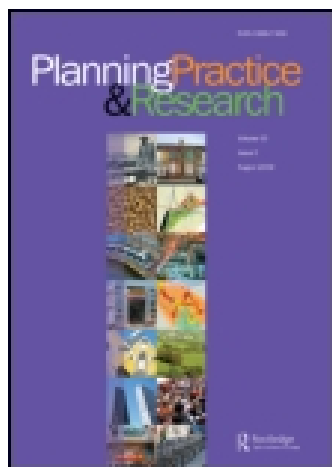


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ARTICLE

Policy Convergence, Divergence and Communities: The Case of Spatial Planning in Post-Devolution Britain and Ireland

JANICE MORPHET & BEN CLIFFORD

Abstract

The implementation of devolution (1999) in the UK was assumed to lead to fractured relationships with the national centre and a fragmented state as a consequence. However, discourse analysis and policy reviews in spatial planning demonstrate that policies and legislation implemented by central and devolved governments since devolution demonstrate marked similarities in intention and type (albeit with some differences in name and delivery route). Having demonstrated a lack of the expected policy divergence, we explore the role of two civil service forums, the British-Irish Council's spatial planning workstream and the 'Five Administrations' meetings of Chief Planners as policy communities.

Keywords: planning; devolution; British-Irish Council; policy community

Introduction

The UK is frequently described as a 'centralized' state. However, since the introduction of the devolutionary process in 1999 (Davies, 1999, quoted in Pike *et al.*, 2012, p. 17), the UK is taking on some of the characteristics of a federal state (albeit without the institutional and constitutional frameworks that accompany this in other countries, including Germany, the USA, Canada and Australia). In the 2014 debate on the referendum for separation in Scotland, there have been calls for a federal constitution in the UK (Jones, 2013; Brown, 2014) regardless of the outcome. This is a significant development since 1999, when devolution was introduced on two scales within the UK. The first was at national level with the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly established as directly elected bodies, and they joined the Assembly in Northern Ireland created in 1998. By degrees, all three have become legislating bodies. In England, devolution has

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not been implemented in the same way but rather through the creation of a directly elected executive mayoralty in London and local government reforms.

As MacKinnon (2013) notes, devolution is now a global phenomenon, as a number of governments across the world have sought to transfer power to sub-state levels. The Scottish referendum itself is having consequences far beyond the boundaries of Britain, for example inspiring nationalists in Catalonia. Devolution is thus an important theme to explore in understanding contemporary governance. This paper is focused on devolution and planning in the UK (with some reference to Ireland, as well). We focus on the UK because we are currently in a period of heightened pressure for change regarding the constitutional settlement of the UK, which could have far-reaching consequences for its governance. Planning, as a devolved function and one closely involved with ideas about territory (which is so central to nationalism), could potentially be heavily impacted by further devolution in the UK.

Our paper examines the formal and informal relationships between the national policy making functions within Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the UK government since 1999 through the lens of planning. There was considerable discussion about the potential policy effects of fragmenting the state at the time of devolution, including those on planning (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999; Allmendinger, 2001). Since then, there have been discussions of the devolved planning systems and their consequential effects emerging within each nation (Glasson & Marshall, 2007; Davoudi & Strange 2009; Haughton *et al.*, 2010), together with examinations within each part of the UK, including Wales (Harris & Thomas, 2009), Scotland (Lloyd & Purves, 2009) and Northern Ireland (Murray, 2009). Changes within the English planning system at strategic and local level have also been considered (Bailey, 2009; Dabinett, 2009; Allmendinger, 2011).

All these discussions have primarily considered the implementation of policy differences *within* the nations following devolution, but in this article we wish to consider the relationships between the civil servants who retain a planning policy central function in all the devolved nations who set these policy frameworks and the UK as a whole which undertakes EU discussions. We have been interested to explore the nature of their continuing relationships and their degree of policy sharing within a more outwardly separate framework. Whilst existing literature has considered the delivery of planning policy, there has been no consideration of the relationships between central civil servants of the devolved nations, how they have developed since 1999 and whether there have been any changes in the role of the UK government since. These were the key questions that we set for our research undertaken during 2011–2013.

In order to examine these questions, we have investigated two research strands. The first has been to examine the territorial and spatial planning policies and associated policy communities that have emerged since devolution began in 1999. We consider the degree of policy divergence within the nations that we have seen since devolution. Second, we have examined the role of two semi-formal institutional spaces which were set up to support policy exchange and dialogue following devolution and their effects on planning policy. The first is through the British-Irish Council (BIC) established after the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998, comprising the four nations together with Ireland, the states of Guernsey,

Jersey and the Isle of Man. This meets formally twice a year and has also established 10 workstreams of which 1 is on spatial planning. The second is the 'Five Administrations' meeting of Chief Planners, which comprises senior officials for the four nations and Ireland. It should be noted that in both of these forums, the roles of England and the UK are unified. Both bodies include Ireland, which for historical reasons has close governance links to the UK and is described as having a 'British style' planning system compared to differing continental approaches (Newman & Thornley, 1996). We have sought to learn more about the role of these bodies: both provide spaces specifically set up for the purpose of bring officials from the UK and devolved governments together, hence our focus on them and interest in their influence and role in planning policy making.

Devolutionary Pressures

The UK is a 'union' state formed over centuries of conquest and voluntary union between England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Notions of cultural difference between these territories have persisted, however, most particularly in Ireland where 26 counties gained independence from the rest of the UK in 1921, leaving Northern Ireland within the union but with its own distinct governance arrangements. Over time, Scotland and Wales gained their own territorial departments of state as part of central government in the UK, but these were frequently seen as technocratic and accountable to Westminster politicians rather than local electorates within these two nations. As a result of a manifesto commitment, on election in 1997, the then UK Labour Government sought to introduce a devolved Parliament and executive to Scotland, and assemblies and executives to Wales and (following a peace process) Northern Ireland. The Scottish Parliament could pass primary legislation from its establishment in 1999 but the Welsh Assembly could only pass secondary legislation until the Government of Wales Act 2006.

This devolution may come to represent the most significant achievement of the Blair administration (Goodwin *et al.*, 2006). Yet, whilst the Scottish Parliament, Northern Irish and Welsh Assemblies were first established 15 years ago, former Welsh Secretary Ron Davies is widely cited as describing devolution as a 'process not an event' (1999 in Pike *et al.*, 2012, p. 17) and Jeffrey (2009) suggests that a new equilibrium with respect to territorial political arrangements has yet to be reached, with successive rounds of increased devolution being implemented asymmetrically within the devolved nations (Goodwin *et al.*, 2006). At present central control is maintained through the distribution of funds and control of most taxation powers, but pressure to further devolve power to all sub-state scales has been increasing (Ahrend *et al.*, 2014).

Planning as a devolved function was not subject to any great debate: the government White Papers paving the way for legislation to introduce devolution to Scotland and Wales (HMG, 1997a, 1997b) simply listed planning as a function to be devolved without any discussion. Attention at the time, and subsequently, has tended to be more focused on constitutional arrangements and areas such as health and welfare than planning (e.g. House of Lords, 2002). This may not only reflect the general status of planning in public debate but also the fact that the previous

system was already differentiated due to planning being led by the territorial departments of state for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006).

At the time of devolution there were, however, a number of predictions that devolution would lead to policy divergence and fragmentation in planning. Tewdwr-Jones commented that 'the potential now exists within each of the four countries of the UK for very different planning systems to be born' (1999, p. 420) and Allmendinger argued that 'devolution has naturally led to expectations of legislative and policy divergence' (2002a, p.793), although neither suggested any specific benefits of the previous system. The idea of devolution might lead to further differentiation was linked to the fact that the territorial departments of state were part of the central UK government, accountable to politicians at Westminster, but the devolved administrations would be directly accountable more locally. At the time of their establishment, distinctive and more culturally aligned policies and priorities (Hazell, 2000; Keating, 2003; Goodwin *et al.*, 2006) were a key objective. Indeed, the pressure for the establishment of a separate jurisdiction that recognizes cultural and historical differences has been central to nationhood. This pressure represents a desire to see self-determination and a symbolic act of separation from the power of the perceived 'centre'. In the case of Scotland, for example there had been a focus on what occurs 'south of the border' and a strong desire to re-establish a locally determined cultural hegemony (Anderson, 2006).

For a number of commentators, the measure of whether devolution has made a difference is measured by the amount of policy variation it has engendered, which may be driven by distinctive popular and political pressures as well as the new spaces created for policy innovation (Keating & McEwen, 2005). Indeed, in the UK, devolution has been permeated with notions of 'change' and new normative trajectories the new administrations could take (Jones *et al.*, 2005). McEwen (2005) wonders whether instances of policy divergence will accumulate over time, whilst Greer (2005, 2007, quoted in Jeffrey, 2007) suggests that devolution is a 'divergence machine' due to a lack of statewide policy standards, weakly institutionalized intergovernmental relations and very permissive block funding. More recently, Jeffrey (2009) argues that 'centrifugal tendencies' due to party political differences between the UK and devolved governments are emerging.

Yet, even in the early period of devolution, Hayton (2002) commented that planning reforms being proposed in Scotland were remarkably similar to those proposed for England. Hayton identified policy convergence rather than divergence post-devolution, reflecting 'global pressures such as economic liberalisation. Given this, it may be that the changes are far less influenced by a Scottish agenda than many would be willing, or indeed would like, to acknowledge' (2002, p. 329). Allmendinger (2002b) explains that significant planning divergence across the UK is unlikely, given that the Labour Party was then in power in Holyrood, Westminster and Cardiff Bay. However, this political alignment has not been the case since 2005, although parallel initiatives for spatial planning have been apparent in areas such as infrastructure (Morphet, 2011). Whatever the forces for convergence and divergence, the dynamics of policy-making and policy ownership are different since devolution. This policy landscape

may provide an opportunity for policy experimentation ‘with ideas pioneered in one jurisdiction taken up in others if they work, producing cycles of divergence and reconvergence’ (Keating & McEwen, 2005, p. 414).

The question of the degree of divergence post-devolution has been considered across a number of policy spheres (Jeffrey, 2004). It has been argued that there are a range of political, economic and social pressures against policy variation. Divergence may be inhibited by shared values, party and institutional ties, financial dependence, the global forces and hegemony of the market, international competition, similar policy challenges, terrorist and security concerns, lack of fiscal autonomy and interdependence with a central state still responsible for revenue and social insurance, the UK single market and the fact that many interest and professional bodies—not to mention political parties—remain UK-wide (Keating, 2005; Keating & McEwen, 2005; McEwen, 2005).

An important factor driving policy relationships is the need to implement common European legislation (Morphet, 2013). The need for coordination around European matters post-devolution led to the establishment, in 1999, of a new institution, the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC; Europe), bringing together ministers and officials from the UK and devolved governments. Coordination on European matters is regular and ‘effective’ (Gallagher, 2012), but interestingly, the more general JMC established at the same time has been ‘barely used’ (Jeffrey & Wincott, 2006, p. 8) and the formal structures for relations between the UK and devolved governments (other than on European matters) are considered weak (Varro, 2012). Spatial planning is a devolved matter and as such there has been no apparent requirement for it to be considered by the JMC, although closer consideration of the application of territorial cohesion (CEC, 2013), Europe 2020 (CEC, 2013) and the re-launch of the Single European Market (Monti, 2010) suggest that there may be other pressures at work that drive some aspects of implementation.

Several scholars note the reliance on collegiality and goodwill rather than formal mechanisms for intergovernmental relations (Keating, 2005; Jeffrey, 2007). The role of the civil service has also been highlighted as ‘a repository of common values and shared understandings of “how to do things”, easing a process of information coordination of problematic issues by officials’ (Jeffrey & Wincott, 2006, p. 9). Whilst there has been little use of the formal concordats and committees envisaged when devolution was first established, there has been more widespread use of softer forums such as the BIC.

Initially, the secretariat for the BIC was provided by the States of Jersey with nations providing meeting support. In 2011, the BIC moved to a permanent headquarters in Edinburgh with a secretariat seconded from the respective civil services of the members. In addition to the biannual meetings of senior politicians, the BIC operates through 10 policy task groups, including 1 on spatial planning established in 2009 (BIC, 2013). This brings together officials responsible for regional development strategies, national planning strategies and frameworks from each member administration.

This is one of two locations where the working relationships between UK national officials performing similar roles in planning operate (as well as informal contact through telephone and email). The second is an officials only group called

the 'Five Administrations' meeting, which comprises the Chief Planners (or equivalent civil servants) from the national governments of the UK. Similar to the BIC spatial planning workstream, these officials meet every six months to compare policy developments and planning issues from their territories. The BIC and the Five Administrations meetings thus provide an opportunity for informal exchanges on planning policy issues that are part of the post-devolutionary mechanisms (Gallagher, 2012). These practices may be contrary to the early expectations of relationships post-devolution (Allmendinger, 2001; Jeffrey, 2004), although the nature of these relationships may be different (Cole, 2012; Parry, 2012). Neither groupings have been examined by planning scholars before, yet, clearly, those attending them may be assisting with what Peck and Theodore (2010) refer to as the 'policy mobility' of planning approaches, instruments and practices.

In the next section we consider the degree of planning policy divergence that may have occurred in planning 15 years after formal devolution in the UK. In doing so we draw on a discourse analysis conducted looking at government policy and consultation documents produced between 2000 and 2012 by the various administrations responsible for planning in each part of the UK and Ireland. This involved a close reading of the documents to see how planning was imagined and highlight cross-references between the different administrations. We then consider the role that these two groupings of the BIC and Five Administrations might play in any policy sharing and similarity found. This draws on semi-structured research interviews conducted contemporaneously and individually with 17 officials attending the two sets of meetings from 2011 to 2012 and one meeting of the spatial planning workstream of the BIC observed directly by the two authors in March 2012. These interviews were then transcribed and coded by annotating the transcript with descriptive, interpretive tags to help identify categories and patterns. Recurring themes were then identified and illustrative quotations selected.

Spatial Planning Post-Devolution: Legislation and Policy

Pressures for both planning policy divergence and convergence can be found in the post-devolutionary UK. Morphet (2010, 2011) found, from a preliminary examination of local planning policy and associated infrastructure delivery planning rather than divergence, that there was evidence of common policy languages and written processes. Whilst this examination did not find that there was necessarily a convergence appearing, it was concluded that the same policy themes and priorities together with implementation modes were occurring across the UK nations, although in different sequences. Morphet described this as having the character of a fugue with recognizable themes delivered within the same framework but with temporal variance.

This research undertook a systematic approach to examining these policies through a literature review and policy discourse analysis of legislation and policy documents in 2011. This identified some key areas of similarity, including legislative reform of the planning system, the definition of planning that is used in each of the nations and, lastly, the recurrence of key issues such as sustainability

and infrastructure delivery. These similarities were present over time and through spatial scales. Another feature was the strong links being developed between planning and wider local government reform processes. Each of these elements can be more strongly demonstrated in two or more of the four nations but over time there has been a filling in of policy space. This is illustrated in more detail in [Table 1](#).

Whilst much of the focus in England has been on local scale reforms since 2004, changes in the strategic scale are apparent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as part of the planning process. In England, the abolition of regional planning has been replaced by strategic plans with an economic focus which have been introduced outside the planning system. Yet, these plans in England appear to be very similar to the strategic development plans in Scotland undertaken through the planning system (Pemberton & Morphet, 2014).

Although we found similarities in terms, definitions and processes between the planning reforms in each nation, there were differences in practices which were significant. At the local scale, the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, which set out new legislative frameworks for planning in England and Wales, diverged in practice. In Wales, there was an emphasis on creating a Wales Spatial Plan (WAG, 2004) within which local development plans would find their policy context. In England, policy guidance and later statements were issued by central government and were interpreted through the local development frameworks or plans without any spatial framework being provided at national level. The way in which the 2004 Act was characterized by the two governments also varied. In England, the new local planning system was described as requiring culture change on behalf of planning practitioners whereas in Wales, the approach to local planning remained within the existing cultural framework. Neither approach achieved significantly faster progress in local plan adoption.

In England and Wales, the term ‘spatial planning’ was used, although in England this was focused on the new local planning system, whereas in Wales it applied to the plan for Wales. The word spatial has not been used in Scotland, although the term used for the plan for the whole of Scotland is called a framework and this terminology has appeared at local level in England. In Northern Ireland, the plan for the whole of the territory has always been described as regional (DRD, 2002), whereas regional plans in England comprised sub-parts of its area and were also described as spatial. Finally, Scotland led the development of plans for its major cities based on functional economic areas, an approach which is being followed in Wales, whereas in England the strategic plans have been prepared outside the planning system, although all have been submitted to the European Commission in response to the requirements of EU Reg 2013/1303 (HMG, 2014a, 2014b).

Looking at this corpus of documents, a common code can be seen with respect to the way spatial planning is imagined in all parts of the UK (even in Scotland, where the term is not specifically used). All the planning policy documents draw on common themes of participatory planning, economic growth and competitiveness, transport, infrastructure delivery, social justice, environmental sustainability, climate change, speeding-up the planning system and ensuring it is ‘fit for purpose’ and both the plans and government policy documents—including those

TABLE 1. Comparing planning systems in the UK post-devolution

Scale jurisdiction	National	Subregional/city	Local	Neighbourhood
England	<p>Policy: NPPF 2012</p> <p>Proposals: Nat Infrastructure Plan 2010, 2011</p>	<p>LEPs and city regions 2007, 2010— strategic plans submitted to Gov and EU 2014 (HMG, 2014a, 2014b)</p>	<p>Local Plans established in 2004 and confirmed through Localism Act 2011 and NPPF 2012</p>	<p>Neighbourhood plans introduced formally in Localism Act 2011</p>
N. Ireland	<p>Policy and proposals: Regional Development Strategy 2001; revised 2008 and 2012</p>	<p>Included city regions dimension in regional plans 2002 and 2008; strategic plans submitted to Gov and EU 2014 (HMG, 2014a, 2014b)</p>	<p>Planning Reform Act 2011: implementation 2015 by new local authorities</p>	<p>Community planning to be implemented from 2015</p>
Scotland	<p>Proposals: NPF 1, 2, 3 2004, 2008, 2014</p> <p>Planning policy (reviewed 2012)</p>	<p>City regions (4) each making strategic development plans; strategic plans submitted to Gov and EU 2014 (HMG, 2014a, 2014b)</p>	<p>Development plans in conformity with Planning Policy and NPF Planning (etc.) Scotland Act 2006</p>	<p>Community planning and partnerships introduced in 2003 Act; reviewed 2012 and proposed extending role to delivery (nb planning here interpreted in its wider sense)</p>
Wales	<p>Proposals: Wales Spatial Plan 2004; Wales Infrastructure Investment Plan 2012</p>	<p>Six Planning regions introduced in 2004; cities policy approach published 2012; 2013 announced Scotland's 'City region' approach being introduced in 2014; strategic proposals submitted to Gov and EU 2014 (HMG, 2014a, 2014b)</p>	<p>Local Development Plans Regulations 2005; 'Each Local Planning Authority must prepare a Local Development Plan which sets out their proposals and policies for future development and use of land in its area.'</p>	<p>Informal approaches under Defra initiatives to promote parish planning</p>
	<p>Policy: 21 Technical Advice Notes (TAN)</p>			

Source: the authors.

from England—present spatial planning specifically as a ‘new’ concept. Table 1 summarizes the many policy initiatives across the four nations of the UK post-devolution. This demonstrates some striking similarities in ideas and reforms.

It is also noticeable how often documents from one nation cross-reference those from others. For example, Scotland noted pressure to move to ‘larger scale planning frameworks’ due to the emerging national/regional strategies in Wales and Northern Ireland as long ago as 2001 (Scottish Executive, 2001, p. 2), whilst Northern Ireland noted:

The need to reform the planning system here mirrors moves in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland to modernise their planning systems, or significant elements of them. In general terms, the justification for such reforms are broadly the same, and there are lessons to be drawn from the different experiences, while acknowledging that reform in Northern Ireland has to explicitly take account of our own particular characteristics. In all the jurisdictions, however, there is a common recognition of the need to reform the planning system in ways that will build greater understanding and help ensure trust and confidence in planning. (DOENI, 2009, pp. 19–20)

Acknowledgement of the origins and movement of ‘spatial planning’ is also provided in Scotland’s second *National Planning Policy Framework*, which states ‘This Framework is informed by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), the EU territorial cohesion agenda and developing European practice in spatial planning, particularly in the Celtic, Nordic and Baltic Countries’ (Scottish Government, 2009, p. 10) and in the *Wales Spatial Plan*, which notes ‘Spatial planning ... had been adopted progressively across the European Union, with Wales one of the leading protagonists in the British Isles’ (WAG, 2004, p. 3).

The flow of ideas and practices between the nations of the UK and Ireland is thus evident, looking not just at the content of the documents but also because it is explicitly acknowledged in them. This is also recognized by most of the officials interviewed. Officials believed that spatial planning was ‘very, very different from the previous process of land-use planning’ (Interviewee 10) so that ‘we’re all much more focused on delivery and infrastructure now, that’s a common shift’ (Interviewee 11), as interviewee 15 argued:

There’s a common agenda but it goes deeper than that ... in each of the administrations there is an understanding about the role of planning and the important of plan making, the importance of it in terms of attracting investment, the importance of it in terms of infrastructure development. (Interviewee 15)

Similarly, Interviewee 1 suggested:

There are quite different approaches but I think there’s a common understanding of what spatial planning’s all about ... it’s more about delivery of the framework with the policies appropriate. (Interviewee 1)

The explanation for this was attributed to a shared planning heritage between the nations, which would always be there, a ‘mindset issues that’s different kind of day between Europe and say the British Isles ... we’re islands on the periphery with a very different structure’ (Interviewee 5).

A number of interviewees were, however, keen to highlight that policy similarity did not mean that policy ownership was not important. Interviewee 14 felt that in the past it was very much London ‘suggesting this is what we do, this is what you should do in the Celtic fringe’. Interviewees 13 and 16, both from different administrations, commented very similarly. They argued that in the past they merely followed what came out from the ‘centre’ in London, albeit with some local adaption for implementation, whereas post-devolution they could look more independently at the best policy for their territory and reflect local ‘political will’. It was commonly felt that this had led to a much more collaborative relationship between all the nations, including the UK government.

This inevitably raised issues of policy differentiation. Interviewee 14 argued that there has been a ‘new energy as the devolved administrations have got powers and wanted to do things differently’ but ‘a path has been set in all administrations which will continue’. In other words, they were all from a common starting point with regard to planning policy, and so a sort of path dependency would mean future reforms in each would bear similarity. As Interviewee 1 suggested,

It is probably easier to talk to UK counterparts because you have a more similar government structure and a more similar approach to how you implement planning policy.

Perceptions on this point were not entirely universal, however. There was some discussion of whether the UK Coalition government was now taking a different approach for planning in England, as one devolved nation official commented, ‘I think we’re fortunate in that generally our Ministers see planning as part of the solution rather than part of the problem’ (Interviewee 2), and a sense that the Celtic nations were more similar in terms of scale, attitude and issues. They had also all similarly used national spatial plans as part of the ‘nation-building’ process post-devolution, in contrast to England, which lacked a national spatial plan. This prompted Interviewee 2 to speculate whether there had been

increasing divergence between the various systems ... they’re all, grounded in the UK planning philosophy which emerged in the inter-war period so they’re all, you know, quite distinct from European practice. But they are increasingly diverging to reflect the different circumstances of the territorial and the political in the various administrations.

The negative discourse around planning from some UK government ministers naturally gives succour to such views. Yet, in practice, the differences may be overstated, as Interviewee 13 explained:

There are policy similarities between the nations but it varies by theme, which is most like which ... there are a lot more similarities than differences between us, the differences are made a lot of but are often more presentational than anything.

This was apparently evidenced by the ease with which ‘common lines’ could be agreed between the UK and devolved governments on European matters: ‘I don’t think there’s been anything in particular that we’ve disagreed with any of the other devolved administrations on’ (Interviewee 1). Indeed, as Interviewee 9 commented, for any issue arising, ‘our first stopping point is what are the other administrations doing, particularly for transposing European directives’. This was because, ‘there is a common understanding of planning between us all, very much’ (Interviewee 13). Indeed, Interviewee 5 suggested that the result of this was policy mobility and cycles of divergence and convergence, similar to the suggestion of Keating and McEwen (2005):

As soon as one nation does one thing, someone else will follow. We are chasing each other’s tails all the time and the policies go round in circles.

A good summation of the situation appeared to come from Interviewee 16:

The detail is different ... but the big things, a plan led system we still aspire to that ... we have a hierarchy of development, the community, the fair and transparent process, the mechanism to appeal, to enforce, examinations into development plans, these key ingredients are what we have.

A range of factors, as suggested in the general literature on devolution already discussed, can help explain this. Nevertheless, it is notable that the officials interviewed frequently commented on how often they personally looked to policy in the other nations of the UK and Ireland when faced with issues.

Altered States, New Relationships?

In the second part of our research, we investigated the extent to which continuing policy relationships and discussions may have contributed to these policy similarities or whether they had been framed through European legislation or political imperatives. The ‘Five Administrations’ meetings involve the Chief Planners of each of the four nations of the UK and Ireland who meet twice a year, and is supplemented by a group of more junior officials working on specific policy areas as required. The meetings rotate between the five nations and comprise an overnight stay and a visit to a site or project of interest arranged by the host nations as well as a business meeting. No agendas and minutes of these meetings are published but in this research project, participants were interviewed on their experience and views of working following devolution.

Through the interviews we found that the meetings were viewed as positive opportunities to share issues and approaches to implementing specific policies. The participants also valued the ways in which they could discuss current political agendas informally and also compare policy implementation. The framework and legacy of a similar legal systems and the role of planning within them distinguishes these five nations from the rest of Europe and this is particularly important when discussing the implementation of EU environmental legislation, which is a devolved matter. All participants reported how valuable these meetings are, and the network provides a means of communicating between nations on a daily basis. Participants reported that relations were more relaxed post-devolution and there was more equal respect between the members.

In addition to the Five Administrations group, there is a regular exchange between the five nations as part of the BIC spatial planning task group. This was established in 2009 following a proposal by the Minister for Planning in Northern Ireland and was agreed by all members of the BIC. This group has used its meetings for more general exchanges and updates on planning policy and practice, rotating its locations and chairs. Unlike the Five Administrations group, the meetings are held in one day and do not include a site visit, although part of the agenda always includes a case study or policy update from the host nation. Discussion is not confined to the meetings and there is evidence of telephone contact to follow up on information provided at the meeting or on a specific issue.

What was clear from the meetings of both Five Administrations and the BIC spatial planning task group is that there is a small and common group of staff. The Five Administrations group comprises the more senior staff. Those who attend the BIC task group may not participate directly in the Five Administrations group main meetings, but they will be the participants of any subsequent sub-groups. Second, there is an awareness by all of those involved in these two groups of the agendas discussed at each meeting and there are some spillovers between them. There is also a sense of running issues and agendas between the two sets of meetings and although not formally linked, there is a clear sense that they both provide an important framework for sharing common planning issues, whether past, current or future. Whilst the BIC meeting includes representatives from the Isle of Man and the States of Jersey and Guernsey, this does not seem to inhibit discussion. Although not part of the EU, these states share a common planning culture and legislative context. Also, despite the differences in scale, all the participants in the BIC meetings stated how useful the meetings were. From the position of the non-EU members of the BIC, understanding the legislative changes that were being implemented was also welcomed as part of understanding the changing context for many of the companies with bases on their islands.

These meetings suggest that the relationships between the four nations of the UK on planning are mature and settled. However, would these improved working relations be adequate to explain the potential policy convergence identified in the policy analysis set out here? This has led to some consideration of the factors that might underpin a seeming convergence in policy approaches, i.e. inputs, although not necessarily in outputs or outcomes. Bennett (1991) examined policy convergence across transnational boundaries and identified four factors that contribute towards this: emulation and elite networking, which are internal factors

fostered through policy communities, harmonization in response to common external factors and the penetration of external interests into the agenda. Three of these factors are apparent here with the influence of external actors reflecting the political context created by government ministers. However, what is important for this to develop appears to be a common status between all the members rather than dominance by any one of them. This convergence appears to have evolved as an outcome of a voluntaristic relationship. We might think of the members of both meetings as forming an ‘epistemic policy community’, in the sense of being a group of technical experts who have access to privileged information and share and discuss ideas (Sutton, 1999).

This sense of community was transmitted when the officials interviewed described the meetings (both the BIC spatial planning workstream and the Five Administrations meetings of Chief Planners) and why they valued them so much personally. As Interviewee 14 commented:

We discuss what to do and what not to do, which definitely influences our thinking and the planning reforms each of us are working on. You’ll see a commonality across the administrations and their reforms.

The meetings were seen to ‘facilitate a shared understanding and best practice’ (Interviewee 5) and to ‘allow us to support each other, share best practice so we don’t constantly reinvent the wheel . . . The meetings mean we can all be greater than the sum of our individual parts’ (Interviewee 13).

The meetings were seen to operate so effectively because all those present were performing the same role, working within the same civil service framework with politicians. As Interviewee 16 suggested:

I welcome the opportunity to speak to people who have the same role because there’s nobody else here that has precisely the same role.

The ‘Chatham House’ rules under which the meetings operated, and their removal from the private (or even politicians eyes) meant that the officials present could have ‘frank’ discussions, which were ‘cordial’ and with all participants seen as on a ‘level playing field . . . we feed off each other (Interviewee 15).

This sense of community extended beyond the meetings, where some members had been invited to each other’s administrations to provide advice and act as a ‘critical friend’. Indeed, speaking about the Five Administrations meeting, Interviewee 14 pointed out that ‘All of us are members of the RTPI so we can count the meetings for CPD purposes and perform a mentoring role of one another’. There was a sense that the meetings were organic, responding to issues as and when they arose and provided ‘an essential way to talk to your equivalents facing the same issues. The political contexts are different, yes, but it’s all very similar, similar issues’ (Interviewee 13), so that ‘we can share ideas, pick and choose amongst different things, what we think is appropriate for us’ (Interviewee 7).

This is not to suggest that the officials at these meetings are operating in a policy vacuum. Policy may be driven by a range of outside factors (the politically driven nature of localism was a frequently cited example) and the policy process

may be influenced by actors beyond this group. Nevertheless, the presence of these bespoke meetings of officials performing similar roles in each of the administrations clearly allows them to share experience and provides a source of expertise, advice and reassurance. This will undoubtedly influence policy inspiration and implementation in their own administrations and appears to us an important factor in explaining how knowledge about planning has spread across the UK and Ireland in times of rapid reform and pressure to deliver.

Conclusions: Communities and Convergence?

The degree of policy divergence in planning predicted by scholars in the early days of UK devolution has not been found in practice. There are similar themes in planning reform in each of the territories of the UK and in Ireland, and particular ideas about a new 'spatial' approach can be traced in one territory and then appearing in others sometime afterwards. Devolution has created a laboratory for policy experimentation and mobility (similar to the suggestion of Keating & McEwen, 2005) but not a 'divergence machine' (Greer, 2005, quoted in Jeffrey, 2007).

The process of devolution has changed the relationships between policy officials and has created new spaces of policy ownership and policy-making. This has not, however, led to fragmentation. Indeed, at the official level, their relationship is described by them as being more positive and active than it was before devolution. This may be due to the changed nature of the relationships on policy-making within the four nations of the UK, where there is no longer a strong culture of hierarchical policy transfer, particularly between the UK government and Scotland and Wales.

Instead, devolution has led to a new relationship of mutual respect between policy-makers from central and devolved governments. Despite the different scale of these governments, there appeared to be a wider appreciation of common interests. The BIC spatial planning workstream inclusion of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man was not an issue, and members of the group stated that they benefited from this wider perspective. This may be a point about focus. For civil servants meeting together to discuss the same policy area, there is an interest in the relational politics and delivery which may transcend the issues of governance scale and turn into a more generic consideration of their daily business. Thus, the task group, as an epistemic policy community, fulfilled both a substantive and a procedural role.

As a policy community, these two groups of planners share legislative frameworks, operating within a national political environment. The same professional training and values are dominant in the development and delivery of policy. Despite the different jurisdictions, and the management of the planning function within each of the governance structures, planning practitioners within the BIC group are all members of the same professional body, the Royal Town Planning Institute. Thus, the cultures and professional education of all members of the BIC spatial planning group are common. Although the practices of each state might vary, the language and communication of policy are likely to lie within a common frame. This helps create a sense of community wherein ideas are shared,

and other members of the group are used as advisers to cross-fertilize ideas between nations. The roles undertaken by advisers in one nation provide credence to their approaches.

Do the relationships between the government officials in the BIC spatial planning workstream and the Five Administrations meetings promote policy mobility between the memberships? There is some evidence that a common pool of advisers is being used between the nations, and in some cases these have been given more formal roles such as the former head of the British Planning Inspectorate examining the development plan for Jersey. Elsewhere, practices and approaches have been emulated, and in some cases directly transferred where these have been seen to be helpful and applicable. We would argue that the officials attending these forums are acting in some ways as what Stone (2004) terms 'transfer agents', helping the movement and sharing of policing between central and devolved government in the UK and Ireland post-devolution (see Clifford & Morphet, 2014).

It is also the case, however, that the implementation and application of these shared ideas are culturally determined and institutionally framed. This leads to similarities and differences in the ways in which terms are interpreted and communicated within the political and planning communities. Even where there was a stronger approach of policy transfer before devolution, in effect the path dependency for the implementation of any initiative meant that they were tailored to other aspects of the governance system and its institutions. Before devolution, this cultural difference was used as a means of indicating difference and was a soft power tool (Nye, 2004) used to enhance separation. Since devolution, when these pressures have not been present, it has been possible to see that these differences were real and their presence was not a political convenience to support devolution arguments. The differences remain in delivery but there is a more relaxed approach to discussing the core content of the spatial planning system. In the second decade of devolution, there are system similarities but operational differences which mark the priorities and culture of each of the UK nations. The same is true of the non-UK members of the BIC where this fugue approach can also be seen and is also culturally defined. This suggests to us that in the future we will continue to see a similarity in the approach to planning taken across the UK, and there will continue to be considerable cross-fertilization in planning reform agendas.

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