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Citation: McGuinness, David, Greenhalgh, Paul and Pugalis, Lee (2015) Is the grass always greener? Making sense of convergence and divergence in regeneration policies in England and Scotland. *Geographical Journal*, 181 (1). pp. 26-37. ISSN 1475-4959

Published by: Wiley-Blackwell

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12090> <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12090>>

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Is the grass always greener? Making sense of convergence and divergence in regeneration policies in England and Scotland

Published in The Geographical Journal, 2014, doi: 10.1111/geoj.12090

Authors: David McGuinness, Paul Greenhalgh and Lee Pugalis, URB@NE Research Group at Northumbria University

This paper is concerned with the trajectories of regeneration policy discourse and practice in a devolved UK context. Over recent years the asymmetrical nature of devolved governance has intensified, exemplified by a policy of political containment in Scotland and a reconfiguration of sub-national institutional architecture in England. Against a backdrop of the transfusion of Holyrood's devolution agenda and Westminster's localism programme, an empirical analysis of contemporary English and Scottish regeneration policy is provided. We investigate the extent to which perceived divergences in government policy resonate with those at the sharp end of regeneration practice, informed by concepts derived from the policy convergence/divergence literature. The key finding is the coexistence of ideological divergence, replete in political discourse and policy documentation, but growing convergence in actual existing practice, evidenced in the nature, extent and scale of initiatives. The enveloping fiscal context and austere politics, producing what is anticipated to be a protracted period of financial retrenchment, appears to be a defining factor in contemporary urban regeneration policy convergence.

KEY WORDS: regeneration; urban policy; devolution; England; Scotland; policy divergence; policy convergence

Introduction

Constitutional reform and devolution were central elements of the 1997 Labour manifesto, *New Labour because Britain deserves better* (Labour Party, 1997). Upon entering government the Blair administration prioritised the establishment of the mechanisms for devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland within their constitutional reform agenda. However, as Bentley *et al.* (2010) note, the process of devolution was never intended to be equitable across Britain and as a result, upon leaving office, Labour left an asymmetric patchwork of economic governance, with devolution and varying forms of political control for Scotland, Wales and London. Yet, England had to settle for an incomplete form of decentralisation for the English regions. In 2010, following the investiture of a Conservative-Liberal Democrats 'Coalition' Government, the asymmetrical nature of devolution in Britain deepened (Deas 2013). This has involved pursuing a policy of political containment in Scotland (to maintain the Union) whilst systematically severing extant institutional architectures within England, including the ostracism and emasculation of regionalised policy frameworks and area-based regeneration mechanisms. Simultaneously, major nationally-sponsored regeneration programmes, such as Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders and Working Neighbourhoods Fund, were curtailed and many areas-based initiatives terminated. This has been encapsulated by a new politics of 'localism' as a justification for market-based reforms in the pursuit of economic growth (Jacobs and Manzi 2013).

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party, a centre left government, in political rhetoric at least, appeared to be attempting to maintain a socially inclusive holistic focus on alleviating socio-economic disparities through regeneration interventions. Area-based regeneration projects, for example, are often considered to be holistic when they seek to alleviate interlinked social, economic, and environmental issues in an integrated manner, although face criticism when divorced from strategic contexts and other constellations of policies (Pugalis 2013, Matthews

2012). Matthews (2013) notes how as part of the national performance management regime in Scotland (i.e. Single Outcome Agreement), the government has developed a suite of sixteen national outcome targets, one of which is a solidarity or social equity target. The Solidarity Target, which has no equivalent in England, is one of Scotland's 'golden rules,' and seeks to increase the total income of all households in Scotland and reduce income inequality by increasing the proportion of that income received by the lowest three deciles¹. Thus, despite changes in governmental administrations, Scotland appears to have experienced more gradual and incremental adjustment of national regeneration policy, albeit with some noteworthy shifts in local practices, which are discussed below.

In contrast, England has faced more abrupt changes, which have often been politically-induced. Initially, New Labour adopted a broadly similar policy agenda that confronted the 'wicked' problems of social exclusion (via the Social Exclusion Unit) and deprivation (using Index of Multiple Deprivation to target area based interventions). However this espoused 'holistic' approach to regeneration in England has gradually dissipated, as the economic climate has deteriorated and dedicated funding has dried up; the contraction being heralded by the 2007 (HM Treasury) Sub-national review of economic development and regeneration, extended by CLG's (2009) regeneration framework and 'crowned' by the Coalition's single minded pursuit of job creation through economic development and the concomitant but misguided faith in trickle-down.

The hypothesis, which initially sparked interest in the research project, emerged from the perception that from an English situated vantage, in terms of the contemporary regeneration policy landscape, quite simply, the grass appeared greener on the 'other side' of the border', in Scotland. An observation from a Local Enterprise Partnership Chair from the North of England, epitomises this:

“...we in the North of England look at Scotland with some envy. Scotland has a clear identity, brand and ‘real’ devolution. It knows where the power is and it gets it.”

From a south of the border, Scotland appears to have the tripartite competitive advantage over peripheral areas of England. Firstly, a more holistic and comprehensive policy approach to regeneration. Secondly, greater political representation on the national and international stage than English core cities, due to a vocal and proactive First Minister, Alex Salmond. Thirdly, more effective tools for achieving regeneration (in terms of funding and initiatives). This paper, therefore, seeks to examine this initial hypothesis from the perspective of those operating at the sharp end of regeneration practice. We seek to test the credentials of an apparent inclusive style of Scottish urban regeneration policy vis-à-vis English regeneration practice paying particular analytical attention to the extent of policy convergence and divergence in terms of ideology, emphasis and strategy.

The following section explores policy divergence and convergence discourses, in order to establish a conceptual outline to inform a comparative analysis of evolving practice in England and Scotland. In section three we consider the methodological implications of the research approach before presenting a comparative analysis and discussion of evolving regeneration practice in section four, before drawing some tentative conclusions in the final section.

Policy Convergence and Divergence

The research takes its theoretical departure from the policy convergence and divergence strand of the multiple ‘travel of ideas’ (Mukhtarov, 2014), others of which comprise policy mobilities, policy transfer and policy mutations. Temenos and McCann (2013) observe that the broad policy mobilities discourse is, ‘...characterised by a concern for the actors,

practices and representations that affect the (re) production, adaptation and travel of policies, and the best practice models across space and time'. Peck (2011, 793) concurs stating that, 'policies are not, after all, merely being transferred over space; their form and their effects are transformed by these journeys'. It is in this sense that policies at particular scales are transformed as they traverse different scales of governance, policy spaces and policy initiatives, creating the potential for divergence and convergence between nation states within the UK.

McCann (2011, 114) helps to frame our research by stating that the key dynamic of the mobility processes are the interactions between 'social actors and their associated institutions'. Thus, regeneration strategies and statements promoted by national politicians and civil servants are not necessarily directly transported into the regeneration milieus of practitioners. The 'transfer' and 'transportation' of policy is messier in practice, thus prescient to the study of regeneration which is itself a contested process involving numerous deals and interests that contribute to particularised regeneration policy assemblages. Although our work draws on the breadth of the 'travel of ideas' literature we are not specifically looking at the transferability (mobility) of an individual policy. We aim to investigate a more comprehensive and complex sub-section of public policy and the external policy drivers which generate convergence and divergence between nation states within the specific public policy field of regeneration. Therefore, to refine our theoretical framework we have drawn primarily on the work of Nutley *et al.* (2012, 200) who detail four main reasons why policies may converge:

- *Concurrent pressure* – where policies converge because nations or states facing similar economic, social and technological challenges arrive independently at similar solutions.

- *Direct coercion* – where a policy is imposed on one country or state by a higher authority.
- *Indirect coercion* - where functional interdependence creates spill overs that lead to policy convergence.
- *Policy learning* – where nations or states adopt lessons from elsewhere.

In terms of drivers for policy divergence, Nutley *et al.* (2012) suggest the following factors are most significant:

- Institutional, demographic and cultural differences that influence the perceptions of problems and potential approaches to counter the problems
- Political pressures – Nationalist governments need ‘to be seen’ to pursue different approaches to the Westminster model (distinctiveness)
- Growth in confidence from the devolved administrations post-devolution means they are more prepared to follow divergent policy approaches

Our research explores direct and indirect variables which impact upon the shifting spectrum of policy convergence and divergence in the policy field of Scottish and English regeneration policy. The empirical data for this analysis comes from a series of semi structured interviews with experienced and knowledgeable regeneration practitioners from both sides of the border. The next section elaborates further on the key methodological issues that subsequently informed our adopted approach.

Methodological considerations and research approach

Comparative analysis across two distinct nations, albeit part of the same union, is a challenging task, which is compounded by the degree of institutional upheaval and policy

churn apparent since the 2010 UK general election. In addition, there is a significant level of confusion amongst frontline practitioners about the current definition and scope of regeneration, in terms of the fuzzy boundaries between ‘regeneration’ and concomitant activities, including ‘economic development’ and ‘economic growth’. Deas (2013) suggests this lack of clarity is understandable due to an explicit policy pursued by the UK Coalition government of attempting to develop an entrepreneurial climate of ‘creative chaos’, which Pugalis and Bentley (2013) observe exudes the notion of ‘competitive tension’. However, as Waite *et al.* (2013) outline there is a need for greater and more reflexive learning of the policy experiences either side of the border and just because something is challenging it should not be overlooked as a research topic. At the very least it is possible to analyse and compare the broad directions of travel of regeneration policy in England and Scotland; is there evidence of convergence or divergence?

The research process began with a comprehensive literature review of key UK and Scottish Government² policy and strategy documents to identify the fundamental issues and frame questions for interview schedules. Yet, in recognition of disjunctures between policy and practice, empirical material was generated via a series of elite semi-structured interviews (for further details about elite interviewing see Harvey 2011; and Aberbach and Rockman 2002), conducted between summer 2012 and spring 2013, with senior regeneration practitioners in England and Scotland.

The rationale for selecting elite semi-structured interviews for this research process was influenced by observations made by Temenos and McCann (2013) that state by exploring the pathways and networks through which policies travel and mutate, researchers can help to uncover some of the tacit knowledge and practices that lie at the heart of policy transfer processes. Such an approach was favoured as it recognises that the translation of

regeneration policies in practice is never pre-given, but rather, is to be negotiated as ideas, presuppositions and ideologies travel and evolve.

Nevertheless, elite interviews are not without methodological controversy, Harvey (2011, 432), states that there is an ‘under theorization of the term elite’, within methodological discourses. In this research, our definition of elite refers to the status of the interviewee within the regeneration profession. The specific characteristics of the individuals that were assessed when selecting interviewees, include the level of professional qualifications held by the individual, the duration of their career within regeneration, their professional networks and connectivity (e.g. membership of professional bodies), their proximity and level of engagement with fellow policymakers/practitioners and their level of cross border experience (e.g. their knowledge of regeneration from a UK wide perspective). Such a definition is purposely narrow as it was intended to focus the empirical stage of research on targeted interviews with regeneration managers and professionals who are the traditional purveyors of national policy.

The 15 practitioners who participated in the interviews (8 from Scotland; 7 from England) have significant regeneration experience in both the public and private sectors (interviewees included representatives from local authorities, former regional institutions, property developers, regeneration consultants, government advisers and professional bodies). They were offered anonymity to encourage expansive, open and honest reflection on emerging urban regeneration policy and practice; participants are referred to by generic job title only. Interviewees were asked a range of question structured around the core themes distilled from the literature review: knowledge of the drivers of policy convergence/divergence within urban regeneration policy in Scottish and English contexts; the influence of political and economic factors on the trajectory of urban policy within the two nations; the influence of concurrent pressure, direct and indirect coercion, and policy

learning. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed before the data was collated and analysed using a thematic coding framework derived from the above themes.

How to define ‘regeneration’ and distinguish it from ‘economic development’ in particular was an issue that arose repeatedly during the research project. There was concern amongst some respondents that regeneration was an ‘elastic’ or ‘fuzzy’ concept which could lead to misunderstanding and, ‘...sometimes it feels as if, especially the private sector, try to badge everything as regeneration, when often it is simply private sector development’ (Interview with Scottish Regeneration Practitioner). In this research we chose not to ‘spill more ink’ trying to define regeneration and instead focused on how practitioners interpreted national regeneration policy at localised levels. This helped to explore how practitioners interpreted policies and engaged in policy assemblage.

In the following section we consider some of the political, economic and cultural factors which have shaped the Scottish political context and how these factors has impacted upon contemporary Scottish regeneration policy.

Contextual differences: comparing England and Scotland

Even prior to the devolutionary settlement north of the Border, and the introduction of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, Scotland has for over three decades pursued a divergent urban policy to England, due in part to the prior delegation of administrative functions to the Scottish Office (McCarthy 1999). Therefore, although policy divergence/convergence appears to be interrelated with the devolution process, it is not contingent on devolution: distinct policy assemblages were apparent prior to 1999.

Keating (2005, 454) states that pre-1999 there were divergent views within the academic community about whether Scotland enjoyed a relatively strong level of autonomy in terms of policy-making or whether the ‘Scottish Office was there to put a Scottish face on British

policy’ – a form of direct coercion. To a large degree the scale of policy divergence under devolution was constrained by contextual and political factors (Keating 2005; Haydecker 2010); a key political factor being the restrictive funding formula that remains in place after the devolutionary settlement and a situation where Scotland does not currently have fiscal autonomy.

The use of Scotland as a ‘testbed’ for policies over the last 30 years, before they are rolled out across the rest of the U.K., partly explains why there has been a sense of powerlessness Scotland felt under Thatcherism, resulting in a theme of shared responsibility and social solidarity running through contemporary Scottish public policy discourse. Indeed, Tomaney and Colomb (2013, 377) attest that, ‘Scottish political culture is more consensual, corporatist and egalitarian’, than its English counterpart and this factor was a central feature of the devolution debate. Bradbury (2008) argues that during the latter half of the twenty first century the Scottish and Welsh nations increasingly distinguished themselves by support for social collectivism, in direct opposition to more individualistic approaches which dominated policy making in England, influenced by neoliberal ideologies.

McCarthy (2010) suggests that the creation of the Scottish Parliament catalysed a divergence in broad policy approach either side of the border, with Scottish policy forcefully promoting a narrative of social justice, which subsequently shifted the emphasis in urban regeneration policy to ‘people rather than place’, as an attempt to move away from the socio-pathological neo-liberal and market-driven assumptions of much Whitehall public policy under successive British governments (Keating 2005). As a direct result of the on-going process of devolution, there have been claims of a ‘new politics’ in Scotland (McCarthy 1999), with advocates championing a greater role for participation, social movements and consensual politics. There is a view that policy-making within this context is more

deliberative, with diminished tendency to claim to know all the answers and more willingness to explore issues (Keating 2005, 457). In support of this thesis, Nutley et al (2012, 199) report that in England:

'...performance regimes for local authorities under the Labour government were imposed 'top down' by the Government and the Audit Commission. Whilst conversely in (Wales and) Scotland although similar performance regimes were enacted they were developed through consensual processes in which local government representatives played a prominent role.'

However, there is robust critique within the academic community in Scotland, challenging the holistic rhetoric of Scottish regeneration policy. Williams and Mooney (2008, 494), for example, observe that many Scottish government policies are 'rhetorical' nation-building proclamations from a nationalist government keen to be viewed as distinct from what is perceived to be a distant London-centric Westminster administration. Akin to some notable critiques of English regeneration practice (see, for example, Lees 2013, Paton *et al.* 2012) suggest that much urban regeneration in Scotland can be classified as state-led gentrification pursued from within a socio-pathological and neo-liberal paradigm. The gentrification thesis charges the state with pursuing class-based physical and social cleansing, often via large flagship physical regeneration projects, which attempts to transfuse struggling places with a middle class population and cultural sensibilities, to effectively dilute 'problem' people and reclaim 'problem' places. This suggests some degree of policy convergence between Scotland and England where many flagship inner city regeneration projects have been implemented and subsequently critiqued for unleashing waves of gentrification (e.g. Salford Quays or the Clyde Gateway).

In the next section, the paper focuses on contemporary regeneration strategies in England and Scotland to explore whether differences in political culture and rhetoric filter through into frontline policy.

Comparative analysis of regeneration ‘strategies’ in England and Scotland

As outlined in the previous section historically, political and cultural distinctions have influenced the trajectories of regeneration policy in the two nations. For example, in the late 1980s to early 1990s the English approach reflected an emerging competitive neo-liberal ethos with funding requests assessed in terms of the quality of the bid which favoured competition, whereas ‘need’ was the central criterion in the Scottish Urban Programme. A macro-level policy analysis of Scottish regeneration policy, since the SNP came to power in 2007, reveals a fairly consistent direction of overall travel. Nevertheless, research by Matthews (2013, 10) offers a more nuanced review observing that in 2007 the incoming Scottish Government weakened the focus in Scotland on deprived neighbourhoods (ABIs) and provided Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) with more latitude to adopt a strategic approach directing funding across wider areas, which directed local authority spending ‘to maximise impact and deliver outcomes’, mirroring the Labour governments’ holistic Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) approach in England and a focus on outcomes. However, since 2010 the role of LSPs in England has diminished in line with the regeneration funding that they administered. The Coalition government systematically demolished the strategic approach to regeneration in England, including the revocation of Regional Strategies, the abolition of Regional Development Agencies and the termination of nationally-funded area-based initiatives.

In February 2011, the Scottish Government published the discussion paper, *Building a Sustainable Future* (Scottish Government 2011a), which shaped the development of Scotland’s outcome driven regeneration strategy, issued in November 2011 under the title *Achieving a Sustainable Future* (Scottish Government 2011b), which was generally well received by practitioners in Scotland. During the same year, the UK Government issued the report, *Regeneration to Enable Growth: What Government Is Doing in Support of Community-Led Regeneration* (CLG 2011), which received stinging criticism, and was subsequently updated (CLG 2012a). There is not space to provide a comprehensive analysis of each ‘strategic’ policy document, but Table 1 offers a simplified overview of the key content and defining principles.

Table 1 A comparison of English and Scottish regeneration strategies

Characteristic	<i>Regeneration to Enable Growth (CLG 2011)</i>	<i>Achieving a Sustainable Future (Scottish Government 2011b)</i>
Political control	Coalition Government	Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) majority
Strategy	Presented as a compendium of existing inherited and newly introduced ad hoc funding programmes	Strategy appears to be part of a considered and planned process
Range and Scope of strategy	Modest and constrained	Broad and embracing in scope
Definition of regeneration	None	The ‘holistic process of reversing the economic, physical and social decline of places where market forces alone won’t suffice’ (p. 2)
Distinction between social, physical and economic	None	Explicit identification of the three strands or pillars of holistic regeneration
Definition of community-led regeneration	None	‘Community led regeneration is about local people identifying for themselves the issues and opportunities in their areas, deciding what to do about them, and being responsible for delivering the economic, social and environmental action that will make a difference. It is dependent on the energy and commitment of local people themselves and has a wide range of benefits’ (p. 20)
Ambition and articulation of vision	Absence of any clear vision	Explicit five-point vision set out (p. 9) with focus for interventions (pp. 11-14) and extensive actions for delivery (pp. 15-37); fairly ambitious
Demonstration of having learned lessons from the past	‘Year zero’ approach; no reference to evaluations of previous initiatives	Focuses on outcomes and takes account of lessons learned – list of seven lessons learned (p. 10). Based on evidence review and identification of critical success factors
Split between funding for physical and social regeneration	None apparent	Regeneration Investment Fund split between a Capital Investment Fund and People and Communities Fund

Identification of roles and responsibilities of key actors and agencies in delivery	Unspecified in document; lack of clarity about role of LEPs and linkages with emerging City Deals	Annex B details clear roles and responsibilities
Mechanisms for evaluation and review	Extremely light touch audit regime – no formal provision for evaluation or review	Minister in charge of regeneration policy (Alex Neil) commits to review process in page iii of strategy

Source: adapted from Pugalis et al. (2012).

When examining the regeneration strategies for Scotland and England it becomes clear that, at least in terms of rhetoric, there are distinct disparities between the two nations in terms of the fundamental nature of regeneration. The Scottish Government (2011b, 2) regeneration strategy is explicit about the intended purpose of regeneration policies, stating that: *‘Regeneration is the holistic process of reversing the economic, physical and social decline of places where market forces won’t suffice.’* Yet crucially, and in striking contrast, the first version of the Coalition Government’s regeneration strategy for England, *Regeneration to Enable Growth* (CLG 2011) failed to define ‘regeneration’, and the mere issuing of a regeneration strategy was surprising given the apparent silencing of the regeneration metaphor in broader Coalition political-policy discourse. In part, this may help to explain why practitioners in England often referred to ‘regeneration’ and ‘economic development’ in an interchangeable manner. In contrast the Scottish Government’s (2011b, 4) attempt to clarify the role of ‘regeneration’ and is unequivocal in its vision that:

‘The relationship between economic development and regeneration is co-dependent – equitable economic growth cannot be delivered with improving our under-performing areas, and successful regeneration cannot be delivered without investing in development, growing local economies and delivering sustainable employment.’

Analysis of interview transcripts reveals that English practitioners tended to be less certain about the broader objectives of regeneration, with many interviewees referring to delivering ‘development’ and pursuing ‘growth’, which may reflect the contemporary nature of regeneration in policy discourse that scripts it as being subservient to economic development. This may indicate that, especially in an English context, the nature of regeneration is reflective of state-led forms of gentrification in practice; in other words, a mode of indirect coercion.

The UK Government’s regeneration strategy merely identifies a set of (largely economic development) ‘tools’ to be selected from a spatially variable ‘menu’. This was challenged by the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee (2011a;2011b), which countered that the Coalition’s espoused community-led approach lacked substance, and discarded decades of accumulated evidence and institutional memory, which led them to conclude that the strategy would ultimately prove to be ineffective. The UK Government responded by revising the original strategy, published as: *Regeneration to enable growth: a toolkit supporting community-led regeneration* (CLG 2012a). Whilst still retaining a strong desire not to prescribe approaches, the revised version did at least offer a definition of regeneration:

‘At its core regeneration is about concerted action to address the challenges and problems faced by the communities of a particular place. It’s about widening opportunities, growing the local economy, and improving people’s lives. But beyond that high level definition, it is not for Government to define what regeneration is, what it should look like,

or what should be used to drive it. That will depend on the place – the local characteristics, challenges and opportunities.’

(CLG 2012a, 2)

Regeneration to enable growth Mark II (CLG 2012a) still fails to develop a strategy of intent or action, despite claims that the role of central government ‘will be strategic and supportive’ in terms of decentralising and reforming public services, incentivising growth and removing barriers, and targeting investment in areas of opportunity and need.

Fundamentally, one of the most significant differences between the two approaches is that the Scottish strategy recognises how regeneration fits strategically with other government policies (i.e. the functional interdependence or indirect coercion of multiple policy agendas). Regeneration is viewed as making a clear contribution to social cohesion and solidarity, by reducing disparities between Scottish regions, reducing income inequalities, addressing market failure, and attracting investment to create new jobs. In this sense, divergence in the nature of regeneration could be attributed to cultural differences. Scotland’s overarching vision is for regeneration to contribute to the drivers of growth by attempting to ensure that the potential of disadvantaged communities is realised, so that they become positive contributors to economic growth, rather than problematised as a societal ulcer, which may reflect a growth in confidence, accumulation of knowledge and *policy learning* from previous modes of regeneration. This is in marked contrast to the Coalition Government’s complete lack of strategy and seeming ambivalence verging on wilful neglect of deprived communities, instead favouring ‘creative chaos’ (Deas 2013), which discounts decades of accumulated regeneration policy experiences and evaluations. Conversely, the Coalition Government’s

reluctance to impose a top-down definition of regeneration may provide opportunity for local innovation and experimentation.

The Scottish Government (2011b, 9) has developed a regeneration strategy which outlines a vision where the ‘most disadvantaged communities are supported and where all places are sustainable and promote well-being’. This vision would necessitate regeneration initiatives being approached in a holistic manner. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to the Coalition’s approach, which appears to be largely based on debt reduction, attempting to refuel the economy of the South of England and piecemeal ‘do it yourself’ regeneration, via more organic, bottom-up, community-driven, self-help initiatives and philanthropy (Pugalis et al. 2014).

The holistic approach in Scotland appears to accept wider structural influences which impact upon the recurrent problem of pronounced social inequalities and rejects the culture of poverty thesis. One of the three explicit strands of the Scottish Government’s *Achieving a Sustainable Future* (2011b), offers support for community-led regeneration. Its stated vision is to support the most disadvantaged communities, the first key element of which is to put communities first:

‘In simple terms we should ask ‘what makes this place good and where do the opportunities lie’ and ‘what expertise and skills do local people have’ instead of labelling particular areas and people as ‘a problem’.

Scottish Government 2011b (12)

Achieving a Sustainable Future (Scottish Government, 2011b) hints at structural roots to social exclusion that emanate beyond neighbourhood scales. This represents a shift away from the dominant socio-pathological neo-liberal discourse that has inflicted much English regeneration policy, which has often implied or assumed that individual failure is the main root cause of deprivation and only the ‘deserving poor’ should be the target of support. According to Matthews (2012), Area Based Initiatives (ABI) in the UK were largely created as a response to deindustrialisation driven by a socio-pathological agency-based interpretation of deprivation which focuses on the symptoms of deprivation rather than the causes. Despite the last notable ABI in Scotland (the Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP)) having ended circa 2006, Scotland has maintained a strategic approach to community regeneration, but with a more grass-roots driven, place-based emphasis. Matthews (2012) contrasts strategic city-wide regeneration initiatives, such as Community Planning Partnerships in Scotland, to the more tightly-focused ABIs, such as the New Deal for Communities, which operated in England between 2000-2010. He contends that in Scotland the strategic approach replaced ABIs because, ‘it was seen as more sustainable and effective’ (2012, 147) before Scottish policy once again began to gravitate towards a place-based approach (Matthews 2013).

Over recent years, the Scottish Government has maintained some level of regeneration funding via the People and Communities Fund (PCF), a £7.9 million per annum fund (2012-2015) to support community regeneration. This appears to be a modest sum to attempt to deal with the ‘wicked’ and intractable issues relating to social exclusion. Nevertheless, symbolically it helps to provide a source of hope. Political pressures are perhaps the most crucial driver for policy divergence with England in this respect, accounting for a situation where there is no comparable ring-fenced funding for community regeneration to serve England, which has ten times the population of Scotland and equally persistent pockets of

extreme social deprivation within communities. The Work Foundation (2012) confirms that, for the first time in 40 years, England has no area based initiatives.

Whilst Scotland's strategy has considerable integrity and reach, it is not without its flaws, one respondent commenting:

“There is a slight irony, on the one hand Scottish government in 2008 saying to local government, right you guys are the local economic development agencies, so you must deliver local economic development. Scottish Enterprise you will step back from local economic development. With that change there has been an increase in remit and responsibilities for [local authorities], to economic development without a commensurate increase in cash to do that.”

Scottish regeneration professional

The Outcomes approach has also been criticised in Scotland as part of the process involved a Concordat being signed between Scottish local authorities and the Scottish government which effectively meant Scottish local authorities lost their ability to raise their Council Tax; a key fiscal tool. There has been much discussion about the exact terms of the Concordat as some Scottish local authorities have perceived a trend of extra responsibilities being cascaded to local authorities without the power to increase local taxation to resource these additional responsibilities and a potentially precarious blurring of responsibilities between the central-local state (see Midwinter 2009 for further discussion). This situation is mirrored in England, pronounced by cuts to local government budgets. When additional responsibilities are bestowed on places without the commensurate legislative and financial support, this has been referred as ‘regulatory’ (Peck and Tickell 2002), ‘responsibility’ (Peck 2012) and ‘policy’ (Waite et al, 2013) dumping. Practitioners either side of the border lamented a situation where the demand for regeneration services has increased in parallel with the withering of

resources. One respondent from the interviews encapsulates the dilemma for local authorities from an English perspective:

“[We are] genuinely hearing the message that the Government do recognise the individual characteristics of places and there is an increased autonomy within place, but sometimes increased autonomy has come with reduced resources, ... it has felt like it has come down to us to make decisions where we cut investment rather than where we can make investment.”

English regeneration practitioner

In England, alongside a cumulative process of responsibility dumping and fiscal tightening, *policy learning* has regressed. By adopting a ‘year zero’ position, *Regeneration to Enable Growth* failed to critically examine past experiences (Pugalis *et al.* 2012) – a point reinforced by Heseltine’s (2012) review of local growth measures. Against a backdrop of the demise of holistic regeneration or nationally coordinated funding for neighbourhood-based, socially focused regeneration, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee urged the Government to ‘urgently review the lessons learned from past regeneration programmes’ and establish how their approach will be evaluated (House of Commons, 2011a). Overall, the Coalition’s approach lacks clarity and rigorous analysis of the nature of regeneration and the task in hand, leaving the Committee to conclude that it has ‘little confidence’ that regeneration needs will be addressed. In the view of one witness, the approach ‘*is really just a hotchpotch of spending commitments and little more than that.*’ (Keith Burge, Institute of Economic Development in CLG 2012b, Ev19). Such views suggest that ‘creative chaos’ operates across multiple scales of English regeneration policy and practice.

Promoting localism and community-led initiative in parallel with ‘responsibility dumping’ practices is a tactic that Shaw and Robinson (2009, 137) argue ‘...deflects attention away from structures and institutions, and how they create and reinforce economic inequalities and unequal power relationships’. It is in this sense that localism has been variously utilised in political and policy discourse to mask some deep-rooted (and exacerbating) socio-economic disparities. Lodge and Muir (2010, 99) observe that, ‘if funding reform is the truest test of localist credentials, then the Blair and Brown governments can be seen as unequivocal centralisers’. More recently, Deas (2013) has suggested that authentic localism can only exist in an environment where the spirit of localist devolution, leadership, organizational structures and resources would vary between places, reflecting the differential ability of local areas in terms institutional capacity, social capital and fiscal integrity.

Under the Coalition Government there is variability between places and the climate for ‘creative chaos’, but without commensurate or guaranteed levels of funding from central government, local actors will have to be extremely imaginative and entrepreneurial to develop sustainable endogenous solutions. A recent report by Localis, a local government think tank, identifies the problem for English local authorities being that, ‘with capital funding no longer available as a panacea for all regeneration ills, the question is now who is able to drive regeneration at a local level?’ (Howell 2012, 5). Robson (2014, 3) offers an optimistic view by observing that, ‘money may not be the most effective lever for change’ and in its absence cities and local authorities will need to innovate. Nevertheless, it may only be the select few that have the confidence and dynamism to go beyond a risk averse default mind-set of shrinkage to core services, which in some places is leading to the decimation of non-statutory services of which regeneration is but one.

Growing spatial inequality is a central issue within the emerging version of English localism. Deas (2013, 73) describes how new assemblages of policy, social and economic actors are ‘being actively encouraged to form and compete, with the fittest flourishing and the weakest withering.’ From this ideological viewpoint, inequality is unavoidable and a price worth paying – the cost of searching out new opportunities. This approach exhibits overtones of Social Darwinism via an ideological vision where communities have to survive and prosper via their own merits without state support; effectively either ‘sinking or swimming’ (McGuinness *et al.* 2012). Equally, the Coalition’s localism agenda has been critiqued as little more than a smokescreen to progressively reduce the role of the state, which masks some important acts of recentralisation (Pugalis and Bentley 2013).

In Scotland, tensions are evident between social democratic aspirations (rhetoric) and neo-liberal realities (McCarthy 2010). Equally, Matthews (2013) suggests a re-emphasis on a place-based focus on deprivation in Scotland may be misguided and directing resources at symptoms rather than causes, which alludes to regeneration being ‘locked into’ hegemonic political economic structures (Pugalis and McGuinness, 2013). . However, there does appear to be significant political will to try to ensure no communities are left behind, and Scottish local authorities currently appear to have greater autonomy and more tools at their disposal than their English counterparts, as one respondent noted:

“Scotland has a devolved government, politically there is an affinity to Scotland, they are making their own decisions around skills, education, health, etc. Local Government in Scotland has been charged with delivering economic development in terms of economic development powers, we still have the equivalent of a regional development agency, they have been ripped apart in England.”

Scottish regeneration practitioner

Even so, not all Scottish practitioners felt that the Scottish Parliament's laudable aim of holistic community driven regeneration was achievable, as articulated by one respondent:

"I am not saying the policy is wrong up here but how the hell do you implement it? Maybe in England the policy is not as good but at least they are implementing it."

Scottish regeneration professional

This suggests some degree of practitioner convergence of opinion in terms of regeneration visions being limited to 'motherhood and apple pie' aspirations. Another Scottish practitioner even implied that they were slightly jealous of the conditions that had been created in England via the Coalition's creative chaos approach, observing that there is:

"...a greater pragmatism in England, a sense of can do because you have to; in Scotland a sense of too frightened to do, risk averse, not just political but also at middle officer level, like a permafrost, afraid to make the wrong decision."

Scottish regeneration professional

These selective interview quotes hint at a potentially more significant point, which is that practitioners (and others such as researchers) are often under the illusion that the 'grass is always greener' in other places and countries. This has potentially important implications in at least two respects. Firstly, it might help to explain the propensity for 'fast' forms of policy transfer and policy travels (Peck 2011). Secondly, it has important methodological

implications especially when conducting international comparative analysis, in terms of the perspective that practitioners adopt. Whilst this paper does not attempt to explore the psychology of envy, it is important to acknowledge the potential influence of constrained or partial information, tacit biases and heuristics, and inherited prejudices based on anecdotal or unreliable evidence and political rhetoric. Elite interviews conducted with senior regeneration practitioners either side of the border portrayed envious glances. Across quite diverse situated vantages, regeneration practitioners often held strong, albeit partial, impressions that things were being delivered ‘much better’ or more effectively in other political, economic and cultural contexts. Such an inversion of the ‘rose-tinted spectacles syndrome’ arises, in part, from conditions of bounded knowledge and information, allowing bias and political rhetoric to gain credence.

Conclusions: ‘Is the grass always greener?’

The central focus of this paper has been to better understand the evolving trajectories of regeneration policy discourse and practice in a devolved UK context. Over recent years the asymmetrical nature of devolved governance has intensified, exemplified by a policy of political containment in Scotland and a reconfiguration of sub-national institutional architecture in England.

The hypothesis, which initially sparked interest in the research project, emerged from the perception that from an English situated vantage, in terms of the contemporary regeneration policy landscape; quite simply: ‘the grass appeared greener north of the border’, in Scotland. We have investigated the extent to which perceived divergences in government policy resonate with those at the sharp end of regeneration practice, which is informed by concepts derived from the policy convergence/divergence literature. The key finding is the coexistence

of ideological divergence, replete in political discourse and policy documentation, but growing convergence in actually existing practice, evidenced in the nature, extent and scale of initiatives.

A desk based review of the evolution and trajectory of English and Scottish regeneration policy indicates significant policy divergence between the two nation states. Such divergence between England and Scotland is nothing new, with Scotland having suffered from decades of direct coercion from Whitehall. The political pressure in Scotland for a Nationalist administration to differentiate themselves from a London-centric UK Government, and a cultural and historic record of more corporatist policies, may exacerbate policy divergence in terms of policy rhetoric between the ‘auld enemies’. However, ultimately the enveloping fiscal context and austere politics, producing what is anticipated to be a protracted period of financial retrenchment, appears to be a defining factor in contemporary urban regeneration policy convergence. Indeed, global economic forces could inexorably be reducing the scope that nation states have to direct, develop and pursue their own bespoke regeneration policies.

Elite interviews with senior regeneration practitioners have provided insights that are not always apparent in regeneration policy discourse, such as the rhetorical statements replete in national regeneration strategies. In summary, our empirical analysis has revealed divergence of:

1. political rhetoric and strategy: the UK Government did not consider it necessary to define what regeneration is, or what it should look like; the pursuit of economic development by ‘backing winners’ holds sway; the Scottish Parliament take a different view, providing a rationale for regeneration that recognises the importance of supporting those in social need.

2. learning lessons - England has adopted a 'year zero' approach, apparently uninterested in what did or did not work previously; Scotland has demonstrated a desire to learn lessons from the past (policy learning).
3. Scotland is increasingly seeking to differentiate itself from England, reflected in their holistic regeneration strategy and retention of some area based initiatives, as a consequence of devolution reducing both direct and indirect coercion from Westminster.

Despite such obvious ideological and policy divergence, in terms of regeneration practice, there appears to be growing convergence between the two countries, with both pursuing broadly localist agenda, characterised by greater autonomy and increased responsibilities for local authorities for the framing and delivery of regeneration strategies at the same time as funding is being cut. Our empirical analysis has specifically revealed the following areas of convergence:

1. unintended policy convergence of funding and delivery arrangements in England and Scotland driven by the concurrent pressure of a global neo-liberal austerity agenda (direct/indirect coercion and policy learning having little influence).
2. regeneration, being a non-statutory function, faces significant fiscal pressures; investment is increasingly targeted at economic growth (backing winners) over ameliorating poverty and deprivation; responsibility dumping poses significant challenges for regeneration practices (and third sector actors such as community groups) in both England and Scotland

Remarkably, in terms of activity on the ground, the creative chaos unleashed in England may offer greater opportunities for innovation (necessity being the mother of invention), than the

more conservative and incremental approach of Scottish local government. Somewhat perversely, it appears that the perception amongst regeneration practitioners is that the grass is greener from whichever side of the fence one is. Will increased autonomy, political power and resources manifest themselves in greater policy divergence between Scotland and England or will the influence of overwhelming global economic and political forces moderate the Scottish Government's scope for doing so?

In terms of future research, there is significant value in examining and contemplating whether global economic imperatives are so omnipotent that governments around the world are embracing austerity measures and rapid forms of financial retrenchment, which may be producing unintended policy convergence across the diverse field of regeneration. Nevertheless, as this paper has revealed, alongside some currents of policy convergence are other currents of policy divergence. This finding alone supports a call for continued research investing the *practice* of regeneration.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their constructive and insightful comments as well as the helpful guidance received by Klaus Dodd. Any errors and omissions are of course the responsibility of the authors.

Footnotes

1. The Coalition government abolished the performance management approach of Local Area Agreements and Multi Area agreements and has failed to replace it, despite suggesting a, yet to be defined, 'light touch' approach to audit and performance management.
2. The use of the term 'Government' in this paper refers to the U.K. Government in Westminster and includes all statutory and policy making powers for England held by Government Departments such as DCLG and BIS; as distinct from the Scottish Government which is referred to as such

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