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Open government and public trust: a new revaluation of the citizen perspective

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6. The formation of public perceptions of local government

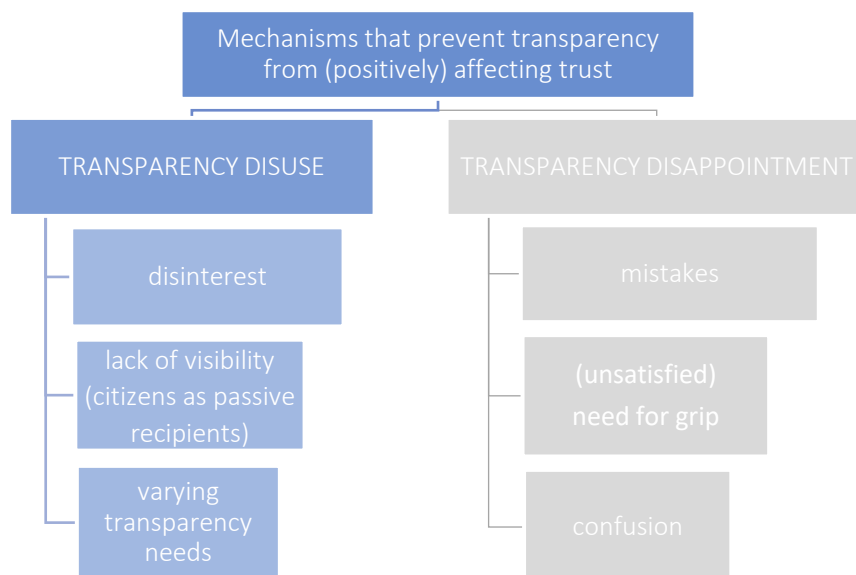
THE survey study reveals several new puzzles, two of which are addressed in this chapter. Through an analysis of focus group data, this section aims to provide more insight into the mechanisms behind some of the unexpected quantitative results. First, no correlation was found between institutional transparency and trust, even though, in the perception of citizens, transparency and trust are strongly related. The literature reveals a mixed picture as well. Therefore, this study delves deeper into the mechanisms that take place between administering institutional transparency and the formation of public trust to answer the question: *Which mechanisms influence the effect of transparency on trust?* Section 6.1 describes two main mechanisms that emerge from the focus group data, each with three sub-mechanisms, that influence the relationship between institutional transparency and trust. Subsequently, the survey results show a general discrepancy between institutional openness and perceived openness. If institutional openness measures are not decisive in creating the image of openness, the question is: *What makes tax payers perceive local government as open and trustworthy?* Section 6.2 describes taxpayers' own accounts of their openness perceptions as well as what forms the basis for their perceptions of a trustworthy government. The chapter concludes with new insights and puzzles that the focus groups bring to light.

6.1 Which mechanisms influence the effect of transparency on trust?

ALTHOUGH transparency and trust are often presumed to be positively related concepts, no correlation was found between the two in the preceding survey study. Several mechanisms prevent transparency from affecting trust or may even cause a negative effect. This section gives a more in-depth insight into some of these mechanisms, such as: the disuse of transparency and transparency disappointment, and their underlying causes. The extent to which these mechanisms occur, explains the absence or the direction of the effect of transparency on trust. Figure 6.1 gives an overview of the mechanisms that can cause a mixed effect of transparency on trust: transparency that is not used and transparency that causes disappointment. Some topics are brought up more often by

respondents than others. To do justice to their relative importance, the number of respondents' stories that demonstrate the mechanism is taken into account in figure 6.1 and 6.2, in which more prominent mechanisms have a larger box. It should be noted, however, that although the perceptions of these participants range from vastly pessimistic to fairly positive, all of them are *involved* citizens with an interest in administrative processes. Therefore, the group of citizens that simply lacks interest in institutional transparency may even be larger than can be concluded on the basis of the respondents' stories.

Figure 6.1 Mechanisms that affect the transparency-trust relationship



6.1.1 Transparency disuse

When transparency is not used by its intended audience (in this particular instance: the taxpayer), it is unlikely to affect public perceptions. Still, the reasons why transparency is not used, are multifold. This section delves deeper into the mechanisms behind transparency disuse, i.e. why transparency is not used. Based on the number of experiences and stories of the focus group participants, disinterest and visibility are the most

important reasons for transparency disuse. Additionally, the variation in citizens' transparency needs creates a mismatch between supply and demand as well.

6.1.1.1 Disinterest

The preceding survey study showed that less than half of the citizens downloaded their free valuation report. Among most participants in the focus groups, this document is known and consulted. Many participants, however, do not search for additional information. Sometimes this is due to their positive image of the municipality. High trusting citizens accept decisions more easily, and feel less urge to delve deeper into the background of the decision making.

'The tax rate is quite low. So I'm actually happy with that. I have no reason to doubt that it is right. I never check anything on the website you mentioned. I didn't even know that existed, or that it was possible.' (BERT, FG3, nonvocal citizen)

Others, however, are disinterested in using transparency out of a more negative attitude. Citizens who lack trust in government, can feel as if they would get lost in the sheer amount of information available. In an ocean of information, a satisfying answer seems out of reach for them. They consciously choose not to search any further, as they lack trust in what transparency can offer them. Previous disappointment with transparency can play a role in this decision as well.

'The more you delve into it, the more you seem to lose yourself in it. At a certain point I'm like, I mean I am able to pay it, and at a certain point I actually don't feel like examining it anymore. But this is about my relationship with government! That is what remains.' (PHILIP, FG5, nonvocal citizen)

In addition to plain disinterest, a gap between the perceived importance of transparency and its actual use is often observed as well. As was already revealed by Seavers (2018), even when people find transparency important, this does not yet mean that they actually use it. Some of the widely available information sources are never used by the respondents. For example, several respondents indicate being interested in the way real estate assessment works. Such information is already available on most

municipal websites and is published in local newspapers, yet the respondents have not taken the step to actually consult those sources. Even when citizens themselves expect to be able to obtain more detailed information easily, they do not request it. Transparency is deemed important, yet apparently not important enough to go after it yourself.

'They don't live up to it, being a 'transparent government'. (The exact calculation) sounds very interesting to me. It's not like I can't live without it. And I think that if I would make a call to the municipality, I would find out. -YES?- Yes.

(HUGO, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

Apparently, a 'transparent government' is expected to provide the information of its own accord and tailor it to the individual information needs of the citizen concerned. Apart from the question of whether this is a realistic expectation, it can create the perception of a non-transparent government. The difference between 'receiving' and 'obtaining' information is a recurring theme in the focus groups. This brings us to the second reason that transparency does not have the expected effect on trust: the visibility of the transparency provided.

6.1.1.2 Lack of visibility

Transparency is not always seen by the public. This seems somewhat contradictory at first sight, but it is the transparency that citizens simply do not know about. In the domain of this study, several information sources are publicly available: websites for anyone to consult (the national website that publishes all residential values, free of charge), or information on the personal situation is freely available after a secure login (the municipal valuation report). The good old-fashioned 'asking the neighbours' about their assessment is still a widely used option as well. In a quest for a better understanding of decisions, most participants use one or more of these sources yet leave other important sources of information untouched. For example, strikingly few participants mention the municipal public website as their information source, even though this is widely used by local governments to explain the background of the assessment system and the decision-making process of 'how things work' – a recurring topic when talking about the information needs of the participants. This shows that some of the available general information is simply not consulted.

Moreover, only a minority goes the extra mile gathering additional information, such as buying ‘purchase price information’ at the cadastre, consulting municipal permits, or reviewing online home sales ads. And this is done out of a general interest in real estate, more so than to check their municipal assessment.

The stories reveal that this *lack of visibility* is partly due to the fact that, at times, citizens act as passive recipients of transparency. Yet, the way in which government transparency is set up often presupposes an active attitude on the part of citizens. Even when people are ‘digitally active spectators’ (Hupe, 2022, 216), this does not mean that they are also digitally active citizens. Regarding the role of citizens in public encounters, Van Eijk & Steen (2022, 64) argue that in its actions, the government should better match what the citizen expects, and vice versa. The view of citizens as active information gatherers, while, despite an existing need for information, they often assume a more passive role in the service delivery process, can cause a misfit. The stories reveal that such a mismatch can occur when it comes to the way transparency is offered.

‘I personally find that opaque. You have to - everything can be found on the internet, that's not the problem. But I just don't have the time for that. It should be assisted more.’
(BAS, FG 2, nonvocal citizen)

When asked about information needs, the majority of the respondents mention what the municipality should bring to them, as opposed to where they themselves could look. The transparency offered does not always result in the presumed active role of citizens or interactivity (Moon, 2020, 554). In the conversations, a mismatch arises between the municipal presumption that curious or even suspicious citizens actively go and find information, as opposed to their sometimes passive attitudes as transparency recipients.

‘You can request it. (...) But one always has to ask. Always ask for it.’ (FLORIS, FG5, exercised voice)

In addition to this sometimes unconsciously ingrained passive attitude, there are also citizens who actually feel dissatisfied with the self-reliance

that is expected. They believe that the government should be much more proactive and should enforce the information. 'Enforcing information' refers to making sure that information is readily available and accessible to the public. They believe the municipality should take active steps to disseminate the information and take measures to ensure that the information is actively communicated so that it is known to the public.

'When we talk about transparency, you see that the municipality says: do you want to know how I determine the value? Some self-sufficiency is expected of you then. You have to look up your valuation report. Well, you do that digitally, but that is a hassle. (...) There is an underlying document. Provide that underlying document right away then!' (JULIAN, FG1, nonvocal citizen)

An important implication of the difference between 'passive reception' and 'active retrieval of information' is that the way in which transparency is often set up does not appeal to the larger public, risking transparency not being seen. Transparency by most government organisations is still often aimed at making information available on request. Awareness of the necessity to actively inform citizens about decisions when you want transparency to also be felt by those citizens, can improve the perception of transparency –which in the literature and in this study does show a strong correlation with public trust. Going the extra mile to proactively provide information, may not only better meet citizens' needs –even when they do not use it–, but it could thus contribute to a positive image of a 'transparent government'. After all, in the absence of repeated notifications on the available information (sources), the impression may arise that the municipality deliberately withholds information. It is a more comprehensive concept of transparency: not just which information is available, but also how does it adequately arrive at those who want to know? The gap found between passive reception and active retrieval of information is one of the reasons why *implemented transparency* does not translate into *perceived transparency*, and thereby does not show the expected effect on public trust. This mechanism is, to the best of my knowledge, not addressed in the literature yet.

6.1.1.3 Varying transparency needs

'More transparency!' is often called for, as if it were one thing. Yet there are many different forms, types, and manifestations. First of all, what is government transparent about? The literature mentions the difference between process and rationale transparency (De Vries et al., 2017, 7) but also the difference between positive and negative messages about government (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2011, 36). In addition to the content of the message, this study has included the direction and means of being transparent (proactively or responsively) as well as data insight (what data does government register about citizens that is used in decision making?). In order to effectively deploy transparency to promote trust, the right kind of transparency is needed, and the type of information is important in strategically deploying transparency to promote trust (Cucciniello et al., 2015, 580). Yet, the difficulty is that information needs, differ from person to person. Some citizens are interested in how tax money is spent, so that they can feel they are making a valuable contribution to society through their taxes.

'I often think it's a pity that the municipality misses this opportunity to briefly explain what it is they spend that money on.' (MARGOT, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

While others seek more insight into the underlying valuation system in order to control government decision making.

'It's just not a good process. And that is why it is important to make the valuation transparent: how did you decide that?' (HANS, FG2, exercised voice)

Moreover, when talking about transparency and information provision, most participants mention their own data. Transparency generally does not seem to evoke the association of general information about the work of the municipality or even of getting an answer to one's questions (proactive and responsive transparency). Respondents lean more towards data insight: what data does the municipality register about me and my home, and how does this data affect the decision? Even when there is a need to understand the general system, it stretches as far as how that system relates to the specific outcome in an individual case.

'I think it's more important that they provide relevant information. Like last year, I think, the law has changed regarding appraisals. So instead of cubic meters they now use square meters. That has had enormous consequences.'

(NINA, FG4, exercised voice)

The level of knowledge among the respondents varies greatly as well. Some have a great deal of experience with administrative processes and a remarkably high knowledge of the real estate market, while others appear to have neither. As the survey study revealed (table 5.6), knowledge does not show a strong correlation with public trust. Trust slightly increases with increased knowledge, although only very weakly. Homeowners with low self-efficacy, who feel they cannot compete against the municipality, may be more inclined to use legal service providers who do the objection procedure for them, hindering any direct communication between these homeowners and the municipality.

Although not everyone is interested in the same type of transparency or triggered to actually use it, the conversations do provide a multitude of examples of an information shortage and misunderstandings, which the municipality could easily provide. For example, misunderstandings about the independence of yearly appraisals, the misconception that decisions are produced automatically, or the use of sales prices to determine the market value. Misunderstandings that, when not addressed, risk turning into suspicion or even distrust.

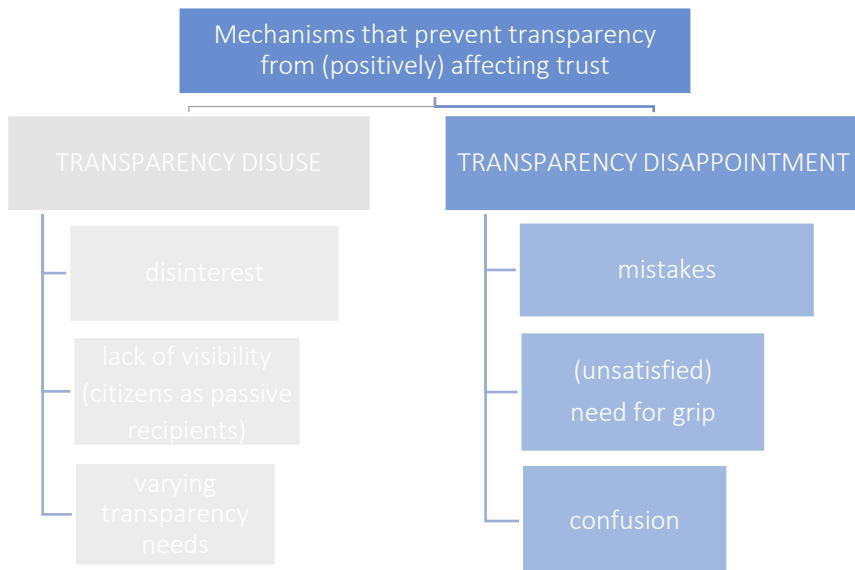
'I thought it was crazy, actually, to put a reference from the owner-occupied sector next to our social housing building. And then the price! Why are you doing that? Is that to push up the price?' (OLIVIER, FG2, nonvocal citizen)

Such examples reveal the necessity of actively and repeatedly providing clear information. The aforementioned mechanisms cause a mismatch between supply and demand of transparency, resulting in disuse. When this gap is bridged, transparency has a better chance of having an effect.

6.1.2 Disappointment with transparency

In addition to disusing transparency, another mechanism that prevents it from positively affecting public trust is disappointment with the transparency that is provided. Such disappointment can be caused by the mistakes it reveals, by the remaining unsatisfactory feeling of a lack of grip, or even by confusion caused by transparency. The next sections describe these mechanisms more in depth.

Figure 6.2 Mechanisms that affect the transparency - trust relationship



6.1.2.1 Mistakes

Transparency does not promote trust when citizens are disappointed with the information found. Such disappointment has different origins. First of all, transparency reveals mistakes. Especially when it comes to data insight: any mistakes in a person's data –either real or perceived– decrease trust in and thereby acceptance of the end result: the decision.

'This is not my house. And so every year I say: can I have the old photo back? (...) And every year they just use that picture, they remain using that picture! And then I look at those reference buildings, and I think well, maybe that is a different house too, you know?' (NINA, FG4, exercised voice)

Grimmelikhuijsen (2012, 235) refers to this mechanism as the demystification of government, as a result of transparency that reveals mistakes. On the basis of these respondents' stories, it does not seem to be demystification, as Dutch citizens already generally do not tend to put (local) government on a pedestal. However, apprehension about the correctness of data, combined with a lack of insight or access to further information, makes citizens doubt other data or decisions as well. This can result in a negative image. Unwarranted differences –or at least to the citizen, inexplicable differences– can even create suspicion of possible ulterior motives, decreasing trust in government.

'Next to me, similar house, mirror image, decorated a bit differently. It is assessed at € 299.000, almost a ton less than me at € 390.000. Might that have been the house of a city councillor? I do not know.' (ROVER, FG2, exercised voice)

Although the importance of using correct information is widely recognized, not everyone reports incorrect data, such as object characteristics, to the municipality. Some do not see the relevance of passing this information on or feel they can only raise issues in a later phase, such as a formal procedure. At times, citizens can be 'calculating' as well. Some participants understand very well which information leads to a higher tax bill and withhold this information from local government. They consider this to be justified as well. At the same time, the municipality is expected to register the data correctly. Correct data may then also be understood as far as 'not to the home owner's disadvantage'.

MAEVEN, FG4, nonvocal citizen: *'We did a renovation at the time. We reported this to the municipality. And somehow they have not incorporated that into the WOZ-value. And then I think well, should I point that out to them?'*
MARGOT: *No, of course not.* ROBBERT: *Of course not, no.* HUGO: *I also keep the square meters as low like that.'*

6.1.2.2 Unsatisfied need for grip

In addition to mistakes, the conversations with respondents reveal there is even more to it, as another source of their disappointment rises to the surface. A reoccurring theme in the focus groups is the need for more grip on government decision making. The participants express a longing to fully understand what is going on, as well as the possibility of checking decisions in great detail. Such high expectations are, however, difficult to meet.

'In government everything must be transparent, traceable. And I slightly do miss that here. They try to give all the information, but I cannot exasperate.' (HUGO, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

Moreover, some citizens feel as if they have no idea what is happening 'behind the closed doors' of the municipal decision-making process. Looking into it further and having the subsequent experience of not being able to figure it out can even create a sense of arbitrariness.

'Give me a handle on how they arrived at that calculation. And why they use those reference properties. Then I don't have to invest anymore. Then I can accept. If they show me how they arrived at that amount, I can accept it. But this makes no sense. It's pure randomness.' (NINA, FG4, exercised voice)

The transparency offered is often not quite sufficient for low trust citizens, an important portion of the users of transparency. Their need for grip, or expectations thereof, transparency appears unable to satisfy. Moreover, this reveals an interaction between transparency and trust. Low trust creates a need for more information in order to control decisions. Yet, when that need is not satisfied, trust drops. On the other hand, when trust is high, there is less longing for detailed information. Low trust combined with such uncertainty can even create feelings of powerlessness, which transparency alone appears unable to solve.

'It's just not clear to me why. And often incorrect information is used. And if you bring this to their attention, you get nothing.' (LILY, FG5, exercised voice)

Although the experienced lack of grip is not solely reserved for those with little trust, going the extra mile to check and wanting to recalculate the decision appears especially present among low-trust citizens. Generally, the stories of the respondents confirm the earlier finding in the quantitative study that searching for more information is associated with low trust. When citizens have doubts, they are more likely to look into it further. Citizens with high trust do not have this urge as much. Thus, the relationship goes both ways. The survey examined the effect of transparency on trust. Yet the level of trust affects how these citizens view transparency, whether they want to make use of it, and how they experience it. This could lead to a vicious circle.

This insight into the doubtful disposition of transparency users is a first step towards a better alignment between the transparency offered and the recipients' needs. Still, the observation that citizens desire to know what is happening in such great detail can be considered quite remarkable. After all, in many other aspects of everyday life outcomes of automated processes and technology are commonly accepted. Apparently, this is different when it comes to decisions by the local government. This interplay between transparency and trust confirms the importance of public trust for public acceptance of decisions.

6.1.2.3 Confusion

At times, the transparency offered causes more confusion than it provides any answers. The confusion that citizens experience is part of the information overload (Ripken, 2006, 160; Heald, 2006, 35). The literature emphasises *information overload* as a negative effect of a transparency overflow, or, as the Dutch expression goes: 'not being able to see the forest beyond the trees'. When citizens receive too much information, it causes confusion. Albeit it is not the sheer amount of data that is the problem, often it is the *context* of the information that is lacking. It is hard for citizens to understand why certain information is provided, which input is or is not used, and which data is actually relevant. Evidently, confusion does not promote trust and can even create suspicion instead.

'Why is it so complicated? And why don't I understand it? That creates feelings such as: do I pay more than my neighbour?'
(PHILIP, FG5, nonvocal citizen)

For example, in this empirical context, the municipal valuation report is a widely used information source. It contains details on one's property and on three comparable recently sold reference properties that should provide an indication of the market value of your property. At the same time, it is a salient source of confusion among participants as well.

'You can go to a website, but that is limited. So I actively look into that, and I find that the information they provide is actually insufficient to properly assess it. And sometimes I don't understand it at all.' (HANS, FG2, exercised voice)

Confusion seems to fuel uncertainty rather than reassuring citizens. This contradicts the assumption of *agency theory* that the agent (government) through transparency lessens uncertainty among the principal (citizens), making the principal feel more in control (De Fine Licht et al., 2014, 114). For instance, the use of jargon can lower perceptions of correctness when citizens view terms differently. In this domain, the term 'appraisal' evokes the association of in-house viewing by a human being but not of an automated comparison by a computer. In both cases, the market value is estimated. The valuation report is a frequently recurring example where confusion, (perceived) mistakes, and visibility all rise to the surface all at once, causing transparency to lack a positive effect on public trust.

'I really wonder what those reference houses are for. Are they determined by lottery or does the computer punch out some numbers? You do not know. And that is supposed to convince you.' (FREDDIE, FG2, exercised voice)

The 'information overload' seems at odds with the previously mentioned mechanisms of 'lack of visibility', where the information does not reach the recipient, and 'varying transparency needs', whereby the variety of citizens' needs can only be met by making many (different types of) information available. Still, all mechanisms show that continuous monitoring of user needs to see if supply meets demand is necessary.

Besides making information available through convenient channels, assisted information has a better chance of getting across. 'Assisted information' then refers to information that is made more accessible or easier to understand through the provision of additional guidance, such as clear and concise explanations on its relevance. For example, why is the information provided. Nonetheless, the problem of *transparency's importance* versus its *actual use* remains. For example, the fact that not all sales prices can be shown and that, by way of illustration the municipality selects a few sold homes, is already elaborately described in the valuation report itself. Still, citizens do not tend to notice the fine print and focus on the data that is most visible. Confusing information does not promote trust and can even substantiate negative perceptions of municipal intentions.

'Why did you choose just those three? Were they perhaps the three highest? That you don't know, and the municipality doesn't think it's necessary to explain that either.' (JULIAN, FG1, nonvocal citizen)

6.1.3 Concluding remarks on the transparency-trust relationship

This section has shown that several mechanisms can occur that prevent transparency, which in the public's perception is closely related to trust, from promoting trust. At the same time, it is striking that despite all these mechanisms, the earlier survey study did not find a negative effect either. Thus, in spite of the possible downside, transparency does not cause trust to decrease either.

Depending on the extent to which these mechanisms manifest themselves, transparency may or may not have an effect on trust. Such mechanisms are complex and cannot be easily captured in simple schemes or solutions. The question remains under which circumstances these mechanisms occur and how they can best be mitigated. This description does, however, offer a starting point for more awareness of these mechanisms that occur in reality regularly. This insight may temper the expectations of transparency. The influence of transparency may simply be limited. For example, clarity may not immediately remove feelings of injustice among low-trust citizens.

'Then it may be clear, but even then you can say: it is unjust.'
(LOVIS, FG5, exercised voice)

Adhering to a more positive image of the malleability of society, this section does provide some tools to influence these mechanisms. More insight into these causes of disuse and disappointment is the first step towards a better alignment of transparency supply and demand. To improve *visibility*, information may be brought to citizens more proactively rather than citizens having to seek the information themselves. At the same time, *confusion* and *information overload* can be limited through 'assisted information'. This knowledge can help governments deploy transparency resources more effectively when the aim is to promote public trust. Nevertheless, if there were only one lesson that sticks out of it all, it would be that the relationship between transparency and trust behind the front door –like any good marriage–, is more complicated than first meets the eye.

6.2 Tax payers' perspectives on municipal openness and trustworthiness

THE second goal of the focus groups was to uncover what makes citizens perceive government as open or closed and as trustworthy or untrustworthy. In the focus groups, citizens, mainly home owners and often in their capacity as tax payers, express how they perceive the municipality and what they believe it could do to be more open and trustworthy. Considering openness and trustworthiness are closely related concepts in public perception, the examples given by the respondents often contain elements of both. Although the concepts are related, this chapter attempts to structure them separately. The following sections describe the image these citizens have of the municipality and illustrate how that image was formed.

6.2.1 Openness perceptions

6.2.1.1 *An impenetrable anonymous government*

Despite the fact that the Dutch municipalities are the tier of government closest to citizens, many still perceive the municipality as an anonymous and impenetrable bureaucratic apparatus. Some even feel as if they can hardly compete with such a powerful government. In their perception, one

almost has to know someone –an insider with special skills and knowledge– to get in.

'Very difficult, very difficult. Very laborious. You really have to be, well, tenacious. And you need the right people that want this too. Who can, at some point, offer knowledge of counterplay, and that have more insight into how those processes manifest themselves. I find that very difficult.' (HANS, FG2, exercised voice)

That the municipality is still experienced as quite closed by many participants becomes clear in their experiences with responsive transparency. Many still have the experience of having to resort to formal procedures in order to just receive an answer.

'All you could do is object. Because you really can't get an explanation in any other way.' (ZOEY, FG5, nonvocal citizen)

Written letters citizens receive from government are subject of criticism as well, especially when it comes to its language use.

'It's just like, we put a lot of expensive words on paper, so that we give you the impression that we know best. But they don't know.' (LOVIS, FG5, exercised voice)

As a result, citizens feel distanced from local government, as they sense that the municipality hedges and shields itself in advance instead of keeping the lines open. Encountering a closed government goes hand in hand with distrust in its decisions.

'Because of digitization, and because of those letters, and such a telephone number where you have to shout out the name of the city –well, you name it–, that creates a distance. That creates distance. And also feeds the feeling of: well, am I paying more than someone else?' (PHILIP, FG5, nonvocal citizen)

Moreover, one notable recurring peculiarity is that inadequate or *incomplete* answers are perceived as *no* answer at all. It does not come as a surprise that if you do not receive any answer at all, trust drops. However, if an answer is not clear or satisfactory in the eye of the citizen,

this can be experienced as not having received any answer. For example, one participant indicates she hasn't received an assessment yet and is still waiting for a response from the municipality to her objections, while later on in the conversation it turns out that an appeal is already pending with the court. This means the previous two stages of contact with the municipality have already been completed and closed. So while the municipality thinks the job is done as the formal procedure has come to an end as the written decision on the objection has been sent, the citizen is still waiting for an explanation or even for an additional answer. This is an extreme, yet not an isolated, example. It also applies to other citizens with more knowledge of and experience with municipal procedures.

'No explanation at all. To all of my other objections that were granted, I never got a motivation as to why they were granted either. Just the phrase 'it has been granted'. So I have to write everything down again. Every time repeat myself, to bring about that reduction again.' (NINA, FG4, exercised voice)

The question can be raised about how far the municipality's responsibility goes to inform citizens in such a way that they understand where they are in the process, almost like a representative or consultant would do. Nevertheless, it is clear that these examples of lack of clarity do not contribute to building public trust in the municipality. It emphasises the importance of *rational transparency* (De Vries et al., 2017, 20), as the absence of an explanation as to why something is or is not granted, negatively affects the citizens' image of municipal openness. This image of an anonymous and closed local government, seems to contradict the efforts municipalities make to be open towards their citizens, such as the variety of openness measures implemented.

6.2.1.2 Appreciating personal contact

It is quite striking that experiences of personal contact with individual municipal officials are mostly experienced rather positively, even by the participants who largely distrust the municipality. This is in line with Goodsell (1994, 180) that 'meeting a real bureaucrat, shatters bad stereotypes'. Individual officials –whether they are an appraiser, a community police officer, or a community centre employee– are all

assessed positively. Still, it appears that the image of the municipality is influenced only to a limited extent by individual officials. More than a single satisfactory interaction with a public official at the micro level is needed for the macro-perceptions of the municipality to alter. Moreover, more issues than the encounter play a role in that image, such as the end result of decision making, the citizen's interests, and previous experiences with other street-level bureaucrats. The competent or benevolent civil servant therefore seems to have a broadly positive, yet limited effect on perceptions of the municipality as a whole.

'He was a very amiable man. And well, I think he was also objective in his value, and his appraisal. He was open, let me put it that way. So he walked around everywhere and told what he thought of the rooms (...) He queried well about it all. And we could share all our information with him.' (ELLA, FG3, exercised voice)

Personal contact contributes to giving a face to the municipality, which can be experienced as an abstract or anonymous entity. Some citizens are fully aware that there's no such thing as a free lunch and have realistic notions about the costs and benefits of personal contact.

'The municipality uses general principles and tries to get as few exceptions as possible, because every exception costs money and every visit from an appraiser costs money.' (TOM, FG2, nonvocal citizen)

'The city council indicated that citizens are entitled to a human approach. And that means that everyone, if they call, someone will come over. They just do. Costs a lot of money, though. It costs a lot of money, but you might earn it back because you have far fewer objections and appeals. That could very well be. They are super customer-oriented and then come right over. Well I say that's good!' (ROBBERT, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

Still, there is a difference between sending an official over on every occasion and the public perception that personal contact is possible. It seems to be more about getting the message across that we're not dealing

with a machine here, but a human being. A municipality with accessible officials instead of an impenetrable apparatus.

'Yes, that they are real, say, people made of flesh and blood, right? You can shake hands with them at the New Year's party, so to speak.' (BERT, FG3, nonvocal citizen)

6.2.1.3 *Different facets of local government*

In the focus group conversations on openness, it becomes clear that there is no such thing as *the* government, and even no such thing as *the* municipality. The municipality is charged with very diverse tasks that evoke different experiences and perceptions. These entities cannot be lumped together when speaking of municipal openness, as citizens are quite capable of differentiating.

'You ask for experience with the municipality. It doesn't exist. All parts exist. Politics differs very much in accessibility from the civil servants. And there is also a huge difference among the civil servants. The city management department in particular is very accessible and very helpful. And the urban development department is very closed and very difficult to get into, and never cooperates. So yes, it is very different.' (MARGOT, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

Moreover, the differentiation between departments implies that the image of the municipality as a whole cannot easily be limited to one implementation task. And vice versa, as experiences with other departments affect perceptions as well, one domain may only have a limited effect on perceptions of the municipality as a whole.

'No [trust at all]. That sounds a bit harsh but I actually do have to say it, yes: none. And that adds up to all the other things I've been through with the municipality. Well, I really don't trust at all what is going on there.' (HANS, FG2, exercised voice)

Remarkably though, nearly all examples presented by the participants involve the direct living environment. Recurring examples are consultation meetings on building plans, sustainability collectives, parking policy, garbage collection, building permits, and neighbourhood habitability

(which varies widely - from street maintenance and installing fibreglass to community policing). They can all be categorised as issues with one's immediate surroundings, of which real estate assessment (in Dutch: WOZ) is just one example. Hardly anyone mentions other predominant municipal tasks, such as the social domain, education, or public safety. It appears that images are formed within a certain framework, here being: the physical environment, with one's home in the centre. At times, national government, the national tax authority, or politicians are mentioned as well, yet to a much lesser extent than the local living environment. This corresponds with the finding of the survey study that trust in the municipality is more strongly related to its perceived openness than to trust in the national government.

6.2.1.4 *The digi-paradox*

Digitization has not increased the image of openness, even though it has undeniably increased the number of openness implementations. Digitization has enabled more ways of getting into contact with government as well as more possibilities to gain insight into data. Nevertheless, the image of openness has not changed for the better. This divergence of increased openness measures as a result of automation and the lagging image of openness can be referred to as a digi-paradox.

'But this is automated, right? That's not a human doing that. This is done automatically.' (HUGO, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

With automated processes, the impression arises that no human is involved anymore, and citizens miss the faces behind automation, even though many officials are involved in the background. Citizens' experience of dealing with an automated process tends to diminish their openness perceptions. This generates increasingly high demands on the transparency of such processes, inherently risking disappointment from such high expectations. The 'techno-optimistic perspective' on public administration in which technology diminishes errors, which would be deemed good from the citizen perspective (Hupe, 2022, 212), does not seem to hold up. One example is the 'algorithm register' that was launched in December 2022, which aims to publish the use of algorithms in

government decisions and to clarify how these algorithms work and how they are used. However, the question is whether the register can increase the image of openness.

'It all has to be very efficient. That doesn't help at all in that feeling of appreciation. But do we want that too? People have also all become very individualistic and do not want to pay extra for that feeling of appreciation. But they do miss it.' (ELLEN, FG4)

This finding seems to contradict the finding that digital interfaces do not affect citizens' satisfaction in public service encounters (Prokop & Tepe, 2021, 438). Similar to the distance digitalization can create, citizens can experience a distance when municipal governance and implementation are separated, for example, because of the transfer of municipal tasks to implementing organisations out of town. Although such organisations have more resources to implement digital openness measures – which they in fact do, as the survey study has shown – citizens' perceptions of their openness are not enhanced.

'So the distance gets bigger. So where in the past you could, so to speak, just walk to the town hall and say: can you explain to me what's going on? Or indeed could say to the alderman, like: well guys. That all disappears from view. And I understand that simply because our society is set up for it that way. But I think it's not good.' (FLORIS, FG5, nonvocal citizen)

Nowadays, citizens can engage less with government via face-to-face contact and instead deal with public sector organisations purely on a remote basis (Lips, 2010, 273). Even though some citizens are reminiscent of old times where town hall was a place for citizens to meet, this seems to be more about imagery than the automation itself.

'And make the entrance a bit more cozy when you enter the town hall. Not like: what are you doing here? Do you have an appointment? That's everywhere these days: do you have an appointment? Even here I had to make an appointment.' (SAUL, FG1, exercised voice)

6.2.1.5 Concluding remarks on openness perceptions

Although the survey study showed that actual openness measures and perceived openness can diverge, the focus groups show that citizens base their image of the openness of the municipality on concrete experiences. Citizens' perceptions of the municipality do not appear to originate from some general image of government. Their individual experiences cannot be properly captured in quantitative measures of openness, making the qualitative examination a valuable contribution to a better insight into the formation of openness perceptions.

So what does make these citizens perceive local government as open? Reasons that these citizens give for their perceptions of a non-open government are the shortcomings in responsive transparency, quick reference to formal procedures, complicated language use, and not getting a complete answer that is experienced as no answer at all. This image is not limited to one implementation task but concerns the municipality as a whole and is influenced by experiences in other domains concerning citizens' physical living environment as well.

Apparently contradictory are the positively valued experiences with personal contact and the still widespread image of an impenetrable apparatus. Moreover, the digi-paradox implies that implementing more openness possibilities and giving insight into more data by itself is not enough to increase openness perceptions. Citizens tend to miss the non-anonymous official. However, bringing back a human face to the municipality could also be a matter of imagery. It does not imply that many people will suddenly visit town hall. It concerns the image of openness, not its actual use. Improving perceptions of openness instead of solely focusing on openness measures offers opportunities to build trust, considering that these concepts are closely related in the public perception.

6.2.2 Perceptions of trustworthiness

There is reasonable consensus in the literature that trust consists of three elements: perceived competence, benevolence, and integrity (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Mayer et al., 1995). A qualitative description of these three elements of perceived trustworthiness adds richness to the quantitative analyses. From the stories of the focus group participants,

mainly in their role as local taxpayers, it is distilled what they think of when it comes to trust, and what makes them perceive local government as (un)trustworthy. From these conversations, some differences arise in perceptions of the benevolence, competence, and integrity of the municipality. First of all, the vast majority of the participants has a positive view of the benevolence of the municipality. It becomes clear that these citizens see this municipal benevolence, the willingness to help, as part of the trust.

'When there is a reasonable story, and it's all been explained to me and he came over. Then I say yes, if someone actually tries this hard, in all fairness, as a citizen, I think it's fine.' (ROBBERT, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

Even among citizens with (very) little trust in the municipality, perceptions of benevolence lean towards the positive. On multiple occasions, participants themselves indicate that they want to name this positive image in addition to mostly sharing negative experiences. Wishing to name something positive could indicate they would rather see their perceptions of government be better. To say the least, it seems that these low trust citizens do not see everything government does in a negative light, as they are still able to recognise and appreciate benevolence. Nevertheless, the stories reveal that trust consists of more than benevolence alone. From various examples, it becomes clear that even though benevolence is appreciated, by itself it is not deemed enough to solve any problems.

'Then you notice that, well, those people are just trying to do their best. Yes, they answer in good conscience. But yeah, it's just that the answer turns out not to be correct, which well, in some cases is quite important.' (MAX, FG1, nonvocal citizen)

Often, when there is a negative image of the municipality, it is attributed to a lack of competence. Incidentally, often low competence is not regarded as the result of a lack of goodwill of individual officials, but more so as a result of too little municipal capacity, the processes, or the systems in which they work. When both benevolence and competence are perceived to be insufficient, low perceptions of integrity lurk as well. Contrary to perceived competence deficiencies, the integrity of the

municipality is only questioned by the participants with very little trust, who are not hesitant to express their doubts.

'I used to work in a country where it was customary to talk to the tax inspector about the tax assessment, and we called that corruption at the time. Here I feel this is a little bit, well, it's bargaining. It's on the verge of. I don't think it's an usual way of doing things.' (HANS, FG2, exercised voice)

A frequently heard issue is the lack of independence of municipal officials. While independence is not the same as integrity, it does touch upon their integrity. After all, their sincere intentions and work ethics are called into question. Especially in a formal procedure, citizens doubt officials' capability to review previous decisions as well as the self-cleansing capacity of the municipality to rectify mistakes.

'And then they send someone to appraise and who knows business. Can't judge the latter, but she was employed by the municipality that paid her salary. And well, that gives some suspicion of pleasing the boss.' (ROVER, FG2, exercised voice)

Another subject related to integrity that came up in the image of the municipality is the perception of conflicts of interest, for example, when government also acts as a private party. The unequal balance of power between government and citizens, can leave the impression of an abuse of power. The image of public organisations and politicians bargaining and pursuing self-interests is mentioned, along with low public trust in central government as well. There is the impression that the government is primarily concerned with its own interests rather than the general interest.

'It's all the same. There's no more trust because everyone thinks it's all just negotiating and of course self-interest, which is most important everywhere... The same government, in those two roles, will never become credible as an authority. I am simply faced with the biggest distortion of competition.' (FREDDIE, FG2, exercised voice)

Nevertheless, others with largely negative perceptions of the municipality are still quite hesitant to question its integrity. Such hesitance can also be seen when using the term *untrustworthiness*, as labelling the municipality

as untrustworthy is considered too harsh even *'if they fall asleep occasionally and are a little bit slow'* (JULIAN, FG1, nonvocal citizen). This reveals that a portion of low-trust citizens would still rather not label their relationship with the government as negative, even when their stories suggest otherwise. Funnily enough, when it comes to integrity, the conversations also show that *'turning a blind eye'* can be interpreted positively as well, when it is to the benefit of the citizen concerned.

ROVER FG2: *I would like to support that. Individual officials are willing to turn a blind eye to some rules. If that is realistic and convenient for you, in my experience.*

MATHILDE (researcher): *Right. And is that because of the quality of the employees you are in contact with, or is it something else?*

FREDDIE: *Well, indeed.* VALERIE: *I do think so. These are people who think independently.'*

This shows the tension between the principle of equality (or perceived equality) on the one hand and the provision of tailor-made solutions on the other (Huisman & Jak, 2021, 17), between the general interest of the public and the individual interest of the citizen, and even between the official's accountability and making decisions independently, i.e. his relative autonomy from organisational authority (Lipsky, 2010, 16). These are all requirements that make a civil servant credible in the eyes of these citizens, as the following sections will also show, yet they are contradictory at heart. This is in line with insights about *goal ambiguity* in public management. An organisational goal, such as enhancing public trust, becomes ambiguous when it is open to a number of different interpretations, for example regarding the direction of organizational activities towards that goal (Chun & Rainey, 2005, 532). Conflicting activities can hinder achieving the desired outcome, and goal ambiguity can even harm performance (Jung, 2014, 207). These examples stress some of the difficulties of properly implementing street-level bureaucracy and justly providing public services.

Examining the three elements of trustworthiness perceptions shows that building public trust can be a demanding and difficult venture and may comprise layers. Municipal benevolence is generally perceived positively,

and a lack of integrity is mentioned only by very low trust citizens. This may offer opportunities for the role of perceived competence, as it may tip the scale towards the positive or the negative. Transferring municipal competence more into the public eye, could enhance trust. Yet, if these elements of trustworthiness interact similarly in other domains and whether, in fact, perceived competence is most decisive in enhancing public trust, would merit more research.

6.2.3 Trust antecedents: to what do municipal residents attribute their public trust?

In addition to the three components of trustworthiness, the following sections describe what citizens themselves mention as the reasons for their trust, or lack thereof, in the municipality. Persistent administrative pet peeves, if you will. As they often fall outside the tax domain, these perceptions are not solely reserved for *taxpayers*, but other citizen roles may take on as well, such as being a *municipal resident*. Although each citizen is different, their stories do contain several recurring examples that contribute to a negative image of the municipality. Even though the emphasis is often on what is not going well, these stories provide clues on how municipalities can prevent a trust decrease.

6.2.3.1 *Admitting mistakes and taking responsibility*

The first is the perception that the municipality does not admit its mistakes. In such cases, the citizen lives under the assumption that the municipality has made a mistake and refuses to admit it. Although the legal objection procedure is intended as a low-threshold option to rectify errors, the impression exists among citizens that the municipality is unwilling to do so.

‘But it is the denial. I think that’s the worst thing about it actually. Certainly by the municipality.’ (HANS, FG2, exercised voice)

Several of the respondents’ examples fall outside the empirical domain of this study, as a result of which I cannot judge whether mistakes have indeed been made. For the examples that do fall within this domain, however, I dare say that not in all cases mistakes were made – at least to the extent that decisions were in fact taken in accordance with applicable law. Nevertheless, citizens live under the assumption that an error has

been made, yet has not been rectified, implying that the municipality's explanation of the decision has apparently fallen short. This can be interpreted in two ways. It may fit within a broader societal trend of people distrusting government and information. It is hard to overcome distrust with providing information alone. Or it could also be that when communication is inadequate and the citizen, out of ignorance, judges that the outcome is incorrect or even absent. This emphasises the importance of a clear explanation of *why* a citizen's objection is not met. In the absence of a clear explanation of the decision-making process, the image remains of a government that is unfair or untrustworthy. Not admitting mistakes in an attempt to uphold the image of trustworthiness undermines trust instead. Similar to the denial of mistakes, citizens sometimes sense that civil servants are not held accountable and that the government as a whole does not take responsibility.

'Nobody ever did it. We did not do that. They all say that.'
(FREDDIE, FG2, exercised voice)

Another related negative perception expressed in the focus groups is about officials 'shifting responsibility' onto others and not daring to take a decision on their own. Although this perceived apprehensiveness to make decision seems at odds with civil servants who are not held accountable for the things they do, these ideas can very well coexist in citizens' negative perceptions.

'Then he hides behind the statement: 'I'm going to deliberate'. And shared responsibility is no responsibility. And I do miss that. Make a decision, and just say yes or no. But no: 'provided, if, as long as, unless'. (...) But the timeline continues and you can't get a grip on it. So I think that even civil servants who do have a responsibility, sometimes do not dare to take it.' (BAS, FG2, nonvocal citizen)

When citizens need something from the municipality, there is a dependency on the government. The municipality is viewed as an anonymous, difficult-to-access entity, and the only reference the citizen has is the official he meets. Encountering perceived indecisiveness or a lack of decision-making power does not enhance trustworthiness perceptions.

'Communicative etiquettes' such as taking the time to listen, keeping promises, and making a sincere effort to address questions or resolve the experienced problem (Bartels, 2015, 201), indeed can affect perceptions.

6.2.3.2 Widespread disappointment with municipal participation

Among the focus group participants, there is a widely felt disappointment with municipal participation. Although this often concerns participation outside the domain of taxation, it does affect the image of the municipality as a whole. Citizens can become wary of the intentions of civil servants due to previous experiences of not being taken seriously (Bartels, 2015, 200). The other qualitative sub-study (chapter 8) further examines the causes of positive and negative evaluations of formal and informal participation within this specific domain. During participation possibilities, an image arises of a government that does not listen but broadcasts instead. No ideas are assembled from citizens, yet the current plans are defended. The perception can be that officials do not know how to properly organise participation due to a lack of competence.

'And I noticed that on those evenings, the municipality has that tendency to explain again and again: why don't you understand what we want yet? And thus avoiding what the local resident asks for or tells, what actually does exist. So that mismatches. Probably it's true what they explain, yet it is not in line with what the district is asking for at that time. (...) And the municipality experiences that as communication. They call it a consultation evening but they broadcast and they explain. They explain and defend.' (VESPER, FG1, exercised voice in other domains)

Furthermore, such disappointment can even fuel mistrust because of the perception that the government pretends to involve citizens but subsequently makes them feel as if their opinion doesn't matter. The effects of citizen encounters are likely to remain limited when participation is instrumental or 'symbolic' (Bartels, 2013, 475).

'And then we say: and now we're going to ask those citizens if they think that's okay. They don't like it? Well, we're doing it anyway. Because that is what it comes down to.' (VALERIE, FG2, nonvocal citizen)

In the most negative situation, disappointing experiences with participation leave these involved citizens feeling deceived. An unpleasant sense lingers, that is much more negative than before the experience.

'So then you get a presentation and that, I find that very fascinating. (...) Then I am enthusiastic. That's the start of the meeting. But then you think well, we're going to discuss with each other what kind of fun we should make of this. No, that's all settled already. (...) Well, then leave that out then. Don't waste my time. Don't raise expectations. Just say well, we've decided this way or that. (...) Let's not go into the details, but it was just all deceit.' (FREDDIE, FG2, exercised voice)

These experiences clearly have a negative effect on the perceptions these citizens have of the municipality. While the municipal organisers perhaps had the best of intentions, these examples show that failing to meet citizens' expectations of the participation possibilities causes public trust to drop. It can even drop to the point that it is no longer attributed to a lack of competence but to a lack of integrity, through the conscious pursuit of ulterior motives.

'Well, I would say: it is quasi participation. It pretends to please citizens, but it is simply only meant to attract voters. For the sake of power, just for the sake of obtaining power.' (TOM, FG2, nonvocal citizen)

These citizens do not feel taken seriously. They feel excluded from a living environment they are part of and want to be involved in as a public participant, yet they do not get a voice. Being aware of this widely felt disappointment is crucial for the proper organisation of participation projects that aim to create public support. Clearly communicating the mutual expectations as well as the limitations in advance is important, as is taking the time to explain *why* something is or is not possible.

6.2.3.3 Uniformity of decisions

Citizens look for and benefit from seeing uniformity in government decisions. Based on the focus group conversations, two types of uniformity can be deduced. The first is horizontal uniformity, or equal treatment. This

is the image that more or less equal cases are treated roughly equally. In this specific domain, it is possible to check the WOZ-value of any residential property in the country.

'I also objected once, when it all wasn't uniform yet. Then I heard: it will soon all be uniformed. And well, I thought it was fine then. Because before in our apartment building, the one was different from the other.' (MARGOT, FG4, exercised voice)

However, the question is whether citizens can properly assess what similar cases are. Misunderstandings can arise about the unequal treatment of what are perceived as equal cases when, de facto, they are not. It becomes clear from the conversations, however, that many citizens attach importance to equal treatment, and if this is recognised correctly by them, it can help create trust. Moreover, taxpayers may attach particular importance to the principle of equality if they feel that they pay more than someone else: *'Do I pay more than my neighbour'*? In the positively rated situation where an official 'turns a blind eye to the benefit of the citizen' ([section 6.3.2](#)), possible deviance from the principle of equality does not affect perceptions negatively.

Secondly, citizens expect vertical uniformity or 'continuity' as well. They look for a logical trend in government decision making, for example, from one year to the next. Previous decisions shape their expectations about new ones. This finding is in line with Leventhal's theory of procedural justice, that emphasises the importance of consistency across time and across people (Lind & Tyler, 1988, 130).

'Public administration should be something that has continuity. That you trust, that you have faith in.' (TOM, FG2, nonvocal citizen)

In this respect, real estate assessment is a difficult domain. After all, the municipality has a statutory duty to determine the market value each year entirely independently from the previous year. That market value is subject to the whims of the housing market, which is not only under great pressure in the Netherlands at the moment but also has major differences

between segments and locations. Thus, even when it is justified and explicable, this lack of continuity in decisions can cause citizens to lose trust.

'And it also has to be logical, right? The increases aren't logical either. Then it goes up again by 50,000. Then it goes with ten, then it goes with less. If you lodge an objection, you will suddenly get 50,000 less. The first time I did that I succeeded, in 2018. But then suddenly they start to boost it again, very quickly. So that is of no use. Then your objection has been in vain.' (LILY, FG5, exercised voice)

Moreover, citizens are not always able to properly assess what the municipality is legally obliged to do. Displeasing decisions are then attributed to the will or even the malicious intent of the municipality, while in fact the cause lies elsewhere (housing market or national legislation). Such attribution errors can cause negative perceptions.

'The municipality has to collect its general budget and they thought: well, it might be a good idea to tax the real estate of the homeowners and landlords.' (JULIAN,FG1, nonvocal citizen)

6.2.3.4 *Grievance asymmetry*

When describing the formation of citizens' perceptions, the emphasis tends to be on negative experiences. Negative experiences simply linger longer and seem to influence perceptions more strongly. Such grievance asymmetry (Yang & Holzer, 2006, 115) is confirmed by the stories of the respondents. One striking example is a citizen who describes several experiences with the municipality. Some of which are very positive, such as the contact with the appraiser and his expertise, the ease of obtaining a subsidy for an AED in the neighbourhood, and the pleasant way in which neighbourhood participation was designed by the municipality. Yet, this citizen's trust in the municipality is very low. This is due to various other experiences with the municipality, such as changes in the parking policy, unprofessional statements by telephone operators, and not getting an adequate response to objections. Knowing such grievance asymmetry

occurs, governments may be better off focusing on preventing distrust than on restoring trust. As the stories show, prevention is the best cure.

Moreover, citizens' low perceptions of government risk colouring its subsequent experiences negatively. Although citizens differentiate between experiences, when trust is very low, it can also become a heuristic for future expectations, similar to a confirmation bias that causes citizens to interpret information confirming their prior beliefs. Filling in any knowledge gaps with this negative image, can escalate into a downward spiral in which the government-citizen relationship deteriorates and can even become hostile. Yet, even in those cases, taking the time to listen can uncover some interesting perspectives that do originate from somewhere. For example, one extremely low-trust citizen, with a municipal building ban because of his alleged aggression towards officials, swiftly mentions the death of his father, as well as his ill and now deceased wife, and the red tape and the financial hassle he subsequently experienced with the municipality and other governmental organisations because of it. It could be that in the relationship between citizens and government, there are specific live events that are crucial and deserve extra attention. These conversations were too short to go into such life events in greater detail, but it could be an interesting topic for further research to see which topics –and thereby which government agencies– lay the most weight on the trust scale.

6.2.3.5 Positive perceptions

Although a single positive experience seems insufficient to restore trust, similarly to several of my predecessors, I too feel the urge to end with a positive note and examine what shapes citizens' positive image of municipal openness and trustworthiness.

'Still, I do kind of love our municipality. No, but I do still tend to love our municipality.' (ROBBERT, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

Besides a kind of maternal love for their city, citizens cite several pragmatic causes for their high trust. In recapitulation, most citizens are pleased in roughly three categories. The first is having personal contact with individual officials. For example, the accessibility, and benevolence of the customer contact centre, district offices, and community police officers,

who are closest to the citizen and their main point of contact. In this empirical domain a friendly appraiser who visits their homes, who is informed, asks questions, and pays sufficient attention to the case contributes to their positive perceptions, as well as being able to talk to a benevolent professional who calls back and tries to help.

'I think that will narrow the distance. The best thing would be of course, that you could just speak to someone in person.'
(FLORIS, FG5, nonvocal citizen)

Secondly, the convenience of fast digital services in themselves may not be sufficient to build trust, but it does contribute to having a positive experience. For example, the ease of reporting issues in public spaces online, simple and smooth web forms to file a complaint, and getting insight into online data that was formerly much harder to view do give credit to the municipality.

'Back in the day, you had to make an appointment. And then you could come in seven weeks to the town hall, you could come by at, I don't know what, a quarter past three in the afternoon on a Tuesday. Well, and then you could look up some folder somewhere, and browse for a thing. Yeah, I mean, I think that's quite an improvement. And it is the municipality, that has made that possible.' (MAX, FG1, nonvocal citizen)

Thirdly, as in any other aspect of their everyday lives, citizens appreciate quick solutions to problems. This can be resolving issues in public space, granting the neighbourhood's wishes in plans for the physical environment, a quick response to complaints or a smooth objection process. The focus group participants especially appreciate officials committing to what they say. It is a general sense that the municipality serves its citizens and does its best to work for them and not against them.

'Yes, 'those kind of things are responded to quickly. You can see that they do quite a lot things for the quality of life. And I like that too.' (ROBBERT, FG4, nonvocal citizen)

When citizens' needs are met adequately, this generally creates a positive experience. Whether meeting demands is decisive in citizens' satisfaction

and trust, or whether other factors affect having a satisfactory experience too, is examined separately in chapter 8.

MODERATOR: *Can things ever turn out to be okay?*

ELLA (FG3, exercised voice): *'If there is a will, of course. But I don't know whether they are interested in hearing our stories, let's put it that way. Indeed as they are experienced from the citizen's point of view.'*

6.3 Which new insights and puzzles do the focus groups bring?

THE focus group conversations have provided rich data on the public perception of the government. Among these citizens, opinions, experiences and needs differ widely and there is 'no one size fits all' solution to fostering trust. Nevertheless, this focus group study offers a more in-depth insight into the mechanisms behind the openness and trust relationship.

Section 6.1 unfolded several reasons for the mixed effect of transparency on trust in the search for an answer to the question: *Which mechanisms influence the effect of transparency on trust?* Evidently, when citizens do not use transparency, its effect on trust is bound to be limited. It is an important reason for the absence of an effect. Disuse can be a result of disinterest, yet also of a lack of visibility or of the type of transparency offered that does not correspond with varying transparency needs. Although disinterest is difficult to influence, the other two reasons for disuse are the transparency citizens simply do not know about (lack of visibility) and varying needs. 'Active delivery' and 'repetition' appear crucial when conveying information and for transparency to come across. Disappointment with transparency is another common mechanism that prevents transparency from positively affecting trust. Such disappointment has several causes, such as (perceived) mistakes, a still unsatisfied need for grip, and confusion, which cannot be solved by transparency alone. Offering additional explanations and concise context for the information can contribute to establishing a positive transparency experience. Although there could be a reciprocity between trust and transparency, these focus groups did not reveal any examples of a prior

lack of trust in government information, resulting in the disuse of transparency. Distrust in (public) information may be more prominent in other domains. In taxation, it fairly often concerns verifiable, or in any case assessable, information about one's property, its tax assessment, and its methodology.

Despite gaining deep insights into citizens' experiences with local government, their stories raise several new questions as well. Several mechanisms prevent transparency from promoting trust, such as disuse or disappointment, and the extent to which these mechanisms manifest themselves influences transparency's effect on trust. Although this study provides several indications to influence these mechanisms, such as 'improving visibility' as well as applying 'assisted information', the question remains under which circumstances these mechanisms occur and how they can be mitigated. How can supply and demand be best matched when it comes to government information and trust, and is striving for as much openness as possible the right path or is a different approach more effective when it comes to trust? Do certain messages resonate better with high- or low-trust citizens? The way governments can ensure that transparency is communicated properly, that it meets the wishes of citizens, and that it is effectively deployed in order to enhance trust merits more research.

Section 6.2 focused on the question: *What makes taxpayers perceive local government as open and trustworthy?* Perceptions of municipal openness are open to improvement, as many still experience it as an impenetrable, anonymous bureaucracy. This image is not reserved for taxation alone, as the local government has many branches. Although digitalization has enabled more means of being open, the image of openness lingers. Personal contact is valued greatly. It can halt the sense of bureaucratic anonymity and offer a counterpart to the digi-paradox. Responsiveness requires going the extra mile to sufficiently answer questions and explain the *rationale* of decisions. Moreover, trustworthiness perceptions are negatively affected by the sense that the government denies mistakes or is perceived as refusing to take responsibility.

There is widespread disappointment with municipal participation. Although a grievance asymmetry occurs, in which negative experiences affect perceptions more strongly than positive ones, not all are negative. Citizens are positive about the personal contact with individual officials, the convenience of online services, and obtaining fast solutions. Taxpayers long for uniformity of decisions, in which lie opportunities for the government to improve perceptions. Delving deeper into the formation of positive and negative perceptions, in this section several new puzzles appear. What stood out is that digitalization has not increased openness perceptions, even though it has enabled many more possibilities to be open. Paradoxically, citizens do recognise and appreciate the benefits of fast digital services. Why the image of openness lags behind and how it can be improved through digital services merits more research. It is not so much about sharing more information, yet a better understanding is needed of how to share information in the right (digital) way, to better match the needs of the public and thereby enhance openness and trustworthiness perceptions.

Moreover, the stories reveal that the elements of trustworthiness: benevolence, competence, and integrity, may weigh differently on the trust scale of taxpayers, or in any other capacity where a citizen has a financial relationship with local government. Benevolence is rated most positively by both high- and low-trust citizens, whereas integrity is only questioned by very low trust-citizens. Does this mean that increasing perceived competence in the middle could be an essential step towards more public trust? The interaction between the elements of openness may differ per domain as well. Repeated research in different domains could provide more insight into this puzzle. And lastly, although the grievance asymmetry is confirmed by the stories, the conversations have been unable to fully answer whether trustworthiness perceptions are steadily changed over time or that certain moments, life events, or administrative topics may play a decisive role in gaining or impairing public trust. Whether certain government agencies may play a larger role in enhancing public trust than others, would therefore be another interesting topic for further research.

Armed with this knowledge, let's return to the three citizens introduced in [chapter 1](#). Although Rose trusts that the government is doing its job well and therefore does not reach out, it can be argued that the most can be gained by keeping this group as large as possible. Digital communication does not reach all target groups, yet Rose could still benefit from assisted information. That means active delivery and repeated messages, accompanied by a complete yet concise context. This also applies to Jack, who is more assertive and knows how to find a lot of the information on his own. Still, without a clear context transparency can lead to feelings of misunderstanding or disappointment. By continuously checking where their specific information needs lie and by continuing to vary and adjust the supply, as not all citizens benefit from the same approach. This requires resources but can pay off in the form of a better image of openness and trust. Most citizens are positive about personal contact with individual officials. Mila, who lacks trust, opted for legal representation between her and the municipality. This option complicates any direct and personal contact with the municipality. Mila's low trust will therefore be more difficult to rebuild. The findings corroborate that prevention is indeed the best cure.