

**‘Who else would we speak to?’ National Policy Networks in Post-
Devolution Britain: the case of spatial planning**

Abstract: The implementation of the devolution process that started in 1999 was frequently assumed by contemporary commentators and scholars to lead to a fractured relationship with the national centre and a fragmented state as a consequence. However, discourse analysis and policy reviews in relation to spatial planning policies, demonstrates that agendas and legislation implemented by central and devolved governments since devolution are characterised by marked similarities in intention and type (albeit with some differences in name and delivery route). In investigating the potential sites and sources of these policy similarities and possible mobilities, and drawing on research data, we suggest that the British Irish Council’s spatial planning task group as one of the potential candidates to be considered as a national policy community or network. Alongside a range of other factors following devolution, this has contributed to development and delivery in one specific policy area that has taken a convergent rather than divergent character.

Keywords: devolution; spatial planning; British Irish Council; policy networks; policy mobility.

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Introduction

Devolution of public policy to Scotland and Wales was one of the most notable constitutional changes introduced by the Labour Government 1997-2010. Since then, the process has continued to evolve under the Coalition and Conservative Governments since (Mitchell, 2011; Keating, 2013), extending powers with successive rounds of specific legislation. The provenance of devolution in Britain lies within a range of key political dynamics, particularly a growing movement for self-determination in Scotland and Wales. A failed referendum in Scotland in 1979 (Bradbury 1998; Mitchell 1998) was followed by a declining number of Conservative MPs (Hussain and Miller, 2006). This was addressed by successive governments through administrative distinctiveness within the machinery of government in Scotland and Wales (Hazell, 2000) and a political commitment for devolution was adopted by the Labour Party (Midwinter and McVicar 1996; Bradbury 1997). When this commitment was fulfilled in 1999, Labour was in power in the UK, Scotland and Wales. Since then, new relationships have emerged following changes in the political leadership of all three governments (Laffin and Shaw, 2005).

At the point of devolution, there were concerns that it would cause policy differentiation and fragmentation, further hollowing out the state (Jessup, 1990). These views were not necessarily based on any empirical assessment of the contemporaneous policy context and operation. Legislation in Scotland had always remained separate since the Act of Union (Trench, 2012). Since 1999, a new period of institutional stabilisation has begun. Some studies are emerging that are investigating how these earlier, pre-devolution policy relationships have been influenced by these changes. They have particularly focussed on policy networks and communities within the devolved nations (e.g. Keating et al, 2009; Cairney, 2011; Keating et al, 2012) and have demonstrated that relationships have not been

adversely affected by devolution whilst policy communities have adapted to meet any changes. Trench (2012) argues that this is because devolution has been more administrative than political in its character and the division of responsibilities has been straightforward.

Other studies have focused on the development of post-devolution formal political intergovernmental relations within multi-level governance (MLG) frames (Parry, 2012; McEwen et al, 2012a and b; Gallagher, 2012). These MLG studies characterise the post-devolution relationships as being adversarial on both horizontal and vertical axis and contained within concepts of intergovernmental relations (IGR). In the early years of devolution, IGR relationships were cordial (McEwen et al, 2012b; Gallagher, 2012) and the failsafe dispute mechanisms for disagreement were not used. As a result, it is argued that IGR institutional structures have not been extensively developed. The implementation of devolution has also engendered discussion about a new form of the British state, which some argue is now quasi-federal (Hazell, 2006; Dolowitz, 2012), although with little institutional apparatus or acknowledgement. In contrast, the language of central government, since 1999, has named the new arrangements as 'devolved administrations' (Paune et al 2014) that are characterised as being more like Government Departments (Bulmer and Burch, 2009) rather than self-determining Parliaments or Assemblies.

However, with their focus on the formal political arrangements, these studies have not explored any underlying reasons for this lack of institutional development. This is worthy of consideration not least as this could have an influence on other relationships between national governments. There could be at least three reasons for this lack of development. Firstly, it could be because all administrations wanted an opportunity for local approaches to mature before engaging i.e. that

there was an initial outward demonstration of 'parental' letting go in specific policy areas. Secondly, political relationships, particularly in 1979 when Scotland and Wales were Labour controlled, meant that these discussions occurred elsewhere and here the model was 'political' rather than institutional. Thirdly it could be argued that from a Whitehall perspective, the devolved nations were seen to be unimportant (Bulmer and Burch 2009) and that the attention of the centre was focussed elsewhere. This model might be described as 'business as usual'. This latter view is the one that most commonly surfaces in other studies (Keating et al 2009; 2012; Loughlin and Sykes, 2008) and may reflect the perceived status of the policy areas that have been devolved.

While the formal relations between the nations of the UK are still developing, there is less knowledge about the continuing and/or changed relationships between national level policy officials post-devolution. The development of specific policy areas over this period might be distinguished by divergence of policies reflecting the difference in spatialities and political priorities in the nations. The development of difference might be considered as a political commitment and part of the agenda-setting process of devolution (Kingdon, 2003), where overt differentiation demonstrates benefits to the national community. This issue of continuity or differentiation can be considered within specific policy areas and as this research has investigated, it is particularly relevant in the emerging field of spatial planning.

The British Irish Council

The settlement for Northern Ireland was not described as part of this devolved policy until the St Andrew's Agreement in 2006 (Knox 2010; Trench 2007). In 1998 the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement included the provision for the establishment

of a British Irish Council (BIC) (Aughey 2005), comprising the four nations of the UK, Ireland, the States of Jersey and Guernsey and the Isle of Man. First Ministers meet every six months in rotating venues. The UK and England have been represented by the Deputy Prime Minister in the Labour and Coalition Governments until 2015 General Election, following which, attendance has been by Cabinet Ministers with an interest in the meeting's agenda.

In the period 1999-2011, the BIC had no permanent home or staff. Secretariat activities were located in Jersey and, in practical terms, shared between members. In this form, Lynch and Hopkins (2001) argue that its progress was frustrated. In 2011, the BIC moved to permanent headquarters in Edinburgh and has a secretariat seconded from the civil services of the respective members. The purpose of the Council is to:

“promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among peoples of these islands the BIC will exchange information, discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of the relevant administrations” (BIC, 2014a online).

In addition to the meetings of senior politicians, the BIC operates through twelve task groups - on collaborative spatial planning, creative industries, demography, digital inclusion, early years, energy, environment, housing, minority languages, misuse of drugs, social inclusion and transport (BIC 2015). The task groups are established through direct requests of politicians and agendas are set by politicians and officials. Most groups have developed a work programme which concentrates on issues of mutual interest that are also cross-boundary. Some of the task groups have sponsored themed agendas for the main BIC meetings. The BIC provides an

opportunity for informal exchanges on policy issues that are part of the post-devolutionary mechanisms (Gallagher, 2012).

The application of devolution has been accompanied by changes in the relationships of civil servants between the nations (Cole, 2012; Parry, 2012; Paun et al 2014), from hierarchical to collegiate. Although there have been external differences in policy presentation, there has also been evidence of policy convergence in different policy domains (Morphet, 2011a; Birrell, 2012). These changes brought about by devolution continue to be examined (Henderson et al 2015). In this research, we have been concerned, like some others (for example Mooney et al 2015) to identify whether there have been changes in the practical outcomes of policy-making since devolution and whether the initial indicators of convergence have more substance than coincidence. Secondly we have been interested in examining the sites of the policy dialogues between central policy makers since devolution. We have sought to examine these relationships in one specific policy area, spatial planning. This was differentiated before devolution and yet shares a common culture, training and professional body between practitioners in all BIC members. Further there was some evidence of the cross-use of civil servants to advise Ministers.

Spatial planning differs from more traditional land use planning in that it focuses on place shaping and delivery through the vertical and horizontal integration of policies and programmes (Morphet, 2011b; Clifford and Tewdwr-Jones, 2013). Spatial planning also provides an example of a policy that has been introduced into planning practice in the UK since 1999 - Northern Ireland in 2001, 2003 in Scotland, 2004 in Wales and England. The presence of the BIC spatial planning task group, together with a group comprising of the heads of planning in 4 UK nations together

with Ireland, known as the Five Administrations (Five Admins) group provide an opportunity to examine policy development and implementation after the introduction of devolution.

The BIC Spatial Planning specialist group is comprised of officials from all BIC members and meets twice a year on a rotating basis. The Five Admins group comprises the most senior civil servants leading on planning in the four UK nations and Ireland and meets each six months to exchange views, update on current issues and discuss practical policy implementation. The BIC task group and the 'Five Admins operate separately but within the same administrative and policy space, with shared agendas, personnel and resources.

Prior to devolution, there were formal and informal policy linkages between the nations. These were through the civil service and also through political parties (Laffin and Shaw, 2005; Lloyd and Peel, 2009). The communication between officials in central UK policy Departments and those based in the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Offices varied in their degree and type depending on the issues. In some areas and at specific times these might be closer than others.

In the area of planning, discussion was likely to be on the implementation of EU environmental objectives. Prior to devolution this relationship was seen to be managed from London in a hierarchical way although the main axis of policy advice, exchange and challenge was between Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast and Dublin rather than with London (Loughlin and Sykes, 2006; Loughlin, nd; Lloyd and Peel, 2005). Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also had more in common with each other than England through their designation as areas in need of economic and social support through EU programmes. Relationships with England in these programmes

were characterised by competition rather than mutuality (Keating and McEwen 2005; Gallagher, 2012))

Central government relations on planning since devolution

There has been a considerable level of government-led policy activity in planning since 1999 as shown on Table 1. This has allowed us to examine policy initiatives within a common timeframe and external policy pressures including the economy and EU frameworks. From a preliminary examination of the planning legislation and policy literature, Morphet (2010) found that rather than divergence, that there was evidence of similarities in policy and delivery mechanisms between all four nations of the UK. This had the character of a fugue, where there is a common root for each of the themes, and whilst policy patterning, ordering and delivery vary, there is consistency within each and across the policy range as a whole. This initial assessment was followed by a further consideration in a specific policy area of infrastructure planning where the same pattern of delivery emerged (Morphet, 2011).

This led the authors to investigate the derivation of this set of policy similarities within a post-devolution frame. As an initial step, a number of potential explanations or hypotheses were considered. These were that:

- (i) this was an coincidence;
- (ii) there were some similarities but in practice these were not significant;
- (iii) there was some higher level, strategic coordination being undertaken at political levels;
- (iv) the similarity in policies was derived from a similarity in the legislative or policy context within which policies were made (policy transfer);

(v) some a planning approaches were ‘fashionable’ and were adopted by practitioners (policy mobility);

(vi) those making policy were sharing ideas and approaches to delivery (through a policy network or community).

A research approach to investigate these propositions was adopted that concentrated on propositions (ii)-(vi). Propositions (ii) and (iv) were examined through a literature review and discourse analysis which is discussed in more detail below. However, even if this review and analysis did not show extensive similarity, this would not necessarily undermine the investigation of other propositions which could be exhibiting superficial similarity but underlying difference. Proposition (iii) was discounted as the political parties have diverged significantly since 1999 (Laffin and Shaw 2005).

Table 1 Comparing planning systems in the UK post-devolution

Scale	England	N. Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Jurisdiction				
Neighbourhood/parish	Parish powers enhanced from 2000; neighbourhood powers 2011		Community planning 2003; reviewed 2012	Informal parish planning
Local	Community strategies 2000; Local plans 2004; Localism Act	Reformed as part of RPA from 2004; implemented 2015	Local plans 2006; community strategies 2010; review	Local development plans 2004; Planning Act 2015

	2011		2016	
Sub -regional/city	City regions and Functional Economic Area Plans policy from 2007; 2010 39 LEPs ; Citydeals 2011; devodeals 2015	City regions as part of 2008 revision of regional plan; Citydeals 2016	4 cities as strategic planning areas 2008	Sub-regions for whole of Wales in 2004; city regions 2012
national	No current plans for a plan for England	Regional plan for whole territory 2001, 2008. review for island of Ireland 2013	National Planning Framework 2004, 2008, 2012 (policy); 2014	Wales Spatial Plan 2004; Infrastructure plan 2012
UK	National infrastructure planning legislation 2008 for UK; policies and plans 2010ff	National infrastructure planning legislation 2008 for UK; policies and plans 2010ff	National infrastructure planning legislation 2008 for UK; policies and plans 2010ff	National infrastructure planning legislation 2008 for UK; policies and plans 2010ff

Source: the authors

Propositions related to the existence of policy communities, networks, circuits or mobilities (v) and (vi) could best be investigated through the means of direct interviews with the policy officials engaged in these processes. The BIC spatial planning group was the first to consider the existence of a policy community or network. Despite its short life and lack of published work programme, the group's objectives to share experience and practices were an initial indication that this would be a reasonable site for investigation.

Policy transfer, communities, networks, mobility and circulation

The approach that has been adopted here is through the literature on the ways in which groups share and develop policy. This literature is set within five main types of investigation that each focuses on the mechanisms for policy ownership, power and movement within and between them. These are policy transfer, policy networks, policy communities, policy mobilities and policy circulation. Policy transfer is characterised in the literature as a method of communicating or circulating policy that is set within the context of formal power relationships that can be coercive or voluntary (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; 2012; Dolowitz, 2012). It can be about 'best practice' or lessons learned (Benson and Jordan, 2011, 2012; Cairney, 2012) and can be buttressed by practices such as benchmarking (Hood, 1998). The role of policy transfer has begun to be re-examined and criticised for its emphasis on diffusion (James and Lodge, 2003; Wolman and Page, 2002; Wolman, 2009), and is now used as a generic term (Dussauge-Laguna, 2012). Prior to devolution, policy transfer was characterised in Scotland and Wales as a dominant mode of policy adoption that is top down direction from 'London'. It can be argued that policy transfer remains between UK central government and the devolved nations, but it is operated through soft power (Nye, 2004) within the

context of 'system stewardship' (Hallsworth, 2011) - that is a central concentration on frameworks and the exercise of influence rather than direction.

Other forms of shared exchange between policy makers are characterised through policy networks or policy communities. Policy networks are seen as mechanisms to achieve common agendas (Hay, 1998; James, 2010). They are intentional in their formation and focussed on specific outcomes, where the boundaries and entry into policy networks may be restricted to certain voices. Policy communities are similar to policy networks but are focussed on the maintenance of specific issues by those who implement them. They include members with common interests but not necessarily from the same sector and have been described as policy 'villages' (Heclo and Wildawsky (1974) or 'administrative parishes' (Jordan, 1990). Members maintain the boundaries and represent the communities' interests with significant players or government interests at their borders. Keating et al (2011) argue that policy communities are alive and functioning within Scotland after devolution but as yet there has been little discussion about the potential for the maintenance or development of policy networks or communities across the four nations since 1999.

Policy mobility (McCann and Ward, 2011; 2012) is a networked approach (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003) 'which incorporates actors and interests that are often implicitly and explicitly assumed to be located elsewhere' (Cochrane, 2011, p x). Here ideas are passed between places by 'transfer agents' whose identities are often closely linked to the 'fixes' they seek to promote (Stone, 2004; McCann, 2011). These may be state or non-state actors, and there has been particular interest in work of place 'gurus' e.g. Richard Florida. In order to demonstrate that post-devolution policy mobilities are at play in the four nations of the UK, then there would need to be some evidence of common agendas or priorities.

Finally within planning, there has been a focus on policy circulation or circuits that has considered the transfer of metanarratives between the academy and practice and between states (Ward, 1999; Harris and Moore, 2013; Wood, 2015). Ward focuses on the mechanisms for policy diffusion, identifying different pathways of influence that reflect the models of policy transfer and communities. He discusses earlier dominant modes of policy transfer for planning between the UK and its Commonwealth and a transition to more 'selective borrowing'.

There have been considerable debates about the dominance and application of these policy models, particularly between policy transfer and policy mobility (Dolowitz and Marsh 2012; McCann and Ward, 2012). In this case, policy transfer is the closest model for pre-devolution practices between officials in the UK. There is some case to suggest that what might be emerging is a policy network. In addition, while the policy mobilities literature is less developed than that on transfer, we consider that it provides some specific insights on the geographies of policy that are useful in this context. Although there is a narrative of spatial separation and difference between the policies published by respective governments since devolution, we have been concerned to identify whether these exist in practice. Secondly, the policy mobilities literature focuses on the transfer by specific agents and in this case we have identified the cross-use of advisers between governments.

Research methods

To investigate propositions (ii)-(vi) identified earlier through the development of policy transfer, networks, circuits and mobility following devolution, we used a staged methodology. Firstly we undertook a literature review of key policy documents published by all governments on spatial planning. This review was then

used as the basis for an examination of them through close reading and content analysis. We used these to identify common policy structures and internal cross-referencing.

Using this as a contextual platform, we constructed the research questions to address the propositions (ii)-(vi) within the frame provided by the policy movement literatures. In identifying possible policy similarities and possible mechanism for policy movement between those engaged in spatial planning within the four national governments within the UK, we investigated the practical policy dialogues that exist, including the BIC and Five Admins communities, as sources of possible exchange. The research was able to examine the relationships between officials and to determine their views as to whether these have evolved or are completely different since 1999. In undertaking our research, we were able to witness two BIC meetings and subsequently interview all of the individual members together with the administrative support officer from BIC central secretariat. For the 'Five Admins' group, we were able to interview all the participants in the regular meetings. All interviews were semi-structured and digitally recorded, transcribed and then coded. Together the interviews represented a 100% sample of those engaged in these discussions of the spatial planning policy agenda.

The membership of the BIC spatial planning group includes Ireland, the States of Jersey and Guernsey and the Isle of Man as well as the four UK nations. One consideration was the significance of the balance of members within and outside the UK. Despite different jurisdictions, planning practitioners within each of the eight members of the BIC group are all members of the same professional body, the Royal Town Planning Institute. Thus the professional culture of all members of the

group was common, and despite varied practices, the language and communication of policy were within a common frame.

Working arrangements across BIC task and Five Admins groups

The spatial planning task group was established in 2009 at the instigation of the Minister for Planning in Northern Ireland. The group meets twice a year, is chaired by the host nation that is also the focus of part of the meeting, following a policy roundup. Between meetings, members may meet at other events and there is evidence of telephone and email contact to follow up on information provided at the meeting or to discuss specific issues.

In the Five Admins group, the Chief Planners of each of the four nations of the United Kingdom together with their equivalent in Ireland meet biannually. This is supplemented by a group of junior officials working on specific policy areas. Agendas and minutes of these meetings are not published and in a second stage of this research project, members of these groups were interviewed on their experience and views of working following devolution.

There is some overlap in the representatives that attend the BIC spatial planning task group and the Five Admins meeting. It was also clear, from the individual interviews and the discussion at the BIC meeting, that there is a common awareness of the agendas discussed at both rounds of meetings. While the BIC meetings were established through a Ministerial initiative and are located within wider formal structures, they do not discuss the detailed issues involved in offering ministerial policy advice as at the Five Admins Group. The formats of the meetings also vary. The Five Admins meet over a day and a half, allowing time for formal sessions and informal discussions over dinner, whilst the BIC meeting and

travel are contained within a single day. Both include a session on a planning issue chosen by the host and this discussion of locally specific issues was regarded as an important feature of both meetings.

Since the establishment of a permanent BIC secretariat, the task groups have held a joint meeting to review their work and future. At the review event, the task group on spatial planning differed from most other groups. These had work programmes that led to major agenda items at full BIC meetings. Although there was no mandate in the task groups meeting to review the groups and their approach, there were challenges to the usefulness and role of the spatial planning group.

As a result of this, the spatial planning group considered the way they worked and any potential changes that could make it more relevant to the other groups. After discussion, the spatial planning group decided to continue with its existing model - sharing information, practices and policy issues across the members. The host presentation was valued as a useful purpose for the meeting despite the variations in scale and jurisdictional context. As part of this discussion, the group also considered changing its name to something that might be more easily accessible to other BIC task groups due to a lack of understanding amongst civil servants from other policy fields about 'spatial planning'.

The case of spatial planning - 1. legislation and policy

Turning to examine the potential influence of these two sets of meetings, the literature review and policy discourse analysis of legislation and policy documents identified a number of key sites of similarity. The first was on legislative reform of the planning system as shown in Table 1. The second was the definition of planning

that is used in each of the four nations. The third was the recurrence of key issues such as sustainability and infrastructure. These similarities were at least of some significance as identified in proposition (ii).

The reform of planning policy legislation in the four nations began in Northern Ireland with a new regional plan for the whole area in 2001 that superseded the earlier proposed Belfast City Regional Plan (Murray, 2009, Ellis and Neill 2006). The subsequent review of Public Administration proposed changes to the local planning systems which have been expressed through the Planning Act (NI), 2011. In England, the 2000 Local Government Act and Planning Green Paper (ODPM, 2001) foreshadowed an integrated approach between planning and local government that emerged through the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act that also included Wales. In Scotland, the Planning Act of 2003 and Planning etc Act 2006 were the main means of change (Lloyd and Purves, 2009). In Wales, a review of the Planning system has also been undertaken in preparation for reforms that have been pursued after further devolution in 2015 (WAG, 2011).

Following these reforms, the definition of planning and the scales of operation have emerged with similarities, particularly at the local level. The role of planning as part of the local government delivery and implementation system, its integrative role between social, economic and environmental considerations and the mechanisms and processes for effective decision making similarities between the different administrations. At the same time, more strategic scales that had been critical as part of the planning process have been increasingly translated into spatial policies for functional economic areas which have emergent roles, fuzzy boundaries and appear to be transitional governance spaces (Haughton et al, 2010; Pemberton and Morphet, 2012; 2013). From our interviews, it was possible to

identify where policies have been informed through these discussions and where there had been some tacit sharing of policy leadership roles. While it would not be possible to suggest that these similarities were due to higher level coordination, as in proposition (iii), the regular and close working relationships created a policy network where ideas were both shared and promoted as in proposition (vi).

However, there were some discernable differences. Although the definitions of planning at the local scale were the same, interpretations of delivery varied. In England the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act was characterised as structural change resulting in different processes and policy instruments, whereas the same legislation in Wales was interpreted as an extension of existing practices which had evolved under the previous legislation in 1990. This differentiation was marked in England, where the first two local authorities that presented their new style local plans for examination but used the preceding methodology that was still being practiced in Wales (under the same legislation), were found to be 'unsound' and had to begin again.

Also there were differences in the use of terms. In England and Wales, the term spatial planning was used whereas in Scotland it was not used at all. On the other hand, in England and Scotland there was a common use of the term Framework although at different scales, used at national level in Scotland and local level in England.

In England and Northern Ireland, regional scales were a component of the planning system whereas in Wales and Scotland city or strategic planning areas were used to define localities that were larger than local. In Wales and England, these areas

covered the whole of the national space whereas in Scotland and Northern Ireland, these were partial in their coverage.

The case of spatial planning - 2. Sharing and comparing

In reviewing the policy sharing models that might have been used in this post-devolution situation, potential framing factors suggest a mix of models. In considering policy transfer, one of the key issues is how far the EU has a continuing role in setting policies that shape or influence spatial planning. If there is a common agenda to be implemented then this might suggest a continuation of policy transfer, as identified in proposition (iv) even where there may be differentiation in delivery post-devolution.

The evidence from the interviews demonstrated that this is a key area of discussion and sharing. Interviewee 3 offered the example of how they often found it easy to agree common positions for European matters as they were “all on the same page”. As there was more institutional and cultural similarity between the Five Admins and other EU member states, there was discussion of similar systems of common law and land-use patterns, so “our first steps when we were looking at policy was to say actually what’s the equivalent in [the other parts of the UK and Ireland]” (Interviewee 1). This was driven not just by a sense of similarity but also challenges in EU policy application.

A further dimension is the way in which the participants perceived the sharing and comparing effectiveness of these networks. The meetings were identified as opportunities to make and maintain interpersonal connections with equivalents performing similar roles in the different territories:

“You know, these soft elements are easily under-rated, in the sort of just making connections, knowing who to go to, who to call-up when you have another issue ... to make and maintain contacts in other administrations, to keep dialogue going” (Interviewee 2).

This also extended to more formal application of these discussions. Interviewee 10 explained that they would often look at policies from the other territories, but with time taken to see how the policy development panned out before trying to apply it themselves:

“There’s a saying here, why reinvent the wheel, if you can take the legislation developed elsewhere, look at it and see particularly if it’s been in operation for a short while, see the reaction to it”.

Discussion

Devolution has changed the relationships between central government planning policy professionals in the UK. However these changes have been subtle and the overriding evidence is that they have become more positive. As one participant of the BIC spatial planning task group said, ‘who else would we speak to?’ as only a small number of people have experience of working in central government on planning. The agendas were shared at a strategic level whilst the common culture of planning, as a set of administrative codes and culturally reinforcing professional education generated trust and common values. These were reinforced even where the policy leads were from the civil service mainstream and not planning professionals, with recognition of the strengths of keeping planning professionals ‘on board’.

There was also evidence of a shared approach to future EU policy and legislation, particularly at drafting stage where joint discussions were seen to be effective in engaging in negotiations taking place in Brussels. There were also discussions of the ways in which EU legislation was implemented and the legal challenges that might ensue. In these discussions, which particularly focussed on the implementation environmental legislation, there was clearly EU framing of domestic policy. The nations other than England were more in tune with EU policy and legislative programmes than their English counterparts, who work with ministers less willing to openly engage in EU policy implementation. Here, policy transfer is being derived from EU membership rather than within the state, although the UK government clearly plays a role in ensuring overall compliance within the devolved framework. These discussions might also be characterised as ‘business as usual’ with no change in negotiating powers post-devolution, although differences in delivery.

When preparing plans at different spatial scales, the UK nations most clearly express difference through the nomenclature and the relative weightings given to them. However, there is a cadre of national experts including civil servants and independent academics who are used both in their home nations and in the others. As such, they act like Stone’s (2004) concept of ‘transfer agents’ and reinforce policy mobility. It is this group that helps to support the ‘back-filling’ of policies and practices which may not be such a high priority in any one of the nations. It is through this backfilling that mobility occurs and why the systems appear similar although operate on different temporal patterns.

Finally, do these two groups - the Five Admins and the BIC spatial planning task group - represent a policy network or community? From our interviews there is

some clear evidence that this is a case for a policy network as it does not permit outsiders into its meetings and discussions. The meetings that are held are bolstered by a common professional culture that enables the participants to discuss issues in shorthand within a jointly understood framework.

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 and harmonisation 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 being less apparent. However, the precondition for the development of this policy convergence appears to be a common status between all the members rather than dominance by any one of them. This convergence appears to evolve as an outcome of a voluntaristic relationship set within a framework that is perceived to be similar to all.

Conclusions

The key conclusions of this research for public policy are that the process of devolution has changed the relationships between policy officials from a position of London policy dominance to one that reflects an equivalent status between each nation. Devolution has not led to fragmentation. Rather, the relationship is described by officials as being more positive and pro-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 'top-down' policy transfer particularly between the UK government and Scotland and Wales. There has also been greater managed expert policy cross-fertilisation between the nations than before. A further conclusion of the research is the lack of a specific English policy voice or position within this discussion. There is no individual representative of England at the BIC task group meetings unlike the Five Admins Group and the legislative and policy considerations for England are contributed by the UK government representative. This blurring between the UK and English roles is accepted without comment by the other participants, but does not dominate discussion either.

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. Thus the groups act as a policy network, fulfilling both substantive and procedural roles. There was no evidence of strategic political coordination from outside the group but some evidence that the group was using other members of the network to reinforce policy positions that would inevitably lead to practical convergence. This might also be described in Ward's terms as 'selective borrowing' from each other.

The third area where the BIC task group had potential commonality between its members was through membership of the EU. This was not a direct issue for the three non-EU states although there was a wider interest in the potential influences on spatial planning practice. The main focus of the discussion of the EU agenda was through environmental and energy policies. There was also a view expressed that understanding of the EU implementation issues that particularly affected individual members was a means of developing potential influence in negotiation.

Do the relationships between central government officials in the eight members of the BIC task group promote policy mobility between the members? In addition to the common pool of advisers, some 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.

However it is also the case 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 governance system and institutions.

Since devolution, the differences remain in delivery but there is a more relaxed approach to discussing the core content of the spatial planning system. Nevertheless, 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 but is also culturally defined. In the longer term this may be influenced by a greater separation following the Scottish independence referendum and new arrangements for England in the UK Parliament.

Whilst the meetings of the Five Admins Group are more informal, they have a higher degree of authority in the UK than the BIC task group. However, the wider

comparison of approaches and positions between the eight members of the BIC does provide a means within which to contextualise proposed policies in ways that officials find helpful with their own Ministers. We have found that a major public policy outcome is that far from being a fragmenting process, devolution has improved internal relationships between civil servants working on a specific policy issue namely spatial planning. These enhanced relationships have had an influence on policy repertoires and implementation modes that have been strengthened through both a common legal and policy framework set by the powers pooled within the EU and the cultural norms and professional practices which are distinct in the eight members of the BIC. Whilst the external appearance of post-devolution planning policy can be shown as performing in different ways, the underlying formation is strongly influenced through the policy network and mobility that has existed since 1999.

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