

Open Policy Making in the UK – to Whom Might Policy Formulation be ‘Opening Up’?

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Abstract

This article explores recent UK government aspirations towards ‘open policy making’ (OPM). Against a backdrop of scholarly literatures on power inequalities in policy making, I consider to whom processes of policy formulation under a banner of OPM are expected to be ‘opening up’. The article draws on an analysis of government documents from 2012–2018 plus some supplementary data from expert interviews. It notes aspirations towards ‘opening up’ policy formulation to new experts and a particular preoccupation with encouraging private sector involvement. Ideas which may boost ordinary citizens’ input are also part of what ‘makes up’ UK Government OPM, though citizen involvement appears restricted, sitting uneasily alongside commitments to austerity influencing how ‘openness’ is understood.

Keywords: open policy making; citizen participation; civil service; governance

1. Introduction

In 2012, then UK Prime Minister David Cameron promised a ‘great wave of decentralisation’ of decision making ‘from Whitehall to communities across the country’ (Civil Service, 2012: 2) that would, he argued, be produced in part by moves towards ‘Open Policy Making’ in the UK central government. Open Policy Making (OPM) has for some years been a growing trend across OECD countries wherein governments aim increasingly to involve external actors of various kinds in processes of policy formulation. Such external actors include ordinary citizens¹ and service users but also a range of experts including those tasked with delivering public services, increasingly these days in the commercial and voluntary sectors. OPM trends are influenced by ‘design thinking’ in policy which involves considering the perspectives of diverse groups upon whom policies impact, ‘improv[ing] policy performance and meet[ing] citizens’ rising expectations’ (OECD, 2009: 21). OPM has furthermore been described as helping to promote inclusive participatory democracy – ‘establishing a new relationship with the citizen who becomes a valued partner’ (House of Commons, 2013: 3).

At the same time, scholars have also long highlighted a reality that social, political and economic elites control government policy making. Literature on policy networks warns that these are often exclusionary, filled with dominant voices espousing dominant discourses and reinforcing depoliticised, narrow understandings of what counts as valid knowledge in the formulation of policies. Against such background and reporting on an analysis of government OPM documents from 2012–2018 plus some supplementary data from expert interviews, this paper asks: how do actors at the centre of UK Government² promoting OPM understand its meaning? How might different understandings and aspirations affect how far policy formulation becomes open *to all*?

One 2013 Public Administration Select Committee Report has argued that UK OPM has ‘great potential . . . to deliver genuine public engagement’. However, there is also ‘a risk of disappointment and scepticism’ where governments may continue to listen primarily to ‘usual suspects’ (House of Commons, 2013: 3). Given this, and in a time where little scholarly research has been carried out so far on UK Government aspirations and understandings under a specific banner of OPM, in this paper I contribute to knowledge on what openness is being taken to mean in this context. I challenge ideas that it may represent commitment to ‘opening up’ policy formulation to less powerful groups, placing discourses in a context of longstanding critiques of policy making via elite networks and also research on oft-celebrated but somewhat restricted initiatives for boosting citizen participation. One further contribution is that I detect within contemporary OPM some ratcheting preoccupation with involving private sector elite experts in policy formulation. Such is described as being particularly ‘necessary’ in times of austerity, as are restricted approaches to involving ordinary citizens. However, austerity also forms part of an ideological basis to how ‘openness’ is being conceived.

2. ‘Opening up’ government policy making in the UK

In 2012, a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in the UK produced a Civil Service Reform Plan (CSRP) which sought to advance UK Civil Service moves towards Open Policy Making (OPM). OPM here has been linked to wider Government efforts to promote transparent ‘open government’ and also ‘open public services’ (Cabinet Office, 2011a; 2011b), the latter reflecting an expectation that services will increasingly become co-produced outside the state (Clarke *et al.*, 2007; Bovaird *et al.*, 2014).

The defining characteristic of OPM *per se* is that this focuses on processes of policy making or ‘formulation’ (Hill and Varone, 2017). OPM as an ideal breaks with a perceived ‘Whitehall monopoly’ on this, committing governments to drawing on ‘wider range[s] of views and expertise’ (Civil Service, 2012: 14). Informed by the notion of policy design (Howlett, 2014),³ it prioritises in part

understanding perspectives of service users and ordinary citizens, though it also involves the incorporation of other *expert* views into policy formulation, including the views of public and private sector actors tasked with implementing government policies:

‘Open Policy Making is about bringing expert thought, challenge, and innovation into our policy processes, challenging ourselves and the way we prepare policy advice. It is about asking ourselves: how is it that we are in touch with cutting edge, world class thinking and connecting that to implementation so that it is tested in the real world with a greater emphasis on users?’⁴

OPM has furthermore been associated with the creation of a UK Civil Service ‘Policy Profession’ (Civil Service, 2013a). In 2013, an OPM team was set up inside the UK Cabinet Office, tasked with promoting a mindset across government wherein policy making would become ‘open by default’. From 2013–15, this team ran capacity-building OPM events, created resources such as an OPM ‘Toolkit’ and reported on OPM developments across government. At the end of 2015 the team wound down. However, its blog has since been managed by a newer ‘sister team’ – Policy Lab (discussed below).⁵

3. Reducing policy failures and enhancing participatory democracy?

OPM agendas today speak in part to long-running debates in policy on the importance of addressing policy failures which arise where governments know too little about the populations they govern (Besley, 2007; OECD, 2009). Academics have written on problems which are produced by ‘myopic’ policy designs (Ansell *et al.*, 2017; Nair and Howlett, 2017), failing to impact on societal ‘wicked problems’ (Peters, 2015) in part because they do too little to account for the perspectives of ordinary citizens. By contrast, policy co-design involving diverse groups leads to greater policy success. Collaboration boosts experimentation, innovation and broader feelings of policy ownership. Policy makers avoid overly simplistic understandings of problems and in turn they minimise policies’ unintended consequences.

OPM furthermore arguably speaks to participatory democracy agendas (see e.g. Pateman, 1970; Young, 2002; Beresford, 2016; Dean, 2016; 2017; Dacombe, 2017) emphasizing a wider intrinsic value of involving diverse groups in policy making. Barnes *et al.* (2007) argue that, regarding major contemporary problems endemic in Western societies of low levels of popular trust towards government institutions,⁶ ‘it is now widely accepted that representative democracy is insufficient as a means of reconnecting citizens with [those] institutions’ (p.27). Participatory policy making may in turn help governments to ‘address inequalities of power’, ‘foster[ing] political renewal’ (p.183) and giving greater recognition and representation in the policy sphere to previously marginalised

groups (Fraser, 1997). Placing importance on diverse lived experiences helps to complicate the ‘shared typical’ (McIntosh and Wright, 2019: 458; see also Cools *et al.*, 2018) and Bevir (2013) argues for an ethical reimagining of democracy wherein no-one in society is considered as possessing superior wisdom and where freedom is a virtue enacted daily through individuals’ participation in dialogic, bottom-up policy making. Critics of participatory democracy do highlight social stability and practicability problems (Schumpeter, 1976; Riker, 1982), and absences of accountability can also arise (Dean, 2019), where ordinary citizens exercise too much direct control over government decision making. However, while participatory policy making may not always be appropriate, certain forms of it are nevertheless arguably often helpful in checking bureaucratic experts’ and political representatives’ power (Fung, 2004).

4. Unequal power and the policy process

Truly inclusive policy making requires some dispersal of power within a pluralist society and it requires that citizens have some agency to effect change (and see Williams, 2016, on social policy’s ‘agentic turn’). However, in analysing government OPM claims, here we must also remain mindful that democracies have long been beset by problems of power inequalities. Social, political and economic elites control government decision making through the exercise of covert and latent power (Mills, 1956; Lukes, 1974; Miliband, 1969). Literature on policy networks and the growth of governance beyond the state in recent decades has moreover often highlighted the stratified nature of such change and the way it empowers some more than others (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; Newman *et al.*, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2005; Rhodes, 2011; Ball and Junemann, 2012; Torfing and Ansell, 2017; Diamond, 2020). Big business dominates (Crouch, 2011; Farnsworth and Holden, 2006) and powerful network insiders constrain what counts as valid policy knowledge and expertise (Shore and Wright, 1997). Work on ‘evidence-based policy making’ in the UK in recent decades has shown the way that powerful actors adopt narrow definitions of what constitutes legitimate evidence (Stevens, 2011; Fleming and Rhodes, 2017; Monaghan and Ingold, 2019). Modernist expertise is prioritised and presented in depoliticised, technocratic and managerial terms (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Mouffe, 2005) as constituting ‘consensus’.

In such contexts, policy making participation for ordinary citizens outside of elite networks sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside elite control. In recent decades governments have increasingly talked a somewhat confused language of citizen participation, showing enthusiasm for e.g. ‘deliberative’ methods (see Pallett, 2015, on how these have been important in Third Way ideology). However, citizen participation is a complex phenomenon encompassing many different understandings (Dean, 2016; 2017; 2019) and these are often glossed

over. Policy elites have tended towards retaining strong authority over decision making, even where elites may appreciate ‘connecting’ with ordinary citizens in some ways, such as ‘testing’ ideas for instrumental purposes of improving organisational learning (Milewa *et al.*, 1999; Rowe and Shepherd, 2002; Parkinson, 2004; Hendricks and Lees-Marshment, 2019; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). However, that not fitting within certain rules – i.e. reaffirming dominant agendas and taking place among narrowly constituted publics (Barnes *et al.*, 2003) and inside ‘invited spaces’ (Cornwall, 2008) – often becomes deemed illegitimate within elite circles and beyond (Young, 2002). With all this in mind, to what extent are UK government OPM aspirations likely to represent fundamental change?

Particular contemporary understandings of what counts as suitable ‘openness’ may partly be reflected in government decisions about spending. The 2012 CSRPs was notably a document outlining, in a context of wider austerity, clear intentions to make the UK Civil Service ‘leaner’. Plans for the cultivation of a ‘post-bureaucratic’ state (Cameron, 2009) led to Whitehall budgets for administration being cut by one third (Page *et al.*, 2012) and staff numbers falling by 15–20 per cent (though these have risen again somewhat following the 2016 EU Referendum).⁷ Developments have been framed positively as promoting innovation, efficiency⁸ and ‘agility’. In 2012/13, dynamic new cross-departmental units such as Behavioural Insights and Policy Lab⁹ were set up inside the UK Cabinet Office, taking on policy work that would previously have been more purely the remit of major departments. Such units, modelled on Nordic organisations such as Mindlab and Sitra, have been described as challenging Departmental silos and energising previously ‘sclerotic’ policy making (Civil Service, 2013a). At the same time, necessarily ‘doing more with less’ (Civil Service, 2012: 3) has been a theme running prominently through reform. ‘Opening up’ policy making to new external actors has been described as being important for producing efficiency savings (*ibid.*)¹⁰ However, cost-cutting may also suggest some ideological commitment to certain *sorts* of OPM over others.

5. Research questions and methods

Academic research has so far been sparse regarding actual government understandings and aspirations ‘making up’ UK OPM. Pallett (2015) has analysed OPM in a context of trends towards institutionalising public engagement in science and technology (Irwin, 2006; Burall *et al.*, 2013). She argues that OPM discourses may have contributed in science policy to a ‘constitutional moment’ wherein state-citizen relations have become fundamentally altered, though she also describes such change as being ‘contested and incomplete’, critiquing government emphases on ‘methods and expertise from business’ within an ill-defined ‘openness imaginary’. Talbot and Talbot (2015) explore

ways in which UK policy makers have used scholarly work in a time of OPM. They suggest that governments have continued to rely on ‘existing established policy networks’, arguing that OPM may involve little more than ‘well-established ways of policy making’. However, they also state that details are ‘yet to emerge’ and express concern that ‘austerity may be limiting external involvement’ (p.188).

With all this in mind, this paper asks: at the centre of UK government, what understandings and aspirations circulate regarding ‘opening up’ policy formulation? How might particular aspirations affect how far policy formulation will become open *to all*? In order to answer these questions, first, a comprehensive qualitative analysis was carried out of publicly available UK government documents directly referencing OPM during the period 2012–2018. Searches for relevant texts returned documents from across government, though the single biggest source was the UK Cabinet Office (where the OPM team was previously based and where Policy Lab is still based). Material analysed included government reports, policy papers, news articles, blog posts and PowerPoint presentations. Worthy of particular note are the OPM Toolkit, analysed in full, and also the OPM team/ Policy Lab ‘Slideshare’ documents on LinkedIn (91 between 2014 and 2018). The OPM blog was additionally analysed in full (202 posts between 2013 and 2018).

Such documents constituted rich data on OPM inside the UK Civil Service and notably both the OPM team and Policy Lab have, since 2013, worked in partnership with many departments across government (indeed civil servants outside the Cabinet Office often contribute guest entries to the OPM blog). At the same time it should be noted that searching specifically for the term ‘OPM’ will have led to some predominance of Cabinet Office material given this phrase is most strongly embedded there. Other UK Civil Service Departments arguably regularly ‘do’ some form of OPM but use different language to describe this (see e.g. ‘patient and public involvement’ traditions in Health – Baggott, 2005). Such work is however beyond the scope of this study which, given space constraints, limits itself to exploring ‘openness’ within OPM discourses specifically.

A thematic, line-by-line analysis of data was carried out using Nvivo. Key understandings and aspirations ‘making up’ UK Government OPM were identified inductively, and a series of codes denoting key discourses was developed, taking care to use wording appearing in government documents. In order to follow-up on some particular themes identified during the analysis above, five supplementary semi-structured expert interviews were also carried out. Interviews (conducted between October 2018 and March 2019) allowed for the incorporation of some direct perspectives of current and former civil servants associated with particular OPM ideas. Some information on interviewees

is provided in an Appendix, though all were guaranteed anonymity. Data from interviews was fully transcribed and again analysed inductively and line-by-line.

Analysis led to the creation of 188 codes in NVivo. Individual codes were also in several instances organised into umbrella categories denoting larger themes. Codes and themes fell broadly under three overarching headings, and these three headings are reported on below.

6. Commissioning new experts

In 2012, the CSRP in the UK stated that, as part of OPM, civil servants must embrace models of operating wherein policy development would increasingly be *commissioned* rather than carried out in-house. OPM work has in line with this been described regularly as involving civil servants working in partnership with external contractors. Civil service training has focused increasingly on staff learning commissioning and contract management skills, and to this end a Commissioning Academy¹¹ exists today.

Desirable OPM is furthermore described as being that moving away from ‘government control[ling] what’s on or off the agenda’ towards contexts where ‘anybody can initiate policy review/ adaptation/ evolution’ (Civil Service, 2012: 15). In 2012 a Contestable Policy Fund¹² was set up to prompt challenging of existing policy, purposefully opening this up to ‘competition from external sources’. Social Impact Bonds have grown too as a policy formation model, where governments take a restricted ‘stewardship’ role (Civil Service, 2013a), specifying desired impacts and contracting external organisations to deliver, but leaving detailed development of initiatives to contractors. Examples include the DCLG 2014 Fair Chance and 2016 Rough Sleeping Funds.

Increased commissioning has created conditions ripe for a proliferation of new (and some older) experts in consultancies, charities and social enterprises. Many specialise in the fast-evolving fields of policy and service design (see Box 1). Ministers have additionally become expected to commission external advice *directly* (Civil Service, 2013b; 2013c), fostering unmediated relationships with outside experts compared with a past where civil servants acted as a ‘filter/ blocker of policy advice’ (Civil Service, 2012: 15). Initiatives such as Extended Ministerial Offices have reflected ‘externalising’ agendas (Diamond, 2020). The National Audit Office found that in 2014–15 the UK Government spent up to £1.3 billion on consultants – a figure £400m–£600m higher than in 2011–12 (NAO, 2016).

Kidson (2013) notes that some Whitehall departments have sought more than others to retain oversight over policy development, and ‘standing’ policy teams do still retain much control over policy making.¹³ At the same time, reports highlight that these teams have been shrunk during efforts to promote civil service ‘leanness’.¹⁴ Flexible staff pools inside departments, working across

BOX 1. Non-state experts involved in OPM

IDEO Nesta Design Council Participle Uscreates Agile Future Forum Agile Connection FutureGov Thirty8 Digital DESIS Lab Stripe Partners ASI Data Science Mastodon C Livework	Fjord Codelegs Mint Digital Delib Nominet InWithForward Innovation Unit Forum for the Future Fehr Advice Involve PA Consulting UKTI Ideas Lab MaRS GovLab SIX	EPIC Projects by IF Superflux Strange Telemetry Snook Interaction Design Foundation Deloitte Accenture PwC McKinsey Public Service Transformation Academy
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Source: Compiled drawing on Cabinet Office OPM blog, 2013–2018.

policy areas, have been established to support standing teams, as have ‘Strategy Units’ and ‘Innovation Units’ again working across policy areas, though interviewees highlighted that capacity issues remain in contexts of overall decreased headcounts (see also NAO, 2017, on gaps in capability). Problems of staff ‘churn’ (Sasse and Norris, 2019) following substantial restructuring have further impacted on teams’ institutional memory and their capacity to formulate policy. In such contexts, reliance on commissioned experts becomes reinforced:

‘The Civil Service will need to do less centrally and commission more from outside’ (Civil Service, 2012: 7)

‘In a time of restricted funding, we need to contemplate innovative, cost-effective methods . . . and use new open policy techniques to their fullest’ (Barcoe and White, 2013).

‘. . . letting the network do the work’ (OPM Blog, 15th August 2014)

Interviewees described ‘opening up’ and the development of new policy in a context of cuts:

‘Our argument was always ‘OK, so declining headcount, fine – this is exactly why you need to do [OPM], because the reality is not going to change. Ministers are still going to expect the absolute best . . . you need to shift your ways. So it’s precisely because we were facing a down-size’ (Interviewee 4)

‘Standing teams are still generally there. because you need people to cover the departmental brief. It’s a question of whether you can have a separate capacity to do *new* policy development or not . . . and there’s been quite a loss of experience, expertise through sort of excessive redundancy rounds . . . and where you have quite poor institutional memory, you often

find that outside groups know a lot more ... so you need to build the relationships.’ (Interviewee 1)

7. A preoccupation with the private sector

Growing involvement of external actors links to a preoccupation with the value of incorporating commercial expertise. Interviewees 4 and 5 described civil servant ‘bias’ and ‘towel over the head’ approaches to evidence in government policy making. Necessary ‘shaking up’ has been described as being partly a matter of involving civil society (see e.g. the 2018 DCMS Civil Society Strategy, DCMS, 2018) and with academic research (see e.g. What Works Centres¹⁵). However, there is a particular focus on ensuring engagement with commercial actors.

One rationale given is the idea that policy makers ought to utilise more the knowledge of groups *implementing* policies. In an era of ‘open public services’, these are increasingly outside the state. In 2012 the CSRPs emphasised as part of OPM the key value of securing ‘buy in’ from policy implementers. Tying policy making and implementation ‘seamlessly together’ (Civil Service, 2012: 4) was described as ‘de-risking’ policies. In turn, commercial sector knowledge becomes critical:

‘Implementing policy should never be separate from making it’ (ibid).

There is, however, also a broader suggestion in OPM aspirations that the most innovative ‘next practice’ lies within the private sector. Prominent initiatives focus on encouraging civil servants to acquire ‘business acumen’. Input from ordinary citizens is described as injecting ‘passion’ into policy formulation whereas input from commercial actors allows for an incorporation of ‘genius’ (OPM slideshare, Nov 23rd 2018). Documents emphasise the importance of breaking down ‘cultural barriers’ between public and private and literature stresses the value of bringing in ‘necessary talent’ from the private sector. A ‘commercial recruitment hub’ has been set up (Civil Service, 2014) and civil servants are expected to undertake private sector secondments. Civil Service restructuring has seen departments recruiting private sector non-executive board members. A network of lead non-executives operates across the Civil Service and an overarching CEO has been recruited on the basis of his ‘strong track record of delivering organisational transformation in the private sector’ (Civil Service, 2014). One Team Government is a network bringing together government officials with non-public sector experts (Heywood, 2017). Departmental permanent secretaries, too, are increasingly expected to have commercial sector experience.

‘As the Civil Service changes – open policy making becoming the norm ... new forms of partnership with the private sector, commercial acumen valued as much as policy skills, greater interchange with industry – so over time will its culture’ (Civil Service, 2014)

Regarding influence for commercial actors, the UK Public Administration Select Committee has raised concerns about OPM risking dominance by powerful ‘vested interests’ (House of Commons, 2013: 17) relative to other, less elite groups, such as ordinary members of the public. Newspapers have reported on instances where this may have been the case (see e.g. Syal *et al.*, 2013). Hallsworth *et al.* (2011) argue that OPM does risk officials becoming ‘locked into’ relations with particular external stakeholder communities with ‘fixed views’ (p.61).

Struggles *against* openness to commercial actors can however also be noted. One report on retaining talent in the UK Civil Service has critiqued resistance to ‘outsiders’, arguing that public officials ‘kill fresh thinking’, regularly causing private sector recruits to depart in frustration (Baxendale, 2014). Former Cabinet Secretary Francis Maude, who championed OPM during the 2010–2015 Coalition, has spoken of officials’ resistance to many aspects of Civil Service reform,¹⁶ as has former adviser to David Cameron/ OPM enthusiast Steve Hilton (2016) who once advised cutting Whitehall staff by 90 per cent. In 2017 it was announced that Extended Ministerial Offices – which had since 2013 allowed Ministers to bypass standard civil service recruitment procedures in deploying external staff – would be abolished. EMOs had been critiqued by the FDA civil servants’ union on grounds that these risked creating excessive distance between Ministers and civil servants (Wintour, 2013).

8. Promoting wider involvement?

Aspects of UK Government OPM promoting involvement of ordinary citizens are many in number. In the first instance, they include evolving digital technologies which engage citizens online – web surveys, social media listening, crowd-sourcing¹⁷ and the creation of wikis. Understandings of public involvement also extend beyond online methods. Influenced again by design traditions, Policy Lab in particular, working in partnership with Ministerial departments and with commissioned designers (many listed in Box 1), regularly undertakes what it describes as *ethnography*.¹⁸ Such work aims to dig into the real lives and problems of particular groups as they experience policy. Methods include ‘observation, video diaries, photographs, contextual interviews, and analysis of artefacts’ (OPM Toolkit, 2019). Civil servants (and sometimes Ministers) travel across the UK aiming to boost *empathy* in policy formulation, allowing for thicker understanding of individuals’ situated experiences.

Such methods might suggest that ‘how we think of evidence has shifted a little bit’ (interviewee 4). Influences can be noted from social design (Kimbell, 2019) in that policy makers are encouraged to think humbly, questioning modernist expertise and recognising the importance of learning from wider constituencies. One former Cabinet Office official argued that, in such an approach,

ordinary citizens are recognised as experts: they are ‘the expert in their life’, becoming ‘legitimised and visible’ (interviewee 2).

OPM often involves, too, the running of consultative workshops with citizens, and methods are deployed to encourage the participation of diverse groups, not only the most confident or articulate. One example here is the medium of sketch – asking workshop participants to *draw* ideas wherever they would prefer this to speaking or writing (Kimbell, 2015; OPM Slideshare, August 23rd 2018). Participants are also encouraged to respond to prompts including pictures, ‘prototypes’ (e.g. mock websites) and visual devices such as evidence cards.

Exclusionary dynamics nevertheless occur. Considering citizens’ engagement online, here we may first note that in the UK today some 10 per cent of households are without internet access (ONS, 2018). Groups without access are disproportionately elderly and disabled and, even among groups *with* access, citizens vary in terms of e.g. social media use (House of Commons, 2013). Second, regarding possible balance between work in ‘real world’ settings and that in ‘invited spaces’ (Cornwall, 2008), references notably abound in OPM literature to formal events where ‘the service user’¹⁹ is but one category of attendee in a longer list including design and tech experts, representatives from civil society organisations, local government and the commercial sector. Even among service users, questions arise over ‘who gets to be in the room’ (Interviewee 2). In a link to themes above on the involvement of private sector actors, Pallett (2015) notably highlights that such initiatives are often outsourced to ‘an influential elite community of experts charged with overseeing, facilitating and reporting on participation events’ (p.770).

OPM literature suggests furthermore that constraints are placed on the types of ideas treated as legitimate. Facilitators encourage ‘diverse views’ but also ensure discussion runs ‘in the direction policy makers need’ (OPM Toolkit, 2019). ‘Constraining’ questions are posed to facilitate ‘realistic’ discussion about limited ‘levers available’ to government:

‘The big risk of this open policy making is we make people believe that just going in and saying ‘anything [is] on the table’ will lead to better ideas. But actually going in and saying ‘here’s a constraint for you to play with’ – with that, your mind can go on to, it might lead to better ideas’ (interviewee 5)

‘Change cards are questions that help people think outside of the box . . . They are cards with questions on them like ‘what if we had no budget’ and ‘what would a start-up do?’ (OPM Toolkit, 2019; also OPM slideshare, July 10th 2015)

One further characteristic of UK OPM discourses is a tendency towards emphasising the importance of policy formulation happening *fast*. Documents describe policy ‘sprints’, project ‘bursts’, ‘hack days’, ‘ideas jams’ and policy making ‘in a day’ (Policy Lab, 2016). Ethnography is described as often taking only ‘a few

days' (OPM blog, 27th March 2015). 'User testing' of 'prototypes' involves seeking 'quick feedback' (OPM blog, 4th September 2014; OPM Toolkit, 2019). 'Personas' and 'journey mapping' (OPM blog, 15th December 2016; OPM Toolkit, 2019) are exercises where civil servants imagine the characteristics of fictional citizens. Such exercises sometimes happen following analysis of 'big data' on citizen characteristics²⁰ and interviews with real citizens (Kimbell, 2015), though such prior work is not always undertaken (Interviewee 2). Government researchers critique absences of representative sampling and in-depth data collection²¹ – tendencies towards informal availability sampling and 'vox-pop' style data gathering (e.g. 'catching people when they're queueing in a coffee shop' – OPM blog, 27th February 2015).

Such dynamics connect to what has been described as 'patchy' buy-in (Interviewee 4) across Whitehall regarding 'openness'. While some Departments have set up 'Lab-style' units (see e.g. the DWP Policy Exploration team, the MoJ User Centred Policy Design team), extensive engagement with citizens has nevertheless been considered 'risky' and provoking 'anxiety' (see also Welsh and Wynne, 2013, on the 'threat' of public participation). Ministers need assurances of 'safety' (Interviewees 2,3,4,5) ordinarily preferring to rely on networks more 'aligned with their worldview' (Interviewee 3). Ministers vary, too, in their support for 'openness' at different points in electoral cycles, depending on electoral majorities and depending on how central a particular issue is to their own agenda or 'core business' (Newman *et al.*, 2004; 215; see also Richardson, 2018, on ministerial priorities). According to Bailey and Lloyd (2016), UK Civil Service officials demonstrate particular discomfort over ethnographic approaches seeking to disrupt modernist understandings of evidence. Interviewee 1 notes more broadly that changes to *process* have not been prioritised:

'One of the things that was really interesting about the OPM approach that the government went in for was that it was OPM as a mindset for the policy maker ... there is all this work on citizens' juries, deliberation, participation ... but if you looked at those initial Cabinet Office charts, it was, you know 'what is the open policy maker like? You know, that they're aware of digital techniques, open to a range of views including expertise, so it was those sorts of attributes ... rather than a different process'.

In a time where governments have aspired to create 'post-bureaucracy' and where cuts have created major restrictions on civil service capacity, 'super cheap and easy' methods are described as being 'not ideal' but necessary (OPM blog, 14th July 2017). Public consultations, where these generate extensive responses, have been described as being overwhelming (Interviewee 4). Policy Lab is a unit run without dedicated resourcing, operating on a cost-recovery basis (Civil Service, 2013a) where it must sell services to Departments across government. In a context where Departmental staff are themselves stretched, Policy Lab has tended towards delivering projects directly on Departments' behalf, and with

only nine staff, leaving limited opportunities for broader capacity building (Interviewee 5).

9. Discussion

Following bold statements that OPM will e.g. ‘throw open the business of government’ (Civil Service, 2012), then, what do we learn regarding how ‘openness’ under a banner of OPM has come to be understood in the UK Civil Service? How does such a picture look, moreover, in a context of long-standing literatures not only on the growth of elite policy networks outside the state but also citizen involvement?

One first point is that ‘openness’ has certainly been conceptualised as including new private sector experts. While the progression of governance beyond the state in neoliberal times is something about which scholars have been writing for decades, notions such as ‘stewardship’, growing importance attached to commissioning in policy formulation and to securing private sector recruits in the UK Civil Service does also suggest some *ratcheting* commitment (though we should also note resistance against this) to facilitating ever-greater policy making access for commercial actors. Regarding what counts as important expertise, actors with private sector knowhow are described in OPM literature as possessing particularly valuable knowledge for improving public policy.

Cuts to civil service headcount are described as rendering increased outsourcing ‘necessary’ and here Diamond (2020) notably argues that reducing permanent bureaucracy does create ‘window[s] of opportunity for external policy actors to acquire influence’ (p.44). At the same time, cuts and outsourcing also likely reflect at least some *desire* on governments’ part to shrink state structures, ‘attacking’ the traditional civil service (ibid). Austerity has often been considered in social policy as being partly a matter of ideological choice (Blythe, 2013) and ‘social innovation’ (as we may consider OPM) has also regularly been harnessed as a discursive device legitimising retrenchment (Grisolia and Ferragina, 2015). Emphasising of private sector ‘genius’ and ‘leanness’ as described in this paper would seem to suggest that more is going on in OPM discourses than governments simply ‘no longer being able to afford’ more state-centric policy making. Here we see commercial elites as intended beneficiaries of what Swyngedouw (2005) calls ‘new technologies of government’. These encompass polycentric policy making, diffuse power, new and complex networks spanning state and non-state, greater ad hocery and fewer codified rules for participation, though also by no means necessarily a greater inclusion for marginalised groups.

On the latter point, understandings of openness to ordinary citizens seem simultaneously contradictory within UK OPM discourses. Testing e.g. policy

'prototypes' (and here we may note again an emphasis on commercial sector expertise – this time the realm of corporate product testing) is a carefully controlled exercise. Public input is restricted, happening largely inside 'invited spaces' (Cornwall, 2008). Strong constraints on participation call to mind depictions by Newman *et al.* (2004) of past government initiatives where members of the public have been characterised as 'child[ren] clamouring for goodies' while governments 'educate them into the realities of limited resources and the difficulty of changing existing programmes' (p.211). Strains can be noted of discouraging 'irrational' input (Hendricks and Lees-Marshment, 2019), leading one to question how far governments truly seek 'wider range[s] of views and expertise' (Civil Service, 2012: 14).

Even more ethnographic research seeking to boost empathy and complicate the 'shared typical' (McIntosh and Wright, 2019), gathering deeper information on lived experiences, cannot be considered synonymous with collective decision making in policy nor what critical design scholars term participatory design (Kimbell, 2019). Kimbell and Bailey (2017) highlight a contradiction within OPM which is that policy makers, even when proclaiming 'openness', may wish to 'limit engagement with publics to avoid unwanted attention, contestation or politicisation'. Descriptions of openness being 'risky' may indicate elite 'self-protective political reflexes' (Hoppe, 2018) driving ambivalence over citizen expertise. Openness towards wider publics seems understood, as in many past citizen participation initiatives, above all as *information gathering* happening *prior* to moments where decisions are actually made (Hendricks and Lees-Marshment, 2019; Milewa *et al.*, 1999; Rowe and Shepherd, 2002; Parkinson, 2004). Such a 'knowledge transfer' approach (Dean, 2019) may well be justified on grounds that more extensive citizen participation certainly has its limitations (*ibid*). It is nevertheless a constrained understanding of 'openness'.

Returning to the role austerity plays in shaping and legitimising particular understandings of OPM, regarding ordinary citizens, 'tough times' are described as rendering *necessary* many informal, cheap methods for gathering public input and also a focus on speed. At the same time, Hendricks and Lees-Marshment (2019) do highlight that informality is often what elites *prefer* when interacting with 'real people'. Moreover, such interaction is limited in its capacity to generate 'broad public legitimacy' (p.610) given its typically more exclusive, non-codified nature.

10. Conclusion

UK government literature on OPM has highlighted its radical, transformatory potential, emphasising new opportunities for participation in policy formulation not only on the part of elite network insiders but also ordinary citizens. In light of longstanding power inequalities known to be endemic in government policy

processes, however, and also in a time of austerity, this paper has explored contemporary understandings and aspirations ‘making up’ UK Government OPM.

Rutter (2012) warns that governments must be sincere in their efforts to open up policy making, not merely engaging in ‘cynical window dressing’ (p.23). Regarding promoting greater policy making involvement for *new sorts of expert*, aspirations towards significant new ‘externalising’ through commissioning can be noted as part of UK OPM. A ratcheting focus can also be noted on importing ‘necessary expertise’ from the private sector at the same time as officials are being impelled to spend time networking outside the state through practices such as commercial sector secondments. Cuts to civil service capacity are described as rendering change necessary, though such cuts are also likely themselves to indicate some government preference for promoting a particular form of ‘openness’ focusing on elites.

Inclusion in policy formulation for ordinary citizens appears a focus at times, though where this happens, aspirations seem confused and contradictory. Methods described for encouraging citizen participation are quite highly constrained, involving little by way of collective decision making. Potentially democratising approaches informed by participatory design and complicating modernist ideas about ‘evidence’ sit uncomfortably alongside requirements to avoid ‘risk’ in policy making and to ensure policy development happens quickly and cheaply.

UK OPM might well be considered, then, more a matter of opening up further to ‘usual suspects’ than it is ‘establishing a new relationship with the citizen’ (House of Commons, 2013: 3). Future research in this field could however go beyond this initial analysis of OPM discourses and aspirations, shedding more detailed light on day-to-day OPM practices and their nuances both inside specific UK Civil Service departments and beyond.

Notes

- 1 ‘Ordinary’ here refers here to people who would otherwise have limited policy making input (beyond e.g. voting in elections). ‘Citizen’ refers in part to those possessing formal citizenship status but also those who may not possess such bestowed rights but may still engage in citizenship *practices* (Lister, 2003) such as activism and exercising voice in public services (Strokosch and Osborne, 2016).
- 2 This work focuses on the UK-wide civil service. Examinations of devolved administrations and local government are beyond the article’s scope.
- 3 See e.g. 2012 creation of the UK Associate Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group
- 4 Cabinet Office OPM blog (hereafter ‘OPM blog’), 8th October 2014
- 5 <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2015/12/22/open-policy-what-next/>
- 6 See Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007.
- 7 <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/civil-service-staff-numbers>.
- 8 See the Cabinet Office Efficiency and Reform Group, set up to help reduce spending by £80 billion.

- 9 Since 2014 Policy Lab has ‘worked across 15 major government departments on over 40 policy projects, working with over 6000 public servants’ (OPM blog, 23rd March 2018)
- 10 Notably the Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights team is now an independent ‘social purpose company’.
- 11 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-commissioning-academy-information>.
- 12 The CPF matched Civil Service departmental spending up to £500,000 where departments applied having commissioned policy reviews. Eighteen projects received funding between 2012 and 2015 (Diamond, 2020).
- 13 Interviewees 1 and 3. See also Rhodes (2011) on the enduring importance of these teams (p.235).
- 14 The Department for Education (DfE) shrunk/ abolished a number of these teams after having its administration budget cut by 50 per cent (DfE, 2012; Kidson, 2013).
- 15 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>.
- 16 <https://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2017/09/i-stress-that-i-became-disillusioned-with-the-service-not-with-civil-servants-maudes-speakers-lecture-full-text.html>.
- 17 See ODPM’s Northern Futures project, NHS Citizen and NHS use of Crowdcity, MOJ use of Wazoku, the Treasury’s use of Citizen Space.
- 18 Nesta, IDEO, the Design Council and EPIC have published resources on ethnography for civil servants.
- 19 Note a distinction between ‘service user’ and ‘citizen’. Clarke *et al.* (2007) highlight that the former has historically been associated less with ideas of rights and entitlements, more with market consumerism.
- 20 See Barnett and Mahony (2016) on ‘segmentation’ methods in government.
- 21 Interviewees 2 and 5.

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Appendix 1 – interviewees

Interviewee 1: A former senior civil servant who worked across multiple Whitehall departments, now writing about policy outside of government.

Interviewee 2: A former Cabinet Office official who worked on developing OPM, now writing about policy outside of government.

Interviewee 3: A former civil servant who worked for more than ten years in one Whitehall Department prominent for its innovation on OPM. Now working for a policy think tank.

Interviewee 4: A former Cabinet Office team member who worked on developing OPM, now senior civil service elsewhere in Whitehall.

Interviewee 5: A current Cabinet Office team member working on developing OPM.