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The policy work of piloting: Mobilising and managing conflict and ambiguity in the English NHS

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ABSTRACT

In spite of their widespread use in policy making in the UK and elsewhere, there is a relatively sparse literature specifically devoted to policy pilots. Recent research on policy piloting has focused on the role of pilots in making policy work in accordance with national agendas. Taking this as a point of departure, the present paper develops the notion of pilots doing policy work. It does this by situating piloting within established theories of policy formulation and implementation, and illustrating using an empirical case. Our case is drawn from a qualitative policy ethnography of a local government pilot programme aiming to extend access to healthcare services. Our case explores the collective entrepreneurship of regional policy makers together with local pilot volunteers. We argue that pilots work to mobilise and manage the ambiguity and conflict associated with particular policy goals, and in their structure and design, shape action towards particular outcomes. We conclude with a discussion of the generative but managed role which piloting affords to local implementers.

1. Pilots and policy making

The use of public policy pilots has a history going back as far as the 1960s in the UK (Burch and Wood, 1983) and US (Campbell, 1969). Since this time they have become a common feature of the policy making process at national and local level in the UK. The local pilot scheme which provides the empirical material for this paper is a typical example of a public policy pilot; targeted funding for a fixed period to support new ways to extend access to healthcare services across several localities in England. At the time of writing there are two substantial national pilot schemes in progress in England addressing similar access issues. Between them these programmes have received in excess of £300 million, and there are innumerable further examples across healthcare and other public service divisions of government both locally and nationally.

Local pilot schemes bring policy makers and evaluators into close contact, surfacing tensions between the different and sometimes competing need for *knowledge* versus the need for *evidence* (Mackenzie et al., 2006; Martin and Sanderson, 1999; Sanderson, 2002). Key to the political narrative of piloting is the principle of experimentation, as stated in an official report on piloting produced in 2003; 'the term "pilot" should ideally be reserved for rigorous early evaluations of a policy … before that policy has been rolled out nationally and while it is still open to adjustment' (Jowell, 2003, p. 11). This highlights the importance of 'social equipoise' (Petticrew et al., 2013) within policy pilots, the principle of uncertainty and objectivity necessary for true experimentation. This view of piloting resembles a form of trial, in which the objective would be to 'discover' new objects of innovation, which could then be diffused or disseminated elsewhere (Berwick, 2003; Greenhalgh et al., 2004). Researchers have challenged this perspective according to the *exceptional* conditions of pilots (c.f. Agamben, 2005), which shifts the narrative of experimentation towards one of exemplification (Mackenzie et al., 2006; Martin and Sanderson, 1999; Sanderson, 2002).

Ettelt et al. (2014) extend this analysis in their identification of four purposes of piloting: *experimentation*, *implementation*, *demonstration*, and *learning*, noting the tendency for these purposes to shift over time and for policy makers to assume that they can be pursued in combination. They conclude that piloting should be

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seen as a policy making 'tool … mostly about making policy "work" in accordance with the wishes of their political masters' (p. 332). In a similar vein Nair and Howlett (2015) focus on the relations of power with which pilots are implicated, arguing that in providing 'meaning' to policy making, pilots are involved in 'framing or projecting the future' (p. 1). Given this role, the rhetorical use of experimentation becomes a means to present a possible future in order to manage the conflict associated with 'politically unpalatable policy reforms' (p. 4).

Seeking to develop this more critical line of enquiry, we begin with the general standpoint that the choice of piloting on the part of policy makers indicates a degree of ambiguity and conflict around the conception and implementation of a particular policy. A pilot, and the injection of resources that accompany it, is therefore required to *experiment*, *demonstrate*, *implement* or *educate* (Ettelt et al., 2014). Situating our argument within broader theories of policy formulation and implementation, we argue that piloting represents a form of what Harrison and Wood (1999) term 'manipulated emergence' in policy. This denotes a shift in policy conception from detailed 'blueprints' handed down for implementation to broad 'bright ideas', which require translation and adaptation, and envisages an active but managed role for local implementers in making policy work 'on the ground'. Following Kingdon (1984) we conceive of this work as a local and collective form of *policy entrepreneurship*. We use our empirical case to show how this entrepreneurial action combines with the design and structure of policy pilots in order to shape particular outcomes. We argue that this affords a constructive and generative role to those 'implementing' policy, and discuss the implications of this for policy and research.

Our analysis is situated in English health policy post-2010, in which, building upon a governmental agenda of localism (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012), devolution and 'super-austerity' (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016), local policy piloting has perhaps gone further than in other countries. However, understanding the contextual conditions that facilitate this approach to policy implementation, as well as the problems that may arise, is important for those in other systems facing the same demographic and financial pressures facing the English National Health Service (NHS). In addition, our use of established theoretical frameworks to situate our case increases the generalisability of our findings beyond our local context, allowing us to describe a set of mechanisms which we would expect to be common features of the piloting process.

This paper draws on the recent experience of evaluating a pilot programme established in 2013, which aimed to extend access to healthcare services. Our broad interest is in how local implementation feeds back into policy formulation, and with what consequences. We argue that the policy work of piloting takes us beyond what might be commonly understood to be the discretionary role of implementation at 'street-level' (Lipsky, 1980), to a more creative and generative role for those 'implementing' policy. We begin by situating this generative role within broader theories of policy making.

2. Policy formulation and implementation

In contrast to rational-objective accounts of policy making, Kingdon's (1984) multiple streams approach proposes an understanding of policy making as made up of ambiguous and conflicted sets of processes. He argues that policy agendas are shaped by activities related to three distinct 'streams': the 'problem', 'policy' and 'politics' streams. The problem stream is concerned with how particular phenomena become conceptualised as problems requiring policy attention, the policy stream is concerned with the development of policy initiatives and the politics stream is concerned with the balancing of different interests, such as party political interests and lobby groups. Kingdon argues that confluence between these three streams results in the policy 'window' being opened and change becoming possible, and emphasises the role of 'policy entrepreneurs' (PEs) in helping to create such windows. Hence the policy that 'gets made' is only one set of arrangements among many possibilities, and opportunism in the coupling of the three streams plays a substantial part in selecting out of what he calls the 'soup' of ideas and agendas.

It follows from this that entrepreneurialism in policy arenas is an inherently collective activity; made possible by the confluence of multiple layers of concerns, crossing different communities, and possibly stretching over considerable periods of time. This point is picked up in much of the wider literature on policy entrepreneurs that has followed Kingdon's (1984) concept, which notes the important role of PEs in building and maintaining networks and coalitions of interest (Mintrom, 1997; Mintrom and Vergari, 1996; Roberts and King, 1991). However, there is a strong emphasis on the individual attributes of PEs, as Kingdon (1984) states: 'their defining characteristic … is their willingness to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money – in the hope of a future return' (p. 122). This produces a heroic account of policy entrepreneurialism, which some argue does not grasp the 'embedded' nature of institutional agency (Garud et al., 2007). The PE literature is therefore marked by a relative lack of emphasis upon the institutional structures and relations that make entrepreneurship possible (Catney and Henneberry, 2015). This is perhaps in part due to Kingdon's focus on policy making at the US federal level, and the consequent focus in much of the PE literature on political elites (Arnold, 2013). In order to make sense of more local entrepreneurial action, it is therefore first of all necessary to bring Kingdon's (1984) framework down to the regional and local level of governance.

Exworthy and Powell (2004) extend Kingdon's (1984) framework to expand on the role of local advocates in pushing ideas onto the policy agenda via 'local windows'. They adopt Kingdon's (1984) policy stream, and add two further streams relevant to local implementation:

1. Process stream, concerned with causal technical and political feasibility
2. Resource stream, concerned with financial resources but also with human resources, power and ownership (Exworthy and Powell, 2004, pp. 265–266)

Exworthy and Powell (2004) suggest therefore that local PEs can mobilise networks to shape local agendas, potentially opening 'little windows' which can achieve a broader influence, 'galvanizing action' (p. 277) in the context of the multiple and conflicting coexistence of ideas and agendas in the national policy 'soup'.

Expanding on the role of local PEs, more recent research has proposed the concept of the 'street-level policy entrepreneur' (SLPE) (Arnold, 2013; Oborn et al., 2011; Petchey et al., 2007). While the 'street-level bureaucrat', in Lipsky's (1980) formulation, creates a limited discretionary space for frontline workers to move within policy frames imposed upon them, the SLPE plays a more active and creative role in changing those policy frames, not only in opening local windows, but in yoking 'together a network to make policy agendas happen' (Oborn et al., 2011, p. 325).

This challenges the implicit dualism between policy makers and recipients commonly assumed in the implementation literature (McDermott et al., 2013). Matland's (1995) theory of implementation, for example, attempts to synthesize 'top down' and 'bottom up' perspectives on policy implementation, arguing that degrees of conflict and ambiguity attending particular policy agendas define