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**Evidence and transparency in the open public
services reform: perspectives for the third sector**

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Abstract

The concepts of 'transparency' and 'evidence of what works' are key features in the implementation and success of the open public service policy. This paper explores, from the perspective of the third sector, the meaning of these concepts and how we can expect them to be operationalized. Initially, an implementation guided by evidence and transparency seems reasonable and ethical. The practical meanings of the concepts become more complicated once we look more closely into the institutional landscape in which organisations operate, with competition for limited resources, uncertainties around commissioning, and opposing ideas about what counts as evidence creating an unpredictable environment. The principles of transparency and evidence-based policy can contribute to the public good through providing the basis for trust between different stakeholders. From the perspective of the individual organisation though, sharing information may expose them to the control and judgement by outsiders. The paper identifies some key research questions that highlight the challenges faced by third sector organisations in this context.

Keywords

Open public service policy, institutional landscape, commissioning, transparency, evidence-based, institutional culture

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Introduction

Over the past years the coalition government has outlined visions and strategies of what they describe as profound changes in the provision of welfare services in the UK. This paper takes a closer look at government documents outlining the open public service reform (Cabinet Office, 2010; Department of Health (DoH, 2010); Minister for Government Policy (MGP, 2011). For third sector organisations (TSOs) the policy of open public services (OPS) sets a new framework for how relations with commissioner, users, and other service delivering agencies are formed and for their role as public service providers. The implementation of OPS hinges on transparency and evidence, which will provide the basis on which relationships between citizens, users, delivering agents, and commissioners will build.

OPS and the government strategy for public health in England (DoH, 2010); MGP, 2011) can be seen to combine ideological, financial, and quality-improvement goals. Transparency and evidence of what works will drive accountability and lend government as well as other service-providers legitimacy and credibility. This paper looks into how we may expect third sector organisations to respond to a request for increased transparency and evidence of their achievements. Based on policy documents the paper examines the underlying assumptions of what role transparency and evidence will play in the implementation of the open public service reform. The paper formulates some key research questions that can help us explore what underpins the way transparency and evidence relates to the practices and strategies of TSOs. The purpose of the paper is to bring to the fore how institutional context may structure the way transparency and evidence is used. We can then begin to appreciate the complexity behind what may seem like reasonable and ethical foundations for policy implementation.

The paper is outlined as follows. First, we begin by taking a closer look at the Open Public Services White paper (MGP, 2011) and the government document 'Healthy Lives Healthy People : our strategy for public health in England' (DoH, 2010) which set out the purpose of reforms in the health sector and the strategies behind its implementation. Following this we examine four areas of research: evidence-based policy making; challenges in attributing outcomes and controversies in evaluation methods; what informs organisations 'disclosure logics'; and finally the relation between institutional culture and the use of information. In the concluding discussion the paper sets out some key research questions that highlight the challenges faced by third sector organisations in this context.

Evidence and transparency in new policies

The policy of Open Public Services has three main goals: ideological goals, i.e. providing individuals and communities with choices; financial goals, i.e. to increase efficiency; and goals to improve quality. The visions foresee public service provision based on a diversity of providers functioning in close alignment with the needs and preferences of individuals and communities. This, it is believed, will be the foundation for the delivery of cost-effective and high quality services. The open public services will deliver more user-responsive services where individuals, communities and local government will be able to make informed choices, based on the availability of clear and relevant data, and where

providers and decision-makers (commissioners) will be held accountable. Being user responsive also means that the framework for delivering services must have room for innovation, both in terms of innovative interventions and new providers.

The new welfare provisioning regime both relies on and aims to set in motion the empowerment of individuals, local government and professionals (e.g. GPs). Their actions will be based on well informed choices. The report *Healthy Lives, Healthy People* (DoH, 2010) provides the following statement:

The Department of Health is designing the new system based on principles of empowering people, using transparency to drive accountability, and ensuring that communities lead efforts to improve health wherever possible, using evidence-based services and innovations tied to evaluation (p. 53).

Transparency of information related to quality assessment and the nature and rationale behind the services offered (i.e. evidence that it works) is envisioned to underpin user choice and to drive provider accountability. Ethics of transparency will also be applied to procedures related to public sector contracting and procurement. This will ascertain a level playing field for providers, making sure that contracts are not rewarded on the basis of historical, longstanding partnerships, but on what organisations achieve and commissioners request, and should hence open up for new providers as well as new ways of doing things (MGP, 2011: 35). It will also support a competition that takes place directly at the interface with individuals who hold personal budgets. The OPS reform paper states the dual purpose of information to empower people as well as to hold providers and commissioners accountable:

As information about services becomes more transparent, people should be able to make more informed choices about the providers they use, citizens should have more information on which to voice their opinions and exercise their democratic rights, and elected representatives should be able to scrutinise providers more effectively on people's behalf. (MGP, 2011: 11)

Public Health England (DoH, 2010) will be operating based on transparency, which in practice means that 'evidence will be as accessible and user-friendly as possible, driving accountability through increased availability of information' (ibid.: 69).

Transparency will guide the way government communicates with the general public in further areas: Firstly, it will be transparent in how tax-payers' money is being spent, i.e. assess the delivery of services according to efficiency. Secondly, it will be transparent in how policies have been formed, through being clear about what rationale underpins reforms and interventions.

Evidence of what works is hence at the core of the shaping and implementation of policies and services and it is closely linked to transparency. It is also essential in how commissioning will be practiced: through evidence and outcome-based commissioning government will gain greater efficiency in the utilisation of limited means. Evidence is hence to be sourced both at systemic levels – through research that looks to identify e.g. causes of social problems and the best ways of tackling these problems – as well as at organisational and project level – through evaluations aimed at assessing the impact of specific interventions and the achievement of individual organisations.

The policy documents recognise that placing evidence and transparency at the core of shaping and delivering new public policies comes with challenges, contradictions and possibly unintended consequences. So, the White Paper on Open Public Services states that ‘it is important to get the balance right between specifying outcomes and enabling innovative approaches to services delivery’ (MGP, 2011: 44). It further recognises that it needs to assess:

...whether or not providers in all sectors should be subject to the same requirements for transparency and in which service areas this would make most sense (e.g. how performance data and information transparency can be extended to private companies and voluntary sector organisations providing public service). (p. 38)

While public bodies will be obliged to adhere to rules and regulations ‘to ensure the state itself will be held accountable’ (ibid.: 21) it is not clear how such regulations can be made applicable to other providers. It is clear though that the intention is for transparency and evidence is to be shared in dialogue, rather than driven by a bureaucratic culture. The reformed public services will use ‘information revolution’ to:

... boost transparency so that failings do not go undetected. It will help foster a culture of active responsibility where staff and patients are empowered to ask, challenge and intervene (ibid. 21).

Along with the recurring reference to transparency, accountability and evidence of what works, the reviewed reports’ use of superlatives is worth noting: not only do policies aim for *greater* accountability; *greater* user participation (MGP 2011: 38,); but also emphasize a focus on ‘the outcomes that matter *most*’ and on ‘what works in order to make the *biggest* difference’ (p. 21, italics added). With specific reference to the third sector the Commissioning Green Paper suggests that TSOs ‘should be assessed on their ability to deliver the *best* outcomes for the *most* competitive price’ (Cabinet Office, 2010: 15, italics added). The language suggests historical as well as contemporary comparisons: historical, since it aims to achieve something better than what has been, and contemporary, since it aims to distinguish interventions and organisations that are worth investing in from those that are not.

In sum, the aims of the open public services are several, including the empowering of individuals and communities, the provision of cost-effective services, the offering of high quality services, and the inclusion of new providers and innovative interventions. The principles of transparency and evidence of what works are closely related: the information to be open and accessible for service providers (TSOs, for-profit organisations, statutory bodies), financial supporters (government, local authority), beneficiaries and the tax-payer, will include financial audits as well as information that come from evaluations and research that offers evidence of the effects of interventions and the achievements of organisations. From the government’s point of view, increased transparency and the emphasis on evidence-based policy will support their aim to gain trust and legitimacy from the public and from organisations that will form the diverse landscape of service providers. Transparency and evidence will contribute to the collective good through increasing quality, efficiency and opportunities for informed user choice. But from the individual organisations’ point of view, what do these principles

mean and what informs the way they may be practiced by third sector organisations? It is to this we will turn next.

Evidence and transparency: from principles to practice

The review below covers four research areas including evidence-based policy making; challenges in attributing outcomes and controversies in evaluation methods; what informs organisations 'disclosure logics'; and finally the relationship between institutional culture and the use of information. The aim of the review is to canvass issues around how the principles of transparency and evidence can be practised. The review draws on literature from the UK as well as the international scene, with a particular focus on the position and behaviour of non-profit organisations. The presentation is organised under four headlines: evidence informing policy; what counts as evidence; transparency and the sharing of information; and finally information, evaluation and institutional culture.

Evidence informing policy

The policy reports examined in this paper suggest that previous governments have failed in applying an evidence-based-policy regime: there is not only, or primarily, lack of evidence, but 'patchy use of evidence' (DoH, 2010: 27, my italics). Policies, it is suggested, have been driven by ideology rather than evidence. And whenever evidence has suggested failure and poor performance this has been 'offset by higher spending' (DoH, 2010: 7) rather than leading to increased learning about limitations in policies and their implementation. Although the tone suggests that the drive for evidence-based policy is different from what has been practiced in previous government there are clear similarities in how previous and present governments see the role of evidence for the outlining, implementing and refining of policies. With New Labour taking office in 1997, the then new government emphasised the importance of 'evidence-based policy'. Sanderson (2002) interprets this evidence-based policy approach as an attempt at creating more interactive governance, and a policy-making model based on the belief 'in progress informed by reason' (ibid.: 1). It was also a way of ascertaining that the implementation of new policies would be seen as based on evidence and wisdom rather than (only) informed by ideology (Sanderson, 2002; Wells, 2007). The evidence-based policy initiative could also be seen as a way of responding to a general scepticism of 'public intervention in economic and social spheres' (ibid.: 2). The expected gains from the evidence-based policy-regime introduced by New Labour appear to be very similar to expectations placed on evidence in present coalition government: with evidence, accountability and transparency the new (local) leadership will be able to implement new policies with credibility, and it will ascertain a new era of local governance and ownership, based on citizens' choices and preferences.

The relationship between evidence and policy-making is highly problematic. Weiss (1999) describes how evidence, retrieved through for example evaluations, is likely to slowly percolate into people's consciousness rather than contribute to any demarcated or noticeable changes. 'Policy-making systems are crowded with contenders writes Weiss (1999: 472) and the 'evidence' is but one of many contenders for attention. Policy-making and implementation is not influenced by evidence by default: the routes through which evidence from research and evaluation can influence public services

are many and often filled with challenges (Weiss, 1999; Nutley, et al., 2007). Recent policy-making history tells us that on the one hand some government programmes, like 'Sure Start' aimed to provide support for families with young children, are closely linked to research evidence (Nutley, et al., 2007). On the other hand, in the context of illegal drugs the notion of 'evidence' has proven to be highly contested and policy-making ideologically charged and we have recently seen conflicts between politicians and the research community as to how to value and interpret research results and expert advice (Monaghan, 2008).

Policy-making related to activities driven by non-profit organisations in the context of poverty alleviation offers examples of further conundrums around the way evidence and policy, with ensuing funding, is connected. The microfinance revolution started in the early 1980s, most famously with the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Aiming at alleviating poverty through lending money to the poorest and at the same time paying for itself, it provided a new concept in international development. A second revolution, perhaps more outdrawn and less clear, has been its global spread: MFI is now claimed to be provided by over 3500 non-profit organisations, reaching more than 155 million households (Leatherman, et al., 2012). The global spread of microfinance has been linked with scepticism and questions among a diverse field of researchers about how to assess its various degrees of success, and failure. This scepticism does not appear to have had great impact on the spread of the microfinance phenomenon: 'Despite the current enthusiasm in the donor community for microfinance programmes, rigorous research on the outreach, impact and cost-effectiveness of such programmes is rare' argues Weiss and Montgomery (2005: 412), (see also Woolcock 1999; Woller, 2002). The lack of evidence-based policy making within the international donor community can be attributed to lack of data, which partly 'reflects methodological difficulties' related to project-evaluations (Weiss and Montgomery, 2005). But perhaps more problematically it is also claimed that the microfinance revolution is built on myths and driven by commercial interests (Bateman, 2010). The lack of coherence between evidence (or the lack thereof) and policies also comes from disagreement about the interpretation of evidence, and what counts as credible evidence. It is to this topic we turn next.

What counts as evidence?

The purposes behind the transparency and evidence driven reform outlined above is broadly speaking twofold. Firstly, to empower individuals and facilitate choice, and to inform commissioners and the like in their decision-making about what interventions to promote and to who award contracts. Secondly, to provide the basis for competition that will drive up quality in services. For both of these purposes to be fulfilled without controversies it is essential that the evidence provided is unambiguous, clear, and relatively easy to understand. However, the task of assessing third sector organisations' achievements is lined with methodological as well as conceptual challenges (see further in Kendall and Knapp, 2000): to what extent can the improvement of a multifaceted problem be attributed a specific project intervention? How can outcome measurement based on criteria of efficiency and savings for a community concur with focus on quality and value attributed to services by individuals?

There are sources of conflict related to how we chose to define 'evidence' – as proof or as inkling? (Greene, 2009) – and what type of evaluations can best capture the impact of an intervention (Pawson and Tilly, 1997). Experimental evaluations, that emphasize causality, and non-experimental

approaches such as case-stories and participatory methods that aim to gain understanding rather than causality and prediction, often come to represent two opposing qualities of evidence (Donaldson et al., 2009). For the third sector, not only are intangible achievements (such as added social value) by TSOs difficult to evidence, but evaluation frameworks used to generate evidence represent underlying conflicting ideas about 'evaluation techniques and the relative merits of the different types of information they produce' (Hall 2012, 5). Again, the area of microfinance provided by non-profits offers a useful example to illustrate the issues related to evaluation methods including the difficulties in providing conclusive evidence and the more or less overt preference for some research methods over others.

In much of third sector work there are issues around how 'success' is defined: do we take the perspective of the client, or that of the service provider? Woller (2002) argues that evaluation research on microfinance has had a bias towards 'products and services' and has made evaluation research on microfinance focus on repayment rates and organisational survival rather than customer needs. The assumption has been that the repayment of loans and repeat credit-taking means that families are ascending out of poverty (see also Woolcock, 1999). However, behind what may appear as success-stories there may be hidden costs for customers, as succinctly highlighted in the title of Brett's paper 'We sacrifice and eat less' (1999). Woller, (2002) and others (e.g. Copestake, 2007) suggest that the chosen evaluation indicators are based on propositions that may not be valid: we cannot assume the quality of an intervention (e.g. that it is leading poor clients out of poverty) based on its productivity. Furthermore, evidence of achievements that 'it works' does in fact tell us little about 'what works' (Woolcock, 1999) and hence offers insufficient insights into what is required for consolidation or the scaling up of an intervention. In order to assess whether microfinance per se 'works' it is necessary to take surrounding financial institutions, workforce participation, and overall economic growth into account (Ahlin, et al., 2011). This illustrates the challenges posed by evaluation research in capturing and attributing impact to a specific intervention. It also highlights the difficulties in interpreting evaluation results as conclusive, and that they ought instead to be viewed as cumulative and complementary. Such a view complicates a policy that assumes we can produce 'evidence of what works'.

There are further issues related to methodological preferences. A recent systematic review of existing research on microfinance concludes that evaluations based on case studies and ethnographic evidence have been side-lined due to present enthusiasm for randomised control trials, perceived as the evaluation gold standard, with the result that it remains unclear how and when microfinance is of real benefit to poor people (Duvendack, et al., 2011). The review signals that claims based on ethnographic findings may not suffice as evidence, which raises questions regarding 'what counts as evidence'. Similar to other policy arenas (see Scriven, 2008; Donaldson, et al., 2009) a preference for experimental evaluations, such as randomised control trials, means that other evaluation frameworks, with case-study and procedural focus, have less value and power in policy-making. As Hall, (2012) points out in his recent paper, TSOs today are faced with an overwhelming number of different evaluation frameworks and as a consequence we find debates about the definition of methodological rigour: e.g. case-studies are deemed subjective and perhaps less trustworthy, and statistics are more

objective. Behind the pressure from funders for non-profit organisations to make monitoring and evaluation data available lie positivist ideas that success and failure are 'easily quantifiable' (Ebrahim, 2002: 84). Whether vying for a voice in policy-debates or for contracts in commissioning procedures TSOs will have to consider 'what counts as evidence' in the eye of outside stakeholders when choosing evaluation frameworks.

Transparency and information-sharing

Debates concerning transparency, i.e. the sharing of financial and other information, in non-profit organisations are not new. In the wake of the boom in international NGOs in the 1990s concerns were raised about transparency and accountability, or the lack thereof (Edwards and Hulme, 1995) and since then a steady trickle of discussions has referred to incidents of mismanagement and corruption (Behn, et al., 2010), as well as 'patterns of wrongdoing' (Gibelman and Gelman, 2004), prompting calls for improved formal and/or informal regulations. With scandals and wrongdoings threatening trust, credibility and legitimacy, we may assume that self-regulation within the nonprofit sector should be a given. However, while openness can underpin trust and legitimacy the sharing of information can also render organisations vulnerable and subject to control and judgments by outsiders. Practising transparency hence requires some strategic thinking.

Exploring the willingness to share financial information among non-profit organisations in the States, Behn, et al., (2010) found that organisations with relatively more debt appear more willing to share financial statements than those with a substantial budget for lobbying expenses. The study also noted a difference in behaviour depending on the organisation operating in a sector where external scrutiny already exists or not. While to some extent we may see patterns related to skills and capacity behind the fact that larger organisations are more willing/able to share information than smaller ones, Behn et al., study suggests that there is something else underlying the decision to share or withhold information. Whether responding to formal rules and regulations or adhering to norms that calls for increased self-regulation, research shows that organisations are left with some discretion as to how closely to follow rules about information-sharing. In a recent study of Belgian NGOs, Verbruggen, et al., (2011) establish that the way organisations comply with rules and norms of social and financial auditing is strongly related to the power of outsiders. Compliance is here seen as essential in a quest for increased accountability and financial transparency. By combining a theory of resource dependence (pressure and power linked to scarcity of resources) and that of coercive isomorphism (pressure from norms in an institutional environment), the research explores how a level of compliance with transparency is linked to levels of dependency and the source of funding. The results suggest that compliance is greater where funds are coming from government rather than private donors, partly because government presents in one and the same body, the source for resources and norms. The authors note that the type of information shared by organisations is mainly raw data. This prompts the question: to what extent can this transparency help stakeholders understand and trust an organisation?

The request for organisations to comply with rules and norms is quite new in the Belgian context: the authors suggest that as time passes coercive isomorphism will be replaced by normative and mimetic isomorphism. This implies that organisations will not simply comply with norms and rules but

will actively use them to their advantage. This is a line of inquiry that is followed in Ebrahim's research on 'information struggles' between funders and NGOs (Ebrahim 2002). Organisations do not just comply with this pressure. Ebrahim argues that with the request for information experienced as a way of funders to exert power and control over NGOs, organisations approach this with resistance as well as strategic behaviour. The sharing of information becomes symbolic – to satisfy funders – and strategic – to enhance the image of professionalism. Organisations are hence selective in what and how they share information, since they see what complete openness grant funders have over their every move. Their resistance 'takes the form of symbolic, selective, and professional provision of information' (p. 109).

Burger and Owens (2010) analyse the characteristics of self-reported information provided by NGOs working in Uganda. The purpose for NGOs providing information is to strengthen accountability and transparency. As the researchers look into how information is reported, and what is hidden and misrepresented, it becomes clear that there is much strategic thinking underlying this activity. Why are there discrepancies between what organisations say they do (such as stakeholder engagement) and what they actually do (or rather do not do)? The authors look to organisational relationships and characteristics and the political context for a deeper understanding of why organisations fail to comply with the norms of transparency and honesty. The authors suggest that organisations tend to misrepresent, for example, their engagement with local communities in order to maintain a good reputation. But they also highlight that misrepresentation 'can be attributed to excessive and unrealistic donor demands' (Burger and Owens, 2010: 1274). Furthermore, and what may be specific for NGOs operating in new democracies, there are issues around transparency and good governance in general that may affect both their possibilities and opportunities to be open about how they operate if their relationship with a government is filled with tensions and antagonism.

There are apparently different 'disclosure logics' (Nicholls, 2010) at play here. The sharing of information is symbolic and strategic, motivated by set rules, informal norms, and the needs and concerns of the individual organisation. Complexities, that arise due to the fact that information generates grounds for both trust and control, have been ignored in the context of non-profit organisations. Because there is no apparent and monetary profit to be gained from third sector activities, these organisations are 'expected to behave more honestly than for-profit forms' (Burger and Owens, 2010: 1264). But there is 'private information and hidden actions in the NGO-beneficiary-benefactor nexus' (Burger and Owens 2010: 1264) and this nexus is characterised by information asymmetries (Kendall and Knapp, 2000). The practice of transparency is surrounded by strategic thinking that aims both to amend and maintain the advantage this position gives organisations (Arvidson and Lyon, 2013). Information is used by organisations to 'master events' (Tomkins, 2001): it plays a role in creating and maintaining trust, coping with risks, and managing relations where power and control are important ingredients.

Transparency, evidence and institutional culture

Wells, (2007) argues that an evidence-based policy can be seen as 'closely aligned to the modernisation agenda themes of audit, inspection and monitoring rather than to the themes of

learning, improvement and involvement' (p. 26). This prompts us to ask; what is the institutional culture in which transparency and evidence will be practiced today? Two recent studies of relevance reveal some interesting differences in the way performance regimes in public health services have been practiced in England, Wales and Scotland respectively (Martin, et al., 2010; Haubrich and McLean 2006). Martin, et al., (2010) outline three different theories of change applied by the three regions. In England, incentives for improvement in quality of services are believed to come from competition between providers. Scores of how providers perform are made public, with the intent of 'naming and shaming' those services that have not been able to reach expected standards. The approaches in Wales and Scotland are quite different, where Wales promote 'education and persuasion' as the basis for improvement, and Scotland a collaborative and consensual style to encourage a learning process. Haubrich and McLean's, (2006) study concur with these results and show that Wales and Scotland are less prescriptive and intrusive in their quality assessment procedures, whereas England has adapted a standardised, top-down and authoritarian approach. The different institutional cultures result in the agencies being monitored adapting rather different strategies, including shirking and deliberate manipulation towards how they provide the information required by the authorities, rendering the information of questionable value.

To use a similar analogy to that of Martin et al., (2010) above, the 'theory of change' that underpins the open public services reform seems to be somewhat contradictory from the perspective of TSOs since it emphasize transparency and evidence as supporting both learning and empowerment, and competition for resources. On the one hand, transparency and evidence of what works will promote empowerment and trust: it will serve the public interest. On the other, transparency and evidence are also the principles behind competition among service providers. Information is therefore likely to be tailored by organisations in order to promote themselves in a competitive market: transparency and evidence become marketing tools and hence serve the interest of individual organisations. Equally, it can be used to forward arguments behind a change in providers or interventions, and hence give power and control to the hands of authorities. Although difficult to say at this stage, the institutional culture that sets the tone for the way transparency and evidence is used will be crucial for how organisations ultimately practise these principles: a 'naming and shaming' culture, where information is used against service providers, will clearly set a different atmosphere to one that emphasizes collaboration and education as a basis for supporting quality, diversity and user choice.

Concluding remarks

The link between 'evidence' and 'policy' has proven problematic. The topic of what counts as evidence has also proven generally contentious, and is continuously discussed in literature on evaluation theory and practice (Donaldson, et al., (2009). For TSOs, the striving for appropriate evaluation-tools reflects tensions around what counts as evidence, and the challenges faced here are enhanced by the difficulties in establishing evidence of the soft outcomes related to their activities. Both these areas refer to long-standing debates about the nature of evidence and the use of evidence in policy. The implications are clearly relevant to TSOs since they need to predict whether powerful institutional

stakeholders see evidence as an inkling that 'meaningfully honours complexity' (Donaldson 2009: 15) or if they seek proof that will offer unambiguous information in decision-making procedures.¹

For the two latter topics reviewed here, i.e. strategies around the sharing of information, and transparency related to the institutional culture, we see that the institutional setting is an essential backdrop to how we can understand the way organisations chose to operationalise the principles of transparency and evidence of what works. The institutional setting refers to both structural attributes (technology, networks of information sharing) and to institutional culture. Questions around what information is deemed meaningful, and how such information can be made easily accessible for various stakeholders, must be considered: what defines, prevents and promotes the sharing of meaningful information? Would formalised structures regarding the type of data and means of data-sharing clearly promote transparency? Is there a risk that lack of organisational capacity (in e.g. small organisations) excludes welfare actors from complying with transparency requests and from reaching important stakeholders? Further understanding regarding institutional culture is also required in order to understand what nature of transparency we can expect, such as transparency tailored for the public good or for more specific, organisationally based, benefits that include access to resources. Although the open public services reform aims at putting an end to 'the regime of top-down process targets' (MGP 2011: 42), can we expect that emphasizing the importance of transparency per se ascertain an institutional culture that promotes collaborative learning? What are the sources of information and power asymmetries in this context, and what incentives do actors have to ameliorate the possible negative consequence such asymmetries may have on what and how information is shared? Transparency is expected to be driving accountability. However, assuming different welfare actors have different goals and values, we may expect private, public and third sector organisations to define and act on requests for transparency in different ways. This comes from an understanding that some stakeholders are more influential than others and will hence set the standard for what and how information is shared. It is also likely that further research into this area would reveal local variations in institutional culture and the way councils and other stakeholders have managed to share information for the multiple purposes of achieving improved quality and efficiency in service provision, as well as a sound basis for customer choice.

The language of transparency and evidence-based policy, as presented in the policies reviewed here, is deceptive in that it does not acknowledge how power, politics and resources strongly influence the way policy is shaped and implemented (Nutley, et al., 2007; Sanderson, 2002; Weiss, 1999; Wells, 2007). In essence, in order to understand how transparency is operationalised we must have a thorough understanding of what guides the way relations are formed and resources are accessed. This paper offers an initial insight into what such a relational approach could reveal when it comes to understanding what and how transparency is developed. The paper also points at possible contradictions between the multiple purposes of transparency and evidence-sharing in the context of the open public services reform, with information-sharing providing the basis for a public good as well as the basis for competition between organisations. It remains to be seen, and further researched,

¹ . Further insights into the both developments made and challenges faced by the third sector are presented in recent TSRC working papers (Harlock, 2013; Metcalf, 2013).

how TSOs of different sizes and capacities, chose to manage the requirements and opportunities this focus on transparency and evidence-based policy offers.

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About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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Economic and Social Impact

Assessing the economic impact of third sector organisations is a key research priority for TSRC. It is linked to our mapping and measuring of the sector, and has a particular focus on the role that third sector organisations play in delivering public services and contributing to general community wellbeing. We are engaged in a review of the wide range of existing methods and tools for measuring impact within TSOs including Social Return on Investment (SROI), blended impact measures and other adaptations of cost/benefit analysis. We will also develop sector wide analysis of economic impact of third sector activity and its contribution to the wider economy, including analysis of workforce trends, volunteering and third sector value.

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