Podcast: The Cost of Failure in Governance

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Respondent(s):	Dan Bristow
	Max Caller

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

Croeso, welcome. I'm joined by Dan Bristow from the Wales Centre for Public Policy. This is The Exchange podcast. Thank you for joining us today, Dan.

Dan Bristow:

Thanks very much for inviting me along.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

As I said, you are from the Wales Centre for Public Policy. Can you explain a little bit more about who you are and what you do?

Dan Bristow:

So, the Wales Centre for Public Policy is a research centre based at Cardiff University, and we exist to support decision-makers in the public sector in Wales to access, understand, and use the best available evidence for the issues that they're grappling with. And we've been doing that work now for about ten years.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

Something you talked about at our event on good governance and financial management, is implementation-minded policymaking. What in your mind is meant by implementation-minded policymaking? And why in your view is it often difficult to implement policy at a national or local level?

Dan Bristow:

So, the phrase implementation minded policymaking came out of a piece of work that we did a few years ago now. We partnered with another organization called the Centre for Evidence and Impact. And the work that we did was, well, it started from a place of being interested in why policies often fail. And what can we say

about what makes for effective implementation? and how you do it? And we conducted a review of academic and non-academic literature and came up with a framework, for thinking about policymaking and implementation, which we called implementation-minded policymaking.

The reason that we did that is because we think that the approach to policy development and design, as well as the approach to then seeking to roll out a policy and see its delivery on the ground. The thing that makes it hard to implement policies is that often, especially the more ambitious policies, what they're trying to do is affect change in quite a complex system. So, you've got different actors at different levels with different incentives and beliefs, and values. And, for a national government trying to affect change, you need to somehow mobilize that set of actors. And that's a tricky task to do. And no one person or organization, national governance or local governments included, has all the powers. You know, they're not omnipotent organizations that can just make stuff happen. They rely on others being, willing and able to collaborate with them on that endeavour.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

The issue of implementation is an interesting, one, I think, because you can talk about the importance of a policy needing to be implemented. But, in cases where you have pieces of legislation that are perhaps more intentionally vague and work more to inspire action. For example, the Well-being of Future Generations Act is an example of this. The point of the Well-being of Future Generations Act is that it's open to interpretation to allow people to implement it in a way that they see fit rather than a way that's prescriptive. So, do you think there's a role for ambiguity in policymaking without necessarily a view to a policy being implemented in a set way or framework?

Dan Bristow:

Yes. I think there is. And I think, at the core of the framework we've developed is this idea that what determines the success or otherwise of an effort to design and then implement a policy is the interaction between the policy itself, so the content and logic of the policy, and the existing context that you're trying to influence, so the social, economic, political, institutional context. So, the interaction between those two things is what determines whether or not your policy is going to succeed or fail. And what you're touching on there, when talking about ambiguity is that in some cases, you want to leave ambiguous what it is that the policy, or maybe some of the delivery mechanisms that you're looking to mobilize or deploy in trying to make the policy happen. So, the content of the policy might have ambiguity because you want local actors to be able to make decisions locally that

respond to local community needs or maybe are co-created with communities like well-being future generations act imagines.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

So, moving on, why in your view do policies fail, and how important is it for officials to gain public trust when proposing or implementing policy?

Dan Bristow:

Like I was just saying, I think there are two ways of thinking about policy failure. One is about ambiguity. So maybe some ambiguity about what the policy is trying to achieve or why or how it's going to achieve that, and we were just talking a bit about ambiguity there. The other is misalignment. So, a policy's alignment or misalignment with the implementation context. So how far does the policy interact, kind of act in accordance with and in alignment with the existing policy frameworks? Do the people you want to act in a certain way agree with what you're trying to do? Do they understand what you're trying to do? All of these things. So that's what we mean when we talk about misalignment.

So those policy failures can come from either of those areas. The role of trust in that is really interesting because I think there are a few different things going on there. Sometimes what happens is that there's an optimism bias from policymakers. They really want this thing to happen, and they really want to see the change associated. What can happen in that space is that there might be people and stakeholders saying, well, the risk with what you're trying to do here is we don't have enough money to do what you're trying to do. People are already overwhelmed trying to deliver other things, and you're not talking about what they're not going to do. If you have politicians standing up and saying, 'We're going to change the world in this particular way' but then don't follow through in thinking about the implementation and securing the kind of implementation mechanisms to make it succeed. Over time, you start to see the public increasingly lack trust in politicians, and you see that there's evidence of a breakdown in trust that's been accumulating for a while now. You know, politicians are not very trusted by the public.

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Alex Swift (Interviewer):

Can you introduce yourself and your role, please?

Max Caller:

I'm Max Caller. I'm currently the lead best value intervention commissioner at Birmingham City Council. I have spent the last twenty-five years being involved in inspections and interventions, under the best-value legislation, mostly in England, but a little bit in Wales.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

You mentioned best value as a subject. Could you go into more detail as to how you define best value and how we measure that?

Max Caller:

Well, best value was introduced by the first Blair government as the antidote to compulsory competitive tendering. And it effectively says that local authorities should continuously strive to improve the economy and the effectiveness of their services. That doesn't mean to say that councils can never fail, but that when things go wrong, councils recognize that they failed and improve. So, it's the process of continuous improvement that's crucial in the best value concept. And how councils and local authorities identify when they're failing and know how to improve. So, I think it's really important, first of all, to have honest reporting about your progress against your goals and objectives, to look at best practice from other places, and to continuously compare yourself against your near neighbours to see how they're doing. But it's a drive to never rest on your law laurels, always to think about how things can be improved either in outcome terms or in value for money terms to ensure that the citizen gets the best possible deal.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

You mentioned the value of reporting, there. Is this where audit has an important role to play? Because this is just as much about an issue of public trust as it is, about finance. What impact can the failing, of a council in their financial management and governance have on public trust? And what role do you think auditors have in that space?

Max Caller:

I think auditors have a crucial role in guaranteeing that the reporting that a council puts out to the public is honest, fair, and properly reflects what's been going on. And it's important for councils, both at member and officer level, to want

to be able to do that, and they can be aided by their auditors in challenging poor practice and improving their processes.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

Moving on from that, what examples of good practice, perhaps in contrast to poor practice, can you identify that can help illustrate this issue for the listener?

Max Caller:

So, actually, I think that you learn more from failure than you learn from good practice because good practice works in the space of that particular authority. Good Practice is where you take some basic principles, but you recognize that you change them to suit the population you're serving. And so sometimes people go and visit authorities that are doing good things, and they don't go back to the basic principles and say, 'How did this come about?'. That's the important thing, I think, that you need to learn from that process. So, I see good practice in places where people understand their communities really well. They start off with a fundamental understanding of what they're trying to serve, and then they look at the outcomes and how that meets the needs of their community. That's where you start.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

And in response to bad practice, where we identify examples of poor financial management and poor governance, what's the process by which a council can identify that and move back to a space where they win back that public trust and win back a sense of certainty and stability in their financial management?

Max Caller:

So, the most important thing, I think, is to establish success criteria right up front as part of the design of whatever you're trying to change or do and commit to a proper post-implementation review and learn lessons from that. It's very rare that you get things in exactly the way you thought they were going to work out. But it's how you learn the lessons is how you avoid bad practice. And it's the ability to be absolutely honest with yourself and with your public about what's really happened.

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Alex Swift (Interviewer):

So, we touched on the positive role of ambiguity in policymaking. However, in your reports, you also point to the role of ambiguity or misalignment with policy context in causing policies to fail. Can you explain a bit more about that, please?

Dan Bristow:

Well, so for example, we talk about different dimensions of ambiguity. Ambiguity about the problem or the need that a policy is trying to address, ambiguity about the aims or change intended, or ambiguity about the strategies or responsibilities. So, we talk about the why, the what, and the how. One example from our own work, you know, we did some work with the Welsh government looking at youth homelessness and youth homelessness prevention. And off the back of that, or partly informed by our work, the Welsh government invested in youth workers and gave a grant to youth workers to support youth work that was designed to tackle homelessness or act as a preventative measure to tackle homelessness. But one of the things that came through from that was that some people weren't clear why youth workers had been given this funding, and in some cases, actually turned to homelessness colleagues and said, 'Perhaps you want to have this money because you work on homelessness and I work on youth work'.

And then in terms of misalignment, an example of misalignment actually under the former UK government was where the UK government chose to invest in economic development, being led by local authorities and deliberately chose not to involve the Welsh government in in that process. And what that led to the Welsh government pursuing economic development policies alongside, but not in concert with the UK government's efforts to support local government to do the same. And that that misalignment created challenges and problems and risks of duplication and confusion. So, misalignment can turn up either unintentionally or intentionally as well, and that's a political decision there that the UK government took at the time, which, led to misalignment.

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

Can you go into more detail about the support approaches that we can use to implement policies effectively?

Dan Bristow:

One of the first things that we think it's important to do in trying to think through defective implementation is to do some work that helps you to understand the degree of ambiguity and misalignment that you have in your given circumstance. And there are two approaches or elements that we've identified that you can use to do this. So, one is problem and context analysis, and then the other one is

stakeholder engagement. So, alongside problem and context analysis, stakeholder engagement is a really effective way of trying to get a picture of the potential for ambiguity misalignment. Do people understand the policy?

Do they understand what their role might be in relation to the policy? Do they see any challenges thrown up by the offered solution in the way in which that offered solution might interact with existing services or existing policies? So, some of that intelligence that you can only really get from talking to people within the system is vital to building your picture of ambiguity and misalignment, and stakeholder engagement is a key way of doing that. But I think stakeholder engagement often gets misunderstood or misused. So, you know, one of the things that you hear sometimes in talking to decision makers is that while we put out this idea when we consulted on it, we're not really sure how to use it.

I think that this framework can help you to think about precisely what it is that you're trying to ask of people and who do you need to talk to, and why are you talking to them? What do you wanna get from those conversations? Be more focused in your efforts to engage with stakeholders. How open or closed are you actually in terms of - do you want them to offer any and all solutions, or are you really interested in, you know, whether they think the idea that you've come up with is a good one? And being honest with people, and that comes back to the point about trust.

So those two elements, problem context analysis and stakeholder engagement are really key to help you build this picture of alignment. And then finally, and in some ways, most importantly, how do you know that you're having the impact that you want to have? How do you know that the policy you're introducing is achieving the outcomes you're looking to achieve. So, what's your monitoring and evaluation framework? What's your approach to learning and so on?

And you can start to see how the more ambiguous a policy is, the more misalignment there is. You need to deploy these different elements in different ways, then your monitoring and evaluation framework can very clearly just check if someone's doing those things. Are you seeing the behaviours turn up in the way you want to? If you're trying to do something new that requires people to behave in a completely different way, then maybe what you want to be doing is putting in mechanisms that support learning and reflection and reflective practice and feedback loops, so that you understand the ways in which it's failing, because it will be failing. You're trying to do something complex and messy. So how is that failure showing up, and what are you doing about that?

Alex Swift (Interviewer):

To end on a deliberately open-ended question, what is one thing you would like to see change in government structures or practices in Wales?

Dan Bristow:

Yeah. That's a biggie. I've got a shopping list.

I guess I'll choose two things. I think that, and I would say this, wouldn't I? Because we spent a lot of time developing this framework. But I'd be keen for people to start to use either the framework we've developed or other frameworks, because there are others out there, to have more sophisticated conversations about implementation at an early point in the policy development process. I think that over the decade or more that I've been working in Wales, a common trap that people fall into and to be fair, this is not unique to Wales.

A common trap that people fall into is to not think through in a bit of detail who is going to do what and how are you going to make sure that they have the time, the headspace, the skill set, the resources that they need to be able to achieve the thing that you're hoping to achieve? Too often, policies fall down, because that work hasn't been done. So, an effort to bring implementation thinking into the policy process at a very early stage would be my first one. And the second one is an age-old one for those who've been paying attention to Welsh policy and practice for a while, but the regional landscape is so cluttered. And I think that nobody seems to want to grasp the nettle of trying to rationalize that.

If I could wave a magic wand and address one thing in Wales when it comes to the governance or the governance structures and practices in Wales, it would be that we solve that. Have a rationalization of the regional structures.