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Citation for final published version:

Farrell, Catherine , McKenna, Dave and Wall, Matt 2022. Setting the stage: scenic design and observers' perceptions of the quality of public governance meetings. *Public Management Review* 24 (11) , pp. 1663-1681.
10.1080/14719037.2021.1909347

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1909347>

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Setting the stage: scenic design and observers' perceptions of the quality of public governance meetings

Abstract

Whilst the importance of securing effective governance has been widely researched, seating configurations and the design of governance settings have not. Taking a dramaturgical perspective, this paper uses the conceptual language of scenic design to examine the relationship between meeting size, seating configurations, actor positioning and perceptions of public governance quality in UK council meetings. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the paper finds strong support that those involved in public governance feel that seating configurations and actor positioning are important considerations and that these factors can help to explain variation in perceptions of meetings' public governance quality.

INTRODUCTION

The use of publicly accessible space to conduct business is a key element of what makes public governance distinctive to other forms of governance. Whether this takes place in the chamber of the local council, the town hall, the school staffroom or the boardroom of the health trust, public governance meetings require a layout. In each case, an arrangement of space is required where the public can observe or participate.

These physical environments are important in ways that go beyond meeting participant's needs. Indeed, the arrangement of public meeting spaces has been purported to influence the behavior of public actors and, by implication, affect the quality of public governance. Reviewing the layout of parliaments across the world, for example, van der Vegt and de Lara (2016, p.6) argue that 'architecture affects the political culture that is shaped in these settings...the architecture of spaces of political congregation is not only an abstract expression of a political culture, it also shapes this culture'. Further, reflecting on Sir Bernard Crick's views on Parliament, Bercow (2018, p.848) highlights that Crick 'appreciated not only that a building could be a

political symbol, but that how it was built was not simply a matter of construction or of design. Rather, it could have consequences for political practice'. The significance of space and location is also discussed by Egeberg and Trondal (2011, p.99) who put forward the term 'organizational locus' where 'face-to-face contacts appear in general to be highly appreciated when critical decisions are made in organisations...Such interaction might be sensitive to the physical arrangement of organizations and to physical distances'. In the context of UK local government scrutiny committees, Snape and Taylor (2001, p.15) have argued that 'if you want to engage the public, partners and the press, take a good look at your committee rooms...Simple changes to the layout of a committee room can make a tremendous impact on the style of working'.

However, this interplay between the arrangement of the spaces within which meetings take place and the quality of governance associated with those meetings has been given little attention in the public administration or management literature. Goodsell (1988) argues that political scientists have not paid sufficient regard to architecture and the ways that physical space has affected the business of government. Flinders et al. (2018, p.149) reinforce this view, highlighting that 'political science has generally failed to recognise, study or comprehend how physical space (buildings, light, paintings, statues, seating layouts, toilets, refreshment facilities etc) structures and impacts on political behaviour'. Further, as Egeberg and Trondal (2011 p.100) note in relation to the location of government departments, 'although practitioners fairly often talk about what can be gained from locating entities together or separately, the phenomenon has attracted marginal scholarly attention'. In short, the importance of space and location have been neglected in public management research.

The purpose of this paper is to identify how the physical arrangement of public governance meetings affect perceptions of the quality of public governance. To frame the discussion, we use a dramaturgical perspective. Specifically, we employ the conceptual language of scenic design to highlight aspects which are often taken for granted by governance practitioners. These considerations are: the governance intention of the meeting, the audience-actor relationship, actor roles and the separation of physical zones. This paper, with its focus on the spaces within which governance is conducted, builds on existing research by Egeberg and Trondal (2018) on the impact on governance of the geographical location of government departments.

The paper proceeds as follows. Part one below presents the dramaturgical perspective and sets out our four considerations about the arrangement of public governance meetings that the study of scenic design brings to light. In part two, we focus on different governance intentions and actor-audience relationships and show how these have conflicting implications for the meeting design choices available to practitioners. We focus on the following three aspects of meeting layout: meeting size, meeting shape, and actors' positioning relative to councillors. Following an outline of the methods and data associated with a survey of elected or appointed office holders who are influential in the design of meetings for principal councils in the UK, the paper presents the quantitative and qualitative findings. The significance of these findings is discussed in part four and conclusions are presented in part five.

GOVERNANCE MEETINGS, DRAMATURGY AND SCENIC DESIGN

The dramaturgical perspective was introduced to the academic world by Goffman (1959) who argued that life can be like the theatre with audiences and actors. Using this approach, Collett and Childs (2009, p.690-1) indicate that ‘social actors engage in performances that create and sustain their view of reality, including their view of self. Although there must be some self-awareness to engage in these performances, many of these actions are done unconsciously’. As the performance is repeated, and practices are replicated, ‘the more real these performances become to them and those around them’. As organisational researchers, including Oswick et al (2001) have argued, theatre is useful both as a metaphor and as a description of practice. A key part of the theatre and the performance metaphor are the significance of aspects including ‘roles, scripts, costumes, props and stages that help social actors actively create the social world and ensure interaction runs smoothly’. Clearly then, performances are affected by the design of the setting where it takes place and also ‘in performances, people strive for making a good impression and avoiding a negative one in front of an audience’ (Visser et al, 2018, p.704). The dramaturgical approach promotes our understanding of space and the interaction of people within it (Boje et al, 2007; Brissett and Edgley, 2005). Staging also “requires attention to the development and manipulation of symbols, including physical appearances, settings, props and other types of artifactual displays” (Gardner and Avolio, 1998, p.43).

The dramaturgical perspective has been used in previous research to analyse public governance. Farrell et al. (2017), for example, apply it to explore accountability within the school governing body context and the extent to which its enactment can be described as a theatrical performance. In this performance, the audience (school governors) is there to support

the actor (headteacher) and this can undermine the amount of questioning and scrutiny from governors. In another study, Freeman et al (2015, p.16) identify 'the challenges faced by board members in terms of the artefacts at their disposal and the limitations of the scripts and staging associated with board practices'. The authors highlight that 'we lack a detailed understanding of the performative aspects at play: what board members say and do to discharge their accountabilities for patient safety' (2015, p.1) thereby calling for more research around governance in practice. The findings from Hajer's (2005, p.642) case study suggests that 'even with the same cast, policy deliberation can change face through experiments with new settings and stagings. This suggests that we need to rethink the settings of public participation'. It is these settings which can therefore promote or undermine the public's participation in co-production, co-design and value co-creation (Dudau et al. 2019) and also the very nature of value itself created by the public in their interaction with services (Osborne, 2018).

Adopting a dramaturgical perspective allows one to theorize that, just as the quality of theatrical plays can be enhanced by scenic design, so the quality of public governance meetings can also be improved by attending to seating configurations. Furthermore, the language of scenic design, borrowed from theatrical practice, brings conceptual clarity by offering established and widely understood terms to a field that lacks such a language, drawing attention to conceptual considerations that are often taken for granted or overlooked. Here we offer four considerations which are borrowed from theatrical scenic design which can be applied to public governance meetings and which inform our methodology and analysis.

Four scenic design considerations

Governance intentions

The first consideration for the theatrical scenic designer is to understand the intention, or purpose, of the performance as captured in the script so that this can be translated into the design of the set. While there may not be a single script for a public governance meeting, different components can be identified such as the agenda, the recommendations of reports, the notes used by the meeting chair or the agreements made by participants or political groups in their pre-meetings. Scenic design distinguishes between the content and the intent of the play. While the former refers to the practical requirements of the performance, such as different rooms, entrance doors etc., the latter requires the playwright's overall purpose to be understood and supported by the design of the set.

From a governance perspective, there are several different intentions, and, as we suggest below, these have conflicting implications for seating. Here we draw on the TAPIC framework devised by Greer et al (2016) which reflects five distinct dimensions of governance, each of which captures a key aspect of the quality of public governance:

- Transparency: Public knowledge about decision making (Greer et al, 2016)
- Accountability: Delivery of 'account' and sanction (Weale, 2011)
- Participation: Meaningful stake in decision making (Greer et al, 2016)
- Organisational integrity: Clear, legitimate roles and processes (Greer et al, 2016)
- Policy capacity: Intelligent collective decision making (Painter and Pierre, 2004)

Actor-audience relationship

The actor-audience relationship focuses on whether a performance is presentational or representational. This is a dramaturgical distinction where presentational performance breaks the ‘fourth wall’ and allows actors to address the audience directly. Representational performance, in contrast, presents a self-contained reality with audiences acting as passive observers.

In a public governance context, a presentational approach is one that is outward-looking and seeks to directly address the public, whether through explanation or direct engagement. It seeks to deliver its governance intentions by dissolving the barriers separating governance actors from the public. A representational approach is more introspective and focuses on realizing governance intentions *in public* rather than through interaction *with the public*. By doing so, this approach delivers its governance intentions by allowing the public to see that things are being done in the ‘right way’. In both presentational and representational public governance, the overarching intentions remain identical (as captured in the TAPIC framework), with the difference in the underlying mechanisms through which these intentions are realized.

Actor roles

A third consideration is the distinction between different actors and their roles. As with theatre, seats can be designed in ways which emphasise the roles and status of individual actor(s). Lead actors, i.e., committee members, are typically placed at the centre. They are supported by others including those in administrative and advisory roles. Ministers and cabinet members will also attend to answer questions and be held to account. When members of the public take part in

the meeting, they become audience participants and need to be accommodated within its design.

Physical zones

The fourth consideration is the demarcation of separate physical zones with distinct functions. As with theatrical performances, the performance of public governance depends on the interaction between three key aspects - the stage (or official zone), the audience (public zone or gallery), and the backstage (see Woods, 1998). These distinctions are also evident public governance meetings but are rarely explicitly evident.

Implications for Analysis

Our analysis treats aspects of scenic design as independent variables and investigates their relationship with perceived public governance quality (our dependent variable). We conceptualize governance quality perceptions as the extent to which participants in public governance meetings meet the intentions contained in the TAPIC framework. For each governance intention, we consider both presentational and representational conceptualizations, capturing the extent to which they are achieved *with the public* and *in public*, respectively.

Given this conceptual and methodological approach, it is important to outline the aspects of scenic design explored across meetings. The first is meeting size, which refers to the number of actors participating in a meeting. The categories identified by Doyle and Straus (1993) are

adopted: small (0-7 participants); medium (8-15 participants); large (16-30) and extra-large (30+). Whilst larger meetings involve a wider range of voices, they may be more challenging to manage. Smaller meetings, on the other hand, might better afford team working and effective deliberation. However, caution may be required. Chaudhary and Gakhar's (2018) review leads to the conclusion that 'there is diverse evidence in the empirical literature linking board size to corporate performance' with some studies including Yermack (1996) suggesting that it improves performance and others including Nicholson and Liel (2007) indicating that it does not. Roberts and Herman, (2009, p.388) suggest that smaller boards 'are more workable for non-profits (and more in line with business models)' though larger boards are more likely to have sub-committees for some areas such as audit.

The second aspect of scenic design is the shape of meetings. Here, there is a distinction between closed, open-ended, and front facing arrangements. The closed shape reflects the traditional committee, boardroom or conference style. Actors sit facing each other in a square, rectangular, circular or oval shape. The open-ended, or horseshoe, shape is associated with parliamentary select committees and scrutiny settings. Following a curved or rectangular 'U' shape, the actors face inwards, are able to confer and the open end allows unrestricted sight of a witness table where those giving evidence are seated. Finally, the front-facing shape is most commonly seen in senate committee hearings or town hall meetings. Actors sit facing a witness table with the audience behind that. These three seating design shapes are presented in Figure 1.

The third variable aspect of the scenic design is 'actor distancing'. This refers to the positioning of actors within meetings. Goodsell (1988, p.44) suggests that while sitting alongside suggests

cooperation, sitting across a table suggests competition, sitting at the head of a table suggests leadership and sitting closest to the leader suggests higher status. Research conducted with students by Sommer (1969) suggests that different seating arrangements are preferred for different conversations - corner to corner for casual conversation, side by side for cooperative activity, and face-to-face for adversarial interaction. Hall (1963) identifies four classifications of distance. These are what is defined as 'intimate' space (up to 18 inches), 'casual personal' (18-48 inches), 'social consultative' (4 - 12 feet) and 'public distance' (12 feet+).

The core implication of the above discussion for our empirical analysis is that scenic design impacts on perceived public governance quality. This contention is expressed in Hypothesis 1 below:

H1: Seating design significantly affects how the observers participating in council meetings perceive the governance quality.

However, no single seating configuration can positively impact on all aspects within the TAPIC framework. Transparency aims to make decision-making process more visible to the public (presentational) or to organisational actors (representational). In both cases, a larger meeting allows a greater number of actors and their interactions to be visible. In a presentational context, an open-ended shape facilitates public observation. Accountability, whether presentational or representational, benefits from a separation between those who are holding others to account and those being help to account. Furthermore, 'public distance' confirms the formality of this relationship. Participation is broadly synonymous with a presentational approach where a front facing shape encourages face-to-face engagement. Organisational integrity may be promoted

through a clear separation of actors with different roles with distance between them with an an open-ended shape enabling better public access. Policy capacity relies upon effective deliberation and is afforded by a small group of actors, in a closed meeting shape, mixed together in close proximity (representational) or an open-ended shape providing public access (presentational).

Table 1 displays a set of choices on each aspect of scenic design and outlines their positive and negative affordances across the TAPIC components.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

From this discussion and illustration, we derive the following hypothesis:

H2: The effects of scenic design choices on how observers participating in council meetings perceive governance quality will not be constant across the components of the TAPIC framework.

We recognize that scenic design is one factor influencing the perceived governance quality of public meetings and our analysis includes a number of control variables outlined below.

Data And Methods

Data collection

The data drawn on in this paper was collected via a survey of individuals who frequently participate in local council meetings of principal councils. The survey was electronically distributed via social media channels of ‘Twitter’ and ‘Linked-in’ and collected using Smart Survey between September and November 2018 following a pilot. The survey procured a total of 157 responses, who fell into the occupational categories and geographical regions presented in Table 2. The predominant occupation of respondents is that of ‘council officer’, which includes senior council officers such as directors or heads of services, council officers providing meeting support (democratic services officers, scrutiny officers, or legal officers), and council officers in other roles. The second most common category sampled are Councillors, while the public and invited experts make up a small proportion of respondents. The data collected relates to council meetings in England and Wales.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In adopting this approach, we acknowledge that this survey does not draw on a representative sample, instead drawing insights from the professional network acquired by Author X over 25 years working in local government. As such, the generalizability of our conclusions is limited, and the research represents a plausibility probe (see Levy, 2008) for our contention that seating design impacts significantly on the quality of public governance.

In seeking to connect seating design choices with the quality of public governance meetings, we asked respondents to evaluate council meetings that they had regularly observed or participated in over the past six months (rather than an individual meeting). Our data gathering focused on three types of public committee meetings of principal councils in England and Wales:

Cabinet: Meetings of up to ten elected executive members in a formal decision-making role;

Scrutiny: Meetings of elected non-executive members acting as an accountability check to the executive.

Planning application meetings: Meetings considering applications for planning permission from the public who can make representations.

Respondents were asked to evaluate each meeting type separately. While several focused on all three types, some evaluated only one or two types. This process led to a total of 324 meeting evaluations to be analyzed¹ with a range of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data are coded as categorical, ordinal, or interval variables – and covered meeting evaluations, characterizations of seating design, and a range of control variables such as the type of meeting being evaluated, the location and structure of the council being evaluated, and the role of respondents. Qualitative data were generated through a series of open questions asking respondents to provide discussions of how and why they felt that seating design could affect governance quality in council meetings. In the findings section, we separate quantitative and

¹ We note here that the n in our quantitative analysis varies somewhat and is typically lower than 324. This is because of instances in the data where some, but not all, aspects of the meeting being analysed were completed in the survey response. In such instances, these observations are excluded from regression analysis, hence the variation in our n across different models.

qualitative data analysis, which are considered together in the discussion and conclusion sections.

Variable operationalization

The TAPIC governance quality framework: presentational and representational aspects

Reflecting our discussion on the *intentions* of public governance meetings and the *audience-actor relationship*, we set out these evaluations into a series of 10 statements. Survey respondents were asked, for each statement, to consider whether that it ‘Describes’, ‘Somewhat describes’ or ‘Does not describe’ the meetings being evaluated. As such, these responses generated a series of ordinal variables. These were coded as follows (Does not describe ‘1’; Somewhat describes ‘2’; Describes ‘3’). The phrasing of our statements means that higher scores indicate a more positive meeting evaluation, whereas lower scores indicate a more negative meeting evaluation. This means that variables with a positive coefficient are associated with more positive meeting evaluations, and *vice versa*.

The statements seek to capture respondents’ perceptions of the extent to which meetings achieve core governance purposes, which are grouped into Transparency, Accountability, Participation, Integrity, and Capacity (reflecting the TAPIC framework). Five of these statements focus on the *presentational* aspect of the audience-actor relationship, centering on the engagement and inclusion of the public in council meetings. The other five focus on the *representational* aspect – they are introspective, focusing on key meeting participants (i.e., councillors and other members of scrutiny and planning committees). All of these statements

are listed in Appendix A. For example, the statements below were put to respondents to allow them to evaluate presentational and representational transparency:

How far do the following statements describe typical cabinet/scrutiny/planning meetings in your council over the last 6 months?

(Presentational) These meetings make decision-making more transparent for the public.

(Representational) These meetings make decision-making more transparent to other councillors.

In the analysis which follows, evaluations of meetings across these 10 statements serve as the dependent variables. Our goal is to estimate the extent to which they are driven by aspects of seating design, controlling for other potentially confounding variables. In the next sub-section, we explain how seating design is operationalized in our research, before outlining the control variables that we employ.

Seating Design: Meeting Size, Meeting Shape and Actor Distancing

In terms of seating design, three key aspects are operationalized. Meeting *size* reflects respondents' answer to a question asking them to estimate how many councillors typically attend each type of meeting. We are using Doyle and Straus's (1993) categories of 'small', 'medium' and large and we treat this variable as categorical in our analysis – as the effect of meeting size is not linear in nature, but instead reflects a distinction between qualitatively different types of meeting. Out of the 324 meetings for which these details were provided, 42 (13%) were small meetings; 229 (71%) were medium sized; and the remaining 53 (16%) were large.

Meeting *shape* captures the distinction discussed earlier in the paper and visualized in Figure 1 between ‘closed’, ‘open’, and ‘front facing’ shapes. A fourth category contains other meeting shapes that do not fall into these descriptions. Of a total of 321 meetings for which respondents provided details of its shape, 136 (42%) were ‘closed shape’; 128 (40%) were ‘open shape’; 31 (10%) were ‘front facing shape’; and a further 26 (8%) were ‘other’. Again, this variable is treated as categorical in our analysis.

The third aspect of seating design combines elements of actor positioning and proximity and we characterize this as *actor distancing*. Drawing on our survey, we identify the following actor types for our analysis: members of the public, advisory actors (such as expert witnesses or representatives of groups/organizations), and administrative actors (such as democratic support officers and legal officers). For each type of actor, the *actor distancing* variable reflects how the seating arrangements create distance between them and the councillors participating in the meeting. We employ Goodsell’s categories of: ‘public distance’ (12 feet and more) coded ‘1’; ‘social consultative’ (4 - 12 feet) coded ‘2’; ‘casual personal’ (18-48 inches) coded ‘3’. For ‘public distance’ arrangements, the relevant actors were seated either at in a gallery or provided a separate place to address the meeting away from the meeting table and public gallery. For ‘social consultative’ arrangements, the relevant actors were seated at the meeting table, but away from the councillors. For ‘casual personal’ arrangements, the relevant actors were seated alongside councillors at the meeting table. This coding is produced for each actor type in each meeting being evaluated. We also had codes (‘4’ and ‘5’) for instances where the relevant

actors were not included in the meeting and where the respondent indicated ‘don’t know’, respectively. As such, we treat this variable as categorical in order to capture a set of qualitatively different actor distancing arrangements.

Control variables

While our analysis centers on identifying the relationship between evaluations of public governance quality and seating design, we also include a range of control variables designed to avoid spurious correlations driving our findings. These variables focus the location and structure of the councils within which meetings take place, the type of meetings being evaluated, and the individual level role of the respondents.

Looking at the council where the meetings are being evaluated, we control for the nation/region of the United Kingdom within which it is located (England, Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland). We also control for the fact that councils across the UK have a variety of institutional structures, including those with an Elected Mayor and Cabinet, a Leader and Cabinet, and those which operate on the basis of Committee systems. In terms of meeting type, we distinguish between cabinet meetings, scrutiny meetings, and planning application meetings (another categorical variable).

Finally, we control for the role of our respondents (the distribution of which is described in Table 2 above) using a set of dummy variables which separate council officers (which includes

meeting support, senior, junior, other), councillors (which includes cabinet members and backbenchers), and members of the public. In the discussion that follows, the individual findings regarding these variables are not the center of our discussion, but they serve to add validity to our findings with regard to the effects of seating design.

ANALYSIS

Quantitative Analysis

In exploring hypothesis 1 and 2, we rely on a series of ordered logistic regression models, which are suitable for the ordinal nature of our dependent variables (for a discussion, see Williams, 2006). We treat respondents' meeting evaluations across the TAPIC statements for both presentational and representational public governance quality outcomes as the dependent variables. This modelling strategy enables us to estimate the extent to which the variables pertaining to seating design can explain the likelihood of a rating moving from 'Does not describe' to 'Somewhat describes' and from 'Somewhat Describes' to 'Describes'. Substantively, this means that we can see whether and how scenic design choices affect meeting evaluations.

In testing hypothesis 1, we deploy a series of models that capture the effects of the variables in our dataset that describe seating design, without including any control variables. Here we are interested in two properties of our models: firstly, whether they can be shown to outperform a null model (that is, a model without any independent variables); secondly, the extent of

improvement that including our seating variables provides over and above a null model. Our focus is not on variable coefficients at this point, instead we are looking at two model fit statistics: the Likelihood Ratio Chi Squared statistic probability value and the Pseudo R-Squared Statistic. A Likelihood Ratio Chi Squared probability value of less than .05 means that we can reject the hypothesis that the model doesn't outperform a null model with 95% statistical confidence. The Pseudo R-Squared statistic, which varies between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating a relatively greater performance of the model compared to the null. While a degree of caution is required for the latter statistic, it provides an indicator of the model's capacity to predict meeting evaluations. These statistics for the models treating the (representational and presentational) TAPIC statement evaluations as dependent variables and meeting size, meeting shape, and actor distancing (members of public, advisory actors, and administrative actors) as independent variables are summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Based on Table 3, there is broad support for hypothesis 1. In only one case (with representational transparency evaluations as the dependent variable) did the model fail to outperform the null model with 95% confidence. While the Pseudo-R squared value hovered around .05 for most models, it was nearly three times this for the models dealing with Participation evaluations. While it is important not to over interpret Pseudo-R squared statistics, this suggests that seating design gives greater purchase over participation evaluations than it does over other governance goals.

In evaluating hypothesis 2, we perform a similar analysis. In this, alongside our seating design variables, we incorporate an additional set of control variables. These capture council location, council structure, meeting type and respondent role. In this part of the analysis, we focus on the coefficients associated with our seating design variables. Our findings are reported in Tables 4 and 5.

TABLES 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE

From Tables 4 and 5 we can see that some aspects of seating design help to predict variance in aspects of governance perceptions (statistically significant predictors in bold), specifically those relating to participation and accountability. Front-facing seating designs (relative to closed designs) are related to improved perceptions of participation (both representational and presentational) and both social distance and public distance for advisory actors (experts, representatives of groups and organizations) bring higher scores for accountability (representational and presentational) and appear to be important in presentational governance generally. Finally, the open-ended or horseshoe shape was (relative to the closed shape) a statistically significant positive predictor of presentational capacity.

However, there is ultimately little support for hypothesis 2, which was built on a theoretical understanding that certain trade-offs were inherent in seating design, with some design

governance affordances leading to deficits in other aspects. This level of sensitivity does not bear out in our analysis of the association between seating design elements and perceptions of governance quality. Indeed, a factor analysis based on a polychoric correlation matrix strongly indicate that all 10 measures can be captured by a single factor (Eigenvalue = 7.29; explaining 73% of the variance). No other factors exceeded an Eigenvalue of 1. Substantively, this indicates that respondents were largely evaluating an underlying sense of the ‘quality’ of the meeting in their responses, rather than separating out (and, therefore, perceiving trade-offs between) the TAPIC governance goals.

Qualitative Analysis

Reflecting the quantitative findings, it was the view of many respondents through text comments that seating arrangements matter and were generally not thought through in terms of their impact on the quality governance. One councillor said that ‘the importance of seating arrangements is greatly underestimated and is usually dictated by the convenience and geography of a room, rather than designed to facilitate better decision making and greater transparency’.

The qualitative findings show that the perceptions of many practitioners are more nuanced than the quantitative findings might suggest. So, for example, respondents put forward a number of comments relating to the shape of meetings and many viewed the ‘horseshoe’ layout as valuable as it meant that ‘councilors faced the public. This helped the public attending as they could also see councillor’s facial expressions and allow them to hear better’. Another said that:

‘using an open-ended or horseshoe table ensures that the members of the panel are audible and visible to anyone in the press or public seating’. Another felt that the horseshoe format with everyone at the same level, without hierarchy, all in view of each other can help people to feel included and part of the meeting. This inclusivity was also highlighted by many others and in addition to this format involving the public, another respondent highlighted its value in promoting good discussion and participation from the public.

Position was also raised consistently in the qualitative data. So, for example, where councillors were seated together rather than in political groups, one respondent felt the meeting was ‘less political, which scrutiny should be’. Another respondent highlighted that where councilors and officers were seated beside each other, this was not good for accountability as:

‘...being set apart from councillors reinforces the idea that the role of officers is to serve councillors and the public and that councillors have every right to question an officer. Where they are seated around a table together, all on first name terms, it makes it much more difficult for a councilor to really put an officer on the spot’.

There should be, according to another respondent, ‘a clear line between those taking decisions and those who are invited to speak, councilors, the public and officers’. Another respondent reflected on the importance of position in the context of a meeting being moved away from its normal room in the townhall:

‘recreating the formality of the town hall in a community venue is crucial to emphasise the difference between who is an officer, who is a portfolio holder and who is providing the challenge’.

A smaller space, closer to a board room style, was identified as more of a ‘friendly environment’ promoting public attendance in which the public are seated in the same room as the meeting rather than an anteroom. The layout of seating for full council meetings was raised by one respondent and here it was highlighted that where members are facing each other, this promotes a much more adversarial tone between members. Another respondent indicated that when a committee meeting was moved from a smaller room to the council chamber, councilors ‘immediately broke into party factions, whereas they are usually forced to sit together in a smaller space’. It may be that these party factionalisation elements are significantly affected by seating design choices, however this mechanism was not foreseen in our survey design and therefore remains to be explored in future work in this area.

DISCUSSION

One theme emerging from our findings is that of representational bias when it comes to the perception of governance practitioners. We found a small, but statistically significant, difference in the perceived importance of presentational governance compared to representational governance in favour of the latter. Our findings indicate that front facing meetings are suited to presentational meetings where there is the expectation that the public are involved. It is also the case that, where advisory actors attended meetings as observers, having some distance between these individuals and those involved in the meeting promoted accountability in representational governance.

A number of obstacles, however, were identified by the public to their involvement suggesting that a public perspective may be lacking when public governance meeting spaces are laid out. Respondents reported that often, the seating arrangements which exist in councils are replicated within other venues in the community and at times, it is difficult for observers and members of the public to find a seat or to see who is speaking. Many reported that the public seating area is not given a great deal of consideration in terms of layout and that the view from the public gallery 'is often obscured either by pillars in the room or by officers sitting in the way of councilors, or councilors sitting in a perpendicular row'. There was a view that this can be particularly the case when meetings are held in local halls and venues and the physical space, or scenic design, in which meetings are held is rarely considered.

Where the public has been invited to a meeting and their involvement is as an observer, but their seating arrangements are rarely ever considered and the public do not view this positively. This could serve to undermine and discourage public participation in both presentational and representational governance at a time when the public are being included in many public forums both as observers and as participants (Boviard and Loffler, 2003) and in situations where there are even more expectation that the public co-design, co-produce, co-create services (Osborne, 2018; Dudau et al, 2019). Ensuring that location is fully considered should therefore be an important element of organising governance meetings as public participation and involvement can be undermined by poor seating arrangements, in other words, poor set design. Further, as Oswick et al (2001) and Gardner and Avolio (1998) have argued, the performance itself can be affected by the setting it takes place in. Despite an intention then to fully involve

the public, the location can undermine this. In designing the settings for meetings, the quality of the play, or public governance in this case, can be improved with good design.

In terms of proximity, the attendance of advisory actors such as expert witnesses or representatives of groups/organizations, promotes a number of aspects including transparency, accountability, integrity and also capacity in presentational governance and accountability in representational governance where there is some distance between them and those primarily involved in the meeting. This suggests that key aspects of governance are enhanced when there is physical space, at least 4 feet (Goodsell, 1988) between the principal participants of meetings and those attending to offer their advice. This is a key finding and has implications for how meetings are organized.

With the shift to virtual meetings in March 2020 as Covid-19 hit, the need to consider the purpose of meetings and to the expected involvement of the participants continues to be relevant. An implication concerning the increasing use of virtual meetings is that many of these are front facing and by nature presentational. Our findings indicate that the default layout of these meetings may promote key aspects of governance quality perception as those participating will be presented as facing forward. As meetings return to face to face when the pandemic eases, ensuring quality governance in many UK council meetings remain a challenge in that the spaces in which meetings take place rarely allow front facing shapes with items such as pillars frequently obstructing viewing.

There are three considerations to place our research in context. First, seating choices can be shaped by factors outside of the control of practitioners. As Freeman and Peck (2007, p.919) highlight, whilst many choices are made about the physical spaces in which board meetings take place such as the room itself, its layout and where the public should sit to observe, these choices are often shaped by considerations outside of a concern for the performance of the meeting such as room availability, and simply, it has ‘always been done this way’. Decisions around size, for example, are often made independently of the resulting meeting dynamics and may reflect the requirements for different groups to be represented. While our findings show a preference for smaller meetings, it is frequently the case in public and corporate boards that the membership is above 20 participants. For example, Cardiff and Vale Health board has a membership of 21 including the Chair, Vice Chair and Chief Executive (Cardiff and Vale Health board, 2020) and similarly in the fire and rescue service, where local authorities come together to have a combined fire and rescue authority, reflecting the requirement to reflect population size and the need to achieve political balance means that the largest authorities have 25 members (LGA, 2017). Shape, proximity and position can be restricted by choice of room, the size of room, the flexibility of furniture and also the location of audio-visual equipment. Position might also be restricted by the preferences of individual actors.

Second, the effects of well-designed seating arrangements may be overridden by other factors. For example, as highlighted by Parkinson (2006), the presence of the media can turn any committee meeting, regardless of layout, into an opportunity to play to the gallery rather than seriously engage with one’s interlocutors. This evidence highlights that television cameras can be a more powerful behavioural cue to a political actor than any seating arrangement. The

behaviours and cultures which actors bring into meetings with them may also impact on the design of public meeting spaces. Amongst elected, for example, actors the status afforded by being either ‘front bench’ or ‘back bench’ can influence position. Clearly, politics and political parties are both relevant here where many participants sit in party groups with those in cabinet and shadow cabinet positions sitting at the front and those without these profiles taking the ‘back-benches’.

Third, the governance quality of meetings can be enhanced outside of the meeting itself. Without any changes to the seating, transparency can be enhanced by more and more by webcasting, video, and social media. Participation may also take place informally before meetings or during breaks when normal rules are suspended with the results being subsequently fed in to the usual, more formal processes.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to identify the significance of seating design for the quality of public governance. Using the conceptual language of scenic design, we have sketched out the trade-offs between different seating design choices and different dimensions of governance quality. We have found indicative evidence that meeting layout contributes to aspects of public governance quality perceptions, serving to enhance or undermine the purpose of key governance activities. In terms of practice, this research highlights the potential role of governance practitioners as scenic designers. Ensuring that the location allows actors the opportunity to perform as effectively as possible and considering the governance intention

together with the actor-audience relationship, these serve to enhance the quality of governance. We recognise, of course, that practitioners work in imperfect circumstances with limited resources and that they may have to satisfice rather than fully satisfy the different dimensions of governance. However, the role of those supporting governance meetings by designing the stage should be appreciated.

This paper represents a first foray into uncharted territory and therefore hope that others will test our findings and assumptions. We highlight, for example, that our practitioners survey is self-selecting and our frame of reference is from by a western European perspective. Nevertheless, we suggest a number of strands for further research. These include the apparent representational bias that exists amongst practitioners, the implications of the increased use of virtual meetings and the power of scenic design to impact on the quality of governance.

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Table 1: Seating Design Choices and Public Governance Quality Affordances

Seating Design Feature	Positively affords	Negatively affords
Small Size	Capacity	Transparency Participation
Closed Shape	Capacity	Accountability Participation
Separate Positions for Different Actor Groups	Accountability Transparency Integrity	Capacity Participation
Close Proximity	Capacity Participation	Accountability Transparency Integrity

Table 2. Occupational Roles and Geographical Distribution of Survey Respondents

Occupational Role	% (number)	Location of Council	% (number)
Council officer	59.8% (94)	England	73.3% (115)
Councillor	22.9% (36)	Wales	25.5% (40)
Member of the public	10.3% (16)	Scotland	.6% (1)
Invited Expert/Representative	0.6% (1)	Northern Ireland	.6% (1)
Other	3.8% (6)		
Rather not say	2.6% (4)		
Total	100% (157)	Total	100% (157)

Table 3. Model fit statistics for ordinal logistic regressions of TAPIC evaluations on meeting size, meeting shape, and actor-distancing variables.

Model fit statistic	T (Rep)	T (Pres)	A (Rep)	A (Pres)	P (Rep)	P (Pres)	I (Rep)	I (Pres)	C (Rep)	C (Pres)
Number of cases	296	299	297	300	295	298	295	295	295	297
LR chi2 (12) p value	.08	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.01	.01	.01	.0
Pseudo R-Squared	.04	.06	.07	.06	.17	.14	.05	.05	.05	.05

Table 4. Full Ordinal Logistic Modelling Results – Representational Governance

	Transparency	Accountability	Participation	Integrity	Capacity
Meeting size ²					
Medium	-.15 (.41)	.73 (.40)	.50 (.47)	-.15 (.41)	.14 (.39)
Large	1.5 (.59)	.54 (.59)	.44 (.61)	.24 (.58)	.38 (.56)
Meeting Shape ³					
Open	.51 (.29)	-.06 (.29)	.55 (.31)	.55 (.29)	-.24 (.29)
Front-facing	.56 (.50)	-.08 (.49)	1.25*(.54)	.80 (.51)	32 (.49)
Actor Proximity – Members of the Public ⁴					
Social Consultative	-.32 (.58)	-.07 (.55)	.00 (.57)	.12 (.59)	-.20 (.57)
Public Distance	-.59 (.54)	.16 (.52)	.06 (.54)	-.09 (.56)	-.22 (.55)
Did not take part	-.51 (.58)	-.80 (.55)	-1.96**	-.31 (.59)	-.30 (.57)
Other	-.62 (.84)	.08 (.80)	-1.31 (.92)	-.45 (.50)	-.34 (.84)
Actor Proximity – Administrative ⁴					
Social Consultative	.19 (.30)	-.07 (.30)	.51 (.32)	-.06 (.30)	-.13 (.29)
Public Distance	.14 (.42)	-.08 (.43)	.34 (.44)	.21 (.42)	.32 (.42)
Actor Proximity – Advisory ⁴					
Social Consultative	.72 (.41)	.64 (1.65)	.33 (.41)	.70 (.40)	.47 (.39)
Public Distance	.34 (.45)	.93* (.44)	.23 (.45)	.70 (.44)	.64 (.44)
Did not take part	.19 (.46)	.12 (.44)	-.92 (.51)	-.08 (.45)	-.56 (.44)
Other	1.08 (.69)	.97 (.67)	-.06 (.78)	.50 (.70)	-.25 (.71)
Council Location ⁵					

² Reference category: Small.

³ Reference Category: Closed.

⁴ Reference Category: Casual-personal.

⁵ Reference Category: England.

Northern Ireland	1.35 (1.35)	1.45 (1.34)	1.53 (1.42)	.40 (1.20)	-.09 (1.18)
Scotland	.80 (1.26)	-.36 (1.43)	-13.4 (859.8)	-.04 (1.27)	-.67 (1.37)
Wales	.56 (.30)	.59 (.31)	-.3 (.30)	.34 (.29)	-.08 (.29)
Council Structure ⁶					
Elected Mayor and Cabinet	-.93 (.59)	-.79 (.53)	-.78 (.55)	-.12 (.56)	-.76 (.55)
Committee System	-.40 (.62)	-.25 (.66)	.22 (.65)	-.02 (.62)	-.32 (.57)
Other	1.52 (.87)	.08 (.85)	.45 (.88)	-.12 (.83)	-.56 (.75)
Meeting Type ⁷					
Scrutiny Meeting	.46 (.32)	.79* (.32)	1.09**(.35)	.37 (.33)	.55 (.32)
Planning Application Meeting	1.64 ** (.39)	1.74 (.38)**	2.34** (.40)	.57 (.36)	1.68**(.37)
Role: Councillor	-.18 (.57)	-.03 (.58)	.79 (.61)	.43 (.58)	.88 (.57)
Role: Officer	.58 (.53)	.74 (.55)	1.06 (.57)	.96 (.55)	1.44** (.54)
Role: Member of Public	-1.99** (.70)	-1.09 (.66)	-.82 (.74)	-1.14 (.69)	-.62 (.68)
Number of cases	296	297	295	295	295
LR chi2 (12) p value	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Pseudo R-Squared	.13	.15	.26	.11	.13

*Indicates that a coefficient is statistically significant with 95% confidence, ** Indicates that a coefficient is statistically significant with 99% confidence.

⁶ Reference Category: Leader and Cabinet.

⁷ Reference Category: Cabinet Meeting.

Table 5. Full Ordinal Logistic Modelling Results – Presentational Governance

	Transparency	Accountability	Participation	Integrity	Capacity
Meeting size ⁸					
Medium	-.48 (.43)	.17 (.41)	.40 (.44)	.26 (.40)	.10 (.41)
Large	-.55 (.60)	.25 (.58)	.66 (.59)	.49 (.56)	-.02 (.56)
Meeting Shape ⁹					
Open	.46 (.30)	.22 (.29)	.41 (.30)	.12 (.29)	.58* (.29)
Front-facing	.55 (.51)	-.08 (.50)	1.45** (.53)	.80 (.50)	.96 (.50)
Actor Proximity – Members of the Public ¹⁰					
Social Consultative	.46 (.57)	-.37 (.56)	-.33 (.55)	.49 (.56)	.28 (.55)
Public Distance	.02 (.54)	-.52 (.53)	-.14 (.52)	.32 (.53)	-.06 (.52)
Did not take part	-.39 (.57)	-1.30* (.57)	-1.92** (.59)	-.39 (.57)	-.38 (.56)
Other	.35 (.82)	-.63 (.80)	-.96 (.82)	.45 (.87)	-.10 (.81)
Actor Proximity – Administrative ¹⁰					
Social Consultative	-.07 (.30)	.16 (.29)	.15 (.31)	-.28 (.29)	-.32 (.29)
Public Distance	-.21 (.43)	.62 (.45)	.34 (.43)	-.68 (.41)	-.51 (.40)
Actor Proximity – Advisory ¹⁰					
Social Consultative	.97* (.41)	.84* (.30)	.99* (.41)	.97* (.40)	.84* (.39)
Public Distance	1.32** (.46)	1.05* (.45)	.71 (.45)	1.01** (.45)	1.04* (.44)
Did not take part	.27 (.45)	.38 (.45)	-.06 (.48)	.37 (.46)	.23 (.44)
Other	1.49* (.74)	1.16 (.69)	1.35 (.72)	1.34 (.70)	1.78* (.70)

⁸ Reference category: Small.

⁹ Reference Category: Closed.

¹⁰ Reference Category: Casual-personal.

Council Location ¹¹					
Northern Ireland	.77 (1.16)	-1.59 (1.22)	-.13 (1.35)	.38 (1.11)	1.18 (1.15)
Scotland	-.14 (1.40)	-16.9 (1391)	-16.1 (1120)	.13 (1.52)	-13.7 (516)
Wales	.74* (.30)	.44 (.29)	-.02 (.30)	.41 (.29)	.65* (.29)
Council Structure ¹²					
Elected Mayor and Cabinet	-.96 (.56)	-.93 (.55)	-1.06 (.55)	-1.20* (.56)	-.64 (.54)
Committee System	-.11 (.65)	.50 (.66)	-.11 (.60)	-.48 (.62)	-.50 (.58)
Other	1.08 (.86)	1.74 (.91)	1.88* (.83)	.67 (.85)	1.04 (.82)
Meeting Type ¹³					
Scrutiny Meeting	-.00 (.33)	-.17 (.32)	.11 (.33)	-.16 (.33)	-.20 (.32)
Planning Application Meeting	1.82**(.41)	1.38**(.39)	2.46** (.40)	.81* (.36)	.71* (.36)
Role: Councillor	.36 (.59)	.34 (.57)	.28 (.59)	.34 (.60)	.24 (.59)
Role: Officer	1.07* (.55)	.87 (.54)	.69 (.54)	.50 (.57)	.53 (.55)
Role: Member of Public	1.57* (.70)	-1.14 (.66)	-.49 (.67)	-1.60*(.72)	-1.56* (.70)
Number of cases	299	300	298	295	297
LR chi2 (12) p value	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Pseudo R-Squared	.18	.16	.25	.12	.13

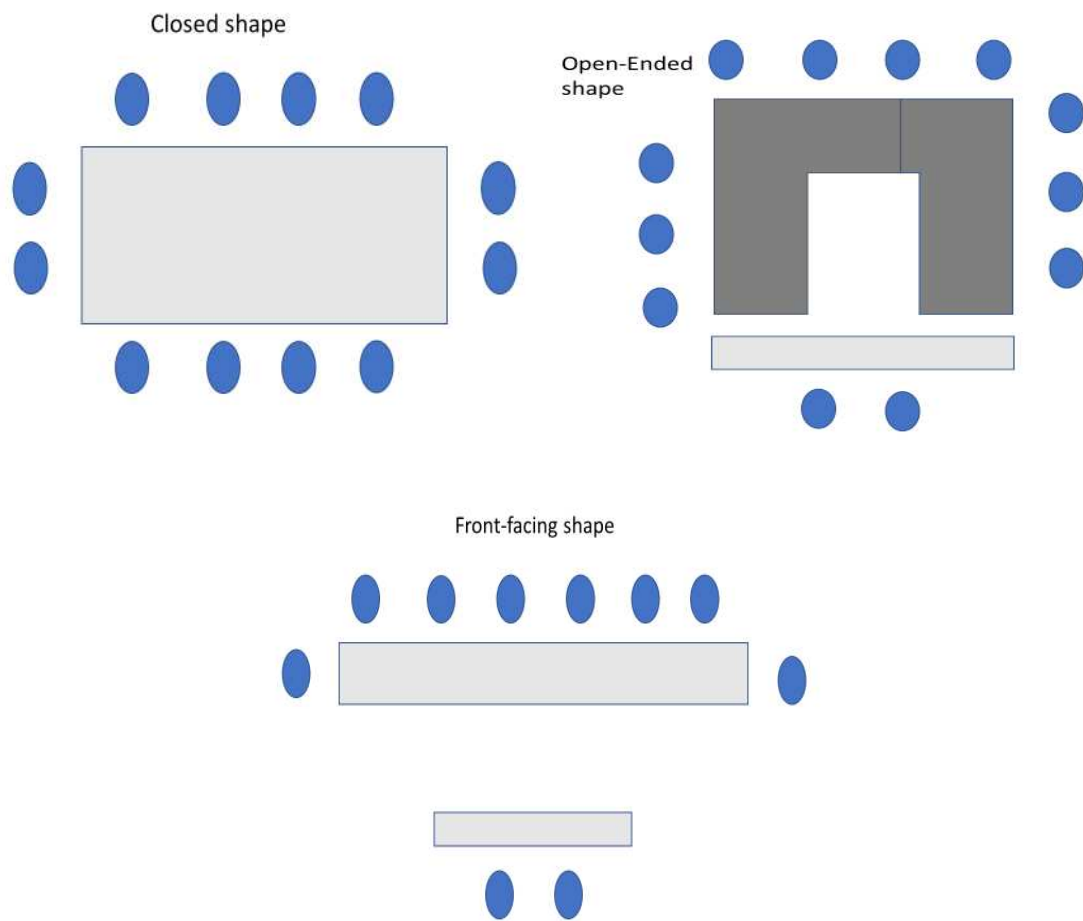
*Indicates that a coefficient is statistically significant with 95% confidence, ** Indicates that a coefficient is statistically significant with 99% confidence.

¹¹ Reference Category: England.

¹² Reference Category: Leader and Cabinet.

¹³ Reference Category: Cabinet Meeting.

Figure 1. Illustration of closed, open-ended, and front-facing seating designs



Appendix A

Element of TAPIC Framework	Statements for presentational governance	Statements for representational governance
Transparency	These meetings make decision making more transparent for the public	These meetings make decision making more transparent to other councillors
Accountability	These meetings make councillors more accountable to the public	<p>These meetings make cabinet members more accountable to backbench councillors</p> <p>(For planning application meetings only): These meetings make planning officers more accountable to planning committee members</p>
Participation	These meetings increase public participation in council decision making	These meetings help cabinet members/scrutiny councillors/planning committee members to involve the public in decision making
Integrity	These meetings give the public more confidence that the council is being run properly	These meetings help cabinet members/scrutiny councillors/planning committee members to ensure that the council is being run properly
Capacity	These meetings give the public more confidence that decisions are being well made	These meetings help cabinet members/scrutiny councillors/planning committee members to make better decisions