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Straddling multiple streams: focusing events, policy entrepreneurs and problem brokers in the governance of English fire and rescue services

Peter Eckersley ^{a,b} and Katarzyna Lakoma ^b

^aLeibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space, Erkner, Germany; ^bNottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

ABSTRACT

Empirical studies that use the multiple streams approach often examine cases of *reactive* policymaking in response to “focusing events”, rather than *proactive* policymakers who seek to broker or construct problems that their preferred solution might address. Drawing on publicly-available debates about reforms to fire and rescue services in seven areas of England, we show how individuals within small policy subsystems may construct problems to try and convince others to support their preferred policy solution. By straddling all three streams and acting as endogenous policy entrepreneurs, policymakers and problem brokers simultaneously, we highlight how these actors can exert substantial influence over policymaking processes – although consensus within the political stream about the existence of a genuine problem is still a key factor in facilitating change. These insights allow us to introduce a more obvious power dimension and greater predictive capacity into the multiple streams approach.

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Introduction

The multiple streams approach (MSA, Kingdon 1984) has proven popular with scholars seeking to understand and account for policy change, particularly under conditions of ambiguity that open up the political process to manipulation (Ackrill, Kay, and Zahariadis 2013). By separating out the concepts of policy problem, political environment and policy solution, and emphasizing how policy entrepreneurs “couple” these streams when the time appears ripe for change, academics have used it to help explain hundreds of examples of policy change in different governance contexts (Jones et al. 2016). Since Kingdon’s book was published, subsequent adaptations have refined his theory (Zahariadis 2014; Cairney 2018), but its fundamental principles remain unchanged. Indeed, some have pointed out that the MSA’s powerful explanatory potential may have resulted in scholars focusing too much on applying it to empirical cases rather than developing

CONTACT Peter Eckersley  peter.eckersley@ntu.ac.uk  Department of Accounting and Finance, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

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the framework further (Zohlnhöfer, Herweg, and Rüb 2015; Cairney and Jones 2016; Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohlnhöfer 2018; Reardon 2018; Van der Heijden et al. 2019).

Ackrill and Kay (2011) introduced a notable insight when they stressed that although the three streams may be analytically separate, this does not mean that actors are only ever involved in one of them. Indeed, since policy entrepreneurs are more likely to be successful if they have greater access to policymakers (Zahariadis 2014), we might expect them to try to get involved in as many streams as possible. This could include building coalitions and shaping debates to help align the *political* stream, framing *problems* in a favourable manner, and proposing possible *policy* solutions. By *straddling* different streams in this way, they could find it comparatively straightforward to *couple* them and effect change. This may be particularly the case if policy entrepreneurs occupy key political positions and are therefore endogenous to the policymaking process. Such a situation is perhaps more likely to occur in smaller policy subsystems, where power is concentrated in the hands of a limited number of actors, who therefore find it easier to dominate the agenda, steer the debate in their favoured direction and introduce their favoured policy solutions (Cairney 2018; Petridou 2018).

Change may also be more likely in cases where policy “windows” are open in *both* the problem and political streams (because this suggests there is agreement over the existence of a problem and also the political will to try and address it in some way). To bring this situation about, policy entrepreneurs might try to construct or exaggerate an issue or “condition” to convince others that it represents a genuine *problem* that they need to address (Knaggård 2015; Cairney 2018; Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohlnhöfer 2018; Reardon 2018). This could make it easier to couple the streams, open two windows simultaneously and increase their chances of effecting change. Again, such a strategy might be particularly successful in smaller policy subsystems that contain fewer veto players.

With these issues in mind, we asked ourselves the question: (how) do endogenous policy entrepreneurs seek to involve themselves in other streams to further their agendas? In particular, how might their strategies be shaped by the presence or absence of a “focusing event” that highlights the existence of a problem? We addressed this puzzle by examining the actions of seven Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in England, who sought to assume responsibility for the governance of fire and rescue services from 2017 onwards. Each PCC had an off-the-shelf policy solution (the creation of a Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner and the transfer of governance responsibilities for fire and rescue services) at their disposal. A policy window was also open in the political stream in all seven areas, because powerful actors supported reform (including both the PCCs in question and the Home Secretary who was responsible for approving the change). However, windows were not open in the problem stream in every case: clear focusing events that revealed genuine public policy concerns only occurred in two of the seven areas, Essex and Northamptonshire. In the remaining five cases, the lack of a focusing event led to disagreement about the existence of a genuine problem that needed to be addressed. Not only did this slow down the reform process, but it also shaped the strategies that the PCCs adopted to promote their preferred solutions. Our comparison of these cases therefore highlights how certain conditions within the policymaking environment might shape the actions of entrepreneurs and – ultimately – the nature of policy change itself.

The next section discusses the literature on multiple streams, highlighting how the approach has largely been used to explain policy change, rather than predict how

certain conditions might shape future developments. We then set out the context for our study and the methods we adopted, and draw on the theoretical perspectives to discuss our empirical findings. Finally, our arguments and their theoretical implications are summed up in the discussion and conclusion.

The multiple streams approach

The notion that policy change often happens when three “streams” are coupled and create a “window of opportunity” has gained widespread attention since the publication of Kingdon’s (1984) *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*. Building on Cohen, March, and Olsen’s (1972) insight that organizational actors usually make decisions in a non-rational, haphazard way and according to the confluence of different “streams” within a “garbage can”, Kingdon identified the existence of a *problem* that needs to be addressed, a *policy* that key actors claim will help to address the problem, and a favourable *politics* that facilitate the adoption of their preferred approach. Studies across the globe have applied the approach to a range of different policy sectors (Cairney and Jones 2016; Jones et al. 2016).

In recent years, one of Kingdon’s initial insights, namely that “policy entrepreneurs” nurture policy solutions in advance and then try to sell them to decision makers once related problems emerge and/or the political stream appears favourable, has attracted particular interest (Mintrom 1997, 2013; Petridou 2018; Staff 2018). As Cairney (2018, 205) puts it, the MSA’s key insight is that “entrepreneurs respond to the counterintuitive nature of the agenda setting process: politics is about well-established solutions chasing problems, not producing solutions when policymakers identify problems”. However, this means that there is currently less scope within the theory to account for *proactive* changes that politicians may introduce for ideological or other reasons, or make *ex ante* predictions about how things might develop when they try to do so (Knaggård 2015; Reardon 2018; Petridou and Mintrom 2020).

Although some have argued that policy entrepreneurs normally sit outside government (Roberts and King 1991), studies have found them almost “anywhere ... including within governmental bureaucracies, political parties, NGOs, or expert communities” (Meijerink and Huitema 2010, 21; see also Kingdon 1984, 122). Indeed, if we assume they operate strategically in order to try and win support for their preferred policy solutions (Cairney 2018; Arnold 2020; Frisch-Aviram, Beerli, and Cohen 2020; Petridou and Mintrom 2020), they may attempt to take up “positions that provide the greatest opportunities to make the most of their talents” (Mintrom 1997, 740). As this suggests, the location of policy entrepreneurs within the policymaking process can play an important role in determining whether their preferred solution is adopted. Therefore, endogenous entrepreneurs may be well-placed to effect change, perhaps particularly if they occupy executive political positions (see Feiock and West (1993) for an empirical example) or can operate in more than one of Kingdon’s three streams. This might include drawing attention to a particular condition, convincing other political actors that it represents a genuine problem, and refining a policy solution so that it appears to address the problem.

Kingdon argued that participants in the policymaking process tend to specialize in particular streams: societal groups are often deeply involved in raising awareness of problems, whereas elite actors tend to dominate when developing policy solutions. Notably,

however, his approach was first developed to help understand policymaking at the US federal level, and subsequent studies also focused initially on large policy subsystems that contain multiple actors. It is only more recently that scholars have begun to apply the theory to subnational and smaller cases with fewer veto players (Robinson and Eller 2010; Rossiter and Price 2013), where policy entrepreneurs might find it easier to promote their ideas and effect change. A smaller number of actors could make it easier to identify and highlight the role of power relations within policymaking – and, by drawing on such examples inductively to build on the theory, might help to introduce a more predictive element into the framework.

Indeed, where the MSA has been applied at the subnational level, studies have found that the same actors sometimes operate in different streams. For example, Robinson and Eller (2010) found that actors who participate in one stream are much more likely to be active in others, and Mucciaroni (2013) and Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohlnhöfer (2018) suggest that participation in different streams may depend on the nature of the problem that the policy solution seeks to address (see also Rozbicka and Spohr 2016; Reardon 2018). Given that recent scholarship has emphasized that policy entrepreneurs sometimes construct problems that their preferred solutions might help to address (Knaggård 2015; Cairney 2018; Petridou and Mintrom 2020) – and that these entrepreneurs may also be elected officials who operate in political contexts – we can see how their participation is not confined to the policy stream. To overcome this issue, Ackrill and Kay (2011) stress that the MSA is still a valid approach if we treat problems, policies and politics as analytically distinct from each other, even though some individuals may be involved in more than one stream.

Nevertheless, and in line with Cairney's quote above, there is a common assumption that policymakers are largely *reactive*, and that they engage with policy entrepreneurs only after problems attract attention (e.g. after a high-profile “focusing event” or “crisis” raises public awareness of a particular issue). Despite Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972, 3) recognition that “you often do not know the what the question is in organizational problem-solving until you know the answer”, this perspective suggests policy entrepreneurs are still largely at the mercy of events and normally have to wait for a window to open in the problem stream before pouncing with their idea. To use Kingdon's (1984) terminology, studies tend to examine cases in which “policy windows” have opened in the *problem* stream and governments respond accordingly. Critics have pointed out that this reliance on focusing events means the MSA is inherently random and unpredictable, and does not lend itself particularly well to the development of testable propositions, causal mechanisms or hypotheses about when policies might emerge (Zahariadis 2007; Robinson and Eller 2010; Ackrill, Kay, and Zahariadis 2013; Mucciaroni 2013; Van der Heijden et al. 2019).

In order to fill this gap, some have sought to integrate it with other theoretical perspectives (Lorenzoni and Benson 2014; Howlett, McConnell, and Perl 2016; Cairney 2018). An alternative approach could involve investigating possible openings in the *political* stream – where politicians take office with a particular agenda but there is little agreement about the existence of a problem that needs to be “solved”. In such situations, we can see how “problem brokers” – “actors [who] frame conditions as public problems and work to make policymakers accept these frames” (Knaggård 2015, 451) can influence decision making through a different type of entrepreneurship (Bakir and Jarvis 2017).

This is particularly the case if policymakers themselves conduct this “problematization” process and are also acting as an endogenous policy entrepreneur. Although this might conflict with some traditional MSA interpretations of the policymaking process (see, e.g. Henstra 2010, 242), we can nonetheless imagine the circumstances in which it might arise. For example, a policymaker might wish to introduce an initiative because they view it as a strategically-important staging post to further their ideological agenda (Zahariadis 2003) or individual career, regardless of its immediate necessity. Constructing and framing a problem in a way that their preferred solution might help to address, for example by using affect priming strategies or symbols, could win support for their policy within the political stream and therefore make it easier to effect change.

The MSA literature characterizes policy entrepreneurs as canny individuals who understand how policymaking processes operate, and therefore we might expect them to adopt a strategy of trying to involve themselves in as many streams as possible in order to increase their chances of success. For example, assuming that they are already involved in the *policy* stream by virtue of helping to design or promote their pet solutions, they could engage with the *problem* stream by framing or constructing a condition in a way that their favoured solution could help to address. For the *political* stream it could mean gaining improved access to policymakers Zahariadis (2014, 35) – perhaps even by becoming one. In this way, we can see how *executive politicians* that act as policy entrepreneurs could be particularly well-placed to straddle all three streams, couple them and effect change.

We were keen to investigate such cases and compare how endogenous policy entrepreneurs might seek to introduce their pet solutions in small policy subsystems where important conditions vary. In particular, could they seek to straddle the streams in order to make it easier to couple them, perhaps by setting out their own interpretation of a specific issue in a way that could open a window in the problem stream and gain support for their pet solution (Knaggård 2015; Reardon 2018)? How might the presence or absence of a focusing event (and, relatedly, the range of views within the political stream as to whether a condition represented a genuine problem that needed to be addressed) affect their stream-straddling strategies and ultimate success in effecting change? Such considerations may become increasingly prevalent in the era of “fake news” and politicized or value-led “evidence”, as powerful individuals try to present deliberately misleading information as “proof” of problems and thereby increase their chances of winning support for particular policy solutions (Mintrom 2013; Perl, Howlett, and Ramesh 2018).

Context and methods

The UK’s Policing and Crime Act 2017 placed a statutory duty on the police, fire and rescue, and ambulance services in England to collaborate at the local level and sets out four different options to try and achieve this (Murphy and Greenhalgh 2017). In ascending order of the scale of change that the various options would involve, they were:

1. increased collaboration without institutional reform;

2. the “representation” model, which involved inviting the directly-elected Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) to sit and vote as a member of the fire and rescue authority (FRA) alongside appointed local councillors;
3. the “governance” model, through which the PCC assumes responsibility for the governance of their local FRA and becomes a Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) but the fire and rescue service and police force remain separate organizations; and
4. the “single employer” arrangement, which would involve the creation of a merged organization with a single budget under the remit of the PFCC.

PCCs are only permitted to introduce any of these changes where “a local case has been made” (i.e. a business case has been submitted and approved by the Home Secretary). To gain approval, the case needs to demonstrate potential improvements in economy, efficiency and effectiveness, or in public safety. By early 2020, the Home Secretary had approved six business cases to transfer to the governance model (at that point it was the only option favoured by any PCCs who wished to change current arrangements), although in two areas the initial approvals were delayed after opponents sought judicial reviews (see [Figure 1](#) for a timeline of events). These six areas were Essex, Northamptonshire, West Mercia, North Yorkshire, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, and Staffordshire. PCCs in several other areas investigated the possibility of governance transfer but had not proceeded with the idea. From these other areas, the most advanced case was in Hertfordshire, where a business case was submitted and approved, but the PCC ultimately abandoned his plans. The Home Secretary did not reject any of the proposals for change.

Given that PCCs are directly-elected, we can see how those who favoured reform would be keen to use public channels to try and persuade local people and statutory consultees of the need for change. Therefore, we consulted publicly-available documentation relating to each of the seven cases to inform our empirical findings. These sources included: each PCC’s business case in support of governance transfer; the results of public consultations conducted by market research companies on behalf of the PCCs; official responses to the proposals from local authorities, Members of Parliament, and representative bodies of the public servants affected; comments from members of the public; the minutes of local Council and FRA meetings that discussed the issue; and

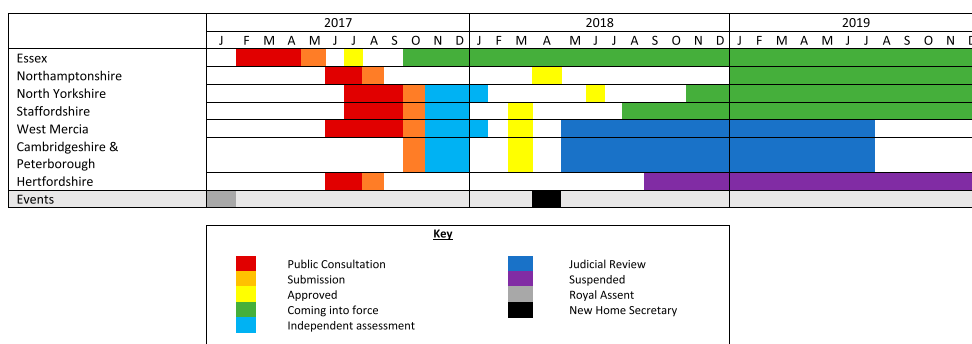


Figure 1. Timeline of events.

local media reports. We examined this documentation to identify how the PCCs argued in favour of governance transfer, and then conducted an *ex post* inductive coding exercise to examine the seven different cases in the context of the MSA's various components.

Our analysis revealed interesting contrasts between the cases of Essex and Northamptonshire on the one hand, and the remaining five areas on the other (West Mercia, North Yorkshire, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, Staffordshire, and Hertfordshire). In each case, powerful PCCs managed to straddle the three streams, and all but one of them were able to push through their proposed reforms. However, the lack of a clear focusing event in five of the cases led to these PCCs trying to construct a problem in order to persuade other actors in the political stream of the need for reform.

Empirical findings

This section uses Jones et al.'s (2016) dissection of the different elements of the MSA, which itself draws on Kingdon (1984), to examine how the attempts at reform in those areas where it was relatively uncontroversial (Essex and Northamptonshire) contrasted with the other five. It takes each of the three streams in turn (policy, politics and problem), before highlighting how the PCCs sought to act as both policy entrepreneurs and problem brokers in introducing their proposals.

Policy stream

The MSA suggests that policy proposals are more likely to survive if: (a) they do not conflict with existing levels of acceptability in terms of norms and values, (b) they are technically feasible, (c) adequate resources are in place to deliver them, (d) key communities or networks who can influence the policymaking process support the proposed solution, and (e) these communities are sufficiently integrated to remain together as a powerful coalition until policy change is achieved (Kingdon 1984; Zahariadis 2007; Jones et al. 2016).

Regarding the first of these elements, supporters of reform – including the PCC in each case – sought to frame the proposed governance changes in terms of widely-accepted norms relating to “value for money” in public expenditure and democratic accountability. For example, they argued that the proposed change would deliver financial savings through operational “efficiencies”, the sharing of buildings and other assets between emergency services, and a more collaborative procurement approach. Some respondents argued that these “efficiencies” would actually result in service “cuts”. Nonetheless, many members of the public supported reform on this basis, perhaps because it resonated with pre-existing notions of public sector “waste” and the ability to deliver “economies of scale” and “efficiencies” through joint working and better sharing of assets. For example:

It's about time one person was in charge of both services and got a grip on the money being wasted. (Comment from member of the public, OPCC for Essex 2017, 17)

In terms of democratic values, PCCs argued the reforms would make fire and rescue services more accountable, because putting a directly-elected individual in charge would help to give the public more control over the service. Although many consultees did not feel that this would necessarily improve accountability (indeed, one felt that their

PCC was “power crazy”, OPCC for West Mercia 2017, 186), the PCC’s nonetheless sought to tap into this democratic norm when making their case:

I would suggest that democracy and accountability is improved by having a directly elected Fire Commissioner rather than appointed local councillors acting as an FRA. (PCC’s response to Shropshire County Council, OPCC for West Mercia 2017, 116)

The PCCs did address the technical feasibility of their proposed solution by arguing that their favoured governance model represented a much better chance of delivering the desired benefits than the alternatives of no institutional reform or the PCC joining the fire and rescue authority. Similarly, they held that it would be easier to implement than the more radical “single employer” model, despite suggesting that this option might result in more substantial financial savings. Although some opponents did question whether the institutional upheaval would ultimately be worthwhile, they did not argue that it would be impossible to achieve; therefore, there was tacit agreement about the technical feasibility of the proposed solution.

In terms of resource adequacy, some critics did highlight the opportunity costs involved in re-directing staff towards managerial tasks and away from other priorities. However, because the reform involved one-off institutional change and would not require significant ongoing additional expenditure, PCCs were able to argue that “the direct costs of implementing the joint governance model will be minimal” (OPCC for West Mercia 2018, 42).

Our analysis of the policy communities associated with the proposals in each of the seven cases revealed notable differences between Essex and Northamptonshire on the one hand, and the other five force areas on the other. PCCs were only required to consult on their proposals for reform with the “upper tier” unitary and county councils within their areas, which appointed elected representatives to the FRA. Nonetheless, a range of other actors did respond, including “lower tier” district councils, Members of Parliament, representatives of the police and fire and rescue services and members of the public. Table 1 highlights the level of local opposition to reform in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, Hertfordshire, North Yorkshire, Staffordshire and West Mercia. In contrast to these five areas, there was substantial support for change in Essex and – to a lesser extent – Northamptonshire. (Northamptonshire County Council neither opposed nor supported the proposal – it was the only upper tier authority not to express a view.)

Regardless of the level of local support or opposition, the then (Conservative) Home Secretary also made it clear that she was unlikely to stand in the way of any proposals, and in 2017 her Minister for Policing and the Fire Service even provided financial support to nine PCCs to help them develop their cases (Home Office 2017). Given that all of these PCCs were also members of the Conservative Party, this party-political factor helped the coalition in favour of reform to remain integrated and coherent, and coalesce around the PFCC as a policy solution. For example, 15 of the 17 Conservative MPs in Essex who supported reform signed a common letter of support.

Opposition was much more widespread in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, Hertfordshire, North Yorkshire, Staffordshire, and West Mercia, even amongst Conservative-controlled local authorities. Notably, however, councils in the affected areas had no power of veto over the PCCs’ proposals and therefore opposing coalitions were in a much weaker legal position. They were also politically diverse, often had different

Table 1. Responses to PCC proposals to adopt a Governance model for fire and rescue services.

	In favour	Opposed
Cambridgeshire & Peterborough	1 Conservative-controlled district council 3 Conservative MPs 1 Conservative combined authority mayor	Cambridgeshire CC (Conservative-controlled) Peterborough Council (Conservative-controlled) 1 then-Conservative MP Cambridgeshire & Peterborough FRS
Essex	Essex CC (Conservative-controlled) Southend Council (Conservative-controlled) Thurrock Council (No overall control) 2 Conservative-controlled district councils 17 Conservative MPs	
Hertfordshire	1 Conservative-controlled district council 11 Conservative MPs	Hertfordshire CC (Conservative-controlled) 2 Conservative-controlled district councils 1 Liberal Democrat-controlled district council
North Yorkshire	1 Conservative-controlled district council	North Yorkshire CC (Conservative-controlled) City of York Council (no overall control) 5 Conservative-controlled district councils 2 district councils with no overall control North Yorkshire FRS
Northamptonshire	3 Conservative-controlled district councils 4 Conservative MPs	Northamptonshire FRS 1 Labour-controlled district council
Staffordshire	2 Conservative-controlled district councils 6 Conservative MPs	Staffordshire CC (Conservative-controlled) Stoke-on-Trent Council (no overall control) 2 Labour-controlled district councils 1 district council with no overall control 2 Labour MPs Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent FRS
West Mercia		Worcestershire CC (Conservative-controlled) Herefordshire Council (Conservative-controlled) Shropshire Council (Conservative-controlled) 2 Conservative-controlled district councils 2 Labour-controlled district councils 1 district council with no overall control Hereford and Worcester FRS Shropshire FRS

Note: bold type denotes upper-tier authority previously responsible for fire and rescue and therefore a statutory consultee.

views about the most problematic nature of the proposed reforms and presented their arguments individually rather than collectively. In North Yorkshire, for example, the upper tier councils argued that political representation and accountability would be harmed under the proposed arrangements, whereas district authorities focused on the validity of the PCC's business case and the fire brigades' union was largely concerned with the impact on firefighters' working conditions (OPCC for North Yorkshire 2017).

Political stream

The political stream consists of three sub-components: (a) the national mood (for our purposes we consider the *local* mood), (b) party ideology and (c) the balance of interests.

Unfortunately, the leading nature of some consultation questions and limited options for responses make it difficult to identify the local mood by examining the public's responses to the PCCs' proposals. In addition, the PCCs commissioned these consultations alone – not together with the FRAs over which they sought to gain control – and this casts doubt on their credibility.

Only in Staffordshire were residents asked whether they would prefer the *status quo* to any of the reform options – and a clear plurality (49%) favoured no change. In Essex, residents were asked to state the extent to which they felt the three different reform models would deliver benefits on a scale of 1–5, and a plurality in each case opted for 1 – in other words, they felt it would have no benefit (OPCC for Essex 2017). At the same time, however, Essex was the only case in which the PCC explicitly stated their intention to adopt the governance model before being (re)elected in 2016 (Hirst for Essex 2016). A majority of residents in Northamptonshire, West Mercia, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire did agree with the PCC's proposals, but these consultations often stated the proposed financial benefits as fact (e.g. in West Mercia), and provided little contextual information about the other available options. Written responses to the consultation suggest that opinion was fairly evenly balanced between those in favour of governance transfer and those opposed, although in most cases the number of submissions from members of the public was quite low and unlikely to be truly representative. At the same time, the positions of most councils in the affected areas (with the exceptions of Essex and Northamptonshire) suggest that there was substantial local opposition. Overall, therefore it is difficult to assess the “local mood” around the issue of fire and rescue governance arrangements – but it also appears that there was little convincing evidence that the public was clamouring for change.

Given that all seven PCCs were members of the same political party as the Government ministers who were ultimately responsible for approving or rejecting their proposals for governance transfer, we can see how this ideological cohesion could help to keep open a policy window in the political stream. Their proposals, which claimed that governance transfer would help to improve efficiency and reduce public spending, might also chime with conservative principles of reducing the size of the state. Indeed, because the legislation required PCCs to demonstrate that governance transfer would deliver improvements in economy, efficiency and effectiveness, or in public safety, we can see how this shared political ideology could help to maintain cohesion within the coalition in favour of reform.

Furthermore, the balance of interests was heavily weighted in the PCCs' favour in each case. Apart from the Home Secretary, the only actor that might have prevented governance transfer was the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), which conducted independent assessments of the PCCs' proposals to judge whether they were “in the interests of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”. Despite these reports including many reservations about the robustness and accuracy of PCCs' business cases, none of the assessments recommended that the Home Secretary should reject a proposal to transfer governance responsibilities (CIPFA 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b), and each was duly approved. The fire and rescue authorities in both Cambridgeshire & Peterborough and West Mercia sought a judicial review of the Home Secretary's subsequent decision to approve governance transfer in these areas, but these appeals were unsuccessful. Only in Hertfordshire, where the PCC eventually abandoned the idea due

to local opposition, was the reform not introduced. As this suggests, the legal and power structures within the political stream placed PCCs in a very strong position push through their reforms, and there were few differences between the seven force areas.

Problem stream

The problem stream has four components: (a) indicators that identify or monitor potential problems, (b) focusing events that result in policymakers prioritizing a particular issue very suddenly, (c) load (the capacity of the system to address the problem), and (d) feedback from comparable initiatives. Our analysis of this stream revealed crucial differences between Northamptonshire and Essex on the one hand, and the other five force areas on the other.

There had been clear indications of a problem with governance at Essex for some time. In particular, two serving firefighters had committed suicide relatively recently (in 2013 and 2015), and this culminated in a focusing event: the publication of an independent review of the service's workplace culture. Conducted by Irene Lucas, a former local authority chief executive and senior civil servant in the UK Government, this report described the service "a failing organization" that was "in urgent need of a radical overhaul" due to its "toxic" culture of "dangerous and pervasive bullying and intimidation" (Lucas 2015, 5). Although the Policing and Crime Act did not become law until 2017, this report acted as a clear justification for the PCC's subsequent proposal to assume responsibility for governance of the service (OPCC for Essex 2017).

For its part, auditors had criticized the quality of financial management at Northamptonshire County Council in a series of reports during the early 2010s (KPMG 2011, 2012, 2014), and funding cuts to local government during this period exacerbated these problems (National Audit Office 2018). These indicators raised awareness that the authority was in trouble, and they were followed by sudden focusing event in February 2018 when the council issued a "Section 114 notice" – thereby announcing that it would be unable to set a balanced budget for the forthcoming financial year. Northamptonshire thus became the first English authority essentially to declare itself bankrupt for nearly two decades, meaning that central government-appointed commissioners were asked to take over the running of the municipality and it was only permitted to spend money on essential statutory services (Dom, Jones, and Murphy 2019). Since the county council had been responsible for the fire and rescue budget, the issuing of this notice strengthened the PCC's case that fire and rescue services had received insufficient resources in recent years – indeed, the authority's budget was set to fall by £5.8 m between 2010 and 2020 (OPCC for Northamptonshire 2017). These events gave a clear impression that a real problem existed with financial management at the council, and that "something must be done" to prevent it having a significant impact on the fire and rescue service (OPCC for Northamptonshire 2017, 30).

Crucially, no such similar events occurred in any of the other five force areas. This made it much more difficult for PCCs to convince other policymaking actors of the existence of a problem and the need for reform. Instead, their cases rested more on indicators related to the financial health of the service (derived from annual audits) and less regular inspection reports conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary

and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). None of these indicators were particularly startling and therefore they did not create a sense of urgency around the need for change.

The load component of the problem stream was not a major issue for any of the seven areas and analysis does not reveal significant differences between them. The workplace culture and financial management challenges mentioned above only affected the fire and rescue services in Essex and Northamptonshire, and therefore did not hinder the PCCs' attempts to propose their favoured governance reform. Moreover, PCCs could redirect resources within their own organizations to focus on their pet initiatives if they chose to do so. This highlights how embedded policy entrepreneurs in executive positions can exert significant influence over decision-making.

Finally, feedback on the effectiveness of comparable initiatives played an interesting role in our cases. After the PFCC took office in Essex, the other six PCCs sought to emulate this model and use it to justify their argument in favour of governance transfer. With the exception of Northamptonshire, however, the lack of a comparable problem that the reform was supposed to address meant that the relevance of any feedback from Essex was not particularly apparent. This made it much more difficult to present and sell the PFCC model as a necessary solution to other policymaking actors.

As a result, we can see how windows were only clearly open in the problem stream in the cases of Essex and Northamptonshire, where high-profile governance failures that resulted in focusing events had convinced a range of local actors of the need for change. There was significant disagreement about the existence of a problem in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, Hertfordshire, North Yorkshire, Staffordshire and West Mercia, which resulted in their PCCs encountering greater resistance to reform.

Policy entrepreneur

The MSA literature suggests that entrepreneurial success depends on three critical factors: (a) resources; (b) access to critical decision makers; and (c) the strategies they employ to achieve their objectives (Jones et al. 2016). Our seven cases are relatively similar in terms of the first two of these components. As executive decision-makers within their organizations who could decide on strategic priorities and had access to additional central government funding to develop their business cases, PCCs in each area had substantial financial, time and human resources at their disposal. Through party-political links they had similar access to national and local politicians, and their positions as elected representatives gave them additional legitimacy when pressing their case for change. Moreover, as endogenous policy entrepreneurs blessed with specific legal powers under the Policing and Crime Act, they were uniquely placed to propose their preferred solution themselves without having to lobby other actors to do so.

However, in terms of the strategies that the different PCCs adopted, our analysis once again revealed clear differences between Essex and Northamptonshire on the one hand, and the other five force areas on the other. In the first two cases, the clear governance and financial problems provided obvious justifications for the proposed reform. This was particularly the case for Essex, where the scale of criticisms within the Lucas report would have been impossible to ignore. PCCs in the other five areas had a more difficult task of trying to persuade others of the need to act. Lacking such clear reference points as Essex and Northamptonshire, their strategies focused on framing the existing governance

arrangements as a problem, by using symbols and affect priming strategies that appealed to pre-existing perceptions of how public services operated. For example, the prevailing context of austerity meant that public spending was a very high-profile issue at the time of the consultations, and PCCs sought to portray the current governance arrangements as inefficient and therefore problematic. Their business cases argue that the proposed changes would deliver financial savings through operational “efficiencies”, the sharing of buildings and other assets between emergency services and a more collaborative procurement approach:

There would be direct benefits from adopting this [governance] option realised through accelerating estate consolidation opportunities. (OPCC for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough 2017, 57)

This appeal to well-worn symbols and tropes did not convince everybody, but there was strong support for the idea that amalgamation could make support functions more efficient, facilitate better sharing of assets and thus “release resources” to front-line emergency services.

Supporters of a change in governance (in this case mostly the PCC) also argued that fire and rescue services suffered from an accountability deficit, and putting a directly-elected individual in charge would help to give the public more control over the service. This elicited vigorous counter-arguments and scepticism, with critics holding that some PCCs were engaged in a “power grab” and argued that no single individual should be responsible for two very different services, particularly if that person had little experience of fire and rescue operations. However, we can see how the appeal to democratic norms helped to give the impression that existing arrangements were unsatisfactory:

Evidence suggests that single, streamlined governance can accelerate reform and improve public visibility, accountability, transparency and effective scrutiny. (OPCC for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough 2017, 9)

Finally, some PCCs argued that adopting the governance model would facilitate greater sharing of knowledge and expertise between the police and fire and rescue services, and ultimately result in a better quality of service to the public. In other words, they held that a lack of joint working between the services was a problem, and more integrated governance arrangements would be an appropriate solution. This argument also tapped into latent public perceptions that public bodies could be better managed, and the notion that a more streamlined decision-making structure would be more cost-effective. For example:

The change to single governance will enable new ways of working that will benefit our communities and our emergency services alike. (PFCC John Campion, as quoted in OPCC for West Mercia 2017, 19)

This argument was largely uncontroversial in Northamptonshire and Essex, where the previous focusing events had convinced many local actors that some change in governance was essential. Importantly, however, key actors in the political stream in the other five areas disagreed about the very existence of a problem with operational performance – and/or that a change in governance arrangements was the best (or only) way to improve

collaboration between the police and fire services. Opponents of reform argued that such a change might even be counterproductive, because the emergency services should be focusing on other priorities:

The PCC's proposition ... offers no sound basis for supporting a potential decision to implement a complex and highly disruptive change in governance for a highly performing and well-regarded Fire & Rescue service. (Hertfordshire County Council 2018)

This fundamental disagreement over the existence of a problem made it much more difficult for the PCCs in these five areas to act as policy entrepreneurs and sell their preferred solution. With the exception of Hertfordshire, however, the PCC's ability to straddle the three streams meant that this opposition was ultimately unsuccessful (Bunn 2018) – highlighting the importance of power relationships within the MSA.

Discussion and conclusions

In each of the seven cases we examined, the PCCs were involved in all three streams. First, they championed a *policy* solution – namely the “governance” model and a PFCC. Second, they played a key *political* role in proposing and pushing through the reform – with help from a sympathetic Home Secretary. Finally, they sought to construct, frame and broker conditions as *problems* that needed addressing – and their success in this exercise was strongly influenced by the existence of a focusing event that convinced other actors of the need for change.

As this suggests, although we can analyze Kingdon's three streams independently of each other, the PCCs were important actors in each one. They performed the role of endogenous policy entrepreneur, policymaker and problem broker simultaneously, and also occupied a key political post. Indeed, the fact that PCCs were able to straddle all three streams put them in an extremely powerful position, enabling them to “couple” the streams, effect change and implement their policy agenda in every case except Hertfordshire. By not having to rely heavily on other actors to perform any of these roles, PCCs were able to exert significant control over the policy process and take advantage of the open window in the *political* stream. This was particularly the case in Essex and Northamptonshire, where windows were also open in the *problem* stream: there was widespread agreement about the need to respond to focusing events, and the PCCs' proposed reform would enable them to do so.

We did not seek to evaluate whether genuine “problems” existed in the other five areas – this was beyond the scope of our study and is also of secondary theoretical importance for the MSA. Instead, we found that the PCCs in Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, North Yorkshire, Staffordshire and West Mercia used symbols and affect priming strategies to portray specific conditions as problems in the absence of clear focusing events, in order to try and mobilize support for change amongst political actors. In most cases this support was not forthcoming, which made the process of governance transfer much more difficult – and, in the case of Hertfordshire, ultimately resulted in the PCC abandoning the policy. Table 2 highlights those aspects of the MSA where we found significant contrasts between Essex and Northamptonshire on the one hand, and the other five force areas on the other.

These examples show how the existence of windows in both the problem and political streams can make policy change easier to achieve. In light of this, where policy

Table 2. Contrasting components of the MSA in our case studies.

	Policy stream		Problem stream			Policy entrepreneur
	Policy communities	Network integration	Indicators	Focusing event	Feedback	Strategies
Essex	Substantial support	Cohesive	Bullying culture, two firefighter suicides	Lucas Report (Sept 2015)	N/A	PFCC as solution to poor governance and workplace culture
Northants	Mostly in favour	Cohesive	Long-term budget reductions and financial problems	Section 114 notice (Feb 2018)	Influential – Essex experience suggested it would be straightforward	PFCC as solution to poor financial management
North Yorkshire	Significant local opposition	More fragmented	Limited	N/A	Difficult to apply feedback because problem less clear	Use of symbols and affect priming
Staffordshire	Significant local opposition	More fragmented	Limited	N/A	Difficult to apply feedback because problem less clear	Use of symbols and affect priming
Cambridgeshire & Peterborough	Significant local opposition	More fragmented	Limited	N/A	Difficult to apply feedback because problem less clear	Use of symbols and affect priming
West Mercia	Significant local opposition	More fragmented	Limited	N/A	Difficult to apply feedback because problem less clear	Use of symbols and affect priming
Hertfordshire	Significant local opposition	More fragmented	Limited	N/A	Influential – legal fights and opposition in other areas persuaded PCC to give up	Use of symbols and affect priming

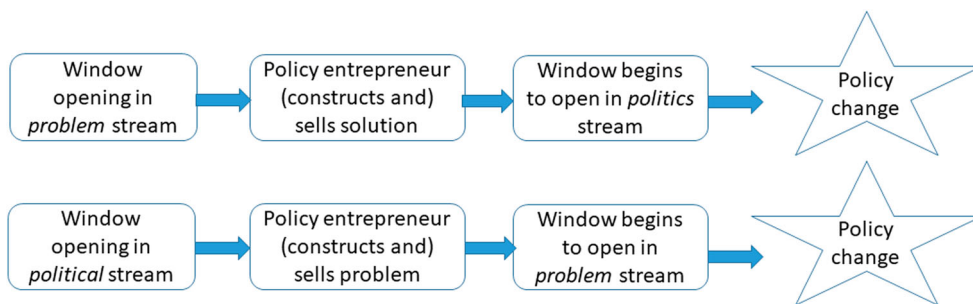


Figure 2. Policy windows and the actions of policy entrepreneurs.

entrepreneurs feel that a window may be opening in the political stream, they might seek to raise awareness of a condition and construct a relevant problem in order to open a window in this stream at the same time, particularly if they are unable to attach their preferred solution to a specific focusing event. This could increase their chances of success – indeed, if they sense that the *political* stream is becoming favourable, they might even wish to “pre-cook” some problems ahead of time. Such a strategy, which mirrors the actions of policy entrepreneurs seeking to take advantage of openings in the *problem* stream by proposing pre-cooked solutions, is represented diagrammatically in [Figure 2](#).

Additionally, the contrasting examples of P(F)CCs show how the influence of a single individual across all three streams plays a key role in shaping policy change, and how we need to take greater account of power dynamics in the MSA. Despite disagreements in five force areas about the existence of a genuine problem that governance transfer could help to address, four of these PCCs were still able to push through their reforms because they occupied powerful political positions. Although it remains useful to analyze problems, policies and politics separately, actors can increase their influence by straddling the different streams (Ackrill and Kay 2011; Rozbicka and Spohr 2016). Our study suggests that if policy entrepreneurs are able to exert influence in each of them, they may find it easier to effect change – particularly if a focusing event helps to open a window in the problem stream. We might also expect stream-straddling to be more common in subnational jurisdictions or smaller public bodies. This is because such policy subsystems are likely to have fewer participants and veto-players, which could make it easier for policymakers to get involved in problem-brokering and policy entrepreneurship alongside executive decision making. We would encourage further research into this area to help underpin theory development.

We would also echo Knaggård’s (2015) and Reardon’s (2018) call for greater examination of the problem stream. This could have a particular focus on how actors seek to frame and construct issues to make them fit their preferred policy solutions – particularly in the era of politicized evidence and “fake news”. By acting as both policy entrepreneurs and problem brokers, PCCs in four of the areas we studied were able to push through their agendas despite substantial local opposition. As such, in addition to acting as policy entrepreneurs who tailor and sell *solutions*, another way to straddle the streams involves brokering, constructing and mobilizing awareness of *problems*, however genuine they may be. Although we found that it was more difficult to effect change in the absence of a focusing event, our study shows that powerful individuals can still

introduce their preferred solutions if they can straddle the streams. Therefore, policy does not always change in response to apparently random events in the problem stream; instead, endogenous entrepreneurs can shape developments by constructing problems, tailoring solutions and building political coalitions. We would encourage additional research into these issues to improve the predictive capacity of the MSA further.

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Notes on contributors

Peter Eckersley is a Senior Research Fellow in Public Policy and Management at Nottingham Trent University, UK, and a Research Associate at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space in Erkner, Germany. He focuses on central-local government relations, public policy, climate change, public services, sustainability and public accountability.

Katarzyna Lakoma is a Research Associate in the Centre for Economics, Policy and Public Management at Nottingham Trent University. She has been undertaking a PhD in the area of public management since January 2018, examining the impact of governance changes on accountability in the context of English Fire and Rescue Services.

ORCID

Peter Eckersley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9048-8529>

Katarzyna Lakoma  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2583-3813>

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