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The Everyday Local State? Opening up and closing down informality in local governance

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Introduction

In the UK the combination of deficit reduction pursued by national governments since 2010 and the policy agenda of localism has led to the concept of 'austerity localism', or the political agenda of framing the local as a site of social responsibility and civic engagement to support further neoliberal reforms and fiscal retrenchment (Featherstone et al. 2012, 177). It is characterised by local government funding cuts, reduced public service provision, and the promotion of citizen self-provision of (formerly public) services. Local government is thus both 'site and target' (Ward et al. 2015, 444), seeking to foster local responses amongst citizens and third sector organisations (TSOs) whilst passing down ongoing cuts imposed by central government. In England, the budget of the central government department that allocates local government revenue funding underwent estimated real terms funding cuts of nearly 40% between 2011 and 2015 (Beatty and Fothergill 2014).

Debates about how local governance is changing as a result are illuminated by considering state and civil society practices and how they relate, using the lens of informality. Drawing from phased research comprising interviews and documentary review in a case study local government area, we consider how the governance of informal practice and the everyday local state develops under austerity by considering informality as both a top-down (government-instigated) and bottom-up (civil society-instigated) process. We find that both local government and civil society actors got better at instigating and responding to informality and navigating its contradictions under austerity, underlining the mutually constitutive nature of state and civil society in the operations of the 'everyday local state' (after Hilbrandt, 2019) and the importance of boundary spanning practices and individuals in realising this. But over time we find that the ongoing strictures of funding cuts are closing down informality and constraining the creativity that has been engendered, as the local state centralises in response. Our case of Cardiff, Wales adds to understandings of austerity localism which have focused on the experience in English local authorities (for example,

Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013; Penny 2017) and is of international relevance in considering everyday, local ways of coping with austerity (Davies and Blanco 2017; Davies 2017).

The article proceeds as follows. We first explain the usefulness of considering practice to understand changes in local governance as austerity discourses are introduced onto the policy agenda. We then explain our approach to informal practice as a top-down as well as bottom-up process and set out the four-model framework used in our analysis. Following an explanation of the research approach and case background, we then present our findings and analysis of how informal practice is reshaping local governance in three realms of community service delivery (via asset transfer, co-production and service commissioning). We conclude by considering what is revealed about the progress and effects of austerity localism on local state-society relations and the broader implications of our research approach.

Understanding through practice

Debates about governance under austerity localism range from the potentially empowering effects of local action, evidenced by the wide-ranging literature on co-production and collaborative governance, to its interpretation as the neoliberal expression of state power, described as 'austerian realism' or the realpolitik imposition of cuts due to the perceived lack of alternatives (Davies and Blanco 2017, 1524). Accounts that emphasise empowerment are criticised for being too optimistic about bottom-up agency, neglecting structural factors and power imbalances (Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke 2014). Those which emphasise the imposition of neoliberalism are critiqued for being overly pessimistic about citizen agency and disregarding the variegated forms of local governance that result (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010).

Considering practice helps to circumnavigate these debates about agency. We focus on informal practice and how local government and civil society actors instigate and respond to informality over time. To set this in context, previous critical policy and new institutionalist studies have deployed relational concepts such as assemblages (Janet Newman, 2014) and institutional bricolage (Lowndes and McCaughie 2013) to consider practice under austerity. These find hope in 'an active politics of the present' (Lowndes and McCaughie 2013, 546) expressed in context-contingent, creative responses. In their case study of an English (city) local authority, Lowndes and McCaughie (2013, 533) found that practices fell between the

extremes of 'trimming' (responding in an ad hoc way to cuts) and 'transformation' (strategic innovation), concluding that local government has a 'remarkable capacity to reinvent its institutional forms'. Political geography scholarship has engaged in debates about the 'prosaic state' of everyday state-society relations (Painter 2006). In contrast, the rich urban geography literature about everyday (informal, do-it-yourself, temporary) urbanisms tends not to consider local government's role, presumed to be absent from the peripheral sites housing marginal populations where research has focused (Hilbrandt 2019, 353). This scholarship emphasises the possibilities for urban activism (Mayer 2013) with its focus on 'minor practices, small acts… that create material spaces of hope' (Tonkiss 2013, 323). Disciplines share recognition of the importance of everyday actions, which comprise the first principle of practice theory (Feldman and Worline 2016, 310). The second principle, of mutual constitution, emphasises the importance of practices which (and individuals who) can span state-society boundaries to create the everyday local state.

Informality

Our approach to informal practice encompasses the role of both state and civil society actors, thus refining the general association made in public policy scholarship of the state with 'the formal' and consequently with formal institutions, and citizen or community activity with 'the informal'. Focusing on central-local state relations, recent research in England into the devolution of responsibilities from central government to groupings of local authorities recognises the importance of state-engendered informality (Ayres 2017; Lowndes and Lemprière 2018). In considering informal governance, or a 'means of decision-making that is uncodified, non-institutional and where social relationships play crucial roles', Ayres (2017, 90) finds that highly-skilled boundary spanners, linked by informal relationships and able to translate agreements into practice, play a critical role. Taking a new institutionalist approach, which has long recognised the importance of informal aspects of institutional regimes, Lowndes and Lemprière (2018, 237) stress the importance of informal practices of collaboration or competition in the formation of local authority groupings. But these approaches do not explicitly relate to the promotion of civil society activity under austerity localism. In turn, urban geography scholarship has largely bypassed the role of the state in informal processes.

In order to address our core question of how the governance of informal practice and the everyday local state develops under austerity, we therefore draw from Tonkiss' (2013; 2014) more holistic approach to informality and the everyday practice of local governance, which encompasses the local state in simultaneous interaction with civil society actors. The approach considers informality as both a top-down (local government-instigated) as well as bottom-up (civil society-instigated) process, important given the accentuation of informality under austerity localism as local government seeks to offload responsibilities to communities (Peck 2012). That informality is engendered by the state as well as civil society actors reiterates practice theory's emphasis on mutual constitution (Feldman and Worline 2016, 310). Formality and informality are also mutually constitutive – informality 'is not "outside" formal systems, but… is always intimately related to them' (Porter 2011, 116) – and both produce 'everyday lived experience' (Iveson et al. 2018, 4). In the 'everyday local state' (Hilbrandt 2019), everyday practices shape the state. Taking a civil society perspective in considering how people negotiate with state agents (such as street-level bureaucracies), interpret the law or engage with peers to gain 'room for manoeuvre' (2019, 353), Hilbrandt concludes that people co-construct the local state by mediating its regulatory frames. She reiterates the importance of boundary spanning by underlining the false dichotomy drawn between state and society which disregards overlying networks of practice.

In general terms, informality is typically used to denote activities that do not conform to existing legal regulations. As a concept, informality is contested depending on disciplinary perspective. Understanding informality requires an appreciation of its inherent ambiguities and contradictions, described by Roy (2009, 9) as the 'grayness… between legality and illegality, the recognised and the criminalised, the included and the marginalised'. Tonkiss defines it not in terms of legality, but as a concept which encapsulates less formality, or anti-formality, whether or not these practices are regulated by legal rules and whether or not they are endured (collectively expected) (Tonkiss 2014, 93). Tonkiss' conceptualisation contrasts with that of new institutionalism, wherein institutions can be either formal or informal as long as they comprise rules (or norms) with an enforcer - in contrast to practice, which can in turn become institutionalised if rules (or norms) and an enforcer emerge (Lowndes and Roberts 2013). Drawing from Tonkiss, here we define informality as practice in its non-institutionalised form, which as yet is not formally, legally regulated and consequently is not necessarily enforced. This definition is pertinent to our phased analysis because it focuses on the liminal periods where everyday practice is either endured (collectively expected) or not,

and whether a practice begins to be sanctioned through legal rules or societal norms or not. These periods of liminal transition are important to our focus through phased research on the shifts wrought under austerity localism – and how these open up and close down opportunities for informal practice.

Models of Local State Responses to Informality

We deploy Tonkiss' (2013, 313-14) four models of local state stances towards or responses to informality under austerity. We describe her first two models, under which informality is enabled or allowed respectively, as 'informality from above' as they are engendered by the local state. The third and fourth models, under which informality is proscribed or the local state withdraws, comprise local state responses to what we term 'informality from below' as these are engendered by citizens, community groups or TSOs. Taking each of Tonkiss' models in turn, the first is *a **positive model*** where local governments use the powers available to create the conditions for informal agencies, such as making asset transfers to community management/ ownership. The second is a ***permissive model*** that does not seek to facilitate such agencies, but does not exclude them (whether for ideological reasons or due to regulatory incapacity). These 'top-down informality' models contrast with the third, a ***proscription model*** that precludes bottom-up informalities by constraining negotiation, improvisation, and initiative, such as through the criminalisation of squatting. The fourth is an ***abandonment model*** in which 'urban territory is ceded to independent agency', leaving even very basic forms of provision to self-generation and social effort. The last resort of such 'extreme economy' is evident in some US cities where austerity is normalised (Davies and Pill 2012; Peck 2012, 626). Whilst the models can be readily critiqued for being too neat or distinct when in actuality they can co-exist simultaneously within and across different spaces and policy realms, as an analytical frame they provide us with a way of identifying transitions in practice over relatively short periods of time riven with uncertainty, thus providing a useful heuristic to understand changes in state-society relations as austerity localism progresses. In turn, to understand practice we need to be mindful of the inherent contradictions and ambiguities of informality (Roy 2009). Two contradictions identified by Tonkiss (2014) help problematise our analysis: that between self-help and abandonment; and between temporary use and insecurity. 'Self-help' refers to the state capitalising on informal networks of social and welfare provision that can provide services beyond or instead of the under-resourced or retreating state (Tonkiss 2014, 103). The contradiction is that the more the community is engaged in service provision, the less state provision is required. Informality is also

expressed in temporary uses increasingly encouraged by the local state as a policy tool to reactivate and protect spaces (via pop-ups and meanwhile uses) in the interim before more valuable uses emerge (Deslandes 2013). This contradiction is relevant given the ways in which, and on what terms, the local state seeks to transfer, or community/ third sector actors seek to appropriate, public assets.

Research Approach

To consider how the governance of informal practice and the everyday local state develops under austerity we consider informality as both a top-down (government-instigated) and bottom-up (civil society-instigated) process. Prior austerity localism scholarship has selected individual local authority areas for detailed case research, which can be considered appropriate as these areas form both its 'site and target' (Ward et al. 2015, 444). Our selection of Cardiff adds a Welsh case to those focused on English (urban) local authorities (such as Lowndes and McCaughie 2013; Penny 2017). Our approach is also distinguished by its three research phases which enable us to consider the progress of austerity localism in the city and the implications for informal practice.

Tonkiss' four models and associated contradictions provide a useful framework for the analysis, through which we identify the mix of models in operation to illuminate whether and how the local state has sought to engender (top-down) and responded to (bottom-up) community-based informal practice. In drawing out informality from above and below, the approach enables consideration of how, in its interactions, the local state contributes to informality and the creation of the everyday local state to cope with austerity. We consider the roles and relations between citizens, councillors, Cabinet members and local government officers. We especially focus on the TSO officers described in previous research as 'hybrid officers' due to their community-based organisations becoming hybrids (between the third and public sector) as the organisations become enrolled in provision of (formerly public) services offloaded under austerity (Pill and Guarneros-Meza 2018; Skelcher and Smith 2015). In contrast to Ayres' (2017) examination of boundary spanners across tiers of government, we use the concept to underline the role of hybrid officers spanning between the state and civil society, who take risks and are creative in their attempts to reconcile informal and formal practices (which stem from the state and their communities) as part of efforts to cope with austerity.

Our analysis draws from a combination of documentary review of policy reports and qualitative research conducted in two principal phases (spring/ summer 2014; and spring 2015) and a subsidiary phase (winter 2017). A total of 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted, fifteen in the first phase, fourteen in the second and two in the third. Given repeat interviews with some respondents across the phases, a total of 23 respondents were interviewed: a Welsh government assembly member; a senior Welsh government officer; four city councillors (including two Cabinet members); three senior city government officers, including the 'network manager' responsible for the Cardiff Partnership and CF clusters (explained below); ten TSO officers, of which five were neighbourhood-based; and four citizen activists. Six respondents (two councillors, the network manager, two TSO officers and a citizen activist) were interviewed in both the first and second phases; and the same two TSO officers were interviewed for a third time in December 2017 to gain a sector-specific update augmented by further substantive documentary review. Such analysis is a useful resource to inform understanding of future practice, given the mutual constitution of formality and informality.

Interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and coded to surface the nature of and attitudes towards informal and formal practices in community service provision, using Tonkiss' models of informality as a framework for analysis (summarised in Table 1). Community services are non-statutory services which meet community social needs, such as the maintenance and management of community centres; play and youth service provision; and employment support services. Community service delivery practice is mediated by the Council and TSOs in three realms addressed in turn in our analysis of informal practice - community asset transfer, citizen engagement in service co-production, and service commissioning.

Cardiff

Cardiff (population 361,000) is the capital of Wales. Welsh local governments share many experiences with their English counterparts due to the extent of UK government funding cuts, but these are also shaped by some distinctive Welsh Government policies, including which public services are protected; policies and new legislation about collaboration; and continued emphasis on poverty reduction. In Wales, cuts to local government grants are ongoing year-on-year though these have not been as severe as in England (Ogle, Luchinskaya, and Trickey 2017, 10). The Welsh Government has protected spending on health, schools and social

services, meaning that other, non-statutory services (environmental, planning, culture, libraries, sports, childcare and youth provision) have faced the brunt. Cardiff Council had a £100 million funding gap for the three-year period to March 2017 (Cardiff Council 2013a) and a similar shortfall for the following three years to March 2020 (Cardiff Council 2016). The Council has 'made £200m in savings over the past ten years' and has 'lost 1,600 full time employees over the past five years' (Cardiff Council 2016). In addition to cuts, its repertoire has included increasing Council Tax to 'enable us to continue to finance some of the non-statutory services residents want' (Cardiff Council 2017a), increasing online 'self-service', and an annual citizen consultation on budget priorities (the 'Cardiff Debate'). As in many English cities, the Council adapted its city-wide partnership of service providers to co-ordinate cuts, leverage resources and offload service delivery. It sought to rationalise and join-up service provision through creating multi-service 'community hubs' (combining the local library, housing office and other services) and developed partnerships with major third sector entities (such as the YMCA) to deliver leisure centre services. With the rise of the self-help imperative as non-statutory community services were cut, existing cross-service neighbourhood partnerships were tasked with co-ordinating their work with the efforts of neighbourhood-based TSOs and informal community groups (Cardiff Council 2013b). Policy document discourse emphasised the need for communities to 'step up' to manage formerly public assets and engage in service provision (Cardiff Partnership 2016).

Distinctive to Wales was retention of its national tackling poverty initiative, Communities First (CF). In Cardiff, the Council contracted neighbourhood-based TSOs to manage its four CF clusters. In England, cessation of such spatially-targeted initiatives was compounded by the removal of a national framework of minimum standards, and the localism agenda was presented as empowering localities to determine their own priorities. Wales has continued to prioritise redressing socio-spatial inequality. The Well-being of Future Generations Act (Welsh Government 2015a) affirmed the role of local collaboration. Local partnerships were tasked with creating local well-being plans, expected to align with poverty reduction goals by targeting service improvements in the most deprived communities. Alignment is expedient as the CF initiative ceased in March 2018 with significant repercussions for its third sector infrastructure.

Findings

Community Asset Transfer

Community asset transfer exemplifies the positive model of the local state's response to informality, wherein local government uses its powers to create the conditions for informal agencies. But an examination of practice in Cardiff illustrates the complexities of the interplays between informality from above and below in this realm. The community 'right to bid' for designated community assets enshrined in the Localism Act (2011) applies only in England. Welsh Government, in describing asset transfer as 'present[ing] opportunities for the community to own and manage facilities that might otherwise be closed down because the local authority is unable to subsidise them any longer' (Welsh Government 2015b) clearly locates the approach as part of the local state's response to austerity. But it had yet to develop policies in this regard. In first phase interviews, a Welsh Government senior officer commented that in England, 'it isn't a simple case of that [right] came in and everything followed in an obvious order, and the communities are now running pubs and shops and libraries'. Local and Welsh state interviewees underscored the challenge of implementation, such as the need to map community assets and, as the senior officer commented, 'the huge governance, financial issues coming down the line'. Welsh local councils were thus left to proceed with developing their own approaches.

The Council's network manager explained the Cardiff Debate process had 'demonstrated there's actually a huge amount of community appetite and interest out there… we've been quite blatant and said all these buildings are potentially up for community asset transfer'. By the research second phase, the Cardiff Partnership's 'Stepping Up' toolkit (first version 2015) sought to provide guidance to communities on how to do so. The Council's network manager saw it as 'hugely complex and a massive challenge' which 'everyone's expecting to be chaos'. The Council was seeking initial business plans from groups as a 'screening process', and had identified some resource to support subsequent development (such as funding for legal advice). From a bottom-up perspective, TSOs identified asset transfer as a realm in which greater informality on the part of the Council - such as lighter regulation and higher tolerance of risk - was not yet evident. One described 'push[ing] quite hard to try and get a community asset transfer for the library [about to be replaced by a community hub at another site]... we were clearly told we weren't going to get it'.

The asset transfers which had gone ahead aligned with the permissive rather than positive model, under which local government does not seek to facilitate but does not exclude informal agencies. A neighbourhood-based TSO officer explained how the TSO had occupied vacant, Council-owned premises, thus demonstrating informal, everyday agency:

> 'We just squatted really. We had keys and we came in and we started developing and using this space. It wasn't being used. It'd been decommissioned as a youth centre... we eventually got a licence to occupy this building, which is only supposed to be for a few months… eventually, I think it was almost two years after we got in… we got a 99-year lease'.

The Council responded to the informality of squatting with informality, in that it was permissive about the incursion into disused space. The important role of boundary spanners in realising and responding to informal practice was stressed, as the TSO officer explained:

> 'They just didn't have the climate to shift stuff in the Council. Then they brought in one of these project managers who just started moving stuff and changing stuff. Since she came in, I think we completed [getting the lease] in a few months. It was just such a shift. You have the right person who you spoke to and said "get it done"'.

Thus informality from above was evident as the Council enabled informal agencies (the positive model) via its signalling through the Cardiff Debate process of its willingness to take some risk by enrolling communities to take over assets, and its development of the 'stepping up' agenda; and also allowed informality (the permissive model) as evidenced by its response to the occupation and use of the fledgling community centre. But communities need resource and capacity to capitalise on this positive/ permissive stance, as a TSO officer stressed: 'it's got two sides really, with that excitement and let's put this back into the community, but… there's that frustration… how are [the community] supposed to take these things forward without the funding, without support from the local authority?' In this example capacity is embodied in a neighbourhood-based TSO that marshals community action and acts as a community-Council intermediary, but the TSO is significantly reliant on the Council to sustain via contracts (such as to manage the now-ceased CF programme) and being commissioned to deliver services. Thus the Council's permissive response to the TSO's

squatting was undergirded by the leverage it could exert over the organisation if the need arose.

By third phase interviews, TSO officers related a change in the city's political leadership (personnel, not party) to a change in local state attitudes to community asset transfer, which reflected longstanding factional divisions within the city's dominant Labour party:

> 'The change was this shift of the Cabinet… you had this whole struggle between Old and New Labour, essentially… the Cabinet now has gone back to… an absolute belief that stuff should be run in-house… state-run… they're missing massive opportunities now in terms of the social value, the added value, that [the TSO] can provide'.

Citizen engagement in co-producing services

Citizen engagement is normatively powerful and has long been invoked on the basis that the knowledge and expertise of citizen-users 'opens up new ways of doing things' (Ines Newman 2014, 191). A central tenet of the CF neighbourhood initiative was that local people are best placed to understand their needs and, together with local service providers, consider how services should be improved (Welsh Government 2006). However, the state retrenchment of austerity has increased the imperative for the local state to inculcate self-help practices rather than seek community input into service improvement. In Cardiff, the 'stepping up' agenda incorporated community self-provision of services (Cardiff Partnership 2016) and the Cardiff Debate process was again used to disseminate the necessity of such practices. By second phase interviews, a Council Cabinet member described increasing, if patchy, public recognition of the urgency of finding alternatives to former Council-provided services and stressed the range of community groups interested in taking services over. A ward councillor, in contrast, questioned 'how realistic it is to expect communities to take over full-time'.

'Co-production' was widely invoked by those interviewed, but most made clear they lacked understanding of the term, with a ward councillor commenting, 'nobody is quite sure. As councillors we are struggling with it'. Discourse revealed demands from below for both greater informality and formality on the part of the state. A neighbourhood-based TSO practitioner called for greater informality from above, as 'it's actually [about] taking a bit of a

risk, releasing some funding'. But most interviewed, including other TSOs, called for greater formality in terms of codification and regulation on the part of Cardiff Council and the Welsh Government, 'there have to be some measures around it', 'it needs to be held accountable'. This related to suspicions about it being a synonym for cuts, 'the danger', as a TSO officer explained, that 'we will be simply putting people where state employees once were as the state rolls back'. Here the fourth model of the local state's response to informality, that of abandonment, is most pertinent, under which service provision is ceded to 'self-generation and social effort' (Tonkiss 2013, 314).

In practice, we identified various examples of co-production/ self-help involving the neighbourhood-based TSOs. The TSOs saw their role as ensuring that informal, community (voluntary) groups have 'the infrastructure needed so they can focus on running their group', including assistance with managing risk (such as police checks). One TSO gained Council agreement for community volunteers to work alongside Council staff in running a new community hub; and had also assisted community groups to provide school holiday activities following cuts to the Council's youth service. The now-formalised, formerly squatted community centre hosts self-help activities such as a clothes bank, community shop, food co-op and community garden. A TSO officer explained:

> 'If volunteers are supported in the right way, they can really do incredible things. They run the food and veg co-op. We had a paid member of staff running that [then the volunteers] just started doing it. We had a bit of a gap for six months. It's [now] running really effectively'.

The voluntarism of some of these community self-help examples was supported through use of timebanking, a 'community currency' which imposes equivalence on the value of people's time. Under its 'one hour equals one hour' principle, enrolled residents can earn and spend 'timecredits' in and on voluntary-provided services (Gregory 2014). The approach challenges the boundaries between formal and informal economies, drawing on the reciprocal relations and social capital that adhere within communities to constitute a non-monetary mode of exchange. Importantly, the Council encouraged this informality by rolling out timebanking to all four of the TSO-managed neighbourhood CF clusters, and helped underpin this informal economy by allowing timecredits earned through voluntarism to be exchanged for Council leisure services. But in contrast to the use of timebanking as a mechanism to engage

marginalised citizen-users in reflective practice with service delivery agencies (as posited by Ines Newman 2014, 192), in practice in Cardiff it was used to prompt self-help.

As with community asset transfer, in the realm of co-production the TSOs and the voluntary practices they support remained extensively reliant on the underpinning provided by the local state to capitalise on the mix of the positive and permissive models of informality from above. The change in the city's political leadership heralded timebanking's shift from a positive, actively encouraged by the local state practice (enabled by the lever of CF funding), to a permissive, allowed-to-occur practice to support the voluntarism of community self-provision. A TSO officer explained that the former Council leader and Cabinet had 'got that third sector vision… now we have a Cabinet where it's just very internal… there's definitely not the appetite, as it was, to take [timebanking] forward'. But another TSO officer clarified:

> 'Cardiff still remains quite a vibrant centre of timebanking and I think the Council, in quite a laissez-faire way… they're not pushing us hard… they just see [timebanking] dovetailing with a lot of stuff they're trying to achieve'.

These changes in political leadership also played out in terms of the city-wide infrastructure of neighbourhood partnerships. The infrastructure was retooled during the first two research phases in an effort to rationalise and co-ordinate the formal and informal service provision of public agencies, TSOs and community groups. The role of ward councillors as community leaders was seemingly revalorised, with each partnership gaining a 'lead member' who, as a Cabinet member explained, 'actually makes sure that things are happening and delivered' by aligning local state and civil society efforts. In practice, a ward councillor explained they continued to be excluded from decision-making regarding neighbourhood service needs and delivery, so that whilst 'councillors generally tend to drive their communities to accept an idea… it's very difficult to do that when you're not involved in the setting up of the [neighbourhood] plan to a meaningful degree'. TSOs engaged in the partnerships experienced similar frustrations relating to the constrained scope for informality, citing the level of prescription and 'ridiculous monitoring'. Thus the use of neighbourhood partnerships as a mechanism to ostensibly engage citizens in co-production aligns with the third model of the local state's proscription of informality through constraining negotiation, improvisation, and initiative. By third phase research TSO officers explained that the 'not functional' neighbourhood partnership infrastructure, not regarded as a credible mode of engaging citizens, had 'petered out'.

Commissioning Services

As in English local authorities, in Cardiff commissioning was presented as a way of streamlining service provision by aligning it with need in light of the outcomes sought. Previous practices of grant roll-over to TSOs were switched to needs assessment and identification of priority areas to inform development of specifications for service commissioning. As a TSO officer observed, scope for informality was constrained as the Council 'are moving to a service delivery model where you only get the money for doing the work and it's really tight and you're essentially tied into their [service commissioning] processes'.

Some TSOs saw themselves as contributing to the commissioning process, seeing it as an opportunity to develop services 'with a community-grounded approach', perceived as boosted by the emphasis on social value, or the collective benefit to a community, of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015). A TSO officer described the Act as 'really radical, it's absolutely ground-breaking globally' but also recognised 'there is so much room for tickboxing'. Signs in practice thus far are mixed regarding the extent to which the Act assists in engendering informality from above in terms of engaging citizen-users and TSOs in identifying needs and service design and delivery, in part because during third phase research the Council was still preparing the statutory well-being plan for the city. The dangers of commissioning turning into a procurement process with the Council 'missing opportunities' due to lack of wide engagement in needs-based planning and insufficient weighting of social value were identified by TSOs:

> 'We're trying to push social values… for example, the well-being stuff, we might try and push for some clauses around… employees 70% should be local – so there's different things you can do, but it's very limited… inevitably it's about price… social value, the community... that whole idea about what a community organisation can provide doesn't really feature highly'.

With the end of the CF initiative Cardiff Council was allocated a £550k 'legacy fund' by Welsh Government to engender community participation and engagement (Cardiff Council 2017b), along with £1.2 million funding for employment support services. The innovation the Council showed in its previous outsourcing, enabling some informality (such as

contracting TSOs to manage the CF initiative) is no longer in evidence, as a TSO officer commented:

> 'What we've seen in Cardiff is the local authority being forced to make budget cuts… legacy funding and employability [the Council] have just pulled all that back in-house. There's a good argument in terms of rationalisation… our argument… is that they're losing what we can provide… that trust and that link to the community… it's a tale of two worlds, of different approaches, different values. With the best intentions in the world, the Council is not going to offer the same kind of care and support'.

Again the third, proscriptive model is revealed as the local state shuts down previous informalities by constraining negotiation, improvisation, and initiative in commissioning services. The scope to bring in wider groups of citizens, especially the 'hard to reach' in deprived communities, was drastically narrowed by the Council's shift to retaining services in-house. A TSO's written submission (shared with us) in response to the Council's tokenistic consultation on its in-sourcing of these services (Cardiff Council 2017b) stated:

> 'Where in this consultation is there an opportunity to reflect on the positive outcomes of CF, the services which work best, the 15 years of accumulated knowledge and techniques... the capacity of the organic approach used by community organisations to experiment with fresh approaches and introduce improvements and innovations in their services?... The fact that the proposals have reached this advanced stage without any of this collaboration is disturbing and indicative of how little understanding or regard there is for the expertise of the voluntary sector'.

Discussion

Table 1: Local State Responses to Informality: Cardiff Community Services Provision

Informality from above	
POSITIVE: creates conditions for informality	PERMISSIVE: tolerates informality
- Cardiff Debate: used to enrol communities into necessity of taking over assets and engaging in service provision, signalled Council risk-taking - Stepping Up toolkit: to assist in community asset transfer and service co-production - Cardiff Partnership: seek to co-ordinate TSO/ citizen and state activities via Neighbourhood Partnerships; leadership role for ward councillors	- TSO squatting vacant Council-owned community centre (then formalised) - Some Council risk-tasking eg community volunteers working alongside Council staff; support for voluntarism via timebanking - Well-being of Future Generations Act/ well-being plans – social value emphasis signalled community-grounded service design and delivery, openness to TSO organic approach
Informality from below	
PROSCRIPTIVE: precludes informality	ABANDONMENT: neglect hence self-generation
- Decline in local state assistance for TSOs to support community asset transfer and voluntarism - Neighbourhood Partnerships: remained centralised, high monitoring, now moribund - Lack of wide engagement in needs-based service planning; social value insufficiently weighted in commissioning processes	- Self-help in service delivery rather than 'genuine' co-production - But TSO support for self-help voluntarism reliant on local state - recentralisation of community engagement and employment services hinders TSOs' innovation by cutting off boundary spanning processes

Source: authors' elaboration of Tonkiss' (2013) four models

Table 1 sets out how the local state has sought to engender informality from above and responded to informality from below. Our three-phase research reveals how opportunities for informality have opened up and closed down as austerity localism has progressed. The first phase (2014) can be characterised as 'preparing too late'. Those interviewed were attempting to respond to the strictures of funding cuts, and state-society collaboration was seen as a way of combining resources to cope. But as elsewhere, the rushed nature of cuts undermined the collaborative working the local state was seeking to engender. One ward councillor commented 'we should have been planning and working on our response… rather than what's happened is we're left to the last minute'. Another expressed concern at the lack of preparation 'because the Council wants to save money quickly'. But importantly, the second phase (2015) can be characterised as one of 'adjusting' as changes in practice started to materialise in community service delivery. Opportunities for informality opened up from above in a combination of the positive and permissive models, with some risk-taking,

facilitated by boundary spanning hybrid officers located in both community-based and city-wide TSOs and the Council. Ward councillors were also revealed as important actors in both top-down and bottom-up processes of informality. Councillors disseminated the inevitability of cuts and the need for communities to 'step up'. But in fulfilling their boundary spanning role of working with their communities and with Council officers and colleagues (Ines Newman, 2014), some councillors displayed a more activist sensibility in how they facilitated informality from below, for example by working with TSOs to encourage creative forms of co-production and in pressing for simplified asset transfer processes.

Overall across the first two phases we found signs of growing informality in community service delivery as local state and civil society actors became more sophisticated in navigating the mix of models. Our findings affirm that in contrast to assumptions that everyday agency is directed against the state or developed in its absence (Hilbrandt 2019, 354), everyday state-civil society relations are mutually constituted. For example, timebanking, championed by the Council, does exemplify the contradiction of informality between 'genuine' co-production of public services by engaging citizens with service providers and the 'abandonment' of self-help. But, as Tonkiss (2013, 323) explains, whilst 'it can easily be argued that such practices are co-optative as they are complicit in austerity localism's emphasis on self-managed practice… in such settings, co-optation is a condition of the work of these practitioners'. TSO officers were keen to stress that they did not undertake their activities 'despite [the Council]. It's a good working relationship with Council.' Another emphasised that throughout the research period 'we've continued to have a relationship with the Council and they've seemed to be pretty supportive of the work that we do'.

But these signs of informality did not consolidate. The third phase (2017) can be characterised as a 'recentralising' to the local state, wherein opportunities for informality were closed down as the proscriptive model emerged with its constraints on negotiation, improvisation and initiative. This finding, from limited third phase interview data, was supported by substantive documentary review (Cardiff Council 2016, 2017a, 2017b). Efforts to boost ward councillors' role as community leaders were in abeyance, along with decreased resource at the neighbourhood level via TSOs to support everyday practice. TSO interviewees linked the recentralising of community service provision to a change in city political leadership. But the imperative to recentralise is heightened as cuts continue to bite

and efficiencies are sought. The turn away at the Welsh and Cardiff levels from deprived neighbourhood initiatives towards an upscaled, centralised mode of practice implies more distanced local state-society relations that undermine the everyday local state by hindering boundary spanning processes, as foreshadowed in other research (eg Davies and Pill 2012). Further state retrenchment underlines the threat of abandonment, with the relentless nature of the cuts outpacing the ability of emergent informal practice to enable community self-provisioning. It gets harder for the Council to relinquish dwindling resource to support the civic voluntarism sought and the city's third sector is further weakened. The in-sourcing of Welsh Government funds by the Council, despite the social value brought by community-based TSO partners to this work, indicates an erosion of the scope for mutually constituted informality and the possibilities this contains. As a TSO officer explained:

> 'The truth is… there's just less money. We are pitching into an ever more stretched environment… there's nothing for [the Council] to pare back any more... it doesn't feel to me like the system can actually take much more strain… it's scorched earth stuff, because once it's gone, to try and get it back, to try and create that diverse ecosystem of groups and organisations…'.

We found that TSOs continue to 'take chances when opportunities arise' (Tonkiss 2013, 323), but these often relate to state funding availability. Opportunities for co-production have arisen through service commissioning related to health, aided by Welsh Government funding protections, as a Cabinet member observed, 'how can we do it?… by working with health because health also very often has some funding'. Timebanking with TSO support is being deployed in place-based health services, such as recovery services and informal groups providing services for the elderly. But neighbourhood-based TSOs are increasingly experiencing financial precarity. For example, in the final year of CF initiative operation, one was receiving nearly 70% of its funding from the initiative, despite efforts to diversify and self-generate funding sources via social enterprise approaches. Another TSO commented that 'the money available to grassroots and third sector is dwindling and the support available around things like governance, around funding… it's not there as it once was'. In seeking to sustain, TSOs are calling for support to develop their governance structures, financial and project management processes so they can cope with a wider set of projects and enterprises. Such calls align with the need for the state to initiate and help sustain civic infrastructure and capacity at the neighbourhood scale, as stressed by Wills (2016) in her seminal book on localism in England. A way of providing greater security and stability for civic infrastructure

would commence via the positive informality of community asset transfer. But to circumvent the contradiction of temporary use/ insecurity, such transfer should then be institutionalised with establishment of formal entities such as community development trusts, the public accountability of which could be secured via engagement of ward councillors in a community leadership role (Ines Newman 2014; Copus and Wall 2017).

Such calls for formality from below point to a limitation of Tonkiss' models, which bring the state's top-down role in engendering informality to the fore, but do not consider civil society's bottom-up role in seeking the formalisation, or institutionalisation, of informal practice as part of efforts to sustain activities. Our findings underline that local state and civil society actors seek to engender and respond to both formality and informality, further breaking down associations of the formal with the state and the informal with citizen activity. Bottom-up calls for greater formality stress its important perceived role in bringing about, if not guaranteeing, social change. Our case of Cardiff's community services emphasises the scope for mutually constituted informal practices developed between the local state and TSOs to achieve change, but we cannot draw conclusions about whether these would become durable by becoming formal. What is clear is that the formal/ informal analytical frame finegrains understanding of transitions in state-society relations through its emphasis on practice.

Conclusion

Deploying the lens of informality enhances understanding of the changing but continually mutually constitutive nature of state and civil society in the operations of the 'everyday local state' under austerity. In UK cities, Tonkiss (2013, 314) argues that the models of proscription and abandonment are 'high in the mix' as budget cuts 'tend to outrun any substantive efforts by city governments to more positively promote alternative urban strategies and solutions'. Following second phase research in Cardiff, this assessment was open to question given the opening up of informalities from above. But the third phase saw the closing down of community engagement and initiative, due to upscaling from the neighbourhood and the centralising of service provision. And thus the prospect of the fourth, abandonment model is now more immediate in the city. Such distancing between the local state and civil society narrows opportunities for boundary spanning and hybridity with the stitching of civil society practices into new modes of local service delivery (Lowndes and

McCaughie 2013, 544), leaving communities to the prospect of more laissez-faire approaches and practices. Thus despite important distinctions between Wales and England, including a policy discourse which continues to focus on poverty reduction, practices reveal that as in England, austerity localism does not engage with inequalities (Featherstone et al. 2012) and encourages centralisation. Creative practices of community service provision likely will continue to evolve but without the concerted underpinning provided in the early stages of cuts, these will become ever more vulnerable to the contradictions of informality, with their attendant challenges of insecurity and precarity, which have resulted in calls for formality from below.

In practice, both sides of (local) state-society relations have used their boundary spanning capacities to open up the opportunities of informality and navigate its contradictions. But latterly, the remorseless nature of funding cuts has acted to close down informality as the local state has centralised, withdrawing from work at the boundaries and widening the gap between the state and society. Over the research timeline 2014-2017, it thus could be said that 'austerian realism' (Davies and Blanco 2017, 1524) has prevailed. But we also identified moments of opportunity to resist austerity and forge alternative pathways through the mutually constitutive operations of the everyday local state. In their work with the local state, TSOs were arguably co-opted into implementing austerity, but the practices which resulted (such as voluntarism) also provide resources of solidarity and collective action which could have, and could still, be deployed in ways that challenge austerity through the operation of civil society in constituting the everyday local state. For example, the city's experience of timebanking points to it being a potentially transformative form of co-production which merits further research into its operation in other localities. The research findings are of relevance beyond Wales as they aid understanding of local variegation in ways of coping with austerity, further problematising totalising claims about neoliberalism (Davies and Blanco 2017; Davies 2017). Our research approach, which derives from scholarship which brings Global South understandings of everyday, 'making do' practice to the (ostensibly formal) Global North (Iveson et al. 2018, 2) adds to this literature by providing a formal/ informal analytical frame for research into the changing dynamics of local practice. Our analysis underlines that this frame should include civil society calls for formality 'from below', highlighting the importance of the state's role in supporting civic voluntarism.

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