LEARNING DURING TIMES OF FAILURE AND BLAME: HOW ENGLISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

RESPONDS TO CENTRAL GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION


by


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# ABSTRACT

How policymakers learn from failure is a perennial question. Some argue that blame avoidance hinders nuanced reflection and learning, suggesting that less blame could lead to more focus on avoiding repeated policy failures. However, the conceptual and empirical relationship between failure, learning and blame is underdeveloped in political science. By uncovering the way policy actors interpret failure, learning and blame, this thesis argues that learning is the means by which failure and blame are known. This finding results from an interpretive comparative case study analysis of the "dilemmas" and "narratives" English local government actors encountered during central government interventions. Specifically, the interventions into Birmingham City Council (2014-2020) and Northamptonshire County Council (2018-2021). The dilemmas were shaped by two governance "traditions" – centralisation and autonomy – each with competing ideas about local government's purpose, power, and accountability. By identifying the narratives that emerged and how they changed over time, this thesis finds that local actors shifted from contesting failure to accepting wrongdoing and responsibility.

By showing that groups learn to shift from contestation to consensus over failure and blame, this thesis provides a novel connection between concepts which past research has only narrowly examined. This thesis also contributes to the policy failure literature by demonstrating that actors compete over the boundaries of failure as a means to delimit and/or expand notions of change embedded within. By tackling the under-researched topic of "blame-games" outside of the public view, this thesis shows that those who witness their

colleagues "lose" blame-games draw lessons from such experiences and apply these to future conflicts. Finally, this research contributes to the policy learning literature by demonstrating that learning can entrench, rather than challenge, ideas about power within governance.

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# CONTENTS

# LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC – Audit Commission

BCC – Birmingham City Council

BRM – British Radical Municipalism

CIPFA – Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy

DCLG – Department for Communities and Local Government

MHCLG – Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

DfE – Department for Education

LGA – Local Government Association

NCC – Northamptonshire County Council

SLI – Sector-led Improvement

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

**1.0 Introducing the problem**

Sustained attention has been paid towards the concepts of policy failure, policy learning and blame. Yet exploration of the analytical and empirical connections between failure, learning and blame have been neglected (see for exception, Howlett, 2012). In contrast with the somewhat intuitive synthesis between failure, learning and blame found in popular and professional cultures (Zwieback, 2015; Evans, 2016; Hunt, 2016), connections seem self-evident and revelatory. What is shared amongst these accounts is that in all domains, blame is bad and undermines the potential to learn from policy failure and address complex problems.

Sharon Shoesmith's account of being blamed for the infanticide of a local child while serving as a senior local government officer exemplifies how failure, blame, and learning are interconnected by practitioners themselves (2016). Subject to intense media scrutiny and a campaign for resignations led by a prominent British newspaper, Shoesmith was removed from her role by central government politicians on live television and without prior warning. Following this attribution of blame and the subsequent fear it induced among social work professionals, the number of children placed into local government care increased by 26% (Shoesmith, 2016, pp. 18–19). A fear of blame led to children being placed in care who should not have been, subsequently spending their childhoods in damaging institutional settings. In other words, the attribution of blame led to professional and policy learning that, in turn, created broader failures within society.

The starting point for this thesis is that accounts of the failure-learning-blame relationship, as presented in the political science literature, are abstracted from the experiences and meanings of failure, the practice of "doing" learning, and the relational dynamics of blame during conflict. For example, one of the few accounts of this relationship in political science argues that policymakers engage in forms of technical and political learning to avoid future attributions of blame for failure (Howlett, 2012; 546). Here, learning is understood as increased command over the policy process to fulfil goals and objectives. A

broader theorisation of the policy process, conceptualised as a series of discrete stages, enables this relationship to be drawn between failure, learning, and blame. Providing a counterweight by exploring how actors themselves interpret and experience failure, learning, and blame, this thesis acts as a bellwether of divergence between everyday experience and academic theorisation on these topics.

Sensitive to the idea that concepts are mobilised within and shaped by specific political, historical, and linguistic settings (Schaffer, 2016), this thesis explores the situated meaning of failure, learning, and blame in the specific context of central-local relations in England. Over the past 15 years, local government has undergone significant changes, with the most profound stemming from a programme of austerity and underfunding (Atkins and Hoddinott, 2020). In parallel, local government failure and central government interventions to address underperformance have become increasingly common.

Central government intervention is a dimension of the "national oversight of local authority functions", involving the removal of local decision-making powers or the establishment of independent groups within councils to oversee improvement (Hammond, 2018). Between 1999 and 2017, intervention occurred seven times (Sandford, 2017). However, since 2020, central government has conducted interventions in 12 local governments in England.

Due to the proliferation of intervention and the increasing instability of local government, a language of failure, learning, and blame is increasingly in circulation within government and the media. Documents entitled "learning lessons" (CIPFA, 2024), "cultural and governance failings in local authorities: lessons from recent interventions' (MHCLG, 2020), and headlines suggesting that central government "blames councils' financial failure on poor leadership" (Bunn, 2023) indicate that this is a fruitful area for exploring the failure-learning-blame relationship. By examining the construction of failure, the demand for learning, and the attribution of blame within central-local relations during times of intervention, this thesis aims to develop new conceptual connections between these phenomena

## 1.1 Research questions and design

On the basis that the failure-learning-blame relationship articulated in political science is distant from the everyday experience of these concepts, this thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

1.) How do policy actors interpret policy failure?

2.) How does actors' experience of policy failure intersect with blame and policy learning, if at all?

3.) What are the implications of the intersection of policy failure, learning and blame for governance?

The interpretivist framework of traditions, narratives, and dilemmas is identified as a particularly helpful lens to situate interpretations of failure, learning, and blame into the political and historical contexts in which they arise (Bevir and Rhodes; 2006; 2010). Shining light on the contested meaning of governance, this framework can help understand how competing interpretations of what has failed, who is responsible, and what should be learnt from such situations may stem from competing ideas about the purpose of government.

To complement this framework, this thesis follows the interpretivist approach to research design (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012) and employs comparative case study research (Boswell et al, 2019). In particular, the comparison of dilemmas across diverse contexts supports the aim of elucidating the similarities and differences of how failure, learning and blame are mobilised by actors themselves. Selecting cases of central government intervention that were both accessible and recent, this research examines the interventions into Birmingham City Council (2014-2020) and Northamptonshire County Council (2018-2021).

Conducting 53 semi-structured interviews with those involved and collecting 91 documents produced through intervention, data analysis followed the practices of grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006), abductive analysis (Van Hulst and Visser, 2024), and diachronic analysis (Widdersheim, 2018). The result was a rich and encompassing analysis of the experiences of intervention and how narratives changed over time.

**1.2 Contributions to knowledge**

The central contribution of this thesis is to provide a novel and innovative conceptualisation of the relationship between failure, learning, and blame. As highlighted above, the connection drawn between these concepts depends on a macro-theorisation of policy stages (Howlett, 2012). The consequence is that scholarship has yet to capture how failure, learning, and blame are entangled within the micro-political dynamics of everyday practice. It is argued that, in the context of central government intervention, local government actors often hold interpretations of failure that conflict with those made by central government. Local actors view failure as located within specific service delivery areas and/or as the result of central government policy and decision-making (e.g., austerity). Centrally appointed actors saw failure as an organisational feature of the councils, for which local political and administrative leadership were to blame. Analysing how these interpretations changed over the course of the intervention, it was found that local actors increasingly aligned with central government's interpretation of failure and blame. It is argued that such acceptance resulted from a process of local actors learning who the 'teachers' are who can legitimately define failure and its solutions (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013).

This conceptualisation of the failure-learning-blame relationship makes an original and important contribution to political science, as it highlights that substantive questions about improving service delivery were superseded by questions of who gets to control the meaning of underperformance and improvement. Learning was not about enhancing policy tools, policy goals, or even tactics of political competition in response to failure and blame (May, 1992; Verge and Lombardo, 2021; Hansson, 2024). Instead, learning was more fundamentally about the distinction between dominant and subordinate groups within governance. In learning the "rules of the game" within central-local relations, beliefs, values, and ways of acting which position English local government as the subordinate actor within English governance were reproduced.

By examining the interpretation and mobilisation of failure, blame, and learning within everyday practice, this research also makes significant contributions to the policy failure, policy learning, and blame literatures. The conceptualisation of policy failure often assumes that failure can be clearly and unambiguously defined (Howlett, 2024), typically classified into

domains such as policy, governance, state, and leadership failure (McConnell and Tormey, 2021; Peters, 2015; Van der Steen et al, 2015), with the aim of overcoming partisan conflict (McConnell, 2015). This research illustrates that, in practice, actors are involved in subtle processes of classification where they compete over the boundaries of failure as a means to delimit or expand notions of change embedded within it. Interpretations of failure are multiple and contested, shaped not only by competing traditions regarding the purpose and function of governance but also by the "audience" to whom failure is expressed. This thesis argues that the policy failure literature is largely insensitive to the diverse nature of failure and is therefore unable to fulfil the goal of navigating political conflict. To address this, conceptualisation must begin with the situated meaning of failure in practice, alongside consideration of underlying governance traditions.

Focusing on the dynamics of blame beyond the public stage, this thesis also contributes new empirical and conceptual insights to the blame literature. Prioritising the study of publicly mediatised conflict between governmental actors, the blame literature has neglected the question of what impact blame has on governance after the "game" (Diamova et al, 2024; 49). Empirically, this research demonstrates that when actors perceive their colleagues to unsuccessfully avoid blame, they can learn to frame themselves as blame-takers during times of conflict. Conceptually, this augments the recently introduced notion of "blame-seeking behaviour" (Flinders et al, 2024) by demonstrating that blame is not only sought for the purpose of fuelling tensions. Blame-seeking behaviour can also come in the form of accepting blame as a strategy of legitimisation and de-escalation.

Capturing how ideas of failure and blame, which privilege central government, were learnt by local actors, this research also reveals the way in which social learning can entrench, rather than challenge, power-relations. The formation of shared understanding between competing groups of actors has been characterised as transformative learning which enhances deliberation (Laws and Forester, 2007; Fischer, and Mandell, 2012) and confronts "hegemonic systems" (Parra et al, 2013; Bartels, 2022). In the context of central government intervention, this research shows that local actors learned to orientate towards the dominant governance tradition of centralisation, which delegitimised local government acts of

contestation whilst also cultivating deference and power dependence with central government.

## 1.3 Thesis structure

Touched upon above, the relationships between failure, learning and blame have been narrowly conceptualised within the political science literature. Chapter 2 reviews these literatures to understand why such few accounts have linked the concepts and what can be done to address this. Using conceptual formation as a lens to interrogate the literatures, this review demonstrates that a "clarificatory" approach to conceptualisation dominates (Durose et al 2022). Privileging scholarly utility, clarification pre-occupies definitional and categorical precision, assuming that such demarcations are meaningful across political, linguistic and temporal boundaries without issue (Schaffer, 2016; 17). Policy failure has been distinguished from policy success (McConnell, 2010; 2015), typologies of blame advanced through additional reactive and anticipative distinctions (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2017) and policy learning categorised into primary and secondary classifications (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013). Whilst useful for scholarly debate, focusing on unique conceptual features has come to the detriment of exploring: i.) the conceptual connections, and ii.) the way the concepts themselves are deployed within certain communities and expressed using context specific languages and practices.

The review argues that balancing "clarification" with "elucidatory" conceptual development can help explore new relationships while sensitising conceptualisation to the contexts in which they are deployed (Schaffer, 2016; Durose et al, 2022). Elucidation "aims to clarify the meaning and use of concepts in lived practices, not to fashion precise conceptual tools of the researcher's design (Schaffer, 2016; 7). For example, elucidating failure and learning within English local government involves excavating the meaning of "corporate failure" (Wajzer *et al,* 2016) and the practices involved in the writing of "lessons learnt" documents produced through intervention (McCardle, 2021). Looking to disciplines outside of political science (e.g., anthropology) which have studied these topics outside the clarificatory framework, the review offers examples of what the elucidation of failure, learning, and blame may look like. This chapter concludes by outlining the research questions.

Chapter 3 argues that an interpretivist framework is appropriate for this research because it sensitises the analysis towards the meaning actors ascribe to their actions. The framework of tradition, dilemma, and narrative is identified as a particularly helpful lens for situating interpretations of failure, learning, and blame within the political and historical contexts in which they arise (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 2010). By shining light on the contested meaning of governance, this framework helps understand how competing interpretations of failure may stem from competing ideas about the purpose of local government (Orr and Vince, 2009). Despite this, Chapter 3 also highlights a neglect towards the relational dimensions of interpretation (Bartels and Turnbull, 2020) and proposes integrating insights from organisational learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974; 1996), crisis management (Boin et al 2016; Boswell et al, 2021) and pragmatist policy analysis (Forester, 1999). In doing so, the analytical framework can help produce a more dynamic exploration of the changing way actors jointly interpret failure, learning and blame across time.

Chapter 4 details the research design and methodological choices of this thesis. A comparative case study design (Boswell et al, 2019) is identified as a useful approach for elucidating the similarities and differences of failure, learning and blame across in distinct settings. The cases of intervention into Birmingham City Council (BCC) and Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) are selected. Providing an initial background on these cases, this chapter also outlines data collection, analysis and ethical challenges of the research.

Chapter 5 provides further context for understanding English governance, central-local relations, and the competing ways in which these have been understood by policy actors and scholars. Deploying the concept of "tradition", defined as the "ideational background" that shapes how actors interpret the world (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 78), this chapter argues that the governance traditions of centralisation and autonomy underpin competing ideas of central-local relations. Encapsulated within the centralisation tradition are beliefs about the subordinate position of local government. Here, local government is a predominantly managerial organisation expected to comply with the demands of central government. In contrast, the autonomy tradition conveys that local government is a political space with the right to resist central government policy and be free from central government performance management. As traditions with long lineages, this chapter demonstrates that the 2010

Localism reforms which abolished much (but not all) of the regulatory architecture for local government amplified this tension. Serving as the backdrop against which the case studies took place, it is argued that the traditions could amount to a dilemma of resistance and acceptance for local actors when faced with evaluations of failure produced through intervention.

Chapter 6 and 7 analyse the experiences of those involved in the interventions into BCC and NCC. Tracing the emergence of dilemmas over the course of intervention and the narratives which formed in response, these chapters capture the way competing traditions of autonomy and centralisation shaped the experiences of intervention across time. Whilst the primary focus of these chapters is on traditions, dilemmas and narratives at play, these chapters do conclude with preliminary reflections on what the findings say about interpretations of failure, learning and blame.

Chapter 6 focuses on the intervention into BCC. By examining the beliefs of civil servants, local government councillors, and officers appointed to investigate BCC, a narrative emerges that blames local political leadership for undermining the managerial functions of local government. This narrative, which sought to empower officers and downplay the legitimacy of party-political conflict, mobilised the centralisation tradition. Local actors, interpreting the intervention as undemocratic and the account of failure as inaccurate, yet recognising that cooperation with central government was necessary, experienced the intervention through the tension between centralisation and autonomy. As they upheld this tension, local actors attempted to engage with the process, although privately they felt deeply sceptical about it. It was only when local actors accepted that they could not control the intervention process and needed to satisfy external evaluations that they began to orient themselves towards the centralisation tradition. BCC's initial contestation of failure and intervention was reinterpreted by local actors as a form of blame avoidance. By analysing these shifts through the various dilemmas that arose during the intervention, this chapter argues that learning is evident in the evolving beliefs throughout the intervention

Chapter 7 focuses on the intervention into NCC. Drawing on the centralisation tradition, which views local government as primarily responsible for implementing statutory legislation, the evaluations of failure produced during the intervention were premised on local

managerial dysfunction and poor decision-making practices. Locally, this prompted an immediate change in both the political and officer leadership of the council. Those who resisted the evaluation were labelled as blame-avoidant and were excluded from executive governance. Newly appointed leadership quickly embraced the intervention, supressed any scepticism towards intervention and failure, and positioned themselves as implementers of externally imposed goals. Controlled by central government, local actors no longer saw the council as functioning as a political entity and, orientating towards the centralisation tradition, sought to build legitimacy as expert, deferential managers. It was only after the intervention concluded, when local actors anticipated potential future council failure, that critical reflections on the intervention emerged. Previously marginalised ideas, such as the impact of austerity on failure, previously voiced by those deemed blame-avoidant, re-emerged at the end of the case study. By analysing these shifts through the dilemmas that arose during the intervention, this chapter argues that learning is evident in the evolving beliefs throughout the process.

Bringing together the empirical findings, Chapter 8 compares the dilemmas and narratives from both cases and outlines the contributions these findings make to the policy failure, policy learning, and blame literatures. One key finding is that interpretations of failure, made by both evaluators and local government actors, contained "hidden transcripts" concealed from both the public and, at times, from one another (Scott, 1990). Another key finding from Chapter 8 is that, within both cases –albeit at different speeds – local actors shifted from single-loop to double-loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974; 1996). Having previously contested failure and the notions of performance underpinning it, local actors ultimately accepted that central government defines the meaning of local government failure, determines the solutions, and expects local actors to take responsibility for wrongdoing.

Chapter 9 answers the three thesis' three research questions. It reiterates the key contributions to knowledge and theory, whilst also providing recommendations for improving central government intervention and reflecting on the limitations of this thesis and futures avenues for research.

## Chapter 2: Mistaking the map for the territory:
## policy failure, policy learning & blame.

### 2.0 Introduction

Understanding policy failure as a generative opportunity for policy learning was proclaimed in the abstract long ago (May, 1992; 341). Since then, there has been limited conceptual and empirical exploration of the relationship. This sparsity has only recently begun to be addressed within political science (Dunlop, 2017a; 2017b). The relationship blame has with policy failure and policy learning is something even less attended to (Howlett, 2012). Building upon such accounts and the associated bodies of knowledge which underpin them, this chapter argues that to further develop the connections between the concepts, a process of conceptual formation sensitive to the way actors experience and mobilise failure, learning and blame is required. In doing so, this will help understand why the connection is so often invoked by actors themselves (Zwieback, 2015; Hunt, 2016) with a particular focus on the way it is deployed within central-local relations within England (Shoesmith, 2016; MHCLG, 2020; CIPFA, 2024). The approach outlined here offers a fruitful avenue for capturing the diverse ways in which failure, blame and learning impacts the everyday practice of governance.

Using the ideas of conceptual formation (Satori, 1984; Schaffer, 2016; Durose et al, 2022) to engage with these concepts, it is argued that the policy failure, policy learning and blame literatures are dominated by attempts to overcome "conceptual stretching" (Sartori, 1984) through the development of parsimonious classifications and definitional precision (Gerring, 1999). Prioritising scholarly language and the negation of ambiguity, this form of conceptual formation is described as "clarification" (Durose et al, 2022). Using English local government and the relationship with central government as the primary example throughout this chapter, it will be shown that clarification neglects how failure, blame and learning are concepts situated within certain historical, political and linguistic contexts that actors operate within. Indicative of this neglect across the literatures is the call by key authors for future research to understand the "impact" failure, learning and blame has upon individuals (Freeman, 2006; 2007; Dunlop, 2017a; 8-13; Hinterleitner and Sager, 2017: 602; Diamova et al, 2024; 49). While this literature does certainly neglect certain empirical spaces (e.g., local

government), this call represents the limits of the clarificatory conceptualisation. The gap identified in this chapter is conceptual just as much it is empirical.

Much value has been derived from clarification. The key authors surveyed in this review have generated widely used frameworks, provoked significant theoretical development and, at times, highlighted the often-neglected process of conceptual formation (Hood, 2002; Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013; McConnel, 2015). When dominant, clarification risks masking the "one-sidedness, universalism and objectivism" (Schaffer, 2016; 12) of this form of conceptual development. Without balancing such literatures with actor-centred conceptualisation, there is a risk that the clarificatory approach will mistake the conceptual "map for the territory" of lived experience and everyday meaning (Blackmore, 2010; 53). Such a risk inhibits the potential for capturing novel connections between failure, learning and blame.

To make this argument, this review begins with a discussion of conceptual formation. Clarification which prioritises certainty, replicability, causality and deductive theory development (Durose et al, 2022; 4) is contrasted with "elucidation" which seeks to illuminate the meaning of concepts as used by actors (Schaffer, 2016). These two perspectives are then used to analyse the conceptual formation deployed by key authors in the policy failure, policy learning and blame literatures. Whilst variegated, these literatures all strive towards clarification. For example, where the policy failure literature prioritises definitional precision, the blame literature focuses upon typological development. Drawing on literatures outside of political science less concerned with clarification, such as urban geography and anthropology, this chapter also provides examples of the way failure, learning and blame may be elucidated. Finally, how links between the concepts are developed is also subject to critique. This chapter ends with the formulation of research questions.

The initial sub-section of this chapter focuses on the approaches to concept formation deployed in the social sciences. Using the two approaches identified, the subsequent sub-sections first interrogate the policy failure literature, before moving onto the policy learning and blame literatures. Each subsection begins with a discussion of how clarificatory modes of conceptual development have dominated each literature and concludes with a discussion of what this means from an elucidatory perspective. Examples from English local government

and central-local relations are peppered throughout these sections. Building on this analysis of the individual literatures, the chapter concludes by interrogating the relationships which have been drawn between failure, learning and blame. It is argued that such relationships rely on broad theorisations of the policy process distant from everyday meaning. This critique then goes onto inform the development of research questions this thesis aims to answer.

## 2.1 Approaches to concept formation

Underpinning this literature review is the acknowledgement that distinct practices of conceptual formation exist within the social sciences. Adapting Durose et al (2022), the approaches to conceptual development – clarification and elucidation – serve as the heuristic for critical engagement with the literatures. Doing so enables several analytical advantages: i.) identifying common features across distinct literatures through examining shared processes of conceptual formation and, ii.) creating opportunity to undo compartmentalisation and envision concepts as interconnected in experience.

The aim within a clarificatory approach to conceptual formation is the elimination of ambiguity. This has been expressed as the desire to "correct the defects of ordinary language" (Sartori, 1984; 58) through the development of specialised terminology which "reduces excess meaning" (Durose et al, 2022; 4). Various criteria have been developed to advance this approach to conceptual formation, but what is shared across the criterion of clarification is the drawing of boundaries between what is and what is not a specified phenomenon (Gerring, 1999; 363). For example, the criteria; "familiarity" distinguishes between "core" and "peripheral" "features"; "parsimony" reaches for "fewer definitional predicates"; and "coherence" is derived from the identification of "essential meaning" (Gerring, 1999; 368, 373, 374). The certainty offered in terms of conceptual identification by such criteria enables researchers to look across cases and deductively assess the conceptual "fit" of diverse empirical phenomenon.

Where the clarification approach draws boundaries around phenomenon using specialised terminology, the elucidatory approach looks to situate concepts within the diverse linguistic, historical and political contexts in which they emerge. Developed in opposition to the practices associated with clarification, elucidation offers three main critiques (Schaffer,

2016). Firstly, elucidation critiques the "universalism" found in the clarification approach which assumes that concepts traverse spatial, temporal and linguistic boundaries without issue (Schaffer, 2016; 17). From an elucidatory perspective, there is no "essential meaning" underpinning a concept (Gerring, 1999; 374). Secondly, clarification is argued to create "one-sided" concepts which privilege "those meanings of a concept that are important to the researcher while ignoring other meanings that are salient to situated actors themselves" (Schaffer, 2016; 12). Thirdly, through the lens of objectivity and implied value-neutrality, clarification fails to capture how concepts are shaped by power relations (Schaffer, 2016; 19). To counter these clarificatory impulses, conceptual formation must occur from the bottom-up, investigating how concepts are embedded within every-day experience and then asking what relationship this has with the specialist terminology of the social scientist (Schaffer 2016; 4).

In the next section, policy failure, policy learning and blame literatures are explored through the lenses of clarification and elucidation. It is shown that the dominance of clarification has led to a neglect of how the concepts are embedded within governance practices. The consequences for each concept are outlined and it is argued that many gaps in the literatures can be addressed though elucidation. This line of reasoning is then used to develop the research questions this thesis will explore.

## 2.2 Clarifying and elucidating policy failure

In this section, the dominant clarificatory approach to understanding policy failure is interrogated through elucidation. Whilst the clarification of policy failure has offered precise definitions and underlining causal mechanisms to help improve policymaking, elucidation highlights that such conceptualisations neglect the importance of self-conceptions of failure among policy making communities and the impact this has on such groups. In turn, the clarification of policy failure, whilst useful for scholarly debate, risks misunderstanding partisan conflict through increased distance between the way policy makers and policy scholars speak of failure.

*2.2.1 Clarifying policy failure*

The clarification of policy failure emerged as a reaction to what were seen as simplistic, relativist or determinist approaches treating failure as mere judgement or as inevitable result of complex institutional arrangements (Howlett *et al,* 2015; 210). For example, Bovens and 't Hart's (1995; 10) stipulation that there are four levels of meaning-making that actors pass through when interpreting failure is deemed to make the concept unverifiable (McConnell, 2015; 225-6) and undermines generalisation (Howlett et al, 2009; Howlett *et al,* 2015; 211). Moreover, the policy failure literature is seen as weak and impractical because it uncritically assumes failure to be present within empirical cases, lacks shared standards of evaluation or is the means by which other phenomena are explored (McConnell, 2010; 2015; Peters, 2015). For example, the few instances in which policy analysis has examined "local government failure", failure is defined in reference to other distant concepts such as "voter apathy", "iron triangles" (Dollery et al, 2006; 343) and economic "efficiency" (Boyne, 1998; 150). From this perspective, the result is that the policy failure literature suffers from a lack of clear and definitive conceptualisation (van der Steen et al, 2015).

More recent accounts have placed greater conceptual emphasis on developing a clearly bounded definition of the phenomenon. One widely used definition is that a "policy fails, even if it is successful in some minimal respects, if it does not fundamentally achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent" (McConnell, 2015; 230). Seen to capture the way failure can occur even when success is evident (McConnell, 2015; 231), this process reflects conceptual "differentiation" with similar but ultimately distinct phenomenon (Gerring, 1999; 375).

Drawing clear boundaries with distinct phenomenon, the clarification of policy failure has also developed conceptual "depth" (Gerring, 1999; 380) in which the various attributes of policy failure are specified whilst bringing them together within an overarching framework.

One example of building conceptual depth is distinguishing between what are seen as the subjective and objective attributes of failure (Howlett, 2012; 2024). Subjective dimensions of failure relate to interpretations of the degree of intentional actions which have led to failure, how avoidable situations are felt to be, and how publicly salient an issue is through

mediatisation and presence within daily life (Howlett, 2024; 255-57). Extent and duration are considered as objective attributes with the former concerned with the level of failure (e.g., regime, institutional, programme) and the latter temporality (e.g., single events such as flooding or longer-term processes of climate breakdown) (Howlett, 2024; 254). Advancing previous accounts of policy failure felt to be overly subjective, identifying the objective dimension of failure is believed to make the analysis of policy failure verifiable (Bovens, 2010; Howlett et al, 2015; 211). [1]

Categorisation has also been developed through the lens of the various causal mechanisms (van der Steen et al, 2015) or "contributing factors" involved in policy failure (Hudson et al, 2019; 2). Arguing that policymaking is composed of three dimensions, McConnell (2015; 232-36) claims that policy failure can be categorised as programmatic, process or political failures. These convey failure as arising from an inability to fulfil technical aspirations, translate ideas into action or construct supportive coalitions. State and governance failures, which are more structural and aggregated than policy failure, are further categories developed by those engaging in clarificatory conceptual formation (Peters, 2015). Other authors have sought to demarcate "organisational failure" (van der Steen, 2015), "implementation failures" (May, 2015) and "bureaucratic failures" (Park, 2021), and "institutional failures" (Newig et al, 2019) as additional categories.

Seeking to enhance conceptualisations by offering definitions of policy failure which are verifiable, identify the objective dimensions of failure and uncover the causal mechanisms of failure, the clarificatory approach has the explicit intention of contributing to policymaking practice (McConnell, 2015). Whilst this literature has certainly influenced public policy scholarship and is widely referenced in the study of failure, the next section highlights that clarification is privileged over elucidatory, interpretivist conceptualisations. This has led to notable gaps in understanding, such as what failure does to policymaking communities.

*2.2.2 Elucidating policy failure*

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[1] Verifiability is the language used by the authors practicing clarification of policy failure (Howlett et al, 2015; 211).

With its focus on definitions, attributes and causal pathways, the clarificatory approach to policy failure has brought order to the messy reality of policymaking. Enabling the development of research agendas and a shared language for comparative work, the clarification of policy failure serves the purpose of scholarly utility. What it does not illuminate is the way policy failure is a concept deployed by actors within government. Seeing failure as a central argumentative strategy in the act of governing, Zittoun (2015; 250) highlights the example of a French Minister who mobilised failure to prompt reform, arguing that "knowing whether his analysis of failure was right or wrong is irrelevant. What is important to understand is how his definition of failure made it possible for him to legitimise his reform project". Debating the conceptual distinctions between programmatic, process, political failure categories (Bovens, 2010; Bovens and 't Hart, 2016) or adding new ones (van der Steen *et al,* 2015) may help scholars characterise failure, yet it does not direct attention towards the role failure plays in the practice of governance.

Elucidation highlights how clarification cannot capture the life failure lives within governance. One reason is due to the "one-sidedness" of the clarification approach in which the researchers' language is privileged (Schaffer, 2016; 13). From this perspective, a nuanced understanding of failure in certain contexts is lost by neglecting to question whether any distance exists between practitioner language and scholarly language. This distance is evident within the clarificatory approach in the way it seeks to apply categories of failure to certain empirical spaces without exploring the meaning of failure for actors themselves. Certain governance communities do produce specific conceptualisations of failure and policy analysis must capture this.

By way of illustration, the idea of "corporate failure" deployed in English local government (Wajzer *et al,* 2016) offers an opportunity to elucidate failure in this specific organisational and political context. The means of evaluating the performance of local government have a political history stemming back to the 1980s and involved considerable contestation and conflict (Laffin, 2018). Failure is likely shaped by this historic backdrop. However, due to the one-sidedness of the policy failure literature, such research has not been conducted. In the few instances that local government is studied in the failure literature, it is categorised as an instance of "implementation failure" (Heidtmann and Selck, 2024) without

considering whether this language is meaningful among actors themselves. This ignores the view that local government is a policymaking entity which does not just implement central government policy and therefore cannot be treat the same as other non-elected service delivery agents and public administrations (Copus et al, 2017).

From an elucidatory perspective, clarification is also unable to account for the way in which power is entangled in the deployment of failure (Schaffer, 2016). Again, English local government offers an interesting illustration of how failure and the evaluative frameworks by which it emerges are connected to unequal power relations. For example, a recent decision by one local government to introduce a four-day working week was framed by the UK central government as a "failure of best value" (DLUCH, 2023). Whilst this was framed as value-neutral, expert judgement about the use of public money, this evaluative framework of "Best Value" has its origins in the central government desire to discipline resistant authorities who frustrate central government (Laffin, 2018; 54).

Such examples suggest a degree of disparity between how certain communities speak of failure with how those in academia speak of it. To re-appropriate the words of Blackmore (2010) when commenting on the distance between conceptual models of community learning and its practice, there is a risk in the policy failure literature that *the map will be mistaken for the territory.* In turn, this risks a disconnect from the everyday practices of policymaking.

Looking to disciplines outside of political science can provide an illustration of what the study of failure can look like from a more elucidatory approach to conceptualisation. Going beyond the temporality of the policy failure literature, anthropological study "challenge[s] the sense of failure as a singular post hoc judgement" by focusing on "what failure does" (Alexander, 2023a; 11-12). Infrastructure projects, such as the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, illustrates the non-linearity of failure whereby once failed design products re-emerge as successful innovations which help realize what was once impossible (Alexander, 2023b; 128). Similarly, geography has demonstrated the need to examine what happens after failure due to its "generative" effects and the way in which failed projects can prompt policy action and professional success in spaces distant from where failure originates (Baker and McCann, 2018). Closer to the sub-disciplinary home of public policy and administration, international relations research has uncovered the construction of failure as

the product of epistemic communities, locating the concept of a "failed state" at the intersection between peacebuilding, crisis resolution NGOs, and academics who compete for the authority to define failure (Kosmatopoulos, 2011; Bueger and Bethke, 2014).

Taking such insights to the world of governance, it becomes clear that the clarificatory approach to conceptualising policy failure neglects to understand what lasting impression failure may have upon actors, how they tell stories to one another in a process of communicating what has happened and whether this shapes their practice of governance. Do narratives of bygone failures inform actions present and future? Are evaluations of failure shared among different groups in government or is there a process of translation whereby various interpretations of failure can emerge? More concretely, what are the underlining practices and meaning involved in the construction of failure within certain policymaking communities? Answering these questions is crucial if we are to understand the practicalities of governing: actors looking at what went wrong in the past and learning from this.

## 2.3 Clarifying and elucidating policy learning

If the issue with the policy failure literature is that a lack of alternative approaches to conceptualisation have been advanced in political science, the opposite can be said to be true of the policy learning literature which has been described as a "conceptual minefield" (Levy, 1994). A rich variety of conceptualisations span across the clarificatory and elucidatory divide (Heclo, 1974; Rose, 1991; Hall, 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). It cannot be said that one approach to concept formation dominates in political science. Having said this, when it comes to articulating a relationship between policy learning and policy failure, it is a clarificatory conceptualisation of policy learning which is advanced. This will be demonstrated through a discussion of Dunlop and Radaelli's widely cited paper on the topic of policy learning (2013) which they go onto relate to policy failure (Dunlop and Radaelli; 2016; Dunlop, 2017a; 2017b). Deploying an elucidatory critique, it is argued that this form of conceptualisation imposes learning on behaviour without attention to whether actors themselves consider this as learning.

### 2.3.1 Clarifying policy learning

Dunlop and Radaelli (2013) report that several issues exist with the past study of policy learning which make it necessary to bring the many ideas that exist within this literature together conceptually. Namely, a pre-occupation with the products of learning and a proliferation of distinct approaches has led to "conceptual stretching" and reduced "analytical purchase" of policy learning (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013; 600). To address these issues, Dunlop and Radaelli (2013; 601) deploy the classificatory approach to conceptual development (Sartori, 1970) and explanatory typologies (Elman, 2005). The aim is to classify primary and secondary types of learning and its demarcation from individual empirical instances (Dunlop and Radaelli; 2013; 601). The superordinate classification, or most "minimal definition of policy learning", is the "updating of beliefs" (Dunlop and Radaelli; 2013; 601) and distinguished from unconscious, automatic "contingency learning" (Kamkhaji and Radaelli, 2017). Secondary classifications demarcate the types of learning: reflexive learning, learning through bargaining, epistemic learning and learning in the shadow of hierarchy (Dunlop and Radaelli; 2013; 602).

Built into this conceptualisation are causal mechanisms which explain the emergence of certain learning types. Learning is co-determined by the intersection between "problem tractability" and "actor certification" (Dunlop and Radaelli; 2013; 602). The former refers to the level of uncertainty around the definition of a problem and the latter whether certain types of individuals are granted the authority to act on such problems. In situations where problems and governance structures are well defined, hierarchical learning takes place where the "teachers" are those within executive decision-making spaces who determine the "lessons" to be "learnt" (Dunlop and Radaelli; 2013; 602). At its most extreme this means "learning is reduced to coping with instructions" (Dunlop and Radaelli; 2013; 613). Using the co-determinants of "problem tractability" and "actor certification" as deductively derived independent variables and relating these to dependent variables enables an expansion of conceptual "property space" (Elman, 2005; 308). The result is that this conceptualisation produces 16 sub-categories of learning which define how exactly beliefs change in line with structural features of governance.

Building upon this conceptualisation, other authors have continued to identify classifications of policy learning with an additional 16 found related to the idea of

dysfunctional learning (Möck and Feindt, 2024). In this vein, this approach to conceptualisation has enhanced the "field utility" by specifying the relations between highly similar phenomenon (e.g., learning types) whilst also advancing "analytical utility" by making the theoretical assumptions transparent. In the next section, an elucidatory critique of this conceptualisation is developed.

## 2.3.2 Elucidating Policy Learning

The important work of Dunlop and Radaelli (2013) brings a much-needed sense of coherence and structuring to the vast literature on policy learning. Speaking to its theoretical depth, it has been debated whether this conceptualisation of policy learning amounts to a theorisation of the policy process itself (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018b; Goyal and Howlett, 2018). Yet as characteristic of the clarificatory approach, there is a one-sidedness in the way scholarly language is privileged. From an elucidatory perspective, the question we must ask is what are "the set of tasks policy makers engage in which both *we* and *they* redescribe as learning?" (Freeman, 2008; 3 *emphasis added*). This section argues that the clarificatory approach to policy learning fails to capture the diverse meanings underpinning a description of learning by policy makers and actually imposes the category of learning onto actors without questioning whether the actors themselves see it this way.

An example from the clarificatory policy learning literature demonstrates that the learning category is uncritically imposed. For example, Dunlop and Radaelli's (2016) study of the Eurozone crisis argued that the European Commission engaged in hierarchical learning with Greece more often than it did with other member states (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2016; 121-2). Their approach to learning is entangled with assumptions regarding the structures of governance but ignores how central-local relations in the EU are also situated within broader trends of racism and power within the European Union. Take for example, Northern European narratives of blame and racism towards Southern European states during the Eurozone crisis (Storm and Naastepad, 2016; Van Vossole, 2016). Against such a context, it might be reasoned that, behind the highly mediatised and performative public statements during such negotiations, the Greeks did not interpret this period as one of "learning". Alternatively, whilst

the Greeks may have framed such periods as learning when engaging with policymakers from the European Union, this may not have been the framing used when engaging with domestic audiences critical of the EU. However, the clarificatory model of policy learning subsumes the Greek reaction as a form of learning regardless of whether those involved would describe this as such.

There is also "universalism" embedded within this conceptualisation of policy learning (Schaffer, 2016; 17). This is clearly evident when authors of the approach offer policy advice using the model: "tell actors that are frustrated with their attempts to produce learning to focus more on the structural characteristics of the policy process and less on the preferred solution or learning types" (Dunlop, Radaelli and Trint, 2018; 13). Reflecting the older notion that lessons for policymakers exist "out there" and that research can assist in locating these lessons (Rose, 1993 cited in Freeman, 2006; 376), presenting the model and its implications as offering lessons for policy makers neglects the act of translation that always occurs when deploying knowledge into specific contexts (Clarke, 2015). Translation is always entangled with unequal power dynamics where the original language is granted authority (Spivak, 2000; 321). This points to the underlying universalism at play that risks assuming that the models, categories and causal logics of learning are meaningful across temporal, linguistic and historical specificities (Schaffer, 2016).

The European Union's (EU) Open Method of Coordination (OMC) is a telling example of how policy learning operates within a complex, messy and multilingual hierarchy. Characterised as a form of "soft governance" (Barbier and Colomb, 2011), the OMC aims to forge consensus driven decision-making through deliberation between the EU's member states (De la Porte, 2007) and central to this is "policy learning" (Buchs, 2008) and "the sharing of experience" (Frazer and Marlier, 2010: 226). As a key empirical space for Radaelli's (2003) early study of learning, they saw the OMC as creating a shared language which enabled learning between countries about key policy concepts and change. Yet the ethnographic study of Hungarian document formation during the OMC has revealed how the translation of National Action Plans into English has excluded indigenous concepts and meaning from EU governance reform (Lendvai, 2015; 143). What looks like the creation of shared meaning and learning from the English language perspective, reveals itself as contested and ambiguous

from the Hungarian perspective (Lendvai, 2015). What this illustrates is the way that the concept of policy learning is shaped not only by linguistic context in which it is deployed, but also how its deployment can service to silence and mask unequal power relations and contestation.

With the insensitivity of clarificatory approach to locality and context, it is not surprising to find that the policy learning literature underexplores learning within local government (De Rudder, 2024). One exception is an examination of the factors which may inhibit policy learning within local government following a disaster: ethnic homogeneity, small population sizes and a lack of financial resources (Taylor, 2023). Focusing on contextual factors which are abstracted from the beliefs and practices, the idea of learning here is far removed from the language of learning deployed by actors themselves. Instead, elucidation demands that an account of learning in local government explores if tensions exist between what researchers and the researched "redescribe as learning?" (Freeman, 2008; 3). For example, in English local government, a narrative of "lesson learning" in response to financial dysfunction is increasingly prominent (CIPFA, 2022; MHCLG, 2020). To study learning in this context, research must understand to what extent this narrative is shared among the local government community and whether conflict over what is to be learnt exists.

Providing clear definitions and types of learning, the clarificatory conceptualisation of policy learning has a high degree of scholarly utility. It allows researchers to differentiate between modes of learning, identify causal pathways and offer advice to policy makers on this basis. Yet at the same time, it also uncritically subsumes all forms of governmental interaction as a type of learning – categorising phenomenon as learning based on reified structures and not whether actors themselves understand certain instances as learning. Whilst learning may well occur in moments which are not explicitly described as such by those studied, clarificatory conceptualization desensitises the analysis of learning towards the diverse meaning of learning within organisational and political contexts. This conceptualisation of policy learning will be returned to when examining the links between failure, learning and blame. Before then, the conceptualisation of blame is examined.

## 2.4 Clarifying and elucidating blame

Much of the emphasis above has been to highlight how the policy failure and policy learning literatures neglect to pay adequate attention to the way actors experience and mobilise such concepts in their practice of governance. Whilst paying closer attention to the language used by actors, this subsection argues that the blame literature is also dominated by clarificatory conceptual development. Namely, this is found in the pre-occupation with typological development, universalistic assumptions about the presence of blame and a neglect towards the experience of blame outside of the public view.

*2.4.1 Clarifying blame*

Unlike the policy failure and policy learning literatures, there has been less intense debate in the blame literature regarding how to define blame. Definitions are often not explicitly given in this literature, but when they are, the role of interpretation is emphasised. For example, one definition identifies two foundational attributes: perceived harm which was avoidable and a perception of responsibility for that harm (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood, 2005; 2). What is more widely discussed within the political science literature is the associated term "blame game" which is defined as the interactions between "blame makers (those who do the blaming) and blame takers (those who are on the receiving end)" – something present across all cultures and historical moments (Hood, 2010; 7). Building upon this in the context of government, blame-avoidance behaviour (BAB) "is generally regarded as all kinds of integrity-protecting activities by politicians and bureaucrats in the face of (future) accusations" (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2015; 139). With all these terms used in a somewhat synonymous fashion, less explicit emphasis on parsimony and definitional precision is found within this work. However, authors have lamented blame's conceptual "vagueness" (König and Wenzelburger, 2014), "fuzziness" (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2017) and lack of unifying theory (Vis, 2013). To address this, influential typological models categorising strategies of BAB found in government have been developed.

Christopher Hood has developed a widely used and built upon typology of BAB distinguishing between presentational, agency and policy strategies (2002; 2007; 2010). Presentational strategies refer to the reframing of actions to counter negative interpretations

and promote positive accounts. Presentational strategies have been further differentiated in relation to how elites respond to crisis and the subsequent types of blame generated (Boin et al, 2009; 84). Undermining the idea that there is a crisis "minimises blame" dynamics, acknowledging crisis but denying responsibility "diffuses blame", and framing crises as an opportunity for change "generates blame" (Boin et al, 2009; 84). Alternatively, agency strategies refer to the delegation of responsibility away from central decision-makers through institutional design. Policy BAB refers to the creation of rule-based systems for action which invoke change automatically (e.g., automatic adjustments for inflation) – both reducing the idea of decision-maker agency and discretion (Hood, 2010).

Bringing further conceptual "depth" (Gerring, 1999; 380) by specifying the relations between BAB's, a distinction has been made between anticipatory and reactive blame (Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood, 2005). They are "based on different calculations, require different types of resources and strategies, display different dynamics and thus have different implications for our understanding of elite behavior" (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2017: 600). Overall, there has been a proliferation of blame categorisations, with one recent review identifying 30 different types of BAB found in the literature (Dimova, et al, 2024; 39). More recently, conceptualisation has focused upon understanding blame in relation to political and institutional contexts.

Rather than viewing blame games as being primarily shaped by the unique crises and controversies from which they emerged, situating blame within specific political-institutional contexts attempts to identify the shared characteristics of BAB across time (Hinterleitner, 2020). For example, blame does not often lead to significant change in the UK because "[r]estrictive conventions of resignation, frequent ministerial reshufflings, and generally low government involvement make it almost impossible for opponents to get hold of political incumbents" (Hinterleitner, 2020; 182). Regardless of the degree of distance and saliency an issue has with the public, institutional factors shape how blame-games unfold.

Unlike the policy failure and policy learning literatures, blame literature is sensitive to the way blame is attributed across organisational boundaries. Political systems with complex structures of delegation invite diffused blame across a range of organisations and actors within take advantage of this (Bach and Wegrich, 2019). Predominantly studied in the EU, this

strand of literature claims that blame is "Europeanised", shaped by the uniquely complex multi-level governance arrangements of the European Union which often benefits national politicians (Sommer, 2019). Appreciative of the way BAB is shaped by multi-level governance dynamics means local government has been studied in this literature (Bache et al, 2015; Chen et al, 2025).

Whilst the contextualisation of blame into specific institutional arrangements and delegation structures points to interesting areas for further conceptual development, from an elucidatory perspective such contextualisation must go further. In the following subsection, it is argued that this involves critically interrogating universalistic assumptions that what is being studied is always an instance of BAB.

### 2.4.2 Elucidating blame

Typical of the clarificatory approach, much focus of the above literature has been on the development of "explorative theory-building" (Dimova, et al, 2024; 36). Such typological theorising has led to the generation of hypothesis testing regarding the effectiveness of BAB in the public arena (McGraw, 1990; Hood *et al,* 2009; Kriegmair *et al,* 2021). Advancing scholarly understanding of elite behaviour, for example, when and why a politician may or may not call a public inquiry following crisis (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2010) has flourished from this literature. Yet from an elucidatory perspective, there are various conceptual dynamics at play which are problematic.

With a strong theorisation of motivation and behaviour within political life, there is an explicit universalism that assumes that across all contexts, actors calculate the risk of blame attribution and subsequently engage in avoidance strategies (Hood, 2010; 7). Even when actors themselves deny that they are engaged in blame avoidance, as the Dutch executive did when they drew attention to the complexity and ambiguity involved in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, governments are understood as engaging in BAB (Feitsma and Schillemans, 2024). This heavily presumed character of blame is also evident elsewhere in the literature. As Hinterlietner and Sager (2017; 601-3) note, anticipatory BAB is an "invisible" dynamic. The intentional design of "fuzzy accountability structures" so politicians can avoid the risk of future blame (Bache et al, 2015) is a theoretical expectation rather than something empirically

observable. What this expectation does is impose an *a priori* meaning on the action of those involved in institutional design.

Assumptions of universal drivers towards BAB have only recently been tempered with acknowledgement that local cultures are likely to shape blame (Dimova, et al, 2024; 43). Japanese and South Korean politicians exhibit a high prevalence of apologies in comparison to the western politicians, something which is seen likely to affect blame game dynamics (Hood et al, 2009). However, rather than deductively inquiring into how apologies may be subsumed into a typology of blame, an elucidatory approach would abductively explore the meaning of apologies in local languages to uncover what they do in practice. For example, how political apologies may create opportunity for "perpetrators" and "victims" to rebuild broken relationships (Saito, 2016). In this example, elucidation would open up space for conceptualising how apologies can be more than a defensive act of blame avoidance.

Alternatively, within specific settings there may be competing beliefs about the purpose and function of governance which may shape blame dynamics. For example, in English governance there are competing beliefs about whether local government is primarily a political organisation or an implementation body for central government policy (Sullivan, 2007). Existing in the mind of local government actors, these beliefs are likely to shape whether actors respond to blame attribution with avoidance or acceptance. Elucidating blame in this context means situating it within a specific historical and political context.

It should be noted that, unlike the clarificatory approaches to developing policy failure and policy learning, the blame literature has paid closer attention to the use of language. The work on blame minimisation, diffusion and generation through framing contests is a notable example already discussed (Boin et al, 2009; 84). Several discourse analyses into the language of blame have also been produced (Hansson, 2015; 2018; Wodak, 2021). Yet such literature focuses only on public statements which stops short of elucidating the concept of blame and the way it may be mobilised on the "backstage" (Boswell and Rhodes, 2024). Even when looking at what effect blame has on internal organisational dynamics, this is done by looking at public statements and decisions (Hinterleitner, 2018) – leaving the backstage of blame largely unexplored. Focusing only on the public dimensions of blame implies that once blame games have played out on the public stage and the political and media agendas shift, blame

becomes unimportant. Yet it is problematic to assume that periods of blame become inconsequential once the initial blame games have passed, especially if they have resulted in considerable organisational change. This absence in the literature has recently been noted, described as a lack of understanding into how it "feels" to be blamed, what impact this has on professional practice and how cultural dynamics shape the experience of blame (Diamova et al, 2024; 49).

To address these neglects, it is not just a matter of filling an empirical gap but rethinking conceptualisations of BAB from the ground up. One fundamental way of rethinking the concept of BAB is to understand it not as a behavioural trait of individual actors, but as something which emerges relationally and is connected with affective states such as anger, frustration and fear (Lacey, 2007). For example, complaint procedures within public sector organisations can shame professionals and inculcate them from the plea of citizens in distress (Lacey, 2007). Such affective states amplify blame and undermine processes designed to redress conflict. Thus, if BAB is as pervasive within public institutions as claimed in the blame literature (Hood, 2010), conceptualisation which captures the relational basis of blame in local settings beyond highly mediatised interactions offers a novel opportunity to move beyond previous accounts. Likewise, it would offer an opportunity to decompartmentalise the blame concept and see it as connected with other phenomenon, such as failure and learning.

## 2.5 Linking policy failure, policy learning and blame

The previous section has argued that policy failure, policy learning and blame literatures are dominated by clarificatory conceptualisation. The result is that they neglect how actors interpret the concepts and what impact this has on governance. Building on the above analysis, this subsection explores the conceptual relationships made in the literature which connect failure, learning and blame. Like the critiques articulated above, it is argued that the connections drawn between the concepts neglect the practices and beliefs which actors express.

### 2.5.1 Policy failure and policy learning

Explicit attempts to integrate policy failure and policy learning have built upon the clarificatory approaches outlined above (Dunlop, 2017a; Dunlop, 2017b; O'Donovan, 2017; Nair and Howlett, 2017; Beech and Smeets, 2022; Leong and Howlett, 2022; Howlett, 2023). This section reveals that two primary means for linking the concepts are evident within this literature.

One common relationship articulated between policy failure and policy learning is that they emerge at different points in the policymaking process (May, 1992; Leong and Howlett, 2022). Crisis management studies which examine public inquiries and policy change is a clear example of a literature which explores the relationship between failure and learning in this way (Birkland, 2004, 2006; Stark, 2019; Crow et al, 2019). Policy learning is ascribed as an intentional exercise which governments engage with post-failure. However, failure at certain points within the policy process can determine the types of learning that emerge in the later stages. O'Donovan (2017), for example, identifies failure in the initial decision-making and agenda setting stages of local, state and federal policy processes in response to tornado disasters and links this to the emergence of instrumental, social and political learning. Assessing the degrees of failure, locating it within certain stages of the policy process and understanding what makes policy "volatile", is seen as key "to understanding the role learning can play in helping avoid or mitigating many common sources of policy failure" (Leong and Howlett, 2022; 1388).

What is problematic about a relationship between failure and learning which is tied to the policymaking stages model is that this "refers to a chronological as well as a logical order thought of as universal" (Hupe 2019; 18).[2] From an elucidatory perspective, this imposes meaning onto communities of policy makers and situates failure and learning within sequential, linear mechanisms of policymaking. A lack of understanding around how failure and learning are constituted by the "policy work" underpinning the idea of stages (Colebatch, 2006) is the result of this neglect.

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[2] Hupe (2011) argues that it is a meta-theoretical framework not necessarily tied to a specific causal model. Howlett, McConnel and Perl (2015) describe the stages model as metaphorical.

Alternatively, a non-stage-based account of the failure-learning relationship has emerged from the conceptualisation of policy learning outlined above (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2016; Dunlop, 2017b; Dunlop et al, 2020). Failure emerges from dysfunctional learning which is more closely related to organisational capacity as opposed to the policy process (Dunlop, 2017b; 19-20). This approach provides a counterweight to the view that learning is always positive, describing instead how the "wrong" lessons can be learned (Dunlop, 2017b; Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018a). The UK government's management of the bovine tuberculosis (TB) outbreak is characterised as forms of dysfunctional epistemic learning (Dunlop, 2017b). Dysfunctionality is an inherent possibility of all learning categories, albeit in varying ways (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018a; 266-7). The epistemic learning in the case of TB became dysfunctional along several dimensions; scientists and civil servants failed to challenge each other on the shared commitment to culling as a policy preference; and decision makers politicised the evidence base by constructing an alternative epistemic community (Dunlop, 2017b). Ultimately, dysfunction in the management of experts by decision-makers meant that rates of TB in agriculture increased yearly. It is thus considered as a policy failure.

Throughout this article, dysfunctional learning is the causal mechanism for the mismanagement of TB and therefore the policy failure. However, should policy failure be situated within the causal conditions of learning? When New Labour tasked the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the community of scientists with curbing the increasing rates of TB in cattle, they inherited a policy space in which no consistent policy preference had ever existed and in which the preceding decade witnessed large scale reductions in badger culling (Grant, 2009; 561). Given this background information, it is reasonable to suggest that actors in the form of scientists and civil servants entering this policy space may have developed their policy preferences in response to perceived *historical failures of inaction* and the mythology surrounding the "rogue", troublesome badger within DEFRA which can be traced back to the 1960s (Grant, 2009; 563). Yet Dunlop's (2017b; 34) account prioritises how beliefs *change* in relation to the causal mechanisms of tractability, actor certification and organisational capacities – not how beliefs are situated within broader historical narratives. Bovine TB is characterised by a high degree of uncertainty, but that uncertainty also has a scientific and governance history which actors encounter both before

and after entering into the relevant policy spaces. This aspect is important for understanding why actors hold the beliefs they do, and which are subsequently deemed to contribute to failure.

Despite the differences between the two approaches, both connect failure and learning by relying on theories of governance and policy which neglect the practices and situated beliefs of actors. What it means when actors themselves draw a connection between failure and learning is unaccounted for in these approaches. In the following section, it is argued that the role of blame is something even more narrowly understood in political science.

### 2.5.2 *The role of blame within the failure-learning relationship*

Blame has been linked with policy failure or organisational learning on a number of occasions. Bovens and 't Hart (1996; 132), for instance, acknowledge the role of allocating blame in passing a judgment of failure and were interested in how methods of blame allocation reflected wider political cultures. In terms of conceptualising what relationship might exist between policy failure, blame and learning, only one account has been found when reviewing literature for this research. Howlett (2012; 541) links the concepts by arguing that policymakers utilise technical and social scientific knowledge, not solely for the purpose of improvement, but also to avoid blame:

> Learning to avoid blame occurs not just in a technical programme sense of greater efficiency or cost savings or congruence with prevailing policy paradigms, but also in terms of being able successfully to negotiate policy and political decision-making processes. Learning and knowledge acquisition in this 'deeper' sense centres on the attempt to construct policies so that decision-makers may, if not always claim credit for policy successes, then, at least, avoid blame for their failure

In this formulation the behavioural trait of blame avoidance is portrayed as the mechanism which stimulates policy learning. A policy maker is more sensitive to negative

perceptions over positive ones and therefore seeks out those causes of failure which bring about negative evaluations of themselves.

Even within the confines of the dominant conceptualisation of BAB found in the literature, linking blame to policy failure and policy learning in this way is limited. Howlett's quote portrays the desire to avoid blame as something which prompts policy learning to *prevent* the allocation of blame. Yet as highlighted earlier, anticipatory blame is but only one form of BAB (Hood, 2002). Howlett's (2012) formulation says very little about the interaction between blame and policy learning once an evaluation of failure has already been established. It is also static due to the lack of emphasis on the relational nature of blame and the interactions involved; hence the common term "blame games". Do blame allocation and avoidance strategies, with their specific relational and discursive dimensions, alter understandings of what went wrong and therefore delineate the boundaries for policy learning?

There is good reason to suspect that blame discursively shapes policy learning. Reactionary, presentational strategies of BAB seek to change perceptions of a blameworthy event by offering alternative interpretations. If an actor successfully reframes and transforms perceptions of who is responsible and what has caused an event, then they also have the potential to undermine what lessons can be learnt. Recent linguistic approaches to the study of political blame can support this idea (Hansson, 2015; 2018; Murphy 2020). Hansson (2015; 308), for example, shows that excuses and justifications to avoid blame, such as "rescue narratives" which frame an actor as a "hero" opposed to a "villain", or the "bad apple" approach which attributes a problem to a lone actor, serve to reframe agency for both the cause of a failure and who should be tasked with dealing with the consequences. Such narratives can commit actors to certain policy decisions, such as Gordon Brown's Keynesian response to the 2008 financial crisis (Hansson, 2015; 307). Problematising this crisis as caused by a "bad apple" and not the financialised economy itself outlines the boundaries for action and therefore what policy lessons may be drawn from failure. Notwithstanding, such blame narratives which identify "villains" for failure may break-down productive relational dynamics between actors and make conflict prominent over cooperation. If actors "learnt best with

friends" (Forester, 1999; 31-8), does this mean actors do not learn when conflicting with those they perceive as the "enemy"?

In light of this possible relationship with policy learning, reconsidering how relational dynamics between certain groups, such as the shared or competing group identities, histories and styles of interaction, beliefs and normative commitments shape BAB is important. For example, how might beliefs of local government actors regarding centralised power in England (Richardson et al, 2019) and histories of conflict with central government (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988) impact local responses to failure and blame attribution? If such attributions are perceived as illegitimate amongst local actors, this in turn may shape what is learnt from such occasions. Thus, a key aim of this thesis is to further develop an understanding of blame, failure and learning within the specific contexts in which they emerge.

**2.6 Conclusion**

To conclude this chapter, a summary of the argument so far will be provided before ending with the specification of the research questions. Clarificatory conceptual formation seeks to provide parsimonious definitions of phenomenon which distinguish between essential attributes and secondary classifications. The aim is to "reduce excess meaning" within conceptualisations (Durose et al, 2022; 4) and create "fewer definitional predicates" (Gerring, 1999; 373). It has been argued that this approach dominates the political science literature on policy failure, policy learning and blame. Precise definitions of how a policy failure provides certainty in the hotly contested terrain of partisan argumentation. Specification of primary and secondary classifications of policy learning unites a fragmented set of literatures through the creation of shared scholarly language. Blame typologies detail the diverse ways in which actors can engage in BAB. Despite the scholarly utility of such conceptualisations, it has also been argued that the way failure, blame and learning are concepts mobilised by actors themselves within certain communities and local settings is neglected (Schaffer, 2016). Using the example of English local government which exhibits concepts of "corporate failure" (Wajzer *et al*, 2016) and "lesson learning" (CIPHA, 2022) which are used by actors themselves,

this chapter has demonstrated that clarificatory conceptualisation homogenises the diverse, localised meanings actors attach to such concepts.

The policy failure literature's pre-occupation with definitional precision has neglected the way failure is mobilised by actors themselves. The critique of policy learning is that clarification imposes learning onto instances which actors themselves might not recognise as such. Likewise, blame subsumes all forms of government action as a form of BAB even when such behaviours are "invisible" (Hinterlietner and Sager, 2017; 601) and is pre-occupied with the public life of blame to the neglect of private interpretations and the impression this leaves on governance practices. Shared across these critiques is that clarification leads to the creation of clearly bounded concepts which partition off certain areas of experience as irrelevant to study. When connections are made, macro-level theorisations of the policy process are relied upon. Political scientists do not understand how the experiential and relational dynamics of failure, learning and blame might offer new insights into their connections. For example, the way blame for failure might shape learning differently in distinct ideational contexts is not understood.

Placing the concepts in context from an elucidatory approach means prioritising how situated meaning shapes the experience and mobilisation of the concepts by actors. To uphold a grounded conceptualisation, this thesis first asks "how" questions which focus on "details and concrete practices" before moving onto more abstracted "what" questions (Flyvbjerg, 2001; 118). It invites a decentred approach to social inquiry which seeks to capture the ways in which policy failure, policy learning and blame arise within the micro-politics of everyday-practice and explore the contours of such a process. It is the intention for this work to explore such dynamics by answering three research questions:

1) How do policy actors interpret policy failure?

2) How does actors' experience of policy failure intersect with blame and policy learning, if at all?

3) What are the implications of the intersection of policy failure, learning and blame for governance?

In the upcoming chapter, the analytical framework for this thesis outlines what is meant by situated meaning and the interpretivist philosophy from which this idea stems.

**Chapter 3: Theorising interpretation through traditions, dilemmas and narratives**

**3.0 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, it was argued that the policy failure, learning and blame literatures are dominated by a "clarificatory" mode of conceptual formation (Durose *et al,* 2022). To balance these literatures and explore the relationship between the concepts, "elucidatory" conceptualisation which places situated meaning at the heart of understanding is required (Schaffer, 2016). In this chapter, an interpretivist analytical framework is developed to help answer the research questions and elucidate the concepts of failure, blame and learning into the contexts in which they emerge. Interpretivism is defined as:

> [A] broad tradition in the social sciences which assumes that the meaning of social activities derives from intrinsic intentions which cannot be read off social behaviour but need to be actively interpreted against the self-understandings of individuals and the functioning of this behaviour in the social context (Bartels, 2015; 51).

A plethora of approaches fall under the interpretivist banner, but the approach associated with Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes (2006; 2010) guides this research. This approach has been selected due to the actor-centred framework emphasising the role contingency and context in the social world (Bevir and Blakely, 2018). Situated agency explains the actions and beliefs of actors in reference to their social context, whilst also understanding that actors can knowingly change their actions and beliefs despite enduring social contexts (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 72). How actors interpret failure, learning and blame is therefore shaped by the histories of such phenomena within certain political and organisational contexts. Yet actors also deploy such concepts in response to contingent events and adapt their meaning (and behaviour) accordingly. It is this interplay between historical meaning and contingency which is the focus of this chapter.

Tradition, dilemma and narrative are the analytical concepts which explain how actors interpret and navigate the social world (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 2010). Traditions shape the

beliefs actors hold about the function and purpose of certain institutions, for example, local government (Orr and Vince, 2009). Dilemmas which represent the interpretation of conflicting beliefs explain change in traditions. Narratives are the means by which traditions, beliefs and dilemmas are connected and expressed by actors. Whilst a useful starting point to understand how actors arrive at the interpretations they make; this chapter argues that the relational dimensions of interpretation are neglected (Bartels and Turnbull, 2020). For example, to understand how interpretations of failure are made within the English local government community, analysis must capture how traditions provide the norms by which failure is ascertained and the affective and interpersonal dynamics between evaluator and evaluated. To address this, this chapter proposes that insights from organisational learning theory (Argyris and Schon, 1974; 1996), crisis management (Boin et al 2016; Boswell et al, 2021), and action orientated storytelling (Forester, 1999) can help produce a more dynamic theorisation of the analytical concepts.

Enhancing the relational dimensions of the tradition, dilemma and narrative concepts is done through three key steps. First, the ideas of single and double loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974; 1996) illustrate that actors work together to address errors in performance. When single-loop learning occurs, actors work collaboratively to correct errors in ways which reproduce, rather than challenge, traditions and the dominant conventions of performance embedded within. Second, small-d dilemmas which draw attention to the role of everyday decisions (Boswell et al, 2019) and the practical demands of dealing with crisis (Boswell et al, 2021) advances understanding of how change can result from accumulative action and actors working with those they perceive as their opponents. Thirdly, a more action orientated understanding of narrative (Forester, 1999) demonstrates that narratives are the means by which antagonism or deliberation are enacted.

This chapter is structured as follows. The underlying philosophical approach to meaning, context and agency are introduced in the initial subsection. Subsequently, how the concepts of tradition, dilemma and narrative are detailed and enhanced with the literatures mentioned above. Finally, the chapter concludes by summarising the argument and segueing into the research design chapter.

## 3.1 The philosophy of interpretivism

Here, the philosophical underpinnings of the Bevir and Rhodes' (2010) interpretivist framework are discussed. Meaning holism and situated agency are considered as the meta-theoretical bedrock for this approach. Whilst they are not ideas operationalised in this research, meaning holism and situated agency provide the necessary undergrowth which structures the analytical concepts. For this reason, it is important to provide a short discussion of these ideas before detailing the analytical concepts of tradition, dilemma and narrative

Interpretivism is an anti-naturalist philosophical stance which holds that social reality cannot be understood through the objectivist ontology and epistemology of the natural sciences. Instead, "social reality embodies the meanings of the individuals who helped create it. In this sense, social reality is a matrix of meanings, continually and collaboratively composed by the people who inhabit it" (Bevir and Blakey, 2018; 20). Individuals compose the social world through interpreting it, whilst those interpretations are also shaped by the "matrix of meanings" in which they are embedded.[3] This relationship between individual interpretations and the broader contexts which shape those interpretations are brought together through the idea of "meaning holism". Meaning holism refers to the way in which "we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole" (Gadamer, 2004; 291) and is often conveyed through the idea of the "hermeneutic circle" (Dreyfus, 1980). This substantiates what was meant in the previous chapter in relation to the situated meaning of the concepts of failure, learning and blame.

Within the version of interpretivism used in this thesis, the chosen phrase to reflect this situated-ness of meaning is "webs of belief" (Bevir, 1999; 29).[4] Opposed to the contextualism which looks to understand the meaning of speech by placing it within linguistic context, meaning is positioned within interconnected webs of belief. For example, to comprehend the widely reproduced quote in British politics that "all political lives (...) end in

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[3] This account of social reality given by Bevir and Blakey (2018) is not new or original. Rather, it builds upon numerous strands of thought within social science such as Charles Taylors theories of explanation (1971) and Anthony Giddens theory of "structuration" (1984).

[4] The web-metaphor can be traced back to Geertz in the phrase "webs of significance" (1973; 5) and who builds on Max Weber's idea that culture is the context that gives meaning to belief. Bevir does not explicitly draw upon such prior theorisations and ostensibly views meaning as contained within belief. This contrast with Geertz who places beliefs, symbols, practices, and languages in networks of meaning (Abolafia, et al 2014).

failure" (Jones, 2023), analysis must go beyond the English linguistic context and situate this within the historical context of parliamentary democracy. The salience of this quote and the meaning it holds is derived from beliefs about the centrality of electoral representation as the primary space for political action within Britain (Hall, 2011; 128). All political lives end in failure because alternative forms of political action (e.g., community activism) are not considered as a space for political success to emerge.

Further discussion of the explanatory role of webs of belief as context and its operationalisation is detailed below. For now, what is important to stress is that webs of belief refer to an interwoven nexus of ideas about how the world works which have evolved over time. Importantly then, meaning is also historical and must be excavated through "historicist explanation" which situates webs of belief within lineages of thought that change over time (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 77). Yet this does not mean that history plays a deterministic role in social action or thought. Actors are agentic and respond to, rather than moulded by, historical trends.

Situated agency is the cornerstone upon which Bevir and Rhodes (2010) build their framework for interpretivist social science. Moving against what is seen as the diminished role for autonomous action under structural and post-structuralist accounts of the world, situated agency sees the individual generating belief through neither "pure experience or pure reason" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 74). Social context does not determine beliefs without reflection of the individual and autonomous free will does not drive thought without the influence of social context. The authors go on to state that:

> To accept agency is to imply people have the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own, and in so doing they can transform the social background. So, agency is possible, but it is always situated in a particular context (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 74).

Intentionality and local reasoning are key constituent ideas for situated agency, providing a fuller account of the actor outside of the claim that context matters. Intentionality goes beyond the everyday use of the term to convey the ability of actors to reflect on "beliefs,

motivations and desires" as if they are "objects that exist in and for the mind" (Bevir, 2017; 54). Local reasoning is the idea that beliefs sit consistently in relation to the wider webs of belief within which agency is situated – a dynamic at play for both actors operating within expert communities and those outside professional, specialised areas (Bevir, 2017; 63).

Situated agency also has implications for theorising actions within this framework. Action is contextually meaningful because it is underpinned by webs of belief (Bevir and Blakely, 2018; 23).[5] When done consistently and seen to "exhibit a pattern", actions are thought of as practices (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 75). Significant debate within the interpretivist community has existed regarding the appropriate role of practice in explanation, with some approaches seeing practice as ontologically and epistemologically prior to belief (Bevir and Rhodes, 2012; Cook and Wagenaar, 2012; Wagenaar, 2014; 2016). In line with the hermeneutic philosophy which underpins the interpretivism used in this thesis, intersubjective structures of belief exist prior to action, despite the latter being an important source for ascertaining belief (Rhodes, 2017; 5). Yet to think about beliefs as prior to action in this absolute sense should not come at the cost of recognising that beliefs are shaped by dynamic interactions (Bartels and Turnbull, 2020).[6] For example, the beliefs civil servants hold about failing local governments are likely shaped by interactions with those they are evaluating and negotiations with colleagues as they work together to develop evaluation reports. What will be argued throughout the subsequent subsections of this chapter, is that with an awareness of the relational dimensions of belief, a more dynamic understanding of the analytical concepts of Bevir and Rhodes (2010) is possible.

## 3.2 The analytical concepts of interpretivism

In the following sub-sections, how the philosophical bedrock of the interpretivist framework translates into deployable analytical concepts is outlined. The concepts as discussed by the

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[5] This is not the case for all physical movements and behaviours. Unlike the involuntary behaviour of sneezing, actions are contextually meaningful because they are brought to life through the beliefs which underpin them (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 73).

[6] Bartels and Turnbull (2020) identify four different approaches to relational public administration which differ based upon contrasting ontologies and epistemologies. This analytical framework is situated in what the authors describe as a "dynamic systems" understanding of governance due to the "substantialist" theorisation of meaning as contained within belief (Bartels and Turnbull, 2020; 1337).

originators of the approach are specified (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010), whilst also tracing the critiques surrounding traditions, narratives and dilemmas. Offering much to the interpretive study of failure, learning and blame, it is argued that the analytical concepts neglect the relational dynamics of learning, change and conflict. To address this, ideas of traditions are enhanced through a theory of organisational learning; small-d dilemmas are linked to the idea of crisis and conflict; and narratives are orientated towards action.

### 3.2.1 Traditions

Tradition operationalises the ideas of meaning holism, context and historicist explanation. Bevir and Rhodes (2010; 78) define tradition as the "ideational background" which invites individuals to hold certain beliefs, make sense of their environments and engage in certain actions and practices. This ideational background is not "inscribed" into "institutions" and "organisations" (Marsh et al., 2014; 341) or determined by broader discursive structures (Hall, 2011; 73), but inherently contingent and dependent on the agency of actors. In this sense, traditions are holistic devices that actors themselves mobilise to help make sense of the world. Yet traditions also shape the intentions, reasoning, and actions underlining the mobilisation of traditions (Bevir, 1999; 196). Due to this dynamic, the relationship between tradition and agency has been described as a dialectical one (Pike, 2020; 4).

Inter-subjectivity and shared meaning between situated agents are also key features of tradition (Bevir, 1999; 195). Early formulations of this interpretivist approach acknowledged the possibility that traditions can contain core beliefs which span across time and contexts (Bevir, 1999; 216). But with an emphasis on contingency within later work, the focus of the founding authors has been more on the notion of change rather than commonality and consensus within communities (Hay, 2011; 171).

Critical engagements with this interpretivist approach have picked up on this absence. One way of formulating the critique is to question why some ideas benefit from a greater degree of taken-for grandness than others. (Robinson, 2016; 123). When examined through the lens of political conflict, an alternative articulation asks, "why some 'inter-subjective' communities are stronger than others" (Pike, 2020; 3). Persistence of a tradition can be

partially answered by Bevir and Rhodes' (2018; 16) notion of "restrictive power" where actors can mobilise "their own traditions to resist policies". More recently, it has been argued that this view of restricted power can be enhanced with the idea that actors imbue traditions with power and legitimacy when they orientate towards them during political conflict (Pike, 2020). Stated differently, some traditions are seen as more authorial and therefore more useful during political conflict because actors interpret power relations, institutional frameworks and the risk of punishment as constraints (or as resources they can mobilise) which shape understandings of what is possible. It is contended that understanding why interpretations of power (and therefore the reproduction of traditions) are made by certain groups can be further enhanced by integrating ideas of learning.

Traditions have been described as "selective legacies passed down from generation to generation" which shape the worldview of actors (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 157). Throughout the work of Bevir and Rhodes, there is often reference to traditions being reproduced through socialisation (Bevir, Rhodes and Weller, 2003; 947; Bevir and Rhodes, 2022; 154). Socialisation has been deployed to describe empirical research examining the way civil servants come to reproduce values, beliefs and practices (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 121). The important role that socialisation plays in the persistence of traditions over time is evidenced within the founding philosophical text upon which the Bevir and Rhodes framework is built (Bevir, 1999; 200). In this text, it is argued that:

> The new born infant develops into a mature adult with beliefs; and because these beliefs cannot come exclusively from its experience and its reason alone, they must embody a tradition transmitted to it during a process of socialisation. The new born infant learns to find his way in the world by being taught to recognise objects, identify their characteristics, name them, and speak about them, where the objects he thus picks out and discusses are made available to him by a tradition. The infant learns to recognise, to identify, to name, and to speak about objects through contact with others whose theories give them, and so the infant, experience of one set of objects rather than another. The infant learns to pick out objects as a result of being shown them and told their names, but what he can be shown and taught to name depends

on the objects of which his teachers have experiences, and so on the theories with which these teachers already make sense of the world. A tradition provides the theories that construct the objects the infant initially finds in the world.

Whilst emphasis in the above quote is on the reproduction of a tradition through the sharing of theories and terminologies, the social and interactive dynamics of learning – "the infant learns (…) through contact with others" – are key. Yet despite the seeming importance of learning, developing this concept within the Bevir and Rhodes framework has been neglected. For example, the beliefs local government actors hold about relations with central government are said to be shaped by various competing governance traditions (Gardner and Lowndes, 2016). Yet in focusing on actors already socialised into a tradition, how actors learn such beliefs through formal and informal interactions aimed at "teaching" actors how to be officers and councillors, and how the process of learning itself is shaped by traditions, is unexplored. By neglecting how actors learn to be situated within a tradition, how actors learn to relate to others is also sidelined. For example, "collectivist" traditions of central-local relations entail "a critique of paternalism and centralised bureaucracy" (Gardner and Lowdes, 2016; 131) and encourage adversarial interactions with central government. Without a more nuanced conceptualisation of learning within this approach, there is a risk that analysis will be unable to capture how traditions shape the often-conflictual relational dynamics of failure, learning and blame within government.

Notions of organisational learning offer a particularly helpful framework to advance the conceptualisation of how traditions are reproduced through learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974; 1996).[7] Similar to the idea of tradition, Argyris and Schon (1996) outline that actors hold "theories-of-action" which provide explicit justifications for decision-making, and "theories-in-action" which offer implicit assumptions about how decision-making leads to certain outcomes. These theories are made-up of "governing values" which refer to identities, beliefs, desires, motivations, and emotions (Argyris and Schon, 1974; 29) and are deployed by groups of actors who jointly attempt to overcome emerging problems by correcting errors (or

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[7] Organisations should not be thought of as reified objects but instead as organisations which exist to the extent that actors jointly interpret them to. This line of argumentation is borrowed from Colin Hay's idea of "if-real" ontology of the state (2014).

failure) in initial problem solutions (Argyris and Schon 1996; 33). Acting upon the interpretation of errors (or failure) can amount to two distinct types of learning: single and double-loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974; 1996). Single-loop learning centres around responding to errors in ways which do not question established beliefs and assumptions within action theories. For example, the "professional" tradition of local government, which values centralised policymaking (Gardner and Lowdes, 2016; 132), may lead local actors to redress failed implementation of central government targets without questioning underlining assumptions of the central-local dynamic. Alternatively, double-loop learning involves critically interrogating underlining values in response to errors.

This idea of organisational learning enhances the understanding of how traditions are reproduced in three ways. Firstly, bringing attention to the way communities work together to interpret and address problems emphasises the social dynamics of reproducing traditions. The idea of "governing values" reminds us that this social process of learning is itself shaped by traditions which inform how actors relate to one another. For example, professions which train newcomers to be adversarial in their practice and who value conflict (e.g., corporate litigation) are likely to address problems following such conventions. Secondly, the idea of "theories-in-action" highlights the tacit quality of certain beliefs which inform how actors respond to emerging problems and engage in learning. This something largely overlooked by those deploying the Bevir and Rhodes framework despite tacit knowledge being invoked to frame findings (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015). Lastly, it provides a nuanced distinction between the types of learning which can result in traditions being reproduced. Single-loop learning responds to emerging problems by crafting solutions which conform to dominant theories within inter-subjective communities. This substantiates the dynamics by which traditions are said to be both enduring and evolving (Bevir, Rhodes and Weller, 2003) and how actors can accommodate tensions and conflicts within traditions. On the other hand, double-loop learning also provides an understanding of the way in which traditions can change through reflecting on underlining assumptions. This line of reasoning will be extended in the next section through an examination of dilemmas.

Before moving onto the question of how dilemmas change, it is worth restating the argument made in this section. The concept of traditions has been critiqued on the basis that

it neglects to account for why certain traditions are more enduring than others (Robinson, 2016). Pike (2020) argues that this can be understood if we pay attention to the way actors interpret certain traditions as more powerful and therefore deploy them during conflict. The argument made in this sub-section is that this advancement can be further enhanced by acknowledging the sociality of traditions and developing the undertheorized concepts of learning. In other words, paying attention to the processes by which actors learn together (and in opposition with one another) that certain traditions are more powerful. It is proposed that the theory of organisational learning proposed by Argyris and Schon (1974; 1996) can help identity the micro-political processes of traditions being produced and challenged through single and double-loop learning.

### 3.2.2 Dilemmas

While traditions account for the "background" influences shaping the way actors interpret meaning, the analytical concept of dilemma brings together agency and change. Bevir and Rhodes state that a "dilemma is any experience or idea that conflicts with someone's beliefs, and so forces them to alter the belief they inherit as a tradition" (2010; 79). The alteration of a tradition is a key dimension of dilemma, accounting for the way actors change their beliefs and practices and so explaining change within social life (Hay, 2011; 178).

Much debate has occurred over the theorisation of change within the Bevir and Rhodes framework (Glynos and Howarth, 2008; Hay, 2011; Fawcett, 2016; Geddes, 2019; Pike, 2020). For those who do not reject the concept, they acknowledge that dilemma neglects "the process of change" and in particular, how dilemmas relate to the "everyday practices and power relations" in which change is entangled (Geddes, 2019; 244, 246).

It is contended that the recent distinction between "big-d" and "small-d" dilemmas can help address this disconnect between dilemma, everyday practice and change (Boswell *et al,* 2019; 39-42). When actors experience dilemma, this can stem from the social and economic theories they hold about the world – such as the dilemma experienced by political elites between high taxation policies and the risk of capital flight within a globalised world (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 10). Such "big-d" dilemmas refer to the clash of grand and abstract

theories about how the world functions. Conversely, "small-d" dilemmas refer to "the everyday choices that these actors make in their work and life" (Boswell *et al,* 2019; 40). Relatively, these are the more banal everyday decisions experienced as competing avenues for action. Where big-d dilemmas provoke change by cultivating new beliefs about the world, small-d dilemmas provoke change "in response to everyday practices" (Boswell et al 2019; 41).[8] Drawing attention to the role that prosaic everyday choices can have disrupting beliefs and traditions; this distinction offers greater nuance in theorising change. Despite this positive step, it remains unclear how small-d dilemmas interact with big-d dilemmas, and in what situations the latter may result in significant change.

Alexandra Meakin and Marc Geddes (2020) study of parliamentary change highlights how everyday decision-making and conflict can accumulate overtime, resulting in clash of grand ideas associated with the big-d dilemmas. The authors describe how the resignation of UK House of Commons Clerk in 2014, questions about subsequent recruitment process, the role title and travel arrangements for candidates became entangle with interpersonal feuds and conflict between the parliamentarian traditions of modernisation and constitutional procedure (Meakin and Geddes, 2020). Change in this example come not from new beliefs emerging which transformed the traditions, but rather "the random unintended consequences of other people's actions" (Rhodes, 2011; 273) morphed overtime into conflict won by those mobilising the constitutional tradition. This example draws attention to the importance of small-d dilemmas accumulating and being amplified through parties divided over competing avenues for action.

Building on this idea that everyday decision-making, conflict and dilemma are intertwined and amplified over time, this thesis deploys the framework of crisis dilemmas to illuminate how such dynamics can arise during times of failure, blame and learning (Boswell et al, 2021). Developed using insights from the crisis management and strategic leadership literatures which detail the practical demands placed on government (Boin, et al 2016; Boin et al, 2021), this framework demonstrates how crises provoke dilemmas between abstract ideals, the everyday tasks of crisis management, and the tensions of political conflict (Boswell

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[8] Keeping in line with the idea that beliefs exist prior to action, beliefs must ultimately be constitutive of change.

et al, 2021). For example, Covid-19 lockdowns created a dilemma between the economy and public health for government elites which were experienced through the everyday decisions around liaising with scientific advisors, cross-departmental coordination and dealing with executive infighting (Boswell et al, 2021). In this framework, five crisis dilemmas are identified; sense making; decision-making and coordination; meaning making; accounting; and learning (Boswell et al, 2021). [9] This framework is summarised in the Table 3.1, adapted from Boswell et al (2021; 1261). These crisis dilemmas illuminate how the tensions actors face in decision-making around labelling events as crisis, responding to accusation of failure and blame, and demands for learning are filtered through political conflict and antagonism.[10]

Table 3.1: Crisis dilemmas framework

| Agency in crisis management | Key dilemma |
| --- | --- |
| Sense-making | When to act: to wait for more evidence or act in advance of the evidence? |
| Decision-making | How to coordinate amid contestation and complexity: to centralise of distribute decision-making? |
| Meaning making | How to project authority: centralise or distribute media communications |
| Accounting | How to claim credit and deflect blame: take responsibility of offload it? |
| Learning | How to move forward: to preserve the status quo or reform |

The first crisis dilemma revolves around governmental actors interpreting an unfolding event as a "crisis". A crisis is not a pre-given state of affairs, but something interpreted through the values actors hold and how this interacts with the values of those they work together with in such situations (Boin et al, 2021; 20). This is an internal dynamic which takes place within government and outside of the public view. Labelling an event as a crisis can be provoke conflict amongst political elites who become divided over the seriousness of events and

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[9] Whilst the crisis dilemmas imply linearity and the idea of policy stages critiqued in the literature review, the framework is deployed with an understanding that each dilemma is likely to be experienced iteratively. For example, learning is likely to be an ongoing dynamic which shapes agency throughout the dilemmas of crisis management. Learning is an integral dimension of how social life unfolds, but it is also something which occurs formally through practices of "lesson-learning" carried out in certain ways by particular professional and expert communities.

[10] In Boswell et al (2021), the learning dilemma is excluded from the analysis due to the constraints of examining the Covid-19 crisis whilst it was ongoing. Using the literature the crisis management literature the table has been adapted to include the learning dilemma (Boin et al, 2021).

prioritise other areas of the government agenda (Boin et al, 2016; 23). This is compounded by the influence administrative and scientific advisors have (or not) over political leadership in persuading them "of emerging threats and vulnerabilities" (Boin et al, 2016; 23).

Once the sense-making dilemma has been resolved through a shared understanding that emerging events do represent a crisis, actors face the "action-imperative" where they "see themselves forced to make choices" (Hupe and Hill, 2007) in how to manage crisis. The decision-making dilemma involves balancing "policy, political, organisational, ethical and sometimes personal" risks (Boin et al, 2016; 16), selecting between competing modes of governance (e.g., centralised/decentralised) and dealing with contestation over who is responsible for what (Boswell et al, 2021).

Following decision-making, actors must navigate the meaning-making dilemma. This involves constructing a persuasive public narrative regarding "what has happened and why, what its repercussions are, how it can be resolved, who can be relied upon to do so, and what lessons will need to be drawn from the episode" (Boin et al, 2016; 80). The negotiations, factions and tensions which occur in private can come to disrupt the coherence of public messaging and enhance the sense of dilemma (Boswell et al, 2021). Again, whilst such meaning-making may involve big-dilemmas of balancing different values to satisfy a diverse citizenship, meaning-making also entails small-d dilemmas such of organising press conferences when social restrictions were place (as was the case during Covid-19).

The accountability dilemma refers to the demand for post hoc rationalisation of government decision-making during crisis within both public and private accountability forums (Boin et al, 2016; 16). Public practices of accountability often begin in an attempt to bring closure to a crisis, but airing competing interpretations of performance can produce further contestation (Boin et al, 2016; 11). For those who are expected to account for their actions during crisis, previous storytelling which emerged in response to the meaning-making dilemma may be called into question – demonstrating the recursive and iterative character of such dilemmas. Relatedly, the dilemma of learning can also arise at the point accountability processes take place such as Public Inquiries. This speaks to the process of navigating competing accounts and attempting to forge shared understandings which may or may not challenge "core values" (Boin et al, 2016; 136).

How this framework for helps advance the interpretivist study of failure, learning and blame can be demonstrated by way of an example. As stated in Chapter 2, failure, learning and blame are often linked to change (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013) through conflict and argumentation (Zittoun, 2015; Hinterleitner, 2018). This is also something evident the few moments that Bevir and Rhodes examine failure (Rhodes, 2007; Bevir and Richards, 2009; 7). Linking failure with traditions and dilemmas, Rhodes (2007; 1253) goes onto say:

> Any existing pattern of rule will have some failings. Different people will have different views about these failings because they are not given by experience but constructed from interpretations of experience infused with traditions. When people's perception of governance failure conflicts with their existing beliefs, the resulting dilemmas push them to reconsider their beliefs and the traditions that inform those beliefs. Because people were socialized in diverse traditions, there arises a political contest over what are the failings and what should be done about them. Rival positions promote their particular sets of theories and policies. This contest leads to a reform of governance. So, any reform can be understood as a contingent product of a contest of meanings in action. Moreover, the new pattern of rule will display new failings, pose new dilemmas, and be the subject of more competing proposals for reform (Rhodes, 2007; 1253).

Considering the types of demands that government actors face during crisis, it becomes clear the above quote neglects the way everyday practices, decisions, beliefs and relational dynamics make failure (and crisis) known. What are the dilemmas that underline the decision to begin an evaluation of governance; the selection of evaluative techniques and the convincing of others that this is an important area of underperformance which demands attention? What are the dilemmas encountered as actors attempt to work together to craft failure narratives, navigate differences of opinion and inscribe a shared vision into documents? Once failure is established, what tensions are involved when attempting to convince others that the failures identified require certain forms of action? How do emerging coalitions learn to work-together and respond to challenge and critiques as they take failure

out into the world? With a more grounded notion of dilemma, the starting point for understanding failure is not from the point at which an "existing pattern of rule" makes failure known, but rather from the tensions within the beliefs, practices and relational dynamics which underpin the emergence of failure, what is done with it and how the dilemmas of failure change overtime.

To summarise this subsection, the concept of dilemma accounts for how social change occurs through actors interpreting contradiction and tension between beliefs. By demonstrating how everyday decisions can provoke dilemmas between grand ideas, the distinction between small and big dilemmas can enhance the theorisation of change within this interpretivist framework. This subsection has also introduced the framework of crisis dilemmas which sheds further light on the intersection between everyday decisions, dilemmas and political conflict. Through a process of abduction and adaptation, this framework of crisis dilemmas will be used to structure the empirical chapters, and adapted so it is shaped by the empirical work carried out within this thesis. The methodological steps taken to integrate the framework into the analysis are detailed in the next chapter.

### 3.2.3 Narratives

Narrative is the last analytical concept that will be mobilised to understand how actors interpret failure, learning and blame. For Bevir and Rhodes (2006b; 28), narratives create, characterise, and bring to life the "shared facts" that a tradition offers. Where traditions account for the context that actors are situated within, a narrative does the work of bringing together "significant relationships, connections and similarities between" shared facts (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006b; 28). Narratives, like theories, serve to organise and structure the complexity of the world into a coherent image. Due to this function, narratives play an important explanatory role within the interpretivist framework: "narrative is a form of explanation that works by relating actions to the beliefs and desires that produce them" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 79). It is something both professional researchers create when interpreting the social world, but it also how actors make sense of their everyday practices (Bevir and Rhodes, 2015b; 23). Beyond the explanatory role of narratives connecting actions, beliefs and

traditions, narratives are also the means by which dilemmas are expressed and therefore how change occurs.

Some have argued that the conception of narrative within this framework is more passive than active. Bevir and Rhodes have been critiqued for focussing solely on how narratives function as an explanatory tool within policy analysis, rather than account for how the world unfolds (Wagenaar, 2012; 209). Whilst much of their conceptual work focuses upon how interpretive social inquiry explains, they do at times demonstrate a more active understanding of how "citizens use stories (…) to inspire involvement, to persuade others to act" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2012; 205). This understanding is clearly articulated when discussing the impact interpretive analysis can have on policymaking practice (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006c). It is stated that "an interpretive approach encourages us to forswear management techniques and strategies but, and the point is crucial, to replace such tools with learning by telling stories and listening to them" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006c; 103). If telling stories is the way in which policy analysts can shape practice, this must also be the case for actors studied. The pragmatist tradition of interpretivist research can help accentuate the social and action orientated dimensions of narrative that remain largely implicit.

The idea of "practical storytelling" illustrates the way narratives guide action (Forester, 1999). Narratives emerge when actors interpret the world through the lens of tradition, but they also move about the world and share such narratives with others in the form of stories. Stories do contain abstracted ideals, personal histories, and experiences, but they are also provide guidance, inspiration, and justification for present and future action (Wagneaar, 2012; 216). Practical storytelling takes place when actors attempt to make sense of and interpret the world together, relating the past and present towards the future (Forester, 1999). As Forester (1999; 192) tells us, practical storytelling is about:

> creating common and deliberative stories together – stories about what's relevant to their purposes, about their shared responsibilities, about what they will and won't, can and can't, about what they have and haven't done.

When such stories originate amongst "friends", actors can undergo a process of learning where our framing of events and situations are sympathetically challenged whilst also being reminded of our values, emotions and desires (Forester, 1999; 197-200). Such conversations can amount to the small-d dilemmas whereby a friend who challenges beliefs leads to a dilemma of how to respond (e.g., defensively/receptively). Likewise, stories can also form antagonistically, reinforcing narratives of who and what is at fault and building notions of us versus them (Forester and McKibbon, 2020). Uncovering the way in narratives are negotiated within groups, modified by events, challenged, and reinforced through conflict will enable this research to identify the interpretation of failure, blame and learning as expressed in narrative form.

## 3.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the theory of interpretation that will assist in answering the research questions regarding how actors interpret the relationship between the policy failure, policy learning, and blame. The interpretivist framework of traditions, dilemmas and narratives are a suitable starting point for understanding how interpretations are shaped by both historical milieus and contingent events. This framework can be further enhanced by addressing questions of how traditions persist, change relates to everyday practice and conflict, and how narratives shape action.

Firstly, it has been argued that an understanding of how traditions persist can be enhanced by integrating the idea of single and double loop learning (1978; 1996). Single-loop learning, in particular, draws attention to the social dynamics of solving problems which can lead to the reproduction of dominant traditions. Secondly, this chapter has argued that the theorisation of change is enhanced when the distinction between small-d and big-d dilemmas (Boswell et al, 2019) is integrated with an understanding of how dilemmas accumulate and unfold through conflict and crisis management (Boswell et al, 2021). In the next chapter, the research design and methodological choices are detailed.

**Chapter 4: Research design and methods**

## 4.0 Introduction

The objective of this study is to provide a novel understanding of the ways in which policy failure, policy learning and blame may be linked within the everyday practice of governance. This research was informed by formulating the following research questions:

1.) How do policy actors interpret policy failure?

2.) How does actors' experience of policy failure intersect with blame and policy learning, if at all?

3.) What are the implications of the intersection of policy failure, learning and blame for governance?

The preceding chapter argued that the interpretivist framework of traditions, dilemmas and narrative (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 2010) could help elucidate the concepts of failure, learning and blame within the contexts in which they emerge. The purpose of this chapter is to detail the research design, methods and analytical techniques suitable this research.

This chapter argues that the approach to comparative case study design formulated by Boswell et al (2019) is appropriate for answering the research questions. Using a comparative case study, opposed to a single case study, is valuable due to the way in which it helps capture the influence of context. As an actor centred approach to comparison premised on shared dilemmas, this approach is particularly useful for examining how concepts may travel between settings (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013; 24) without relying upon reified structures or institutions. This supports the aim of situating the concepts of failure, learning and blame in relation to specific political and historical moments.

Utilising Boswell et al's (2019) approach, this chapter outlines how cases of central government intervention into English local government were identified as fruitful empirical spaces for this research. The specific cases of intervention into Birmingham City Council (2014-

2019) and Northamptonshire County Council (2018-2021) were selected as appropriate due to the likelihood of access and their relative recency.

Collecting data from 53 semi-structured interviews and 91 documents, this chapter also outlines the use of grounded analysis (Charmaz, 2006) and abductive inquiry (van Hulst and Visser, 2024). Deploying these techniques to inform the coding of data enabled analysis to move iteratively between policy failure, learning, blame and governance literatures and the emerging findings – utilising tensions and contradictions to inform the analysis. Shifting from empirically orientated coding to theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006), the idea of "temporal units" (Widdersheim, 2018) and crisis management dilemmas (Boswell, et al 2021) were selected to structure the empirical chapters and demonstrate how narratives and dilemmas changed over time.

After detailing the research design and methodological choices, the ethical considerations of this research are outlined. One key ethical risk stem from researching "small connected communities" in which many of the participants know one another and their opinions of certain topics (Damianakis and Woodford, 2012). This risk is enhanced with the naming of the case studies. Navigating this through pseudo-anonymity, where individual attributes (e.g., precise job titles) are removed from the data whilst retain some level of contextual specificity (e.g., job type), is outlined. This chapter then concludes before moving onto the first empirical chapter.

## 4.1 Doing interpretive work comparatively

This research will be centred around an interpretive, comparative case study design of failure, learning and blame within English local government. Within this sub-section, the approach to interpretive comparison and how it helps capture actor's beliefs, experiences and practices is outlined.

The preferred interpretive research design is the comparative case study approach developed by Boswell, Corbett and Rhodes (2019). Interpretive case comparison begins not with shared variables across settings, but rather with actors and the way they perceive the choices for action available to them (Boswell *et al*, 2019; 4-10). Comparison is premised on

shared dilemmas and the way in which actors facing similar problems, in possibly very different settings, respond in similar or dissimilar ways (Boswell *et al,* 2019; 40, 44).

A comparative case study design is selected for this research over a single case study because of the way it supports the elucidation of concepts (Schaffer, 2016). Within interpretive case study research, the conventional approach has been single in-depth cases seeking contextual depth and which views any sacrifice in service of breadth as akin to "airplane ethnography"; a fleeting and surface level form of immersion (Yanow, Ybema and van Hulst, 2012; 332). Yet concepts travel and their analysis should contain some degree of "transferability" to avoid being "purely idiosyncratic" (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013; 24). The approach used within this research seeks to bridge contextual sensitivity with the ability to speak to wider analytical questions (Boswell *et al*, 2019; 29) and serves to "help understand relevant processes at work in specific cases and explore the relationship between local meaning and political concepts" (Simmons and Smith, 2019; 352). This supports the aim of elucidating failure, learning and blame, because it sensitises the analysis to see subtle and contextually meaningful differences in how concepts are mobilised within specific governance settings, whilst also providing the analytical space to identify shared meaning across settings.

The practice of interpretive comparison is underpinned by the concepts of "family resemblances" and "plausible conjectures" (Boswell *et al*, 2019; 28, 30). Family resemblances reflect the idea that concepts can be grouped together due to similarities and overlaps in usage, whilst not having a fixed attribute shared by all (Haugaard, 2010). Looking at how concepts travel across domains and sacrificing some specificity to capture how meaning is *shared* is part and parcel of interpretive research – "trade-offs between detail and accuracy on the one hand and unveiling and communicating broader truths on the other" (Boswell and Corbett, 2015; 221).

Relatedly, plausible conjectures are the analytical method for making the specific general. Boswell *et al* (2019) define them as "general statements that are plausible because they rest on good reasons, and the reasons are good because they are inferred from relevant information" and are the interpretive alternative to generalisability (Boswell *et al*, 2019; 29). This follows the dynamic interplay between theoretical reflection and empirical puzzling that

characterises abductive logics of inquiry. How such abduction unfolded and led to the emergence of a research puzzle and suitable case study selection is discussed below.

*4.1.1 Arriving abductively at cases of central government intervention into English local government.*

Abduction reflects a "puzzling-out process, [when] the researcher tacks continually, constantly, back and forth in an iterative–recursive fashion between what is puzzling and possible explanations for it" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013; 27). It is such puzzlement which makes it difficult to deploy the language of "case selection", for what a case represents can only be known through fieldwork.[11] Yet even when the researcher has a better grasp of the case, this only results from a process of "casing" where "members of a generic empirical category (e.g., families, firms) are declared to be relevant objects for a theoretical idea and thus 'cased'" (Ragin and Becker, 1992; 219). Despite the constructed-ness of the case studies, this does not mean that no standards exist for explicating why certain case studies are selected.

Normative preferences and the positionality of the researcher have a central and unavoidable influence on research design. The interpretive approach embraces this, making such influences transparent whilst seeking to tease out analytical questions from "intrinsically interesting" cases (Boswell et al, 2019; 59-62). A key abductive strategy in doing so is reflecting on the values and beliefs brought into research design and how this intersects with the experience of surprise and tension during the research process (van Hulst and Visser, 2024).

Central government interventions into English local government are the empirical phenomenon which are "cased" to study the relationship between policy failure, policy learning and blame in this thesis. Interest in this area originated from observing the UK government's response to the Grenfell Tower disaster (2017) – a tragic event, in which 72 individuals perished after a council housing complex set ablaze. In subsequent days following the event, central government worked closely with Kensington and Chelsea Council to manage

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[11] Interpretive scholars recognise the uncertainty involved in case selection and remain either "agonistic" about the language of case selection strategies (Boswell et al, 2019; 60) or eschew it all together (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2013; 69).

the situation whilst simultaneously blaming the council for ignoring local residents who complained about fire safety. This dynamic raised critical questions: How could central and local actors collaborate privately while publicly engaging in blame games and presenting divergent narratives of failure? Did the imperative to avoid blame dominate the attention of political elites to the detriment of the victims?

Puzzling over the Grenfell Tower disaster also drew attention towards the idea that central government could remove power and responsibility from locally elected politicians. Whilst the culpability of the council seemed obvious, the idea that local democracy could be overrode raised a broader question around who gets to determine when and what failure is significant enough for political power to be removed from local electoral representatives. Assuming that conflict and defensive reasoning were likely, the production of "lessons learned" documents (MHCLG, 2018) during intervention provoking a further line of puzzling regarding how shared understanding could emerge during moments of disagreement.

These questions, surprises and tension served as a catalyst for developing an "intrinsic interest" in the broader dynamics of failure, blame and learning within central-local relations (Boswell et al, 2019; 59). Yet beyond such initial puzzling, interventions into English local government also appear to be fruitful spaces for understanding experiences of failure, blame and learning concepts within specific communities.

Within government documentation, interventions are often explicitly framed as instances of "governance" and "cultural" failures which provoke "learning" (MHCLG, 2020). This learning is described to take place both within central government departments and within the local governments which experience intervention (MHCLG, 2018; 2020). The language of learning from failure is also something reproduced by local government sector organisations (CIPFA, 2024) – creating the opportunity to capture diverse meanings of the concepts as deployed in distinct professional and organisational spaces. When interventions do take place, media accounts often frame interactions between central and local government through the lens of blame (Bunn, 2023). This suggest that, even if the language of blame is less evident among local and central actors, it is none the less an interpretation they must navigate. Altogether, the use of failure, blame and learning language during central

government intervention suggest they are a highly suitable place to explore the relationships between the concepts in practice.

### 4.1.2 Context of central government intervention into English local government

English governance has conventionally been described as a "dual polity" centred on the distinction between central and local government (Bulpitt, 1986).[12] Legally, central government can undo this distinction, remove decision-making powers from local government and "intervene" when there are concerns around compliance with the "best value duty" (MHCLG, 2020; 15). Best Value is defined by "continuous improvement of (…) services, in relation to the achievement of economy, efficiency and effectiveness" (Bovaird and Löffler, 2002; 12).[13] Intervention initially takes the form of a Best Value Inspection which the Secretary of State initiatives. Once this has been conducted, central government can respond in three ways: no action, statutory intervention or non-statutory intervention (MHCLG, 2020; 15). If statutory intervention is chosen, central government can either issue a "direction" which may specify certain actions to be taken and areas of improvement for an authority to focus upon, or it may involve the appointment of "commissioners" who may take control over certain service provision or governance functions of an authority (MHCLG, 2020; 20-21).

During the New Labour years, interventions into local government were conducted by the Audit Commission (AC) and were premised upon the evaluative framework of Comprehensive Performance Assessments (Turner *et al*, 2004)[14]. After the AC was abolished in 2015 by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Government (2010-2015), central government subsumed the functions of the AC (Hammond, 2018). This was accompanied by the introduction of non-statutory, or "informal" interventions in the form of advisory

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[12] This characterisation has not been accepted unanimously amongst local government scholars (Rhodes, 1999) and its relevance questioned following four decades of reform (Richards et al, 2022). However, the purpose of introducing the term here is to begin a brief descriptive discussion of English governance.

[13] Local authorities are classified under the umbrella term of "best value authorities" which cover Fire and Rescue Authorities, Combined Authorities, Integrated Transport Authorities and many more. These public bodies can also be subject to central government intervention.

[14] The Audit Commission was the creation of statute and its members appointed by the secretary of state, but was formally independent from central government.

"improvement panels" or "taskforces" without the statutory removal of control and power from an authority (MHCLG, 2020; 12). The Local Government Association (LGA), the key membership body which represents the local government sector in England and Wales, became responsible for the conduct of informal interventions under a programme called "Sector-Led Improvement" (SLI) (Laffin, 2018; 57). Such informal interventions occur frequently within the English local government community whilst the statutory interventions and commissioners have been used relatively infrequently (Sandford, 2017). Further details on the introduction of SLI and broader changes in central-local relations during the UK Coalition Government (2010-2015) are detailed in Chapter 5.

At this stage in the research, both informal and formal interventions are provisionally "cased" as interesting empirical sites to explore the relationship between failure, learning and blame. They emerged abductively as "intrinsically interesting" cases (Boswell et al, 2019; 59) and further preliminary investigation of government documents and media accounts suggest they are a suitable area for exploring the possible failure-learning-blame relationship (MHCLG 2020). Following the abductive logic throughout the research, this casing will be subject to critical engagement and reflection as the analysis unfolds. In the following section, the details and justifications for which specific interventions selected are outlined.

## 4.2 Selecting cases which are assessable and contemporary

Examining the history of central government interventions into English local government, only 13 interventions occurred between 1999 and 2020 (Appendix 1).[15] Selecting which intervention to "case" is guided by two primary logics. The first is the logic of accessibility which purports that cases should be chosen based on the likelihood of accessibility over any

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[15] This number has increased exponentially since designing the research and collecting data. This is something reflected on in the conclusion of the thesis. For the purposes of case selection, the cut-off point for case selection was 2020.

theoretical considerations (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013; 71). Secondly, there is the time element. Not only is it expected that more contemporary cases will lead to greater access (in terms of the successful identification and contact of participants), but that they will also result in the collection of richer, more meaningful data – both in terms of participant recall and the extent to which data reflects the contemporary governance arrangements in the UK.

Applying such logics leads to the interventions into Northamptonshire County Council (2018-2021) and Birmingham City Council (2014-2020) to appear as the most suitable cases. Firstly, the researcher's geographical position (Midlands, England), institutional affiliation with the Institute for Local Government Studies, enables greater access to Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) and Birmingham City Council (BCC). Secondly, intervention in NCC and BCC are also some of the more contemporary cases that are deemed accessible. There are more recent interventions, such as those in the Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council (2017-2019) and Liverpool City Council (2020-present), yet the events surrounding these remain highly controversial and publicly salient, likely to negatively impact the ease of attaining access. Indeed, "gatekeepers" – those "who controls or limits researcher's access to participants" (Saunders, 2006; 49) – in central government encouraged the selection of cases which were not "live", adding that they would be more able to speak freely about past cases opposed to those ongoing (civil servant, personal communication).

In order to explore the contextual details of BCC and NCC, the decision was taken not to anonymise the cases. Yet the consequence is that full anonymity of participants cannot be granted. The ethical dimensions of this decision, how it was navigated, and the broader ethical implications of the research are discussed later in this chapter. Before doing so, specific contextual details on each case study are required.

### 4.2.1 Intervention into Birmingham City Council (2014-2020)

Birmingham City Council (BCC) is located in the West Midlands region of England and is a single-tier metropolitan borough council, meaning it is a singular institution, functionally and legally distinct from neighbouring local authorities. Serving over 1 million residents (BCC, 2024), BCC "is ranked the 7th most deprived local authority in England" (BCC, 2019c; 2).

Between 2010 and 2020, BCC's funding grant from central government decreased by 36% (Pugh et al, 2022). During the periods of interest for this research, BCC has been under a Labour majority administration with a Conservative-led opposition. Prior to this, the council was governed by a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition between 2003 and 2012.

BCC has a history of reported underperformance, which central government has attempted to address. Most prominently this has been in the area of Children's Services. Underperformance was first identified in 2002, and subsequent inspections found that the non-statutory Improvement Notices issued by the Department of Health failed to stimulate improvement (Le Grand, 2014; 5).[16] Following a ministerial visit to Birmingham's Children's Services, central government issued a Statutory Direction in March 2013 (Le Grand, 2014; 7).[17] This process culminated with the appointment of a Children's Commissioner which removed BCC's formal responsibility for Children's services (Timpson, 2014).

During this time, BCC was at the forefront of the anti-austerity campaign, popularising the "Jaws of Doom" graph which argued that reductions in council funding were occurring as demand for council services were increasing. This led BCC's council leader to proclaim an "end of local government as we know it" (Butler, 2012b). Simultaneously, the council attracted significant attention due to an "equal pay scandal", in which it was found to have historically paid female employees less than their male counterparts (Walker, 2012). This led to the council being legally compelled to provide compensation into the hundreds of millions. Conflicted over this matter, BCC's council Leader and the Secretary of State for the Department for Community and Local Government (DCLG) briefed against one another in the media when discussing this issue (Walker, 2012).

The intervention cased in this research was triggered by the Trojan Horse Scandal in which the council was blamed for the supposed "Islamification" of schools (Holmwood and

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[16] An Improvement Notice is a form of non-statutory intervention "designed to tackle significant or enduring underperformance...[Central government] specify the issues of concern, the level of improvement required, when and how this will be assessed, and subsequent steps that may be taken if improvement is not achieved" (LGA, 2019; 3).

[17] Unlike an Improvement Notice, Statutory Directions provide the central government with the ability to enact organizational change which may involve the removal of service provision from a local authority to a third party (LGA, 2019; 4).

O'Toole, 2018).[18] Following initial investigations, it was announced by the Coalition Government that DCLG's Permanent Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, Bob Kerslake, would conduct an "independent" review of BCC.[19] The purpose was to assess the council's governance and whether failure should be addressed by reorganising BCC into smaller units covering less geography (Kerslake, 2014). The review was categorised as an "informal" intervention as it was voluntarily arranged between BCC and DCLG (Kerslake, 2014). However, being led by senior civil servants from central government, it was a curious form of informal intervention which deviated from the idea of sector-led improvement discussed above.

The Kerslake review did not recommend reorganisation, but did make a series of recommendations regarding how the council should improve. One such recommendation was the establishment of a Birmingham Independent Improvement Panel (BIIP) which was to oversee improvements. BIIP reviewed the council's activity and reported to the DCLG's Secretary of State. This body remained in the council until 2019 when it was replaced by "non-executive directors" who also reported to central government. This arrangement lasted until 2020, when the intervention was concluded.

Further contextual detail on the intervention process will be provided in the empirical chapters, but what is important to emphasise here is that the period between 2014 and 2020 is "cased" as an empirical site for exploring the relationship between failure, learning and blame (Ragin, 1992; 219). As stated, there were previous interventions into the council that this research could have reasonably focused on. However, Kerslake was the first intervention in the Council's history to focus on the council as a whole rather than a single service delivery area.

*4.3.4 Northamptonshire County Council (2018-2021)*

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[18] This attracted significant attention, with the production of hundreds of speculative articles (Cannizzaro and Gholami, 2018). Numerous investigations were established and resulted in the announcement of an Education Commissioner taking formal control away from the council (House of Commons, 2014). So, at this point, BCC's Children's and Education services were controlled not by local actors, but by commissioners who reported to DfE.

[19] During the 2010-2014 Coalition Government, the then Prime Minister David Cameron, removed the Cabinet Secretaries formal responsibility over the everyday running's of the Civil Service. The new role created was titled Head of Home Civil Service (Heywood, 2022; 353-54).

Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) was a two tier non-metropolitan council located in the East Midlands of England. Due to its two-tier status, NCC split service delivery responsibilities with adjacent district and parish councils. Services such as children's services were responsibility of the county, and others, like planning, were devolved. Up to 2021, NCC served a population of 784,000 residents (ONS, 2021a; ONS, 2021b) and like all other English local authorities, had experienced reductions in central government funding.[20] The council had been controlled by the local Conservative party since 2005.

NCC has been associated with financial issues since the 2008 financial crisis (Smulian, 2008). At the beginning of 2016, rumours regarding NCC's volatile financial situation were circulating within the local government community (Calkin, 2016a). During this time, the possibility of the council issuing a Section 114 Notice – a financial reporting mechanism used by a council which expects they will be unable to set a balanced budget – was something noted by senior leadership (Calkin, 2016a).[21]

Attempting to overcome such challenges, the council developed the "Next Generation Council Model" hoping this would lead to financial savings (Calkin, 2016a; Linford, 2015). This involved outsourcing council functions and services to external bodies and social enterprises (Byrom, 2017). One example was the Local Government Shared Services (LGSS) body which was owned by both NCC and Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) and provided services such as finance, human resources and IT (Byrom, 2017). Overall, the changes saw 4000 staff being outsourced to external bodies with only 150 remaining within NCC (BBC, 2015). Political leadership believed the "Next generation Council Model" aligned with central governments agenda for innovating local government in the wake of austerity (Scott, 2017).

As NCC's financial difficulties become increasingly publicized, tension emerged between NCC and local district councils (despite such councils mostly being controlled by the

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[20] The exact figure of NCC's underfunding was subject to debate and contestation during the intervention and no final agreement was reached regarding the amount to which the council had been cut since 2010 (Caller, 2018; 7).

[21] The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) outlines that a section 114 notice is made by the Chief Finance Officer when they deem that their local authority is unable to create a balanced budget which is a legal requirement (CIPFA, 2016; 3). CIPFA (2016; 3) also highlight that the issuing of a 114 notice may indicate a breakdown in senior relationships within an institution and the failure to appreciate or provide prior warning of financial instability.

Conservative party). NCC's political leadership wished to restructure into a Unitary council to help address the financial problems of the County (Paine, 2016). As this proposal meant absorbing all lower-tier councils into a single unit, this was largely opposed by the district and parish councils (Smulian, 2016c). Following the publication of an 'adverse' external auditor's report, which indicated that NCC's proposed savings for 2016–2017 were unlikely to be met and that spending would exceed reserves (Calkin, 2016), Daventry District Council published a report requesting central government intervention in NCC (Smulian, 2017d).

Whilst viewing reorganisation as one means to mitigate financial underperformance, NCC was also engaged in a campaign to increase its funding from central government (LGA, 2017), using Conservative party-political channels in an attempt to exert influence over the Conservative-controlled central government. Not only unsuccessful in this campaign, the council also received an evaluation of failing to provide "value for money" in a 2017 external auditor report (Smulian, 2017f). Following this, central government commissioned a Best Value Inspection to assess governance within the authority at the start of 2018 (MHCLG, 2018a) – a rare event at this historical moment in English local government.

The inspection concluded that NCC had failed to comply with "best value" and recommended reorganising the council into two unitary authorities, along with the removal of formal decision-making powers from local politicians and officers (Caller, 2018). Central government followed the recommendations by deploying two commissioners who remained in place until 2021, when NCC was formally abolished and split into two unitary local authorities: North Northamptonshire Council and West Northamptonshire Council. It is this period, between the conduct of the review and the abolition of NCC that is "cased" for this research.

## 4.3 Methods

Due to the aim of explaining how actors make interpretations of failure, blame and learning, the appropriate methodological choice is qualitative rather than quantitative methods. Quantitative methods are not precluded from interpretivist research (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 67), however the task of elucidating concepts as contextually meaningful does encourage the use of qualitative methodologies (Schaffer, 2016). Therefore, it is understood that an

interpretivist orientated qualitative methodology enables this research "to interpret and understand the actors' reasons for social action, the way in which they construct their lives and the meanings they attach to them as well as to comprehend the social context of social action" (Sarantakos, 1998; 38). This section argues that semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis were the most appropriate tools for capturing the experiences of intervention and interpretations of failure, learning and blame.

Placed between structured and unstructured, semi-structured interviews have the "purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; 6) that are relevant to the research aims (Birkman, 2020; 437). Sensitive to the way interpretations of failure, who was to blame and what should be learnt may emerge across time, and that interventions last numerous years and have distinct stages (MHCLG, 2024), predetermined questions ensured that interviews covered the entire breadth of the process and captured experiences of working in the authorities before, during and after the interventions. In particular, with the aim of capturing learning – commonly defined as changes in belief (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013) – structuring the questions around the periods of intervention sought to provoke reflection on how interpretations changed over time. Notwithstanding, before data collection it was often unknown to what extent an individual was involved in the interventions, when precisely and for how long. Semi-structured interviews help collect such information in a standardised format whilst also providing the space for interviews to unfold in unexpected ways through follow-up questions which deviated from the interview guide (May, 2011; 135-36).

Whilst semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool, documentary analysis constituted the secondary tool. Documents represent knowledge and practice inscribed into mediatised forms and physical artefacts (Freeman and Maybin, 2011). The analysis of documents is defined as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents (…) to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen 2009; 27). Documentary analysis was deployed to mitigate the lack of detail sometimes missing during interviews given the time that had elapsed since actors experienced intervention. Similarly, numerous individuals who occupied key positions in central government during this time refused to participate in the research. Often encountered in

qualitative research into elites (Goldstein, 2002), documentary analysis enabled this research to understand the central government perspective.

More substantially, documents appear to have great significance within governmental life (Freeman and Maybin, 2011). This is particularly the case with central government interventions in which much activity centres around the production evaluation documents, local government responses and the "lessons learnt" reports (MHCLG, 2018; 2020). Key documents were also something interviewees referred to, critiqued and admired during interviews. For example, as detailed in Chapter Seven, local actors in the NCC case reproduced a specific phrase during interviews which originated from the Best Value inspection document. To understand the reaction documents provoked among those involved in intervention, it was therefore important to understand and incorporate such documents into the overall analysis.

Using interview and documentary data together represents a practice of triangulation which contributes to the "contextual validity" of this case study research (Scapens, 2004; 269). Documents "armed" the researcher with knowledge to help clarify the meanings expressed by individuals (Yanow, 2007; 411) whilst interviews provided the space to explore practice of documentary creation often neglected within the analysis of document content (Freeman and Maybin, 2011). A clear example of enhanced contextual validity from using interviews and document together was a more in-depth understanding of how interpretations of failure, learning and blame made in practice related (or not) to formalised accounts. Uncovering how interpretations expressed differed depending on the "audience" helped identify competing narratives and concealed disagreement. Acknowledging the heterogeneity of data and exploring competing accounts enhances the criticality of this research (Alsharai and Shboul, 2019). The next subsection provides specific detail on the data collected using these methodological tools.

### 4.3.1 Primary data collection: semi-structured interviews

Between July 2022 and February 2023, a total of 53 interviews were conducted across the two case studies. A case-specific breakdown of the participants interviewed can be found in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. Through informal conversations with those in the local government sector, it was

understood that the most relevant organisational actors on the local level were senior political and administrative leadership. Using Freedom of Information Requests, a breakdown of the individuals who held such positions before, during and after the intervention was attained from the councils. Many no longer worked within the organisations and so Linkedin proved to be an invaluable source of information for contacting those who no longer held institutional affiliations with BCC and NCC.

The majority of interviews were conducted with councillors who held cabinet positions and senior local government officers within corporate leadership teams. Interviewees often recommended other individuals to interview who were not obviously connected to the interventions when first selecting participants. This dynamic was also the case when interviewing those external to the councils, such as civil servants, reviewers, inspectors and professional association bodies. Civil servants, Members of Parliament, Ministers and Secretary of States were less receptive and/or accessible with many refusing to participate. Due to the preferences expressed by interviewees, all interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Table 4.1: BCC Participant Characteristics Breakdown

| Birmingham City Council – Participant Table | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Core Participants** | **Organisation** | **Number of Interviews** |
| Corporate Leadership | BCC | 10 |
| Councillors | BCC Labour | 5 |
| Civil Servants | DCLG | 4 |
| Reviewers | Independent Kerslake Review Advisory Board | 3 |
| External Appointments | Birmingham Independent Improve Panel | 3 |
| Professional Association Officers | Local Government Association | 1 |
| Total | | 26 |

Table 4.2: NCC Participant Characteristic Breakdown

| Northamptonshire County Council – Participant Table | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Core Participants** | **Organisation** | **Number of Interviews** |

| Corporate Leadership | NCC | 10 |
|---|---|---|
| Councilors | NCC Conservative | 8 |
| | NCC Labour | 1 |
| | NCC Liberal Democrat | 1 |
| | Corby District Council Labour | 1 |
| Local MP | Member of Parliament | 1 |
| Civil Servants | DCLG | 1 |
| Inspectors | Independent | 2 |
| Commissioners | NCC | 1 |
| Professional Association Officers | Local Government Association | 1 |
| Total Number | | 27 |

The interview guides used in the conduct of semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix 3. Rather than asking questions related to failure, learning and blame, the focus of the interview guides was to elicit descriptions of work during interventions, the interpersonal dynamics with those they had to work with and concrete examples for generalised opinions expressed during the interview. For example, evident within the topic guides is the theme of producing evaluation documents which diagnosed the councils as failing. Choosing to capture the experience of writing documents is underpinned by an awareness that this process can involve contestation over what to include (Cornut and de Zamaróczy, 2020) and therefore may provide insights into the dilemmas actors faced. The topic guides were also designed to capture experiences of how local actors interacted with external actors brought into the council, how they worked to improve the organisations and what legacies such interventions have had on practice. Topic guides were "living documents" and changed based upon revelations or unexpected areas of importance. For example, several participants from BCC placed significant importance on the resignation of one key individual and therefore in subsequent interviews, individuals were asked about their experiences of this event.

Audio recordings from the 53 interviews were transcribed with the aid of Zoom's inbuilt transcription function. Verbatim, line-by-line, transcribing was conducted and "filler words" such as "erm" and "you know" were removed. Whilst it is acknowledged that the

hesitation represented by such words may contain meaning, participants were often candid in their reflections and therefore such subtle expressions were not considered as significant for the analysis.

*4.3.2 Secondary data collection: documents*

To complement interview data, this thesis also analysed a total of 91 documents relating to the specific case studies and the wider governance system of English central-local relations. A breakdown of the documents analysed and the sources they were gathered from can be found in Appendix 2.

Key documents in the BCC case were the evaluation reports published by those conducting the intervention, progress reports published by BCC and BIIP, and formal correspondences between BCC, BIIP and DCLG. In NCC, the key documents were the Best Value Inspection report, ministerial correspondences, report and to a lesser extent, the commissioner produced progress reports.[22] The length and depth of these documents varied to a large degree, spanning between 1-60 pages of written text.

Document selection was not based upon collecting a certain number of documents, but rather based upon how they can help answer the research questions (Bowen, 2009; 33). The evaluation documents produced through intervention were understood as containers of failure narratives and partially invoking the dilemmas that actors were responding to. Media documents constructed through journalistic outputs were also selected to help capture the narratives of blame. Journalistic accounts of failure often involve the attribution of blame to political elites (Hameleers, et al 2019) and involve the reproduction of antagonistic language used within party-political conflict (Ekström et al, 2022). For this reason, media publications were seen as producing and reinforcing dominant narratives which actors themselves absorb, reflect on and reproduce (Mautner, 2008; 32). Lastly, policy documents which refer to broader governance arrangements between central and local government and how performance

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[22] As the analysis will show, the Best Value Inspection document held greater importance among those involved in NCC than did the subsequent commissioning reports. This was a marked difference from the BCC case where the reports published during intervention were the subject of debate and contestation.

management and accountability functions were also selected for analysis. The following subsection details the specific analytical methods applied to make sense of collected data.

## 4.4 Data analysis: deploying grounded theory through an abductive logic

Interpretive research is iterative (Yanow, 2000; 84) and produces an empirical and analytical mess which should be embraced rather than tamed (Boswell et al, 2019; 96). The analyses developed in this research exemplifies the complex, non-linear and messy process of understanding the "field" so often talked about by experienced interpretive researchers. This section attempts to bring coherence to the analytical process which has produced the subsequent empirical chapters. Given the constraints of writing, what follows may give the impression of a confidently applied, step-by-step linear strategy of cohering the data collected. However, in an abductive fashion, the practice of analysis has been plagued by tension, doubt, bricolage (Van Hulst and Visser, 2024) and spiralling (Shwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013; 31) which has not always felt like the enlightenment that such experiences are supposed to represent. How this process unfolded through the intersection of grounded theory and abductive inquiry is outlined below.

As a novice researcher, the author was initially attracted to the grounded theory articulated by Charmaz (2006) and the seemingly standardised stages of open, focused and theoretical coding. Reading that it should be a "heuristic strategy" for facilitating "a dialogue of theory and world" (Wagenaar, 2011; 261) the use of grounded theory followed an abductive logic. Deploying grounded theory abductively meant being guided by the purposive hand of open, focused and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006) but simultaneously reflecting on the surprise and bewilderment that arose when empirical ideas defied expectations based on experience and prior knowledge (Van Hulst and Visser, 2024; 3). Practically, this meant that alongside coding interviews and documents, "analysis through writing" (Boswell et al, 2019; 101) occurred as emerging findings and how these linked to the research questions and substantive literatures of failure, learning and blame were shared with the supervisory team

Coding was a key analytical step and centred around the initial categorisation of data. It is an analytical act which "takes segments of data apart, name them in concise terms, and propose an analytical handle to develop abstract ideas for interpreting each segments of data" (Charmaz, 2006; 45). Using Nvivo software, initial coding centred around identifying "meaning units" such as words, sentences and paragraphs, categorising them in terms of actions to let the data speak (Wagenaar, 2011; 262). The result was an analytical mess in the form of 400 plus codes categorising what were believed to be uniquely important forms of action detailed in the data. Focused coding helped to reduce complexity by grouping together repetitive codes and creating overarching categories which are more conceptual than strictly empirical (Charmaz, 2006; 57). This involved recategorizing individual codes into larger group codes through comparison and aggregation. For example, the codes "extrapolating failure" and "distancing from failure", were merged into an overarching code of "resisting failure".

Focused coding reduced the number of individual codes further and helped to identify commonality which highlighted areas of significance. Whilst this went some way towards reducing complexity, to say that it completely resolved the messiness of analysis would be an overstatement. What at first felt like a "thousand-piece jigsaw" (Yanow, 2006; 102) failing to come together, now felt like 500-piece jigsaw which continued to resist coherence. At this point, doubt arose over whether this thesis was related to the phenomenon of *policy* failure because many interviewees from the council saw intervention as something more than helping to improve service provision. The very meaning of governmental action was being called into question. Whilst seeking to critically engage with the policy failures literatures, the tension between the emerging findings and literature were felt to undermine attempts to build a coherent analysis.

Within abductive research, doubt is considered "generative" and should be reflected on as a means to theorise (Van Hulst and Visser, 2024; 4). Returning to the literature to explore this doubt, the field of "critical failure studies" (Mica et al, 2023) which articulated the "(in)stability" of failure across time helped the analysis to embrace the messiness of failure found in the data (Alexander, 2023a; 11-12). Likewise, this contestation around the meaning of government action was connected with the idea of governance traditions. In particularly, traditions about the purpose and function of local government and the dilemmas they can

produce (Sullivan, 2007). So, in addition to advancing the analysis in relation to the research puzzle and the associated literatures, abduction also involved consulting policy and academic texts on the history of local government to understand the traditions of governance which could help make-sense of contestation.

Whilst attempting to write up the competing narratives of failure, it was decided to engage in diachronic analysis which structured the analytical story around "temporal units" – distinct periods based on key events such as the removal of political and administrative leadership teams (Widdersheim, 2018). Diachronic analysis amounted to the theoretical coding stage within grounded analysis which "specify possible relationships between categories (…) developed during focused coding" (Charmaz, 2006; 63) through the imposition of "ideas and perspectives (..) from outside" of the data (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014; 11).[23] Whilst theoretical codes can remain more or less implicit within the analysis (Charmaz, 2006; 66), temporal units emerged as a key structuring device when "writing to analyse" (Boswell et al, 2019; 101). The chapters are presented chronologically and aim to use time to illuminate changes in belief.

Documentary analysis was particularly helpful for diachronic analysis and the identification of temporal units. Providing specific publication dates, documents served as chronological anchor points which could hold the narratives expressed by interviewees and help ascertain how they emerged over time. This means that documents were analysed both in terms of their substantive textual content and as temporal artefacts which can help reconstruct how events unfolded sequentially.

The final stage of theoretical coding integrated the framework of crisis management dilemmas (Boswell et al, 2021). The purpose of this phase of analysis was to overcome a "breakdown of expectations" through methodological bricolage (Van Hulst and Visser, 2024; 7). This breakdown related to the disconnect between the theoretical framework of dilemmas and the difficulty of identifying dilemmas within the emerging findings. Applying the framework of crisis management dilemmas (Boin et al 2016; Boswell et al, 2021) helped to identify points of tension in the data regarding decisions over how to respond to evaluations

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[23] Drawing on temporality as a theoretical structuring code was something articulated by one of the originators of grounded theory, yet it has since been neglected in later reformulations (Charmaz, 2006; 63).

of failure and the subsequent practical demands placed upon the councils. Again, theoretical coding took place through a process of abduction; moving iteratively between NVIVO, initial write-ups of the empirical chapters, and the theorical and substantive literatures.[24] Following this process for each case study, the end result was the three empirical chapters presented in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

Chapter Five is structured around the identification of competing governance traditions. Chapter Six and Seven are structured around the temporal units, crisis dilemmas and the narratives which emerged in response. Narrative categories are based on an aggregation of beliefs captured through analysis and do not necessarily refer to the specific words spoken by participants. The narratives do bring together competing beliefs but with the purpose of showing how they were interrelated, which beliefs endured, and which were side-lined. For example, in Chapter 7 Section 7.2.2 the narrative of "capitulation" situates competing interpretations of failure into a dynamic context in which certain actors and certain points of view were being excluded.

Unfolding the thesis in this way, the structure of the empirical chapters provides an in-depth and linear account of central-local relations in England and the specific cases of intervention. Rather than seeing this "contextual" approach as a constraint on comparative analysis (Boswell et al, 2019; 116), the deep and chronological reading of the cases mirrors "the narrative structure, its organised beginning, middle and end" expressed within stories policy actors tell and those reconstructed by policy analysts (Kaplan, 1993; 172). Using the findings from the empirical chapters, Chapter 8 moves from "depth" to "breadth" (Boswell et al, 2019; 118) by comparing the similarities and differences in the dilemmas and narratives across the case studies.

## 4.5 Research Ethics

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[24] One significant change stemming from the abductive application of the crisis management dilemmas was the exclusion of the "learning" stage (Boin et al, 2016). Originally designed for the study of national crises, this learning stage describes the demands placed upon policymakers as they are formally held to account for crisis decision-making through the likes of Public Inquiries. Arguably, this learning stage could be used to categorise the entire process of intervention into local government. Seeking to illuminate the actions of local actors and the diverse demands placed upon this, it was decided to that the learning dilemma could be excluded from the analysis without losing any analytical leverage into local account giving.

This research was granted approval from the University of Birmingham's ethics committee in April 2022 (reference, ERN_21-1739). A key component of making this research ethical related to informed consent and ensuring that participants were fully aware of the research aims and objectives, risks and benefits of engaging with the research. The purpose of achieving informed consent is to enable individuals to make well informed decisions regarding participation. To achieve this, this research developed standardised recruitment messages, participant information sheets and consent forms approved by the ethical review committee (Appendix 4). Opportunities to further discuss the research and their possible participation prior to the signing of the consent form were also provided. During such discussions, a number of participants highlighted areas they would not like to be questioned on, and they were assured that they would not be pressed to answer questions they felt uncomfortable with. Providing such spaces to discuss participation represented the building of trust with participants which itself helped produce high-quality qualitative data (Batlle and Carr, 2021).

Assuring participants that collected data would be treated confidentially also provided the basis for informed consent. Confidentiality refers to securing the privacy of those involved in the study and removing any identifiable features within the data. During the research process, only the lead researcher and supervisory team had access to interview data. Generalised pre-fixing provided pseudo-anonymity when referring to a participant's identity (e.g., 'a local government officer', 'a local councillor', and 'central government civil servant'). Specific role titles were omitted from the analysis due to the limited number of, for example, chief executive officers, who worked at the councils within the designated intervention periods.

Focusing on senior officers and councillors within specific councils, there is a limitation on how anonymous participants' data can be made due to the context of small policy communities (Damianankis and Woodford, 2012). English local government has strong networking practices (Walker, O'Toole and Meier, 2007) and industry specific media outlets follow changing leadership positions across the sector. For this reason, BCC and NCC represent "small connected communities" comprised of individuals who may be aware of one another's opinion on contentious events (Damianakis and Woodford, 2012). To address this, when

writing up the findings, the author engaged in a process of working out "the ethics of what to tell" which involved removing any details, such as gender pronouns or specific roles, which might undermine pseudo-anonymity (Ellis, 2007; 24). Furthermore, consent forms were transparent on use of pseudo anonymity (e.g., via code names) practiced in the research. During interviews, participants were advised they could speak "off the record" whereby audio recording would be stopped and no notes taken (Peabody *et al*, 1999).

Recognising how the author's positionality shaped interactions with participants and the subsequent analysis was a further dimension of practicing ethical research. Reflecting on positionality is an attempt to understand "how one is inserted in grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations and knowledge production" (Sultana, 2007; 376). Because the researcher's professional, social, cultural, economic, gender and ethnic background inevitably shapes research practice, self-awareness is required to navigate this (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2013; 98).

One area worthy of reflection is the sympathy the researcher felt towards those working in local government who shared distressing accounts of intervention. At times this felt like "taking their side". Similarly, having been brought up in a traditional Labour stronghold, the researcher felt an underlining suspicion towards Conservative politicians from NCC. This suspicion was further heightened when it come to light that one interviewee had been accused of sexual harassment. Whilst such "biases" cannot be eliminated, being transparent by reflecting on them here primes readers of the risk that they may shape the analysis. Notwithstanding, transparency around biases as a researcher enhances the authenticity of data analysis and therefore the trustworthiness of analysis (Alsharari, and Al-Shboul, 2019; 51).

## 4.6 Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter outlines the interpretive and abductive approach to the case study design and the suitability of such an approach to answering the research questions concerned with how actors interpret failure, blame and learning. Central government interventions are proposed as an interesting case to explore the dynamics of failure, learning and blame as it is

assumed that they are instances in which such phenomena are present. This is something critically reflected upon throughout the analysis. A comparative case study is also proposed as a particularly useful for the aim of elucidating failure, learning and blame, sensitising the research to both context and specificity. The cases of BCC and NCC were selected as they were deemed as the most contemporary and accessible instances of central government intervention.

Semi-structured interviews and documents were the key sources of data. Using grounded analysis and an abductive inquiry, 53 interviews and 91 documents were analysed to produce the proceeding empirical chapters. Structured around temporal units and crisis management dilemmas, this analysis captures competing interpretations and how they change over time. Ethical considerations of researching small communities (Damianakis and Woodford, 2012) and the limitations of pseudo-anonymity and bias have also been discussed.

Having detailed the research design, how the analytical steps outlined above unfold across the subsequent empirical chapters requires clarification. Chapter 5 constructs the traditions of governance against which local government actors make sense of central government intervention. This is achieved through an analysis policy documents and secondary literature from political science. It is argued that the competing traditions of centralisation and autonomy produce conflicting ideas about the relationship between central and local government, the location of power, and the functioning of accountability and evaluation – ideas likely to influence how actors interpret failure, learning and blame. Notwithstanding, this chapter also functions to provide an in-depth reading of the context and history of central-local relations.

Chapter 6 and 7 moves onto the case-specific empirical findings. Whilst the language of failure, blame and learning are woven throughout the chapters, the primary function these chapters is to present the analysis through the interpretivist framework developed in Chapter 2. For this reason, the chapters are structured using the framework of crisis dilemmas and are not explicitly related to the research questions and puzzle. After devoting a single chapter to each case study, the comparison of the dilemmas experienced across the cases is conducted in Chapter 8. With the insights gained from comparison, Chapter 8 also reorientates back to the substantive literatures and reflects on the findings analytical implications for

conceptualising policy failure, learning and blame. Finally, Chapter 9 answers the research questions, gives a statement of contributions to knowledge and considers the limitations of this study and the future avenues for research.

**Chapter 5: Governance traditions of centralisation and autonomy within English central-local relations**

**5.0 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the broader governance context within which the interventions into Birmingham City Council (BCC) and Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) took place. As argued in Chapter 2, to establish how actors interpret failure, learning and blame, analysis must capture the way in which concepts are shaped by political and organisational contexts. Chapter 3 has theorised context and the influence this has on the agency of actors through the analytical concept of tradition. Traditions represent the intersubjective structures of meaning which shape, but do not determine, the beliefs actors hold (Bevir, 1999; 195) and they function as the "starting point" for analysis (Rhodes and Weller, 2003; 14). In this chapter, the traditions which influence the beliefs that actors hold about the purpose and function of local government and the nature of its relationship with central government are detailed.

It is argued that the competing traditions of "centralisation" and "autonomy" are key perspectives within the local government community and are likely to influence how actors interpret failure, learning and blame during central government intervention. According to the "centralisation" tradition, local government is subordinate to central government, seen as the implementer of services determined by central government policy and to be assessed through evaluative frameworks enshrined into statutory legislation. Alternatively, from the "autonomy" tradition, local government is primarily a political organisation with the right to resist central government policy, provide service delivery according to local need and be free from the evaluative gaze of central government performance management. Thus, as can already be seen from these brief summaries, "centralisation" and "autonomy" contain contradicting beliefs in relation to the political role of local government, the appropriateness of local government resistance to central government policy, and the character and purpose of service delivery and governance reform. When local government actors encounter evaluations of failure, attributions of blame and demands for learning which often accompany

central government intervention, these two contrasting traditions may help produce a dilemma of resistance or acceptance among local government actors.

This chapter shows that the clash of these traditions, whilst an enduring feature of central-local relations, was particularly acute with the onset of the Coalition government of 2010-2015 and the localism reforms which reconfigured the central-local dynamic. Dissolving numerous bodies such as the Audit Commission (AC) which had previously evaluated local government, the localism reforms emboldened the idea that local government should control performance management and the means to address underperformance. Yet simultaneously, many aspects of centralised performance management and accountability remained. The consequence was that the localism agenda intensified the tension between traditions of centralisation and autonomy, creating space for dilemmas in response to judgements of failure to emerge.

The argument that follows is based upon historical analysis of secondary documentation, something crucial in the task of situating actors within traditions of thought and practice (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). Such secondary documentation relates to policy documents produced by the UK Government, Parliament and the Local Government Assocation (LGA) (See Appendix 2), in addition to academic texts concerning historical and contemporary central-local relations.[25]

The formulation of beliefs which define traditions of "are not natural kinds" or "a series of discrete and identifiable entities" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 18, 21) which exist beyond the construct of the researcher for a particular analytical task. Indeed, others have detailed alternative traditions of central-local relations for the purpose of studying issues such as community governance (Sullivan, 2007). Whilst not unconnected to previous articulations of traditions of central-local relations, the traditions outlined here serve the specific purpose of explaining the competing narratives, beliefs and practices which produce dilemmas for local government actors as they respond to central government intervention.

This chapter is split into two main subsections which explore the historical emergence of the traditions of centralisation and autonomy. As the authors of the interpretivist approach

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[25] The analysis presented in this chapter weighs most heavily on academic literature regarding English central-local relations but does complement this with original analysis using policy documents. The risk and limitation this poses for constructing traditions is reflected upon in the conclusion chapter.

argued, traditions must be identified by tracing "a historical line from the start of a tradition to its current finish" (Bevir et al, 2003; 15). The first subsection details the emergence of the centralisation tradition and its more contemporary manifestations within managerialism and performance management. The second subsection does the same for the autonomy tradition. To conclude this chapter, how the two competing traditions interact is exemplified through a brief discussion of the 2010 localism reforms – providing the reader with a broader and more immediate governance context against which the interventions into BCC and to a lesser extent, NCC, took place.

## 5.1 The centralisation tradition of central-local relations

At the core of the centralisation tradition is the belief that power rightfully sits at the very centre of executive government. This belief has its origins within monarchical forms of government and the enduring legacy of the "royal prerogative" (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller, 2009; 47). Predating representative government, the royal prerogative legitimised the absolute control of the monarch (Rokkan and Urwin, 1982; 11). New traditions of representative and responsible government emerged during the shift towards constitutional monarchy, yet the belief that political power is hierarchical has persisted (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller, 2009; 46). Contained within parliamentary democracy is the view that politicians in Parliament and Whitehall are the most appropriate decision-makers who convey the "national interest" and can resist inappropriate public demands (Hall, 2011; 124). A variegated landscape of beliefs and practices regarding Parliament and the Executive exists (Geddes, 2023), but they nonetheless share the assumption that these institutions are the most appropriate spaces of political action and conflict.

As national political institutions are the primary containers of agency to enact political change, the electoral functions of local government are subsumed within the centralisation tradition. The Widdicombe Committee (1986), established in response to local authority rebellion to the Thatcher government's rate-capping policy, exemplified the idea that local

government is not a space for political action.[26] Arguing that local government is dependent on Parliament, the argumentation found within the Widdicombe Committee frames Local government as an institutional space conceived by central government, with no legitimate claim to challenge statutory legislation and central decision-making which underlines this. As the Widdicombe Committee stated:

> Although local government has origins predating the sovereignty of parliament, all current local authorities are the statutory creations of Parliament and have no independent status or right to exist (...) It follows that there is no validity in the assertion that local authorities have a 'local mandate' by which they derive their authority from their electorate placing them above the law (Copus et al, 2017; 16).

Within the centralisation tradition, party politics functions to subsume local government as a space of political action. The political deference of local government to central government has converged around the "nationalisation" of local government party-politics which emerged during the mid 20th century (Copus et al, 2017; 142). During this time, local and national politicians became more closely integrated through networking events and new party-political structures dedicated to local government (Gyford, 1985a). Through national directives and disciplinary party mechanisms, such as whipping, local political parties have become more deferential (Copus, 2004).

Seeking to undermine local government as a political space, ideas and practices of managerialism empowered local administrative actors and disempowered political leadership (Stewart and Stoker, 1995). As a process which can be traced back to the 19th century, managerialism has been underpinned by the formalisation and standardisation of a professional class of local government officers – something central government facilitated to control council politics (Gill-McLure, 2014; 368). Managerial reforms in the 1980s, such as "corporate planning", centralised management away from local departments (Cowell and Martin, 2003). Empowering Chief Executives with more decision-making responsibility

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[26] This rebellion and its links with the tradition of autonomy within English local government is discussed in section 5.2.

(Collinge, 1997), this process continued into the 1990s and 2000s as officers were expected to drive the "modernisation agenda" through "transformational leadership" (Cochrane, 2004; 489). In this context of modernisation, local political leaders "were expected to be able to move beyond party political divisions to become embodied – and almost apolitical - representations of their localities or communities" (Cochrane, 2004; 490).

Coinciding with the belief that local government functions to deliver standardised services (Copus et al, 2018; 145), managerialism framed local government as accountable to central government and led to the introduction of performance management regimes and evaluative frameworks (Stoker, 1999). The first of these was the Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) regime which demanded that local authorities increase private sector involvement in service delivery. The aim was to disempower trade unions, counter inflationary pressures in the economy and discipline uncontrollable Labour councils who had resisted central government during the 1980s (Walsh, 1995; Campbell-Smith 2008). Replacing this was the Best Value legislation introduced by New Labour which also sought to curtail the potential of local government to resist central government policy (Entwistle and Laffin, 2005; Laffin, 2018) and further empower the private sector (Newman and Clark, 2009; 77). This involved evaluating local government performance on the basis of "continuous improvement of their services, in relation to the achievement of economy, efficiency and effectiveness" (Bovaird and Löffler, 2002; 12). Within the centralisation tradition, political leadership cannot challenge the judgements derived through this framework and instead must adhere to the advice of officers on how to fulfil such statutory requirements (Leach, 2010). By performing in the way central government expects, local government can strive for "earned autonomy" in which it is granted additional freedoms in the form of extra funding (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003; 292).

Arguably, this idea of "earned autonomy" has been extended into the decentralisation reforms that local government has experienced in recent years. Seen as a vehicle for achieving economic growth and deficit reduction desired by the centre (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011), "devolution deals" have been premised on local actors accepting the "framework of the [central] government's approach" (Ayres, Flinders and Sandford, 2018; 860). Involving "the transfer to local public bodies of tightly bound powers hedged in by quasi-contractual terms, evaluation and financial incentives", constitutional questions about the relationship between

central and local government have been sidelined (Sandford, 2016; 3). Any such notion that decentralisation has shifted the central-local relations beyond this is delegitimised by those firmly positioned within the centralising tradition. This is clearly expressed by a key architect of the devolution agenda within the Conservative Party, Michael Heseltine:

> When one talks of devolution it's not realistic to talk about freedom. This is a partnership concept. Central government are elected and they are entitled to have their manifestos implemented and it cannot be contemplated there is a sense of freedom at a local level which can actually frustrate the clear mandates upon which governments are elected.…I am sympathetic to the word 'partnership' rather than 'freedom' or 'devolution' (Ayres et al, 2018; 861).

To summarise this subsection, the tradition of centralisation offers beliefs about the political primacy of national political institutions, in particular the executive, parliament and nationalised political parties. Local government is an electoral space, but one which must defer to the dominant, national space of political action. First and foremost, then, local government within this tradition is an administrative unit of the central state whose organisational performance is legitimately determined by centrally designed evaluative frameworks. In the centralisation tradition, the evaluations of failure are accepted rather than contested and the attributions of blame and demands for learning which follow are embraced. This account of central-local relations offers one side the "ideational background" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 78) against which central government intervention into English local government can be interpreted. Yet there is also another key dimension relates to the tradition of autonomy within central-local relations.

## 5.2 The autonomy tradition of central-local relations

A tradition of autonomy has an arguably longer, more complex, and unsurprisingly disaggregated history compared to centralisation. During the 17th century conflicts between royalists and parliamentarians, a regional liberty believed to predate centralised monarchical

state was mobilised against the idea of a "royal prerogative" (Loughlin, 2013; 26). Even with this conflict subsided, the succession of a tradition of autonomy was prominent in relation to territorial governance.

As already noted from the centralist interpretation of central-local relations, territorial control by the centre was ensured by the spread of elites who would represent government and the monarch (Bulpitt, 1986). Yet a key difference from the autonomous perspective is that:

> [L]ocal representatives of the King, the Lords Lieutenant, Sheriffs and J.P.s, were in practice independent of the ministers of the Crown. They corresponded with ministers on matters of mutual concern, especially the preservation of the peace, replied to occasional requests for information but otherwise *rarely took orders*" (Hennock, 1982; 39 *emphasis added*).

Unlike the subordination of local government to national political institutions within the centralisation tradition, the tradition of autonomy offers an alternative reading of constitutional thought and the location of political power. In an autonomous interpretation, the unwritten constitution is seen to pose a risk of unconstrained, centralised power which local government must act to "diffuse" (Jones 1988; 167). While this sentiment is likely linked to libertarian traditions of government which favour a small state (Gardner and Lowndes, 2016), what is important for the purposes of this thesis is the idea that local government holds central government accountable. Therefore, by implication, local government has a legitimate, bottom-up evaluative purpose which can drive contestation. Such an evaluative purpose was evident in the establishment of the Parliamentary Office of Comptroller and Auditor General, a body which sought to scrutinise central government expenditure in the 1800s. The introduction of this body largely resulted from local government concern towards central government corruption (Hennock, 1982; 39).

With the formation of the middle classes in the early 18th century and shifts towards representative government, local government was remade as a space for democratic politics (Webb and Webb, 2013). Local political organisation created bottom-up pressure for reform

and became increasingly entangled with Parliamentary politics. In doing so, those who succeed in controlling local government "were able to call upon the centre to support whatever they wanted to do" (Wills, 2016; 50). When persuasion failed, outright resistance towards centralised power could emerge. Such forms of autonomous political action have been termed 'poplarism' following a 1921 tax rebellion by Poplar Borough Council (Shepard, 2004). Protesting against the inequalities of local deprivation and the relative affluence of other London boroughs, Poplar Council (now Tower Hamlets) ceased collecting property taxes on behalf of the County (Branson, 1979). Despite councillors being imprisoned, public support and protest for Poplar was significant and Government responded by legislating the Local Authorities Act of 1921 which attempted to share the tax burden between Borough Councils.

Beliefs and practices of local government resistance to central government policy was also something evident during the British Radical Municipal (BRM) movement of the 1980s.[27] Those councils associated with this project questioned dominant conceptions of how local government, and the state more generally, should be organised (Lillo and Ferguson, 2022). Undermining the idea that local government should only concern itself with "low" politics" (Bulpitt, 1986), BRM campaigned on international affairs and called into question structures of police power (Boddy and Fudge, 1984). They also expanded beyond the conventional space of political action within local government, engaging young adults below the voting age and blurring the boundaries between administration, politics and community (Gyford 1985b: 58; Lillo and Ferguson, 2022; 14).

Resistance between the BRM and central government culminated in the 1985 rate-capping rebellions, in which central government attempted to control local expenditure (Stewart, 1987; Walsh, 1995). Refusing to set council budgets within the prescribed timelines by central government, a policy of noncompliance was agreed at the 1984 Local Government Association (LGA) Conference (Rose, 2024; 129). Councils who voted in favour of this strategy sought to mobilise public support by using council resources to campaign against rate-capping (Massey, 2020). Ultimately, this campaign was unsuccessful and resulted in central governments abolition of a leading council within the BRM movement, the Greater London

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[27] Examples of authorities involved in this movement; Greater London Council, Merseyside and South Yorkshire, Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool.

Council (Seyd, 1987). Although largely seen as the high-water mark for politicised, autonomous action of English local government, traditions of autonomy are evident across the landscape of English governance.

Outside of the leftist experimentalism, the autonomous tradition is evident within more explicit forms of political action advanced by central government itself. The "localism agenda" of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (2010-2015) aimed to empower local government by removing much of the performance management regime that had emerged since the 1980s. Bodies such as the AC and the Standards Board were abolished and with this, certain evaluative frameworks such as Comprehensive Area Assessments (CAAs), National Indicators and Public Service Agreements (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; 26).

Mobilising the tradition of autonomy to frame the localism agenda, central government narrated changes to performance management as the dismantlement of overly controlling, undemocratic forms of governance. The abolition of the Audit Commission, for example, was described as the undoing of a "creature of the Whitehall state" which "was regulating, micromanaging, and inspecting, forcing councils to spend time ticking boxes and filling in forms rather than getting on with the business of local government" (DCLG, 2010a). Citizens were also envisioned to play a greater role in the scrutiny of local government performance. Articulated through the idea of "arm-chair auditors", local governments were required to start publishing performance management data, and it was expected that citizens would evaluate and hold local authorities accountable using this information (Waugh et al, 2022). The frameworks and practices which replaced centralised performance management were designed with this aim of moving towards bottom-up forms of accountability.

Central and local government advanced the idea of "Sector-led Improvement" (SLI) as the democratic alternative to the performance management of old. The narrative surrounding SLI rested on local government being accountable to their electorate, not central government, and that the sector as whole had a collective responsibility for performance (LGA, 2011; 7). Local government actors still felt that they should engage in performance management, but how they did so and to what extent councils collaborated together, was to be voluntaristic and shaped by local context (LGA, 2011; 6). In contrast to the centralisation tradition, the local

government community is seen as the legitimate actor to control the meaning of local government performance and how underperformance was to be determined and addressed.

Replacing inspection practices, SLI involved evaluations through "critical friend challenges", "corporate peer reviews" and peer-to-peer mentoring schemes (LGA, 2012) conducted by actors within the local government community (Martin et al, 2013). Akin to a form of self-regulation, the evaluation of local government, identification of areas for improvement and ultimately progress in the local government sector was to come about through horizontal relationships between professionals and bottom-up forms of accountability to local electorates.

In sum, the autonomy tradition provides an alternative history of central-local relations in which local government holds central government accountable and is a legitimate political space which can resist central government policymaking. In more contemporary articulations of this tradition, such as the localism reforms, local government is accountable to citizens rather than central government. Here, the meaning of performance, how it should be evaluated and who can legitimately act to address underperformance, is to be the prerogative of local government. It is argued that the beliefs associated with this autonomy tradition are likely to shape how actors interpret central government intervention and the evaluations of failure which accompany them. In concluding this chapter, attention now turns to the question of tension and conflict which may arise when the traditions of autonomy and centralisation intersect to create dilemmas during central government intervention.

## 5.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to outline the competing governance traditions of central-local relations. The centralisation tradition contains the idea that local government cannot challenge central government and instead, must implement centrally determined policy, standardised services and be subject to evaluation through managerialist frameworks. Alternatively, the tradition of autonomy conveys that local government is a political organisation which can resist central government and is accountable to local citizens, not central government. Whilst offering conflicting ideas about central-local relations, so far this

chapter has articulated the traditions as separate. However, in the everyday experience of governance, these traditions are closely intertwined, influencing how actors interpret central-local relations and creating space for dilemmas to emerge. To exemplify the way in which centralisation and autonomy are linked, the chapter concludes by briefly returning to the topic of accountability, performance management and local government failure.

As discussed in the previous section, the localism reforms aimed to free local government from centralised performance management and explicitly mobilised the tradition of autonomy. Yet whilst numerous oversight bodies were abolished, the Best Value legislative framework was left untouched and central government remained in a position to determine the parameters of local government performance. Highlighted in the government produced diagram (Figure 5.1), local authorities remained statutorily accountable for performance to the Department for Education, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Communities and Local Government (MHCLG, 2018e). For initiatives such as SLI, they were merely layered on top of more enduring forms of accountability untouched by the localism agenda. This created tension and contradiction that actors themselves experienced during the introduction of these reforms.

This tension was evident during the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee Inquiry into the abolition of the AC and the introduction of SLI. One key question the Inquiry sought to answer related to how failure could be known and whether centralised metrics were valuable. The "command and control" regime of centralised performance management was deemed to have an "appealing logic" but "highly controversial" (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2011a; 29). Situated within the autonomy tradition and critiquing discussion of centralised metrics, one local government officer giving evidence asked, "why any national indicators were required under a regime of localism in which local government was trusted" (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2011a; 31). Yet the conclusion to the inquiry subtly critiqued the SLI narrative, arguing that "it would be idle to pretend that intervention by central government in the conduct of local authorities is never going to be necessary" (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2011a; 33). They concluded by ascribing the tension between local

and central performance management as a natural, permanent feature of the relationship between central and local government:

> [T]here will always remain a tension between driving improvement from the centre and securing improvement through delegation and trust. This tension will not disappear, whatever approach the government of the day favours (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2011; 30)

What the tension at the heart of the SLI narrative served to do is to make legitimate both local and central forms of evaluation. In doing so, it created a space for the competition and contestation of competing evaluations of performance. As the case study chapters will reveal (Chapters 6 and 7), local government actors resisted narratives of failure they felt were imposed onto them. Yet at other points, local actors embraced evaluations of failure resulting from central government intervention. In other words, when confronted with an evaluation of failure from those outside of the local authority, local actors may face a dilemma between resistance or acceptance.
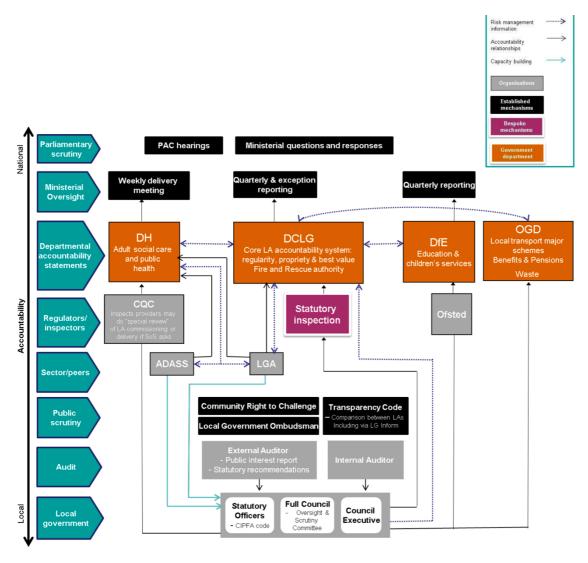
Figure 5.1: Accountability framework for English Local Government

**Chapter 6: Birmingham City Council – Dilemmas and Narratives of Intervention**

**6.0 Introduction**

In the preceding chapter, it was argued that central-local relations are defined by the competing governance traditions of centralisation and autonomy. Due to contrasting ideas about who should evaluate local government found in the traditions, it was argued that a dilemma may result from judgements of local government failure. This chapter explores how the competing traditions and possible dilemmas unfolded within the case of central government intervention into Birmingham City Council (BCC). It uncovers the experiences of those who were involved in BCC's intervention, and provides empirical illustrations of the dilemmas encountered across the distinct periods of intervention.

Using an abductively derived framework integrating "crisis dilemmas" (Boin et al, 2016; Boswell et al, 2021) and "temporal units" (Widdersheim, 2018), the six-year period of BCC's intervention (2014-2020) is categorised into six periods. To aid navigation of this chapter, a concise timeline for this case study is located in Table 6.1.

The first period, spanning July to December 2014, involved a sense-making dilemma among *external reviewers* who held conflicting beliefs about the voluntary character of the review. The second period, from July to December 2014, revolved around a decision-making dilemma between acceptance or resistance experienced by *local actors* when responding to the review. The third period investigated the meaning-making dilemma experienced as local actors implemented what they believed to be the wrong solutions for failure during January to June 2015. The fourth period, between June 2015 and February 2017, was when BCC's performance was challenged, and councillors and officers experienced an accountability dilemma. December 2015 to August 2018 represented the fifth period, covering the establishment of new leadership and their experience of a meaning-making dilemma.[28] Lastly,

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[28] This temporal unit partially overlaps with the previous subsection. Distinguished for the analytical purpose of emphasising the different demands faced by actors at different points, in practice the dilemmas faced were intertwined. For example, changes to leadership and the appointment of new actors occurred at different times following conflict over the council's performance. The accountability and meaning-making dilemmas were recursive in this sense and hence, why the dilemmas were experienced more than once by different groups. Like

August 2018 to June 2020 was the sixth period, centred around the emergence of a final accountability dilemma before intervention concluded.

Table 6.1: BCC Timeline

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**2014**

- **July:** Central Government announces Kerslake review.
- **December**: Kerslake Review published; Birmingham City Council (BCC) responds.

**2015**

- **January**: Birmingham Independent Improvement Panel (BIIP) established.
- **March**: BIIP approves council's improvement plan – "Future Council Program".
- **June:** BCC Publish first Progress Report
- **July - September**: BIIP publishes progress letters; concerns over leadership arise
- **October - November**: BCC leadership changes; John Clancy elected as leader.

**2016**

- **January - March**: BIIP updates indicate slow but steady improvement and "steps back"
- **November**: BIIP & BCC published autumn progress report. BIIP critical of council finances, culture and management

**2017**

- **February - March**: BIIP critiques management; corporate leadership changes (new CEO & CFO).
- **June - August**: BIIP acknowledges leadership improvement
- **September**: industrial dispute causes political leadership to resign; Ian Ward becomes council leader. BIIP decide not to remain in place.

**2018**

- **January:** corporate leadership changes (new CEO & CFO).
- **July:** Civil service get more involved with BCC-BIIP interactions
- **August:** BCC Publish new improvement plan

**2019**
- **April 2019:** BIIP disbands, calling for continued external oversight.
- **August:** Non-executive advisors appointed

**2020**
- **July:** Non-executive advisors step-down cited council achievements

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all of the temporal units identified in this thesis, they are not objective, clearly demarcated containers of experience. Instead, they are analytical tools which help trace changes in belief overtime and link them with certain actions, groups and decisions that can be discerned from examining the public record.

Throughout the analysis, it is revealed that over the course of intervention the dilemmas oscillated between the competing traditions and the tension surrounding centralised or bottom-up notions of accountability. The tradition of autonomy and the associated ideas of sector-led improvement, bottom-up accountability, independence, and conflict often held an allure for actors and shaped how they interpreted intervention. However, the key finding from this chapter is that ultimately, many of the dilemmas were resolved by submitting to the intervention process and orientating towards the centralisation tradition.

Tasked with conducting the initial evaluation, the reviewers side-lined their concerns about the voluntary status of the review by forging a shared interpretation of BCC's failings, situated within the centralisation tradition. In response to the evaluation, local councillors and officers upheld the tension between centralisation and autonomy by simultaneously accepting and rejecting the Kerslake recommendations. It was only with a change of leadership and full acceptance that BCC had failed in the way portrayed through intervention processes that the centralisation tradition was largely embraced. While newly appointed actors faced their own dilemmas when navigating intervention, the narratives that emerged in response built on, rather than contested, ideas of failure produced by those external to BCC. This was seen to provide new leadership with legitimacy in the eyes of central government, enabling the council to conclude intervention.

Focused primarily on presenting the empirical findings through the lens of traditions, dilemma and narrative, the language of failure, blame and learning is weaved throughout the chapter when appropriate. It is demonstrated that failure was often expressed through synonyms (e.g., dysfunction) which contained hidden forms of meaning which actors shared only in private (e.g., intervention as undemocratic). Likewise, blame was also expressed through synonyms (e.g., taking responsibility) by those who wished to cement the idea that certain actors within the council had been blame avoidant. The language of learning was rarely used by those interviewed but when it did arise, it was used by local actors to demonstrate a willingness to comply with intervention. Further analysis of failure, blame and learning is developed in the subsequent discussion and conclusion chapters.

Each of the following subsections are structured as follows. First, the contextual detail required to substantiate the temporal units is provided. This contextualisation informs the dilemmas explored in each section and how they are shaped by the empirical findings. Secondly, the dilemmas are then empirically grounded in the data. Thirdly, the narratives which emerged in response to these dilemmas are then analysed. At the end of the chapter, the findings are summarised in Table 6.2. The chapter concludes by providing initial reflections about how actors interpret failure, learning and blame.

## 6.1 Sense-making dilemma (July – December 2014)

This subsection focuses on the dilemmas and narratives of actors external to the council tasked with evaluating BCC. Announced by the Secretary of State (SoS) for Education in July 2014, the Kerslake review examined the perceived "weaknesses (…) in the governance culture of the council" made evident through the Trojan Horse Scandal (House of Commons, 2014; 1248). Composed of civil servants from the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the recently defunct Audit Commission and a selection of councillors and officers from the local government community (Kerslake 2014; 4-5), the team published their review on the 9th of December following the "lines of inquiry" set out in the terms of reference:

- structure and size of Birmingham City Council
- clarity of strategic leadership and direction
- managerial capacity to deliver the council's priorities
- role of the council in representing the community
- financial planning and sustainability in the medium and long term
- performance management and accountability
- the council's approach to partnership (Kerslake, 2014; 67)

Instigated by central government, the dilemma over labelling an event as a failure (or crisis) or not had already been resolved by recognising the Trojan Horse "scandal" and

launching investigations (Boswell et al, 2021). However, those conducting the review held conflicting beliefs about the review's independence from central government and the extent to which it was imposed onto BCC. This dilemma was overcome through consensus over BCC's failures and the solutions required. The narrative of "bad politics" blamed the local Labour party and the domineering political leadership of the council for failure. The solution was for change in this area. As such, "bad politics" was situated within the tradition of centralisation which seeks to diminish and reshape local politics through managerialism.

### 6.1.1 Was the evaluation imposed or voluntary?

Among the diverse actors who comprised the review, there were contrasting beliefs whether the evaluation was imposed or voluntary for BCC. Publicly, the terms of reference stated that the Kerslake review was jointly requested by BCC and DCLG (Kerslake, 2014; 67), and this view was shared amongst the civil servants interviewed (SR1, SR3). Specifically, one civil servant expressed that the review amounted to a form of sector-led improvement:

> A number of them [central government politicians] wondered whether Birmingham was just too big as a council and actually you should look to break it up. I thought actually let's have a proper review of Birmingham. It wasn't, and this is really important, a statutory intervention, it was a voluntary intervention, agreed with the council (...) in that respect, much closer to what I would call an enhanced peer review, out of the LGA peer review (SR3).

Regardless of central governments involvement, the above interviewee believed that this intervention aligned with the tradition of autonomy and offered a "proper" opportunity to examine the political question of reorganisation. Drawing attention to the reviews use of the "Local Government Association's (LGA) peer review model" (Kerslake, 2014; 4) – a form of evaluation "delivered by the sector for the sector" (LGA, n.d *Corporate Peer Challenge*) – the implication is that the reorganisation question could be answered by expert, non-partisan members of the local government community.

Alternatively, local government actors involved in the review team were less sanguine about the review. One reviewer described the review as "top-down" (R2). Another reviewer rejected the idea that the process was like sector-led improvement, believing that the review was only voluntary in so far as the threat of statutory intervention hung over BCC:

> So normally [LGA] peer review is a voluntary process. In this case, it wasn't. They didn't have a choice (…) it was a choice between this and the full-blown people walking through the door, inspectors, commissioners and goodness knows what else. So, from a local government perspective, we managed to keep the wolf from the door (R4).

Despite conflicting views among the review team, both quotes above share the idea that the review represented a win for local government. Enabling expert assessment of the reorganisation question or avoiding statutory intervention, the review worked against the controlling impulse of central government. In the following subsection, the shared interpretation of BCC's failings among reviewers is detailed. Encapsulated in "bad politics", this narrative coalesced around the belief that BCC was yet to modernise and do away with party-political conventions of old. This shared belief about failure and its solutions meant concerns about the reviews voluntary status were bypassed.

### 6.1.2 The narrative of bad politics

Central to "bad politics" was the belief that failure largely resulted from domineering political leadership. Linking this with underperformance, one reviewer stated that BCC was defined by a "traditional political leadership model that didn't really embrace the modernization agenda (…) there was no corporateness to Birmingham" (R2). This sentiment was shared by another reviewer when they exclaimed that the "leadership style of [BCC's leader] was problematic, overly focused on detail, quite controlling" (SR3). Clearly linked with managerialism, political leadership were framed as marginalising roles such as the Chief Executive (Kerslake, 2014; 34).

Failing to conform to the norm that administrative leadership should play a defining role within local government, political leadership were implicitly blamed for failure.

Wider political dynamics within the local Labour group were also interpreted as contributing to BCC's failures. One reviewer argued that the Birmingham Labour Group had an over-dependent relationship with trade unions:

> There are places, Liverpool's the classic, where what I call the District Labour Party or local Government Committee or whatever, all these people from the unions impacting on member behaviour in the council, which they shouldn't be. You need to split that off, some of that in Birmingham as well, which was a challenge. If you don't do a little deselect, you think "oh what am I going to do, that hasn't gone away, so it's constantly managing that" (R4).

Liverpool City Council's "District Labour Party" is drawn upon to refer to the British Radical Municipal movement (BRM) of the 1980s who were seen as too closely integrated with trade unions (Massey, 2020). This historical moment is mobilised to encapsulate local government failure and deployed as a benchmark against which BCC's failures can be defined.

Linking BCC's relationship with trade unionism more explicitly with failure, another review member argued that BCC's financial issues linked to equal pay liabilities (See Section 4.2.1) resulted from the dominance of trade union movement:

> [W]e were looking at how much the bin men got paid. So, you've got difficult finances, and the bin men were getting paid a fortune. Now, I don't necessarily disagree with bin men getting paid well, but when the bin men are getting paid that amount and other staff are not and that's because the bin men were all in Unite and Unite were running the council (…) So where [as] other councils had to deal with all those equal pay issues, et cetera? Birmingham had never really grasped that mettle (R3).

Believing that historic pay inequalities resulted from excessive union strength, this respondent implied that the local Labour party must delink from trade unions to avert failure.

Inaction was indicative of failure as it demonstrated that politicians did not have the conviction to do what was necessary. From this perspective, it was in local government's self-interest to distance themselves from the trade unions. Framing BCC as outlier in this regard served to convey an implicit attribution of blame to local politicians, in which the "misfortune" of failure stemmed from the absence of acting in one's own self-interest – which the rest of the local government community had done (Douglas, 2003).

Interpretations of failure as a result of political dysfunctionality were evident in the Kerslake review document itself, but its expression was subtle. Primarily, the language of a "dysfunctional corporate culture" was used (Kerslake 2014; 7), yet this referred implicitly to the perceived dominance of politicians, and particularly the recent resistance to austerity. In opposition to the comments made by BCC's then leader that austerity was "the end of local government as we know it" (Butler, 2012b), the report argued that austerity was something which could be managed through staff and service reductions (Kerslake, 2014; 20, 25, 34, 39, 41). Framed as a reality the council were yet to accept, the charge against BCC was a failure to accept the unavoidability of austerity (Kerslake, 2014; 44). As said in the document, "[m]embers need to have a realistic vision for the city and the council's future that is achievable". (Kerslake, 2014; 34)

Corporate dysfunctionality (synonymous with political dysfunctionality) defined the review's solutions and situated the review within a centralisation tradition which seeks to minimise the political character of local government. A governance "reset" to shift the balance of power away from councillors and towards officers was recommended (Kerslake, 2014; 7). One way in which this was to occur was through the redrawing of electoral boundaries and a reduction in the number of councillors (Kerslake, 2014; 40). Whilst seemingly an extreme measure, reviewers saw this as unproblematic, with one commenting that "the structures of the local government were an absolute mess. I think it was 120 councillors in multimember wards, elected by thirds with an overwhelmed senior officer leadership" (SR1). The review document also recommended that the responsibilities and relationships between councillors and officers were to be redefined; "finance, performance management, Human Resources and IT and property should be managed *corporately*" (Kerslake, 2014; 9 *emphasis added*).

Not found within the Kerslake review document, one civil servant shared that the review team believed change in political leadership was required for improvement and that the review process functioned to encourage this outcome. This was expressed when discussing reorganisation as a solution for failure:

[T]he balancing act [during the review] was around who was involved in defining the causes of the problem, who is involved in defining the solutions, and really, fundamentally, should Birmingham Council have been broken up? That was the view, a pretty strongly held view of some in government at the time. So, there was a, "okay, we've got a default answer from some in government, but how does that match up with the evidence and actually our expert view on the problems and the best way of addressing that". I think it was apparent [for the review] reasonably early that a change of political leadership was going to be necessary in Birmingham. Not a political party, but an individual. The review needed to provide a robust but reasonably graceful way of enabling that to happen (RS1).

Whilst this was not shared blatantly among the rest of the review team, their explicit critiques of political leadership noted above imply that this form of change was believed to be necessary.

In summary, any potential contestation resulting from personal dilemmas and differences of opinion among the review team were overcome through a shared narrative of bad politics. Believing the review avoided the worst excesses of central government control and that BCC's political character was central to failure, consensus emerged. The marginalisation of administrative leadership and local government modernisation by council politics served as the evaluative benchmark for failure. Ultimately, this meant political leadership were to blame for the situation the council found itself in. Situated within the centralisation tradition, the unwritten but intended solution was the removal of political leadership. Amounting to a "rude surprise" (Rhodes, 2011; 273) for local actors, the next subsection demonstrates how the evaluation provoked a dilemma of resistance and acceptance for BCC.

**6.2 Decision-making dilemma (July – December 2014)**

BCC's response to the review and its recommendations is examined in this subsection. The review was made public in early December, but local actors sensed the critical direction of the report prior to publication (LC2, LGO3, LGO7). For this reason, the months between announcing and publishing the review are considered as the temporal unit for the decision-making dilemma.

The decision-making dilemma relates to the choice between centralising or devolving crisis management (Boswell et al, 2021). Here the decision-making dilemma was around resisting or accepting the review's findings. Local actors believed the review was undemocratic and lacked validity, but that the appropriate response was to recognise the findings. A narrative of "antagonistic cooperation" whereby local actors accepted the findings but held deep reservations about the legitimacy of the review perpetuated, rather than resolved, this dilemma and the clash of centralisation and autonomy underpinning it.

*6.2.1 Resist or accept evaluations of failure*

Officers and councillors from BCC felt that the review was something "they couldn't refuse" (LGO3) but did believe they would receive a "fair ride" due to those involved (LC2). However, as local actors detected the emerging interpretation of failure and began contemplating the council's response, a dilemma between acceptance and resistance was experienced. This dilemma was acutely felt by one local government officer who had worked closely with the review team and was also tasked with drafting the council's response:

> It got a bit hairy out towards the end when they were actually writing the review up and presenting their findings. I was sitting there going, "I don't agree with that", and they were like, "well, tough" (...) I had to write it [the council's response]. Oh God, it was complex because the timing had to be right, and you needed to manage the situation. So, you have to acknowledge the findings, don't you? And there's obviously

a decision that's made are we going to go out fighting or are we going to say, actually, we recognize some of these and I think we said that we recognized some and had issues with others (LGO7).

The dilemma was navigated through balancing critique and recognition. Whilst only expressed in such explicitly dilemmatic terms by this officer, both the contestation of the review and a need to accept the findings were beliefs found across BCC's councillors and officers interviewed. Due to this mixture of contestation and cooperation, the response has been categorised as a narrative of "antagonistic cooperation".

*6.2.2 The narrative of antagonistic cooperation*

Mobilising a tradition of autonomy, BCC's response framed the review as a central government imposition: "the presumption, inherent in many of its recommendations, that the people of Birmingham and their city council should be instructed on local affairs from Whitehall" (BCC, 2014; 3). This sense of imposition was evident among local actors who believed that preconceived ideas of the council's failures were brought into the review process. As the following Labour councillor makes clear, the review was neither an exploratory nor open inquiry.

> Lord Kerslake has come in having been told or having observed a set of things about Birmingham City Council and how it operates and how it does or doesn't work. And it's not necessarily that he is being open minded and curious about exploring that issue, it's that there is a hypothesis which needs to be proved (LC5).

This language of hypotheses was also mobilised by an officer working in the council during this period (LGO3). Conjuring up the image of a distant actor imposing a predetermined logic, this interpretation of imposition provoked feelings of anger and resentment: "By the time the report came out I probably thought 'What the hell? (…) You've kind of just assembled a report that supports your kind of hypothesis'" (LGO3).

Many councillors and officers shared such feelings of frustration and anger but also acknowledged that the report did contain some truth. Responding to the idea that organisational wide failure had occurred (Walker, 2014) one councillor in the cabinet said that "my view on Kerslake is all of it is true for some bit of the council, little of it is true for all of the council" (LC1). Sharing this interpretation, a local government officer added that "If I'm honest, if you went into 50% of the local authorities across England, you would probably see the same" (LGO5). This interplay between frustration with the intervention process and a perceived truthfulness of the review's findings was captured most explicitly by the following cabinet member:

> I wouldn't say that there wasn't a reason to look closely at Birmingham. I just think in my view, things like the Audit Commission were actually a much more effective way of doing it than this quasi-political process that really lacks accountability (…) But bar the size issue, there was nothing in the Kerslake report I could disagree with. I do think his single member wards were the most stupid idea to have come out and where he plucked that particular joyous one from. Again, four-year terms have proven that you lose democratic accountability through a process (LC4).

This respondent both critiques the review as an overreach by central government politicians whilst also seeing the findings as valid. Yet simultaneously, they believe the review led to a loss of local democracy. Underpinning this complex interplay of seemingly conflicting beliefs is the clash of traditions. Centralisation encourages an appreciation of expert, managerial, non-political forms of local government oversight. Autonomy privileges local government as a space for political action – the boundaries of which should be determined locally.

Holding conflicting beliefs related to competing governance traditions was something evident in the council's public response to the review. The council "accepted the broad thrust of all the recommendations in the report" (BCC, 2014; 3), yet in the same document rejected four of the Kerslake recommendations around financial planning, devolution, and strategy (BCC, 2014; 3-5). Of those they did accept, interviews revealed that local actors privately held

reservations. For example, despite local actors disagreeing with it, the council's public response accepted the recommendation to change electoral boundaries and number of councillors (LC2, LC4, LGO3, LGO4). In the following quote, one local councillor explains why they felt unable to contest this:

> Kerslake made a hash of some things, and I was never able to say that. You can't, you're bound in by a sense an etiquette which means that you are to work with government (…) it's unwritten. And over a period of time, some people in leadership in different parts of the country have been unwilling to work with a government of a different persuasion. In Birmingham, we've always done it. I can go back many years and go back to previous Tory administrations which a labour government tried to work with. I got along with [government minister] and almost became buddies. I've still got [government ministers] mobile number (…) Not so with everybody [in local government]. Someone like Ken Livingstone is a good example of simply not wanting to work with central government, he was an oppositionist (LC2).

Invoking the idea of an etiquette that must be followed reveals that acceptance aimed to performatively signal that BCC was a cooperative local authority. Even if they disagreed with the review's recommendations, it was important for BCC to distinguish themselves from "oppositionist" councillors associated with the Radical Municipal Movement. This sentiment was echoed when officer's recalled advising councillors not to look like they were in "denial" (LGO4, LGO7). Failure was an evaluation which BCC must be *seen* to accept.

To summarise, local actors responded to the dilemma of resistance and acceptance with a narrative of antagonistic cooperation. Many councillors and officer believed that the review was undemocratic, but that it contained elements of truth and was important to appear cooperative. The result was that the council accepted a number of the Kerslake recommendations, even when they disagreed with them in private. This complex interplay between beliefs, some pushing towards antagonism and others encouraging cooperation, is defined by the competing traditions of autonomy and centralisation. In the following section,

how actors attempted to shift towards a more positive outlook in relation to intervention is explored.

## 6.3 Meaning-making dilemma (January to June 2015)

In the review, it was recommended that a Birmingham Independent Improvement Panel (BIIP) provide "robust challenge and support" to BCC whilst implementing recommendations (Kerslake, 2014; 8). Comprised of a Labour council leader, chief executive of a neighbouring local authority, two Audit Commission officers and a private sector leader from Birmingham, BIIP formed in January 2015. As stipulated in the review, BIIP would meet "leaders of each party group on the council and Chief Executive on at a minimum of a monthly basis during the course of the first year" (Kerslake, 2014; 64). No specification of when BIIP should conclude was given, but they were to publish two assessments between March and July 2015 (Kerslake, 2014; 64). This sub-section covers the period of BIIP's establishment, the council's initial attempts to improve and the panels first assessment. BIIP's later July publication and the contestation this provoked is examined through the lens of the accountability dilemma in subsection 6.4.

The dilemma focused upon in this subsection is the meaning-making dilemma. The meaning-making dilemma refers to the task of presenting oneself as authoritative (Boswell et al 2021) by constructing a story about "what has happened and why, what its repercussions are, how it can be resolved, who can be relied upon to do so" (Boin et al, 2016; 80). For local actors in BCC, this dilemma centred around making the implementation of solutions palatable despite believing intervention was undemocratic. Drawing on the tradition of autonomy, BCC's officers constructed a narrative of "local improvement" emphasising bottom-up organisational change. However, BIIP's approval of such change was still sought. This represented a subtle shift away from contesting failure and the placation of central government, towards actively engaging with top-down accountability mechanisms.

### 6.3.1 How to make implementing the wrong solutions palatable?

BCC had rejected the BIIP recommendation when responding to the review (BCC, 2014; 5) but such resistance was soon silenced. In January BCC's leader remarked that they "have now had time to reflect on the report and (…) welcome[d] the [BIIP] appointments that have been made" (BCC 2015a). Suggesting a move further towards cooperation, this did not mean that antagonistic interpretations subsided among local actors. The tension which resulted from agreeing to implement contested recommendations was captured by one officer involved in the implementation programme:

> [The Kerslake review] was disrespectful to the independence and democratic mandate of local government. But I could see what was occurring and some of the dilemmas you face is that some of [the review's] concerns were genuine ones, you know it was a real challenge that [councillors] weren't signed up to the improvements recommended. But I could understand why because they weren't quite the right ones (LGO3).

Sympathetic with aspects of the evaluation and the view that councillors could inhibit improvement, this officer also believed that intervention was undemocratic and proposed the wrong solutions. Whilst only expressed by this officer as a dilemma, the above quote succinctly captures how the tension between traditions of centralisation and autonomy persisted as local actors attempted to implement the Kerslake recommendations. In order to navigate this, a narrative of local improvement was constructed by officers tasked with designing organisational change.

### 6.3.2 The narrative of local improvement

Contrary to the sense of imposition documented in BCC's initial response, the narrative of local improvement contained a belief that intervention could be controlled locally. This belief was evident when, in January 2015, the then Chief Executive, described his approach to intervention in a letter to the Local Government Chronicle:

Of course, in Birmingham there was (and still is) the added frisson of being under very close scrutiny by various parts of central government and all the attendant telling you what you need to do that goes with being in detention. But this just reinforces for me the absolute necessity of taking the initiative yourself (...) [Without] we make managing [funding] reductions all the more difficult and, potentially, all the more damaging (Rodgers, 2015).

Significantly different from BCC's initial response to intervention which claimed that austerity represented an "impending financial crisis in local public services across the country" (BCC, 2014; 3), this response emphasised control within externally imposed constraints. Yet cryptically, this letter was signed off with the anticolonial phrase "a luta continua" (Rodgers, 2015) which translates to "the struggle continues" (Dube, 2015) – suggesting that resistance through compliance was possible.[29] In this vein, officers and councillors shared how they believed the Chief Executive was rightfully using the review to empower the changes they would have been making regardless of intervention (LGO3, LGO7, LC5)

The plan for implementing the review's recommendations was called the "Future Council Programme". Involving a 134-point action plan and the creation of a new position of Strategic Director of Transformation, this plan sought to go beyond the changes demanded by the review. This was clear within the Chief Executive's framing during a press conference:

So, our Future Council Programme is all about how we transform ourselves into a new organisation (…) the programme will cover everything we need to do. It will be holistic and integrated. In plain English, it will pretty much be the kitchen sink. We are going to throw everything into this (…) We had quite a few reviews last year and the big one, what Lord Kerslake did, we've now written an action plan for that and it has been agreed with the Independent Improvement Panel that's monitoring our progress and we have actually integrated this into our Future Council Programme, so it's all in there together. So, message number one, we have an agreed action plan, and we are moving

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[29] This phrase originates from the Mozambique war of independence used has been used by leftist activist movements engaged in various forms of resistance (Dube, 2015),

forwards on our organisational improvement journey. The second thing I want to say, and this is more important to me, we are going to make as much information available to you [the public], as we possibly can (BCC, 2015b).

The interplay between the competing traditions of autonomy and centralisation is evident within the above text. The Future Council Programme was not simply an exercise in the implementation of recommendations from above, but something developed by the council itself and orientated towards local citizens. Yet nevertheless, the council was still accountable to BIIP in the improvement process.

For those who occupied BIIP, the Future Council Programme was something they initially approved (BIIP, 2015a). Commenting on this, one panel member expressed that despite doubt, they agreed to give BCC space to work on improvement without close oversight:

Yeah, I think [panel member] at this stage was very much of the view that this wasn't a heavy-handed intervention, and that panel should close down as quick as possible, it looked bad for Birmingham. Both the leader and the chief exec said "look, we've got this and we're on top of this, we can do this, we need you to get out of our way so we can do it". So, I think that was the view we all came to, to give them that chance. We were in different places as to whether we believed it, but [panel member] particularly believed it (PM5).

Going through their own sense making process, this suggests at this early stage, the panel perceived themselves as playing a reactive rather than prescriptive role.

Despite the projected image of a coherent plan, diverging beliefs about the Future Council Programme existed among local actors. For example, while one officer described that they were "quite positive about the plan and that we were tracking Kerslake [implementations]" (LGO3), a cabinet member leading one work stream within the plan interpreted it as a "tick box exercise" (LC4) not addressing the dysfunctional management structures that others believed it was (LC1). Outside the cabinet, Labour councillors believed

that the Future Council Programme represented an acceptance of austerity and councillors resigned from committee positions in protest (Elkes, 2015a). Reflecting on a wider sense of disagreement among those in BCC, one councillor connected division around improvement to the contestation of failure outlined in the previous subsection:

> The problem was, in an improvement journey, you begin by having one version of the truth and one version of what's wrong, everyone agrees on. Once you've agreed on what's wrong, you can try and fix it and make a plan for fixing it. With Kerslake, we never agreed on what was wrong. (…) And then because internally we didn't agree on what was wrong, and then the panel had a sort of idea as to what was wrong that I think went way beyond what the report said (LC1).

What this account illuminates, is that despite publicly committing to the Future Council Programme, local actors were privately divided over improvement and understandings of failure which underlined this. Whilst officers muted their frustration with the review by focusing on intervention as an opportunity to provoke change, councillors remained frustrated and angry at the situation.

To summarise, the dilemma of making the wrong solutions palatable was navigated through a narrative of local improvement. Attempting to project authority, officers articulated that improvement and change were owned locally. Framed as an alternative to centrally determined change, this narrative appealed to the tradition of autonomy. Yet simultaneously, BIIP's approval was sought and the types of change envisioned were those determined by a reduction in central government funding. This points to the way local officers orientated towards the centralisation tradition and increasingly engaged in cooperation rather than resistance. Councillors on the other hand remained divided over the intervention process. How BCC responded to the charge that they were failing to improve is examined in the next section.

## 6.4 Accountability dilemma (June 2015 to February 2017)

This subsection examines BIIPs progress reporting which, sent to the SoS for DCLG, evaluated BCC's improvement. Due to the publication of competing accounts of success and failure between BCC and BIIP, and the associated resignation of key leadership in the council, the periods between July 2015 and February 2017 have been identified as the temporal unit for the accountability dilemma.

The accountability dilemma refers to actors navigating the decision to accept responsibility for failure or resist accusations of blame (Boswell et al, 2021). In response to this dilemma, a narrative of *implementing blame* emerged among BCC's Labour councillors. Perceiving BIIP to blame political and administrative leadership for a failure to improve, Labour councillors acted to remove leadership believing it was the only way to avoid statutory intervention. This occurred despite both councillors and officers largely disagreeing with BIIPs evaluations. Abandoning the attempt to control intervention, local actors embraced the centralisation tradition and belief that local government must act subordinately to the demands of central government.

### 6.4.1 Accepting responsibility or offloading blame?

In June of 2015, BCC published an evaluation of their implementation of the Kerslake recommendations. Despite the initial rejection of certain recommendations, the report claimed partial or complete implementation in relation to all 11 recommendations in the Kerslake review (BCC, 2015b). By December, 61% of the 134 action plans in the Future Council Programme were reported to be implemented (BCC, 2015d), which further increased to 80% by November 2016 (BCC, 2016). This was framed as a "creditable record of achievement", meaning that the "City Council can take forward further improvements through the local leadership" – indicating the belief that BIIPs oversight was no longer needed (BCC, 2015d; 4).

Progress was contested by BIIP who perceived the Future Council Programme as a failure of improvement. Whilst never explicitly referring to implementation rates, BCC's successful framing was contested on the basis of slow progress (BIIP, 2015b). In the following excerpt from one of BIIP's initial evaluations, political leadership is blamed for a failure to improve:

[O]ur concerns about the senior management capacity issue reflect a wider concern. Namely that the senior political leadership of the Council, in spite of assertions to the contrary, may still not understand the scale of the task facing the Council (…) We continue to observe a Council where the politicians with most influence are focusing too much on the inner political workings of the authority rather than engaging widely and enthusiastically with external partners and the communities of Birmingham. There are many very able and committed councillors and staff who welcome the potential for radical change (BIIP, 2015b; 5).

Focused on internal political conflict, political leadership is blamed for quietly resisting improvement through ignorance and not demonstrating the "community leadership" associated with the modernisation agenda (Cochrane, 2004). Evident above is also the distinction between local actors the panel perceived as for or against change. Ostensibly, political leadership are located within the latter category. Implicit is the idea that leadership change was required – something given greater credence when the SoS encouraged a "change in the culture and style of leadership at the heart of the council" (Clark, 2015; 1) in response to the BIIP letter. Media accounts made this even more explicit, interpreting the conflict to be one about blaming political leadership for a failure to improve (Elkes, 2015b)

Even when BIIP did acknowledge positive change, it was claimed that the panel should remain in the council because "new arrangements and improvements are fragile and as yet untested" (BIIP, 2016; 5). As of January 2017, BIIP were reporting that BCC exhibited "disappointingly slow progress in addressing many of the most important Kerslake recommendations relating to the Council's culture, capacity and capability" (BIIP, 2017; 5). Specific critique was aimed at the BCC's failure to produce a balanced budget and how "corporate managerial leadership did not, during 2016/17 especially, fully grip and co-ordinate in a timely manner its transformation and financial sustainability agendas" (BIIP, 2017; 5). Indicating the ongoing contestation, the Chief Executive spoke to the media and argued that Conservative government's austerity policy (Gentleman, 2016) explained this

outcome. Again, local media accounts from this period explicitly framed such tensions as the attribution of blame between local actors for this failure (Elkes, 2017).

Conflict between BIIP and BCC's leadership was something many of those interviewed reflected on (LG1, LGO3, LGO8, LC2, LC5). Officers in particular contested what they perceived as BIIP's approach to improvement. One described how they believed BIIP were pre-occupied with "measurable inputs and outputs, not outcomes" (LGO8), wished officers to remove politicians from leadership positions (LGO3) or were excessively critical (LGO1). Whilst those panel members interviewed did not reflect on their approach to improvement in such terms, they did agree that the accountability dilemma had created an us-versus-them dynamic between BCC and BIIP:

> I think we were too forensic in the way we went about supporting the council and trying to copy sort of inspectorate regime way of doing things (...) All it did was create us and them. We became far more challenging than we should have, and they became more defensive. So, it was never [a] shared [process] (PM5).

In the following section, how local councillors and officers shifted away from contesting evaluations of failure towards acting upon perceived blame attributed to leadership will be explored.

*6.4.2 The narrative of implementing blame*

During this period, a sense of powerlessness was evident among local officers and councillors. Fear that BIIP would recommend statutory intervention was central to this. The access BIIP were perceived to have with central government was considered as the panel's "trump card" (LGO1) and meant that they could encourage government to use a "really big stick and get rid of all of us and take-us-over" (LC1). How fear drove the desire to satisfy BIIP is evident in BCC's second progress report written in first person by the then leader of BCC:

> Birmingham has listened, I have listened (…) And my final remark has to be a plea to the Panel, that if we are not on the right path then please work with us and guide us

in the right direction. We are working harder and smarter to deliver the new form of local government and partnerships that the city both requires and deserves. But we are also willing to listen to and learn from others in order to deliver changes that will have the most positive impact possible for our citizens (BCC, 2015e).

Signifying a shift away from simply complying with the Kerslake recommendations and locally determined improvement, the language of learning is deployed to signify a readiness to comply with the demands of the panel. Even in the absence of understanding BIIP's critique, there is a "plea" to be guided by the panel and in the claim "I have listened", a legitimation of the idea that leadership was once ignorant. Indicating a change in perception that to improve meant to comply, one local government officer recalled the moment that they learnt how to deal with intervention:

Just do what the bastards tell you for long enough until they fuck off. That's what I've learned. That advice came too late because that came in 2016, I probably needed that advice in 2014 (…) I didn't have the power, or the influence to trump anybody (LGO3).

Going into intervention, this officer believed they could utilise intervention as an opportunity to prompt change. Experience of the accountability dilemma changed this. They subsequently saw passivity and deference as the only useful modes of engagement. However, this officer believed that for them it was "too late" because they were perceived as a problem of leadership by BIIP.

Subtle blame dynamics were emerging at this point. For example, the below officer who liaised between BIIP and BCC's leadership blamed themselves for failure despite disagreeing with BIIP's approach to improvement:

Well, on a personal level, it's a great toll on me because of the person that I am, I had an over developed sense of responsibility. So, I did go through that period of thinking, well, shit, this is all my fault. [Officer] said, of course it isn't don't be stupid, but this was a couple of years after the event when we finally started to talk about it. (…) I could happily go and work with someone to help them improve. But not this kind of

continuing probing of the deficit position and kicking everybody. It just makes you feel like you're crap (LGO7).

Speaking to the implicit dynamic of blame, this officer kept the internalisation of blame to themselves, never revealing how they felt with colleagues until after the event.

Blame was largely targeted at leadership and local actors perceived an increasing pressure for change in this area. For example, one officer said, "I got phoned up by [Birmingham Labour MP] who was digging around asking if [political leadership] were up for change" (LGO3). Another officer who worked closely with Whitehall perceived central government as also encouraging a process of leadership change.

At this point we had a new Secretary of State, who was much more amenable, positive person to work with. They worked very closely with the Core Cities, for example, on the devolution agenda. So, we had a relationship with where we could discuss issues in a bit more positive way than we could with Eric Pickles. But it was clear that the course of the intervention [to remove leadership] had been set and would continue. And there was no way that even if the Secretary of State wanted to change the approach that they would. It was like dealing with a runaway train that you just couldn't stop; [leadership change] was going to happen. So, there was a sort of unspoken process of pressure on the leadership going on behind the scenes, as well as what everybody could see was written in the report (LGO4).

Like the officer who did not share with their colleagues how the blamed themselves (LGO7), the above quote ascribes blame and the desire for leadership change to exist on an "unspoken" level.

With a growing sense that BCC would not be evaluated positively until changes of leadership occurred, councillors in the Labour party acted on the perceived pressure and removed political and administrative leadership during this period. Many officers and councillors believed that such changes occurred because of BIIP's critique (LGO1, LGO3, LGA1,

LC1, LC2, PM2) and the idea that BIIP had prompted such changes were openly speculated in the media (Elkes, 2015b; Elkes 2017).

To summarise, this subsection has focused on the dilemma of accountability resulting from diverging accounts of BCC's improvement. Fearful of statutory intervention, local actors did not openly contest BIIP's framing that a failure to improve resulted from poor leadership. Publicly, leadership were committed to working with the process and felt compelled to address BIIPs critiques – in turn reinforcing the idea that leadership had been a problem. Perceiving BIIP's unwavering critique as a demand to remove leadership, local councillors acted upon this perception of blame and removed leadership. Seeing themselves at the behest of BIIP and central government, local actors embraced the centralisation tradition and acted to satisfy these actors. How the new executive worked with intervention and experienced their own meaning-making dilemma is explored in the next section.

## 6.5 Meaning-making dilemma (December 2015 to August 2018)

This subsection examines the attempts made by new leadership teams to rebuild relationships with BIIP and establish a new approach to improvement which replaced the Future Council Programme. This culminated with the publication of the "Corporate Improvement Program" published in August 2018 (BCC, 2018).

It is argued that newly appointed actors faced a meaning-making dilemma similar to one examined in section 6.3. BIIP undermined the viability of Future Council Programme and narrative of "local improvement" as the previous resolve to meaning-making task. Newly appointed actors were therefore tasked with constructing a new story about "what has happened (…) [and] who can be relied upon" (Boin et al, 2016; 80). Situated within the interplay between the traditions of centralisation and autonomy, local actors felt the need to gain the trust of BIIP whilst also challenging the panel's persistent perceptions of failure. In response to this, a narrative of "difference" emerged which reinforced the idea that previous leadership were blame avoidant and used this as a point of contrast for future improvement. Building on interpretations of failure made by BIIP and further delegitimising BCC's past

contestation and resistance, this dilemma was navigated by embracing the centralisation tradition.

*6.5.1 How to rebuild trust with the cynical?*

Newly appointed actors experienced the dilemma of convincing BIIP that they could be trusted to improve a persistently failing council. As stated by one interviewee who would come to work closely with BIIP, this dilemma stemmed from the perceived proclivity of the panel to produce negative judgements:

> [T]he vibes I got in that first few months were not good, it was all a negative, "I know you've come in, but you'll never sort this, no one's ever sorted it". And I had a warning that the improvement board were difficult and was headed by [BIIP Member], whose is formidable and equally sort of Thatcher like. [They] came from a finance background, so in a sense I had an immediate ability then to be able to relate to [BIIP Member] because they spoke my language, they knew my discipline. So, one of the first things I've got to do is to convince these people that they can trust me to deliver and not antagonize them and not give them reason to step in and say, well, actually, [BCC Officer] is no better than anything else that's gone before (LGO10).

Characterising the BIIP member as "Thatcher like", whilst also seeing potential for understanding based on a shared professional background, situates this dilemma at the interplay between centralisation and autonomy. The Thatcher analogy evokes images of a controlling character who, suspicious of local government, was likely to engage in conflict. Alternatively, there is the idea of a shared professional language which could help build a trusting, deliberative relationship. Contrasting with one another, this dilemma represents the two opposing relational possibilities which this officer saw.

Another BCC officer who joined the council during this period also shared the dilemma of building trusted relationships with BIIP and how this had to be balanced with remaining loyal to the council:

> Working with an improvement panel, your number one job is to get on board with the improvement panel, make a relationship with the lead person and get the right balance between not trying to be their best friend or make them your best friend, but get over to them that you are going to be honest with them. Yes, of course, you will be presenting facts in a way that you think suits the authority, but you're not going to lie and you are going to be genuine in terms of exposing what the challenges are and genuine in saying, "Look, I genuinely think we've made progress here, but I fully acknowledge that we're not where we need to be here now". That balance is quite tricky (LGO2).

Evident above is a tension between traditions of centralisation and autonomy, whereby this officer had to balance seeking BIIP's approval with remaining loyal to BCC. Whilst this dilemma was only articulated in such terms by these two officers, the narrative of "difference" detailed below contained implicit references to this dilemma whilst also highlighting how the dilemma was navigated in practice.

### 6.5.2 The narrative of difference

During the initial stages of intervention, BCC's executive governance – the Chief Executive, Policy Executive for Chief Executive, Chief Finance Officer, Leader, Deputy Leader and Cabinet – remained largely the same. Following the removal of leadership, executive governance was rebuilt with the explicit aim of a clear demarcation between new and old. As new coalitions formed based on who had "bought into this Future Council thing" (LGO2), those who worked under previous leadership were perceived to be "shut out" from engagements with BIIP (LGO1). One member of the executive team brought in during this new phase commented on

how the sense of injustice felt by those who served under previous leadership was a cultural problem which needed to be addressed:

> There were people who had been there a really long time, nice people, well meaning, but quite kind of browbeat[en] by what the place has been through. So, I think there was definitely lovely people, but there was definitely a need to refresh and bring in people with a slightly different mentality (...) there was a lot of turnover and I ended up with a much more modern, progressive, agile and better resourced, core team. So, working the kind of culture side of what had gone on. It had been debilitating for people and people lose motivation and start to get into a bit of a downward spiral (LGO6).

What the above quote represents is the process of interpreting past failure through the lens of blame. Those who remained from the past administration were perceived to blame BIIP for unnecessary change and were now expected to look forward. Yet this did not mean that the recent past had no significance for those newly appointed actors. Rather, an image of the past as embodying failure and blame was deployed as an evaluative benchmark against which new successes were judged. This was most evident within BCC's progress reporting which contrasted the councils past and present to claim that improvements had been made (BCC, 2016; 7, 11, 13, 16,18, 22, 33, 38). Critiques of previous leadership was one way in which this was done. Thus, the document contained statements such as:

> "[s]ince the Kerslake review and the (eventual) subsequent strengthening of the leadership group, there have been significant developments" (BCC, 2016; 7)

> "[a]ll of this activity is in stark contrast to the situation a year ago, when there was limited interaction between the Leader of the Council and his political counterparts" (BCC, 2016; 13).

In mobilising an interpretation of past dysfunctional leadership to define the promise of new, the idea of moving away from council politics dominated by blame was also at play. For example, the progress report quoted above also argued that the legacy of past blame in response to failure, whilst being moved away from, continued to pose a risk to improvement:

[A] long history of staff at the council not feeling trusted and empowered has led to entrenched behaviours that will not be "unlearned" overnight. The member-officer workshops surfaced a number of factors that are holding us back from working as effectively as we could be, including poor communication, a fear of blame and confusion over roles and boundaries (BCC, 2016; 13).

Moving away from a politics dominated by blame was also a sentiment found in the 2018 Corporate Improvement Plan which replaced the Future Council Programme. In seeking an "organisational culture that (…) supports leaders to take personal responsibility of issues and challenges" one aim of this improvement plan was for leadership to avoid "defensiveness" when underperformance emerged (BCC, 2018; 13). Integral to this aim was an implicit interpretation of past leadership failings. For example, when providing the background to the "improvement aim" of "tackling defensiveness", the report claimed:

this corporate governance plan represents a 'line in the sand' in terms of the Council confronting the degree of honesty and rigour required in order to tackle historic weaknesses in organisational culture (BCC, 2018; 13).

A strict demarcation with the past defined by a lack of honesty among leadership is evident in the above quote. Implied through the metaphor of a "line in the sand", the approach to improvement found within this new plan signifies a shift towards new leadership being less conflictual and blame avoidant.

The new approach to improvement was seen to help improve working relationships between officers and BIIP, with interviewees from both groups initially sharing a positive assessment of the changes (LGO2, LGO10, PM2). However, for councillors who had witnessed

the development and subsequent demise of the Future Council Programme, a continued cynicism towards improvement was evident. For example, one councillor said, "the first thing [the new chief executive] does is change Future Council with another bloody vision statement and another corporate plan" (LC4). More critically, another cabinet member suggested that changes were not driven by a genuine belief among local actors that past attempts at improvement failed, but rather by fear of being blamed by the panel:

> The reason why that [Future Council Program] fell was basically the panel lost confidence in that as the thing to do. Fired the guy whose brainchild it was. Everyone was petrified of touching any of it after that. And it just sort of drifted away because all senior officers were like, if I try and continue this program, the boss just got fired because of it (LC1).

To summarise, newly appointed local actors experienced the dilemma of building trust with BIIP. Beliefs around cooperating with the panel and persuading them that improvements could be made clashed with beliefs about remaining loyal to the council and pushing back against unwarranted criticism. Navigating this dilemma, a narrative of "difference" meant new relationships could be formed with BIIP around a shared critique of the past. This shared interpretation of the past reproduced the idea that previous leadership were blame avoidant whilst also defining the new approach to improvement in opposition to this past. Cementing the past as defined by counter-productive and illegitimate forms of defensiveness, the task of building trust with BIIP was navigated by mobilising the centralisation tradition and the belief that BCC must mould itself towards notions of performance favoured by BIIP. In the following section, it is shown that this resolve did not endure as BIIP once again questioned the progress BCC claimed to make.

## 6.6 Accountability dilemma (August 2018 – July 2020)

This last subsection outlines the re-emergence of BIIP's critical evaluations and the work of local actors to exit intervention. Following BCC's publication of the Corporate Governance

Improvement Plan in August of 2018, BIIP once again produced critical assessments of the council's performance. After BIIP published a final progress report in April 2019 and stood down, intervention continued as BCC and DCLG agreed to establish a board of non-executive advisors (NEA). Made up of actors from the local government sector, the NEA's supported the council in areas such as "financial resilience", "governance and culture change", and "risk management" (BCC, 2019b). In the agreement with DCLG, BCC's senior officers and the NEAs were to report to the SoS three times a year (Brokenshire, 2019). This arrangement lasted till July 2020 when the NEA's published their final report.

Again, this period is defined by the accountability dilemma stemming from BIIP's critiques of BCC's progress. Rather than being subsumed by fear and blame, this time local actors navigated the accountability dilemma through a narrative of "managing blame". By influencing progress reports local actors believed that the risk of being blamed in response to BIIP's critical evaluations could be minimised. Likewise cultivating positive relationships with central government was seen as a central strategy for promoting positive assessments of the council and undermining BIIP's perspective. However, the relationships built with central government continued to centre around assuring DCLG that local political leadership would not follow in the same conflictual footsteps of old. In doing so, this response was still ultimately situated within the centralisation tradition.

### 6.6.1 Accepting or offloading responsibility

Despite the enhanced relationships, local actors were soon railing against BIIP's continued critique of performance. The perception that working with the panel was becoming increasingly challenging due to BIIP's unhelpful preoccupation with past failures and blame was shared by the following officer:

> So, I was probably slightly conflicted when trying to be diplomatic [with BIIP]. On one level, I think you've got to get those core tenets right of corporate functions and aspects of good governance. But then you can't ignore what I would say as the unique set of factors that swirl around Birmingham. You can attribute blame around the

financials and around things like equal pay and there's all sorts of historical decisions that we'd now ideally do things differently. Particularly in terms of [political leadership] inheriting that, I think you have, to a degree, give them credit for their inheritance and help them work through that, as opposed to kind of keep casting back to what could have been done differently in the past (LGO6).

This officer agreed with the "core tenets" that the panel prescribed but not with the continual "casting back" to the past. An interpretation that BIIP could not move beyond past failures was also something shared by other officers, members and professional association representatives who met with panel (LC1, LGO6, LGO10, PA1), with one recalling that BIIP would "rehearse what had gone wrong many times" to the detriment of looking forward (PA1).

On the other hand, all panel members interviewed shared how during this period they continued to detect failure (PM1, PM2, PM5). As one member shared, failure was entangled with frustration as they felt intentional forms of inaction and deception were be deployed by officers:

> [BIIP members] were sometimes frustrated because one or two officers were blocking [improvement], and [BIIP members] could see through somebody kicking into the long grass (…) This officer left. They come from [local government] and was going to change the world and had a good reputation and this was [their] dream job. I smile because within twelve months they were off and it was no longer the dream job. They really wanted to please the politicians and actually played the politician themself. And you can always spot an officer who can't be just an officer in the way that they speak to you and try to get over things. And you're thinking, yeah, "you're playing a politician with me to try and get me on the side and try and get a story through about progress that you're making (PM1).

Attempts by local government officers to tell a positive story was perceived by this panel member as "kicking [improvement] into the long grass", a phrase often associated with

the avoidance of blame by deploying procedural mechanisms such as inquiries (Sultizeanu-Kenan, 2007; Hood et al, 2009). Underlining this interpretation was a deep mistrust and a belief that despite stated intentions, the officer referenced was attempting to manipulate the panel.

The accountability dilemma was underpinned by the competing interpretations of performance held between BCC and BIIP. Local actors believed that BIIP were attributing blame and BIIP believed that local actors were avoiding blame. Due to these beliefs being held privately rather than being explicitly aired, the clashing groups continued to attempt to work together. How local actors navigated the accountability dilemma through the narrative of "managing blame" is outlined below.

*6.6.2 The narrative of managing blame*

Increasingly critical of BIIP, local actors saw the panel and the fall-out from their progress reporting as something to manage. Having participated in the removal of the previous leadership, one councillor shared how they sought to influence the panels written reports to minimise blame-risk:

> They'd [BIIP] write a progress report letter [to DCLG], send us the draft. We'd look at it and go, "oh, my God, this is terrible. Is this really what you mean?". And they'd go, "oh, no, we don't mean that". And [incumbent leader] would go, "if you leave that sentence in there, I'm going to have to resign as leader because that sentence is so bad, it's the kind of sentence that got [previous leader] ousted" (LC1).

Party political dynamics were perceived as something the panel did not understand, and councillors were required to translate how their progress reports would be read as an indictment by the wider Labour group.

Whilst presenting opportunities to avoid blame, learning to manage blame through influencing progress reports was also seen as creating the risk of blame attribution. This was evident when a BCC officer recalled that they were asked by councillors to request changes

which they believed were inappropriate. While the suggested changes were delivered to BIIP, this officer privately distanced themselves from the request and the possible fallout of over-stepping:

> [Councillor] basically wanted them to write something saying [they] were marvellous. The problems of Birmingham City Council were solved and a lot of it was down to [them] personally (...) So I very grudgingly and very uncomfortably made a couple of the suggested changes (...) You try and be loyal to [councillors] (...) but I think I spoke to [panel member] on the phone and said, "look, I'm sending you back these amendments. Some of them have come from me. Some of them have been requested by [councillor]. You will understand what I mean when you see them" (LGO2).

This officer saw negotiation over BIIPs progress report as much about navigating the risk of future blame as it was about the evaluations found within.

An additional dimension of managing blame was councillors framing BIIP as responsible for blame-attracting policy decisions. This tactic was something commented on by cabinet members who saw it as "helpful" (LC1) and backbench councillors who believed it was a "way of blocking democratic direction of the authority" (Birmingham Labour Group, 2019; 3). In the following quote, the more favourable interpretation is given by a cabinet member who recalled the example of voting on financial cuts:

> [W]e had really difficult budget decisions and we'd have to take them to the Labour group and say, "I know you don't want to cut services to put money into reserves, but the panel will slaughter us if we don't. They're [BIIP] telling us we have to put more money into reserves" (LC1).

Believing that opposition to austerity was one of the reasons for intervention into BCC, this decision was deemed necessary. Framing the decision as BIIP's aimed to protect leadership from a dissatisfied Labour group by claiming they lacked agency and must avoid statutory intervention.

Whilst managing blame, local actors sought to rebuild the relationship with central government in order to bypass BIIP (LGO6, LGO10, PA1, LC1). During this period local actors saw a relationship with the civil service as an opportunity to influence the intervention process. The one officer tasked with rebuilding this relationship recalled a moment of breakthrough where they believed they gained the trust of a senior civil servant from DCLG:

I remember on moments like the LGA [Local Government Association] Conference or the Conservative Party conference in Birmingham, I would go and spend time with [senior civil servant]. I'd take [senior civil servant] for a pint, I'd understand what was going on in [senior civil servant's] life. I'd try and build that relationship in a way that we could be really honest with each other. [Senior civil servant] could then ring me and say, "you know what, one of the issues here is that we just don't trust [leader] to be the person to do this". And I'd be like, "is that fair"? You'd have the kind of grownup, really sensible conversation about trust and what's actually going to happen here. So, that was a massive shift in the dynamic of how the intervention was managed (LGO6).

Like earlier periods of intervention, it was still felt that improvement centred around demonstrating that leadership had changed. Previously interpreted through the tradition of autonomy and seen as undemocratic (LGO3), the above officer did not use this new relationship to challenge the framing of improvement. Instead, the relationship was used as a vehicle to successfully argue that new leadership were "sophisticated and mature [and would not] (…) make political points" (PA1). This points to the continued relevance of the interpretation, emerging first in the Kerslake review, that BCC's past failures stemmed from an overly conflictual dynamic with central government.

New relationships with the civil service were not used to challenge the framing of success but did, it was believed, lead to critiques of BIIP. As one BCC officer described, positive contacts led DCLG to "realise that the panel had a tone and a colour to it that was influenced by four years of being there and not making a difference (LGO10). Recognition of BCC's improvement was felt to expose BIIP to interpretations of failure.

BIIP were not aware of the relationship between BCC and DCLG (PM1), but did detect a loss of influence. This was implied when one panel member shared that they were increasingly liaising with "administrative people" rather than senior civil servants when interacting with government (PM5). Discussing the decision-making around BIIP standing down, another panel member added that they lost influence with both the council and central government:

> There were all those changes. Change the leader, change the chief exec. The council did listen, but it waned (…) I think it just became clear that we were finished. That was my view. We were still working and still doing everything that's required of us still doing reports, but our leverage [with BCC] had gone. So, the only leverage we had was the possibility of government intervention. If the Secretary of State wasn't taking any interest, there wasn't going to be any government intervention. The Secretary of State was probably thinking "the last thing I want is to have Birmingham go wrong on my turf. So, I'll just keep out of it so I can say "what has it got to do with me?". Those idiots up in Birmingham made that mess" (PM2).

Speaking to the centrality of blame during this period, it is telling that the loss of influence was interpreted by this panel member as generating the risk of blame. BIIP still believed that the council was failing (BIIP, 2019) and upon standing down, now saw themselves as a blame-target.

With a refreshed central-local dynamic, local actors grew confident that central government would not intervene statutorily (LC1, LC3, LGO6, LGO10). Additional oversight, in the form of non-executive advisors (NEA's), replaced BIIP and within a year stood down citing good progress on the council's improvements (BCC, 2020). Noted by central government as a "conclusion" to the intervention (MHCLG, 2019), local actors remained uncertain about whether they had exited intervention.[30] As one councillor commented, the council never received "a departmental letter to say we're out of intervention (…) we never actually formally

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[30] In 2016, the Department for Communities and Local Government was renamed to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

left intervention" (LC1). Discussing this with the officer who rebuilt the council's relationship with central government, they believed that the risk of blame for future council failings underlined MHCLG's lack of recognition:

> I suspect there was still a risk judgment from government that "Birmingham is a place that's complicated, it's never likely to be completely safe". So, putting your name to a letter is difficult and actually just to step away more quietly and hope that it stays quiet for long enough to extract yourself without a great fanfare is probably the most elegant solution. But also if you start talking about ministerial letters, it gets actually political, doesn't it? The idea of a Conservative SoS publicly endorsing Birmingham's Labour leadership, it was probably always likely to be a bit of a stretch. But I think we took their silence, if you like, there's confirmation that they were happy to endorse the progress that had been made and we took that as a win (LGO6)

Whilst BCC may have been understood as an improving council, a lingering doubt over future success and failure remained.

In summary, the accountability dilemma arose after BIIP contested BCC's new approach to improvement. A narrative of managing blame involved local actors believing they could avoid the blame games of the recent past and that a refreshed relationship with central government could assist in this process. Rather than challenging the central government idea of failure (i.e., conflictual political leadership), relationships were deployed to assuage such concerns and undermine the legitimacy of BIIP. This was central for resolving the accountability dilemma. Yet despite new and influential relationships with DCLG, without public acknowledgement of the council's improvement by central government, a lingering doubt and ambiguity over the conclusion of intervention was evident.

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed how competing traditions of centralization and autonomy shaped the dilemmas and narrative that arose during central government intervention into BCC. A

summary of the temporal units, dilemmas, and narratives examined in this chapter can be found in table 6.2.

Table 6.2: Overview of BCC's temporal units, dilemmas, and narratives

**Competing traditions**

*Centralisation:* local government failure demands hierarchical forms of oversight

*Autonomy:* local government failure to be determined and addressed locally

| Temporal Unit | Dilemma | Narratives |
|---|---|---|
| *September – December 2014:*<br><br>Evaluation conducted and published | *Sense-making:*<br><br>Was the evaluation imposed or voluntary? | *Bad politics:*<br><br>Managerial reform can address failures resulting from archaic Labour politics |
| *December 2014:*<br><br>BCC responds | *Decision-making:*<br><br>Resist or accept evaluations of failure? | *Antagonistic cooperation:*<br><br>Evaluation flawed and undemocratic but appearing cooperative important |
| *January – June 2015:*<br><br>Implementing recommendations | *Meaning making:*<br><br>How to make implementing the wrong solutions palatable? | *Local improvement:*<br><br>Integrating top-down and bottom-up solutions for failure satisfy both central and local actors |
| *June 2015 – February 2017:*<br><br>Leadership resignations | *Accountability*:<br><br>Accept or avoid blame for failing to improve? | *Implementing blame:*<br><br>Accepting blame and removing leadership will avoid statutory intervention |
| *December 2015 – August 2018:*<br><br>New improvement plan developed | *Meaning making:*<br><br>How to rebuild trust with the cynical? | *Difference:*<br><br>Trust cultivated by defining new leadership in opposition to past leadership |
| *August 2018 – July 2020:*<br><br>Intervention processes change and conclude | *Accountability:*<br><br>Accept or avoid blame for failing to improve | *Managing blame:*<br><br>Blame generated through intervention can be avoided by building new relationships with central government. |

It has been argued that reviewers held conflicting beliefs about whether the intervention was voluntary and therefore situated within the autonomy tradition, or whether

it was imposed onto the council by central government and situated within the centralisation tradition. This tension was navigated through a shared narrative of BCC's failures and the required solutions. Situated within the centralization tradition, the "bad politics" narrative identified political leadership and the local Labour party as responsible for failure and sought to reshape council politics through managerial reform.

When responding to the review, local officers and councillors experienced a dilemma between resistance and acceptance. Situated at the interplay between traditions of autonomy and centralization, a narrative of "antagonistic cooperation" upheld rather than resolved this dilemma by simultaneously contesting the review whilst accepting its recommendations. Tasked with implementation, local actors experienced the dilemma of making the wrong solutions palatable and attempted to navigate this through a narrative of "local improvement". This framed intervention as a bottom-up process but also involved a silencing of past critiques and the seeking of BIIP's approval. Whilst stepping away from the previous antagonism, this period continued to be plagued by the tension between centralization and autonomy. When BCC's implementation was later contested by BIIP, an accountability dilemma emerged. Finally embracing the centralization tradition, Labour councillors removed leadership they believed were being blamed for a failure of improvement.

Newly appointed officers and councillors in BCC faced the dilemma of building trust with BIIP who remained cynical about improvement and the council's ability to change. Building upon BIIP's past critiques, a narrative of "difference" perpetuated the dominance of the centralization tradition by deploying past leadership failures as a benchmark to demonstrate the success of new improvements. Contested by BIIP once again, another accountability dilemma emerged. Responding to this through a narrative of "managing blame", new leadership softened how BIIPs critique would land among the wider Labour group and rebuilt relationships with central government to assuage central government directly. Cultivating positive assessments of the council through assurances that leadership was no longer conflictual and ready to accept responsibility for future failure, the resolution to this dilemma was situated within the centralization tradition.

In terms of interpreting failure, one clear implication is that failure was often expressed through contextually specific synonyms (e.g., "corporate dysfunction") or antonyms (e.g.,

"improvement"). Such language often contained hidden forms of meaning which only come to light when interviewing individuals within confidential settings. For example, when interviewing the reviewers, it became clear that "corporate dysfunction" was intimately related to the belief that BCC was failing to live up to the expectations of managerialism. Alternatively, local actors hid the degree to which they contested narratives of failure produced through intervention. This dynamic of concealed interpretations of failure will be analysed in further detail in Chapter 8.

The language of blame was largely absent at the start of intervention but became more prominent towards the end. Initially local actors saw themselves as contesting failure and the undemocratic process of intervention. When blame did emerge, it was in actions such as the removal of leadership. Rather than the enactment of accountability, those involved in the removal of leadership saw themselves as implementing the wishes of more powerful others who they could not resist (i.e., BIIP, DCLG). Later, when blame synonyms did emerge (e.g., "responsibility" and "defensiveness") they were deployed strategically to frame past leadership as blame avoidant and new leadership ready to take responsibility. In Chapter 8 it will be argued that the emergence of blame resided upon the acceptance norms underpinning ideas of (under)performance within local government.

Learning was difficult to locate within the language used by actors involved in intervention. When it did arise, officers and councillors used learning to signal the belief that they could not control intervention in response to the first accountability dilemma. Having contested intervention, learning was subsequently used by actors to demonstrate a readiness to follow the instructions of central government BIIP. The changes in beliefs that emerged as intervention unfolded also suggests that local actors learnt to become deferential to the demands of intervention and learnt that local government could not successfully resist central government. In the next chapter, interpretations of intervention within the case of Northamptonshire County Council are explored.

**Chapter 7: Northamptonshire County Council – Dilemmas and Narratives of Intervention**

**7.0 Introduction**

In the Birmingham City Council (BCC) chapter, it was argued that beliefs held by local actors about intervention changed incrementally through the experience of dilemmas and protracted conflict with interveners. Whilst earlier responses were caught between the clash of autonomy and centralisation traditions, the end result was the privileging of beliefs situated within the centralisation tradition. This current chapter turns to how local actors experienced intervention in Northamptonshire County Council (NCC).

Like the previous chapter, this chapter resulted from moving abductively between the data, "temporal units" (Widdersheim, 2018) and "crisis dilemmas" (Boswell et al, 2021). Using this framework, the three-year period of NCC's intervention (2018-2021) was categorised into four periods.

The first temporal unit, spanning from January to March 2018, centred on the conduct and publication of the Best Value Inspection (BVI). During this period, those conducting the inspection encountered a sense-making dilemma stemming from conflicting beliefs about the review's purpose and independence. The second temporal unit, from January to May 2018, revolved around NCC's response to the BVI, highlighting a local decision-making dilemma between resistance and acceptance, and the subsequent changes in local leadership that followed. The third temporal unit, identified between May 2018 and June 2019, involved the appointment of commissioners and further executive governance changes. During this period, local actors experienced a meaning-making dilemma as they sought to build positive relationships with the commissioners. Lastly, the fourth temporal unit, spanning from November 2018 to March 2021, was defined by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government of the United Kingdom (MHCLG) permitting deviations from statutory requirements and the formal enshrinement of local government reorganisations in legislation. This period is analysed through the lens of an accountability dilemma. To assist the reader in navigating this chapter, a concise timeline for this case study is provided in Table 7.1

Table 7.1: NCC Intervention Timeline

**2018**

- **January**: The Secretary of State orders a Best Value inspection
- **February**: CFO issues a Section 114 Notice and external auditor advises that council budget set is likely to be unlawful
- **March**: Best Value Inspection published; Council Leader and Chief Executive resign
- **May:** Commissioners appointed by MHCLG
- **August:** Second 114 Notice issued; Council vote to reorganize council into two unitary authorities
- **November:** Children's Commissioner appointed by DfE; MHCLG's Commissioners publish progress report and central government permits NCC to deviate from financial regulations

**2019**

- **May:** MHCLG agrees to legislate to replace county and district councils with two unitary authorities
- **June:** Cabinet reshuffle

**2020**

- **March:** MHCLG's Commissioners report council underspend in 2019/2020 budgeting
- **November:** Children's Trust established

**2021**

- **January:** Parliamentary legislation passed for reorganisation
- **March:** Councils formally dissolved and new councils established

Due to almost immediate changes to political and officer leadership of NCC, and the exclusion of those who challenged intervention from executive governance, it is argued that the allure of the autonomy tradition and the associated beliefs of resistance were quickly marginalised within NCC. Beliefs situated within the centralisation tradition, such as local government functioning to implement centrally-determined policy objectives, became dominant amongst officers and councillors who experienced intervention. Building relationships with commissioners on the basis of accepting intervention evaluations, the prescriptions for improvement and compliance with instruction, both local and central actors perceived intervention as a success. However, evidence suggests that once local actors exited intervention, they perceived their organisations as likely to fail again in the future and were

reinterrogating decisions made during intervention. Those marginalised beliefs which challenged ideas of failure, and which were situated within a tradition of autonomy, appeared to re-emerge among local actors at the end of the case study.

The main focus of this chapter is to explore the empirical findings through the lens of traditions, dilemma and narrative. However, the language of failure, blame and learning are woven throughout the chapter when the empirical findings suggest these concepts are being deployed by actors. It is argued that whilst the language of failure is evident throughout the data, the language of blame and learning are marginal. When blame was present, it was deployed to discredit the contestation of failure by outgoing leadership. As conflict subsided, blame become less relevant. Learning was a concept infrequently mobilised by central government actors but when it was, related to local compliance to intervention measures. It is argued that learning is most evident when examining changes in belief across the entirety of the intervention periods. Further analysis of failure, blame and learning are developed in Chapter 8.

Each of the following subsections are structured as follows. First, the contextual detail required to substantiate the temporal units is first detailed. This contextualisation informs the dilemmas explored in each section and how they are shaped by the empirical findings. Secondly, the dilemmas are then empirically grounded in the data collected. Thirdly, the narratives which emerged in response to these dilemmas are then analysed. At the end of the chapter, the findings are summarised in Table 7.2. It is at this point that initial reflections about how actors interpret failure, learning and blame are provided.

## 7.1 Sense-making dilemma (January to March 2018)

In this subsection, the dilemmas and interpretations of failure made by inspectors tasked with evaluating NCC are analysed. On the 9th of December 2018, the Secretary of State (SoS) for the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) announced a Best Value Inspection (BVI) into NCC. Premised on a "question [of] whether the authority is failing to

comply with its best value duty", the SoS's decision came after critical reports into NCC's finances conducted by external auditors and the Local Government Association (House of Commons, 2018). Composed of a Lead and Assistant Inspector, and a civil servant seconded from DCLG, the inspection team were Directed to examine:

> [W]hether the authority: [1] has the right culture, governance and processes in place to make robust decisions on resource allocation and to plan and manage its finances effectively, [2] provides clear, useful and sufficiently detailed information to councillors to inform their decision making, [3] allows for adequate scrutiny by councillors, [4] has strong processes in place to manage services within the budget constraints – within the Council's finance department and also within service areas, [5] has and shares appropriately the right data to support spending decisions and to support the management of services, [6] is organised and structured appropriately to ensure value for money in delivery of its functions (Caller, 2018; 3).

During the inspection, NCC's Chief Finance Officer issued a 114 Notice noting that the council may not fulfil the statutory requirement of setting a balanced budget.[31] This was the first time in two decades that this had occurred in English local government (Butler, 2018c). Subsequently, when NCC published its budgeting plans, external auditors published an "advisory notice" claiming that this budget would likely deviate from legality (KPMG, 2018). On the 15th of March, the BVI report was published (Caller, 2018). The experiences of conducting the review and the findings within are analysed below.

It is argued that the BVI team experienced a sense-making dilemma whilst conducting the inspection. In the original formulation, the sense-making dilemma refers to the decision between labelling emerging events as a crisis or withholding judgement and collating more evidence (Boswell et al, 2021). As the decision to commission a BVI had already been made, the sense-making dilemma for inspectors was less about labelling or deferring judgement and more about the competing identities and purposes of inspection. Both the Lead and Assistant inspectors were experienced local government officers who, for the first time, were acting on

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[31] See page 66 for the background on 114 notices in English local government.

behalf of central government (BVI1, BVI2). Conflicting beliefs arose in this situation which stemmed from the traditions of centralisation and autonomy. On the one hand, they believed in the need to help a failing local government, and that they could operate independently from central government. On the other hand, they believed that they were to judge NCC from a distance and follow the Directions set by central government. Despite the tension between these beliefs, the resolution involved privileging beliefs associated with the centralisation tradition. The result was the narrative of "bad governance" which claimed that NCC's decision-making procedures were leading to failures in the implementation of statutory legislation. The dilemma experienced by the inspectors is first analysed before moving onto the narrative of failure which subsequently emerged in the inspection document.

### 7.1.1 Working within or around the constraints set by government?

Both inspectors shared, albeit with varying degrees of self-awareness, a dilemma of working within or around the constraints set by government. One inspector encountered this when events which occurred during inspection were felt to test the inspection remit and understandings of the inspector role:

> It was a challenge to keep focus on the inspection and the brief we had when there was so much going on that was so severe in the council with the section 114 and the auditor's notices, trying to make sure that we didn't get steered too much by events. It was hard for us because we're very experienced [local government] officers and it was quite hard to keep being "Inspector" and not trying to help. So, it was sort of getting that balance right between listening to them and sort of responding, but not responding in a sense, because we didn't want the Council to fail, of course, and you're there and you sort of think actually, "I could help here, but that's not my job" (BVI1).

Key to this dilemma was the impulse to act as a fellow officer and offer "help" to NCC – implying a horizontal and collegiate relationship in which they could support local actors to respond to failure. This is contrasted with the role of "being Inspector" and testing failure

against the criteria set by the SoS. At a later point in the interview, BVI1 shared that "sort of responding" meant offering contacts to NCC who could advise on how to respond, but that ultimately, the dilemma was resolved by "sticking the brief" and delivering the report to the SoS on time (BVI1). Situating themselves within the centralisation tradition by following hierarchically determined lines of inquiry, failure was determined through the evaluative boundaries set by central government and with a strict demarcation between inspectors and local actors.

The clash of beliefs underpinning the dilemma of sense-making was also shared by the other inspector (BVI12). Evident in the below quotation is a tension between the acceptability and independence of the BVI report. When asking the inspector how they decided on their recommendations, they shared that they worked both independently from the preferences of central government actors *whilst also* seeking to produce a report that central government would be likely to implement:

> British government is littered with reports which look absolutely wonderful with a whole series of recommendations, and none of them get implemented. And the one thing you can say about my recommendations is that always, government have followed them (…) I'm independent, I will make the recommendations that I will recommend. If you want to fix the outcome, don't ask me, okay? That enables me to stand up and everyone will know that this wasn't a fix. They all know that if I write it, it's because that's what I believe. I don't ask people to agree with me, but they at least know that it's my judgment, based on the evidence, that drives the recommendations (BVI2).

The above response illustrates a clash between beliefs about the BVI's independence and the desire to make recommendations work for central government. Whilst unrecognised by the inspector, this clash speaks to the enduring tension between the traditions of centralisation and autonomy. How inspectors interpreted NCC's failures, and in doing so resolved their own dilemmas, is explored below. It is argued that, by rejecting the local claim that failure resulted from the (in)actions of central government, inspectors privileged the

tradition of centralisation and attributed failure solely to local conditions through a narrative of "bad governance".

## 7.1.2 The narrative of bad governance

Within the BVI report, a narrative of "bad governance" was constructed to frame NCC's failures. The bad governance narrative contained beliefs that failure was driven by a lack of local compliance with statutory legislation and that any underperformance was unrelated to the wider governance of central-local relations. This is evident within the BVI report which mobilised an expanded interpretation of Best Value (BV) and "continuous improvement" to define local government failure:

> The concept of continuous improvement must mean that the best value duty must be a process. It must mean that even in the best performing authorities errors will occur, failures of policy or practice may result despite good intentions and that an instance of this would not automatically mean a failure to comply with the best value duty. However, it must mean that an authority will learn from its past performance, rectify defects and not continue along a path when failure is evident. Such events should be clearly isolated and exceptional rather than regular and repeated and should be immaterial in value or wider implications. A continued failure to comply with say, a Statutory Direction, is not an isolated matter and capable of being considered a failure to make the necessary arrangements that the legislation envisages (Caller, 2018; 5).

Two notions of failure are evident in the above definition. One is the regular, everyday "errors" that occur in the conduct of governing which do not impede on "value". The other is a more wilful deviation from standard practice which goes beyond a singular point in time and results from engrained habits of recalcitrance. Solidifying this second form of failure in an example of noncompliance to Statutory Directions – actions prescribed by central government (MHCLG, 2020; 20-21) – situates this definition of failure within the centralisation tradition and follows the lineage of Best Value legislation designed to disempower resistant local

authorities (Entwistle and Laffin, 2005).[32] The implication within this definition is that the only possible source of failure is at the local level. Central government legislation and policy are beyond criticism in this context.

Contesting NCC's attempts to situate failure within the broader system-level context of central-local relations was a key component of the bad governance narrative. In September 2017, NCC had launched the "Fairer Funding Campaign" which claimed that DCLG had not adjusted the funding settlement in line with demographic changes – making NCC the least funded county council in England (Scott, 2017). The BVI report's first section dismantles these claims whilst also framing local government contestation of central government as a constituent dimension of failure (Caller, 2018; 6-8). For example, the claim that NCC were the most underfunded County Council was not only interpreted as inaccurate, but also meaningless because local government must fulfil statutory requirements regardless of context:

> Even if there was a completely indisputable case for more funding, the legal requirements to set balanced budgets year on year and live within them continues and everyone in local government understands the position (Caller, 2018; 8).

As shared by one inspector, local attempts to situate failure in a broader context was interpreted as form of blame avoidance (BVI1). The following response was given when the inspector responded to a view shared by one local councillor (LC5), that NCC's failures were partly related to the dysfunction of the external audit system. The inspector reflected that:

> [External Auditors] probably should have been spotting that there was non-compliance (…) But I don't think you could blame the auditors for the problem that the council was in, because the council just were not delivering their savings (BVI1).

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[32] See elaborated discussion of Best Value and the centralisation tradition in section Chapter 5, section 5.2.

Despite the inspector agreeing that the external auditor's performance was unsatisfactory, the belief that there might be additional factors which explain the emergence of local government failure were interpreted as irrelevant and defensive.

The political context in which NCC's failure had emerged was also something marginalised within the bad governance narrative. As discussed in the Section 4.3.4, NCC had engaged in large outsourcing of council functions and services through the "Next Generation Council" model. Such moves were framed as following central Governments agenda for the organisation of local government service delivery (Scott, 2017). Indeed, only weeks prior to the BVI announcement, the SoS for DCLG, Sajid Javid, publicly acknowledged the councils' successes and emphasised his shared political identity with the council (Javid, 2017). However, the beliefs, values and political identities underpinning this restructuring were absent from the bad governance narrative. Instead, failure was interpreted to result solely from poor implementation:

> In essence, no effective work had been done by NCC to turn a radical vision of a future operating model for a County Council into a practical system which recognised the need to join up services and ensure effective controls for the use of public money (Caller, 2018; 16).

Due to the influence of the centralisation tradition and the tendency to downplay the political character of local government, the bad governance narrative framed NCC as a purely managerial entity which functions to implement policy decisions of the centre.

An overriding managerial interpretation of NCC was also evident in the lack of distinction between NCC's political and officer leadership in the bad governance narrative. For example, the "cabinet" was often grouped with "management" (Caller, 2018; 2, 21, 30, 33) and similarly critiqued for excessive secrecy (Caller, 2018; 27), defensiveness (Caller, 2018; 30, 31) and unaccountability (Caller, 2018; 33). As such characteristics were interpreted to span across time and various political and officer leaderships, they were deemed to be collectively engrained into the culture of the organisation. For example, in reference to a failure to balance the budget, inspectors interpreted this as "[l]iving within budget constraints is not part of the culture of NCC" (Caller, 2018; 35). Returning back to the definition of failure mobilised in the

BVI report that a failure of compliance cannot be conceived of as a "isolated matter" or an "error" (Caller, 2018; 5), the implication is that local actors had learned a habit of non-compliance.

The interpretation that engrained habits led to noncompliance influenced the solutions offered in the BVI. The central recommendation was to abolish the system of two-tier local government, and that anything else would be a "reward for failure" (Caller, 2018; 36). Reflecting on what this phrase meant during the interview, one inspector shared that this stemmed from a concern that without such a change "the people who would be in control would be the same people [as before]" (BVI3). However, such explicit reference to the removal of certain leaders was not found in the report documents itself. Any sense that the inspectors blamed certain individuals within NCC for failure is largely implicit, masked by the generalised account of bad governance as an organisational feature. This generalised account of failure meant the solution was similarly general: "[a] way forward with a clean sheet, leaving all the history behind, is required" (Caller, 2018; 36). In practice, this meant excluding all groups currently in power through structural reorganisation.

To conclude this section, inspectors tasked with conducting the BVI experienced the dilemma of working within or around the constraints set by government. On the one hand, they believed they were independent from central government and could help NCC deal with emerging failures. On the other hand, they were constrained by the boundaries set by central government and were there to test NCC against such benchmarks. This clash of beliefs was resolved through situating themselves, and the emerging narrative of failure, within the centralisation tradition. The bad governance narrative contained the idea that local government is a managerial, rather than political, organisation that functions to implement statutory legislation. Failure was interpreted as deviation away from this understanding of how local government works. Noncompliance and poor implementation were the central drivers of this deviation within the bad governance narrative. The political or system-level context NCC was situated within was irrelevant to this interpretation of failure – any attempt to situate NCC into this context was interpreted as a form of blame avoidance.

Since dilemmas can "arise from the random unintended consequences of other people's actions" (Rhodes, 2011; 273), understanding the inspectors' dilemma and resolution

is crucial for understanding the intervention more broadly. Whilst distinct from the experience of local actors, the inspection dilemma and narrative of bad governance were central in shaping the dilemma of accepting or resisting intervention which was unfolding among local actors as the inspection was ongoing. This is explored below.

## 7.2 Decision-making dilemma (Jan-May 2018)

In this subsection, the experiences of responding to the BVI among NCC's councillors and officers between January and May 2018 are explored.[33] This temporal unit is based upon the announcement of the BVI and the subsequent changes to political leadership which occurred before the arrival of commissioners in May.

Within this temporal unit, a number of key events occurred. Following the 114 Notice issued in February, all seven local Northamptonshire MPs published a joint statement of "no confidence" in NCC's political leadership (Chronicle and Echo, 2018d). The backbench councillors who the MPs endorsed to take over produced their own letter of "no confidence" (Chronicle and Echo, 2018e) and voted to remove the Council Leader on the 28th of February (Hanson, 2018). When the BVI was published, the Council Leader and Chief Executive resigned, and the election of a new Leader led to all cabinet members deemed loyal to previous leadership to be removed (Chronicle and Echo, 2018i). Whilst this was occurring, MHCLG followed the BVI's recommendation and requested NCC and the surrounding lower tier councils to submit proposals on their preferred form of reorganisation (Cusack, 2018f). At this point, MHCLG had not responded to the BVI recommendation to appoint commissioners. Remaining just as a recommendation, this period is demarcated on the basis that local actors were responding to the BVI without being formally controlled through statutory intervention.

It is argued that during this time local actors experienced a dilemma of decision-making. The original decision-making dilemma refers to the decision between centralising or

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[33] The sense-making dilemma and decision-making dilemma were partially overlapping temporally. Categorising the months before and after the publication of the BVI serves to acknowledge that the dilemma of resistance and acceptance was likely emerging during the conduct of the review. Internal political conflict within the local Conservative group was prevalent in the years preceeding intervention, and those cleaveges were amplified and empowered with the onset of intervention. For this reason, the temporal unit is expanded beyond the publication deadline to include the time up until MHCLG decided to appoint commissioners.

devolving crisis management (Boswell et al, 2021; 1626). Examining the local response to the BVI report shifts this dilemma away from the question of "how to manage" crisis, towards the local decision of "how to respond to a judgement of failure". For local actors, the dilemma was between accepting or resisting the BVI account of failure. Various beliefs spanning complete rejection, ambivalent agreement and complete acceptance were evident among local councillors and officers who were divided over the BVI. Those who agreed with the report removed councillors and officers seen to be rejecting the findings and, for this reason, the distinct beliefs are aggregated into an overarching narrative of "capitulation". This captures the movement from active contestation of intervention towards submission.

*7.2.1 Choosing between resistance and acceptance*

The decision-making dilemma of accepting or resisting the BVI report and its recommendations was most clearly articulated by local government officers who had worked in NCC prior to, and during, the inspection (LGO1, LGO2, LGO6). This was shared most succinctly by the following officer when they discussed the local desire to challenge the BVI report due to perceived errors:

> We had this conversation as a senior leadership team; do we want to do anything about this and are we going to win the battle in terms of going to town on the report? We almost got to the point of formally challenging the report and I was an advocate of that (…) But fundamentally, [the BVI] came up with the right conclusion and we live in a democracy, the political masters have made a decision about how they want this to work (LGO2).

At a later point in this interview, the officer detailed that they were an advocate for challenging the report because "you would normally get a draft to verify facts and data but we didn't get any of that" and that "it could have added value for our staff" who felt disempowered by the BVI (LGO2). Here two interpretations which situate the appeal of resistance within the autonomy tradition are evident. First is the idea that identifying failure

should be the result of collaboration with local actors, rather than something imposed onto them. Second is the idea that regardless of failures, leadership must support and empower the local workforce. However, the BVI is also interpreted as entangled with the political power of central government which led this actor to accept rather than resist failure. As expressed by another officer who was similarly frustrated with the report and wished to challenge it, "opening a public debate [about the findings] wasn't really going to get me anywhere" (LGO1). Resistance was desired but challenging the report was deemed counterproductive to both their career and the task of addressing the failures which they did recognise. Whilst the dilemma of resistance and acceptance was only expressed explicitly by these officers, there was a broader acceptance among other councillors and officers that there was a shift away from resistance and towards acceptance. This narrative of capitulation contains an implicit acknowledgment of the tensions between resistance and acceptance, being more clearly expressive of how the dilemma was resolved through the suppression of doubt and the exclusion of the resistant.

### 7.2.2 The narrative of "capitulation"

The concession noted above, that the BVI, whilst not completely accurate, recommended the correct solutions for failure, was not shared by all. Councillors, particularly those who had been in positions of power prior to the inspection expressed a more conflictual interpretation (LC5, LC10). For example, the outgoing leader mobilised critiques of central government funding recently made by the National Audit Office to argue that NCC's noncompliance with statutory legislation resulted from underfunding (Northampton Chronicle and Echo, 2018b).[34] Here the failure to balance the council's budget were interpreted as the result of external conditions. This was also shared by another outgoing cabinet member, adding that the "cold

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[34] The National Audit Office is an independent Parliamentary body with responsibility for examining spending within central government departments. The referenced report found that central government had not funded local government to deliver adult social care and deployed similar language to the BVI, concluding that the Department for Health and Social Care were not providing "value for money" (2018; 11).

shoulder" of lower-tier councils undermined the collection of tax revenues (LC10).[35] Likewise, the belief expressed by this Leader and another councillor interviewed was "that the report was written before they touched down in Northamptonshire" and stemmed from the "antipathy" towards NCC that local MPs had "stirred up" within central government (LC5, Northampton Chronicle and Echo, 2018b). Central to these beliefs was that failure was brought about by influences external to the council which could not controlled by locally. Crucially, this was also accompanied with an understanding that this conflict over failure could not be won by local actors. As the outgoing leader of NCC stated when resigning in the wake of the BVI publication, "as I was told a few days ago, if the machinery of government has turned against you, you cannot win" (Northampton Chronicle and Echo, 2018b).

Even with changing political leadership, the interpretation of external causes of failure did not immediately subside. A lingering doubt was evident amongst the newly appointed political leadership about the validity of the BVI, intermingled with the belief that NCC must accept the report and work with central government (LC2, LC4). This was illustrated in the following exchange between Matt Golby, NCC's interim leader, and a journalist during a press conference following the BVI publication. The quotation begins with the leader responding to a question about whether they felt abandoned by the Conservative party in central government:

> We've been making it clear, and all in this sector have, we need a fundamental review of funding for councils that run social care. With respect to the inspector's report, we have to acknowledge the findings and act upon them. We've got to find a way of working with our MPs, with government and we'd like to think we can draw a line in the sand. We are going to do what we are asked to and tasked to by government and move along all together (...) In terms of what has happened before, it has been a symptom of circumstance that we have been dealing with. It's been really high pressured, not only in the last six months but also in the last few years. We have made clear we are not going to be able to carry on as we are. We made it clear, Heather

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[35] In two-tier local government structures, lower-tier district councils are the "billing authority" which collect council tax and upper-tier county councils are the "precepting authority" which can claim a certain percentage the tax collected (Stuart et al, 2020; 9-10)

[previous leader], wrote a letter to the Secretary of State before Christmas to say we need to look for alternative sources of finances or the ability to raise taxes locally. Now is about how we are going to move forward with government with commissioners if that is one of [central government's] decisions.

Reporter: The council can't keep blaming government and has to take responsibility for what has happened.

Interim Leader of the Council: Yeah absolutely. I am fully willing to take the opportunity to offer an apology in that respect. I will accept my responsibility (Northampton Chronicle and Echo, 2018b).

At this point, like the outgoing leader, Matt Golby saw value in mobilising wider critiques of central government funding. Articulating a vision of the local government sector coalesced around this narrative points to the allure of the autonomy tradition, the importance of horizontal relations between local government and the idea that collective action can help challenge central government. However, accepting the bad governance account of failure and the impetus to work with central government, points to the pull of the centralisation tradition. In the first utterance, Matt Golby appears to believe that it is possible to believe both these accounts of failure. One does not negate the other. However, the journalist interjects to enforce the incompatibility of holding these two beliefs, framing the attempt to contextualise NCC's financial problems as an attempt to attribute blame and thereby create a dilemma of resistance and acceptance for the leader. Despite what may have been some personal convictions about the underfunding narrative, the leader is coaxed into admitting responsibility and muting any doubt about the BVI claims.

An interpretation that both the BVI and the Fairer Funding Campaign were simultaneously legitimate was also something shared by other councillors. For example, one backbench Conservative councillor who was appointed to the new cabinet believed that both incompetent management and "central government preventing the council from raising local funding" caused failure (LC2). Likewise, an opposition councillor shared the belief that NCC

had attempted "to shift the blame for their failure onto central government" whilst also acknowledging that "it was probably true that they [NCC] did not have enough money" (LC4). Whilst it may have been more politically useful to publicly accept the BVI, this did not mean that actors did not somewhat doubt its validity in private.

Complete acceptance of the bad governance narrative was clear among cabinet members appointed under new political leadership (LC1, LC3, LC7), backbench Conservative councillors (LC11) and local government officers (LGO10). For example, in demonstrating their alignment with the bad governance narrative of failure, a number of these individuals shared how the phrase "doing the boring well", which originated from the BVI report, resonated closely with them (LC1, LC3, LG010). In the following quotation where a councillor recalls a past experience which for them represented failure, use of the phrase "doing the boring well" indicates the extent to which bad governance shaped local interpretations of the councils past failings:

I would say I got bullied and it was very uncomfortable. Not a lot of councillors listened to me. And I think, to be fair on the people who were in power, they wanted to believe they were right. Sometimes you wanted to believe it too and you don't want to listen to the bearer of bad news. They were not nasty people. The thing is, where we fell, we didn't have good governance. It all came to governance. So, when [the BVI] came, the report was very clear, "we didn't do the boring well". And everybody now uses that phrase. Well, in fact, boring doesn't mean that you should not be progressive, but you should have good governance. So, your boring is your governance. Now, people interpret that the way they want. But the [BVI] report was spot on. (LC3)

Political conflict is downplayed in the above text. Whilst this councillor had once felt "bullied" by previous leadership, through the lens of bad governance, past conflict is re-interpreted benevolently and blame attribution downplayed. Conflict was neither the result of intentional antagonism nor failure the result of "progressive" ideas, but rather both were the result of inadvertence.

To summarise, the dilemma of decision-making during this phase of intervention stemmed from the decision between accepting or resisting the BVI. Conflicting interpretations existed among local actors, but all shared a sense of submission. Situated within the tradition of autonomy, outgoing leadership exhibited complete resistance by contesting the BVI and claiming that failure resulted from external forces. Second, there was a doubtful acceptance which involved local actors believing that failure resulted from both internal and external conditions but that it was counter-productive to make public this latter dimension. Third, complete acceptance of the BVI reproduced the bad governance narrative and the idea that failure resulted from local managerial dysfunction. With the exclusion of resistant previous leadership from executive governance, newly appointed political leadership positioned the council as ready to be instructed by central government. In doing so, the dilemma between resistance and acceptance was resolved by privileging the latter and embracing the centralisation tradition. How local government officers and councillors worked with commissioners who subsequently took control of the council is explored in the next subsection.

## 7.3 Meaning-making dilemma (May 2018 – June 2019)

The temporal unit examined in this sub-section is between May 2018 to June 2019. This period has been demarcated on the basis that commissioners entered NCC in May 2018, and, changes to executive governance networks stabilised in June 2019.

On the 10th of May 2018, MHCLG appointed Tony McArdle and Brian Roberts – experienced senior local government officers – as the commissioners for NCC (MHCLG, 2018a). They were supported by a senior civil servant who worked as the commissioners' Chief of Staff. With the aim of rebuilding "governance capacity" and stabilising finances so the council conformed to its "best value duty", the SoS provided the commissioners with the powers to control:

(1) All functions associated with the governance and scrutiny of strategic decision

making by the Authority; (2) All functions associated with the strategic financial management of the Authority (…) (3) All non-executive functions relating to the appointment and dismissal of persons to positions the holders of which are to be designated as statutory officers (MHCLG, 2018c; 1-2).

Soon after the commissioners entered into the council, they identified a £70m deficit in the council's budget which coincided with the Chief Finance Office issuing a second 114 notice (Cusack, 2018p). As spending controls were imposed to address this, further failures emerged. The Department for Education's (DfE) inspection body – the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) – identified failure in NCC's Children's Services which led to the appointment of an additional Children's commissioner (Paine, 2018). With failures in Children's Services continuing to unfold into 2019, tensions arose between local political leadership and commissioners, resulting in a cabinet reshuffle in June 2019 (Northampton Telegraph, 2019).

It is during this period that local officers and councillors experienced the meaning-making dilemma. For Boswell et al (2021; 1262), the meaning-making dilemma refers to the choices over how to "build legitimacy for extreme measures" with the public through the construction of persuasive stories. In the case of NCC, the meaning-making dilemma orientated around the task of building legitimacy with the commissioners. For local actors, this posed a dilemma because they expected to be judged as either a constitutive dimension of failure or part of the solution by commissioners. More broadly, local actors were worried that they would be interpreted as conflictual and disruptive. To resolve this, a narrative of "deferential cooperation" emerged which conveyed that local actors were future orientated and willing to take instruction from the commissioners. Any sense of doubt towards intervention and the bad governance narrative of failure was superseded by the everyday work of implementing the externally determined goals of financial stabilisation and reorganisation.

*7.3.1 Building legitimacy with the commissioners*

The dilemma of building legitimacy with the commissioners was felt most acutely by one of the few local government officers who remained in place before, during and after the commissioners were appointed. In the following passage, they explain that the generalised account of failure within the BVI meant they saw a risk of being seen as part of the problem:

> The suggestion [in the BVI] is everybody in the council behaved in a certain way and all the Directors failed (…) [If] you think about it, being introduced to [commissioning team] as one of the only standing directors from the old NCC can actually label you in quite a bad way. You were either doing the right things, therefore you were kept on, or you're a legacy that's still there that probably should have been flushed out with the rest. So, there was a kind of, from my point of view, a need personally and professionally to make sure it's clearly the former, that I was still there for good reason, and I'm not part of that old brush (LGO1)

In the above perspective, there is no middle ground – you were either associated with failure or you were not. Whilst this dilemma was only expressed in such stark terms by this officer, the expectation that local actors would be judged as either part of the problem or the solution was explicitly shared by one member of the commissioning team. For example, when discussing their initial experiences of entering into NCC, the following commissioning team member described their strategy for dealing with resistance:

> [Y]ou basically just explain to [officers] what your role is, that you know they feel uncomfortable [about commissioners presence], tell them you're not there to be liked, but they will learn to trust you because you want the right outcome for that organization and if they don't, I have a saying; *"you change the people, or you change the people"*. You either change the impression that "those people parachuted in think they know best" and all of the stuff that goes around "don't tell us what to do we're local government, were independent" – so to say nothing of the fact that actually you've got yourself in one shocking, awful, bloody mess and somebody needs to get you out of it because you can't do it yourself (…) [to the perspective that] you need to

work with [commissioners], not against them. That's where you get to change the people or change the people. *I mean that if they can't work with you, they need to go* (GCA3 emphases added).

For this individual, resistance comes in the form of assertions of local government independence. However, failure delegitimises this defence and by implication the associated tradition of autonomy. Over time, local actors who respond like this either "learn" to trust intervention or are removed from their position. Building on the power granted to commissioners in the Directions to remove local government officers, this person frames resistance as a reason for removal – situating this within the tradition of centralisation.

The two quotes above exemplify the dilemma of building legitimacy with the commissioners. Whilst this was not expressed as a dilemma by other interviewees, the shared narrative of "deferential cooperation" which emerged during this period does suggest that implicitly, local actors perceived that they needed to avoid being labelled as a problem by commissioners.

### 7.3.2 The narrative of deferential cooperation

A narrative of deferential cooperation centred around beliefs about the need to build positive relationships with commissioners and how to do so. One key dimension of this was the continued acceptance of the BVI's account of failure. This was expressed by one newly appointed cabinet member who argued that when working with commissioners:

[Y]ou've got to fully accept from day one that it's gone wrong and fully accept that, for whatever reason, it's somebody's fault. You just have to accept that. And the real thing is not to just sit and say, "oh, that's terrible what the commissioners are doing to us". Actually, accept that it's all gone wrong and let's see how we can fix it (LC1).

Implicit within this account is both the possibility of resistance and an ambiguity around interpretations of failure. This person conveys that what is important, is to accept that

failure has occurred and move forward. How this individual felt about narratives of underfunding and local taxation are negated in service of cooperation because "to just sit and say, oh, that's terrible" produces inaction. Amounting to a commitment to not interrogate the bad governance narrative, this orientation towards the future was also expressed by others. For example, one opposition councillor noted how the cabinet "were managing the endgame, really, more than providing strong political leadership" (LC4). Likewise, a professional association member who worked closely with the cabinet shared the interpretation that, "members were a bit subordinate, the scenario needed it (…) they needed to be motivating for the future of Northamptonshire as a place and doing the right thing rather than just trying to be sort of defensive (LGA1)". From these quotes, it is clear that an orientation towards the future was entangled with perceptions of how to work with commissioners and address failure.

Cultivating this future orientation among local actors was also something the commissioning team saw as part of their role. This was evident when one recalled their experience of initial meetings with the council's workforce once they arrived at NCC:

> [O]ne of the things you have to do as a commissioner, you have to use it [BVI] almost like a Bible, because you have to say, look, this is the truth. One of the most compelling, time-consuming parts of any intervention, and it's not just true in Northamptonshire, it's all of them, is people desperately try to want to get you to address what's happened and what's gone wrong in the past (…) We respond to that as a commissioner by saying, "we're not here to sort out the past. That's never part of our remit. We have no remit to deal with how this happened. Our remit is how you get out of it". And it's unsatisfactory to the people you're talking to because they actually want to talk about blame (CGA1).

Sensing that the BVI did not offer resolve for those who wished to interrogate failure further through the attribution of blame, the above quotation evidences a concern among the commissioning team over how local actors related to failure. For this commissioner, talking

"about blame" risked going beyond the generalised account of failure within the bad governance narrative – something which was undesirable and required curtailment.

A concern for how local actors related to failure was likely related to ongoing developments outside of the council. For example, during this period one Conservative MP from Northamptonshire who had previously signed the letter of no-confidence "broke ranks" and argued that NCC's failures had resulted from both underfunding and poor management (Butler, 2018b). This built upon critiques made by those in the wider local government sector, that underfunding did play a role in NCC's failures (Economist, 2018) and that other local authorities would find themselves in a similar position in the future (Brady, 2018). However, committed to the BVI account of failure and building positive relationships with commissioners, the narrative of deferential cooperation entailed local actors distancing themselves from such contestation.

Despite local protest from residents' groups, trade unions and opposition councillors in response to proposed cuts (Butler, 2018a), Conservative councillors voted down a motion tabled by the local Labour Party to request more funding by central government (Northampton Chronicle and Echo, 2018c). They also voted to reorganise into two unitary authorities as recommended in the BVI despite conflict over this within the local Conservative party (Siddique, 2018). Even when disagreement did arise between councillors and commissioners, one cabinet member claimed that they "didn't hold grudges" but just accepted that commissioners were "still going to do what they're going to do and that's fine. On to the next thing" (LC1). What this suggests is the degree to which local actors were willing to forgo their own beliefs and avoid contestation with those they disagreed with.

Whilst the dynamic with commissioners was often described as "advice" rather than instruction by local actors (LC1, LC11, LGO3, LGO7), the commissioning team themselves shared a more hierarchical interpretation of this dynamic. Where one described the relationship as one of "command and control" (CGA2) another argued that an unspoken, but always present, threat of issuing Directions underpinned positive relationships.[36] This more critical interpretation was also shared by dissenting local actors who drew on the tradition of

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[36] Commissioners were granted the legal power to issue directions. Like the directions issued by central government departments, these are legal instructions for local authorities to carry out certain actions.

autonomy to express their dissatisfaction with intervention. For example, one local government officer described, disapprovingly, that "the commissioners effectively enabled the disconnection of local democracy from the chief exec", with "central government driving the agenda" (LGO9). This disdain was also something evident among cabinet members who believed they were removed from their positions during this period because they fell afoul with commissioners (LC2, LC3, LC8). For example, one cabinet member shared that airing disagreement with the Chief Executive who was hired by the commissioners resulted in them losing their leadership position:

> Esther and Young were our auditors and they wanted something, and our chief executive disapproved. So, we got into a tangle with our external auditor. And for me, that was not the right approach. They needed to have a robust discussion, but we didn't need to have a fight (…) I lost the [cabinet position], so I was out (LC3).

For a sympathetic cabinet colleague who also believed they were demoted because they were too challenging, they held the view that replacements were selected on the basis that they would be compliant with the commissioners (LC8). Such tensions were made public when one cabinet member spoke to local media and claimed that they were removed for posting about the commissioners on social media (Averill, 2019b). This suspicion that commissioners had been involved in their removal from cabinet was also shared by another who believed they had proposed changes "a leap too far for the establishment" (LC2). Such interpretations point towards the belief that commissioners did not only control officer appointments as stipulated within the SoS's Directions but also controlled political appointees.

To summarise, the dilemma of meaning-making meant local actors felt they were likely to be judged as a constituent of failure or part of the solution. In order to avoid being judged as part of the problem and build legitimacy with the commissioners, a narrative of "deferential cooperation" emerged. This narrative was situated within the centralisation tradition which conveyed that local government must submit to central government control. This was expressed through beliefs that local actors had to be orientated towards the future and not

question the past, mute any appeal to resistance when disagreement arose, and that the cabinet was to work within the boundaries of acceptable action determined by the commissioners. In the following section, how actors evaluated the conduct and goals of intervention will be analysed.

## 7.4 The accountability dilemma: to take responsibility or offload blame (November 2018 – March 2021)

In this subsection, the temporal period identified is November 2018 to March 2021, based on the emergence of positive evaluations of the council's improvement made by commissioners and MHCLG. Such evaluations continued until the abolition of the council in March 2021.[37]

Beginning in November of 2018, commissioners began reporting to central government that they were working collaboratively with political leadership to find ways to address the council's deficit. The result was that central government permitted NCC to use "capitalisation dispensation" whereby the capital used from the sale of assets (e.g., the newly built council headquarters), could be used to balance the budget (Bunn and Cusack, 2018). In a public statement following the announcement, Matt Golby, now elected Leader of NCC, framed central government's permission as an indication of the council's successful improvement (Northampton Telegraph, 2018b).

By the start of the financial year of 2019/20, NCC was reporting an underspend within its budgeting and attributed this to "a growing ability of the council to exercise management discipline, make better use of information, and drive change through good practice and innovation" (McArdle and Roberts, 2020b; 2). Projected underspends continued and commissioners noted positively the council's governance, collaboration, and progress on rectifying those areas of dysfunction found in the BVI (McArdle and Roberts, 2020c). Following

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[37] Time periods for sections 7.4 and 7.5 are partially overlapping due to the analytical distinctions made between the meaning-making dilemma and the accountability dilemma. Whilst such dilemmas and the narratives which emerged to resolve them are not likely to be strictly compartmentalised in the way this chapter is structured, doing so in relation to specific points in time helps illuminate certain analytical themes. For example, in the meaning-making dilemma subsection, inclusion of those cabinet members removed in 2019 allows the analysis to demonstrate that some local actors rejected the narrative of deferential cooperation.

the passing of relevant legislation, the Children's Trust was established in November 2020 and the reorganisation of NCC enshrined into law (McArdle and Roberts, 2021a).[38] As of the 31st of March 2021, NCC and its lower-tier structures were replaced by the unitary councils West Northamptonshire and South Northamptonshire.

It will be argued in this section that no accountability dilemma arose during this period due to a lack of contestation of the council's improvement. The process of implementing financial stabilisation and reorganisation was widely seen as a success and the credit claimed by commissioners and local actors. In this sense, during this stage of intervention no accountability dilemmas arose. For this reason, this section begins not with a dilemma, but with the narrative of "success" which emerged as the goals of intervention were reached. Yet as local actors were interviewed two years after intervention ended, they inevitably reflected on this narrative of success, and it is here in which, through a narrative of fragility, hints of an accountability dilemma are evident. Working with the consequences of reorganisation, the success of intervention was tempered with a view that the newly organised councils were likely to fail in the future. Arising once more were beliefs about failure caused by external forces and the allure of the tradition of autonomy.

### 7.4.1 Narratives of success

The success of intervention was claimed in a multitude of ways. For example, one councillor who was dismissive of commissioners due to being removed from the cabinet, believed that they and their colleagues were part of a "shit-hot" team who took over from an incompetent administration and recovered the council (LC2). From their experience of working in NCC during intervention, they believed that "having gone through what I have, I could walk into any council in the country and analyse its finances and tell you where it was going to be in five years" (LC2). The allure to the tradition of autonomy is evident here in that any external involvement in improving the council is negated by local expertise. Such confidence amongst local actors was something one local government officer reflected on, detecting momentarily, that some in the council were starting to question the decision to reorganise:

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[38] A Children's Trust is the Department of Education's favoured form of reorganisation to address failing council services for children. This involves removing decision-making (but not financial) responsibility away from councils and giving these to independent bodies (Turner, 2020)

154

So ironically, don't forget as well, because we have commissioners, by the time we finished, the county council was actually in a very financially viable situation. And ironically, what became quite clear to us was many of the district and boroughs weren't actually. So, think about this "reorganisation was borne out of the county council's financial situation and being bankrupt or whatever", but ironically, with good management, it became better. And actually, others were like "should we still do it?" (LGO1).

Whilst this questioning of whether reorganisation should take place was most likely an expression of regret for what could have been, opposed to a decision seriously entertained, it does point to an impulse among local actors to challenge the process of intervention. Notably, this challenge come from perceiving failure among those lower-tier councils NCC were expected to merge with.

Interpretations of success among councillors related more to the successful process of intervention rather than an evaluation of the outcomes (LC1, LC2, LC11). For example, the following cabinet member frames the establishment of the Children's trust as an unwieldy process they managed too successfully tame:

We just keep working behind the scenes, it's a really busy time. I can't explain to you well enough how difficult and busy it all is to try and keep all of those balls in the air at the same time and look at everywhere and everything (…) You just keep going off a little mouse on a wheel as well. We just kept going yeah, and we done it (LC1).

The sense of movement in the above quote and use of the metaphor like a "mouse on a wheel" points to an implicit recognition they were on a predetermined path; like intervention, establishing the Children's Trust were goals imposed by others. Successfully working towards externally imposed goals was something shared by another Conservative councillor who believed that finally getting a deadline for reorganisation "focused minds

brilliantly" against the recent history of uncertainty due to the General Election (LC11).[39] Entangled with the narrative of "deferential cooperation" and belief of being orientated towards the future, local actors worked towards implementing pre-determined ends without questioning how such ends might play out.

The commissioning team also shared a narrative of success, claiming that never using their powers of Direction was an indicator of success. In their last progress report to MHCLG, the commissioners explicitly commented on the quality of political and administrative leadership in implementing the solutions for failure brought about by intervention and working collaboratively:

> We are pleased that, as the maturity of Council decision making has grown over the course of the intervention, and despite facing some challenging tests, this arrangement has held. In our view, local democracy in Northamptonshire is the better for it (McArdle and Roberts, 2021b; 3).

Invoking the idea of enhancing democracy through successfully working with intervention situates this interpretation within the centralisation tradition through paternalistic evaluation. By the end of 2021, there had been no council elections in Northamptonshire since 2015 (McCardle and Roberts, 2021b) and, in this sense, the council arguably was characterised by a democratic deficit. However, this interpretation of enhancing democratic legitimacy rests upon the idea that decision-making had become "mature" and the stability of relationships between commissioners and local actors "held". The implication is that democracy is understood as complying with the rules determined through intervention.

In the following subsection, it is argued that this interpretation of success among those operating within the newly established local authorities was increasingly questioned. Such reinterrogation holds the potential for an emerging accountability dilemma.

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[39] Due to the announcement of the General Election in October 2019, the Parliamentary processes for approving the reorganisation of council structures was postponed (BBC, 2019d). During this time, Labour and Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidates for the Northamptonshire area proposed alternative reorganisations which deviated from the BVI recommendations – arguing that they created an electoral advantage for the Conservatives and inefficient services (BBC, 2019d). However, following the Conservative party's success in this election, the Parliamentary procedures were completed in February 2020, sealing the fate of reorganisation.

*7.4.2 The narrative of fragility (Post April 2021)*

Whilst no one denied that NCC had improved since the start of the intervention, the narrative of success seemed not to extend to the outcomes of intervention. Many interviewees shared varying degrees of dissatisfaction and frustration with the changes that had occurred. This was expressed by some through a cynical take on the work of commissioners to secure financial stability. For example, one local government officer believed that capital dispensation had been only permitted "once central government could take the credit for turning [NCC] around" (LGO2). For another officer, they believed that use of capital dispensation created a false sense of success and baked financial dysfunction into the new local government structures. They said:

> [I]t didn't actually solve anything. You're trying to get the books to balance. The books were then balanced by selling off assets to take capital receipts and then the authority was split into two and became two unitaries. So actually, even at the time of its splitting, the books had been artificially balanced and then the budgets had been split over two authorities, with one of the authorities inheriting One Angel Square [council headquarters], which was going to be a huge rental bill that they have to pay. So, they were already on the back foot. So, once the unitaries had been formed, the commissioners exited stage left, and the problem is now left with two unitary authorities. And I think what we'll find is that unless those unitaries are making drastic changes to the way that they spend money, potentially they're going to end up in the same situation (LGO4).

Failure was not so much dealt with, but rather deferred into a future for local actors to deal with once commissioners and central government had left the council. This sentiment was shared by a councillor who moved into the new structures of government, believing that the commissioners and central government gave "no thought for whether that conclusion was sustainable in the future" (LC5).

The critique that the reorganised structures which replaced the county council were suboptimal was shared by other local actors. One officer who had worked in NCC's property department described the unitary structures as "unviable" and that ultimately, they resigned because they were "unwilling to take my team and cut it in half" (LGO9). Even for officers brought into the council through the commissioning team, there was a level of disdain towards changes with one describing how they felt "agnostic" about the introduction of the Children's Trust as a means to improve service delivery (LGO3). They went on to reflect more generally:

Have [the new council structures] delivered better services? Questionable. But certainly, financially it's more stable and they're not carrying the baggage of the County Council's failure (LGO3).

Whilst the success of financial stabilisation is not called into question, the idea that reorganisation would enhance service provision is contested. The value of reorganisation lay primarily in shifting "the baggage" of failure. The suggestion is that failure is something which, regardless of improvement or enhanced service provision, was entangled within NCC's identity.[40] Another commissioner appointed officer mobilised a more explicit critique of intervention seemingly appealing to the autonomy tradition when understanding how to overcome failure. Critiquing "structural" approaches, this officer implied that such change only benefits central government:

Well, to me, a structural solution to a problem is never the obvious answer. It doesn't guarantee improvement. What guarantees improvement is outstanding leadership and management. And to me, the work required to set up a trust was a distraction from improving the service. But it was mandated from central government (LGO7).

For those councillors who moved into positions of leadership in the new authorities, the types of system level critiques expressed at the start of the intervention which situated

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[40] Numerous accounts in the media describe leading members of the local government sector, claiming that NCC had become a "byword" for failure in local government (Butler, 2019; Robson and Manning, 2020)

failure into a broader context of funding settlements, the taxation system, statutory provision, emerged once again. While some held onto the idea that reorganisation "may save money in 5, 6, 7, 8 years" (LC1), others perceived financial fragility as an inevitability due to the design of the local government system (LC2, LC7). For example, one cabinet member who worked on the establishment of the Children's Trust shared their frustrations with what they saw as a tension between underfunding and regulatory standards:

> I felt that in order to do well in children's social services, you almost had to be Houdini. And I raised this with the [commissioning team] who agreed. It's impossible to achieve what is classed as a good care service without throwing way too much money at it. We're talking about children in care, it's a very emotional area but there's only so much money you can throw at the system. It's not the fault of the council that a child is in the system, it's the fault of the individuals. And there was too much blame placed on the council rather than the perpetrator, but if they want that level of level of support for the child, then they need to give more allocation of money to councils. Which goes back to my point. I think probably social services and adult social care need to go within the NHS, because there the money tap doesn't seem to turn off (LC7).

This critique of demand-led services and the pressure it places on council finances mirrors the beliefs of political leadership who controlled the council prior to intervention. Failure is not caused by the council itself but caused by the confluence of austere funding settlements and the central government expectation that the same quality of service provisions can be delivered. The additional dimension found here is that increasing demand is a public problem, rather than a council problem.

Like the re-emergence of a system-level critique, as local actors navigated the consequences of reorganisation there was a desire to interrogate decisions made during intervention – a tendency which had been muted through "deferential cooperation". This was evident when one local government officer working in the newly established local authorities shared their frustrations that emerging problems related to structural changes were now seemingly permanent:

The implications go on for many, many years and there is no ability to kind of say, well, "hang on a second, did we get things wrong? Do we adjust it?". There is nothing. It's a line in the sand that just says, "that's it, your split now, you just gotta deal with the consequences" (…) Even at the end, we knew, given COVID and everything else, we knew something still hadn't been done properly. But by then, everybody, government, everybody is so set on a path that says this needs to happen by that date, that it's going to happen, whatever, it's on a roller coaster that you can't stop (LGO1).

For this individual, the end date for organisation was not only a deadline. It was the point at which reorganisation, and the decisions taken during intervention, were solidified into an unchallengeable and unchanging history. This end date signified completion, no matter what problems may arise. Like the bounding of failure on the local level within the "bad governance" narrative, intervention and the changes brought about by central government were infallible and the task for local actors was now to manage the consequences.

Whilst the local actors quoted above have shifted towards beliefs closer to those associated with the previous administration, it must be made clear that this does not mean they exhibit the level of contestation which characterised the start of this case study. As one cabinet member in a newly organised unitary made clear, the failure of the local government system can be managed through expertise, but there will come a point where crisis can no longer be postponed:

Essentially all you're doing is postponing pushing out the crisis point. If you've got a really top-notch bunch of people, they can keep the ship afloat while they're there. But as soon as they've moved on you've either got to increase the fundamental structural funding or you've got to have another team of really hot people who can keep things going despite all of the problems that they're facing (LC2).

Here the legacy of the bad governance narrative of failure is evident. Expert councillors and officers are believed to be able to offset the risk of failure, but generational workforce change means expert management could potentially fall by the wayside.

To summarise, a dilemma of accountability was not something experienced due to the narrative of successful intervention. Local actors and commissioners agreed that the process had unfolded successfully and that NCC, at the point of abolition, was financially stable and significantly improved. There was largely little contestation over the ownership for this success. However, as local actors exited intervention, moved into positions in the new authorities and lived the consequences of intervention, critical beliefs about past decisions made during intervention emerged. Councillors and officers believed that failure had been deferred through structural change, but that future failure was likely. Interpretations of failure which had been silenced through intervention, such as the role of underfunding and local taxation, arose once more. Whilst the risk of failure could be offset by expert management, these features of the local government system could not be completely controlled for locally. As an imagined future, an accountability dilemma had not fully emerged. However, the conditions for future contestation between central and local government, and the pull towards beliefs situated within the tradition of autonomy, were emerging.

## 7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how those involved in the intervention into NCC experienced a variety of dilemmas and that local responses were situated at the interplay between competing traditions of centralisation and autonomy. A summary of the temporal units, dilemmas and narratives for this case study is located in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2: Overview of NCC's temporal units, dilemmas, and narratives

**Competing traditions**

*Centralisation:* local government failure demands hierarchical forms of oversight

*Autonomy:* local government failure to be determined and addressed locally

| Temporal Unit | Dilemma | Narratives |
|---|---|---|

| January – March 2018: | Sense-making: | Bad governance: |
|---|---|---|
| Inspection conducted | Working within or around the constraints set by government? | Failure stems from noncompliance to statutory rules set by central government |
| January – May 2018: | Decision-making: | Capitulation: |
| Leadership and cabinet replaced | Resist or accept evaluations of failure? | Leadership reject *bad governance* but are replaced by those who embrace or remain ambivalent about failure |
| May 2018 – June 2019: | Meaning making: | Deferential cooperation: |
| Commissioners enter council and changes in managerial and political leadership continue | How to build legitimacy with commissioners? | To survive intervention, local actors focused on implementing goals determined by intervention and silencing critique |
| November 2018 – March 2021: | Accountability dilemma | Success and Fragility: |
| NCC permitted to deviate from statutory requirements and councils are reorganized | N/A | Intervention goals achieved and good governance practiced, but future failure likely due to system-level features |

To understand the emergence of local dilemmas and interpretations of failure among those working within NCC, this chapter first analysed the experiences of those conducting the BVI in NCC. Inspectors experienced a dilemma between working within the constraints set by central government and the need to adapt to the ongoing situations within the council (e.g., 114 Notice). This was encapsulated within the conflicting beliefs about the BVI's independence and tension between the inspector role and their identities as a local government officer. The narrative of "bad governance" resolved this dilemma by privileging the inspectorate role, working within centrally prescribed constraints and judging the council on these terms. Within this narrative, NCC ultimately failed because they did not comply with statutory legislation and challenged the "rules of the game" by contesting the funding settlement and centrally controlled taxation system. In the context of local government failure, the role of central government was beyond criticism. Within the bad governance

narrative, it was only local conditions which were relevant to interpretations of failure, and this provoked a dilemma of resistance or acceptance among local actors.

Local political leadership had been explicit in their interpretation that failure was the result of conditions external to the council. In actively mobilising this interpretation, local actors drew on the tradition of autonomy to challenge what was perceived as the inducement of failure by a dysfunctional system and an intervention designed to destabilise local governing coalitions. The narrative of "capitulation" captured the process of resistant leadership being ousted and replaced by those who embraced the inspection findings or remained silently ambivalent about the idea that failure resulted purely from local conditions. In muting doubt, these councillors and officers privileged interpretations of failure situated within the centralisation tradition.

As intervention unfolded, local actors navigated the dilemma of building legitimacy with the commissioners through a narrative of "deferential cooperation". This narrative entailed beliefs that councillors were to passively accept commissioner decisions, not air disagreement and remain focused on the predetermined goals of financial stabilisation and reorganisation. Situated within the tradition of centralisation, councillors simply became implementers of central government solutions for local government failure. Through this lens, intervention was deemed a success as the deadlines were met for implementing central government policy goals, with councillors and commissioners claiming credit for this. In this sense, no dilemma of accountability was evident in this case. Yet as local actors exited intervention, a narrative of "fragility" was emerging which expressed concerns about the future viability of newly organised local government structures. Pointing to the re-emergence of beliefs that failure results not only from local conditions but also a wider dysfunctional system central government was responsible for, the emerging contestability of central governmental decision-making suggests a tradition of autonomy was increasingly mobilised to re-interpret the recent past and future.

Whilst the research questions are explicitly answered in the conclusion chapter, it is pertinent to offer some initial reflections on how the actors in the NCC case study interpreted failure, blame and learning before moving into a comparative analysis across the two cases.

Unlike the language of failure which was present within colloquial synonyms such as "mess", "gone wrong", "doing the boring well" or concepts such as "114 Notices", the language of blame was more marginal. When the language of blame was used, it was employed to discredit undesirable behaviours. For example, councillors who drew attention to the role of underfunding were framed through the lens of blame. Done so in the context of contested interpretations of failure, claims that local actors were blame-avoidant shifted attention away from the clash of ideas through accusations of self-interested intent to defend oneself during a crisis. The consequence was that acknowledging both the context of the local government system and local mismanagement in NCC's failures was made impossible.

Similarly, the language of learning was minimal in the experiences of intervention expressed by local actors. At those infrequent times it did emerge, it was deployed by central government actors who expected that local actors would learn to adhere to the solutions prescribed for failure. The implication was that central government were the "teachers" who determined what was to be "learnt" by local government. More broadly, learning became about compliance with a governance framework in which local government did not challenge central government. Learning was about local actors exhibiting the beliefs associated with the tradition of centralisation, such as the subordinate and ultimately managerial relationship local government has with central government.

Changes in belief captured among local actors do suggest that they learnt these "rules of the game" and situated their interpretations of failure and how to overcome it within the tradition of centralisation. For example, shifts between resistance, doubt and deferential cooperation involved local actors muting feelings of frustration, certain beliefs about failure and concerns about the future. However, compliance was not perfect. Once actors were operating within the new authorities and relatively distant from central government, more critical reflections questioning intervention processes emerged. In the following discussion chapter, the similarities and differences in dynamics of learning, blame and failure across the case studies are explored through comparison.

# Chapter 8: Comparing the experiences of failure, learning and blame across the case studies

## 8.0 Introduction

Expanding upon the analysis of traditions, narratives and dilemmas in the previous three chapters, this chapter compares the cases. Chapter 5 argued that the competing traditions of centralisation and autonomy are central when interpreting local government failure. Centralisation encourages actors to see hierarchical accountability and the evaluations stemming from this as legitimate. Autonomy idealises local government freedom from central government and encourages resistance. Chapter 6 and 7 analyse the way local actors shift between these two traditions over the course of intervention. In Birmingham City Council (BCC), local actors both contested and cooperated with the intervention, which upheld, rather than resolved, the tension between centralisation and autonomy. It was only when critical evaluations of improvement emerged, and local actors attempted to satisfy interveners, that centralisation was embraced. In Northamptonshire County Council (NCC), local actors quickly shifted towards "deferential cooperation" when responding to intervention. The dominance of the centralisation tradition only loosened when local actors exited intervention and began to interrogate the recent history of intervention.

This chapter identifies the similarities and differences of the case studies by comparing their dilemmas and narratives. Summarised in Table 8.1, this chapter first identifies that despite differences in the role of party politics in failure, evaluators involved in both interventions concealed certain beliefs about failure from public view. For example, participants from both groups believed leadership change was necessary but left this unwritten in public documentation. Secondly, whilst the degree of local resistance differed between the cases, both councils shared a sense that they were powerless to challenge intervention evaluations despite continued scepticism. Thirdly, local actors across the cases did accept that independence from external oversight had to be earned, but the speed at which this belief emerged differed drastically between BCC and NCC. Fourthly, whilst BCC responded to critiques of their improvement by rebuilding the central-local relationship, the success of NCC's improvements went unchallenged. It was only after intervention was

concluded that those from NCC started to challenge improvement and the role of central government.

Table 8.1: Comparison of BCC's and NCC's dilemmas and narratives

Competing traditions

Centralisation: local government failure demands hierarchical forms of oversight

Autonomy: local government failure to be determined and addressed locally

| Dilemmas | Narratives | |
|---|---|---|
| | Differences | Similarities |
| Sense-making | BCC's political identity central to interpretations of failure but marginal in NCC case. | Certain solutions concealed from public. |
| Decision-making | BCC contested failure but NCC immediately removed those deemed resistant. | Local governments powerless to resist. |
| Meaning making | NCC submitted to intervention process while BCC attempted to control intervention. | Independence could be earned by satisfying external forms of oversight. |
| Accountability | BCC's improvement was contested and this led to changes of leadership and a rebuilding of central-local relations. NCC's improvement was widely accepted but future concerns were increasingly challenging this initial position. | N/A |

Through the comparison, this chapter reflects on what the similarities and differences say about failure, learning and blame. It is argued that there are "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) within the interpretations of failure and blame identified in this research. Hidden transcripts reflect a "backstage discourse of what cannot be spoken" which exist in tension with what is shared publicly (Scott, 1990; xiii). Both local actors and external appointees held backstage beliefs about what had gone wrong, what had caused it and who was responsible. This both contested and inflected what was said publicly about these matters. Cooperation between these groups involved the suppression, marginalisation and silencing of critical beliefs about intervention, failure and blame. However, when conflict and contestation arose,

previously concealed beliefs re-emerged.  The hidden transcripts of failure reveal the multi-layered, unstable and contested nature of failure and blame. By uncovering the "private life" of these concepts, the findings presented in this chapter problematise policy failure and blame literatures premised upon publicly stated policy goals or attempts to influence public perception.

Public cooperation and the acceptance of failure was dominant across the councils and reflected a sense of powerlessness to confront central government. This chapter argues that publicly agreeing to work with the intervention initiated a process of learning that it was central government which defines local government failure and determines who was responsible for addressing it. Key to learning the "rules of the game" was the deployment of "temporal framings" (Moore-cherry and Bonnin, 2022), which framed the recent past as a "container" of failure and illegitimate contestation. Deployed to signal what local actors were moving away from, this temporal frame served to privilege failure narratives which originated externally to the councils, cement the council's past as one of local government failure, and distance local actors from their past colleagues who were deemed overly critical and blame avoidant. The result was that local actors learned that by removing those deemed blame-avoidant or by framing themselves as responsible blame-takers, they created an opportunity to gain legitimacy and move forward with intervention. In doing so, local actors were engaged in a form of single-loop learning whereby blame was understood as an inevitable convention of performance within central-local relations. This finding suggests that learning underpins the process of conflict subsiding and the emergence of consensus over past failures emerging.

This chapter unfolds as follows. Each subsection compares the responses to dilemmas identified in Chapters 6 and 7. The framework of crisis dilemmas structures these subsections and serves as the basis for comparison (Boswell et al, 2021). Building on the deep, contextual reading of the cases outlined in the previous chapters, this chapter provides a more "thematic" and "evocative" account, focused on shared meaning across the cases (Boswell et al, 2019; 116-7). In addressing each dilemma, the subsections also explore intersections within the policy failure, policy learning, and blame literatures. Finally, a summary brings together the insights identified in this chapter before moving on to answer the research questions in the concluding chapter."

## 8.1 The hidden transcripts of failure

This sub-section will compare the dilemmas of sense-making and the narratives of failure expressed by evaluators brought into the councils through intervention. It is argued that both failure narratives were shaped by the centralisation tradition and deployed the ideal of officer-led, ruling following councils, to determine failure. Similarly, both "bad governance" and "bad politics" sought changes of leadership in ruling coalitions as a solution for failure but concealed this from public documentation. Demonstrating that failure contains "hidden transcripts" in which certain beliefs are only expressed "offstage" (Scott, 1990; 4), this finding complicates the clarificatory conceptualisations of policy failure and blame which both, to varying degrees, rely on public dimensions of these phenomenon to determine definition and categorisation (Hood, 2010; Howlett, 2012). This subsection first compares the sense-making dilemmas and narratives. Using these findings the subsection then goes onto reflect the policy failure and blame literatures.[41]

### 8.1.1 Sense-making dilemmas

In this thesis, sense-making dilemmas refer to the conflicting beliefs among evaluators about intervention. Many of them were local government officers and councillors who, in principle, believed that intervention was wrong or felt uncomfortable with the process. In this sense, the tradition of autonomy and the idea that local government failure should be addressed by local government were explicitly mobilised. Yet these same actors believed that the local councils they were evaluating were unable and unwilling to address their own failures, making central government involvement inevitable. Situated within the centralisation tradition, hierarchical accountability mechanisms were appropriate because local government did not have a right to fail. The clash of these beliefs was evident across the diverging accounts of

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[41] Learning is something most evident in the cases when looking at how beliefs changed across time. Due to the short amount of time evaluators were in the councils, what these actors learnt during their intervention is not analysed.

whether intervention was imposed in the case of BCC, and also the uncertainty over the independence from central and local government in NCC.

Given the tension between ideas of local government autonomy and centralised accountability, what was surprising within and across the case studies was the lack of contestation among evaluators over failure. Whilst evaluators may have experienced personal dilemmas about intervention being imposed or the desire to help local actors, shared narratives of local government failure meant conflict did not arise. Consensus among evaluators was shaped by the prevailing orientation towards the centralisation tradition when interpreting failure.

Both the "bad politics" and "bad governance" narratives of failure were underpinned by the administrative ideal of officer-led councils which worked to implement central government policy. For the Kerslake reviewers, the perceived dominance of political leadership and trade union control over the council undermined the administrative function of local government. For the Best Value Inspectors (BVI), failure was perceived as the result of dysfunctional implementation and non-compliance with statutory legislation. A shared feature of both narratives was the idea that the councils were insubordinate to the demands of central government, that failure was solely the result of local conditions, and that a change in the composition of political and administrative leadership was required.

In the public evaluation documents produced through intervention, administrative and organisational failures were central. Managerialist frameworks of "best value" and "sector-led improvement" framed failure as resulting from council-wide features, such as organisational culture, and that the intervention process was purely evaluative. Yet by comparing this with what was shared during interviews, the analysis uncovered interpretations of failure concealed from public. Evaluators and inspectors believed that leadership was closely tied to failure, and that intervention could facilitate change in this area, but this remained unwritten. These unwritten beliefs constitute "hidden transcripts" of failure which are comprised of "offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in public transcripts" (Scott, 1990; 5). Still aired with others, hidden transcripts are expressions and performances shared within enclosed spaces and "restricted

publics" (Scott, 1990; 14).[42] Whilst it remains unclear if unwritten beliefs were openly discussed among evaluators, the ease at which they were shared and implied during interviews suggests this may have been the case. Conversely, the "public transcript" refers to "the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" which upholds the "self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen" (Scott, 1990; 18). Where the public transcripts of failure framed evaluators as impersonal and neutral experts concerned only with the organisational efficiency, the hidden transcript exposed evaluators as political actors seeking to change the individuals and groups seen to hold power in the councils.

The hidden transcripts of failure pose an issue for the clarificatory approach to conceptualising policy failure premised on "goal attainment" (McConnell, 2010; 2010b). The argument within this approach is that an important way to determine if a policy is failing (or not) is to examine whether the "goals that proponents set out to achieve" have been met (McConnel, 2015; 230). Doing so helps identify the "objective" dimensions of failure and creates opportunity for verification by policy analysis (McConnell, 2010; 2010b; Bovens, 2010). However, this research demonstrates that stated intensions and aims of governance can differ depending upon who the audience is. Without recognising this hidden dimension, a clarificatory approach may indeed categorise a policy as failing, whilst for certain actors, the policy is fulfilling goals expressed only within enclosed spaces (e.g., aiding factional conflict). Whilst the clarificatory definition does acknowledge that failure can contain some aspects of success (McConnel, 2015; 230), this approach is not only insensitive to the many layers and forms that interpretations of failure can take, but also why certain interpretations are publicly proclaimed and others hidden from view. An elucidatory approach which seeks to understand

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[42] The idea of "hidden transcripts" also takes on a literal meaning in this research. For example, during data collection the researcher sought to locate the transcripts generated through the interviews conducted during intervention. The researcher made a Freedom of Information request to both councils and DCLG, requesting access to the transcripts. The response from all was that this information was not held due to the evaluations being independent processes. Those interviewees who were asked about unpublished material also did not know where such information would be held. In this sense, the material relied upon to construct narratives of failure seemingly existed a space inaccessible to both the public and government themselves, concealed within an ambiguous and momentary space of independence from both central and local government.

the situated meaning of failure for actors holds greater potential for capturing the hidden dimensions of failure and policymaking more generally.

Considering blame dynamics can help further understand the "hidden transcripts" of failure. Despite evaluators blaming the current council leadership for the failures which had emerged, neither report calls for the resignation of any leadership – a conventional indicator of blame attribution within the political science literature (Brändström, 2015). Whilst this absence may be explained by the constraints set by terms of references for the interventions, in both case studies evaluators shared the belief that evaluation processes and recommendations should provoke leadership changes. This suggests that blame was something expected once evaluation documents were released into the world and received by local audiences, such as councillors, who were in a position to remove leadership.

Arguably, it is unsurprising that beliefs about leadership change were concealed from public transcripts. Outright blame attribution can escalate conflict (Feitsma and Schillemans, 2024) and produce "backlash" by audiences if perceived as unfair or inappropriate (Antonetti and Baghi, 2024). Due to role constraints, conflict within central-local relations and political leadership's electoral legitimacy, it was likely that explicit blame attribution was concealed to avoid any potential "backlash". Instead, implicit blame attribution aimed to create local conditions fertile for locally specific blame-games and conflict within and between local political actors.

The finding of a hidden blame dynamic does not fit neatly within the differentiated typologies of blame. Presentational blame which seeks to influence public perceptions in response to crisis would be an obvious candidate for categorising the evaluations (Hood, 2010). The Kerslake review was sought to frame BCC as a dysfunctional institution resulting in the likes of the Trojan Horse Scandal. The Best Value Inspection reframed NCC's financial issues as the result of local actions not central government. However, presentational blame attunes analysis only to those dimensions of blame seemingly orientated towards public perception. It therefore neglects the subtle ways in which blame attribution targets specific groups within governance and seeks to influence the perceptions they hold in order to produce certain outcomes. Evaluators never once mentioned that they intended to influence public opinion, and the managerial and technical language deployed in evaluations documents

suggests that the public were not the target audience. But given that they expected their evaluations to enact change, the target audience must therefore be internal political factions who could deploy evaluations to remove leadership. The argument being made here is not simply that this finding challenges the definition of "presentational" blame, but that clarificatory conceptualisation often excludes capturing what blame does within governance due to its focus on the public dimensions of blame.

## 8.2 Powerlessness and the hidden transcripts of failure

The focus of this subsection is how actors within NCC and BCC initially responded to the narratives of failure produced through intervention. In both cases, councillors and local government officers experienced a dilemma between accepting or resisting failure. Perceived as inaccurate, there was an impulse to challenge failure narratives. Yet local actors also saw themselves as powerless to resist what they saw as an instrument of central government control. Both councils publicly accepted failure, however local actors continued to contest failure "offstage" (Scott, 1990). By changing political leadership, NCC supressed doubt and scepticism about failure but in BCC, private reservations about failure remained closer to the surface and upheld, rather than resolved, the dilemma between acceptance and resistance. This finding contributes to the policy failure and blame literatures by uncovering the impact that critical evaluations can have upon actors after judgements have stabilised (Dunlop, 2017). Namely, concealed resentment on the basis of powerlessness can resurface when conflict arises. It is also argued that the local responses to failure signified the beginning of a learning process around the need to satisfy central government in order to succeed.

This subsection first compares the decision-making dilemmas and narratives from both cases. Using the findings from the comparison, the subsection moves onto to reflect on the failure, blame and learning literatures.

### 8.2.1 Decision making dilemmas

When evaluations were published, the primary dilemma for local actors was to resist or accept the narratives of failure. This dilemma is situated within broader networks of meaning about what was a possible and appropriate response of local government to intervention. Evident here is the interplay between the traditions of autonomy and centralisation and how they shaped, to varying degrees, the narratives of local actors in both cases.

Arguably, the response to the decision-making dilemma diverges significantly between the two cases. Unlike the BCC case, the narrative of "capitulation" conveyed a rapid shift from contestation to acceptance which involved the removal of NCC's political and administrative leadership. New leadership privileged accounts of failure produced through intervention and muted beliefs about conditions external to the council contributing to failure (e.g., taxation and underfunding). This was despite the eruption of contestation within the wider local government community and nationally between Labour and the Conservatives over the role of austerity in NCC's failure. In other words, there were fault lines emerging about the meaning of NCC's failures which local actors could have mobilised to contest the BVI but chose not to.

Alternatively, the narrative of "antagonistic cooperation" in BCC did not entail a clear resolve to the dilemma of resistance and acceptance. Keeping the tension alive, BCC's public response emphasised both acceptance of the Kerslake review findings and a rejection of a number of recommendations. Even among those recommendations which were accepted, governing coalitions within BCC largely disagreed with them (e.g., changes to electoral system). Unlike NCC, such "hidden transcripts" of failure were not marginalised and key individuals who sought to work with intervention were, at the same time, deeply sceptical about failure and the prescribed solutions.

Regardless of these differences, a sense of local government powerlessness to confront failure and express concerns was shared across the cases. Local actors saw evaluations as either supported by, or an enactment of, central government power over local government. Such an interpretation was clear among local actors in BCC and NCC who saw failure as being imposed onto the council by central government. Whilst harbouring resentment towards central government, local councillors believed or were being advised that, resistance was futile. As the outgoing leader of NCC stated when resigning in the wake

of the BVI publication, "as *I was told* a few days ago, if the machinery of government has turned against you, you cannot win" (Northampton Chronicle and Echo, 2018b).

In conveying local government powerlessness, this interpretation is situated within the centralisation tradition which upholds the belief that hierarchical power defines central-local relations. As was clearly the case with NCC's outgoing leader, the centralisation tradition was orientated because "of the beliefs of others" (Pike, 2020; 2). It was not that local actors believed that it was right for local government to be subordinate to external evaluations or that they believed in the narratives of failure. Rather, they saw that it was the expectation of others (e.g., central government) that local government would acquiesce in such circumstances. Conversely, actors could situate themselves within the centralisation tradition on the basis of "inherited beliefs" – as was the case when a history of failed resistance to central government in the 1980s was invoked to justify cooperation in the BCC case.

Despite the prevailing influence of the centralisation tradition, the "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) of disagreement captured in this research were important, nonetheless. In hiding the doubt and scepticism which characterised some privately held interpretations of failure and instead emphasising acceptance of evaluations in public, weak forms of collaboration emerged. In the BCC case, this was evident when the previously supressed sense of injustice led local actors to fear that BIIP would recommend statutory intervention, whilst also contributing to the breakdown of relationships with the interveners following the first accountability dilemma. In NCC, collaboration with interveners endured until the new councils were established. Following which, the beliefs upon which collaboration were centred, namely that failure was caused locally, were increasingly accompanied with the idea that external conditions were at play.

These findings help answer the questions of what impact failure and blame has upon those who are subject to critical evaluations (Dunlop, 2017a; 8; Diamova et al, 2024). When failure and blame are accepted due to a sense of powerlessness, future conflicts are likely to resurface and remobilise these past transgressions. Public acceptance of failure and blame in such contexts are unstable because the "hidden transcripts" upon which they are built can emerge and challenge power relationships exhibited within "public transcripts" (Scott, 1990; 19).

Arguably in both cases, collaboration between central and local government could have been enhanced through "agonistic failures" in which conflict is surfaced, acknowledged and worked through (Landau, 2021). However, because concerns were supressed and/or marginalised through exclusion, initial responses to intervention marked the beginning of a process of learning among local actors that central government controls the definition of local government failure (Dunlop and Radaelli's, 2013; 602).

Prior to intervention, local actors attempted to define failure through critiques of austerity and central government funding formulations. Such attempts held some significant sway at the time as evidenced by the influential "jaws of doom" framing popularised by the then leader of BCC (Butler, 2012b) or the hold NCC's narrative of underfunding held over local media (Northampton Chronicle, 2017c). Believing that central government were expecting local government to do more with less, such local challenges represented an attempt at "double-loop learning" – questioning "the very norms which define effective performance" (Boin et al, 2016; 128). Narratives of "bad politics" and "bad governance" formed a counter-narrative to this, using the conventional norm that local government performs through implementing decisions made at the centre to frame this challenge as a failure of local government. *Capitulation* and *antagonistic cooperation* entailed local actors learning that they must, at the very least, appear to comply with the "rules of the game". In other words, local actors were learning that they were confined by the unequal relationships of power between central and local government, and that such relations were embedded in the production of knowledge and meaning. The following section compares how such dynamics unfolded as local actors worked to implement the improvements stipulated by intervention evaluations.

## 8.3 Learning through demarcating the past

This subsection compares the improvement initiatives which took place in the cases. Divergence between NCC and BCC was evident initially. Where BCC mobilised a tradition of local autonomy to reclaim the improvement process, NCC mobilised the tradition of centralisation to build deferential relationships with commissioners. Convergence emerged

once BCC's leadership changed, and newly appointed local actors embraced the centralisation tradition through aiming to satisfy interveners.

During this stage, the process of learning the "rules of the game" continued. Key to this learning was the deployment of temporal framings (Moore-Cherry and Bonnin, 2022) which privileged failure narratives introduced through intervention and delegitimised past contestations. The "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) of failure which harboured critique or resentment towards intervention quietened as local actors worked with, rather than against, the situation they found themselves in. In order for local actors to cooperate with intervention in practice, the present had to be demarcated from the past, in which local actors had previously called into question the subordinate position of local government.

This subsection first examines the meaning-making dilemmas and examines the similarities and differences between the cases. Using the insights from this comparison, it is then argued that the idea of "temporal framings" offers a novel contribution to the relationship between failure, blame and learning.

*8.3.1 Meaning-making dilemmas*

Once actors agreed to cooperate with the intervention process, what they then experienced was meaning-making dilemmas. The interventions studied were unprecedented in English local government history. The reorganisation of a local authority in response to failure was unseen up until the point of intervention into NCC (Copus and Leach, 2022). Likewise, the Kerslake review and Birmingham Independent Improvement Panel (BIIP) where the first "informal" intervention of its kind. It was in this unusual context that local actors were expected to implement external demands for change in organisational structures, routines and practices – areas conventionally the purvey of local political and officer leadership. Arguably, in both cases, this demand reflected the task of building "legitimacy for extreme measures" (Boswell et al, 2021; 1262).

At first, the responses to the meaning-making dilemma were drastically different. In BCC, a narrative of "local improvement" appealed to the tradition of autonomy and framed organisational change as a bottom-up initiative (See Section 6.3.2). The "Future Council

Programme" absorbed the Kerslake recommendations and BIIP were persuaded to remain distant from the improvement process. Yet upholding the tension between centralisation and autonomy, BCC's improvements were also premised on BIIPs approval. This captures the subtle process of learning whereby local actors shifted away from antagonism (i.e., viewing the intervention as undemocratic and BIIP as unwanted) and from the belief that they merely needed to appear cooperative, toward the idea that even locally driven improvement required some minimal engagement with top-down accountability processes.

NCC's narrative of "deferential cooperation" entailed local actors finding meaning in the "bad governance" narrative beyond political opportunism or a sense of powerlessness. Unlike BCC's distance with BIIP, deferential cooperation saw NCC build friendly, supportive and meaningful relationships with commissioners who were seen as legitimate experts and helpful purveyors of improvement. Disagreements did arise, but local actors supressed their beliefs and accepted that the commissioners were in control. Orientated towards the centralisation tradition, such deference, though sometimes frustrating, was ultimately seen as legitimate.

Convergence between the two cases emerged when BCC faced the meaning-making dilemma again following the appointment of new political and officer leadership. By constructing a narrative of "difference" from the previous regime to build trust with cynical BIIP members who doubted the council's capacity to change, the "Future Council Programe" was dismantled, and those deemed loyal to the previous regime were removed from executive governance (See Section 6.5.2). Perceiving BIIP to have a legitimate evaluative function and unencumbered by the feelings of frustration and anger underpinning antagonistic cooperation, new local political and officer leadership sought to work with rather than around BIIP. Shifting towards the centralisation tradition, autonomy was something to be "earned" (Lowndes, 2003) by satisfying external forms of oversight.

A key component of the narrative of "difference" and "deferential cooperation" was a particular relationship to time and a strict demarcation with the past. Difference involved local actors mobilising BIIP's framing that the council's recent history was characterised by failure and how the new approach to improvement was an explicit shift away from this past. Deferential cooperation also shared this demarcation from the past, where local actors were

orientated towards the future and commissioners shared the explicit aim of quelling a desire to interrogate recent history. Across both cases, the past was seen by local actors and those brought into the council through intervention as a "static container" of failure which was to build upon rather than excavated.

The relationship between failure and time is something which has previously been narrowly conceptualised in the policy failure literature. For example, Howlett (2024; 254-6) sees duration as an "objective" dimension of failure which has "physical" features, such as those which come with "flood or riot". However, in this research a demarcation of failure histories is more akin to the idea of "temporal framings" and how different groups "playing with time" shapes interpretations of failure (Moore-Cherry and Bonnin, 2022). Speaking to how failure in one domain can generate success in another (Baker and McCann, 2018), the demarcation of recent history by those tasked with improving the council served to establish a stable benchmark for their own successes while also cementing the failures of their predecessors. In doing so, the past narratives of failure and the entangled attributions of blame were simultaneously left behind and taken forward with local actors into the future. How past attributions of blame come to shape interpretations of future will be returned to when discussing the accountability dilemma below.

Such temporal framings were also central to the shift from resistance towards working collaboratively with interveners. Certain temporal framings have been associated with various forms of successful resistance in the literature. For example, the life-long perspective of residents in opposition to time-limited frameworks of urban developers has been found as one form of temporal framing which enables successful resistance (Degen, 2017). Whilst not successful in the case of BCC, there was a particular temporal framing within the narrative of "antagonistic cooperation" whereby local actors were unable to remove themselves from what they saw as the undemocratic character of past decisions. Yet in later stages, temporal framings within BCC's narrative of "difference" enabled cooperative relationships to form between local and external actors on the basis of shared understandings of the past. Cooperation centred upon ignoring the contested nature of local histories, resulting in the silencing of counter-narratives (Verloo, 2023), and the amelioration of what once spurred resistance.

Temporal bracketing which privileged narratives of failure were also integral for local actors learning to accept failure, the prescribed solutions and ultimately the subordinate position of local government. Separated from past contestation and colleagues who had once rallied against intervention, local actors grew more comfortable with satisfying the demands of external evaluators. Ultimately, this reinforced the belief that central government holds the power to determine who are the "teachers" and what the lessons are to be learnt from failure (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013).

The form of cooperation which emerged contrasts starkly with the relationships that can emerge through transformative learning. Transformative learning involves deliberating over "the contested meaning of past actions", cultivating interdependence (Laws and Forester, 2007; 342) and recognises differences of opinion among those in conflict (Forester, 1993; 216-15). Such characteristics were absent or were actively worked against within the cases studied, yet this does not mean new forms of shared understanding and action did not emerge through learning. Shared understanding between local actors and interveners was arrived at through the silencing of past contentions, marginalisation of those who felt wronged and cultivating a dependence on the evaluations of interveners. This flips the social learning literature which argues for its potential in confronting hegemonic systems (Parra et al, 2013; Bartels, 2022) and offers an example for the way social learning can entrench power relations.


## 8.4 Learning to blame and ambiguous conclusions

This final comparative section examines how actors responded to the accountability dilemma across the councils. It is argued that actors learnt to blame through the experience of accountability dilemmas. In both cases, local actors learned that attributing blame to their colleagues while defining themselves as responsible leaders created opportunities to gain legitimacy and advance the intervention. This section outlines the novel contribution of linking blame with learning that has been captured in this research. It also highlights the dynamic and ambiguous character of failure as evidenced by the conclusions of intervention in both cases.

*8.4.1 Accountability dilemma*

The accountability dilemma refers to the tension between claiming success and avoiding blame for failures which emerge during crisis (Boswell et al, 2021). In the context of this thesis, the accountability dilemma centred on conflicting interpretations of council performance when attempting to improve.

This dilemma was most clearly experienced in the case of BCC where there was clear contestation over council performance. The dilemma first emerged when BIIP's critical accounts of the Future Council Programme clashed with BCC's claim that they were successfully implementing the Kerslake recommendations. Despite believing that BIIP's evaluations were largely misguided, councillors saw that BIIP blamed leadership for a failure to improve and were worried that statutory intervention could follow. Having already shifted away from the contestation of failure and towards the idea that solutions must be approved by BIIP, a further shift occurred in response to the accountability dilemma. Encapsulated in the narrative of "implementing blame", local actors believed they had to concede to the demands of BIIP to remove leadership. When the accountability dilemma later re-emerged, a narrative of "managing blame" encompassed the belief that local actors could influence critical evaluations and cushion how they would be received by the local Labour group and central government. Central to this narrative was rebuilding relationships with central government to provide evidence of the council's improvements directly.

In contrast, NCC's narrative of "success" in stabilising the councils' finances and reorganising into new local government structures was not contested during intervention. It was only when local actors faced the pressures of underfunding in their new organisations and a narrative of "fragility" emerged that the decisions made during intervention were interrogated. Fragility conveyed a concern that, despite now practicing good governance, the new local authorities were likely to experience failure due to decisions made during intervention and the wider conditions within the local government system. Local actors expressed critical beliefs about the unrealised promises of enhanced performance through structural reform and joining what was felt to be an impoverished sector. It was only at this point that something vaguely resembling an accountability dilemma began to surface.

Movement between system-level and individual-level reflection becomes clear when comparing BCC and NCC's response to the accountability dilemma. BCC entered into intervention contesting failure and mobilising against what was perceived to be the undemocratic nature of intervention. Concluding intervention, local actors believed failure and the blame this produced could be managed through building relationships with key individuals in central government. Alternatively, intervention into NCC was initially defined by the acceptance of failure and a desire to build relationships with commissioners in order to avoid being blamed for past wrongdoing. NCC's intervention concluded with the emergence of critical beliefs about structural reform and the design of local government. Throughout the cases, local actors either learned to reproduce dominant narratives of failure and blame or were increasingly shifting towards challenging them.

Characterising such changes as movements between single and double loop learning is illustrative for thinking about the relationship between blame and learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974; 1996). Single-loop learning involves responding to problems without challenging prevailing ideas which define performance. Double-loop learning involves critically interrogating underlining values in response to problems. Those periods when individual-level reflection was prominent in the councils, premised on relationship building and conforming to beliefs central actors held about local government performance, exemplifies single-loop learning. Yet it was also during these instances that local actors appeared most concerned with blame. For example, NCC's acceptance of the BVI was in part driven by an interpretation that they would been seen as blame avoidant if they did not. In BCC, this dynamic was evident in the rebuilding of relationships with the civil service on the basis that leadership would not engage in blame games if failure re-emerged.

Alternatively, in those moments of resistance in which local actors contested failure, beliefs about blame were marginal. As a form of double loop learning which involves questioning dominant assumptions about performance, the contestation of failure also contained a contestation of the act of blame attribution. For example, BCC was blamed by central government for the "Trojan Horse" scandal despite not being formally responsible for the implicated schools. Whilst acknowledged as the trigger for intervention, such blame was seemingly unimportant in the subsequent beliefs about failure during intervention. It is

argued that this is the case because local actors themselves did not recognise the blame they received as legitimate. During such instances, local actors refused to fit into the "blame taker" category key to the conceptualisation of "blame games" (Hansson, 2018; 548). Conflict was instead felt to be about the clash of ideas and the unequal relationships of power between central and local government. It was only when local actors focused on building, instead of contesting, relationships with central government that they learnt to orientate themselves to being blame takers.

Looking across the case studies, we can also see the dynamic and ambiguous character of failure. By the end of intervention into BCC, failure had shifted away from the council and towards BIIP as a failed mechanism of improvement. Yet this was only felt implicitly by local actors and panel members – either through new informal relationships or a perceived absence of bygone relationships. Both BCC and BIIP commented on what they perceived as an unwillingness on the part of DCLG to acknowledge either success or failure. Unlike all previous progress reporting, BIIP's final critical evaluation was never responded to by DCLG. Likewise, no official letter was sent to BCC from the Department confirming that they had exited intervention. Notwithstanding, the failures which started off intervention (i.e., trojan horse/Kerslake findings) were seemingly no longer relevant and were rarely referred to as a benchmark against which success was to be measured. In the NCC case, whilst the publication of "lessons learnt" (McCardle, 2021) suggest a more stable understanding of failure, the critical reflections captured when interviewing local actors suggest that failure was once again re-emerging.

Recognising the ambiguity and fluxing character of failure contributes to the policy failure literature in numerous ways. Firstly, it connects the idea of "persistent policy failures" which re-emerge (Howlett, Ramesh and Wu, 2015) with intentional forms of "inaction" within policymaking (McConnel and T'Hart, 2019). From a party-political perspective, and particularly in the context of conflictual central-local relations, it is more useful to leave failures within an ambiguous state where it remains as a discursive tool to be deployed in future political conflict and blame attribution by central government. Excluding any acknowledgment of failure's end from the "public transcript" (Scott, 1990) contributes to its re-emergence at a later point. Secondly, ambiguity contrasts with the language of objectives and goals central to the

conceptualisation and operationalisation of policy failure (McConnell, 2015). Across the case studies a significant number of areas were deemed to be failing: children's services, refuge services, adult education, economic development, industrial relations, financial management and best value, devolution, austerity mitigation, organisational restructuring, scrutiny and governance, party-political dysfunction, leadership. Narratives of failure went beyond a clearly demarcated programme which moves through the cycle of problematisation, agenda-setting, policy design, implementation, and evaluation. Few, if any, formalised evaluations which linked policy actions to policy outcomes were in circulation prior to intervention. Amorphous narratives of failure meant that it was the organisation and its leadership, rather than the individual policies which were deemed to be failing.

## 8.5 Conclusion

This chapter compared the cases, examined the similarities and differences, and reflected on the implications for failure, learning and blame. Table 6.2 summarises what this chapter has found in relation to failure, blame and learning.

Table 8.2: Implications for failure, blame and learning

| Failure | Blame | Learning |
|---|---|---|
| Hidden transcripts reveal the multi-layered, unstable and contestable nature of failure in the public realm | Tacit blame sets the stage for local blame generation without the need for explicit attribution but can go unrecognised by targets | Contesting failure (and blame) involves double-loop learning and an interrogation of performance norms |
| Past failures can be "generative" for the success of others | | Learning revolved around who defines failure and blame |

When conducting the comparative analysis, the key finding in relation to failure and blame was the identification of "hidden transcripts" shaped by notions of appropriateness within central-local relations (Scott, 1990). Within public transcripts, evaluators emphasised failure as an organisational feature but privately, they blamed leadership for failure and saw that intervention could serve as a tool for change. Local actors concealed the doubt and

scepticism they felt towards failure, excluding those seen to be the loudest proponents of resistance and emphasising cooperation with a process they felt powerless to resist. Supressing the ambivalence they felt towards evaluations, the comparison reveals that during times of conflict or contestation, concealed beliefs about failure can resurface. Failure interpretations are unstable because the "hidden transcripts" upon which they are built can resurface and challenge established relationships and the power dynamics within (Scott, 1990; 19). Revealing the multi-layered nature of failure interpretations and the tacit but directed character of blame attribution, this chapter has argued that the dominant conceptualisation of policy failure and blame built upon policy goals and public perception constrict understanding of these concepts beyond the public dimension. That is, unlike this thesis, the policy failure and blame literatures have not captured what impact these concepts have on governance practices and the interaction between actors within.

Examining the similarities and differences between the cases also revealed that local actor's relationship to blame changed over the course of intervention. During those moments of contesting failure and the clash of ideas about evaluation, local actors were less concerned about blame attribution. It has been argued that such moments, characterised by double-loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974), called into question the ideas which define local government success/failure and therefore undermined the evaluative basis upon which blame was being assigned. It was the emergence of single-loop learning, whereby local actors accepted failure and the dominant norms which underpinned this, that they were became concerned with avoiding blame. It is argued that with learning that central government was the "teacher" which defined failure (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013), local actors were learning to be deferential blame "takers" (Hansson, 2018; 548). By arguing that local actors can learn to fail and accept blame in ways which privilege dominant groups and discipline subordinate ones, this contributes to the social learning literature by arguing that learning can entrench unequal power-relations.

Key to this process of learning was the deployment of "temporal framings" (Moore-Cherry and Bonnin, 2022) which framed past colleagues as incorrect in their critiques of failure and as blame-avoidant. By de-contesting the idea that the councils recent past did amount to local government failure, previous local division over intervention were deemed a thing of the

past. By upholding the interpretation of past failure produced through intervention processes, local actors could use this as the evaluative benchmark against which current/future successes could be measured. This finding and those others identified in this chapter will be further elaborated in the next chapter when answering the research questions.

**Chapter 9: Conclusion**

**9.0 Introduction**

This thesis aimed to elucidate the concepts of failure, learning and blame by exploring how these concepts were deployed by, and were entangled within the experiences of, actors involved in cases of central government intervention into English local government. Previous chapters discussed and compared the findings from two case studies of central government intervention. To fulfil the research aim, this final chapter further develops the insights identified previously by answering the following research questions:

1.) How do policy actors interpret policy failure?

2.) How does actors' experience of policy failure intersect with blame and policy learning, if at all?

3.) What are the implications of the intersection of policy failure, learning and blame for governance?

Firstly, it is argued that actors draw on competing traditions of governance when interpreting failure and this leads to conflict over the boundaries of failure. This level of contestation over failure is unrecognised in the policy failure literature which itself is concerned with the developing conceptual categorisations. Secondly, actors' experience of policy failure intersects with blame and policy learning in the way previously competing groups come to agree on what has failed and who is responsible. Learning is the means by which failure and blame are known, and so this thesis questions accounts which exclaim that policy failure often does not lead to policy learning. Thirdly, because learning to accept failure and responsibility involves conceding to dominant understandings of wrongdoing, it is argued that such dynamics contribute to the reproduction of unequal power relations within governance.

These findings make a number of conceptual and empirical contributions to political science literatures interrogated in this thesis. Primarily, the key contribution is to offer a novel conceptualisation of the failure-learning-blame relationship by showing that accepting

responsibility for previously contested failures involves learning who controls problem definition and solution. Contributing to the policy failure literature, this thesis broadens understanding of the variegated and contested nature of failure and how it is shaped by competing governance traditions. In relation to the blame literature, the findings show what impact blame games have upon "losing" coalitions who draw lessons from such periods. Contributing to the policy learning literature, this thesis demonstrates how learning through exclusion and marginalising contestation can entrench unequal power relations. Lastly, this thesis offers empirical contributions. Local government is an underutilised empirical space within the policy failure, policy learning, and, to a lesser extent, the blame literatures. This research helps fill that gap. Likewise, contemporary English local government scholarship neglects central government interventions as a topic. This research provides a rare, in-depth account of this form of governance and the specific cases of Birmingham City Council and Northamptonshire County Council.

Reflecting on the theoretical implications, this thesis also contributes to advancing the interpretivist framework of Bevir and Rhodes. Firstly, this research has provided a novel account of how traditions persist through dynamics of organisational learning. This addresses the neglected concept of socialisation within this approach. Secondly, by building on the distinction between small-d and big-d dilemmas, this research demonstrates how actors themselves draw connections between competing avenues for action in everyday work and the clash of abstract ideals and principles.

This chapter summarises the preceding chapters including the literature review, analytical framework and research design. Following this, a brief summary of the empirical chapters is given before moving onto answering the research questions. Concluding this thesis, this chapter provides a statement of contributions, discusses policy recommendations, reflects on the limitations of this research, and suggests directions for future research.

## 9.1 Thesis summary

Proceeding the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 reviews the policy failure, policy learning, and blame literatures to explore why these concepts have rarely been linked and how this gap can be addressed.

Interrogating the conceptual formation of these literatures, it was shown that a "clarificatory" approach (Durose et al., 2022), which prioritises definitional and categorical precision over context (Schaffer, 2016), persists. Aiming to avoid "conceptual stretching" (Sartori, 1984), clarification has led to distinctions between policy failure and success (McConnell, 2010; 2015), refined typologies of blame (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2017), and classifications of policy learning (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013). While advancing scholarly debate, this approach to conceptual formation has neglected to explore what connections exist between these concepts and how they are embedded within communities and entangled within local languages and practices. This chapter argued for rebalancing the policy failure, learning and blame literatures by engaging in elucidatory conceptual formation which embraces the meaning and use of such concepts within everyday governance work (Schaffer, 2016).

Chapter 3 detailed how the interpretivist framework of tradition, dilemma and narrative (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006; 2010) is suitable for the task of elucidating failure, learning and blame within certain historical and political contexts. Traditions outline how interpretations of the world are shaped by diverse "ideational backgrounds" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 78) which, when challenged by contingent events, can lead to dilemmas in the form of competing beliefs. Whilst useful for understanding how failure, learning and blame are likely influenced by competing values and conflict, this chapter argued that the relational, affective and interpersonal dimensions of interpretation are overlooked in this framework (Bartels and Turnbull, 2020). To address this, the chapter integrated insights from organisational learning theory (Argyris and Schön, 1974; 1996), crisis management (Boin et al., 2016; Boswell et al., 2021), and action-oriented storytelling (Forester, 1999).

Chapter 4 justified the research design and methodological choices made in this research. Using the interpretive approach to comparative case study research (Boswell et al, 2019), it was argued that instances of central government intervention into English local government are interesting empirical space to explore the dynamics of failure, learning and

blame. The selected cases – interventions in Birmingham City Council (2014–2019) and Northamptonshire County Council (2018–2021) – were chosen due to accessibility and recent occurrence. Data collection involved 53 semi-structured interviews and 91 documents, analysed using grounded analysis (Charmaz, 2006) and abductive inquiry (van Hulst and Visser, 2024). By moving iteratively between theory and emerging findings, this chapter outlined the use of "temporal units" (Widdersheim, 2018) and crisis management dilemmas (Boswell et al, 2021) as a framework for structuring the analysis.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 comprise the empirical sections of the thesis and explored the data collected through the lens of traditions, dilemmas and narratives.

Chapter 5 examined policy documents and scholarly research to outline the competing governance traditions which shape how actors interpret central-local relations in England. The "centralisation" tradition views power and accountability as operating hierarchically within central-local relations, with local government in a subordinate role. Conversely, the "autonomy" tradition sees local government as a political organisation with the right to resist central policy and manage its own performance. This chapter claimed that the experience of central government intervention and the evaluations of failure are likely to be shaped by these competing traditions.

Chapter 6 shared the findings from the BCC case study. It was argued that beliefs held by local actors were initially caught between traditions of autonomy and centralisation. These provoked dilemmas of resisting or accepting the accounts of failure produced through intervention, implementing the wrong solutions, building relationships with interveners and responding to critiques of performance. Through continual contestation of the council's performance, local actors slowly orientated towards the centralisation tradition and privileged understandings of failure supported by central government.

Chapter 7 analysed the experiences of intervention in the NCC case. Despite also experiencing similar dilemmas, local actors quickly resolved the tension between competing traditions by embracing the centralisation tradition and the dominant accounts of failure. The dominance of the centralisation tradition only loosened when local actors exited intervention and began to interrogate the recent history of intervention and the notions of failure underpinning it.

In chapter 8, the thesis turned to comparing the dilemmas and narratives from the case studies, whilst also considering what impact the comparative findings had for theorising failure, learning and blame. It was shown that in both cases, local actors orientated away from the tradition of autonomy and towards the centralisation tradition. This was most clearly expressed in the way local actors increasingly viewed intervention as something they must work with through by silencing contestation and excluding those deemed resistant. From these findings, failure and blame were shown to have "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) whereby actors only expressed certain beliefs within enclosed spaces. This was used to trouble dominant conceptualisations found in the political science literature premised on policy goals and public perception. An additional reflection was that as the case studies unfolded and contestation lessened, that local actors learned to accept accounts of failure and blame determined by intervention.

Building on these insights, this chapter now addresses the research questions outlined at the start of this thesis.

## 9.2 How do policy actors interpret policy failure?

This thesis has demonstrated that interpretations of failure made among those involved in central government intervention are deeply contested, underpinned by competing traditions of central-local relations, and stratified between the public accounts and enclosed policy spaces. The result is that the interpretation of what has failed – to what extent and with what reach – differs between different groups and across time.

Situated within the centralisation tradition and exhibited in "public transcripts" (Scott, 1990), is the interpretation that local government failure is defined as failure to fulfil the expectations of managerialism and compliance with central government decision-making. This interpretation portrays failure as an organisational feature enmeshed throughout the organisation and entangled within dysfunctional cultural dynamics. Such an interpretation is something broader and more all-encompassing than policy failure reducible to an individual functional unit of the council. Instead, failure resonates with the concept of "governance failure" which "focus[es] less on the details of each individual policy and more on the structural determinants of action within the public sector" (Peters, 2015; 261). Whilst the

boundaries of what constitutes "governance" are delimited to the individual councils themselves rather than the broader system of central-local relations, in this account failure is structurally engrained into the organisations and demands change on this scale.

Another interpretation of failure, one which is still situated within the centralisation tradition, is concealed within "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990). This hidden interpretation relates to beliefs about the individual failings of council leadership, local party politics, and how intervention can bring about change in these areas. More akin to the idea of "leadership failure" in which dysfunction results from personal attributes (McConnell and Tormey, 2021), those who expressed this interpretation did not see it as contradicting the idea of organisation-wide failure or the implied forms of change within this assessment, but as simply inappropriate to express within public accounts.[43]

Alternatively, from the autonomy tradition, failure is interpreted as bound to specific service delivery areas within the council or the result of decision-making at the central government level. Embedded within this view are ideas that specific functional areas in the council need to change or that changes in central government policymaking are required. In this sense, this interpretation of failure has a closer affinity to the idea of policy failure rather than governance failure. In particular, a local interpretation that a specific service delivery function is underperforming is akin to "programmatic" policy failure where a service fails to reach a target population (Howlett, 2012; 545). On the other hand, failure resulting from central government decision-making might be likened to a "process" failure where, for example, the idea that reduced funding creates more efficient services fails to translate into local outcomes (Howlett, 2012; 545). Both interpretations of failure were deployed by local actors to contest the idea that the councils were failing on a collective, organisational level. Yet such beliefs were often concealed from public accounts, surfacing only in moments of

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[43] A number of explanations exist for why such actors believed these ideas were not appropriate to express publicly. On one level, and to borrow a phrase from the street-level bureaucrat perspective, it is simply the acknowledgement that policymaking is "people making decisions about other people" (Lipsky, 1980; xii). Intimately understood amongst those who do policymaking, keeping this hidden conceals the role of interpersonal tension and human fallibility whilst upholding "the self-portrait" of the administrator as expert and non-partisan (Scott, 1990; 18). Conversely, the hidden dimension of failure could also relate to a top-down theory of change implicit within centralised notions of accountability. Within the centralisation tradition, English local government is believed to be an instrument which can legitimately be reshaped through top-down measures, but the permissibility of explicitly targeting local political leadership is something which remains hidden within this tradition.

intense conflict between competing groups who reached different interpretations of failure from observing the same events.

This research demonstrates that conflicting groups of actors compete over the boundaries of failure and the implied ideas of change embedded within. This is not to argue that certain interpretations of failure are bound to certain groups, but rather that different groups will draw on competing governance traditions and ideas about democracy, power and the history of central-local relations to interpret failure in competing ways.

Clarificatory conceptualisations of policy failure dominant in the policy sciences literature do not capture the contested, messy, historically situated means by which failure is interpreted. Rather, the clarification of "policy" or "governance" failure actively desensitises analysis to the contested nature of failure through the development of frameworks which convey an epistemological certainty of failure. McConnell's (2010; 2015) distinction between "programmatic", "processual" and "political" failure illustrates this. Premised on a stable assumption about how to categorise government activity, it is argued that "if we know what governments 'do', we are well placed to understand 'failures to do'" (McConnell's, 2015; 234). Yet this thesis demonstrates that what government does is contested by governmental actors themselves. Traditions which provide norms about the purpose and function of government – and therefore the norms by which failure is judged – are multiple and competing. When interpreting failure, those within government can draw upon competing traditions which can result in conflict over the boundaries of failure. In this situation, failure does not fit neatly into boundaries of "governance", "policy" or "implementation". Whilst such clarificatory approaches claim to acknowledge "the contested nature of failure" (McConnell, 2015; 231), this thesis argues that such conceptualisations work against understanding the depth of meaning which underlines contested failures and leads to simplistic assumptions that instances of "non-compliance" equate to failure (Leong and Howlett, 2022; 1390-1). This weakness undermines the practical intention of such approaches to help see beyond partisan conflict over failure.

Aiming to objectively identify which failures do and do not fit into certain categories, the risk with the clarificatory approach is that it could encourage the very conflict it seeks to help overcome. It is not unreasonable to imagine that the conflicting groups studied in this

thesis could deploy the many categories of failure (May, 2015; McConnell, 2015; Peters, 2015; Park 2021) as tools of conflict. The distinct categories of failure create spaces of division which have greater potential to work against, rather than towards, creating shared meaning between those who disagree. The approach to studying failure practiced in this research, one which aims to ground the meaning of failure into beliefs and experiences of actors, holds greater deliberative potential than previous approaches. This argument will be returned to when considering the recommendations for policy and governance.

A key finding across both the case studies is that whilst failure was contested, particularly at the onset of intervention, this did subside over time. It is through reflecting upon this finding that this thesis answers the second research question.

## 9.3 How does actors' experience of policy failure intersect with blame and policy learning, if at all?

In this research, policy failure intersected with blame and policy learning in the way local actors shifted away from contesting failure towards accepting it. Specifically, as the experience of failure unfolded, local actors learnt that they could not "win" when in conflict with the centre over how to define local government failure. Local actors learnt that they were part of a failing local government and, consequently, learnt they were the blame "taker" rather than the blame "maker" in situations of central government intervention.

As previously demonstrated, failure was interpreted as incorrect and an attack on local democracy by local government actors. In this sense, both councils demonstrated elements of double-loop learning whereby the values underpinning notions of performance within the central-local dynamic were excavated to proclaim failure an exercise in political domination (Argyris and Schon, 1996). From this view, the appropriate response to failure was to challenge what were perceived as dominant ideas of central government control in search for "liberating alternatives" (Clark, 2021; 42). Infused with values and ideas about the purpose of local government, the contestation of failure contained elements of "knowledge controversies" (Barry, 2012) in which "the very metrics used for evaluating evidence themselves become the subject of debate" (Best, 2016; 42). However, double-loop learning was only partial in that it

was not a joint process of inquiry with those in central government, wider groups within the council or the local government sector. This was akin to a dynamic of ""over-learning": premature, one-sided, and rigid application of hastily drawn inferences supported by the [locally] dominant coalition" (Boin et al, 2016).

At different points, the councils both shifted to single-loop learning whereby local actors aligned themselves to managerial ideas of performance espoused by central government and evaluators. In NCC, they appeared to be shift back towards double loop learning once intervention concluded. However, prior to this, local actors in both cases learnt to accept the evaluations of failure introduced through intervention and aligned themselves with the conventional norms of local government performance.

A defining feature of the theory of single and double-loop learning is error recognition and correction (Argyris and Schon, 1974). The central driver for learning is actors perceiving mistakes and acting to prevent them from reoccurring. In this research, the changes from double to single-loop learning come from actors perceiving that their initial interpretations of failure and/or their subsequent reactions were unable to change broader narratives about local government failure. In other words, it was eventually recognised that they were not the "teachers" of the situation who could define the problem definition, but the "learners" who were to take "lessons" (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013; 605). This was something evident in BCC when the narrative of "implementing blame" signified that local actors saw themselves as unable to influence dominant ideas of failure and its roots. The resistance which characterised the earlier responses to intervention were reinterpreted as an error and acting on what local actors believed central government desired was a way to mitigate future errors.

With the shift from double to single-loop learning, local actors were more concerned with blame attribution than they previously had been. When contesting failure, local actors were contesting the act of blame attribution itself. Alternatively, single-loop learning involved the reproduction of dominant ideas about local government performance, with one of those being that local government is a "blame-taker" within central-local relations. With stabilised notions of performance, and the acceptance that the recent past did amount to a failure of local government, this research argues that learning to fail also involved local actors learning to become blame takers. Part of this learning process involved local actors seeing their past

colleagues' contestation of failure as unsuccessful and counter-productive forms of blame avoidance. Making this interpretation, local actors saw that the best way to avoid similar situations in the future was to demonstrate a readiness to accept responsibility for any future failures.

In contrast to the policy learning literature which sees learning as an intentional process of lesson drawing (Rose, 1991), learning was an ever present dynamic throughout the cases (Heclo, 1974), something which is always ongoing as actors engaged with the situation with which they were presented. This research then calls into question the dominant assumption found in the literature that policy failures often do not lead to learning (Moran, 2001; Howlett, Ramesh and Wu, 2015). Alternatively, it is suggested that when policy failures – which first emerge as a tool of argumentation (Zittoun, 2015) – are accepted within and between policy communities, agreement emerges because actors learn who has the power to define problems and their solutions. As evidenced in the BCC case, the language of learning was explicitly mobilised to demonstrate this power dynamic (See Section 6.4.2 in Chapter 6). This finding problematises the clear-cut distinction between learning "structures" and learning "products" (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013), illustrating that a product of learning can be new beliefs about the structural characteristics of governance – something which the policy learning literature has only recently acknowledged (Dunlop, Radaelli, Wayenberg and Zaki, 2024).

The argument that actors learn to blame also contributes to the blame literature in various ways. Recent interventions have demonstrated the that lower tier actors do not passively accept blame and use their discursive agency to shift blame onto others (Li, Ni and Wang, 2021). This thesis demonstrates that this can also work on the inverse – actors learning to exhibit a readiness to take responsibility as a means of gaining legitimacy amongst upper-tier governance actors. This finding resonates with the idea of "blame-seeking behaviour" (BSB) which claims that some politicians aim "to proactively stimulate the wrath of opponents" (Flinders et al, 2024; 82). In this research, blame taking served to quell antagonism and appealed to ideas about the "rules of the game" believed to be held by superiors. For this reason, blame-taking served as a "resource" to bolster the credibility of local actors among the "constituencies" of central government (Flinders et al, 2024; 90).

Arguing that becoming a blame-taker results from a process of social learning also contributes a novel conceptual and empirical finding to the blame literature. Implicitly framing blame through a learning perspective, Hansson (2024; 161, 176) recently argued that blame can either facilitate learning about the beliefs of others or that actors can learn to improve blame avoidance behaviours and enhance strategic self-interest.[44] This thesis builds upon this latter assertion, but goes to suggest that blame itself is a learnt social dynamic which is not an unavoidable cognitive impulse (Weaver, 1986) embedded within the structure of "risk society" (Hood, 2002) or part and parcel of the way which actors make sense of the world (Bovens and t'Hart, 1999). By demonstrating that blame can be a learnt response, this research offers opportunities to begin thinking about the way in which blame dynamics can be prevented from emerging within the practice of governance.

## 9.4 What are the implications of the intersection of policy failure, learning and blame for governance?

Demonstrating that actors learn to fail and accept blame, it is argued that this intersection reproduces unequal relations of power within central-local relations. Local actors learning that they cannot control the meaning of failure and have no other choice but to accept blame encapsulates a process of arguments being "won". This process comes to reinforce the beliefs, identities, values and ways of acting defined by the centralisation tradition. It is in learning these "rules of the game" that notions of local governments subordinate position within English governance are reproduced.

The governance of central-local relations in England is often characterised as a highly centralised system (Copus et al, 2016) dominated by the perspective that "Whitehall knows best" (Marsh et al, 2024; 665). The dominance of central government goes unchallenged by passive local politicians entangled in party-political hierarchies (Copus, 2004) who implement, adapt and then mitigate policy acknowledged to seriously undermine local government (see for a discussion of local authority responses to austerity, Gardner and Lowndes, 2016). This

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[44] This argument represents an interesting, and until this point unacknowledged, tension between blame improving or undermining deliberation.

research supports this characterisation, but crucially, adds that failure and blame are key discursive tools in the reproduction of such power relations within governance.

Re-interrogating the "asymmetrical power model" of British governance, Marsh et al (2024; 668) argue that serious "shortcomings in the UK's political performance" increasingly exist in contradiction with the idea that "Government knows best". Here, the norms of centralised governance and practices of fragmented policy delivery are challenged because, whilst dominant, they simultaneously cause policy failure. This thesis inverts this argument, claiming that the production of failure evaluations and attributions of blame among policy communities contributes to centralisation. Dominant narratives of failure, particularly within central-local relations, privilege local government as the site of failure. Even when central government intervention seemingly fails to improve councils, questions of central government failure or dysfunction within the design of subnational governance remain marginal.[45] This research considers the discipling of dissent that occurs during intervention as a key component to failure remaining isolated within local governments. This in turn works to reproduce unequal relations of power between central and local government.

In this research, power has been theorised through the concept of traditions. Following Pike (2020; 8), "traditions formed by groups of people in institutional settings and competing with other traditions, are products of power (a group acting together) and ongoing tools and strategies for legitimation (ideational maintenance)". By placating interveners, prefiguring interactions so as to encourage positive evaluations and privileging the accounts of failure that were produced through intervention, local actors in this study orientated towards the centralisation tradition as a means to attain legitimacy. Favouring the accounts of failure produced through intervention, those past local actors who had once contested failure are cemented as being on the wrong side of history – framed as the rightful losers of this conflict who were engaging in blame-avoidance rather than legitimate contestation.

Beyond the individual cases studied in this thesis, it would appear that narratives of failure and blame, containing ideas about winners and losers, produced through intervention also serves to reinforce power relations across the broader system of central-local relations.

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[45] Both BCC and the newly established councils in Northamptonshire entered some form of intervention again after data collection ended.

Central government intervention is an "unusual" mode of governance (Sandford, 2017) and arguably represents the most extreme mode of central-local interaction. However, whilst relatively infrequent occurrences (historically at least), this research argues that central government interventions hold a central place in the psyche of the local government community when it comes to questions of resisting central government. Lovell (2017) has shown that policy failures in one location are translated into other spaces as actors observe their broader governance environments and learn not what to do. Formally isolated from the wider local government sector, central government interventions hold the potential to discipline the entire sector and encourage an embrace of centralisation. Speaking to this, when exploring why local government actors did not resist the 2010s austerity, Davies and Blanco (2017; 1528) found actors talking about central governments abolition of the Greater London Council in 1980s, still to this day fearful of what central government could do in response to perceived resistance. As discussed more fully below, further research is required to fully understand the place of failure and blame within the broader local government community.

The idea that learning to fail and accept blame reproduces distinctions between dominant and subordinate groups within governance also contributes to policy failure, learning and blame literatures. Emerging consensus around organisational failure and who is responsible has been claimed to enhance policy outcomes and citizen-state interactions. For example, contestation is argued to create misalignment between policy intentions and outcomes, contributing to policy failure (Verge and Lombardo, 2021). If contestation distorts "good" policy intentions, emerging consensus over what has failed and who is responsible offers a stable and unchallenged space of passage through the policy process. In terms of citizen-state interactions, the acceptance of blame could also be seen as political elites positively adapting to "[p]ublic manifestations of discontent [which] potentially serve as helpful signals of (potentially) harmful past, present, or future events and norm violations (Hansson, 2024; 175). In other words, blame is a vehicle for learning about public sentiment and the reshaping of elite behaviour accordingly. This thesis offers an alternative perspective by demonstrating that in the context of conflicting groups, the emergence of consensus over what has failed and who is responsible reproduces beliefs about power within governance.

## 9.5 Contributions to knowledge

With the existing literature neglecting an exploration of the connections drawn between policy failure, policy learning and blame, this thesis has sought to understand what relationships may exist and how these concepts are embedded within the every-day experiences and practices of governance. Doing so has produced various conceptual and empirical contributions.

As highlighted above, previous conceptualisations aiming for clarification over what is and is not, for example a policy failure, has led to strict conceptual compartmentalisation. The consequence is that the relationships between policy failure, policy learning and blame are under-theorised. One notable exception was identified in the literature review which argued that failure inspires policy actors to enhance policy design so to avoid future blame (Howlett, 2012; 541). The central contribution that this thesis makes is to offer a novel conceptualisation which brings together the concepts of policy failure, policy learning and blame. It is shown that the emergence of consensus among competing groups over what has gone wrong and who is responsible is underpinned by actors learning to fail and accept blame. Simply put, the acceptance of previously contested failure and the shift towards being a blame-taker was the result of learning who are the "teachers" which control the definition of failure and the prescription of solutions (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013). This new perspective shows that both dominant narratives of failure and blame are the "products" of learning (Dunlop et al, 2020).

The second contribution is to provide an in-depth account of the way actors interpret failure, how such interpretations compete and how they change over time. Concerned with identifying failure and categorising it, the policy failure literature has overlooked the way failure is deployed by policy actors themselves as an argumentative tool for provoking change within governance (Zittoun, 2015). This research demonstrates that conflicting groups of actors across government compete over the boundaries of failure as a means to delimit and/or expand notions of change embedded within failure. Failure is "made to matter" (Alexandra, 2023; 12) amongst such groups because they draw on competing traditions of governance

which, in this thesis, inflects failure with beliefs about the perceived nature and history of central-local relations.

A third contribution stems from the analysis of blame beyond the public stage. Much of the established blame literature prioritises the study of blame-games which play out between competing groups in public (see for exception, Boswell and Rhodes, 2024). The consequence is that the blame literature in political science has not captured what impact being the "loser" of a blame game has after public attention shifts (Diamova et al, 2024; 49). Working to close this gap, this thesis demonstrates that within organisations, those who witness their colleagues "lose" blame-games draw lessons from such experiences and apply these when in situations of conflict. When those lessons are premised on the perception that past colleagues were needlessly blame avoidant, the result is that actors frame themselves as blame-takers ready to accept responsibility for any future wrongdoing. This both adds a new perspective to the idea of "blame-seeking behaviour" by showing that it can be used to deescalate conflict and reinforce the "rules of the game" (Flinders et al, 2024) whilst also demonstrating how reactionary and anticipatory blame are linked – something which has not been captured empirically until now.

A fourth contribution is to demonstrate how learning can reproduce unequal power relations within governance. Social learning is often proclaimed to have the potential to challenge dominant relations of power (Parra et al, 2013; Bartels, 2022) and facilitate deliberation and shared understanding between competing groups (Laws and Forester, 2007). Inverting this perspective, this thesis outlines how the formation of shared understanding among conflicting groups rested on the exclusion of actors who once contested failure and a subsequent delegitimation of the very act of contestation itself. Undermining the potential for local actors to challenge central government on ideas about what it means for local government to function properly, the asymmetrical power of central-local relations is bolstered.

The fifth contribution is an empirical one to the policy failure, policy learning and blame literatures. Local government is an underutilised empirical space in these literatures and this thesis mitigates this lack of engagement. By doing so, this research illustrates that the conventions of performance which delineate the boundaries of failure, ideas about who is

culpable for wrongdoing and what lessons are to be learnt, are all enmeshed with traditions and beliefs which are deeply specific to English local government. For example, a tradition of autonomy and the belief in bottom-up forms of accountability encourages local actors to see failure as the result of policymaking determined by central government. Notwithstanding, this research also contributes to the English local government literature, providing an updated account of how English local government responds to intervention – something largely unexplored amongst local government scholars since the 2010 localism reforms (Laffin, 2018). Relatedly, this research provides an in-depth understanding of the specific interventions into BCC and NCC, shining a light on what occurred during these periods and contributing case specific knowledge.

## 9.6 Contributions to theory

Developing the interpretivism of Bevir and Rhodes (2006; 2010), this thesis advances this framework by integrating a theory of organisational learning into the conceptualisation of "tradition" (Argyris and Schon, 1996). Traditions are defined as the "selective legacies passed down from generation to generation" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 157), yet how this works in practice and contributes to the endurance of certain traditions has been overlooked (Robinson, 2016; Pike 2020). As discussed in Chapter 5, the centralisation tradition holds a dominant place within central-local relations. Contesting accounts of failure produced through intervention, local actors initially posed a serious challenge to centralisation by drawing on the autonomy tradition. This subsided as new political and officer leadership orientated towards the centralisation tradition. Deploying the theory of organisational learning, this research illustrates how local actors increasingly perceived past contestation, one which challenged dominant ideas of local government performance, as an error and shifted towards "single-loop learning" (Argyris and Schon, 1996). In doing so, they reproduced dominant assumptions about what causes failure (i.e., local conditions) and that it was legitimate that they be held accountable by central government. Integrating such ideas into the Bevir and Rhodes framework, this thesis provides a novel approach to explaining learning as the driver of continuity among traditions.

A second contribution is to advance understanding of the conceptual relationship between "small-d" and "big-d" dilemmas (Boswell et al 2019; 41). Dilemmas arise when actors interpret contradiction (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; 79) and this can centre around the clash of grand ideas (big-d) or mundane tensions within everyday life (small-d) (Boswell et al 2019; 41). However, the relationship between these types of dilemmas and how they interact is unclear. This research finds that actors themselves link the tensions, frustrations and conflicting avenues for action they experience with grand ideas. For example, in both case studies local actors choosing to hide or make visible their frustrations with evaluators and interveners were explicitly linked to ideas about democracy – thereby connecting "small" interpersonal dynamics with "bigger" tensions between beliefs about the purpose and function of local government. This research demonstrates the value of attending to the way actors link interpersonal tension with abstracted ideas which serve to legitimate certain courses of action.

## 9.7 Recommendations for policy and practice

Beyond contributing to academic literature, this thesis also offers various recommendations to improve the policy and practice of central government interventions. These centre around enhancing the sense of collaboration of local government actors and minimising the risk that conflict becomes counterproductive rather than constructive.

Chapters 6 and 7 have demonstrated that local actors faced with intervention feel powerless to contribute to understandings of failure. Failure is instead seen as an imposition. The risk that such perception poses is clear from looking at BCC; bitter and disgruntled, local actors agreed to cooperate with intervention without a shared understanding of failure, ultimately leading to further conflict and political instability at later points. On this basis, this thesis offers a number of recommendations to redesign the intervention process so that it fosters a sense of collaboration and joint ownership between central and local government actors.

Firstly, this thesis recommends that councils are directly involved in the evaluation processes which initially accompany intervention. Councils can currently make

representations to central government preceding an evaluation and local actors are often interviewed during; however, this is as far as local involvement goes. Evaluations must be something produced in collaboration with local government. Secondly, evaluations should be led by an experienced conflict mediator who facilitates "joint-fact finding" and the development of mutually agreed plans for moving forward (Laws and Forester, 2007). Mediators should be unaffiliated to either central or local government policy communities and when evaluations require technical knowledge, mediators should involve experts which conflicting parties both accept as independent (Laws and Forester, 2007). Thirdly, evaluations should directly involve politicians from both central and local government and be recognised as a political process which must be dealt with through mediation. As intervention unfolds beyond initial evaluations and ultimately concludes, it is also recommended that central and local actors convene to conduct formative and summative evaluations of intervention with mediators facilitating this. Across the entirety of the intervention process, provisions for conflict mediation could be built into statutory legislation, like is the case for US federal government departments when interacting with local communities (Langbein and Kerwin, 2000).

Ultimately, the above recommendations assume that the types of conflict documented in this research can be productive if addressed through mediation and deliberation. However, dealing with failure and conflict, both critically and pragmatically, is a long way off within English central-local relations. As one local government officer from BCC shared, the very meeting of political leaders from central and local government is seen as a failure:

> I used to do a bit of a roadshow for a year or so on improvement, where we'd say, right, what are the symptoms of local government dysfunction? (…) My example was Albert Bore and Michael Gove having a conversation in Birmingham (LGO6).

The basic condition for conflict mediation – that opposing groups come together – is deemed as inappropriate. Together with the way intervention protects central government from accusations of complicity in local government failure, this idea about the meeting of political foes from central and local government is likely to make many of the above recommendations

unfeasible. Arguably, more transformative change is needed to reimage central-local relations as interdependent in nature.

## 9.8 Limitations and avenues for future research

No piece of academic research would be complete without a recognition of the limitations and how these can be addressed through future research. Notably, in this research, such limitations centre around notable absences in data collection, the retrospective nature of the data and weaknesses stemming from the analytical framework. It is proposed that expanding beyond specific cases of central government intervention and an analysing the proliferating secondary material on local government failure could help mitigate limitations.

Primary data collection involved conducting 53 interviews with a diverse range of actors, but a significant majority of interviews were conducted with actors who had worked in BCC and NCC. For this reason, the thesis predominantly answers the question of how *local government actors* interpret failure, learning and blame. But it should be acknowledged that certain local actors chose not to participate due to the stress and emotional impact of such periods. These were often individuals who lost their position within the councils and failed to move into other senior roles within the local government sector. From this perspective, it could be said that this research has largely captured the perspectives of the "winners" rather than the "losers". Those on the receiving end of the intervention welcomed the space to share their experiences, whereas those who were seen to have damaged reputations from the interventions remain silent within this research. Given the number of interviews conducted, it is unlikely that their participation would have substantially changed the direction of the analysis. However, being transparent and cognisant of their silence in light of the analysis which has been conducted offers the reader clearer means for evaluating it.

Because this research has focused upon collecting experiences of intervention after they have happened, the observation of live practices is another limitation of this research. While analytically, practices have been referred to in this research, empirically it has been the practice of retelling which has been captured through interviews. With all the complexities of memory, it is possible that the retelling of practices may have differed from live practices and

reflect more the way in which stories are reconstructed dialogically within professional and political settings. Interviewees often spoke of discussing their experiences in various forums and how they have since reflected upon events outside of active conflict and intense forms of scrutiny. The stories that were constructed to narrate practices as they unfolded will have undoubtedly been transformed through later process of dialogue and reflection. Ethnographic research involving participant-observation within councils who are being intervened into would be helpful for capturing the practices of intervention.

Given the sensitivity of "live" interventions, restricted access might continue to inhibit ethnographic possibilities. Instead, a viable avenue for future research would centre around tracing the way stories of intervention diffuse across the local government community. Due to the increasing rate of central government interventions, there has been a proliferation of spaces opening up for members of the local government community to share their experiences.[46] Conducting participant observation in such spaces could be more viable and would help to understand how the wider local government community interprets failure, learning, and blame. Conducting future research which "zooms out" from specific cases of intervention might also help address an additional absence in this thesis.

Having focused on the experiences of local actors, it must also be acknowledged that this research has largely not captured how Whitehall interprets failure, learning and blame. Central government politicians who decided to conduct interventions and the senior civil servants which advised them often refused or ignored invitations to participate in this research. As is clear from documentation cited in this thesis and the few interviews conducted with central government actors, there is a language of failure and learning within this policy community (MHCLG, 2020). Future research would benefit focusing more on the situated meaning of failure and learning within central government. Given fragility of the local government sector, as evidenced by the increasing rate of intervention, the likely extra resource central government has deployed to scrutinise local government would make such research timely.

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[46] The 2023 Local Government Association conference held a workshop on local government responses to intervention. Related events have also been held by the Centre for Scrutiny and Governance.

The analysis of governance traditions has also been limited by a reliance on secondary documentation. The risk with this form of analysis is that it serves as a historiography of the discipline of local government studies, an illustration of the way scholars have thought about the topic, rather than the way in which elite administrative and political actors have understood and experienced local government (Wagenaar, 2011; 100). As it has been shown throughout the analysis, the local beliefs which emerged in response to intervention do point to underlying ideas about power within central-local relations, but the positioning of such beliefs within the very broad conception of centralisation, over say traditions of community leadership (Sullivan, 2007) is a theoretical, rather than empirical, step taken in this research. Abductively moving between the themes which emerged during data collection and revisiting secondary literature with such themes in mind has been one strategy to ground the analysis. Future research could usefully finetune the analysis of tradition by analysing the burgeoning practitioner literature on local government failure emerged since the start of this research.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: List of identified interventions

| Local Authority | Statutory or non-statutory |
|---|---|
| London Borough of Hackney (2001-2007) | Statutory |
| Hull City Council (2003-2006) | Statutory |
| Stoke-on-Trent City Council (2008-2010) | Statutory |
| Lincolnshire county council (2005) | Statutory |
| Anglesey Council (2009-2013: intervention by Welsh Government) | Statutory |
| Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council (2010-2014) | Statutory |
| London Borough of Tower Hamlets (2014-2018) | Statutory |
| Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (2015-2019) | Statutory |
| Birmingham City Council (2014-2019) | None-statutory |
| Kensington & Chelsea Council (2017-19) | None-statutory |
| Stoke-on-Trent City Council (2019-present) | Statutory |
| Northamptonshire Borough Council (2019-2021) | Statutory |
| Liverpool City Council (2020-present) | Statutory |

**Appendix 2: Documents analysed**

| Document | Total number | Source |
|---|---|---|
| Kerslake review | 1 | Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government |
| BCC correspondences | 2 | Birmingham City Council |
| BCC progress reports | 9 | Birmingham City Council |
| BCC press released | 4 | Birmingham City Council |
| BIIP progress reports | 8 | Birmingham City Council |
| BIIP correspondences | 4 | Birmingham City Council |
| BIIP Press Release | 1 | Birmingham City Council |
| Ministerial correspondences | 16 | Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government |
| Freedom of Information Response | 1 | Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government |
| Non-Executive Advisors report | 1 | Birmingham City Council |
| Campaign paper | 1 | Birmingham Labour Group |
| Media articles | 22 | Local Government Chronicle; Birmingham Mail; Guardian; The NE Enquirer; Northampton Chronicle; Northampton Chronicle and Echo; Local Government Chronicle; Northampton Telegraph; Economist; Public Finance |
| House of Commons announcement | 2 | UK Parliament |
| Committee report | 2 | Communities and Local Government Committee, UK Parliament |
| Best Value Inspection report | 1 | Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government |
| Commissioner reports | 9 | Northamptonshire County Council |
| Lesson Learned reports | 3 | Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government |
| External Auditor report | 1 | KPMG |
| Professional Association webpage | 3 | Local Government Association; Association of Democratic Services |

**Birmingham City Council**

**Topic one – participant's relationship to case study**

1. Can you tell me about your role at BCC during the time of the Kerslake Review (2014)?

**Topic two – the local authority prior to inspection**

2. What were the circumstances that led to inspections being undertaken?

    a. Can you give me an example of encountering *circumstance* in your role?
    b. What did you think of such circumstances?

3. Can you tell me about the relationship between BCC and central government leading up to the inspection?

    a. Can you give me an example?

**Topic three – Experiences of inspection**

4. Can you walk me through the Kerslake review from when the inspection began?

    a. What thoughts/feelings did you have when announcement was made?
    b. What was the mood like in the council at this time?
    c. What did you make of the threat to break-up the institution?
    d. In what way, if at all, did the inspection affect your work? Can you give me an example?
    e. If interviewed by the review team, how did you prepare for this?

**Topic four – Impact**

5. Can you tell me about the release of the Kerslake report?

    a. Did you immediately recognise the findings and if not, how did you begin to make sense of them?
    b. Can you give me an example of how you learnt about your colleagues reactions to the report?
    c. How did you go about formulating an official response to the review findings?
    d. Can you walk me through any immediate changes in your work following the report?
    e. Are there any examples you can give me in which you returned back to consult the Kerslake report?

**Topic 5: Improvement measures**

6. Can you walk me through the Birmingham Independent Improvement Panel from when it was established to when it was abolished?

   a. To what extent did the findings from the Kerslake review inform the Councils improvement initiatives?
   b. How much were improvement measures in your mind whilst carrying out your role in the Council?
   c. Can you give me an example of how your role changed?
   d. Can you tell me about the working relationship with the improvement panel?
   e. How did the council's relationship with MHCLG change during intervention?
   f. Either on the individual level or organisational level, what learning has occurred through the improvement measures?
   g. Can you tell me about the decision to disband BIIP?

**Topic six – AOB**

7. Is there anything else that we have not covered that you would like to tell me?
8. Who else do you think I should talk to?

**Northamptonshire County Council**

**Topic one – participants relationship to case study**

9. Can you tell me about your role at NCC during the time of the Best Value Inspection (2018)?

**Topic two – the local authority prior to inspection**

10. What were the circumstances that led to inspections being undertaken?

    a. Can you give me an example of encountering *circumstance* in your role?
    b. What did you think of such circumstances?

11. Can you tell me about the 'Next Generation Council' model?
12. Can you tell me about the transformation work prior Best Value Commission? To what extent would you describe this as successful?
13. What about auditor and LGA evaluations of NCC prior to inspection? What did you make of these?
14. To what extent did it feel like the break-up of the council felt a foregone conclusion?
15. Can you tell me about the reported notion that NCC believed it would be bailed out by central government?

16. Can you tell me about the relationship between BCC and central government leading up to the inspection?

    a. Can you give me an example?

**Topic three – Experiences of inspection**

17. Can you walk me through the Best Value inspection from when it began?

    a. What thoughts/feelings did you have when announcement was made?
    b. What was the mood like in the council at this time?
    c. In what way, if at all, did the inspection affect your work? Can you give me an example?
    d. If interviewed by the inspection team, how did you prepare for this?

**Topic four – Impact**

18. Can you tell me about the release of the Best Value inspection findings?

    a. Did you immediately recognise the findings and if not, how did you begin to make sense of them?
    b. Can you give me an example of how you learnt about your colleagues reactions to the report?
    c. How did you go about formulating an official response to the review findings?
    d. What did you make of the recommendations for the reorganisation of NCC?
    e. If any, can you walk me through any immediate changes in your work following the report?
    f. Are there any examples you can give me in which you returned back to consult the Best Value report?

**Topic five – Improvement measures**

19. Can you walk me through the use of commissioners from when they arrived to when NCC was abolished?

    a. Can you tell me about the working relationships with the commissioners?
    b. If at all, can you give me an example of how your role changed?
    c. To what extent did the findings from the Best Value inspection inform the improvement measures?
    d. How did the council's relationship with MHCLG change during intervention?
    e. Either on the individual level or organisational level, what learning occurred through the use of commissioners?
    f. Can you tell me about the decision to abolish the council?

**Topic six – AOB**

20. Is there anything else that we have not covered that you would like to tell me?
21. Who else do you think I should talk to?


**External appointees**

**Topic one – participant's relationship to case study**

22. Can you tell me about your role during your time at BCC (2014-2019)/NCC (2018-2021)?

**Topic two – the local authority prior to inspection**

23. Before being appointed to your role, to what extent were you aware of the circumstances at NCC/BCC?

    a.   Can you give me an example of how you became aware of these circumstances?
    b.   What did you think of such circumstances?

**Topic three – Experiences of inspection**

**24.** Can you walk me through the inspection from when you were asked by Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to conduct it to the publication of the findings?

    **a.**   Can you describe how you were approached by MHCLG and what your thoughts/feelings when they did so?
    b.   What type of preparation did you do?
    **c.**   How did you go about the design of the inspection?
    **d.**   How did you know what type of questions to ask during the inspection interviews?
    e.   Can you tell me about the working relationship with BCC/NCC at the time of inspection?
    f.   What about the threat to reorganise (only suitable in context of BCC)?
    **g.**   How did the section 114 notice affect the conduct of the inspection (only suitable in context of NCC)?

**Topic four – impact**

**25.** Can you tell me about the release of findings and recommendations?

    **a.**   How did you communicate your findings to MHCLG/NCC/BCC?
    **b.**   Can you tell me about the Councils response?
    **c.**   What thoughts/feelings did you have when you encountered their response?

**Topic five – Improvement measures**

26. Can you walk me through your experience of the interventions into BCC/NCC from when they began to when they ended?

   a. What were your thoughts/feelings when you first arrived?
   b. To what extent was your work informed by the Best Value/Kerslake findings?
   c. Did you consult the inspection documents during your time at the Council? If so, can you give me an example?
   d. Can you tell me about the working relationship with the council?
   e. How did the council's relationship with MHCLG change during intervention?
   f. Can you tell me about your relationship with MHCLG whilst at the Council?
   g. Either on the individual level or organisational level, what learning has occurred through the improvement measures?
   h. Can you tell me about the decision to disband BIIP/NCC?

**Topic six – AOB**

27. Is there anything else that we have not covered that you would like to tell me?
28. Who else do you think I should talk to?

## Appendix 4: Recruitment text, participant information sheet and consent form

### Email Recruitment text

Dear x

I am contacting you in connection with your involvement in Birmingham City Council (2014-2019)/Northamptonshire County Council (2018-2021) during the time of central government intervention into the local authority.

I would like to invite you to take part in an interview as part of my research project investigating how central government intervention may affect learning within local government. I am also interested in your views on the conduct of inspections and the working relationships between local government and those charged with implementing and monitoring improvement.

This research has the potential to offer a significant contribution and benefit by examining the conditions for the effective implementation of improvement measures, and the opportunities and challenges for professional development in such circumstances.

Your perspective would offer a valuable and important insight, and I would welcome your consideration of our invitation for interview. The interview will be conducted online via zoom and will take approximately an hour of your time, at a time and date convenient to you.

Please find attached a participant information sheet, and a consent form, which provide more information about the project and aim to ensure informed consent to be interviewed. Should you have any questions about the research prior to your interview, please do not hesitate to contact me. I fully recognise the demands upon your time, but would very much appreciate you giving my invitation consideration, given the timely and important nature of the issues.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely

Matthew McKenna (doctoral candidate)

Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV), School of Government, University of Birmingham.

**Participant Information**

In this research, interviews are being held with individuals from Birmingham City Council, Northamptonshire County Council and the UK Government's Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing. The purpose is to understand the perspectives and experiences of council leaders, officers, councillors, inspectorates and civil servants of central government intervention into English local government.

Institutional ethical approval from the University of Birmingham has been secured to undertake this research, and will adhered to the University of Birmingham's Code of Practice for Research. All those involved in the research will be treated with honesty and respect. The primary element of ethical approval relates to informed consent and being clear about how data is collected, stored and managed. It also relates to issues of anonymity and confidentiality.

The primary mode of data collection will be through interviews, and some individuals will be asked to participate in follow-up interviews when appropriate. This data will be used to answer the research questions.

Participation in this research project is voluntary. In addition to the information provided in this document, you will have the opportunity prior to the research interview to ask the researcher any questions you may have relating to the project. Following the interview, there will be a two-week window in which you can request a copy your transcript. Within the same two-week period, you also have the right to withdraw your data. If you do choose to withdraw your data, it will be removed and permanently deleted

Participants' data will be held confidentially, and only be read and accessed by the named researcher and supervisory team. Context is important, and for this reason the local authorities being researched will not be made anonymous. Interviewees will be pseudo-anonymised using an assigned ID code, which will allow the researchers to identify a participant's data. When referring to a participants identity within the analysis, generalised prefacing (e.g., 'a local government officer', 'a local councillor',

and 'central government civil servant') will be used. Data will be collected, stored, managed and archived on the University's secure Birmingham Environment for Academic Research (BEAR) system.

Should you decide to withdraw from the project, including removal of consent for us to use any of your data up to that point, or have any questions about how the research is conducted, please contact the named researcher and supervisory team:

Mr Matthew McKenna, Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham,

Dr Catherine Durose, Honorary Professor, Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham,

Dr Stephen Bates, Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Birmingham,

**Participant Consent Form**

To help ensure that participation in this research is informed and consent is documented, each participant is required to complete a Participant Consent Form before participating in the research. By completing and signing this consent form, you recognise that you are participating in a research project supported by the University of Birmingham. This form records your agreement to take part in the research and covers your consent for data to be collected by your participation in an interview and any follow up interviews.

I confirm that I have read the Participant Information and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction ☐

I agree voluntarily to take part in this research ☐

I understand that this is a research project and that my participation is part of a data collection strategy to address the research questions of the project ☐

I understand that taking part in the research will involve an online interview, which will be recorded using observational notes and/or audio-recording and transcription ☐

I understand that I will have the right to request a copy of the interview transcript up to two weeks following my interview ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the research up to two weeks after my interview by contacting the named researcher ☐

I understand that any recordings will be used only for analysis, and no one outside the research team will be allowed access to the recordings ☐

I give permission for the information collected to be used for research purposes including publication and wider dissemination ☐

I acknowledge that I will be referred to by a pseudonym ☐

Name (Print)        _____

Signature            _____ (if unable to print and scan, please

sign in capitals)

Date                    _____