An IPAC Case Study

Case Studies in Policy Innovation in Canada's Public Sector

City of Guelph: Open Guelph – Open Government Action Plan

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Title: Case Studies in Policy Innovation in Canada's Public Sector: City of Guelph: Open Guelph – Open Government Action Plan

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Abstract: This case study explores key mechanisms of policy capacity that can support Canadian public sector organizations to deliver policy and program innovation and excellence in an increasingly complex context. Open Guelph is the City of Guelph's implementation of open government based on its Open Government Action Plan, the first of its kind in Canada. Open Guelph is analyzed through Mohr's (1969) motivation-obstacles-resources lens which considers the motivations of organizations to innovate, the obstacles faced by governments contemplating innovation, and the resources drawn on to adopt these innovations. Several policy capacity mechanisms comprising the resources used to adopt innovative initiatives are revealed and examined.

Key Words

- Policy, policy capacity, innovation, policy innovation, open government, municipal government, communications, Ontario,

Innovation in the Public Sector: About This Series

Government and public agencies are constantly adapting and innovating. There is no shortage of challenges, natural, human and organizational, that demand it. Often innovation takes the forms of small steps, tentative trials and adaptations based on experimentation. Seldom is innovation of the big-bang, game-changing variety in government. It is more often the tentative change, the trial and error and adaptation or, as we see more often, the rapid response to major events, threats or urgent demands. The series opens with three cases, written by Malumir Logan and extracted from her larger look at innovation in the public sector, entitled, **Policy Capacity Mechanisms to Support Innovation in the Canadian Public Sector.**

We welcome more cases like this. IPAC celebrates innovation in the public sector in a number of ways, through its awards program and the content of its Annual Conference as well as the Leadership Conference. What case studies bring to the conversation is a granularity of detail and the capacity to learn from others through lessons learned, roads best not to take and practices that worked and might be applicable in other situations. For the academic, these cases provide concrete examples of what innovation actually is, what the challenges are and how to best understand the concept in the public context.

Please connect with the Case Study Editor if you have a case for the Series.

Initiative Description

Open Guelph is the City of Guelph's implementation of open government based on its Open Government Action Plan, the first of its kind in Canada (City of Guelph 24 July 2013). Guelph's approach to open government is designed to be a partnership between citizens and the public service, where local government becomes "open by default" and citizens "participate by nature" (City of Guelph 2014 "Action plan").

Open Guelph's approach reflects the evolving concept of open government from the historic notion of freeing information (i.e. open data, "government 2.0") to the current emphasis on "collaboration, shared resources and increased transparency and accountability." (City of Guelph 2014 "Interim report": 17; Francoli 2011: 152). This approach to open government "represents the capacity of new technology and a fundamental shift in the culture and practice of governance…its emphasis is on sharing, the distribution of power and collaboration." (2011: 153). It is important to keep this approach to open government in mind as we discuss this case further below.

Impetus for the Initiative

In 2011, there was exploratory political interest in open government. Two key champions at the City of Guelph—CAO Ann Pappert and then-City Clerk Blair Labelle—recognized that the city needed to commit to change in a big picture way to equip Guelph for the future. These leaders looked at open government from a long-term perspective, recognizing it as a unifying concept of organizational change that could be leveraged for the transformation of Guelph as an organization (I3 2016).

There was a broad understanding that citizens' expectations of their municipal governments are changing. Specifically, expectations are changing with respect to the information available, the means to access government, and the opportunities to participate in not only consultation but also decision-making. Guelph officials grew concerned that municipalities as institutions are designed based on an archaic model, and not on the way that citizens are now interacting with the world. Thus, the impetus to explore open government in Guelph was the recognition that the municipality needed to modernize in order to remain relevant to its citizens (I3 2016). The fact that local governments are infused in the day-to-day lives of citizens through service provision is well understood. However, the city asked itself whether citizens are able to reach out and touch the institution that provides those services, and whether or not citizens can adequately assess the performance of various services. In order to stay relevant and build trust with those who depend on the municipality as an important player in citizens'

everyday lives, Guelph recognized it needed to modernize not only what it does but how it does it (I3 2016).

City officials recognized the potential to achieve the following two broad goals at once by undertaking an exercise in open government: firstly, to improve the experience of residents (open data, open access technology) by modernizing services (using the best of current technology); and, secondly, to create new internal efficiencies (working smarter, not just harder) (I3 2016). Currently, the development of Open Guelph is reaching a critical mass, particularly now that there is a dedicated management resource. Guelph is the first municipality in the country with a management resource dedicated to this particular form of organization change. There is still much more work to be done and access points to be created through Open Guelph. The municipality is identifying new opportunities to expand, thinking about open government comprehensively, and investing in early and frequent engagement with citizens to feed into the design (I3 2016).

Initiative purpose

Operationalizing accountability, transparency and innovation into the design of city services is what open government means at the City of Guelph. There are three purposes Open Guelph seeks to achieve: the first is that public servants need to ensure that the problems they are working to resolve are done so with the citizen at the top of the chain. The ultimate purpose of Open Guelph is to entrench this notion of public service. The second purpose and an underlying driver is the necessity to transform the City of Guelph as an organization to meet the needs of citizens in the next five, ten and twenty years. City officials believe that a transformed organization will be better equipped to catch up with evolving needs of citizens. Finally, municipal resources in Canada are under considerable strain, particularly in the context of the infrastructure deficit. Therefore, the more creatively that Guelph can allocate resources and anticipate needs, the better positioned the city will be to respond to the new norm of public service in Canada (I3 2016).

Process and Outcomes to Date

In 2014, the City of Guelph Open Government Action Plan—a five-year planning document to evolve Guelph toward open government—was unanimously approved by the Guelph City Council (City of Guelph 2016). The development of this action plan involved extensive investment in soliciting a wide variety of input, ranging from informal to structured settings. There were informal conversations

(for example, the city provided toolkits for community members to have casual meet-ups with neighbours); there were structured, facilitated meetings with community groups such as civic actions groups, business groups and the university community; and, there was a "Change Camp" exercise with over one hundred participants. The purpose of this idea-generation and priority-setting engagement was to ensure the action plan would be responsive to citizen needs. The city wanted the action plan to be informed by citizens, with the lens that this was not an exercise to be done to citizens but for them. Akin to how technological companies develop end-user applications, the idea was to ask the actual users how to best solve issues (I3 2016).

Aptly described as "the beautiful mess of open government," (I3 2016) this form of public engagement is far more intensive than typical consultation processes in government. However, the city recognized that the outcomes of an extensive engagement process will be far more durable and effective in meeting the needs of the citizens for which Guelph is providing services (I3 2016).

These are early days for Open Guelph, but the initiative is on a productive trajectory. The creation of a dedicated management position and program area for this exercise is a significant indicator that Guelph as an organization is invested in Open Guelph. Particularly as the project is in early development, and given the breadth of its scope, it is significant that the city has invested in a dedicated management resource to think about the strategic health of the whole exercise and provide Guelph with the confidence that the organization will achieve success. This is particularly important, given the other responsibilities and urgent day-to-day matters that can emerge for those in positions with portfolios of more diverse scope (I3 2016).

Key Factors of Success

In early internal discussion, the program area acknowledged that measuring citizen trust is very difficult (e.g. baseline data that does not currently exist, outdated citizen surveys), particularly in trying to determine whether the measure of change is attributable to correlation or causation. The program area also recognized that while trust is part of an outcome related to open government, it is not the ultimate outcome. In working closely with program evaluators and other experts, Guelph decided to set aside measurements on trust for the time being and instead to focus its efforts on measuring services that impact people's lives (I3 2016).

Performance is measured against the Open Government Action Plan. In 2016, which is two years into the five-year plan, the city will perform an initial performance evaluation of the Action Plan. This performance evaluation will

assess firstly the city's progress on delivering Phases I and II of the Action Plan; secondly, any lessons learned thus far; and, thirdly, hard data such as accounting for the number of new digital services (I3 2016). The Guelph Map App is one example of how creative problem-solving can contribute to operational efficiency gains. Citizens can use the Map App with the same physical motions and same actions as sending in complaint tweets to solve bylaw and other problems. Bylaw enforcement officers used to respond to issues based on the order in which complaint phone calls were received, which could result in the bylaw enforcement officer driving greater distances to resolve receipt-order issues. Now that the bylaw enforcement officers can see the issues geographically on the GIS application, the officers can be allocated more efficiently based on geographic location of reported problems. In other words, innovative mechanisms like the Map App can result in the ability to allocate bylaw enforcement officers or other human resources such that the problem is resolved in a more efficient manner (I3 2016).

Additionally, the open government program area is currently working to determine how to measure impacts of Open Guelph innovations such as decreased frustration and saved time. However, there is recognition in the program area that these kinds of measures are different from measures strictly related to open data.

Barriers or Limitations Encountered

One challenge related to the implementation of Open Guelph is that there is overlap with how the public service and politicians engage with the public. It was important for the program area to frame issues in such a way that shows how changes in service delivery as part of Open Guelph are able to support public service goals while also meeting political objectives (I3 2016). Specifically, there are political figures in Guelph who believe strongly in directly providing accessible customer service to citizens. There is a spectrum of considerations with this characteristic, because on the one hand, a citizen can directly contact the institution via a political figure; the complaint or issue is then funnelled through various mechanisms before it reaches the operational area responsible to address the issue. Although such a process is less efficient, the citizen has the benefit of direct access to political representatives. On the other hand, if citizens are able to report issues directly to the operational area through an app, efficiency is substantially increased. Therefore, the city has been cognizant of the balance related to increasing efficiency without undercutting customer service (I3 2016).

One approach to better understanding this overlap has been one-on-one sessions the Open Guelph program manager has held with the majority of municipal representatives. These conversations have helped to relay how there is benefit in Open Guelph for everyone, because Open Guelph principles relate to politicians' common priorities such as core services, efficiency and transparency.

There are also internal challenges, including institutional resistance to change, and internal issues related to which areas are driving change, which areas are making changes, and which areas receive credit and recognition for undertaking the work associated with these changes.

Lessons Learned

Since the early development stages of Open Guelph, citizens have frequently been infused into its various processes; such as the Open Guelph Roundtable, which puts citizen members to work side by side (co-creating, not just consulting), making them very empowered. Guelph learned that there is a balance to be struck in providing empowerment. Specifically, empowerment gives responsibility, and responsibility can take time. If roundtable members are unpaid volunteers, there is a limit to what can be expected of them. Now that Guelph is on its third iteration of how the roundtable is operated, it is better structured to incorporate this learning about the natural tensions that exist with truly empowering citizens. In other words, Guelph has learned that there are limits to empowerment (I3 2016).

The fact that there are limitations such as these is not negative. There is a fine line between respecting and misusing volunteer citizens' time and skillsets. There is also a risk to the success of a project if citizen members are a key component of project success, but have limited time to dedicate to projects. Initial attempts at empowerment through the roundtable were a little too idealistic, but failure and learning were important because it equipped the city to adjust its approach (I3 2016). Overall, Guelph is in the process of learning the practical realities of aligning the concept of increased citizen engagement in this real work, given other constraints (finance, council, provincial legislation) (I3 2016).

Political and Public Acceptance

So far, there has not yet been sufficient communication about the new Open Guelph initiative for there to have been much reaction from the public. Part of the context is that open government in Guelph has transitioned from being "fuzzy" as a concept to being tangible as a priority undertaking. Another factor is the

intensity of the day-to-day work of operationalizing Open Guelph; the people doing that work are highly productive, but are taxed with the range of duties and long term goals associated with the file (I3 2016).

From a political perspective, Open Guelph is revolutionizing the nature of day to day service delivery duties; part of the challenge of this change is the need for upfront investment to achieve that change (I3 2016). Lack of funding to date has been good in the sense that it has helped to fuel creativity and innovation. The city has so far been able to find ways to free up existing resources and has been able to innovate in ways that are less financially taxing on the organization. However, the city may need to assess the point at which the development of Open Guelph could benefit from funding support (I3 2016).

Motivation-Obstacles-Resources Context

Similar to the first case, we will discuss the obstacles which helped to fuel the motivation for the implementation of Open Guelph, and will then examine the policy capacity mechanisms at play in this case.

Obstacles

The obstacles in the development of Open Guelph were related to firstly internal concerns for potential risks of misperceptions stemming from transparency and secondly impacts of transforming established organizational operations. While there is potential for internal obstacles common to any organizational transformation, existing challenges have been overcome with an educational communications approach that seeks to frame the transformation in the ways that it benefits political and internal leaders, the public, and the organization as a whole. Additionally, vulnerability is a significant aspect of this work, in that, Guelph communicates openly the full extent of what the city is trying to accomplish, not just a minimum that the city can guarantee it will do. Institutions often try to manage or lower expectations as a risk management tool, but Open Guelph is itself open about why, how and when the municipality does things. This exercise in vulnerability is based on trust that citizens will be open to having an open conversation based on shared goals (I3 2016). For example, Open Guelph hosts an online budget simulator which allows citizens to experience the types of decisions the city faces when developing and approving the annual budget. While current media culture does not always lend itself to facilitating informed conversations about public services, the city recognizes that instead of shying away, it can work to build resilience in its provision of customer service (I3 2016).

Motivation

With roots planted in the history of Freedom of Information legislation, open government as a concept has evolved from access to information into a transformation of how government operates (City of Guelph 2014, "Interim report": 17; City of Guelph 2012; Francoli 2011). This new notion of open government is characterized by "collaboration, shared resources and increased transparency and accountability." (2014: 17; 2011: 152). In 2009, the United States government issued an Open Government Directive to all of its departments and agencies "to take specific actions to implement the principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration set forth in the President's Memorandum" (United States Executive Office of the President 2009; Obama 2009). In 2011, the Government of Canada launched its Open Government initiative "to enhance its transparency and accountability to Canadians" (Government of Canada 2011) and in 2012 joined the international Open Government Partnership (Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada 2014) which has grown from eight participating countries in 2011 to 69 in 2016 (Open Government Partnership 2016). Additionally, as technology has continued to evolve, so has the increasingly participative market and democratic context within which individuals interact with their product and service providers (City of Guelph 2012). It is in this context that a new business model for government in the form of open government or "Government 2.0" has become globally recognized and increasingly adopted in recent years (OECD 2011). Within this frame of reference, Guelph's political leaders had an interest in open government as part of its long term strategic direction to support organizational excellence, innovation in local government and city building objectives (City of Guelph 2012).

Resources

Based on our framework for discussion which defines Mohr's resources component as policy capacity, which includes analytical, operational and political skills and resources, below are key mechanisms that supported adoption of Open Guelph in this case study. Policy capacity elements in this case included the following:

- The analytical, operational and political elements of policy capacity reflected in the political will and internal leadership that resulted in Guelph Council's decision to include in its corporate strategic planning process consideration of how open government in Guelph could support several strategic objectives.

- o Analytical resources existed in the provision of advice that resulted in Council's decision to approve the Open Government Action Plan and approve incorporation of open government in its Corporate Strategic Plan Framework; operational resources existed in the form of the internal decision making and relationship management processes of the City Clerk's office to lead the development of the Open Government Action Plan; and finally, political resources existed in the political will of Council to support the action plan even though open government is still in its very early stages globally, and in particular was not yet commonplace among Canadian local governments at the time. This also reflected political resources in the leadership culture of openness to change.
- Analytical resources that provided the research, analysis and advice to support the development of Guelph's Open Government Framework which informed the development of the Open Government Action Plan.
- Operational resources to recognize that in order for Open Guelph to be successful, there would need to be a wide range of people across the organization who are working on it and achieving quality results. In order to achieve this organization-wide buy-in, the municipality recognized that champions must be identified; to create champions, it was a priority to frame the initiative by its benefits to the potential champion specifically. This notion of working to gain buy-in from various actors reflects the importance of knowing one's audience and framing conversations based on that knowledge.
- Analytical, operational and political resources to recognize the value of and enable:
  - o Inclusion of this priority in the strategic planning process.
  - o Employment of a well-designed consultation process to inform the plan's development.
  - o Internal willingness to consider how this priority will change business management operations.

Internal leadership to recognize the importance of assigning and funding a dedicated management resource to the initiative in order to continue to build relationships,

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