significant impacts on policy actors' perspectives (CX1,

CX2). In contrast, lengthy papers were viewed as less valuable, for example one chief executive commented '*I don't want to trawl through 50 pages of stuff - I want to see one sheet*' (CX1). A senior policy actor concurred, and suggested that it is difficult to consider the large number of academic outputs available within the time constraints in their role: '*it is constantly difficult to keep on top of all of the evidence that is coming out...I get so many things across my e-mail or across my desk and am I expected to read them all?*' (POL4).

In summary, the consideration of the quality of evidence varied across the policy areas considered in the case study. In the early discussions on the formation of the WMCA, discussion of the quality of evidence was only observed when it appeared to question the politically preferred policy option. In developing the SEP, there were discussions on the realism of evidence from economic modelling in the SEP Board, but limited wider debate of the issues and no public justification of the key assumptions behind the adopted model or targets. In the MHC work, the quality of evidence was explicitly evaluated in the academic 'baseline assessment' report. The case study suggested that policymakers preferred evidence which was presented clearly and concisely, given the other pressures on their time.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed in detail the different types of evidence used in the case study, identifying a wide range of types of evidence used in each policy area. Some of these were novel to some policy actors involved, and the next chapter suggests that, in the collaborative setting, repeated interactions between groups of diverse policy actors led to consideration of a range of new types of evidence (8.2).

By far the most commonly used type of evidence was economic and statistical analysis, which was used across all the policy areas examined. This aligns with the initial focus and purpose of the CA around economic development, and also reflects the influence of economics on policy development in the UK. Other than economic analysis, the types of evidence used varied between policy areas, for example the use of formal academic research (7.2.1), randomised controlled trials (7.2.5), and evidence from people with lived experience (5.4) was identified only in the mental health policy area.

Evidence from consultations with the public played a limited role in the policy development of WMCA, except in Coventry where the proposal to join the WMCA was politically controversial. The MHC also had little engagement with the general public, however it engaged fairly extensively with people with lived experience of mental illness. This reflected the importance attached to this type of engagement by mental health professionals. Engagement with elected councillors, private companies and technical experts was more extensive, deliberative and linked to more direct authority to impact on policy decisions.

Evidence from 'calls for evidence' and trials of new innovations were viewed as particularly relevant and timely by policymakers. Embodied evidence, particularly from consultants but also (in the MHC) from people with lived experience, was also valued.

The case study results on the characteristics of evidence used by policymakers align with existing studies, suggesting that evidence which is timely and concisely presented is particularly valued (7.3). The 'quality' of evidence was rarely questioned by policymakers in the case study, and indeed there is evidence that

some concerns may have been self-censored in order to maintain momentum in developing the WMCA.

8 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

8.1 Introduction

The last three chapters summarised the case study findings on “How is evidence used in policymaking in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How is this understood by participants?” (Research Question 1), and “What types of evidence are used? What are the characteristics of this evidence?” (Research Question 2). This chapter uses the initial conceptual framework developed from the literature review in chapter 3 to examine why evidence was used in these ways, addressing the final research questions: “Why is evidence used in these ways? What factors affect how evidence is used in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How can a conceptual framework help in analysing this use?”. The types and characteristics of evidence used were considered in the previous chapter. The remaining explanatory factors in the initial framework are next each analysed in turn: policy actors, institutions, governance, context, networks, and ideas. For each factor, the case study data are analysed and discussed in the context of the literature. The chapter identifies refinements to the conceptual framework in the light of the case study data and further literature (8.6). The final conceptual framework provides a set of explanatory factors together with commentary on the content of each factor and the relationships between them for use in future research.

The ‘discussion’ section (8.7) then further considers the case study findings in the context of the literature review. The three key findings of the thesis are examined: (i) how evidence was used in backstage collaborative settings, (ii) how evidence was used to create narratives and (iii) how collaboration led to the use of new types of

evidence. The final conceptual framework is used to help explain the empirical findings from the case study.

8.2 Policy actors

Policy actors are seen here as individuals or collectives with an interest in a given policy issue who are involved in the policymaking process at some stage(s) (John, 2013). The case study data identified significant personal and inter-personal effects of policy actors on evidence use. Despite a discouraging history of ineffective regional working in the region, council leaders, council chief executives and other policy actors in the region developed a collaborative working approach, using evidence in private discussions to reach shared understandings and policy positions. Repeated interactions between groups of diverse policy actors led to consideration of a range of types of evidence, some of which were novel to some participants but important to others. As a result, a broad range of evidence was considered in the policy process. Finally, the evidence suggests a potential negative impact of the collaborative context on evidence use can be the reduction in the critical challenge of evidence and resulting policy proposals.

Individual policy actors may have different perspectives on the use of evidence in policymaking, which this thesis terms their 'epistemic position'. For example, an individual may believe that evidence has no role in policy, which should be based on other factors such as political ideology. Or they may believe that only scientifically generated research, such as systematic reviews of multiple randomised controlled trials, form a robust basis for policy. Alternatively, they may view a wider range of evidence, such as the views of experts or people with lived experience, should also

be considered. In the case study, some of the key policy actors were established advocates for the use of evidence in policymaking. For example, the chief executive of the WMCA during its 'shadow' year before the mayoral election was an academic economist before becoming a council chief executive and continued to be honorary president of the Local Area Research and Intelligence Association (CX3, CX4, CX5, CX6). Similarly, the Mental Health Commission chair was previously awarded the Political Studies Associations' award for 'the best use of evidence by a politician' relating to his time as Minister of State for Care and Support (Political Studies Association, 2014).

Previous research has demonstrated the complexity of policymaking in practice, including the importance of the capabilities of policy actors, how they approach policy problems, and their ideas and beliefs (3.4). The case study demonstrated how, in developing a CA, these personal and inter-personal effects were magnified as actors from different organisations participated in multiple repeated interactions around the shared project of establishing the new collaboration and developing shared policies. Case study data suggested that the adoption of practice from elsewhere was facilitated by individual policy actors with links to Greater Manchester and consultants who had been involved in the GMCA (7.2.4). Policy learning from Greater Manchester by subsequent CAs has also been widely identified in earlier studies (2.5.4). The transfer of learning by policy actors from one location to another aligns with the Knowledge Utilisation account (3.2) and the literature around policy and social learning (Bennett and Howlett, 1992; Hall, 1993).

Inter-personal relationships affected the use of evidence in the collaborative context. Surprisingly, given the long history of difficult relationships between Birmingham, the

Black Country, Solihull and Coventry (Lowndes and Lemprière, 2018), several leaders and chief executives involved in developing the CA reflected on the early stage WMCA development as a period of intense collegiate working and close collaboration between councils which they had not previously experienced in the region (CX1, CX2). This change may have been helped by the arrival of several new actors in important positions soon before the case study period. This included the chief executives of Birmingham, Solihull and Walsall councils (each appointed in 2014) and Wolverhampton council (2012), and new council leaders in Solihull and Dudley (2014) and Coventry (2013). In total, out of the 14 metropolitan council leaders and chief executives in the WMCA, half had taken up their post within the previous three years (WM council websites accessed May 2016).

Evidence was developed, interpreted and used through interactions between actors in the policy process. Policy actors' perceptions of the importance of the overall process of developing the CA had a significant impact on the use of evidence.

Across the policy areas in the case study, many local actors keenly felt the need to act diplomatically to avoid 'derailing' the CA. A recurring theme in the interviews was the sense of a pressure to keep the development process of the CA '*on the road*' (CON3); this manifested itself in actors choosing to avoid directly confronting some sensitive or controversial issues (CX2, CX5, CX6, LEAD1). At the same time, the CA had to address a number of contentious issues in order to develop policy, for example on the allocation of land for housing. The somewhat lengthy process of establishing and running policy commissions helped these difficult discussions, by giving key actors time and a venue to build trust and a shared understanding of the evidence base relating to the controversial issues before reaching conclusions. This was reportedly the first time that key regional actors had been able to discuss such

contentious issues productively (CX1, LEAD1, POL1). This is linked to the use of evidence to enhance dialogue and debate discussed later (8.7.1).

The case study results build on the findings of previous work in the field which has highlighted the ways in which evidence is used by policymakers as knowledge is created through interactions between actors in the policy process (3.2). Literature on collaborative governance supports the suggestion from the case study that social settings which foster recurring face-to-face interaction among a small group of participants may be particularly favourable to developing trust (2.2). The adoption of conflict-avoidance behaviours by some policy actors in the case study, such as eschewing directly confronting some sensitive issues and avoiding critical challenge of the quality of evidence used in policymaking (7.3), to some extent mirrors ideas of 'groupthink' where insular groups of decision makers fail to evaluate options effectively (3.4.1).

In summary, individual policy actors and their inter-relationships had significant influence on the use of evidence in the case study. Each actor's individual capabilities, epistemic position and approach to relationships impacted on the use of evidence. In the collaborative context, a diverse range of actors were pulled together around the common project of developing the CA and collaborative policy, and used evidence to develop shared understandings and policy positions through repeated private interactions. The case study results align with much of the existing literature on the effects of policy actors on evidence use, whilst also suggesting a new understanding of how the processes adopted in developing collaborations impact on evidence use and that such high stakes political contexts may reduce the critical challenge of evidence.

8.3 Institutions

The case study revealed significant commonality in norms of evidence use across the institutions and policy areas involved, but also some marked differences – particularly around health. Institutional norms affected the policy agenda and the creation, use and presentation of evidence in policy development – both ‘opening up’ and ‘closing down’ the use of different types of evidence. Historic legacies influenced the availability of collaborative research infrastructure, narratives and norms of behaviour, impacting on the availability of evidence and the capacity for research, and demonstrating a degree of institutional path dependence (3.4.2). The design of the WMCA in part mirrored the model created earlier by Greater Manchester CA, and case study interviews suggested that this resulted from conscious mimetic isomorphism although this was tempered by actors’ recognition of the differing starting conditions of the two CAs (3.4.2).

There was wide consistency in the use of some types of evidence in the case study, but also some significant variations. Economic analyses were widely used across the policy themes, for example comparisons of government investment in the region with those in other regions such as Greater Manchester (CX3, CX6, CX7, LEAD1, LEAD2, LEAD3, LEAD7). At the same time, some types of evidence were valued only in specific policy areas. In particular, mental health policy actors valued evidence such as systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials and evidence from people with lived experience (POL4). In contrast, these types of evidence were absent from discussions on the formation of the WMCA and the Strategic Economic Plan, which involved local authority and business leaders rather than health professionals.

Institutions in the case study were able to deflect policy development that might challenge their current service organisation or resources and to influence decisions on what evidence was captured. An institutional filtering process appeared to apply to the initial agenda setting stage of deciding which policy areas to explore. For example, around health, whilst the extant evidence indicated the value of a fundamental review of health and social care issues in the region, institutional filtering restricted the remit of the Mental Health Commission in two significant ways (CX4, CX7, LEAD6). First, local council leaders had no appetite to take on control of local health services as had been implemented in Greater Manchester from February 2015 (CX4, CX7, LEAD6). Second, local health service managers were seen as wanting to avoid the review focussing on wholesale system change or reviews of existing services such as children's mental health services (CX4, CX7, LEAD6). The final remit therefore resulted from a selective consideration of the available evidence constrained by local political preferences.

The use of evidence was described as pragmatic, with evidence filtered and potential policy options tested against criteria such as the level of support they enjoyed from key stakeholders such as government departments, their political acceptability, the level of adaptation the policy option required from the whole service system, local practice leaders' assessments of its practicality, and the availability of funding, as well as the strength of support from the evidence itself (CON2, CON7, CX3, CX4, CX7). At times institutions directly limited the evidence that could be captured or used in WMCA policymaking, for example by withholding expenditure data requested from Local Authorities and Clinical Commissioning Groups in the MHC academic review (Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017, p. 13). Evidence providers were

conscious of institutional filters; in the case study interviews some reflected how these influenced their approach when presenting evidence (CON2, CON4).

Long-term patterns of limited collaboration between councils in the region provided a difficult collaborative context for the development of the WMCA. Councils in the region maintained only limited regional collaboration after the abolition of metropolitan county councils in 1986, with joint-decision making responsibilities allocated to a variety of joint committees with varying memberships (Leach and Game, 1991) and there was little collaborative research capacity between local authorities in the region (5.2). Two significant exceptions were the passenger transport authority, created by the seven metropolitan councils in 1986, which developed a transport analytical function, and the Black Country Consortium, a private company wholly owned by the four Black Country councils which was formed in 2006 to deliver economic intelligence. Whilst individual councils maintained their own research capacity, from 2010 these often became victims of budget cuts (Eckersley and Tobin, 2019) so that, by 2014, the internal research capacity available to WM councils was limited. One consultant commented that *'the diminished local authorities are quite weak in terms of research. There used to be strong research teams but then all the budgets have gone'* (CON1). The historic lack of regional collaboration in the West Midlands led to a lack of both regional research capacity and a shared authoritative analysis of the regional economy.

The WM councils did succeed in establishing a CA and negotiating a Devolution Agreement with government, despite the historic constraints discussed above. This achievement was influenced by the involvement of policy actors who were new to the West Midlands and/or had experience of collaborative regional working elsewhere

(7.2.4), together with the wider fiscal environment and central government policy context linking CAs to additional powers and funding (5.3). Local actors actively chose to step outside the historic path of limited, unstable, and difficult collaboration in the West Midlands in an attempt to develop a more productive approach (CX6, POL1). The case study demonstrated that historic constraints did not wholly determine the ability of policy actors to decide future policy direction.

Conversations between West Midland council leaders leading up to the early Hotel du Vin meetings highlighted concerns at Manchester's comparative success in attracting (public and private) investment, which was viewed as related to the fact that *'Greater Manchester had clearly got its act together'* (CX3) in terms of joint leadership of the region. There was a fear that (as one council chief executive put it) *'if Manchester keep forging ahead with their CA and joint working, we look further and further behind'* (CX1). Interviewees highlighted a perception that Greater Manchester had been particularly successful in developing effective regional governance, building strong working relationships with central government, building a shared evidence base and research capacity, achieving significant devolution of powers and funding, and presenting a united image to businesses (CX3, CX5, CX6, CX7, LEAD1, LEAD2, LEAD3, LEAD4, LEAD7, POL1). Many interviewees pointed to the Greater Manchester CA 'model' as influential in developing the WMCA. Many characteristics of the GMCA organisation, governance and use of evidence are reflected in WMCA, which was established four years later. This includes the main elements of GMCA's constitution, the adoption of an elected metro mayor, and the main policy areas covered by the Devolution Agreement (2.5.4, 5.3). For example, the GMCA's strong advocacy of the use of evidence-based policy (2.5.4) was reflected in WMCA's strong public assertions of adopting this approach (6.2). Whilst

the overall approach to the WMCA was influenced by the experience of GMCA, at the same time interviewees were clear that the GM model could not simply be transferred to the West Midlands because of their different histories and cultures (CX6).

The case study data highlighted the time pressures faced in responding to central government's invitation in July 2015 to submit proposals for Devolution Agreements incorporating mayoral governance arrangements by 4 September 2025 (2.5.3). The deadline meant that the WMCA Devolution Agreement proposals had to be developed prior to the completion of its Strategic Economic Plan (CON1), which one chief executive described as developing '*policy on the hoof*' (CX5). One council leader suggested that the time pressure '*drove us to agreeing some things which we wouldn't otherwise have agreed*' (LEAD1).

Relatively few studies have examined institutions in relation to evidence use in policymaking, however the case study findings reflect institutional theory that institutions structure meaning and develop networks of actors, to some extent constraining the choices and behaviour of policy actors (3.4.2). The findings align with the expectation of the evidence utilisation literature that evidence which supports existing institutionalised paradigms and cultures is more likely to be accepted by policy actors, whereas challenging ideas are blocked by institutional 'filters' (Smith, 2013b, p. 81). The case study results also align with existing research demonstrating that organisational structures affect how evidence is used and that the use of evidence is embedded in its context and influenced by temporal effects (3.4.2). Finally, the results identify the role of institutional path dependence and isomorphism in evidence use in the collaborative context. Linked to the theory

of historical institutionalism, the path dependence analytical framework suggests that institutions influence the behaviour of actors and organisations along established paths determined by past decisions (3.4.2). Isomorphism involves pressure for those in a particular 'institutional field' to become more similar to each other (3.4.2).

In summary, institutional constraints affected evidence use in the case study.

Institutional norms mitigated against effective inter-agency collaboration. Historic legacies limited collaborative research capacity. The design of the CA was influenced by institutional path dependence, with significant institutional isomorphism identified in relation to Greater Manchester CA. Nevertheless, policy actors were able to surmount these institutional constraints to develop a working CA, demonstrating that these constraints did not wholly determine evidence use in the case study.

8.4 Governance

The case study showed that the adoption of informal governance led to most early policymaking taking place in private 'backstage' settings rather than in formal 'frontstage' settings (3.5). Through repeated discussions in backstage settings, policy actors developed shared understandings of evidence and agreed policy positions away from external challenge and without having to perform expected public roles such as promoting the interests of their individual council. In these settings, evidence was frequently used deliberatively, to enhance dialogue and debate. The existence of organisational veto powers for both local and central government encouraged the avoidance of contentious issues and impacted on the availability, use and presentation of evidence. Whilst the use of these veto powers

by central government was nuanced, local actors' recognition of their existence indirectly influenced the types of evidence used and presented in policy proposals.

In developing WMCA policy, council leaders and chief executives adopted an informal approach to governance and used a series of private meetings to develop the outline of a shared approach to the creation of WMCA, including its purpose, operating principles and governance (LEAD4, CX3, CX4, CON3). In these private, informal sessions which had not been formally sanctioned by their councils, leaders and chief executives reviewed evidence and its associated narrative framing and gradually developed a shared understanding and consensus on how they wanted the WMCA to be established. The proposals developed in these sessions were then discussed privately and informally with other councillors and stakeholders such as central government and the three LEP Chairs, in settings out of view of the public and lacking formal decision-making rules (participant observations). The private, backstage, informal discussions enabled policymakers quickly to develop a shared understanding, reaching a consensus which may have been difficult to achieve through more public and formal processes (CON3). The individual pieces of evidence were later deployed as argumentative 'ammunition' (Majone, 1989) to persuade wider stakeholders of the justification for the proposals, for example a Black Country leader frequently quoted the number of his residents whose jobs were based in Birmingham (CX1). After the informal, backstage discussions between local politicians and other elite actors had been completed, the requirement for formal approval of the policy meant that the debate moved frontstage and was opened to a wider range of stakeholders, such as other councillors and eventually the public.

The predominantly informal governance approach was to some extent replicated in the further areas policy development examined in the case study. First, the negotiation of the first West Midlands Devolution Agreement used an informal governance approach where a group of policy actors (a LEP chair and executive manager, a council leader and chief executive) held private discussions with local councils and other stakeholders to develop proposals for inclusion in the agreement, and then completed a series of confidential negotiations with central government leading to the final published agreement (HM Treasury and WMCA, 2015).

Second, the development of the CA's Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) primarily involved a different group of actors, the SEP Board, which was accountable to the CA Board with the remit of advising on overarching economic strategy and narrative, preparing the SEP document, and the evaluation of progress in delivering the SEP (WMCA, 2016a). The SEP Board, which was led by the (private sector) chair of one of the three LEPs, met in private and minutes were not published, however written updates were provided to the CA Programme Board (observations). The SEP was published by WMCA in 2016 (WMCA, 2016d).

Third, the MHC members met in a series of private sessions from October 2015 through 2016, alongside significant engagement with a wider group of stakeholders such as people with experience of mental health issues through the Citizen's Jury and engagement events (Lamb *et al.*, 2017; WMCA, 2017c). The MHC report was published in 2017 (Lamb *et al.*, 2017). It is noted that, although the majority of the policymaking process in each of these examples involved informal governance approaches, nevertheless each resulted in published outputs approved through

formal governance processes. Each involved a mix of informal and formal governance.

The case study data was analysed to test whether particular types of evidence use were related to particular policy settings. The analysis utilised the typology of evidence use developed by Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott (2019) (3.2.1) and was restricted to the two types of evidence use identified most frequently in the case study data, to maximise the data available. The use of evidence to 'justify a position' was identified in relation to policymaking in a range of settings including published reports, discussions with groups of councillors, formal committees which met in private session such as the CA Programme Board, and private meetings with central government officials. The use of evidence to 'enhance debate and dialogue' was identified primarily in non-public policy discussions, including meetings of the SEP Board and policy commissions, and in private meetings between the council leaders and chief executives. The case study raises the possibility that, in collaborations, the policy setting influences the nature of the use of evidence in policymaking. This is an important subject for future research.

The collaborative context led to the existence of veto powers for several organisations who were able to block policy decisions (5.3). In the case study, veto powers of local and central institutions affected the availability, use and presentation of evidence. The effects of local institutional veto powers on evidence use were fourfold: who was involved in policymaking processes, the focus of policy objectives, the adoption of an overarching 'balance' objective, and the types of evidence available. First, the range of institutions involved in specific areas of policymaking was extended to offer positions of influence to local stakeholders who might

otherwise decline to engage with the process (CX7). Second, the focus of policy objectives shifted in response to institutional interests. For example, the initial decision to focus on mental health reflected the lack of political support in the West Midlands for taking on responsibilities for health services (CX4, POL4). Third, since each of the seven metropolitan councils had some veto powers through their ability to withdraw from membership or wider participation, the WMCA partners adopted the principle of ‘balance’ as one of its six founding principles - that ‘all communities will benefit from growth, but not necessarily at the same time or in the same way’ (WMCA, 2015a, p. 13). Finally, veto powers were used to restrict the evidence available to policymakers. For example, data was sought from Local Authorities and Clinical Commissioning Groups using a bespoke audit form to provide detail on current expenditure on mental health services. However, as the response was ‘*extremely patchy and incomplete*’, less timely and comprehensive published data had to be used instead (Newbigging and Parsonage, 2017, p. 13). In summary, the existence of local veto powers (and in one instance their actual use) significantly influenced the availability, use and presentation of evidence in the collaborative context.

Turning to the veto powers of central government, the need for statutory approval of new CAs and Devolution Agreements provided a significant veto power for central government (5.3). The way central government actors chose to use (or not to use) this power in the case study was nuanced. On the one hand, HM Treasury chose not to veto local partners’ preference for a wide ‘3-LEPs’ geography for the WMCA, compared to HMT’s preferred geography of the seven ‘metropolitan councils’, partly in response to evidence from the economic analysis of the functional economic market area (6.4.2). In contrast, central government effectively imposed an elected

mayor governance arrangement on the emerging CA, despite opposition from local politicians and the evidence of a lack of popular support towards a (city) mayoral model by local residents in referenda in Birmingham and Coventry in 2012 (LEAD1; LEAD2; LEAD4; BBC, 2012). Recognising the potential of government veto, types of evidence which were perceived to be particularly persuasive to central government were sought and used by local policymakers. For example, proposals submitted as part of the Devolution Agreement made use of formal cost-benefit analyses, since this form of analysis is in line with HM Treasury epistemic positions (HM Treasury, 2003).

Another example of evidence use being shaped by the perceived preferences of central government was the recommendation of the Mental Health Commission for government investment in several 'Evidence-Based Programmes', such as 'Housing First' (Woodhall-Melnik and Dunn, 2016) and 'Individual Placement and Support' (Becker and Bond, 2020; Drake, Bond and Becker, 2012). An 'Evidence-Based Programme' is defined as a 'set of coordinated services or activities that demonstrate effectiveness [on some desired outcome] based on research' (Mihalic and Elliott, 2015, p. 125). These programmes were seen as attractive for investment from the Department of Health and other government departments, because of their robust evidence base in terms of the particular type of evidence favoured by these departments (systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials) (POL4, CON7). A consultant closely involved in the MHC gave the example of recommendations for investment in one evidence-based programme (Individual Placement Support, IPS) as being influenced by the existence of evidence of its effectiveness, its organisational fit with the main funder (the Department of Work and Pensions, DWP) and avoiding challenge to existing service providers, as follows (CON2):

Picking IPS off the shelf is another example of: we've got something, it has a good evidence base, there's a lot of enthusiasm for it, we could get DWP to sign up for it, we can identify new money for it, we don't have to challenge the kind of [service] status quo - let's do IPS!

Overall, there is comparatively little research on the role of informality in policymaking (Jitske van Popering-Verkerk and van Buuren, 2016) and research on informal governance 'has focussed on the supranational level' (Ayres, 2017, p. 95). Recent research has identified that informal governance approaches are frequently adopted in CAs and the negotiation of Devolution Agreements (3.5). The importance of veto players has also been identified in other studies on the ratification of Devolution Agreements (Ayres, Sandford and Coombes, 2017, p. 869). The case study findings support the conclusions of previous studies that the advantages of an informal governance approach include efficiency and the development of innovative policy options, but that operating informally can lead to challenges in maintaining transparency (3.5). More generally, the case study aligned with the literature suggesting that evidence use depends on processes like sense making, developing collective understanding and persuasion (3.2).

In summary, the use of evidence in the case study was influenced by several governance factors. The use of informal governance with frequent meetings in backstage settings facilitated the use of evidence to enhance debate and dialogue. The existence of veto players affected the availability, use and presentation of evidence in policymaking discussions.

8.5 Context, networks and ideas

The initial conceptual framework included explanatory factors of 'context', 'networks', and 'ideas' (3.4.8). The case study data confirmed that each of these factors influenced policymaking and the use of evidence. However, analysis suggested that the relevant effects were already captured by the factors discussed above (8.2-8.4). Therefore, these three factors were removed from the final version of the conceptual framework (8.6).

Context had significant impact on evidence use. Key contextual issues included the substantial reductions in local council funding from central government from 2010; the perception by local leaders that the West Midlands region was falling behind some other regions in attracting external investment; the limited capacity and capability for Birmingham City Council to lead development of an inter-municipal collaboration; the regional history of local councils disbanding collaborative infrastructure after the abolition of the West Midlands County Council; and the politically pressured environment created by central government's approach to developing Devolution Agreements which set a very tight deadline and encouraged competition between local areas. The case study data suggested that the 'context' factor overlapped with that of the 'institutions' factor (8.3).

The case study identified impacts of policy networks, particularly relating to private sector company leaders and health professionals. The private sector was heavily involved in parts of the WMCA's policy development, especially through the formal involvement of the three LEPs in the SEP and wider WMCA (LEAD7). For example, council leaders proactively engaged with business stakeholders in promoting the initial proposals for the WMCA (LEAD1, CON1, CX6). In the Mental Health

Commission, different policy networks sometimes demonstrated very different epistemic positions. For example, some stakeholders held a biomedical perspective, which tended to value 'high quality' evidence in traditional Evidence Based Medicine study designs such as Randomised Controlled Trials, whereas others identified more with the 'mad studies' perspective (Ingram, 2016) which focuses on lived experiences and the social construction of mental illness (CON2). Whilst policy networks had impacts on evidence use, these effects were separately identified in the analysis of the factors of 'policy actors' (8.2) and 'institutions' (8.3).

The case study data confirmed that ideas were influential on policymaking and the use of evidence. Three policy ideas were found to be particularly influential in the development of the CA. First, the economic theory of agglomeration (CX3, LEAD2, LEAD7) and the related concept of the city-region (CX1, CX4, CX6, LEAD2, POL1). Second, the idea of governance by a directly elected mayor (2.5). Third, in the Mental Health Commission, the idea of 'evidence based programmes' such as the Housing First programme (Baxter *et al.*, 2019) and the Individual Placement and Support programme for people with mental illness (Drake, Bond and Becker, 2012; Frederick and VanderWeele, 2019). However, analysis again suggested that the relevant effects are adequately captured by the earlier three factors, 'policy actors' (8.2), 'institutions' (8.3), and 'governance' (8.4).

8.6 Updating the conceptual framework

The initial conceptual framework has been updated in view of the case study findings including the key findings on the range of evidence used in the case study IMC, the importance of evidence in relation to the collaborative narrative, and the novel use of

evidence to enhance dialogue and debate noted particularly in informal backstage settings in the case study. The initial framework identified seven explanatory factors based on existing literature: policy actors, institutions, governance, context, networks, ideas and the type/characteristics of evidence itself (3.4.8). The case study data confirmed the relevance of all these factors in the case of a new collaboration. In developing the conceptual framework, it is important to find a compromise between the complexity of policymaking and the utility of the framework (Oliver, Lorenc and Innvær, 2014), so this thesis seeks to develop a framework which is as parsimonious as possible whilst accounting for the key factors involved. The case study data showed that three of the explanatory factors in the initial framework appeared to have limited additional explanatory value beyond what is covered by other factors (8.6). The data also confirmed that the explanatory factors of 'policy actors', 'institutions' and 'governance', and interactions between these factors, influenced the types and characteristics of evidence used, and the ways in which evidence was used.

The case study enabled further refinement and elaboration of the conceptual framework. In line with Maxwell (2012), this framework incorporates elements from the literature but its structure was developed through analysing the primary research data. The initial framework was provisional and has been revised during the course of the study as new insights arose from the literature review and case study.

The final conceptual framework is designed to assist analysis of the influences on evidence use in collaborations, by identifying the key factors which affect the use of evidence in this context, and the relationships between these factors. Reviewing the case study findings in the light of existing research has enabled the initial framework

to be elaborated and generalised for future use. This is in line with Yin's concept of analytic generalisation, where the researcher seeks to develop generalisable findings based on advancing theoretical concepts from existing literature and the case study findings (4.8).

The components of the final conceptual framework are explained below, along with the linkages between them, thus seeking to provide a higher level of generality so that the framework may be useful to others studying the use of evidence in collaborative contexts. The framework comprises four explanatory factors (policy actors, governance, institutions, and types and characteristics of evidence), which interact with each other and together influence how evidence is used in collaborations. The revised version of the conceptual framework is shown in figure 8-1. The thesis uses the label 'conceptual framework' rather than a 'theoretical framework' because of the lack, certainly at this stage, of specific predictive claims (Wacker, 1998), whilst recognising that different authors use these terms in various ways (Imenda, 2014; Van der Waladt, 2020). Table 8-1 lists the main attributes pertaining to each factor of the framework, discussed earlier in the findings and discussion chapters.

Figure 8-1 Final conceptual framework

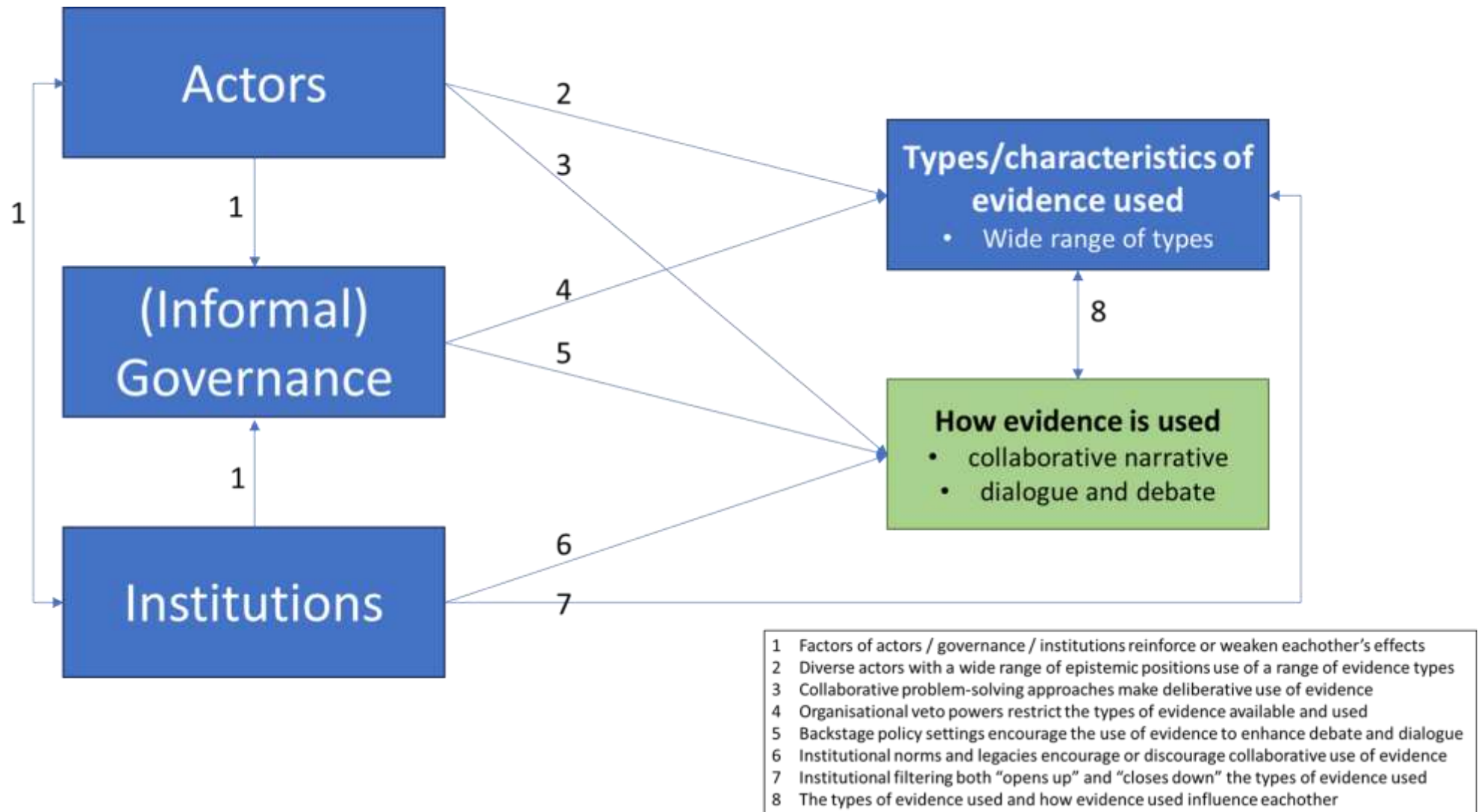


Table 8-1 Factors in the final conceptual framework on evidence use in collaborative settings

Factor	Attributes
Actors	Capacity/capability • Approach to problem solving • Policy learning Epistemic positions • Professional backgrounds Relationships • Inter-personal relations • Approach to relational / collaborative problem solving • Levels of trust • Shared understanding/position • Self-censoring behaviour / limiting critical challenge
Governance	Formal / informal governance • Repeated meetings • Common purpose Frontstage / backstage setting • Deliberative evidence use – to enhance dialogue and debate • Developing trust / commitment Veto powers • Limit the availability or use of some evidence

Factor	Attributes
Institutions	Institutional norms • Institutional filtering of evidence capture and use • Collaborative behavioural norms Historical legacies • Existence of collaborative narratives • Path dependence • Availability of collaborative infrastructure for research and evidence Organisational design • Isomorphic change • Temporal pressures
Types / characteristics of evidence used	Range of types of knowledge / evidence used • Narrow / broad range of types of evidence • Knowledge type (e.g. academic) • Gap filling Characteristics of evidence • Relevance to policy area • Recency • Presentational clarity and conciseness • Study design quality

Factor	Attributes
How evidence is used	Collaborative narrative • Development • Communication • Maintenance Enhancing debate and dialogue (mainly 'backstage') Political uses • Legitimation / substantiation • Public statements asserting adoption of an 'evidence based' approach • Argumentation in favour of policy position Instrumental uses

Policy actors

Individual policy actors and their inter-relationships can have significant influence on the use of evidence in collaborations, both directly and indirectly, in several ways.

The first direct mechanism is that they bring individual characteristics, such as their capability and capacity for evidence use and their approach to problem solving.

Second, their epistemic positions influence the types of evidence used and how this is used in policymaking. Third, relationally they may (or may not) interact with other

actors in ways that build trust, encourage relational problem solving and can lead to shared understandings and policy learning, and they may self-censor their

behaviour, for example avoiding challenge to the quality of evidence. The wide

range of epistemic positions in collaborative policymaking **broadens the range of types of evidence considered** compared to the situation inside individual

organisations. The relational and collaborative approach to problem solving

influences how evidence is used, including prioritising the development and

maintenance of a **collaborative narrative**. The relationship between the factor of

policy actors and the factors of governance and institutions is nuanced; the agency

of actors can reinforce or weaken the effects of institutions and governance.

(Informal) governance

The approach to governance impacts on how evidence is used in collaborations.

Where an informal governance approach is adopted, repeated private meetings in

backstage settings between elite actors may facilitate the growth of trust and

commitment, and hence a **deliberative approach to evidence use which**

enhances dialogue and debate. The presence of veto powers impact on the

availability, interpretation and presentation of evidence. In addition to the interaction with policy actors discussed above, the governance factor also interacts with the institution factor as historic legacies, behaviours and 'rules in use' (Ostrom, 1999, p. 23) influence what forms of governance are adopted in new collaborations.

Institutions

Institutional constraints can influence evidence use in collaborations, particularly through institutional norms, historic legacies and path dependence, and design issues including isomorphic pressures. Institutional norms and historic legacies affect, for example, expectations around collaborative behaviour, the existence (or absence) of collaborative infrastructure, and existence of collaborative narratives, impacting on how evidence is used in collaborations. The approach to organisational design affects evidence use, and this is influenced by isomorphic pressures such as the desire to emulate pre-existing collaborations which are viewed as successful by influential stakeholders. The effects of institutions **can both 'open up' and 'close down' the range of types of evidence used** in collaborative policymaking, by introducing partners to types of evidence which are novel to them, and by filtering out evidence which is threatening to institutional interests. The relationship between this factor and those of actors and governance are discussed above.

Types and characteristics of evidence

How evidence is used in collaborative policymaking can be influenced by the type and characteristics of evidence itself. The collaborative setting may encourage the use of a **wider range of types of evidence** than policymaking in a single organisation, whilst at the same time ‘closing down’ the use of some types of evidence through institutional filtering. Some characteristics of evidence make its use more likely, such as being relevant to the policy issue, timely, and clearly and concisely presented. These characteristics may be more influential than the quality of evidence in terms of study design and implementation.

How evidence is used

Evidence in a collaborative setting may be used in a wide variety of ways, including to ‘**enhance debate and dialogue**’, which this thesis describes as a ‘deliberative’ use of evidence, and to ‘justify a position’, which is more in line with the ‘political’ use of evidence. Less frequently observed uses included instrumental uses and testing the feasibility of policy proposals. The crafting and deployment of a **shared collaborative narrative** concerning the need for the collaboration and its positive impacts on the future of the area may be an important mechanism in the collaborative context. Evidence use may be tailored to the preferences of key stakeholders, particularly local and central bodies with veto powers. Evidence may be used both to legitimise the collaborative organisation, for example by suggesting a rational approach to policymaking in published policy statements, and to substantiate specific policy positions.

In summary, the final version of the conceptual framework develops the initial framework to provide a generalised and detailed explanatory framework for future research on evidence use in collaborative settings in the light of the key case study findings and additional literature. The final framework can be used in future research on evidence use in collaborative contexts. By addressing attention to the four explanatory factors, researchers will be able to elucidate how and why evidence is used in CAs and other IMC collaborative settings, in the UK and internationally.

8.7 Discussion

This section considers the findings of the thesis in the context of the existing literature, focussing on three key findings on the use of evidence in the case study combined authority: evidence use to enhance dialogue and debate, evidence use to create and maintain policy narratives and the use of new types of evidence in the collaborative context.

8.7.1 Evidence use to enhance dialogue and debate

Perhaps most interestingly, the case study identified the frequent use of evidence ‘to enhance dialogue and debate’ (6.3). Evidence was used to support ‘honest’ conversations and to develop shared understandings and robust, ‘sellable’ policy proposals (6.3). This particular use of evidence is seldom identified in the evidence utilisation literature. The contributions of evidence to relationships and the relational nature of policymaking has been under-examined by policy theory (Bogenschneider,

Day and Parrott, 2019). In general, the case study findings align with the knowledge utilisation account which sees policy as emerging from debate and argues that decision makers adopt a relational problem-solving approach. The findings add to the literature by providing new empirical data and theoretical insight into the use of evidence to enhance debate and dialogue, and the apparent relationship between this and policymaking in private, backstage informal policy settings.

The conceptual framework helps to illuminate the emergence of the use of evidence to 'enhance debate and dialogue'. First, in terms of governance, it is notable that this kind of use was observed primarily in informal governance settings where repeated policy discussions were held in a private (backstage) setting. The existing literature suggests that repeated private discussions can help in the development of inter-personal trust and problem solving. Second, the project to create the combined authority led to a significant degree of common purpose and collaborative approaches between policy actors which, in the context of repeated interactions, built trust and relational problem solving approaches. Third, policy actors were able to surmount problematic institutional legacies such as poor inter-authority working relationships, supported by the presence of a significant number of actors with experience of more collaborative inter-authority working from other regions.

8.7.2 Evidence use to create and maintain policy narratives

The second important finding from the case study highlighted the importance of the use of evidence to develop and maintain a regional narrative in the CA (6.4.1). The importance of 'narrative' in politics is widely recognised in the political science literature, which suggests that political actors frame their arguments by selecting

elements of perceived reality and making them more prominent, and that policy narratives have the potential to open (and close) policy windows and to influence whether a policy idea is (or is not) adopted (3.2.2). However, the relationship between evidence and framing has rarely been investigated (Stucki and Sager, 2018). Schlauffer, Stucki and Sager (2018, p. 647) argue that evidence is always incorporated into persuasive 'stories and narratives', echoing the assertion by Majone (1989, p. 46) that 'there is no evidence without an argument' and the suggestion by Lowndes (2016) that 'policymakers select and utilise evidence in the context of narrative' (p.105). The case study adds to this literature by identifying three distinct applications of narrative in the collaborative context: promoting the case for creation of the new collaboration and its policy preferences to central government, promoting these to local stakeholders, and testing the fit of new evidence to the developing narrative (6.4.1).

The conceptual framework helps to explain the emergence of this use of evidence in the collaborative setting. In terms of governance, the creation of a regional narrative sought to legitimise the nascent combined authority to central government (and other stakeholders) by suggesting that this action would positively transform a problematic regional economy through more strategic planning and leadership. For policy actors, the narrative (and supporting evidence) was critical in 'selling' the collaboration to local stakeholders such as councillors and the public. Institutionally, the development of the regional narrative represented both a step away from the historic legacy of conflictual approaches between councils in the region, and a response to isomorphic pressures from the perceived success of the consistent regional narrative developed by the Greater Manchester region.

8.7.3 The use of new types of evidence in collaborations

The third significant finding concerned how the collaborative context both ‘opened up’ the use of types of evidence which were novel to some policy actors, and also ‘closed down’ the use of some evidence which might have been embarrassing to influential stakeholders.

Chapter 7 examined the types and characteristics of evidence used in the case study, illuminating the range of evidence used and facilitating future comparative research. Whilst the analysis showed considerable commonality in what was considered as ‘evidence’ by policy actors and the types of evidence used across the policy areas, it also demonstrated some areas where the types of evidence used varied significantly between policy areas. The use of economic analysis was ubiquitous, in line with statutory purpose of CAs and echoing the findings of existing research on the considerable influence of economics in policymaking in the UK (Christensen, 2017; Hirschman and Berman, 2014; MacKillop and Christensen, 2019). Hirschman and Berman (2014, p. 781) suggest that this results from three factors: the overall status of the economics discipline, the institutional position of economists in policymaking, and the diffusion of economic ways of thinking about issues – what they refer to as ‘cognitive infrastructure’. In the case study, this type of evidence also responded to the perceived preferences of central government, for example in the use of HM Treasury’s Green Book Cost-Benefit Analysis of proposals in the Devolution Agreement (6.4.3). The case findings on the somewhat limited approach to public engagement in most of the councils are in line with existing research on the development of CAs and Devolution Agreements (2.5.1).

In some cases, types of evidence which were novel or ignored by some actors were introduced into the policy process because they were valued by others, opening up consideration of additional types of evidence. This finding aligns with existing research on the different 'cultures' of evidence in different policy areas and institutions (Lorenc *et al.*, 2014). For example, the extensive use of evidence from both randomised controlled trials and from people with lived experience in the Mental Health Commission (uniquely across the policy areas examined in the case study) reflected the epistemic positions of health actors, which in turn were influenced by the impact of ideas from 'evidence-based medicine' on health stakeholders, and the importance of service user involvement to professionals planning and developing mental health services (Telford and Faulkner, 2004). In contrast to opening up evidence types, the case study also revealed some cases where institutions limited the range of evidence considered by policymakers, for example information on current service costs (8.4). This finding aligns with the ideas of institutional filtering of evidence in the literature (3.4.2), but extends this literature by providing new empirical data and theoretical understanding in the context of the WMCA.

The conceptual framework helps to understand how the collaborative context both 'opened up' and 'closed down' the use of different types of evidence. In governance terms, the existence of powerful veto players meant that their preferences in the types of evidence use had to be carefully considered. Individual policy actors brought their own epistemic positions and preferences, and the range of actors involved in policy development in a collaboration is typically more diverse than in a single organisation. Repeated interactions between policy actors enabled sharing of epistemic positions, for example discussions of the value of evidence from people with lived experience in the mental health commission. Institutional filtering of

evidence, and norms of evidence use within collaborating institutions, influenced the production, analysis and presentation of evidence.

In summary, the conceptual framework developed in this thesis is helpful in explaining each of the three key findings in the case study.

8.8 Conclusion

The three most surprising findings from the case study have been examined in the light of the existing literature and the conceptual framework developed in this study. First, the case study data showed that evidence was often used ‘deliberatively’, supporting dialogue and debate between policy actors and developing shared understandings and policy options. The ‘deliberative’ use of evidence was particularly noted in repeated private backstage discussions between consistent groups of policy actors. This type of evidence use is rarely noted in the evidence utilisation literature, perhaps because it is often hidden in backstage settings. These findings raise intriguing questions regarding the nature and extent of the impact of the policy setting on the use of evidence in policymaking, potentially beyond the context of inter-municipal collaborations. This is an important area for future research.

Second, reflecting the importance of political and policy ‘narrative’, as widely recognised in the political science literature, the case study provided new insights on the relationship between narrative and evidence in the collaborative context. The case study identified three important roles of evidence in relation to narrative in contributing to the creation and maintenance of a regional policy narrative: promoting

the collaboration to central government; promoting the collaboration to local stakeholders; and influencing the presentation of evidence (6.4.1).

Third, the case study demonstrated how the collaborative context both ‘opened up’ the use of types of evidence which were novel to some policy actors, and also ‘closed down’ the use of some evidence which was potentially embarrassing to important stakeholders. This institutional filtering of evidence has been noted in studies of policymaking in individual government departments, but the collaborative context appears to strengthen the effect because of the wider variety of epistemic positions from diverse policy actors and the existence of powerful institutions who may be veto players.

This chapter further developed the initial conceptual framework developed from the literature review (chapter 3) into a final conceptual framework consisting of four factors: policy actors, institutions, governance and the types/characteristics of evidence itself. The final conceptual framework (figure 8.1) proved helpful in understanding and explaining the case study findings, and has potential value for future studies of evidence use in IMCs and other collaborative contexts.

9 CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the main thesis findings and their implications, and establishes the academic and policy contributions of the research. Collaboration is an important element in tackling complex policy issues, which are beyond the capacity of any single public agency (Costumato, 2021; Daley, 2009; O’Leary and Vij, 2012; Weber and Khademian, 2008). Over recent decades, there has been an increasing recognition of the need for collaboration across different sectors and different tiers of government (Bryson, Crosby and Stone, 2006; Head and Alford, 2015). At the same time, the normative expectation of the use of evidence in public policymaking has continued to grow internationally, often assuming a rational ‘Evidence-Based Policymaking’ model (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015). Policymakers face the challenge of using evidence to develop policy, in the complex context of collaborative working.

The thesis research questions concern the use of evidence in policymaking in the setting of early-stage Inter-Municipal Collaborations (IMCs). In response to pressure on local governments such as increases in the externalities of local policymaking, IMCs have become increasingly widespread throughout Europe and an important phenomena internationally (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007). The aim of this thesis is to deploy policy studies and evidence utilisation theory to enable policymakers and academics to understand how evidence is used in inter-municipal collaborations. Whilst the extant literature provides many useful explanations of how evidence is used in policymaking, it lacks an overall conceptual framework which might be

applied to collaborative contexts. The significance of the thesis is that it informs the theoretical understanding of evidence use by introducing a focus on local collaborative settings, and informs the empirical understanding of evidence use in this novel context. It also provides insights for policymakers on how the initiation and design of inter-municipal collaborations may impact on their approach to policymaking and the use of evidence. The conceptual framework developed in the thesis provides a way of framing future empirical research or theory building on evidence use in policymaking in IMC collaborative settings.

The chapter starts by establishing the responses to the research questions and reflecting on how these questions have been addressed. The following sections explain the significance and implications of the findings, assessing the contributions of the thesis to the field of evidence utilisation studies empirically, theoretically, methodologically and in terms of policy implications. Three key findings are highlighted: the unexpected but frequent category of evidence use ‘to enhance debate and dialogue’ in the case study data, new insights on how evidence is used in creating and maintaining collaborative policy narratives, and how collaborations present opportunities for the use of new types of evidence. Finally, the chapter considers the limitations of the research and questions for future research, including reflection on how data capture from participant observation could be further developed.

9.2 Responding to the Research Questions

Extensive existing research has investigated the use of evidence in policymaking, the types and characteristics of evidence used, and the explanatory factors involved.

This thesis is informed by a detailed review of the relevant literature which identified several limitations of the extant literature in addressing the research questions: understanding in detail how evidence is used in policymaking, examining evidence use locally rather than nationally, investigating evidence use in early-stage collaborative contexts, the lack of an overall conceptual framework for analysing the use of evidence in this context, and explaining how evidence is used with policy narratives.

First, the literature identifies the lack of detail in past studies regarding *how* evidence is used, due to a lack of detailed descriptive accounts (Kneale *et al.*, 2017), for example concerning the complexity of political and official policymaking (Parkhurst, Ettelt and Hawkins, 2018b). Second, existing studies provide only limited understanding of the process and politics of evidence use at *local* level. Most studies of evidence use have focused on national-level rather than local-level policy or practice (Durrant *et al.*, 2023; Verboom and Baumann, 2022), however it appears that local policymaking exhibits distinct characteristics (Boaz and Davies, 2019; Cheetham *et al.*, 2022; Kneale *et al.*, 2017). Third, there is little research concerning how evidence is used in (early stage) collaborations, although implementation research and some recent studies in specific policy areas suggest that the collaborative context may significantly influence evidence use (e.g. Purtle *et al.*, 2022). Fourth, whilst there are dozens of models explaining all or part of the process of evidence utilisation, no overarching theory has been developed and there is no overall conceptual framework which can be applied to the context of early-stage collaborations. Finally, whilst existing studies demonstrate the importance of policy narratives in policymaking, general conclusions remain cautious and the function of evidence in framing policy arguments has seldom been explored.

The first area of interest is how evidence is used in policymaking in the context of an IMC, and how this use is understood by participants in the policy process. Given the changing nature of collaborations over time (3.4.6), the thesis investigates a specific temporal stage: the early development of the case study CA and its early policy development. Therefore, the first set of research questions is:

RQ1 How is evidence used in policymaking in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How is this understood by participants?

As well as examining how evidence is used, it is important to understand the characteristics of the evidence that is used in policymaking in this context. The term evidence has been broadly defined in the thesis to capture a range of types of evidence, such as the results of systematic research and knowledge from lived experience. Hence, the second set of research questions is:

RQ2 What types of evidence are used? What are the characteristics of this evidence?

As well as the rich description generated by the first two sets of research questions, the thesis aims to deploy policy studies and evidence utilisation theory to enable policymakers and academics to understand how evidence is used in an inter-municipal collaboration. The third set of research questions is therefore:

RQ3 Why is evidence used in these ways? What factors affect how evidence is used in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How can a conceptual framework help in analysing this use?

How the research questions were addressed

Addressing the exploratory research questions required an in-depth examination of the processes, events and perspectives involved in policymaking during the early stages of developing an IMC. For example, the analysis needed to recognise the potential effects of different settings of policymaking, such as private discussions versus public debates. The thesis therefore adopted a case study design which enabled a better understanding of the complexity involved in policymaking compared to alternatives such as experimental designs (Contandriopoulos *et al.*, 2010; Liverani, Hawkins and Parkhurst, 2013; Nutley, Walter and Bland, 2002). The use of case studies in empirical studies on evidence use in policymaking is well established, for example Oliver *et al.* (2014) identified over 50 such studies. The thesis adopted a critical realist ontological position and an interpretivist epistemology, since the research questions required the researcher to understand and interpret the meanings in human behaviour, to appreciate the understandings constructed by the people involved (Neuman, 2014) (4.2).

The case study focused on the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). There were three main reasons for the selection of the WMCA as the case study (4.3). First, Combined Authorities (CAs) are an important example of inter-municipal collaborations, covering a population of over 14 million people in England by 2023. Second, the timing of the creation of the WMCA fitted well with the fieldwork for the thesis, enabling interviews to be conducted soon after the events taking place. Finally, the WMCA was chosen as the case study because of its intrinsic interest to the researcher and the pragmatic benefits of being able to negotiate access since at

the start of the PhD the researcher was employed by one of its constituent councils. The issues of positionality relating to this are discussed in section 4.9. The time period covered starts with the earliest discussions about the possibility of developing a Combined Authority (CA) in 2014 and concludes with the election of the region's first directly elected mayor in May 2017. A single case study was chosen to enable an in-depth analysis of the policymaking process.

The literature review identified key factors likely to influence evidence use in the collaborative context (3.4), leading to the development of an initial conceptual framework for the thesis (3.4.8). Analysis of policy studies theories identified five factors considered to influence policymaking processes: policy actors, institutions, networks, ideas, and context (3.4). Given the collaborative context of the thesis, the framework also incorporated a factor relating to governance (3.4.6). Finally, the framework included a factor concerning the types and characteristics of evidence itself (3.4.7). The initial conceptual framework therefore had seven explanatory factors (3.4.8). The framework was refined in the light of the case study data and further literature. Analysis of the case study data showed that for three of the seven explanatory factors in the initial framework, whilst they had demonstrable effects on evidence use, these effects were already captured by other elements of the framework, i.e. the factors overlapped (8.6). In order to develop a framework which can be used efficiently in future research, these three factors were removed (8.6), leaving the following four factors in the final framework: policy actors, institutions, governance and the types/characteristics of evidence. The final framework describes the explanatory factors, the significant attributes of each of the factors, the relationships between the factors, and their influence on the use of evidence (8.6).

In terms of the methods of data capture, evidence utilisation research has tended to make use of a somewhat limited range of methods, particularly surveys and semi-structured interviews of stakeholders such as researchers and policymakers (3.3). However, the literature review identified methodological limitations due to over reliance on such methods (3.3). In response, in addition to semi-structured participant interviews, the thesis captured data from the analysis of documentary evidence and participant observation. The case study data included semi-structured, one-hour interviews with a purposive sample of 25 elite policy actors. An interview topic guide was developed which unpicked the role of evidence by concentrating on the policy process and how policy was informed by evidence, allowing interviewees to tell their story of policymaking rather than having to conform with researcher-led frameworks to explain their use of evidence (4.5.2). The case study also analysed data from reviews of 60 documents and participation in 77 meetings (4.5). Data analysis followed a thematic analysis strategy using the Framework method (4.6). The methodology chapter provides details of the approaches adopted to assure validity and reliability, such as triangulation and member checking (4.8); to address researcher positionality (4.9); and to ensure appropriate research ethics (4.10).

The adoption of these methodological approaches brought significant benefits. For example, the analysis of documentary evidence provided the detail of participants attending key policymaking meetings and revealed that reports published by the WMCA consistently espoused a rational, instrumental explanation of the use of evidence in policy. Data from participant observation provided additional evidence, for example on the reaction of council leaders to the presentation of evidence on commuting patterns. Allowing interviewees to tell their story of policymaking provided an effective way for interviewees to reflect on the policymaking process and

reduced potential barriers to understanding their perspectives. This approach to structuring the interviews also minimised the impact of researcher assumptions and bias that a more directive set of questions around evidence use may have introduced, for example if a narrow definition of 'evidence' had been imposed. Overall, the thesis confirmed that the use of a range of data capture approaches can both facilitate effective engagement of participants and yield valuable information to support the analysis of evidence use in policymaking.

9.2.1 How evidence is used in developing policy in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations and how this is understood by participants (RQ1)

The first research questions sought to establish how evidence is used in policymaking in IMCs and how this is understood by participants. Whilst the empirical literature has increasingly documented the practice of evidence use, it has often lacked a detailed description of evidence use in local policymaking or the collaborative context. Recent studies in specific policy areas suggest that the collaborative context may affect the use of evidence in policymaking (Hyde *et al.*, 2016; Palinkas *et al.*, 2014; Purtle *et al.*, 2022). The thesis extends the extant research by focussing in detail on evidence use in an IMC. The findings suggest that whilst evidence use in IMCs in many ways resembles that reported in the literature, the collaborative setting may also introduce complexities.

The case study data reveals a range of uses of evidence in policymaking in the collaborative context. Statements published by the case study CA repeatedly and consistently espoused an instrumental, rational and direct use of evidence in policymaking in line with the dominant Evidence-Based Policymaking account

(Colebatch, 2006) (6.2). Nonetheless, the case study data from interviews and participant observations demonstrates a more complex picture. In line with published studies, evidence was used both politically and (less often) instrumentally in the case study.

The first and perhaps most surprising finding concerned **how evidence is used in backstage settings**. The case study data identifies a frequent category of evidence use that could be described as 'deliberative', 'to enhance debate and dialogue' in the terms of the typology developed by Bogenschneider, Corbett and Parrott (2019, p. 783) (6.3). This type of evidence use is not predicted by many policy theories (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019), although the important role of interaction between policymakers has been identified in previous research (3.2). For example, the knowledge utilisation account of evidence use sees policymaking as a complex social activity involving many actors and stakeholders (Sedlačko and Staroňová, 2015), in line with Hecló's conception of policymaking as 'collective puzzlement' (Hecló, 1974, p. 305). It appears from the case study that evidence played an important role in enhancing debate in the WMCA (8.4). The adoption of repeated interactions between elite policy actors in private, backstage settings led to the development of trust and relational problem-solving approaches, where evidence was often used to enhance dialogue and debate. This deliberative use of evidence is an important area for future research.

The second important finding concerns **how evidence is used in creating and maintaining narratives**. In the case study, in order to justify the creation of the CA, policy actors consciously crafted a regional narrative which highlighted risks of the region 'falling behind' economically (6.4.1). The narrative posited that the creation of

the CA and introduction of a more strategic and inter-council approach would enhance regional economic development. The process of narrative development utilised a range of evidence, such as comparative statistics on transport investment (6.4.1). Later, the presentation of evidence was sometimes influenced by the narrative, for example by highlighting city-level travel-to-work data rather than regional-level data when the former better supported the regional narrative (6.4.1). The importance of narrative is widely recognised in the political science literature in framing arguments (Entman, 1993) and providing a context for evidence use (Lowndes, 2016; Schlauffer, 2018), although the relationship between evidence and framing has rarely been investigated (Stucki and Sager, 2018). The case study explains the detailed relationship between evidence and narrative by identifying the relationship of evidence and narrative in the case study in promoting the collaboration to central government, promoting the collaboration to local stakeholders, and influencing the presentation of evidence (6.4.1).

In summary, in many areas the case study findings align with existing literature. This section highlights two particularly interesting results in relation to the research questions. First, the case study reveals that in backstage policy discussions there was a frequent use of evidence to enhance dialogue and debate, which is seldom reported in previous studies but aligns with elements of the Knowledge Utilisation account. Second, the case study demonstrates how the development of a shared policy narrative interacted with the use of evidence in the collaborative context. Evidence was used in developing this narrative, and later the presentation of evidence was influenced by the narrative. This finding builds on literature around the role of narrative in policymaking, enhancing our understanding of the relationship between policy narrative and evidence in the collaborative setting.

9.2.2 The types and characteristics of evidence that are used in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations (RQ2)

The second set of research questions investigated the types and characteristics of evidence used in IMCs, identifying the types of evidence viewed by policymakers as useful and valuable contributors to the policymaking process in this setting. The thesis purposively adopts a wide definition of the term ‘evidence’ to explore participants’ own understandings. The thesis documents in detail the specific evidence utilised in the case study, to illuminate the range of evidence used and facilitating future comparative research (7.2). The case study identifies a wide range of different types of evidence used in policymaking, with some types prevalent across all the policy areas examined and others appearing in only one policy area (7.2). The types of evidence include economic analysis, the results of public consultation exercises, and evidence embodied in individuals, such as people with lived experience of mental illness.

The case study demonstrates **opportunities for the use of new types of evidence through collaboration**. The collaborative setting affected the types of evidence considered by policymakers. Types of evidence which were novel to some actors were introduced to the policy process because they were valued by others, for example the use of evidence from lived experience was highly valued by mental health professionals (8.3). On the other hand, evidence which might have proved challenging to one or more of the organisations involved was sometimes avoided or ignored (8.3). The case study suggests that the collaborative setting both ‘opens up’ and ‘closes down’ the types of evidence captured and used in policymaking. The

types of evidence used to assess and justify policy proposals were tailored to the epistemic positions of key stakeholders, such as potential funders and statutory authorisers of the CA (6.4.3). In describing this phenomenon, the thesis adopts the concept of ‘institutional filtering’ (Smith, 2013b, p. 14). Smith demonstrated that policymaking institutions act as filters for ideas, encouraging the influence of ideas fitting with institutionalised paradigms, while limiting the influence of ideas that challenged these paradigms. This finding also aligns with recent research in specific policy areas (Hyde *et al.*, 2016; Palinkas *et al.*, 2014; Purtle *et al.*, 2022) suggesting that collaboration opens up the use of evidence.

Turning to the characteristics of evidence which were found useful by policymakers, extensive research has identified a fairly consistent set of barriers and facilitators for evidence use in policymaking. This includes the characteristics of the evidence involved, such as it being seen as relevant, timely and concisely presented (3.2), and the case study findings here align with the existing research. Whilst the ‘quality’ of evidence is viewed as crucial in the Evidence-Based Policymaking account, which assesses quality primarily in terms of study design and implementation (3.2), the case study finds that policymakers tended to test the quality of evidence in terms of whether they found its conclusions realistic (such as the predictions of economic models in developing the Strategic Economic Plan) or appeared to contradict established policy preferences (such as the functional economic market area analysis regarding membership of the WMCA) (7.3).

In summary, the case study demonstrates that the collaborative context can both ‘open up’ and ‘close down’ the types of evidence used in policymaking. A variety of epistemic positions and institutional norms were brought into the policymaking

process, opening up consideration of a diverse range of evidence. At the same time, powerful institutions were able to ‘filter’ what evidence was available and used in this process. This builds on literature around the institutional filtering of evidence and the effect of collaboration in ‘opening up’ the use of additional types of evidence.

9.2.3 Why evidence is used in these ways: Factors affecting how evidence is used in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations (RQ3)

The final research questions moved from the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of evidence use to investigate why evidence is used in these ways in inter-municipal collaborations: “Why is evidence used in these ways? What factors affect how evidence is used in early-stage inter-municipal collaborations? How can a conceptual framework help in analysing this use?” The thesis identified and analysed key factors which influenced evidence use in this context using the conceptual framework developed in the thesis (8.6).

The case study shows that policy actors, and how they collectively approached policy issues, had important effects on the use of evidence in policymaking (8.2). The collaborative environment brought together actors with varied capabilities and epistemic positions through repeated interactions in establishing the CA and developing its policy positions (8.2). As expected from the emerging literature on cultures of evidence use (e.g. Lorenc *et al.*, 2014; Piddington, MacKillop and Downe, 2024), the range of capabilities and epistemic positions varied more between organisations and professions than within a single organisation or profession. The case study shows the process of establishing the CA and its policy proposals brought together policymakers with these varying epistemic positions who developed

inter-personal relationships through an intense policymaking process involving repeated meetings, in a collaborative context which lacked formal hierarchy to establish which epistemic positions dominated (8.3). The case study also shows that the degree of critical challenge of the quality of evidence was low in some policy areas, partly because participants 'self-censored' to avoid endangering the overall collaborative endeavour of creating the WMCA (7.3). The findings suggest that, in collaborative settings, the diversity of policy actors' capabilities and epistemic positions, and their development of relationships, may result in a relatively wide range of evidence being used in policymaking, but this also risks limiting critical challenge of the quality of evidence.

The case study identifies institutional influences on the use of evidence in policymaking. The thesis adopts the definition of an institution as 'an enduring collection of rules and organised practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and changing external circumstances' (Olsen, 2007, p. 3). The case study shows that institutions affected evidence use through multiple mechanisms including historic legacies, institutional norms, and organisational design (8.3). Historic legacies influenced the collaborative infrastructure for evidence generation and analysis, and the collective narratives and the norms of behaviour which were inherited by the nascent CA. The historic antipathy between councils in the West Midlands meant that little collaborative research infrastructure was available (5.5). Institutional norms influenced the CA's policy agenda and the approach to producing and presenting evidence (8.3). Key aspects of organisational design, such as the presence of multiple veto players (8.4) and reliance on authorisation by central government, magnified these institutional effects (8.3). As a newly forming collaboration

dependent on authorisation by central government, the case study CA experienced pressures for isomorphic change in line with an existing CA (Greater Manchester) that was viewed as 'successful' by central government and local actors (8.3). These findings confirm and extend existing research which found that institutional norms can suppress or reject information that conflicts with organisational premises (3.4.2). The case study findings suggest that, in collaborative settings, institutional influences on evidence use may be contradictory, for example they can both broaden and constrain the types of evidence used in policymaking.

The case study suggests that governance affected how evidence was used in the nascent CA (8.4). The adoption of an informal governance approach in developing the CA led to most early policymaking discussions taking place in private, backstage settings (8.4). The existence of veto players gave some actors and organisations strong influence on the availability and use of different types of evidence (8.4). Surprisingly, evidence was often used to enhance debate and dialogue between local policymakers, helping to develop shared understandings and collaborative policy proposals (8.4). The literature on partnerships suggests that informal approaches to governance are frequently identified in the early stage of establishing new multi-organisational partnerships. Research on combined authorities has identified the frequent use of informal governance approaches in the negotiation of Devolution Agreements (2.5.3). The case study findings suggest that, in collaborative settings, the adoption of informal governance approaches involving repeated private meetings of policy actors may facilitate the deliberative use of evidence, enhancing dialogue and debate. This is an important subject for future research.

The case study also identifies important interactions between the above factors – for example, historic institutional legacies and norms influenced the forms of governance adopted in the CA, and policy actors were able to undertake effective collaborative policymaking despite historical institutional constraints on collaborative working across the councils.

In summary, the thesis develops a conceptual framework which identifies the key factors explaining how evidence was used in early stage WMCA: policy actors, institutions, governance, and the types/characteristics of evidence itself. This framework can be applied in future research on evidence use in the collaborative context.

9.3 The contributions of the thesis

The thesis makes significant and original empirical, theoretical, methodological and policy contributions to the field of evidence utilisation studies. These contributions are now considered in turn.

Empirical contributions

The empirical findings of this thesis provide a new understanding of the use of evidence in policymaking in inter-municipal collaborations. The thesis has started to address the main empirical limitations identified in the literature: detailed analysis of the policymaking process; the use of evidence in local-level policymaking; evidence use in collaborative contexts, specifically in early-stage IMCs; and analysis of how evidence is used to construct and communicate policy narratives. (3.3).

The thesis presents a detailed account of how evidence was used in the policy process in the case study CA. The CA published multiple statements on its use of evidence use, consistently presenting a direct, instrumental use of evidence (6.2), in line with the Evidence-Based Policymaking account (3.2). However, the evidence utilisation literature suggests that the reality of evidence use in policymaking is more often 'political' rather than instrumental, and the detailed case study data revealed a more complex picture. As expected from the empirical literature, the case study identifies few cases of evidence use which were direct and instrumental (6.4.4) and a larger number of cases of the political use of evidence to support pre-existing policy positions and to legitimise the CA policy development process (6.4.3). Most significantly, the thesis identifies a deliberative use of evidence, to enhance dialogue and debate between policymakers (6.3), which is seldom seen in the literature.

The case study highlights that the collaborative context influenced how evidence was used in several important ways. First, the CA adopted informal governance arrangements involving backstage policymaking and this appeared to enable the use of evidence **to enhance debate and dialogue**, a use that is rarely noted in the literature (8.4). Second, the development of a shared collaborative regional **narrative** was found to be particularly important in establishing the legitimacy of the case study CA; the development of the narrative was informed by evidence, and subsequently evidence was tested for its alignment with the narrative (6.4.1). Third, the collaborative setting was associated with a broad range of epistemic positions through the diversity of policy actors and institutions engaged in policymaking. This both led to the use of a **wide range of types of evidence**, some of which were novel to some policy actors, and at the same time 'closed down' consideration of some types of evidence (8.2-8.3).

Theoretical contributions

The thesis provides significant theoretical insight into evidence utilisation in the collaborative context. This includes new insights into how evidence is used backstage in collaborative settings, the relationship between evidence use and narratives, and how collaboration opens up opportunities for the use of new types of evidence.

Theoretically, the thesis particularly builds on studies examining the impact of policymakers adopting an informal approach to governance (e.g. Ayres, 2016; Jitske van Popering-Verkerk and van Buuren, 2016) and examining the use of evidence in the context of relationships between policymakers (e.g. Greenhalgh and Russell, 2006), specifically its function to enhance debate and dialogue (Bogenschneider, Day and Parrott, 2019). Whilst the extant literature provides many useful explanations of how evidence is used in policymaking, it lacks an overall conceptual framework which might be applied to collaborative institutional and political contexts.

The thesis provides a conceptual framework on the use of evidence in inter-municipal collaborations, which identified explanatory factors (actors, institutions, governance, and the types and characteristics of evidence) that are particularly relevant to the collaborative context. The framework provides a clear working definition and identifies the key attributes of each factor concerning of how evidence is used in inter-municipal collaborations (8.6), a figure illustrating the key factors and attributes and the relationships between them (figure 8.1) and a list of key attributes (table 8.1). The final conceptual framework can inform the design of future empirical research or theory building relating to evidence use in policymaking in collaborative settings. The framework has potential to expand the understanding of evidence use

in these settings. A natural progression of the thesis is to test the framework in future comparative and longitudinal case studies of evidence use in other collaborations.

Methodological contributions

Methodologically, the literature suggests that evidence utilisation research often makes extensive use of interviews and surveys of researchers and policymakers, whilst recognising that a more diverse range of data capture methods could reveal additional insights (3.3). This thesis adopted a range of research methods in response to these findings (4.5). First, the thesis adopted a qualitative case study design which enabled a detailed understanding of the complexity involved in policymaking and the perceptions of participants. Second, the interview topic guide encouraged participants to ‘tell their story’ of policymaking in the inter-municipal collaboration in order to develop an understanding of policy actors’ activities, context and influences. Third, whilst still relying extensively on semi-structured elite interviews, the thesis supplemented evidence from interviews with methods such as documentary analysis which provided additional insights into evidence use and brought significant benefits to the thesis. For example, documentary analysis of published reports showed the degree to which these public statements espoused a rational, instrumental explanation of the use of evidence in policy. Encouraging interviewees to ‘tell their story’ of policymaking minimised the impact of researcher assumptions and bias that a more directive set of questions around evidence use may have introduced, for example if a narrow definition of ‘evidence’ had been imposed and participants asked to give examples of its use in policymaking. Overall, the experience from the thesis supports calls for evidence utilisation studies to adopt

a range of data capture approaches since these can both facilitate effective engagement of participants and yield valuable information to support the analysis of evidence use in policymaking.

Policy contributions

From a policy perspective, the thesis provides empirically based recommendations for understanding and influencing the use of evidence in collaborative policymaking. These findings complement existing studies of CA design and governance (e.g. Hickman and While, 2017; Murphie, 2019; Shutt and Liddle, 2019). The findings will be of interest to policymakers engaged in the development of inter-municipal collaborations, by providing fresh insights on how the identified factors may impact on the collaboration's use of evidence in policymaking.

There are several implications for CA members and officers. First, decisions on how policymakers meet may influence the process of policymaking and evidence use. Repeated private meetings of the same elite group(s) are likely to help in building trust between these actors and in developing shared understanding and policy positions (8.2). Adopting an informal approach to governance can facilitate creative problem solving and deliberative evidence use, although participants should be aware that the use of evidence is likely to become more political later when policymaking transitions to a more formal and public setting. Policymakers should also recognise that there is a risk of reduced challenge of evidence and policy options in private, informal collaborative settings, and may wish to take actions to mitigate this risk such as adopting "devil's advocate" examinations (3.4.1). The adoption of informal governance approaches may also reduce the engagement of

wider stakeholders in the policymaking process, with potential implications for the formal approval of proposals and their implementation.

A second implication for CA members and officers is the value of recognising that institutional effects on evidence use in collaborations may include (helpful or unhelpful) historic legacies (such as collaborative research infrastructure) (8.3), institutional filtering of evidence (8.3), organisational design issues such as the creation of veto players (8.4) and pressures to adopt approaches observed in previously created collaborations which are viewed by influential stakeholders as successful (8.3). Some of these may be open to influence by local policy actors. For example, in the case study institutional histories of antagonistic relations between local partners were mitigated by the development of new more trusting relationships between elite policy actors (8.2). Policymakers may also find it helpful to anticipate that in collaborative settings they may encounter a wider range of types of evidence than in their 'home' organisation or profession, and that this evidence may be used differently in backstage collaborative settings – for example more deliberatively or less politically. By being conscious of the potential for institutional filtering of evidence, policy actors could choose to explore types of evidence which they would not usually use.

The findings also have implications for central government in developing IMCs. Central government may be an influential stakeholder with regard to development of IMCs, for example due to their roles in authorisation and funding. In setting the 'ground rules' for collaborations, they indirectly influence how evidence is used. For example, if collaborations are given sufficient time to develop policy, this may enable more creative and engaged policymaking approaches and consideration of a wider

range of evidence. Conversely, imposing tight deadlines is likely to limit the range of evidence considered and restrict the policy options explored by collaborations.

Central government may choose whether to encourage or discourage the use of particular types of evidence, perhaps recognising that their instinctive epistemic positions may not necessarily be optimal in addressing every policy issue faced by inter-municipal collaborations.

9.4 Limitations and questions for future research.

This section considers the limitations of the thesis and suggests areas for future research. The issues relating to the adoption of a single case study method are considered first, together with the approaches used to assure validity and reliability in the research. The researcher's positionality is considered next, recognising both the value of familiarity and access, and the risks of subjectivity and bias. The researcher then reflects on the use of data from informal records of meetings, and the scope for generating more systematic data from observation in future projects. Next, the section considers the complexities around the meaning of 'evidence' and observing 'evidence use'. Recognising the increasing importance of the collaborative context in policymaking, the section suggests further research to refine the conceptual framework, examine collaborations at different stages of development, and more directly assess policy actors' perceptions of evidence use.

There are potential disadvantages and issues in adopting a case study method, particularly relating to generalisation and ensuring appropriate rigour. Given the qualitative and case-specific nature of this thesis, it is not possible to generalise these findings to other contexts. However, the thesis provides building blocks for

future comparative research and the conceptual framework developed through the thesis can be used in future research to understand evidence use in different collaborative settings, leading to further refinement of the framework itself (8.7). The thesis aims to develop ‘user generalisability’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2009, p. 256), reflecting the specific context but which others may find relevant to their situations, and ‘analytic generalisation’ (Yin, 2017, p. 39), developing generalisable findings based on advancing theoretical concepts from existing literature and the case study findings. A number of approaches were adopted to ensure that the analysis was rigorous by addressing issues of internal validity (through triangulation of sources, testing the validity of initial findings with participants, and reflecting on the positionality of the researcher), reliability (through triangulation and reflection) and external validity (4.8).

There were technical limitations to this research, regarding generalisation (discussed above), scope and timescale. The scope of the research as a single case study design was limited. Future studies investigating comparative cases and augmenting the qualitative analysis with wider survey data capture, would provide useful additional data to test and revise the conclusions and the conceptual framework.

Regarding timescale, this study offers a snapshot of a dynamic situation.

Longitudinal studies of research use in inter-municipal collaborations could identify shifts in how evidence is used at different stages of organisational development.

The researcher’s role as a senior officer in one of the constituent councils in the case study CA gave opportunities to access meetings and interviews which provided rich data for the thesis. The literature identifies a number of potential advantages and complications of the effect of insider status on researcher positionality. Potential

advantages include knowledge, such as familiarity with the research environment and participants; interaction, whereby familiarity enables the researcher to know how to approach participants and to avoid stereotyping; and easier access to participants (Greene, 2014). Potential complications of insider status include social roles constraining the researcher role and compromising professional ethics (Chavez, 2008); subjectivity, due to over-familiarity with the research subject leading to assumptions based on prior knowledge; and bias (Greene, 2014). The researcher adopted a reflexive approach and various strategies to manage these risks, such as prolonged engagement, member checking and triangulation of data sources (4.9). On balance, the researcher found the insider status helpful in terms of interpretation, access to participants and building rapport with them.

One aspect of the researcher's positionality was the access their professional role provided to confidential discussions regarding the nascent combined authority. When these meetings took place, the researcher was not aware of the potential value of this information to the thesis (which had not yet been developed). The methodology chapter discusses the resulting issues in terms of the lack of systematic observation linked to the research questions and potential ethical issues around consent, and how these issues were addressed in reporting the data (4.5.3). On reflection, the researcher felt that earlier identification and planning of the thesis fieldwork could have enabled both participant consent to be sought and systematic observations to be undertaken. Adopting earlier planning of fieldwork would provide useful additional research data in future studies through more systematic approaches to participant observation.

The thesis highlighted the conceptual complexities surrounding the meaning of the term 'evidence' and the fact that evidence 'use' is an elusive, rarely directly observable phenomenon which is seen differently depending on the perspectives brought to it (Gitomer and Crouse, 2019; Neilson, 2001; Rich, 1997; Webber, 1991; Weiss, 1991). The adoption of a broad definition of 'evidence' and 'use' (Blum and Pattyn, 2022) proved helpful in capturing the perceptions of interviewees, many of whom demonstrated a similarly broad conceptualisation of the terms. There are also significant difficulties in applying typologies of evidence use empirically. First, it is not possible directly to access the cognitive processes of policymakers to assign a specific incident of evidence use to a category of the typology; the researcher must interpret this based on the information participants provide (3.2.1). Second, typologies in the social world often fail to meet the standard criteria of scientific typologies (3.2.1).

Government policy in the UK, Europe and internationally suggests that further collaborations will continue to be established in future, and so future research is needed to capture the approach to policymaking and evidence use in these settings. A natural progression of this thesis is to analyse the use of evidence in other inter-municipal collaborations in the UK and internationally. Interviews in the later stages of fieldwork for this thesis suggested that (personal and institutional) relationships in the case study CA were already shifting as the WMCA became more formally established. Future research could explore evidence use in later stages in the development of such collaborations through longitudinal and comparative research designs using the conceptual framework created in this thesis. This would enable the conceptual framework to be further refined, testing the identified factors and relationships (and the linkages between them) in additional case studies and

potentially identifying additional important factors. As existing inter-municipal collaborations age and develop, research can capture how their changing governance, membership, capacity, etc. impacts on the approach to policymaking and evidence use. Further case studies in these areas would address the limitations around the scope and timescales of the current thesis identified above.

Considerably more work is required to investigate whether different types of evidence are influenced in different ways by the factors identified in the conceptual framework. For example, future research could investigate whether evidence developed at the local level (such as public consultation or evidence from service users) may be considered by policymakers in collaborations as more useable than more generalised evidence (such as systematic reviews of international randomised controlled trials). This could adopt a policy tracing methodology alongside the interpretative methods used in this thesis. Research could also be designed to seek more directly an understanding of policy actors' perceptions of the different types of 'use' – perhaps through contemporaneous policy actor interviews or focus groups alongside the policymaking process incorporating a typology of evidence use, or utilising ethnographic methods.

9.5 Conclusion

Discourses on the use of evidence in policymaking have become prevalent in the UK, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Netherlands and across OECD countries since the 1990s. At the same time, governments have increasingly adopted approaches to tackle complex policy issues which involve collaboration across different sectors and different tiers of government. In response to global

political and economic factors, governments in most economically developed countries have decentralised certain central government roles, undertaken territorial reform (merging municipalities) and encouraged inter-municipal collaboration. Inter-municipal collaborative arrangements are now common throughout Europe and internationally. Policymakers are therefore faced with expectations to develop evidence-informed policy in complex new collaborative settings.

This thesis enables policymakers and academics better to understand the nuances of evidence use in this increasingly important context. Recognising the lack of an existing conceptual framework which could be applied to collaborative contexts, the thesis has developed a key building block for future empirical research and theory building relating to evidence use in policymaking in such settings. The final conceptual framework analyses the impact of policy actors, approaches to governance, institutional factors and the characteristics of evidence itself on the use of evidence in this context.

The three key findings of the thesis provide enhanced understanding of the use of evidence in policymaking in inter-municipal collaborations, giving a new level of detail in empirical data and new theoretical explanations. The thesis highlights what happens to the use of evidence in the collaborative context, when diverse actors and institutions work together at the local level across a range of policy areas. As expected from the empirical literature, evidence was often used to ‘justify a position’ (a ‘political’ use of evidence). More interestingly, the case study suggests evidence was also often used to ‘enhance dialogue and debate’, a type of evidence use which is rarely noted in the literature. This appears to be associated with backstage policymaking under the informal governance arrangements which have been

prevalent in developing Combined Authorities. Evidence interacted with the development and maintenance of a collaborative policy narrative in important ways. In addition, the collaborative context both ‘opened up’ and ‘closed down’ the types of evidence used in policymaking.

From a policy perspective, the thesis provides empirically based recommendations for influencing the use of evidence in collaborative policymaking. The findings will be of interest to local and national policymakers (in the UK and internationally) engaged in the development of inter-municipal collaborations, by providing fresh insights on how the identified factors may impact on the collaboration’s use of evidence in policymaking.

At the start of this PhD, the researcher wanted to understand how the move to collaborative arrangements affects the use of evidence in public policy. The evidence from this thesis suggests that collaborations matter in terms of evidence use. Collaborations bring together diverse actors, institutions and governance approaches, which affects how evidence is used. Much of this can be positive – bringing new openness to different types of evidence and enhancing debate and dialogue in policymaking. There are also more troubling aspects, such as the lack of citizen engagement in informal governance and the way pressures around developing a collaboration can inhibit critical challenge. By being aware of these potential impacts in developing collaborations, policymakers may be able to make choices which support more effective evidence use and collaborative policymaking in future.

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11 APPENDICES

11.1 List of documents analysed

			Thematic area			
Title	Author	Year	Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
Public documents relating to the Combined Authority						
Birmingham and Black Country agree combined authority in historic deal	WM Councils	2014	1	1		
Launch Statement: Growing the UK Economy through a Midlands Engine	WMCA	2015	1	1	1	1
Summary of engagement analysis on proposals for a West Midlands Combined Authority	WMCA	2015	1	1		
West Midlands Functional Economic Market Area Study: Headline Findings	WM Councils	2015	1	1		1
West Midlands Functional Economic Market Area Study	WMCA	2015	1	1		1
West Midlands authorities' statutory governance review	WM Councils	2015	1	1		
Scheme for the establishment of a Combined Authority for the West Midlands	WMCA	2015	1	1		
West Midlands Combined Authority Devolution Agreement	HM TREASURY	2015	1	1		
West Midlands Combined Authority Scheme for the Establishment of a Mayoral WMCA Consultation Engagement Plan	WMCA	2015	1	1		
Summary of consultation analysis on proposals for a West Midlands Combined Authority	WMCA	2016	1	1		

Title	Author	Year	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
Summary of Coventry City Council's Engagement and Consultation Activities on Proposals for a West Midlands Combined Authority	Coventry City Council	2016	1	1		
The West Midlands Combined Authority Order 2016 No 653	HM GOVERNMENT	2016	1	1		
Implementing the Devolution Agreement - Provision for Mayoral West Midlands Combined Authority	WM Councils	2016	1	1		
Summary of Consultation Responses: Functions required to deliver the Devolution Agreement in the West Midlands	WMCA	2016	1	1		
The West Midlands Combined Authority (Election of Mayor) Order 2016	HM GOVERNMENT	2016	1	1		
Strategic Economic Plan. Marking our mark.....The West Midlands, the best region in the UK to do business	WMCA	2016	1	1		1
WMCA Strategic Economic Plan Technical Appendices: Top Strategic Companies.	WMCA	2016	1			1
WMCA Strategic Economic Plan Technical Appendices: Sectors	WMCA	2016	1			1
WMCA Strategic Economic Plan Technical Appendices: Skills	WMCA	2016	1			1
WMCA Strategic Economic Plan Technical Appendix: Vision Setting	WMCA	2016	1	1		1
The West Midlands Mental Health Commission Citizens Jury	WMCA / Shared Future	2016	1		1	
Instruments drawn to the special attention of the House: West Midlands Combined Authority Order 2016	Secondary Legislation	2016	1	1		

Title	Author	Year	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
	Scrutiny Committee					
The West Midlands Combined Authority Order 2016	DCLG	2016	1	1		
The West Midlands Combined Authority (Election of Mayor) Order 2016	DCLG	2016	1	1		
Thrive West Midlands: An Action Plan to drive better mental health and wellbeing in the West Midlands	Sir Norman Lamb WMCA	2017	1			
Mental Health in the West Midlands Combined Authority: A report for the West Midlands Mental Health Commission	Newbigging, K. and Parsonage, M	2017	1		1	
Constitution of the West Midlands Combined Authority	WMCA	2017	1	1		
West Midlands Combined Authority: A second Devolution Agreement to promote growth	HM TREASURY	2017	1			
Investment and Spending	WMCA	2017	1			
West Midlands Land Commission: Final Report to the West Midlands Combined Authority Board	WMCA	2017	1			
Administrative documents						
The way forward: an independent review of the governance and organisational capabilities of Birmingham City Council	Sir Bob Kerslake, DCLG	2014				
Agenda and minutes, Cabinet - Thursday, 28th May, 2015	Coventry City Council	2015	1	1		
Agenda and minutes, Cabinet - Thursday, 28th May, 2015	Coventry City Council	2015	1	1		
Annual Review and Group Accounts for Board	WMCA	2016	1	1		
West Midlands Combined Authority Board Annual General Meeting	WMCA	2016	1	1		1

Title	Author	Year	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
Update on the West Midlands Combined Authority and the wider devolution agenda since September 2015	Warwickshire County Council	2016	1	1		
Councillor and LEP Governance Arrangements item 2.4a at the West Midlands Combined Authority Board Annual General Meeting	WMCA	2016	1	1		
WMCA Board Minutes (monthly)	WMCA	2017	1	1		1
WMCA Policy Research Plan (23 June 2017)	WMCA	2017	1	1		
WMCA Public Service Review Board Minutes (Quarterly)	WMCA	2017	1	1	1	
Statement of Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2017	WMCA	2017	1	1		
WMCA Research Evidence Base Library	WMCA	2018	1		1	1
West Midlands Mental Health Commission Update	WMCA	2018	1		1	
Review of the Annual Plan 2019 - 2020	WMCA	2020	1	1		1
Media and journal articles						
Press and media reports referencing the combined authority, 2014 to 2016	Nexus database	2014-6	1	1		
'Super council' plan for West Midlands	BBC	2014	1	1		
Birmingham and Black Country agree combined authority in historic deal	Birmingham Live	2014	1	1		
Norman Lamb MP announced as chair of mental health commission for the West Midlands Combined Authority.	WMCA	2015	1		1	
West Midlands Combined Authority Consultation– Mayoral WMCA Functions Scheme: Have your say here!	WMCA	2016	1	1		
West Midlands Land Commission launched to help unlock sites for development.	WMCA	2016	1			

Title	Author	Year	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
The West Midlands Mental Health Commission Citizens Jury	WMCA	2016	1		1	
Mental health commission heads to Westminster.	WMCA	2016	1		1	
New senior management roles at West Midlands Combined Authority	WMCA	2017	1	1		

11.2 List of interviewees

Category	Interview labels	Organisation / role (ordered by date of interview, not label)	Areas of focus in the interview				Date
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health Comm	Strategic Economic Plan	
Council chief executives	CX 1-7	Sandwell Council	✓	✓			Oct-18
		Wolverhampton Council	✓	✓			Oct-18
		Birmingham City Council	✓	✓			Oct-18
		Coventry City Council	✓	✓			Oct-18
		Walsall Council	✓	✓			Oct-18
		Dudley Council	✓	✓	✓		Feb-19
		Solihull Council	✓	✓			Mar-19
Council Leaders	LEAD 1-7	Birmingham City Council	✓	✓			Oct-18
		Coventry City Council	✓	✓		✓	Oct-18
		Solihull Council	✓	✓			Mar-19
		Wolverhampton Council	✓	✓			Aug-19
Local Enterprise Partnerships		Chair, Greater Birmingham & Solihull LEP	✓	✓		✓	Feb-19
		Chair, Coventry and Warwickshire LEP	✓	✓		✓	Feb-19
Policy Commissions		Chair, Mental Health Commission			✓		Mar-19
Officers	POL 1-5	Birmingham City Council	✓	✓			Jun-18
		Wolverhampton Council				✓	Oct-18
		Mental Health Commission			✓		Nov-18
		Birmingham City Council	✓	✓			Dec-18
		Mental Health Commission			✓		Dec-18
Consultants	CON 1-6	Black Country Consortium	✓	✓		✓	Nov-17
		KPMG	✓	✓			Dec-17
		University of Birmingham			✓		Jan-18
		Metro Dynamics (2)	✓	✓		✓	May-18
		Metro Dynamics (2)	✓	✓		✓	Jun-18
		Legal	✓	✓			Oct-18

11.3 Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

The use of “evidence” in developing policy in the WMCA Participant Information Sheet

Description of the research

The research is supported by Birmingham City Council and forms part of a PhD study carried out by a part-time postgraduate student at the University of Birmingham.

The objectives of this research are to explore:

- How is combined authority policy being developed?
- In what ways has (various kinds of) “evidence” been used in the development of combined authority policy?
- What are the factors affecting the use of evidence?

Invitation to participate

You are invited to participate through an interview, group interview and/or provision of further documentation. The interviews typically last around 1 hour and will be recorded unless you request otherwise.

Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. In particular, you are free to withdraw after the interview at any point before end December 2018.

Please seek further clarification from the researcher if there is anything which they do not understand prior to participating.

Your data will be treated as confidential and held by the researcher. Reporting will be on “Chatham House” principles, with any quotations being anonymous, and where necessary details changed to protect anonymity. In line with the University of Birmingham’s Code of Practice for Research, information will be held securely for up to ten years and then destroyed.

A report of the findings of the interviews will be provided within six months of the final interviews to relevant officers, and (once amended after consideration of any further feedback) may be published. The interviews will inform a further report on the use of research, intelligence and transformation in the WMCA and proposals for future arrangements.

Contact details

Academic supervisor: Professor Vivien Lowndes,
email [REDACTED]

Post graduate research: Jason Lowther
email [REDACTED]

 UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM	The use of “evidence” in developing policy in the WMCA Permission Form

The purpose of this form is to ensure participants understand why they have been invited to take part in the research, and what will happen to the information they provide.

- **Why are we doing the research?** To capture views and information on the use of “evidence” in developing policy in the combined authority.
- **What will happen with the results?** The results will be used to inform analysis of current activities and attitudes, and proposals for future arrangements.
- **Audio recording:** This discussion will be recorded to make sure we have an accurate record. The recording will be shared with a transcription company who will type this up. It will not be shared with anyone else outside the Research Team.
- **Confidentiality:** This research is confidential on “Chatham House” principles. Findings used in research reports will be anonymous; names will not be included.
- **Right to withdraw:** Participation is voluntary. Once you have taken part in this discussion you will be able to withdraw your comments from the research, without providing any specific reason. In particular, you are free to withdraw after the interview at any point before end December 2018. Your comments would not then be taken into consideration in the review.
- **Data retention:** In line with the University of Birmingham’s Code of Practice for Research, information, including audio recordings and notes discussions, will be held securely for up to ten years and then destroyed.
- **Report:** An interview research findings report will be distributed to all participants within six months of the final interviews taking place.
- **Complaints process:** If you have concerns about the research, please contact Prof Vivien Lowndes by emailing v.b.lowndes@bham.ac.uk

Permission

I give my permission to take part in this discussion. I understand the purpose of the research and agree the discussion can be recorded.

Name (Print):

Signature:

Date:

More Information

If you have any questions about the research, please contact:

Jason Lowther, Post-Graduate Researcher, [REDACTED]

Please send your signed copy of this permission form to

[REDACTED] **and keep a spare blank copy for yourself.**

11.4 Interview topic guide

Introductions

- Reminder of research and researcher role
- Consent to interview and audio recording

Individual's role and involvement with WMCA

- What is your current role?
- What has been your involvement with the development of the Combined Authority?
- Please describe how the WMCA came about, and the process of formation?
- Which WMCA policy areas were you involved with?
(prompts – overall process, development of CA itself, Strategic Economic Plan, Mental Health)

Development of specific example policies (for each of the policy areas relevant to this interviewee)

- Please describe how the WMCA policy was developed in xxx (policy area)?

Selective potential prompts

- a. **Why, when, how** and **where** was xxx policy developed?
 - b. **Who** was involved in the policy development process? How did that affect the process and the use of evidence?
 - c. What **types** of evidence were considered in developing this policy?
 - d. **How** was this evidence identified / generated / brought into the policymaking process?
 - e. How and when was the evidence **used**? Why do you think this approach was adopted?
 - f. What made the evidence **useful** in this context?
 - g. What were the impacts of different ways of **thinking** about evidence?
 - h. Did the nature of the **CA** and partnership working impact on how policy was made?
 - i. Was the **quality** of the evidence used appropriate? [How] was this assessed?
 - j. What were the important **contexts** of policymaking here (e.g. politics, culture, economics)? How did these contexts affect the use of (different types of) evidence?
 - k. **Why** do you think evidence used in these ways?
 - l. **Any other comments** on the use of evidence in policymaking?
 - m. [How] did **actors** in different organisations/professions make use of evidence?
 - n. [How] did the nature of **partnership** working impact on how evidence was used?
- Are there other staff or members of the CA you feel I should speak to on these topics?

11.5 List of meetings attended

Date	Meeting	Participants	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
3/11/14	BCC Leader's Update	Leader, Deputy Leader, chief executive, Director of Finance, Assistant Director (Strategy), Head of Cabinet Office, Head of Communications	1	1		
18/12/14	BCC Leader's Update	As for 3/11/14	1	1		
5/1/15	BCC Leader's Update	As for 3/11/14	1	1		
2/2/15	BCC Leader's Update	As for 3/11/14	1	1		
9/2/15	CA working group	Met council chief executives / officers	1	1		
16/3/15	BCC Leader's Update	As for 3/11/14	1	1		
16/3/15	CA working group	Council officers from met councils	1	1		
30/3/15	BCC Leader's Update	As for 3/11/14	1	1		
9/4/15	BCC Executive Management Team	BCC cabinet and chief officers	1	1		
15/4/15	CA working group	Council officers from met councils	1	1		
20/4/15	CA "balance" group	Council officers from met councils	1	1		1
22/5/15	CA working group	Council officers from met councils + partners	1	1		1
26/5/15	BCC CA working group	BCC chief executive + officers	1	1		
2/6/15	CA working group	Council officers from met councils	1	1		1
5/6/15	CA working group	Council officers from met councils	1	1		1

Date	Meeting	Participants	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
5/6/15	CA leaders' group	Council leaders and officers from met councils	1	1		1
9/6/15	CA "balance" working group	Council officers from met councils	1	1		
15/6/16	CA working group	Council officers from met councils	1	1		1
24/7/15	CA working group	Council officers from met councils	1	1		1
3/8/15	Public Service Reform (PSR) Board	Council officers and partners	1		1	
9/9/15	PSR Board	Council officers and partners	1		1	
28/9/15	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
2/11/15	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
10/12/15	PSR Board	Council officers and partners	1		1	
11/1/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
21/1/16	CA working group	Council officers and partners	1	1	1	1
9/2/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
16/2/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
23/2/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
8/3/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
15/3/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
25/4/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
2/5/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
10/5/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
16/5/16	WM research and intelligence group	Research officers from councils and partners	1		1	1
17/5/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	

Date	Meeting	Participants	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
24/5/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
31/5/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
16/6/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
21/6/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
24/5/16	WM research and intelligence group	Research officers from councils and partners	1			
27/6/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1			
6/7/16	WMCA Programme Board	Council chief executives, officers, and partners	1	1		
26/7/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
2/8/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
4/8/16	WMCA working group	Council officers	1	1		
10/8/16	WM research and intelligence group	Research officers from councils and partners	1		1	1
16/8/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
30/8/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
5/9/16	Devolution Agreement working group	Council officers and partners	1	1	1	1
6/9/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
9/9/16	WMCA PSR Board	Lead members, council officers and partners	1		1	
20/9/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
27/9/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
4/10/16	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	

Date	Meeting	Participants	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
2/12/16	WMCA Programme Board	Council chief executives, officers, and partners	1	1	1	1
20/1/17	WMCA Programme Board	Council chief executives, officers, and partners	1	1	1	1
9/2/17	WMCA PSR Board	Lead members, council officers and partners	1		1	
21/2/17	PSR working group	Council officers and partners	1		1	
23/3/17	Public Service Reform team	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1	1	1	
12/4/17	BCC Senior Leadership Team	BCC senior officers	1			
25/4/17	Public Service Reform team	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1		1	
28/4/17	WMCA Programme Board	WM council leaders, officers, partners, WMCA staff.	1	1	1	1
5/5/17	Multiple Complex Needs workshop	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1		1	
23/5/17	BCC Senior Leadership Team	BCC senior officers	1			
25/5/17	Public Service Reform team	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1		1	
1/6/17	WMCA Devolution Agreement meeting	HMT officers, WM council policy officers, PWC, LEP officers	1	1	1	1
6/6/17	BCC senior leadership forum	BCC senior officers	1			
15/6/17	WM regional analyst group	Analysts and researchers from WMCA, councils and partners	1			

Date	Meeting	Participants	Thematic area			
			Overall process	Formation of CA	Mental Health	Strategic Economic Plan
16/6/17	Devolution strategy group	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1	1	1	1
20/6/17	Public Service Reform team	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1		1	
26/6/17	WM information sharing group	Analysts and researchers from WMCA, councils and partners	1			
28/6/17	WMCA fiscal subgroup	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1			1
29/6/17	Public Service Reform team	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1		1	
25/7/17	Public Service Reform team	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1		1	
1/8/17	Wellbeing Delivery Group	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1		1	
2/8/17	Devolution Strategy Group	Council officers, partners, WMCA staff	1	1	1	1
Total			77	30	48	18

11.6 Initial coding book

Name	Description
Evidence types and characteristics	
Characteristics of evidence	
Type of evidence	This thesis adopts a broad definition of 'evidence' incorporating a range of types of evidence, including formal academic research, economic and cost-benefit analyses, and information on the views and perspectives of service users and citizens.
Factors affecting evidence use	
Context	The existing set of commitments of policymakers and the wider external policy environment may impact on how evidence is developed, selected, understood and used in policymaking.
Ideas	The policy studies literature highlights that potential policies are built within constraining policy ideas (Campbell, 2002), including the preferences of higher tier governments.
Governance	Whether a formal or informal governance approach was adopted for this policymaking stage.
Institutions	'an enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and changing external circumstances' (Olsen, 2007, p. 3).
Networks	Policymakers consult and negotiate with interested groups and stakeholders, developing relationships known as networks (Rhodes, 1990).
Policy actors	Policy actors are the individuals or collectives with an interest in the given policy issue who are involved in the policymaking process at the stage under consideration (Weible and Sabatier, 2018). They may be affiliated with a governmental or non-governmental organisation and are likely to include policy elites such as political leaders (Sabatier, 1991).

Name	Description
How evidence is used (Bogenschneider)	
Assessing feasibility	Assessing the political and economic feasibility of policy decisions
Changing own position	Changing one's position on an issue
Contextualisation	Providing a larger context for thinking about issues and an enlightened understanding of the complexity of issues
Defining problems	Defining problems and raising awareness of why action is needed
Earning trust	Earning the trust of colleagues as a knowledgeable and credible information source
Educating others	
Enhancing debate and dialogue	Improving the decision-making process by enhancing debate, dialogue, collaboration, and compromise
Explaining a vote	Explaining a vote on an issue
Informing own position	Informing one's position on an issue
Justifying a position	Justifying a preexisting position on an issue
New ideas	Offering new and emerging ideas
Persuasion	Persuading others by developing arguments that support one's view or anticipate and counter opposing views
Pragmatic	Designing good legislation and stopping bad legislation
Raising questions	Asking important questions for policy or political purposes
How evidence is used (Weiss)	
Enlightenment	Where research-derived concepts and understandings permeate policymaking.

Name	Description
Intellectual enterprise of society	Social science and policy interact, influencing each other and being influenced by the larger fashions of social thought
Interactive	Where researchers are one of many parties who engage in discussions with policymakers working on a given topic. Policymakers use research as one way to inform themselves of the range of knowledge in a policy area.
Knowledge-driven	Insights from basic research are applied directly to develop new policy
Policy driven	where policymakers turn to research to provide insights to identified social issues; research provides the missing knowledge, facilitating the policy decision
Political	where research is used as 'ammunition' to support a pre-existing viewpoint.
Tactical	Where the act of conducting research is useful to policymakers, rather than any content of the research; research becomes proof of responsiveness, a delaying tactic, or a shield to deflect criticism.