The Dynamics of Policy-Making under UK Devolution: Social Housing in Northern Ireland


Published in:
Housing Studies

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access
This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback
The dynamics of policy-making under UK devolution: social housing in Northern Ireland

Abstract

Housing policy formation under the United Kingdom’s devolution settlement is currently under-researched and insufficiently well understood. This paper uses the example of social housing policy-making in Northern Ireland to reflect on its impact. Five factors with the potential to influence post-devolution policy-making are identified: common UK citizenship and ideology; policy networks; the political process; the mechanics of devolution; and membership of the European Union. A post-devolution review of social housing policy in Northern Ireland is followed by a discussion of three key issues from the 2007-11 administration: governance; procurement of new social housing; and shared space and a shared future. Interviews with policy-makers indicate that 2007-11 marked the beginnings of trend away from the technocratic domination of officials towards greater intervention and policy ownership by politicians, but that the significance of this should not be overstated. The implications for multi-level and multi-jurisdictional policy-making in devolved and federal states are considered.

Keywords: devolution, federalism, housing policy, Northern Ireland, social housing, UK.

Introduction

Housing policy formation under the United Kingdom’s (UK) devolution settlement is currently under-researched and insufficiently well understood. This paper uses the example of social housing policy-making in Northern Ireland to reflect on the impact of the fundamental change to governance structures and policy dynamics brought about by UK devolution from 1999 onwards. The process has been described as ‘filling in’ rather than ‘hollowing out’ the complexities of spatial difference (Goodwin et al, 2005) and has been approached in an uneven fashion which has left the Northern Ireland and Welsh Assemblies, and the Scottish Parliament, with some differences in their structures and powers (Birrell, 2009; Trench, 2007). Recently the focus has shifted from the nature of the powers of the devolved administrations to funding arrangements (NIA, 2013; Trench, 2013); in addition, the 2014
referendum on independence for Scotland in 2014 raises the question whether devolution is an end in itself or a stepping stone towards further territorial autonomy in at least one case. Conversely, the impact of devolution on English policy-making has been very limited, although the development of the English ‘localism’ agenda since the 2010 general election has provided a useful new complementary field of study to assist with the understanding of multi-level governance in a multi-jurisdictional state (e.g. Jacobs and Manzi, 2013; Maclennan and O’Sullivan, 2013).

In Northern Ireland, devolution has been ‘inextricably bound up with the peace process’ (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2009:10) by which society is moving away from paramilitary violence towards governance solely by democratic means. Despite considerable improvements to the public order situation, policy delivery still takes place against low level sectarian conflict between Protestant and Catholic\(^1\) communities, reinforcing the strong element of territorial division which has been a key determinant of housing policy for many years (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive were formed under the provisions of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act and first met in 1999; however, the mandatory coalition (with ministerial positions allocated on a proportional basis) has not always found it easy to work together and was suspended between October 2002 and May 2007, with political power returned to Westminster. Therefore the 2007-11 electoral term was the first in which all aspects of Northern Ireland’s devolution settlement functioned fully and continuously, with local politicians in control of decision-making and thus taking a full part in shaping the new policy dynamics of the region.

The provision of good quality social housing was a policy priority in Northern Ireland throughout the civil strife of the ‘troubles’ (Brett, 1986; Paris, 2008) and has continued to be so since devolution. This paper assesses the impact of the devolution settlement on social housing policy-making in Northern Ireland from 1999 until 2011, with a particular focus on the period from May 2007 until April 2011. The following section considers the complexity of policy-making in the UK post-devolution and identifies five factors with the potential to influence policy-making: common UK citizenship and ideology; policy networks; the political process; the mechanics of devolution; and membership of the European Union. Particular attention is paid to the concept of ‘policy ownership’ (McEwan, 2005) in multi-level states. A review of social housing policy in Northern Ireland since 1999 is followed by a discussion of three key issues from the 2007-11 administration: the governance of social housing; the procurement of new social housing; and improving access to shared space and a shared future through addressing community divisions in social housing allocation. Written sources are supplemented by semi-structured interviews with five senior participants in policy networks, which took place between May and June 2010, around the time of the UK general election. Several interviewees requested strict anonymity in order to allow them to speak freely on sensitive political issues, therefore participants’ organisations cannot be revealed. The paper

\(^1\) The main ethnic division in Northern Ireland is by religious background, namely, in one case, various Protestant denominations and, in the other, the Roman Catholic church. The Roman Catholic population is referred to as ‘Catholic’, as is the general usage in Northern Ireland.
concludes that the 2007-11 period marked the beginnings of trend away from the technocratic domination of officials towards greater intervention and policy ownership by politicians, but that the significance of this should not be overstated.

Policy-making under UK devolution

There has been little housing policy divergence within the UK since 1999 (Birrell, 2009; Paris et al, 2003; Paris, 2008). However, this may be less true in future with the development of a degree of difference in Scotland (Pawson and Davidson, 2008; McKee, 2010; Maclennan and O’Sullivan, 2013) and the greater variety in political control across the UK after the 2010 general election may also have a longer term impact (Keating et al, 2012).

Figure One: Factors potentially affecting policy difference within the UK post-devolution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizenship, government and ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• UK-wide citizenship rights and ideology e.g. welfare state, health service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Influence of Secretary of State positions at Westminster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Public opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy networks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• UK-wide policy networks, formal and informal: civil service, professional networks, think tanks, voluntary sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Different policy communities and civil society dynamics within the devolved jurisdictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Policy transfer and copying – domination of England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Similar policy challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The political process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• UK-wide political parties vs. some different political parties in the devolved jurisdictions (especially Northern Ireland)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Different voting systems, importance of coalitions except in England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Policy ownership in the devolved jurisdictions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The mechanics of devolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Impact of reserved powers on devolved policy areas and on budgets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial allocation from Westminster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Powers of devolved administrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Weak intergovernmental co-ordination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership of the European Union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Directives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negotiations undertaken at UK level e.g. public procurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Policy networks e.g. multi-national projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Birrell (2009); Cairney et al (2009); House of Commons Justice Committee (2009); Jeffery (2006); McEwan (2005).

Maclennan and O’Sullivan (2013) have recently made some very pertinent points about the limits of devolved policy-making, pointing out that within the UK the retention by the UK Treasury of most taxation powers, and all welfare benefits policy, sets some distinct
parameters for housing policy change. This remains true in Northern Ireland despite nominal autonomy on welfare policy, due to the parity agreement between the UK Treasury and the Northern Ireland Executive (Birrell, 2009; NIA, 2011). A further argument for the importance of multi-level policy-making is the need for ‘systematic knowledge generation and transmission’ (Maclellan and O’Sullivan, 2013: 8), linked to effective multi-jurisdictional policy networks. Maclellan and O’Sullivan (2013) argue convincingly, using the example of Canada, that without connections between levels of government and governance in devolved or federal systems, policy ‘dumping’ may occur, in which responsibility is devolved without real power.

Figure One draws together and categorises from other sources factors potentially affecting policy difference within the UK after devolution, under five headings: citizenship, governance and ideology; policy networks; the political process; the mechanics of devolution; and membership of the European Union. The importance of policy networks, and the mechanics of devolution have been discussed above. The common factors of UK citizenship and the ideology of the welfare state including the National Health Service are perhaps underestimated in assessments of UK devolution although in federal states such as Australia and the United States their relevance is clearer. Key aspects of the political process include the use of different voting systems – and the mandatory coalition in Northern Ireland – requiring a more collaborative approach to policy in the devolved jurisdictions. The identification of ‘policy ownership’ (McEwan, 2005) as a particular aspect of political behaviour is discussed at greater length below. Finally, the significance of European Union membership introduces another level to the policy-making process, taking into account legal aspects such as procurement policy, policy networks, and access to funding which has been particularly importance for Northern Ireland. These factors may contribute either to policy convergence or to divergence, depending on their strength, detailed characteristics and combinations, and on how they are influenced by their past and present context.

**Policy ownership in multi-level states**

Much of the debate on policy difference in devolved or federal structures is institutional in nature, which does not provide a complete picture of the dynamics involved (McEwan, 2005). Writing about economic policy, Goodwin et al (2005: 422) note that the capacity for success ‘partly rests on a range of non-state and non-economic factors such as sub-national social, cultural and institutional forms and supports.’ Mooney et al (2006) claim that devolution has changed the nature of citizenship in the UK through providing greater recognition of nationalist sentiment in its constituent parts. This can lead to a tension in public attitudes between a continuing wish to endorse state-wide values (such as the welfare state in the UK), and ‘a desire for even fuller ‘ownership’ of politics at the devolved level’ (Jeffery, 2006:11). Only the second of these factors was acknowledged in New Labour’s devolution project, which was presented as improving democracy (Jeffery, 2006) and empowering communities, ‘albeit in very prescribed ways’ (Mooney et al, 2006: 486). The logic of devolution might be thought to point towards policy divergence, which has not happened on a large scale. Hence
the counterintuitive question: how different do policies actually have to be to allow them to be branded as ‘ours’?

This question is addressed in depth by McEwan (2005), who argues that it is important to focus on the policy process, including political decision-making, as well as on outcomes. She suggests that policy divergence may not be a necessary component of ‘institutional distinctiveness’:

The appearance of distinctiveness may be achieved by assuming ownership of public policies, and branding them as policies designed to respond to and reflect the needs and priorities of the nation or region in question. As such, policy communities may play a role in asserting territorial distinctiveness, regardless of whether the policies themselves are distinct (McEwan, 2005: 539, emphasis in original).

In other words, devolution of the policy process and political decision-making reinforces the authority of the sub-state decision-making body even if the policies that result from this process are the same or similar to those in other parts of the ‘nation’. It is ownership of the process that is important. If policies are presented as appropriate for the jurisdiction, then they enhance the legitimacy of the administration even if the policies are no different from those of other jurisdictions. Following her research in Quebec and Scotland, McEwan claims that policy ownership is actually more important than policy divergence in establishing the legitimacy of devolved or federal administrations, a claim that is examined here in relation to Northern Ireland.

Social housing policy-making in Northern Ireland since 1999

Social housing policy in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the Department for Social Development (DSD), reporting to the Minister for Social Development in the Northern Ireland Executive. The DSD is also responsible for regulation. Social housing is owned and managed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and 25 housing associations, with around three-quarters of the stock of 118,200 being the responsibility of the Housing Executive. New social housing is built by housing associations. The Housing Executive also has a wide range of strategic responsibilities including the calculation of housing need, social housing allocations, the social housing new build programme, and the Supporting People programme for the funding of special needs housing support (NIHE, 2012).

Both the Housing Executive and housing associations are governed by appointed boards, but Housing Executive board members are recruited through the public appointments system and paid a stipend, whereas housing association boards invite membership individually and through the Northern Ireland federation of Housing Associations, and do not provide payment. Northern Ireland’s politicians from all parties acknowledge continuing housing need and support the social housing sector strongly. However, the continuing promotion of home ownership, including the popular House Sales Scheme, has seen the proportion of social housing decrease from 39 percent in 1981 (Paris, 2001) to 17 per cent in 2011 (DSD, 2011).
Policy development 1999-2011

Social housing policy development in Northern Ireland under devolution has been characterised by a high level of activity in policy networks but little in the way of outputs\(^2\). An example has been the failure until recently to produce a housing strategy to tie together the policy and practice functions of the DSD, Housing Executive and housing associations as well as acknowledging the role of other government departments responsible for related areas such as planning, health, crime, anti-poverty initiatives and sustainable development. Policy coordination is particularly important in an administration that includes twelve regional level government departments, a greater use of arms-length governance than the rest of the UK, and a correspondingly less important role for elected local government (Birrell, 2010). The problem of policy fragmentation and delays in decision-making has been identified as a wider issue in the Northern Ireland Executive, described as ‘lowest common denominator decisions’ (Gray and Birrell, 2011: 17).

Social housing policy development in the period 1999 – 2011 proceeded by way of inquiries, legislation and ad hoc policy documents. The most important of these are outlined here (see Muir (2012) for a comprehensive account). The first housing initiative to be undertaken by the new Assembly was the wide-ranging Inquiry into Housing in Northern Ireland held by the Committee for Social Development in 2001-2, which influenced the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 2003\(^3\). Although the Inquiry and the 2003 Order established the policy agenda and the parameters of Northern Ireland’s housing policy network, many of the decisions taken brought Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK, with existing English policy being particularly influential. Two differences were the extension of the House Sales Scheme (the local ‘right to buy’) to housing association tenants, and the ruling out of stock transfer as a way of increasing investment (although the 2003 Order introduced provisions for majority tenant endorsement of transfer).

The following year, the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (2004) conducted an inquiry into social housing provision and housing need, in which an increase in social housing supply was urged and it was proposed to introduce developer contributions to social housing as part of conditions for planning approval, as operated in the rest of the UK. Further policy convergence occurred in the same year with the introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, six years after the rest of the UK. The question of social housing supply was revisited in the Review into Affordable Housing (Semple, 2007), commissioned by the DSD at a time of rapidly rising house prices and concerns about affordability and access to housing in all tenures. The report called for more social housing to be built but also for access

---

\(^2\) Useful accounts of social housing in Northern Ireland before devolution include chapters in Paris (2001b); and material from Paris et al (2003); and Paris (2008).

\(^3\) Legislation for Northern Ireland was passed via Orders in Council during the period when the Assembly was suspended.
to low cost home ownership to be maintained and, again, for developer contributions to affordable housing to be introduced (Northern Ireland is still, at the time of writing, the only part of the UK without this provision).

After the restoration of the Assembly in May 2007, the focus shifted to policy development. Legislation during the period provided only minor policy amendments, with the exception of the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which is likely to prove important in the future restructuring of the Housing Executive as it allows regulations to be made to permit other statutory authorities to carry out Housing Executive functions. Otherwise, there was a continuation of ad hoc policy development in areas such as Supporting People, good relations, homelessness, rural housing, community safety, social housing procurement, and fuel poverty. In addition the 2008 Programme for Government housing commitments formed the basis of the New Housing Agenda for Northern Ireland, a document which set out a number of targets to be achieved by May 2011 (NIA, 2008). Although by no means a comprehensive strategy, the document provided a framework for political accountability.

For all its flaws, the New Housing Agenda marked the beginning of a new phase in Northern Ireland housing policy, in which the beginnings of a transition away from a purely technocratic approach towards more political control could be detected. The period 2007-2011 also saw the resurgence of the local branch of the Chartered Institute of Housing, which in 2009 initiated the Independent Commission on the Future for Housing in Northern Ireland (CIH, 2010), chaired by Lord Richard Best. The report expressed frustration about slow progress in a number of policy areas and was arguably influential in the final production of a draft Housing Strategy (DSD, 2012). The Commission’s process of taking evidence from interested parties helped to reinforce and expand policy networks, thus providing a countervailing force to the increasing political control being exercised by the Minister for Social Development.

**Three key housing policy issues from the Assembly term 2007-11**

Three key housing policy issues were identified during the period 2007-11, derived from policy documents and tested for their relevance in interviews: the governance of social housing, the procurement of new social housing, and ‘shared space’ and a shared future.

**The governance of social housing**

Given that the dynamics of policy-making were changing, it was not surprising that different types of governance issues became prominent during this period. Three types of issues arose, covering: the demarcation between policy and strategy; corporate governance of social housing providers; and the influence of politicians.

As outlined earlier, social housing policy is formally the responsibility of the Department for Social Development and strategy lies with the Housing Executive, along with substantial service delivery functions. In reality grey areas have evolved, which interviews revealed had
caused confusion: ‘I see strategy as the way policy is implemented, so I still think of [the Housing Executive] as the regional strategic authority, not DSD (although they are encroaching and don’t see the distinction)’. The Housing Executive continued to be important for policy development due to the expertise generated within a single issue body, whilst at the same time the DSD became responsible for some strategies such as fuel poverty and social housing procurement. An organisational review of the Housing Executive had commenced by April 2011 and later in the year recommended a separation of policy, strategy and management functions (PWC, 2011). However, it was not evident that structural change in itself would provide clarity.

The area of corporate governance was also contested during this period. Both the Housing Executive and housing associations were regulated by the DSD, with different regulatory systems. Fourteen out of 33 housing associations had failed their DSD inspection in 2009 (NIAO, 2009) causing seven associations to be suspended from development. The Housing Executive had also been subject to a review of its corporate governance. Although much good practice was identified, improvements were required in the areas of land sales, contract management and repairs inspection. (DSD, 2010). One interviewee felt that the degree of control over housing associations exercised by the DSD meant that lenders might no longer see them as independent, and argued for a lighter regulatory regime. In contrast, another regarded the Housing Executive’s degree of scrutiny as being far greater and challenged housing associations’ claim to get ‘the rough end of the stick’. There was support for a single regulatory regime that could be ‘proportionate, risk-based and outcome-focused’ and involved residents; it would improve trust within policy networks and greater transparency for service users.

Finally, the greater involvement of politicians in the governance of social housing was a culture shock post-1999 and in particular post-2007, because since founding of the Housing Executive in 1971, social housing had not been under the direct control of politicians. Political involvement included the Minister for Social Development but also the Committee for Social Development, which performed a scrutiny role, and Ministers from other departments responsible for related areas – the best example being the division of responsibility for the introduction of developer contributions between the DSD and the Department of the Environment. Local councillors had an advisory role as part of the Northern Ireland Housing Council, which also held three places on the Housing Executive board. There was a general view from interviewees that all the political parties in the Executive4 were cautious about making decisions - ‘working around at the margins’ – although the legitimacy and importance of political direction was not contested. Two examples were given: the tendency for local Ministers to agree a smaller rent rise for Housing Executive tenants than had been the case under direct rule; and the long delay in introducing developer contributions, attributed to a powerful developer lobby. It was interesting that the

---

4 At the time of the interviews, these parties were the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The Minister for Social Development was from the SDLP.
increase in political influence did not lead to greater interest in tenant and resident involvement.

The procurement of new social housing

Pressure for changes to procurement practice came from several directions including EU and UK-wide procurement policy; a policy emphasis on greater efficiency in construction allied with the wish to support the construction industry in the economic downturn; and concern within DSD about the performance of housing associations as discussed in the governance section above. The new Procurement Strategy for the Social Housing Development Strategy required all housing associations to be part of a procurement group if they wished to bid for development funding (DSD, 2008)\(^5\), with efficiency savings to be made through the use of supply teams within the groups.

Previously, most housing associations made individual bids to be included in the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) and, if successful, invited tenders on a one-off basis. There had been a few instances of larger associations managing projects on behalf of smaller associations. Therefore it was a culture shock to be forced to work together and it is important to note that this approach to social housing procurement was not taken uniformly across the UK. Initially, four groups were formed, but one found it impossible to work together and was disbanded; its members joined other groups. Problems also occurred because seven housing associations had failed their DSD development inspection and were suspended from development. Their schemes had to be taken over by other associations in the group, or delayed, thus affecting the overall performance of the group. Interestingly, groups chose to form on the basis of diversity of size, geographical scope and housing specialisms, rather than the sector choosing to create centres of expertise in, say, supported housing provision for people with disabilities (Muir and Mullins, 2013).

Over the next three years the groups all established their framework structures for consultants and savings targets have been met, although whether due to the new structure or falling construction costs is hard to say. The latest challenge is whether to consolidate these savings by establishing a single development team for each procurement group. Although this makes sense in terms of sharing resources when the development programme is declining, it also threatens the autonomy of individual associations and is being approached with caution (Muir and Mullins, 2013). Interviewees for this paper had mixed views about the Procurement Strategy. One claimed it was poorly delivered and had sidestepped the more important procurement challenge of major repairs for Housing Executive stock. Another saw the strategy as an important step towards greater efficiency, given the small size of many of Northern Ireland’s housing associations. It may be that procurement groups turn out to be a transitional stage on the way to mergers or group structures, rather than a permanent fixture.

---

\(^5\) Northern Ireland’s overall public procurement policy applies to grant-aided organisation receiving more than 50 per cent of their funding from public sources and therefore includes housing associations.
‘Shared space’ and a shared future

The final key issue, unique to Northern Ireland, was the policy commitment to increase the number of areas in which Protestant and Catholic households felt they could live together safely (Murtagh, 2001; Gray et al, 2009). All Northern Ireland’s social housing is allocated from a Common Waiting List for all social landlords, administered by the Housing Executive. Allocation is complicated by the residential segregation that increased during the Troubles and has not reversed since, with 91 per cent of Belfast’s Housing Executive estates contain more than 80 per cent of either Protestant or Catholic households (Shuttleworth and Lloyd, 2007; for a detailed account of the issues, see Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). Policy-makers anticipate that reduced segregation in social housing will contribute to better community relations as well as more efficient use of available housing (NIHE, 2007; Deloitte, 2007).

Policy and practice on shared housing should ideally take place within a wider policy context on promoting what is known as ‘good relations’ between the two communities. The 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement incorporated a commitment to: ‘the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing’ (NIO, 1998: section 6 para. 13) and s.75 (2) of the 1998 Northern Ireland Act placed a duty on public bodies to promote ‘good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group’ s.75(2). Housing associations are included as public bodies in the scope of this legislation. A comprehensive good relations policy was introduced under direct rule (OFMDFM, 2005), however it was put to one side by the incoming 2007 administration who indicated that they wished to introduce a replacement, ‘Cohesion, Sharing and Integration’ (NIA, 2009). However, the final version of this policy had not been introduced by April 2011, nor by the time of writing two years later.

Therefore action to increase integration in social housing has been led by social housing bodies, mindful of their s.75 responsibilities under the 1998 Act. The Housing Executive and housing associations proceeded with a programme of activities to promote community cohesion and shared housing, along with related measures such as the removal of sectarian symbols and conflict reduction at territorial flashpoints (NIHE, 2007). The Shared Future Housing Programme was introduced for new schemes built and managed by housing associations and the Shared Neighbourhood Programme for thirty existing Housing Executive areas. In each case the focus of the programme was the signing of a good neighbour agreement including appropriate behaviour for a mixed community locality, such as not displaying sectarian symbols. However, the Housing Executive accepts that in some areas tenants would not yet feel secure enough to live in close proximity with the other community. The initiatives were described rather bluntly by one interviewee as ‘back to what it was’ and this participant believed that far more should be done. Another believed that the introduction of mixed tenure Shared Future schemes would be beneficial and that the introduction of
choice-based letting, giving tenants more autonomy in their housing choices, might speed up the process of integration.

The dynamics of housing policy under devolution: the view from policy networks

Social housing policy-makers were also asked about factors contributing to policy dynamics under devolution, differences in social housing policy across the UK, and the relevance of the concept of policy ownership. With reference to Figure One, UK-wide professional policy networks were identified by the majority, for example the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. Special mention was made of the way in which the Independent Commission (CIH, 2010) had been an excellent forum for the sharing of ideas from across the UK and contrasted with one view of local capacity for policy development: ‘I don’t see yet the emergence of a truly informed locally based policy network, and this is, sadly, reflected in fairly poor quality local policy making’. Membership of the European Union was also highlighted, along with the shared culture of the welfare state and, to a lesser extent, common tax and benefits system as a driver towards convergence, ‘pulling policy together’.

Opinions were then sought about differences in social housing policy across the UK under devolution. There was a clear view that policy had converged since 1999 and would continue to do so given the underlying financial framework of the block grant and also the common welfare state: ‘breaking parity’ (NIA, 2011) was not seen as a realistic option. One participant felt that discussion of ‘convergence or divergence’ was unhelpful, because social housing delivery structures (and those of many other public services) had been so different in Northern Ireland since 1971. All thought England’s influence remained strong:

... the focus is to reduce expenditure and the English “solution” is being touted as the way forward – no evidence, no analysis, just rhetoric’, and more generally, the description of reaching for English policy documents as ‘intellectual laziness and fuzzy thinking.

One respondent thought Scotland would be a better model to follow, but no-one mentioned looking outside the UK for alternative policy approaches. It was striking that social housing policy in the Republic of Ireland was not mentioned. Although in general there was no discussion of exporting policy from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK, one participant did suggest that the approach to shared space and a shared future could be of benefit elsewhere.

Finally, the concept of policy ownership was introduced. It was recognised instantly and in general seen as relevant and perhaps almost commonplace, because politicians with any degree of power will claim credit for policy success as ‘the buck will stop with them’. It was remarked upon that politicians refer to local issues all the time but are addressing them by looking at policies from England or Scotland; as McEwan (2005) noted in relation to Quebec, control over policy was considered to be more important than its uniqueness. Although some were disparaging about this approach – ‘there is no substance to it and the perspectives are...
very short term’ – others felt originality was over-rated and that it was important to utilise
good practice from elsewhere. The ‘appearance of distinctiveness’ (McEwen, 2005: 539),
existing alongside the lack of evidence for substantive policy difference, was illustrated thus:

I detect something of a conflict on policy post devolution. On the one hand politicians
do say they want Northern Ireland solutions for Northern Ireland problems, but the
evidence on the ground is not there; in reality, unionist politicians are even more
strongly drawn to the parity issue, and nationalists seem intent on all Ireland solutions.
Difficult to reconcile!

Conclusion

The literature on UK devolution contains ‘relatively little systematic analysis within it of
shifts in the government and governance of housing (Maclennan and O’Sullivan, 2013: 4).
This paper has reviewed the situation in Northern Ireland as a contribution to the requirement
for increased policy innovation and learning across the UK post-devolution, the importance of
which has increased since the introduction of the ‘new localism’ in England raises equally
importance questions about where housing policy sits within multi-level government and
governance. Along with a range of other social services, it is regarded as unproblematic to
deliver housing policy at local or regional level (although in Northern Ireland it is too
sensitive for the local level); but the policy options of the devolved administrations remain
constrained by their lack of power to shape economic policy (Trench, 2013) and their lack of
effective control over welfare benefits. The identification of five contributory factors –
common citizenship and ideology; policy networks; the political process; the mechanics of
devolution and membership of the European Union (Figure One) make it clear that the key
question is not at which level should housing policy sit; rather, the issues are that the level
should be effectively connected to others and that strong links need to be made with related
policy areas such as planning, regeneration and health. This is a relevant observation not just
for the new and still changing political and administrative structures within the UK, but also
for other devolved and federal states.

In Northern Ireland, the experience of the 2007-11 Assembly and Executive’s approach to
housing policy revealed the beginnings of a trajectory away from technocratic domination of
decision-making towards policy ownership by politicians, with the 2008 New Housing
Agenda as a crucial turning point. However, it is important not to overplay the results from
one four-year period. As one reviewer pointed out, DSD and Housing Executive officials still
retain considerable control over a complex policy area: ‘policy ownership is not just for
politicians!’. This may be one reason why the very active civil society policy networks were
unable to progress cherished policy goals such as a housing strategy and developer
contributions.

The legislation and inquiries from 1999 onwards do not reveal the development of a different
social housing policy agenda from the rest of the UK; rather, policy has been aligned more
closely with England. Nevertheless, a structural difference remains: the only directly elected
politicians involved in Northern Ireland’s housing policy are the Minister and the members of the Northern Ireland Housing Council, as the subject is still deemed too politically sensitive to devolved to local councils. The three key issues identified in the 2007-11 administration (governance, procurement and a shared future) show the development of a more dynamic policy field based on policy networks rather than formal events such as inquiries. It was clear that the increasing involvement of politicians in social housing policy and implementation was a culture shock and not welcomed by all. Participants in social housing policy networks were struggling to come to terms with the difference between the substance (or lack of it) of social housing policy and the presentation of that policy by Northern Ireland’s new political establishment, and thus recognised and appreciated the concept of policy ownership. Since May 2011, a draft housing strategy has been issued and detailed planning for the restructuring of the Housing Executive has commenced. The dynamics of housing policy in Northern Ireland will be tested and perhaps changed further by these recent initiatives.

The case of social housing in Northern Ireland prompts some reflections on the implications for policy more generally in devolved and federal states. The question of the appropriate level of policy development and delivery, along with connections to other policy areas, has been remarked upon. The case also shows that devolution of powers may not necessarily lead to different policies in the devolved or federal jurisdictions, and that effective policy networks and sharing of good practice across the state and internationally remains crucial. It is useful to identify factors that contribute to policy difference, as has been done in this paper, but they are part of a wider picture. Finally, the case has strengthened the argument for the appropriateness of McEwan’s (2005) concept of ‘policy ownership’ within the complex governance structures of devolved and federal states, adding to her case studies of Quebec and Scotland. Further comparative study would be beneficial. Within multi-level and multi-jurisdictional states, especially when different political parties dominate at different levels, it is not surprising that politicians seek to differentiate their responsibilities from others and to highlight their alleged successes.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the five policy-makers who agreed to be interviewed; to Joe Frey, Stephen Martin, Brendan Murtagh and Peter Shanks for comments on an earlier draft; and for comments provided by three anonymous reviewers and the editor. All comments helped to improve the final version.

References


DSD (2010) Review of Governance in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Belfast: Department for Social Development


NIA (2009) From a Shared Future to Cohesion, Sharing and Integration: Developments in Good Relations Policy, Research and Library Services Briefing Note 71/09, Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly.


