

Where We Live Now: An approach to policy and growth that is centred on place

Jamiesha Majevalia reports on the progress of a British Academy project

Scale of place

Since late 2015, the British Academy public policy team has been leading a project on place-based policy-making. Through *Where We Live Now*, we have sought to draw on both humanities and social sciences to understand what places mean to people and why, and to use that

understanding to propose ways in which policy-making can be improved. In particular, the Academy has sought to understand the scale at which people relate to place, and how this has an impact on the scale at which policy is directed. Often people relate to many places – where they live, work and spend their leisure time – but public policy fails to connect with these different experiences of place. Similarly, having a ‘sense of place’ depends on the lived experience and can be as small as a street, or as large as a city, county or region, and is by no means mutually exclusive between the two ends of the spectrum.

All of this has consequences for policy-making. How we organise local and regional policy has major implications for the vital services people rely on. This also raises tensions in how national policy is decided, interpreted and cascaded down to city and local authorities. Related

to this are questions of infrastructure – how we support strong UK cities, which are better connected, as thriving hubs of economic and social activity. To this end, a lot of investment has gone into City and Growth

Deals. But this begs the question about the geographic limits of a growth deal. What is the future for rural, often isolated places that are left out of such deals, albeit unintentionally?

Place and productivity

We started off the project by working with the Place Alliance to host the fourth ‘Big Meet’ in October 2015. This biannual conference brings together academics, practitioners and policy-makers to discuss a key issue or theme related to place. The Big Meet 4 focused on ‘a place for living’ – how to balance housing quality and supply, as well as how to take advantage of the devolution of resources to achieve these objectives. At this conference, Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, then Minister for Housing and Planning, commented, ‘an increased focus on good quality design could help us to deliver more homes, at a quicker pace, which communities can feel proud of.’ Generally, participants agreed that, whilst the Government should set the tone and strategic ambitions, it is up to local areas including towns and cities to agree and work out how to achieve local housing supply objectives, with place quality as a central component.

Our project then turned to finding test cases of place-based thinking. The focus of national discussion was (and still is) productivity – how to achieve local and regional growth, what new ways of thinking could be harnessed to do more with less, or to improve what is already being attempted via City and Growth Deals. We worked with Fellows of the British Academy and an expert working group to think about places where we could have useful discussions about the project questions. The



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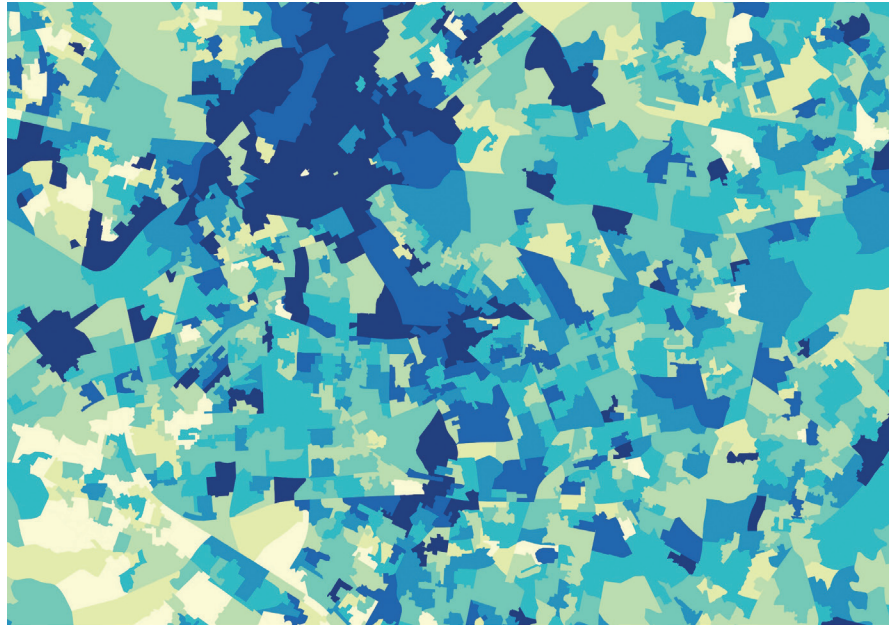
overarching considerations were: ‘What makes a “good” place?’ and ‘What would a place-based approach look like here? What else would it include, that is not part of a generic economic strategy?’

We held these discussions in Manchester, the focal point of the ‘northern powerhouse’; in Cornwall, a county with significant tourism activity and a strong industrial and cultural heritage; in Cardiff, to discuss the interrelated issues of socio-economic deprivation and health inequalities across Wales; and finally in London, where housing and inequality are the key current priorities for local government. In each of these places, we engaged with academic institutions, including relevant research centres that look at local economic development or environmental interaction; and with local authorities and related public bodies, think tanks and charities looking at employment and community engagement based or operating in the region, as well as regional offices of major bodies like the National Trust and Historic England.

Willingness, knowledge and governance

Many interesting observations and ideas came out of these discussions. In the midst of general consternation and frustration at the siloed nature of much of public service policy-making and delivery, we found a great willingness from all to work together better, but scant idea of how best to do that. This is starkest amongst front-line services staff, who are aware that in deprived communities they are not the only people delivering services and often seek better ‘joining up’ at the local level. For example, in Cornwall the Health & Wellbeing Board operates in continuous communication with the Local Enterprise Partnership and the Local Nature Partnership, with Cornwall Council at the centre, to produce joined-up solutions to employment, health and sustainability issues. Place can offer a useful lens to reconsider key issues, such as how best to deliver community support, health and well-being services, social and benefit services, education and lifelong learning including skills development in an integrated way. Many practitioners believe that this could both save money and improve services.

Related to the issue of operating in silos is the need for joined-up policy to address the health consequences of socio-economic deprivation. The issues are systemic and wide-ranging. Unemployment has impacts far beyond income, to both physical and mental health. Local solutions for health inequalities must address these connections. An excellent proposal for addressing some of these gaps is a cultural barometer that looks at the ability of the entire health services architecture to be reoriented towards a systems-thinking



A map of Manchester in which the darker colours indicate higher concentrations of households experiencing one dimension of deprivation (Census 2011).

approach. Two excellent examples of genuine co-production with communities are the Gellideg Foundation in Merthyr Tydfil, and People and Work (P&W) based in Cardiff. Gellideg was founded by residents on a social housing estate to develop an anti-poverty strategy, and P&W conducts community-based action research to offer connected solutions to health, employment and education.

Similarly, traditional measures of productivity and success are no longer seen as relevant to addressing some of these systemic challenges. Many of our discussions suggested a need to change what we consider the end goal, and look instead to well-being and a sustainable life course. In a more mobile society, some of the social infrastructure we used to rely on needs to be re-thought. This raises questions about what we consider ‘good work’ to be today, and what the responsibility of the employer should be to nurture skills and general health and well-being. An excellent example is the ‘Just Work’ research programme led by Professor Jill Rubery FBA of the University of Manchester, in partnership with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. This programme will work with employers in the North East to explore challenges around developing and sustaining decent work in Greater Manchester.

Zooming out of the hyper-local, we come to the thorny issue of infrastructure and development. We are now more focused on housing supply than at any point in the last 15 years, but there is still a dearth of meaningful solutions – we need more housing and faster, improved regional transport infrastructure, and quicker implementation of technologies such as high-speed broadband and Google Fibre to support businesses. Everybody agreed, however, that the key to this is good governance at the local level to engage people in thinking about the

needs and possibilities of their place – matched by a willingness at the national policy-making level to delegate decisions. Local leadership is best placed to consider the needs of the local population, and prioritise these weighty issues accordingly.

Our disciplines at the heart of ‘place’

As we approach the culmination of this project, we are thinking about its legacy. Much of the output can be found on the web.¹ A set of tools and ideas that can be easily embedded and implemented will be presented to government. We will highlight how place-based policy can help develop a sustainable future for cities (on which the Government is currently focused), as well as supporting local authorities and local services to work better together.

A separate companion publication is also in production, looking more thematically at different perspectives on place. The project has drawn on many sources of data from across the social sciences, such as health and employment data as well as social media. However, the humanities disciplines we have tapped into are very much at the heart of this project. Perspectives from anthropology, literature, cinema and history tell us why place matters, about the deep connections we make to places, as well as the significant emotional turmoil that place change, or policies insensitive to place, can wreak. For the British Academy, the objective of *Where We Live Now* has been to make the case for place-based policy-making – and in doing that we have also made the case for better appreciation of the contribution that the humanities and social sciences can bring to policy-making. ■

Governing England: How the British Academy is seeking to inform and influence debate about devolution in England

The *Governing England* project was established by the British Academy in Spring 2016 to further understanding of the government and governance of England. The project seeks to inform academic work on the British constitution as it is changed by devolution – both across the UK and within England. *Governing England* contains six strands which draw together a variety of issues relating to England: (1) England in the UK Parliament; (2) the impact of devolution on Whitehall; (3) fiscal devolution within England; (4) mayors and regional governance; (5) the future of the political parties; (6) English identity.

Each of these strands is crucial to how England is governed and how responsive political institutions are felt to be. *Governing England* examines how England is represented within the UK Parliament, such as whether English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) is sufficient to alleviate public perceptions of unfairness around the West Lothian Question.

Devolution, and measures such as EVEL, also have an impact on Whitehall. *Governing England* examines how UK-wide devolution has opened a number of debates about how Whitehall can differentiate between what it does for all of the UK and what it does for England and Wales, or for England only. As devolution within England itself progresses, powers that once were held within Whitehall are beginning to be transferred to local levels.

Different areas of England have varying needs. What works for one area, and what is desired in another, may be very different. *Governing England* is holding a series of regional round tables to explore how suitable alternative governance models are felt to be by local communities. The regional events are bringing together politicians and practitioners from local and national politics as well as businesses, academics and other interested parties in order to investigate regional devolution in England and what future devolution deals should look like.

Political parties will be changed by devolution, and *Governing England* assesses the ways in which this may have an impact on them. Devolution within England offers parties new ways to engage with different regions and areas as well the possibility of renewal through success in regions considered closed to them. New mayors open the possibility of high-profile individuals representing their party across the country, so devolution presents both a challenge and an opportunity to all political parties. *Governing England* held events at the Labour and Conservative party conferences in September/October 2016 on the effect on each party of devolution within England, including questions such as whether Labour may soon have a specific English party.

Governing England seeks to understand English identity and whether regional identities influence how people wish to be governed, such as their openness to certain institutions such as mayors or regional assemblies.

The *Governing England* project will utilise a variety of formats to disseminate our findings. A book will be published in 2018 with a long-term view of the issues around English governance and identity, while articles more responsive to the changing political climate will be available on the *Governing England* blog. On the 5 July 2017, the British Academy will hold a conference on *Governing England* in order to bring some of the leading academics in each area together with practitioners in the field to discuss and debate the issues raised. A series of panels will explore each strand, and bring the strands together on cross-cutting issues such as identity. If you wish to attend the conference, please contact Martin Rogers at m.rogers@britac.ac.uk.

More details about *Governing England* can be found at www.britishacademy.ac.uk/governing-england

1. www.wherewelivenow.com