Trust in the programme: an exploration of trust dynamics within rural group-based support programmes

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Abstract

Publicly-funded programmes of business support are important vehicles for rural development, and over the last two decades, group-based models of business support have become popular, in which dedicated advisors work with small firms in groups, rather than one-to-one mentoring. A fundamental goal of such programmes is to foster enhanced inter-firm knowledge exchange and learning, and improved firm resilience and innovation, through the development of collective trust amongst participants,. Although many studies have investigated the evolution of trust, including in a rural context, to date most research has focused either on the macro-institutional level, or the micro-personal level, with relatively little exploration of how meso-level collective trust may be encouraged amongst groups of participants in rural business support programmes. This paper addresses the gap by exploring the development of collective trust within two group-based rural business support programmes in Northern Ireland. The study reveals that programme design features and the interpersonal style of advisors combined to shape clients' trust in the programmes and their sponsoring institutions, as well as influencing the degrees of goodwill and camaraderie within the client groups themselves.

Keywords

Trust; rural; support programmes; agri-food; small business.

1. Introduction

In the rural and agri-food context, it has been argued that government support agencies and third level institutions, can be critical to successful and sustainable rural development, not least in fostering business networks (Bourne et al., 2017; Faure et al., 2012; Landini et al., 2017; Nettle et al., 2018; Oreszczyn et al., 2010; Phillipson et al., 2016). In recent decades, there has been a shift in popularity amongst policymakers towards business support programmes that follow group or network-based models, in which dedicated advisors or champions are appointed to work with groups of firms, rather than on a one-to-one mentoring basis. Typically, such groups comprise individual firms who share some spatial commonalities, but who, without the programme, would be unlikely to get to know one another or share ideas, experiences or resources. A fundamental aspect of group-based programmes is the fostering of "collective trust" amongst participants (Welter, 2012), that is, a state of goodwill and camaraderie, so that participants feel willing to share their experiences, open their eyes to fresh ideas and perspectives, and find potentially new directions for their enterprises through mutual help and support. This state of collective trust has been linked to numerous beneficial rural development outcomes, including more resilience across individual businesses as they give and receive peer support (Phillipson et al., 2006), and development of more vibrant small business communities, as a result of enhanced spirits of collective empowerment and self-reliance (Curry, 2010). Essentially, through the fostering of collective trust between peers, group-based models can become more than the sum of their parts, and achieve more than support models based on top-down, one-to-one advice.

If collective trust is indeed a highly important component of group-based business support programmes, how do those administering such programmes foster and encourage it?

Although it would seem likely that the emergence of trust between members of a group-based support programme would be shaped by both institutional and personal factors, to date few studies have investigated the interactions between these different levels (Welter, 2012; Welter and Smallbone, 2006), for example, how the public reputations of support institutions shape the collaborative engagement of clients on programmes, or how advisors, as representatives of the public face of support institutions, can potentially filter and shape clients' views of those institutions. The aim of this research is to explore these inter-connections, by investigating how different forms of trust evolve, over time, in group-based rural support programmes. In particular, the research sought to (i) investigate the dynamic interactions between institutional and personal forms of trust in a rural support setting, and (ii) examine how these forms can shape and impact on the development of goodwill and camaraderie amongst participants of group-based support programmes.

The empirical context of this research is two group-based support programmes for small agri-food firms that ran sequentially over a six-year period in rural Northern Ireland. The UK agri-food sector is an interesting setting for an exploration of the dynamics of trust between firms, institutions and advisors, with several sub-sectors having a tradition of individualism and resistance to formal business cooperation (Fisher, 2013; Kasobov, 2015; Oreszczyn et al., 2010). Furthermore, over the last two decades, a period of liberalisation has taken place in rural business advice and support (Landini et al., 2017; Nettle et al., 2018), such that previously stable, well-recognised public agencies have been replaced by a mix of private consultancies, research institutes and third sector bodies, sometimes funded through temporary or fixed term instruments. This has created a more complicated environment for farmers seeking business advice, and one which is arguably antithetical to farmers' trust development at both institutional and personal levels (Enticott and Vanclay, 2011; Fisher, 2013). However, against this backdrop, policy instruments in agriculture and the rural environment have widely embraced group-based models of business support (Curry, 2010; Ingram, 2008), with initiatives such as LEADER, EIP Operational Groups and specific measures of the Rural Development Programme designed to encourage grassroots collective action and to mobilise actors to jointly solve problems and grow rural communities. The two business support programmes featured in the current study are characteristic of these policy instruments, being fixed-term funded programmes, in which dedicated advisors were employed to work with groups of small agri-food businesses, to create an environment of mutual self-help and support, from which ideas, learning and creativity could flow.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the paper considers how support institutions and business advisors, respectively, build their reputations and trust with clients on group-based programmes, and then how those processes of trust-building are mediated by institution-advisor relations. Next, the empirical study design is described, and then the results are reported and discussed. The paper concludes with some final thoughts on trust development in rural business support programmes and proposes ideas for future research and practice.

2. Group-based business support programmes: how does trust evolve?

2.1 Institutional trust and group-based support programmes

Institutional, or "system" trust, is often conceptualised as the faith or confidence that actors have in the macro context or milieu in which they are situated - the political, legal and economic framework and its informal rules (Luhmann, 2000; Williamson, 1993). These in turn shape the reputations of official bodies and agencies operating within the macro context, and the degrees of faith or confidence that economic actors have in them. In milieus characterised by low levels of institutional trust (Fukuyama, 1996), the pervading cultures of mutual caution make actors reluctant to render themselves vulnerable to their peers. In a rural business support context, this presents challenges to group-based models, as programme designers and advisors must seek to militate against those weak cultures.

However, whatever the bearing that the macro context has on the confidence that actors place in official institutions, the literature indicates a number of factors - within the control of the bodies themselves - which can strengthen their reputations. First, is the extent to which bodies and agencies listen to, and understand, actors' needs: institutions that are viewed as distant, authoritarian and out of touch, are unlikely to be regarded as trustworthy and may indeed destroy pre-existing cooperation (Edwards et al., 2010; Kamau et al., 2018; Landini et al., 2017; Loader, 2018; Neergard and Ulhøi, 2006; Van Cauwenberge et al., 2013). Second, is the level of impartiality and integrity that institutions exhibit in pursuit of their agendas, specifically, whether their actions are regarded as fair and equitable, or biased and furthering of selective interests (Huggins, 2000; Laschewski et al., 2002). Third, is the extent to which programme design takes account of pre-existing social dynamics and prior knowledge of potential partners in the client base (Landini et al., 2017; Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2006; Sökjer-Peterson, 2010). Studies also argue that the judgements actors make about trust in institutions are primarily *cognitive* in nature, that is, actors undertake a rational and objective assessment about how much confidence can be placed in the institution (Smith and Lohrke, 2008). This argument is based on the assumption that institutional engagement is an impersonal activity, where objective measures of confidence will take precedence in shaping actors' perceptions of trustworthiness, such as the institution's accreditations, awards or past achievements, rather than intuitions about its people or processes.

2.2 Personal trust and group-based support programmes

In contrast to institutional trust, personal trust refers to a state of confidence or goodwill that exists between two or more individual persons. Where personal trust exists between individuals, the expectation of those individuals is that the others will behave in ways that are benevolent (Welter, 2012), which results in their willingness to be vulnerable to each other (Mayer et al., 1995; McEvily et al., 2003; Rousseau et al., 1998; Vangen and Huxham, 2003). In the context of group-based support programmes, personal trust is relevant in the relationship between appointed advisors and the clients with the group. In theory, personal trust is a self-reinforcing cycle, whereby the trust placed in advisors by clients, based on their behaviours, is recognised and reciprocated by advisors to clients. However, the opposite dynamic can emerge, in which a dynamic of mutual caution and suspicion constructs itself. How then can advisors initiate a positive cycle of trust with their clients? A first important factor is the advisor's benevolence or empathy (Mayer et al., 1995): the capacity to listen, to value the input/views of clients, and be committed to participatory decision making (Landini et al., 2017). This has also been described as advisors enacting a "Navigator" role (Bowden and Liddle, 2018, p. 147). Second is the capacity to inspire and energise others (Hewes and Lyons, 2008), and strategically mobilise collective action. This has also been described as social or civic entrepreneurship (Malecki and Tootle, 1997), or enacting a "Driver" role (Bowden and Liddle, 2018, p. 147). In fact, Navigator and Driver roles represent quite contrasting imperatives for a business advisor, implying the need for responsiveness in interactions with clients, whilst simultaneously guiding or steering the group (Klerkx and Leeuwis, 2009). Laschewski et al. (2002) describe this duality as business advisors' "impartiality paradox", and it speaks to the subtle and complicated character of the social interactions required of advisors. Third, is the ability of advisors to be flexible in approach, and adjust their facilitation according to the group's evolution, starting, in the early phases of development, with sensitivity to group pre-history (Sökjer-Petersen, 2010). In terms of the basis of trust judgements, in the context of personal trust, it is argued that these are primarily *affective* in nature: that is, actors arrive at their judgements through feelings, instinct and intuition, based on cues signalled by others such as appearance, demeanour and other symbolic attributes.

2.3 Interactions between institutional and personal trust in group-based support programmes

Having considered how institutions and advisors build their reputations and foster trust with clients, this section considers how areas of interaction between the two levels can mediate these processes. As advisors are charged with implementing institutional policies, these individuals embody the public face of those sponsoring institutions (Juntti and Potter, 2002; Sutherland et al., 2013). Therefore, the scope and nature of advisors' efforts to build personal trust with clients is shaped by the structures and policies of the institutions they represent, manifest not least in the design of the programmes that advisors have been appointed to deliver. On the one hand, this means that clients' perceptions of the trustworthiness of advisors can be shaped strongly by the existing degrees of faith or confidence they have in official bodies sponsoring the programme - that may be particularly relevant at programme launch, where advisors are personally unknown to most clients. Through the course of programme delivery however, as advisors construct and enact the features of the programme, their work in executing the content, e.g. the extent to which they facilitate group interaction and foster esprit de corps, not only shapes collective trust in the client group (Besser and Miller, 2011), but can also shift clients' perceptions of sponsoring institutions. This interaction between institutional and personal trust levels indicates how it is possible for judgements about the trustworthiness of official bodies to have an affective as well as a cognitive basis. Moreover, the pivotal position of advisors in shaping, and being shaped by, institutional reputation also highlights the potential for advisors to experience psychological and workload stress, particularly in situations where they are compensating for clients' lack of trust in official bodies, and/or are working on programmes with goals/terms that are poorly matched to clients' needs, which advisors are nevertheless expected to implement (Juntti and Potter, 2002; Phillipson et al., 2006; Sutherland et al., 2013).

A final way in which the relationship between advisors and support institutions shapes their reputations is in the contractual arrangements put in place. Often, advisors appointed to deliver business support programmes are external consultants or specialists, rather than direct employees of the sponsoring bodies. Contractual agreements underpin these appointments. However, in a business support context studies show there is a balance to be struck between under and over-reliance on contracts. Under-reliance is associated with "over-trust" (Goel and Karri, 2006; Zahra et al., 2006), where one party (e.g. the support institution) affords another party (e.g. the advisor) excessive freedom to act in an unmonitored or unchecked way. Such over-trust has been linked to collusion, favouritism and opportunism (Tonoyan et al., 2010), which have a negative effect on institutional trust (Welter, 2005). Therefore, institutions which appoint advisors to work with client groups, but do not monitor or evaluate their progress towards that goal, may risk damaging their own reputations and the wider trust environment, as well as missing the opportunity to build goodwill within the group. On the other hand, institutions that do not allow advisors any flexibility or improvisation in programme delivery, especially around relationship building with the clients, may hamper the advisors' capacities for empathy, responsiveness and other desirable behaviours for fostering collective trust. The risk of stress and frustration for advisors would also increase.

3. Empirical study

To meet the aims of this study, and to respond to calls for research designs to explore processes of trust development (Allen et al., 2018; Kautonen et al., 2010; Smith and Lohrke, 2008), a qualitative, longitudinal, case study design was employed. This allowed time to capture the evolution of actors' relationships in the programmes, and also to develop deep understanding of the complexities of trust development.

The selected case studies were two inter-related publicly-funded business support programmes (Acorn 1 and Acorn 2 - real titles have been disguised to preserve confidentiality), targeted at small agri-food businesses in Northern Ireland, which ran in sequence from 2009 to 2015. Both cases were considered highly suited to an investigation of trust in agri-food business support, in particular collective and institutional trust. On one hand, small-scale, owner-occupied farm holdings have a high representation in the agri-food industry in Northern Ireland, and this abundance of sector-specific, geographically proximate small firms represented exactly the kind of client base with a lot to gain, in principle, from participation in group-based support programmes. Historically however, the agricultural sector in Northern Ireland had exhibited the same culture of individualism, and similar business support legacy issues, as described earlier for the rest of the UK. This implied many complexities to explore with respect to the development of collective trust between farmers, and also farmers' confidence and trust in support institutions. Moreover, the sequential nature of the two case programmes, staged within the same geographic and sectoral context, allowed for a comparative dimension in the analysis, aiding theory development (Limaj and Bernroider, 2017; Linton and Kask, 2017; Miller, 2011).

Data collection comprised a mix of documentary scrutiny, focus group discussions, participant observation of programme meetings and events, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders including the programmes' advisors and participants (Table 1). The study commenced just prior to the launch of the second programme in 2013 and continued almost four years beyond its completion, in late 2016. Documentary analysis took place from 2013-2015 and involved the study of (i) publicly available reports, press articles and online material pertaining to the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland, (ii) internal tendering and evaluation documents for both programmes, which detailed the intended objectives, content and structure of the programmes, and the official assessment of their effectiveness in meeting their targets, and (iii) internal documents relating to participants' engagement and feedback, specifically for Acorn 2, 36 business audits, 23 post event evaluations, and 24 client mentoring plans. The publicly available documentary evidence shed light on the macro context of the sector and its trust environment at the commencement of the first programme, whilst the internal documents provided specific facts about the programmes' execution and insights into the clients' experiences and perceptions, which could be triangulated with data gathered first hand from the focus groups and interviews.

[Insert Table 1 here]

A total of five focus groups were held with programme clients at an introductory event for Acorn 2 in 2013. Two of these groups were comprised entirely of Acorn 1 graduates who had just enrolled on Acorn 2. The numbers participating in the groups varied in size from two to four. Although the group sizes were relatively small, smaller groups are recommended when participants are likely to have a lot to say on the research topic, i.e. when they are emotionally involved with the subject matter (Morgan, 1988). In this case, the main themes explored in the focus groups (prior experiences and existing knowledge of support institutions and programmes, including Acorn 1, the motivations in joining Acorn 1 and/or 2, and expectations for Acorn 2) attracted strong views and interest from the participants. In this way, the focus group discussions generated insights into institutional trust (the macro context), and collective trust and affective aspects during Acorn 1 (meso level development of camaraderie). The focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

A series of participant observations was undertaken at business support events during the execution of Acorn 2, in 2013 and 2014. In total, observations were carried out at four events organized as part of Acorn 2 (programme introduction and closing events, and best practice meetings) and at one separate event organized by a local council, which provided further access to Acorn 1 and 2 participants. This data collection focused on observing the interactions between the clients, and between the clients and the advisor, within the setting of the events as they took place. Copious fieldnotes were made in situ, recording not only the content of the spoken interactions, but also nonverbal cues and behaviours e.g. individuals' mannerisms and body language, as well as the wider feel and atmosphere of each event. As far as possible, informal discussions were held with participants both during breaks and immediately after the events (Svare and Gausdal, 2015), to explore issues related to what had been observed, and to encourage participants to relay their perceptions in their own words. With each event, participants became more habitualised to the presence of the research team, which promoted increasingly open and relaxed interactions. Informants talked not only about the immediate events, but also the wider programme and the actors and bodies involved. In addition, Acorn 1 graduates compared and reflected on their experiences on Acorn 1 and 2. In this way, the participant observations gave invaluable direct insights into the quality and nature of the interactions between members of the client group, and between the clients and the advisor. After each event, the research team members compared and wrote up their observations to build a reliable, consolidated account of the interactions. The longitudinal aspect and prolonged engagement with the subject guarded against the effects of the researchers' presence on the setting. Another problematic issue that can arise with observational methods is that of objectivity. This potential pitfall was avoided by the research team discussing issues arising from the data and framing these in theoretical terms rather than specific practical problems facing the participants.

A total of sixteen semi-structured interviews were undertaken, from 2013 to 2016. The interviews were held with six out of the 22 Acorn 1 graduates (all six of whom went on to participate in Acorn 2), seven out of the 37 "new" Acorn 2 participants, and three key individuals responsible for programme delivery (the programme manager, and the two appointed support advisors). The main themes explored with the programme clients were their motivations for taking part in either or both programmes, their perceptions of the content and delivery, and their views of the advisors and the support institutions. These interviews also revealed insights on the basis of their trust judgements, including whether these were primarily cognitive or affective in nature. In the Acorn 1 client interviews, participants were also encouraged to talk at length about their experiences of Acorn 1 and to reflect on the differences they perceived between the two programmes, with respect to group camaraderie, and relationships with advisors. These insights were particularly important to gather as no participant observation data was collected "live" on Acorn 1. The programme manager and advisor interviews focused on client engagement in the programmes, the role of trust (at advisor-programme manager and advisor-client levels), and the methods used to build trust with clients. The interviews with these support actors provided insights into the formation of collective trust and how this compared across both programmes.

It can be seen from Table 1 that the different methods of data collection were executed in an overlapping process. The focus group discussions were concentrated during the opening phase, which gave the opportunity to gather initial insights quite rapidly from a relatively large proportion of the client group, particularly relating to their perceptions of the programmes, and - for the two Acorn 1 groups - participants' experiences of Acorn 1. The focus groups also gave the chance to make first observations about how the programme participants behaved towards each other. The depth interviews were concentrated in year two of the data collection period. This gave the opportunity to explore, more deeply and directly, specific themes and issues that had emerged from preceding focus groups, as well as from the participant observation of events and scrutiny of programme documents, both of which were undertaken in a more continuous process over the fieldwork period. The triangulation of methods and sources, gathered over an extended time period, helped to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

One acknowledged feature of the research design was that for Acorn 1, data collection took place retrospectively, following completion of the programme. While this meant that client group relations and interactions with the advisors were not observed at first hand in real time, the perceptions and experiences of the eight Acorn 1 graduates, and the Acorn 1 advisor, were captured through focus group discussions and depth interviews. This retrospective dimension to the study (Gummesson, 1991) allowed for comparison and observations of group relations with the second "live" case and for comparisons between Acorn 1 and Acorn 2 participants. In addition, client interactions continued to develop beyond the formal programme duration, and these were captured through observation and the depth interview with the relevant advisor. Thus, the data collection for the study extended post-programme, adding further to the longitudinal nature of the study.

The data analysis followed a thematic approach based on repeated reading of transcripts and fieldnotes, and followed a number of steps (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data analysis was conducted both manually and with the assistance of the qualitative data analysis package NVivo (10)[1]. The process began with familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and fieldnotes (Eisenhardt, 1989). This step was followed by initial coding of transcripts and fieldnotes and the data were segmented into small pieces of information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Further reading of the data was undertaken to get a sense of their scope, to check for recurring regularities (Guba, 1978) and for an interpretation of the themes or patterns (Patton, 2015; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Themes included: *how trust developed over time across the programmes; lack of institutional trust; changed institutional goals; advisor capabilities; weak/strong collective trust; conflict of interest; over trust; regional legacy*. The themes were then reviewed, and constant reference was made to original transcript material and other sources to check the validity of these themes. This activity was accompanied by note-taking, in which the researchers' observations and ideas were captured (Tesch, 1990). This process allowed for an in-depth consideration of the interrelationships and the intricacies of the context being studied, providing depth of meaning and richness of understanding (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Next, a concise introduction is given to the cases. Following this, the analysis of trust development is presented in relation to each case.

4. The cases

The main features of the two case programmes are summarised in Table 2. Both programmes sought to build a network of small food producers based on goodwill, or collective trust, so as to facilitate knowledge exchange, collaboration and generation of new business opportunities. Acorn 1 ran for two years (2009 to 2011). Administered by the then Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), a devolved institution for economic development policy for Northern Ireland, it was financed through EU Regional Development Funds matched by five local councils, plus small fee contributions from participants. The programme specifically targeted firms that had been unable to access existing forms of support/funding from InvestNI, the regional development agency responsible for delivering DETI's economic development strategies. These included participants that were for the most part new to business development support (micro-sized start-ups and farm businesses seeking to diversify) but also a number of experienced food producers. Of the 22 firms recruited, the majority were owner-manager artisan producers. The programme itself encompassed a package of activities, including themed knowledge exchange workshops, one-to-one mentoring, and introductions to external stakeholders such as retail buyers. Two appointed advisors (Susan and Peter, not their real names) facilitated these activities. Although both advisors were well-established with over 20 years consulting experience and had worked with food companies in the region on various projects, there were no pre-existing relations between the advisors and the Acorn 1 clients. On completion of the programme, the programme evaluation report noted that all pre-set targets for the programme were well exceeded, which related to numbers of jobs and new products created and collaborative activities begun. The programme evaluation also referred to how the programme received recognition for its business support and training through an award for "Training Excellence" from a local food association.

Following the achievements of Acorn 1, the consortium of councils sought funding to stage a second programme. Acorn 2 launched in 2013, and ran for two years. Thirty-seven participants were recruited, including nine participants from Acorn 1, all of whom were food micro businesses engaged either in production or food service. Although both Acorn 1 and Acorn 2 shared the same group-based support model, the orientation and delivery of the second programme differed from the first in two key ways. First, due to a greater participation of InvestNI in the funding, Acorn 2 had a more overt business growth and export orientation than Acorn 1. Second, Acorn 2 was delivered solely by one advisor (Peter), whose expertise represented a closer fit to the growth orientation. As with Acorn 1, an evaluation of Acorn 2 was undertaken on its completion. This found that although the second programme achieved the set targets for new products and jobs created, these were not to the same levels as the first programme. Acorn 2 did not meet its target for collaborative activities.

[Insert Table 2 here]

5. Results

5.1 Institutional trust environment in the Northern Ireland agri-food sector prior to commencement of Acorn programmes

Before the launch of the Acorn programmes, the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland exhibited a support environment where advice and training for collaboration, and engagement by small businesses, was limited. This was exacerbated by a reticence among small food businesses to collaborate. A number of Government-led reviews covering the period running up to the first Acorn programme (pre 2009) highlighted a need for increased co-operation in the agri-food industry, and indeed a need for a "major cultural shift" to make progress (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2016, p. 96). In a report published in 2008 for Matrix, the Northern Ireland Science Industry Panel[2], it was identified that within the agri-food industry, while there were strong network relationships, links with "science partners" appeared to be "intermittent and driven by short-term decision-making" (Matrix, 2008, p.106). This was attributed to a lack of awareness of the full range of available Government funding and supports. This may have been exacerbated by the lack of a specific policy to support the local food sector in Northern Ireland, unlike other initiatives in other parts of the UK (Rural Network NI, 2015). In recognizing the need for a more coordinated approach to support for the sector, in May 2008 new support structures were announced to strengthen joint working across Government on food issues and to provide industry with a strategic forum to offer advice to Government departments and agencies on development support. More pertinently, in relation to the type and size of enterprises in this study, data from economic agency sources for this period indicated that historically there was a paucity of applications for food related research and development support to InvestNI and that there had been no recorded applications to the agency's collaborative networks programme from small/micro food enterprises[3].

Set against this context, the introduction of the Acorn 1 programme in 2009 and its focus on knowledge exchange, collaboration and collective trust building among small agri-food businesses and institutional bodies seemed a very timely and appropriate intervention.

5.2 Forms of trust and their evolution in Acorn 1 (2009-2011)

This section describes the execution of Acorn 1 and presents the analysis of trust between the main actors and institutions. The key themes that emerged in Acorn 1 were: strong degrees of trust between sponsoring bodies and contracted advisors; very strong trust built between one advisor (Susan) and the client group, and the fostering of excellent camaraderie between the group members.

As conveyed earlier, Acorn 1 commenced in 2009, with the aim of building a group of speciality food businesses that could share experiences and learn from each other, based on fostered goodwill. The programme was part-funded and administered by a consortium of five local councils. The programme manager, an economic development officer based at one of the councils, was responsible for appointing and managing the advisors who ultimately delivered the programme and worked directly with the clients. The two appointed advisors (Peter and Susan) divided their contributions according to their experience. Susan had extensive experience in training and coaching small businesses and, therefore, took the lead on business development, while Peter's experience in economic development led him to spearhead food tourism through the marketing of products at events and festivals. Peter's involvement in Acorn 1 was, however, in practice quite removed in that he did not himself have much direct contact with participants. The division of roles meant that, of the two consultants, Susan took a leading role in the delivery of content that required regular face-to-face engagement with participants.

In the management of these advisors, testimonies revealed that the programme manager placed considerable trust in the advisors, based on his past knowledge of them and favourable experiences. That is, although the advisors' contracts contained certain objectives, targets, and monitoring procedures, beyond these, the advisors were given considerable autonomy to get on with the programme delivery. This included, for example, being given the freedom to refine and tailor their activities following an initial benchmarking of clients' support needs at the start of the programme. The Programme Manager explained the nature of the relationship between himself, on behalf of the funders, and the advisors as delivery agents for the programmes:

> The design of the programme is such that while we are responsible for it, it is outsourced to the delivery agent in the first case….the programme is led, and has been led by the

> delivery agent (advisors). They are fundamental…you do need a delivery agent who has the ability to understand small business and the particular sector. The programme has to be highly flexible….we need to have a resource that is able to go out to companies and be with them on a supportive, flexible basis.

Both the advisors valued this autonomy, and indeed viewed it as helpful to improving the flexibility and responsiveness of the programme overall:

> I have got a very good relationship with [the Programme Manager] and we have got a very trusting relationship…and that is because of the years that we have worked together. So, he tends to just let me get on with things. (Peter)

> If they don't trust us, they're not going to give us the freedom to run the network. There were times when we were going back to the council and saying we need to change something. [The Programme Manager] always said yes because he knew we always did it with the interests of the participants at heart. (Susan)

In addition to the existence of this strong trust, there was much evidence of very strong trust built between Susan and the client group. Our analysis indicated that the origins of this were the interpersonal style and approach taken by this advisor. From the outset, Susan placed a high degree of importance on one-to-one engagement with participants, getting to know them individually in order to understand their motivations and expectations. Indeed, Susan used the formal benchmarking activity scheduled at the start of Acorn 1 as a vehicle for developing a deep understanding of the clients' needs:

> These (baseline assessments) were conducted on the clients' premises, so that we could gain a good understanding of their business and the current position. These were useful documents for mapping the starting point of each firm, for understanding their needs within the workshops and also for the mentoring. It also helped establish the level of delivery of workshops, and helped us to know what the participants wanted from the programme. (Excerpt from evaluation report undertaken by Susan)

Following this care taken in initial interactions with clients, Susan continued to build relationships by demonstrating commitment to the clients, and acting with professionalism and empathy for their needs:

> The only way I can build trust with them is that they have confidence in me, that they believe that I know what I am talking about. That they believe that I can add value. They are all really busy.….You don't need to know everything but you do need to be able to go and find it out for them and you have to do what you said you would do…you have to be as good as your word... (Susan)

Susan's particular combination of skills and capabilities in being both an initiator and mobiliser of action, as well as being empathetic, was remarked upon by participants:

> Well I think you need someone really good as the driving force which [Susan] was….If you have a really good person at the helm who is a go-getter…[She] was over and chatting, how are you getting on and was interested and you need someone like that. She did help so many people on that course, she really was good. (Participant 11, Acorn 1 and 2)

Susan's approach not only inspired trust between herself and the participants, but also initiated collective trust between the members of the group. Susan worked to supplement the more formal interactions that took place within the programme (workshops, supplier meetings and presentations) with a breadth of informal encounters where participants could socialise in a relaxed manner. These included outings and visits to food markets, festivals and agricultural shows. Group members appreciated the value of these efforts in many ways, including that they gave opportunities to share experiences and learn from each other:

> Good to meet and talk to other small producers – possibly get more information from them than anything else. They have gone through or are going through the same problems as I am and there is sure to be one of them with the solution to my problem. (Anonymous feedback comments on Acorn 1 programme evaluation)

> I think the major thing for me is the networking…I found that invaluable, the link and friendships that came from all of the groups. And the willingness of people to share information with you….we are able to talk about all aspects of business…so it certainly has been very useful to discuss those things with others to see what they say, what works for them. (Participant 9, Acorn 1 and 2)

A further example of Susan's emphasis on building group camaraderie in Acorn 1 was the inclusion of well-tailored extended trips in the programme, which provided further opportunity for group members to socialise and develop stronger bonds:

> Collaboration stemmed from them spending time together. We had a couple of residential events and a trip to London…some people think they are junkets but my

> experience is that the amount of goodwill that comes out of those, the amount of collaboration and joint working, the amount of peer support…we don't get that when people come to a one day workshop. You sit in a bar and have a drink with someone and you really have a chance to get to know them…the trust has been built up because they got to know each other. (Susan)

> A two-day event like that, you got to know more of the people in the group after the talks and things like that. Having a few drinks and getting to know them. (Participant 11, Acorn 1 and 2)

Goodwill and collective trust developed over the period of the programme, as relationships and friendships were forged. Overall therefore, the approach of Susan, which struck a good balance between empathetic "navigation" of the group (Landini et al., 2017; Bowden and Liddle, 2018) and energetic "driving" (Hewes and Lyons, 2008; Malecki and Tootle, 1997), were key to the development of strong trust between herself and the clients, as well as collective trust within the client group. In terms of the nature of trust judgements in Acorn 1, we found judgements to be strongly affective, both in terms of judgements made by support institutions on the advisors (via the programme manager), and between the advisors and clients. By the end of Acorn 1, there was also some evidence that the clients' experience of working with Susan modified some of their pre-existing views towards support institutions. Specifically, the case of one of the more experienced participants was quite telling. Participant 6 (Acorn 1 and 2) had held quite negative views on the nature of support from Government agencies. While her attitudes towards specific agencies, based on her experiences, did not change, her involvement in Acorn 1 did change her attitudes to the value of support more widely:

> I could not have seen the value of sitting down and talking to someone, but yet, I now do….I now watch Dragon's Den. It is not the money you get out of Dragon's Den, it is the money you get behind you. That is so important and does more for you than the money. And that is what I realised about the Acorn programme – they took you down that road and (I) realised what someone else could actually do for you.

5.3 Forms of trust and their evolution in Acorn 2 (2013-2015)

Our analysis found that trust flows were very different in Acorn 2. Specifically, although we found continued strong programme manager - advisor trust we found weaknesses in advisor - client trust, which were further undermined by a "trust shock" feature of the programme, which precipitated a fracturing of collective trust within the client group. Ultimately, this led to unplanned - and unpaid - input by Susan, the Acorn 1 advisor, who intervened to reanimate the camaraderie of the original Acorn 1 group.

Acorn 2 commenced in 2013 with a cohort of 37 clients, nine of whom were graduates of Acorn 1. At the outset, analysis indicated positive perceptions and goodwill amongst both sets of clients for the support institutions, particularly so amongst the Acorn 1 graduates, due to their positive experiences of the first programme. Therefore, although there had been an 18-month hiatus between the end of Acorn 1 and the commencement of Acorn 2, these clients expressed optimism and good faith in the new programme and in the institutional arrangements. Participant 6 (Acorn 1 and 2) recalled how she had been approached by Peter prior to Acorn 2 and given an opportunity to help set the agenda for the content of Acorn 2:

> We were told by him that he was tendering for it and he asked us what we would like to see in it. We were growing and wanted accreditation. The first programme had taken us to the stage where we had a product and if you were going to move forward you were going to have to comply with these things in a more organized fashion…And because there was all day meetings and a small group on the first programme, we had all got quite friendly. (Participant 6, Acorn 1 and 2)

Other participants from Acorn 1 felt positive about the proposed direction and content of the new programme:

> For those who have been involved in the first one (Acorn 1), consolidating products, finding ways of getting them to the end customer, getting it to market…I think to be truly effective you are talking about mainland Europe as the focus for the next Acorn programme. That seems to be where the opportunities are. (Participant 8, Acorn 1 and 2)

> I think the premise and the idea of Acorn (2) is great, and I think as a follow-on from the first Acorn programme, bringing in new producers – there has been a lot more new producers from when it started, it is a great idea. (Participant 15, Acorn 1 and 2)

From fairly early stages of the programme delivery however, evidence indicated that these perceptions of goodwill and optimism began to wane, both amongst the graduates and the new Acorn 2 clients. One reason for the graduates' loss of goodwill related to the programme design. In contrast to Acorn 1 where the programme structure and content had been well tailored, the graduates found the second programme lacking in genuine advancement on the first:

> I was gaining nothing from it. I was going over old ground. I had to move and try something different. The best practice visits were covering old ground….what was the point of that? We had already done that when they had already brought in buyers from supermarkets. (Participant 6, Acorn 1 and 2)

> I probably would have needed more regular mentoring working with someone. If the topic is not something you are really needing, you are not going to go. I have never had enough time to think, let us have a day out today. To me they are like jollies…So I think the funding for me would have been better put into consultancy, a bit more regular once a month type stuff… (Participant 12, Acorn 1 and 2)

For the new Acorn 2 graduates, the programme content was problematic in other ways. Although the events and activities were more novel to them, they questioned the practical value of the content and the extent to which tangible outputs (economic benefits) were achieved:

> I thought to myself, why would they not for example take some of my cider and bring it to a hotel/restaurant chain to see if they are interested in it and help practically…For example, if you had a meeting (with chefs)…straight away there is a direct link from the person who makes it. (Participant 5, Acorn 2)

> We need people with hands-on knowledge…to talk to issues that are affecting us. That would help. Much more so than workshops or conferences. I am done with all of that. I am just too small…it is the time, I just do not have it. (Participant 7, Acorn 2)

Overall therefore, there were structural and design deficiencies which placed a strain on the goodwill of the clients towards the programme and their perceptions of the institutional support around it. However, an even greater area of strain in goodwill emerged, centred on the relationship between the Acorn 2 advisor and the clients. The outcome of the tendering process in Acorn 2 was the appointment of Peter as sole advisor (although both Susan and Peter submitted bids). Analysis indicated that this decision was shaped by the greater emphasis in Acorn 2 on business growth and pursuit of export opportunities. Specifically, the greater financial involvement of InvestNI brought an expectation that clients' businesses would form part of this institution's "*export pipeline*" (Programme Manager). Given Peter's experience and consultancy activities - specialising in pursuit of large buyer contracts and export opportunities - his profile was seen to represent a better fit with the Acorn 2 orientation. However, there were certain features of Peter's approach and interpersonal style which were not conducive to trust building with clients. First, observational data identified that Peter adopted a formal style in the workshops, which did not invite much interaction or informal discussion. This, combined with a reliance on remote and electronic means of communication outside of meetings and events, contrasted with the more informal and personal communication style of Susan, as expressed in the Acorn 1 graduates' testimonies. The difference in approach between the two advisors extended to the clients' baseline assessments: whereas Susan used these as an opportunity to delve into the motivations and expectations of the participants, Peter used the assessments to collect quite descriptive data on the clients' current business activities. The consequence of all this was a perception amongst clients that Peter lacked genuine interest in their needs and circumstances, partnered with a growing cynicism about what the programme was offering them (a lack of tangible benefits):

> This is where the likes of the programme or some of these other bodies, they are trying to push us into directions you don't want to go. Somebody is coming to me and talking about Harrods and Fortnum and Mason. Hold on, I have not got into one tenth of decent restaurants (within the local area). (Participant 5, Acorn 2)

> They had great ideas, but they never seemed to be implementing them…I haven't found the second programme worth it, which is very disappointing. (Participant 15, Acorn 1 and 2)

The appointment and management of Peter as advisor in Acorn 2 followed the same process as Acorn 1, and analysis identified the same high levels of trust between the programme manager and Peter, with a light touch monitoring regime. However, whereas the empathetic and responsive approach of Susan resulted in no problematic consequences for advisor-client trust under this regime, in Acorn 2 the light touch monitoring was indeed problematic: with Peter given free rein, his more overt "driver" role and lack of empathy weakened trust with the clients, but these problems were not recognised or acted upon by management. Furthermore, the problems in both programme design and advisor style combined to obstruct development of collective trust in the client group. Specifically, Acorn 1 graduates, disillusioned by the covering of old ground, and the lack of attention paid to group-building features, gradually drifted away from the programme by absenting themselves from events. This had an obvious and direct impact on whole group cohesion and morale. The new Acorn 2 clients meanwhile, did not build the same group camaraderie because of the limited opportunities for group building within the programme.

Trust development in Acorn 2 was most impacted, however, by a “trust shock” feature of the programme. In the design of Acorn 2, sanctioned by the funding agencies, an opportunity was given to producer clients to sell their goods through a distribution company, under the distributor's own label. Crucially, Peter was the owner of this company. Peter viewed this arrangement as a new type of business support model, where he, as advisor, had a more instrumental role in clients' development. While several clients were happy to support this initiative by agreeing to supply goods, the majority of the clients did not provide products. The post-programme evaluation report indicated that at least seven of the Acorn 2 clients were unhappy with the uneasy dual role the funding bodies had granted Peter, and saw that it compromised his impartiality as an advisor. In turn, this undermined their trust in his advice, and negatively impacted their perceptions of the integrity of the supporting institutions. It also had the effect of creating within-group tensions and rivalries, as some clients saw themselves in competition with each other, while others were more critical, in a general way, of their peers' willingness to engage with the arrangement:

> I didn’t find the mentoring great because I feel (Peter) has his own agenda which is to develop his own food business and he was very much steering us in that direction and he might have been right in the things he was saying but one always wondered what the agenda was? Did he want to supply us with his own intermediary food business? We were always a bit not sure about the advice. (Participant 12, Acorn 1 and 2)

> When they started talking about this branding thing, whatever they call themselves… I

> think at this stage that started bringing in, is that not a conflict of interest? Instead of trying to keep everyone together, they have sort of tried to make us splinter off … and they have pushed people over other people to get the best price for themselves. It might be better for some businesses than not, but they haven't helped themselves…. (Participant 15, Acorn 1 and 2)

In response to the "trust shock", some participants stopped engaging directly with Peter, and instead only communicated with an events assistant employed by him. Reflecting on the distribution company arrangement and his own status within it, Peter acknowledged a conflict of interest issue, and recognised that sensitive handling was needed in order to regain the trust of participants. He also explained the situation as representative of the tension between satisfying the requirements of the funders (i.e. the growth and export orientation of InvestNI) and meeting individual participants' needs. Unfortunately, although Peter expressed that efforts had been made to listen to clients and to handle the conflict of interest issue sensitively, the result for clients on Acorn 2 was a severe loss of trust.

In the wake of the programme design and advisor relations problems, and frustrated by the lack of peer-to-peer social contact, Acorn 1 graduates acted spontaneously to reignite team spirit that had previously existed between them. The ongoing degree of connectedness that existed between these clients was expressed in the views of Participant 6 in an interview in November 2014, indicating that Acorn 1 participants were "*…still connected...maybe more so because of the second one (Acorn 2) not working…*". This led to a member of this group, after completion of Acorn 2, approaching Susan with a request that she consider supporting and facilitating the group, on an informal (and unpaid) basis, including individual mentoring activities. Susan did agree to this, and indeed organised a meeting of the group at a council led local food event:

> I facilitated the meeting….for free, and because I have a real commitment to this….I am the only non-food producer on it, probably because I facilitated the meeting….They meet, they have a Facebook page and people are constantly putting stuff up on it all the time.…It is really lively, really good, has been a fantastic support to them. The other thing that they do is every three months they have a meeting, someone hosts it…they organise a speaker or they do a tour and then they just talk to each other about what they want out of it. And that is one of the spin offs, all the food producers being in touch with each other….

Post-Acorn 2 therefore, there was a legacy impact due to the collective trust that had been built by Acorn 1 graduates during the first programme. Susan's testimonies did not indicate personal concern with this turn of events. However, the outcome does reveal the workload implications for those who are identified as trustworthy advisors in business support networks. Such risks may be particularly high in rural settings and other forms of small community context, where feelings of social obligation and personal responsibility for the well-being of others may be particularly strong (Atterton, 2007).

Overall therefore, Acorn 2 was characterised by problems in programme design, advisor style and status which served to weaken the advisor-client trust, and also the collective trust within the group. The existence of strong manager-advisor trust had a detrimental impact in perpetuating those trust weaknesses. In Acorn 2, as in Acorn 1, we also identify that clients connected their perceptions of Peter - particularly his conflicted status - with their perceptions of the underlying programme organisation and institutional support. In this way, we identify that the advisor plays a role in inflecting, or mediating, the client-institutional trust. Our analysis of Acorn 2 testimonies and observations also finds much evidence of affective trust.

6. Discussion

In the now popular group-based models of business support, trust is recognised as a vital component of success (Besser and Miller, 2011; Newbery et al., 2013), as is the role of advisors or facilitators (Ingram et al., 2020; Macken-Walsh, 2019). In Figure 1 we present a longitudinal schematic of how trust evolved in the two support programmes we studied, and the key features, conditions and events that shaped the trust development. In the following text, we elaborate on this scheme and compare our analysis with the literature.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

As Figure 1 indicates, our study explored trust over four temporal phases: pre-Acorn programme, Acorn 1 delivery, Acorn 2 delivery, and post-programme. In the pre-Acorn phase, we identified a quite weak macro-trust context due to historic and structural features in the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland, and somewhat mixed levels of confidence in institutions by prospective clients, based on the extent to which those institutions were seen to be specific towards clients' needs. During Acorn 1 delivery, strong advisor-client trust evolved through the empathic approach of the advisor (Landini et al., 2017; Nettle et al., 2018), and her ability to balance “Navigator” and “Driver” roles (Bowden and Liddle, 2018). The advisor's ability to achieve those outcomes was facilitated by the strong trust placed in her by the programme manager. The advisor also stimulated at least some goodwill towards support institutions, via her position as the “public face” of the programme, and embodiment of what they stood for: as she shaped the programme to provide experiences that were fitting and valued by clients, so did the support institutions enjoy some halo goodwill effect. Finally, the approach of the advisor, facilitated by management trust and basic programme design features, fuelled strong collective trust in the Acorn 1 client group. To this extent, we label this phase as "Collective Trust Established".

During Acorn 2 delivery, the new advisor's interpersonal style, and overt 'driving' role (Bowden and Liddle, 2018), were not conducive to trust building with the clients, nor with the promotion of camaraderie within the group. Moreover, the institutionally approved commercial arrangement in Acorn 2 served to further alienate clients from the advisor, with a loss of status on his part as impartial (Laschewski et al., 2002). The commercial arrangement, and the advisor's role in it, also served to alienate clients from each other, by creating a rivalrous environment. The lack of goodwill clients expressed for the advisor extended itself to support institutions, as clients connected the personal and institutional dimensions of the programme. In this phase, the high degree of trust placed in the advisor by the programme manager constituted a damaging lack of vigilance (McEvily et al., 2003), which allowed the weakened trust elsewhere to perpetuate. Overall, we characterise this phase as "Collective Trust Fractured".

During the Acorn 2 phase, we observed the interesting phenomenon of Acorn 1 graduates acting to recreate, for themselves, the camaraderie they valued from the first programme. On one hand, one could justifiably interpret this as a criticism of Acorn 2, which failed to sustain the collective trust that had been fostered before its launch. However, it could also be interpreted more positively, as a demonstration of the legacy impact of programmes that do succeed in building collective trust. In the cases studied here however, the clients involved in the action did seek continued support to maintain the collective trust. This not only raises questions about the on-going burdens placed on advisors when strong goodwill has been built up with clients, but also how self-sustaining collective trust can be beyond the end date of fixed term programmes, when the activities to animate and enact the trust - to avoid dissipation - are the responsibility of the clients themselves. Hence, we characterise this phase as "Collective Trust Fragile".

At the beginning of the paper we posed the question - if collective trust is a highly desirable goal of group-based business support programmes, how do those administering such programmes foster and encourage it? In other words, is it the people or the institutions that matter to the development of trust in business support groups? Do individual advisors build institutional trust, or is it the other way around? This research shows that personal trust, developed through the skills and capabilities of advisors, is particularly key. This accords with a number of recent studies that have argued that advisors should assume the role of facilitators rather than technical experts in order to deal with complex social and group processes which require strong interpersonal skills (Gorman, 2019; Ingram et al., 2020; Nettle et al., 2018; Landini et al., 2017; Macken-Walsh, 2019).

The findings support Huggins' (2000) assertion that the energy, enthusiasm and experience of intermediaries or brokers is key in generating collective trust through effective interaction and exchange between participants. More recent work by King et al. (2019) also acknowledges the efforts made by experienced and engaged facilitators in the pursuit of relationship building. The advisor's leadership abilities, and capacity for connecting clients into productive and beneficial group-based support was evident in Acorn 1. Again, as indicated in the post-Acorn phase of our depiction of trust evolution, the programme advisor is effectively a "grassroots leader", i.e. someone who can trigger collaboration in local settings, and is driven by passion and not by monetary incentives (Sökjer-Petersen, 2010).

7. Conclusions

The paper concludes with some final thoughts on trust development in group-based business support programmes and the interplay between institutional and personal levels of trust. The implications for the management of support programmes and future research are considered.

First, personal and institutional trust, together, provide an explanation of the development of meso-level collective trust in a business support context. Within this axis, personal trust and the role of the advisor is a particularly strong determinant of collective trust. The study also provides insight into the nature of trust flows along institutional and interpersonal dimensions and how collective trust is built or not. The findings reveal how the goodwill, high trust relations and strong ties developed from one programme can dissipate quickly for those members who progress to a further programme, characterised by poorly matched programme goals and client needs, and contrasting advisor style and capabilities. However, as the findings on Acorn 2 indicated, trust relations may be reignited as core groups of long-standing members continue to develop learning communities by reverting to earlier network forms rather than seek to pursue knowledge sharing in existing network forms.

Trust is a complex subject and one that is challenging to investigate, both conceptually and methodologically. This study's limitations are common to other studies on trust in that respondents' perceptions of trustworthiness may be incomplete and perceptually biased. Future research could be undertaken to explore whether the themes identified here have explanatory power in other regions and contexts. Moreover, although our findings did not suggest any possible contagion effects from the presence of a pre-formed group from an earlier linked programme, it is an area worthy of further investigation.

The first key policy implication arising from this study is the need for strong consultation and communication with client bases early in the development phases of support interventions, and for advisor training programmes that prioritise the development of interpersonal skills and capabilities in dealing with complex social and group processes (Landini et al., 2017). Second, institutionally-approved delivery mechanisms must take account of the advisor role and the potential for conflicts of interest, which prove highly damaging to advisor-client trust relations and particularly so when the advisor lacks strong interpersonal skills in overcoming client concerns. The third policy insight from this research concerns the challenges of designing and implementing good "follow-on" programmes that run subsequent to a previously successful intervention, particularly where not all members are following-on, and so do not share the same heritage. Our results highlight the risks that can come from an imperative to shift direction and/or pursue bolder ambitions with such programmes, in order to evidence continued value added by the sponsoring institutions and/or continued growth/development trajectories amongst the clients. The ambitions of these programmes are unlikely to be realised if they are not shared by the clients themselves.

Notes:

1. Given the amount of data to code and analyse, the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo (10) was used to assist with the management and analysis of the data

and the identification of core themes. This allowed for a more complete set of data for interpretation than might occur when undertaking such a task manually, thus helping to ensure rigour within the analysis process (Bazeley, 2007).

2. MATRIX, the Northern Ireland Science Industry Panel, is a business led expert panel, formed primarily to advise government, industry and academia on the commercial exploitation of R&D and science and technology in Northern Ireland.

3. In data obtained by the authors from InvestNI, in 2010 there were 22 recorded applications to Invest NI for food related research and development support. Of these, 5 were from micro food enterprises.

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Table 1

Data collection.

Timeline	Internal Documents	Observation Events	Semi-structured interviews	Focus Groups
2013	Acorn 1: Terms of reference (1) Programme evaluation report (1) Council committee meeting minutes (1) Acorn 2: Terms of reference (1) Programme application (1) Council partner agreement (1) Quarterly Progress reports (1) Press release (1) Business Audits (36) Event attendance sheets (12) Post visit/event evaluation reports and feedback (12) Quarterly Progress reports (4) Quarterly expenditure reports (4) Schedules of events (1) Client mentoring plans (24)	Programme introductory event for Acorn 2 (1) Acorn 2 best practice visit meeting (1)		Focus groups (5) (2 focus groups with Acorn 1 only participants and 3 focus groups with a mix of Acorn 1 and Acorn 2 participants)
2014	Acorn 2: Event attendance sheets (10) Post visit/event evaluation reports and feedback (10) Quarterly progress reports (4) Schedules of events (1) Quarterly expenditure reports (4)	Acorn 2 best practice visit (1) Concluding event for Acorn 2 (1)	Baked goods (3) Alcohol (2) Meats (2) Dairy (1) Food service (2) Oils/preserves (1) Advisor – Peter (1) Programme Manager (1)	
2015	Acorn 2: Event attendance sheet (1)		Baked goods (1) Dairy (1)	

	Post visit/event evaluation reports and feedback (1) Programme evaluation report (1) Expenditure report (1)		
2016		Local food event organised by Council	Advisor - Susan (1)

Table 2

Case features.

Case	Programme Dates	Funding Source	Delivery Agents	Support Tools	Participants
Acorn 1	2009-2011	EU Regional Development Funds matched by five local councils, plus small fee contributions from participants.	Programme Manager (Council Economic Development Officer). Two advisors (private consultants) responsible for delivery ('Susan' and 'Peter')	Themed knowledge exchange workshops, one-to-one mentoring, and introductions to external stakeholders such as retail buyers.	22 no. (20 producers and 2 food service).
Acorn 2	2013-2015	Part-financed by EU Regional Development Local councils' contribution 25% of the programme costs, matched by 25% from InvestNI.	Programme Manager (Council Economic Development Officer). One advisor (private consultant) responsible for delivery ('Peter').	Workshops, one-to-one mentoring, large firm mentoring, and introductions to external stakeholders through a supply/distribution arrangement.	37 no. (24 producers and 13 food service).

Note: 9 participants from Acorn 1 progressed to Acorn 2.

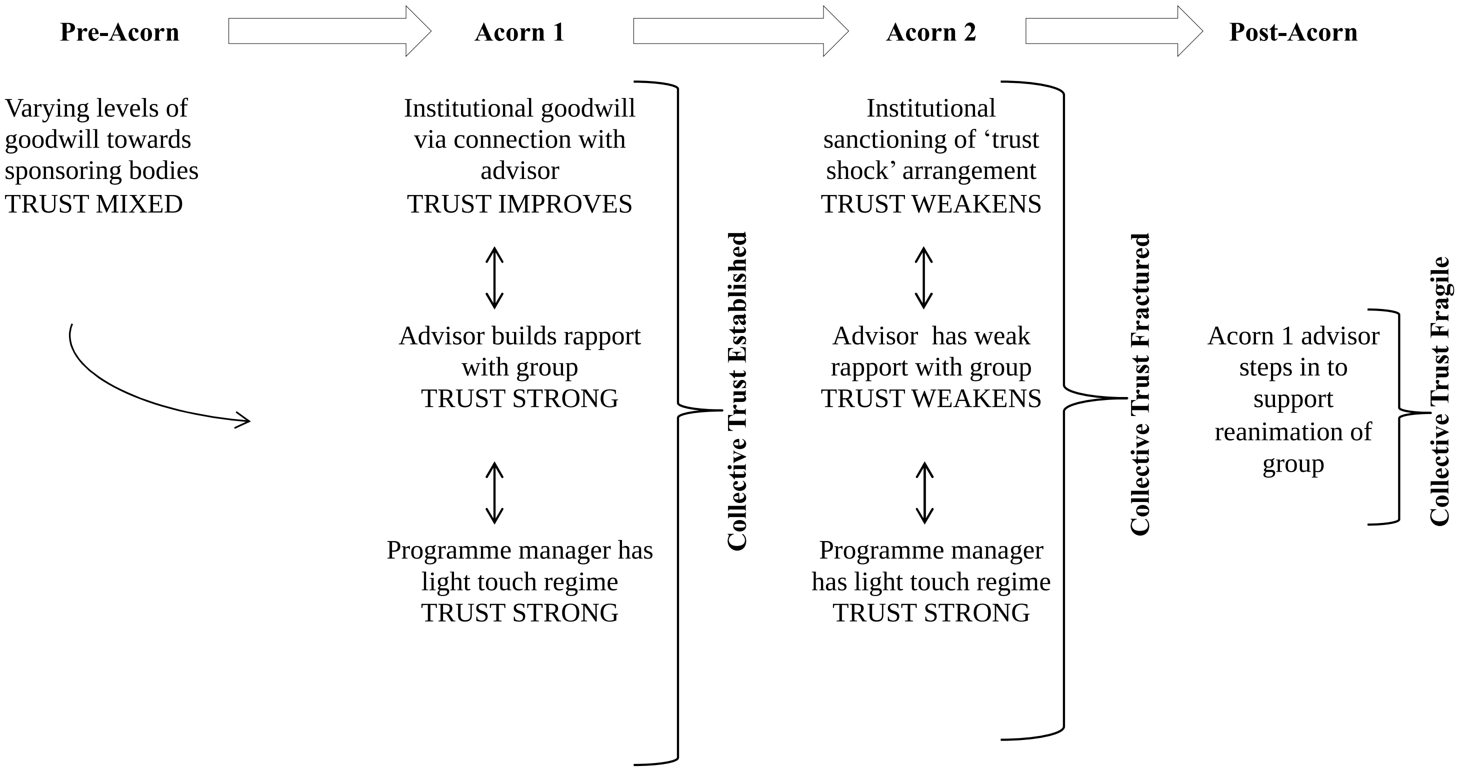

Figure 1
Evolution of trust in the Acorn programmes.