Submission to the Local Government and Regeneration Inquiry into the Delivery of Regeneration in Scotland

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Key messages

- There needs to be an appraisal of what regeneration activity can achieve in the face of growing income inequality, socio-spatial polarisation and fiscal constraint.

- There is room for more energetic and progressive thinking about how mainstream services can deliver quality of place in regeneration areas within the context of fiscal constraint.

- People should not be expected to live in poor quality neighbourhoods because they are experiencing poverty.

- Better off neighbourhoods can capture more than their share of mainstream services, particularly those services concerned with ‘quality of place’.

- There is evidence that mainstream environmental services – street cleaning and basic maintenance – can work effectively to deliver regeneration outcomes.

- There may be a case for prioritising and tailoring environmental service provision in disadvantaged areas as a form of ‘preventive action’ in the context of public service reform.

- We need to level the playing field with regard to public service provision in order to make it possible for community-led approaches to regeneration to prosper.

Introduction: what can regeneration activity achieve?

We live in a highly unequal society which is getting more unequal\(^1\). There is also strong evidence that income inequalities are increasingly influencing where we live, such that concern is growing that different fractions of society are pulling apart socially and spatially.\(^2\) Such trends are despite sustained regeneration intervention over the decades. There are numerous examples of where regeneration has improved quality of life in residential neighbourhoods and, in some cases, addressed market failure. However, it is recognised that regeneration activity has been unable to tackle these big socio-structural trends in a fundamental way.\(^3\) Given this context, plus the added ‘whammy’ of severe and long term fiscal constraint, I would argue that it is important to focus on realistic yet ultimately ambitious objectives for regeneration, particularly at the scale of residential neighbourhoods.

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The 2011 Regeneration Strategy *Achieving a Sustainable Future* is clear that the ambition is for regeneration activity to be ‘transformative’. One sphere which is emphasised as key to success in residential neighbourhoods is ‘quality of place’. Evaluations of regeneration interventions over the years tell a stark story: it is much easier to address the physical problems of neighbourhoods than their socio-economic problems – we have had more success on the ‘place’ agenda in comparison with the ‘people’ agenda. Despite this, it is not apparent that regeneration does achieve a ‘quality of place’ which is actually transformative. Arguably, a transformative outcome would be one in which the quality of the environment did not signal the underlying social and economic make-up of the neighbourhood. In some nations, such as Sweden and Denmark, it can be much harder than it is in Scotland to read levels of social deprivation from the quality of the environment.

I conducted a small experiment in early June 2013 which produced some interesting evidence on this point. I took a group of 32 Dutch undergraduate geography and planning students on a tour of a range of Glasgow residential neighbourhoods. I asked them to estimate the level of social deprivation in each area by paying attention to the nature and quality of the physical environment. In particular I wanted to explore their perceptions of neighbourhoods which had been subject to significant regeneration investment but which remained disadvantaged in socio-economic terms. Would this group of outsiders (effectively ‘parachuted’ into an unknown city) be able to read the social from the physical landscape even in regenerated areas? The answer was largely yes. Thus they could reasonably readily identify ‘average’ and ‘quite rich’ neighbourhoods. For the experiment, four areas which had undergone regeneration in recent years were also visited. In all income deprivation placed them in the bottom 30% of the spectrum. Almost all of the students thought three of the four areas were home to ‘quite’ or ‘very poor’ people. The exception was New Gorbals. Here, the majority of students (85%) thought this area was home to people who were ‘average’ (53%) or ‘quite rich’ (32%) in income terms. It appeared that, in New Gorbals, quality of place has effectively masked social deprivation. This was not the case for the other three regeneration areas where socio-economic deprivation was still legible from the physical landscape.

There may be a range of explanations for the low evaluations of the other three regeneration areas (and it should be noted that New Gorbals was the least income deprived of the four areas visited). However, it was clear that their estimates of social deprivation were strongly coloured by their perception of the quality of public space. Thus, they noted down problems with “garbage”, “closed up shops”, “rusty gates”, “bad maintenance” and “bad roads”. Interestingly, a key issue appeared to be the amount and quality of open spaces in the three sites. One commented: “houses look good, ugly grass” while another noted “nice architecture but green spaces which are not used”. In the better off areas, these spaces were viewed as an asset “lots of green parks”.

There are two key issues to draw out from this small and informal experiment. First – as we know of course - across Scotland there are poorer residential neighbourhoods which remain blighted by under-maintained semi-derelict land despite significant regeneration

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5 The research was very small scale. It is mentioned here as illustrative of a problem rather than provided as conclusive scientific evidence.

6 They were not told they were in a regeneration area until they had offered their view of it.
intervention. Such areas will tend to have experienced levels of demolition and re-structuring of the housing stock as a result of population loss and low levels of demand. For genuine quality of place to be achieved, it will be necessary to either attract development to take place on this land, or for the maintenance of it to improve substantially. The question of maintenance links to the second key issue. There is a need for the nature and quality of mainstream services, particularly those concerned with environmental maintenance, to be considered as a fundamental part of the regeneration agenda. Incidentally, I actually perceived that quality of place in these regeneration areas seemed to be a little better in June 2013 in comparison with previous visits. However, I would suggest that a significant problem remains if a group of outsiders with no local knowledge are still able to read socio-economic deprivation from the physical landscape.

However, this is not just about external perceptions of neighbourhoods. I would argue that a realistic yet ambitious objective for neighbourhood regeneration activity in the face of socio-spatial polarisation would be to achieve a level of quality of place in regeneration areas which does not reflect wider social divisions so clearly. If this were achieved then a range of other benefits might flow – such as improvements to mental health or to levels of physical activity. Better environmental quality might also make the regeneration areas more attractive to a range of social groups as well as the market, setting in train a virtuous cycle with some potential to ameliorate socio-spatial polarisation. In the next section of this paper, I argue that to achieve this, a more progressive approach to integrating mainstream services into the regeneration agenda is needed. In the context of public service reform this might mean that national and local government should think of these services as a form of ‘preventative action’.

The need to integrate mainstream service provision into the regeneration agenda

In the Ministerial Foreword to the Regeneration Strategy, the priority attached to “reforming the way mainstream resources are used to support vulnerable communities” is made clear. Such prioritisation reflects a long run ambition in Scotland and the UK more broadly to use mainstream services more effectively as instruments of neighbourhood renewal. In relation to using public services to maximise the impact of place-based regeneration, the Strategy suggests a two pronged approach. The first is to achieve more integration and better partnership working between different services and also between mainstream services and specialist regeneration programmes. The second is to consider how mainstream resources are focused on tackling disadvantage, and in particular how

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7 It should also be noted that levels of citizen satisfaction with environmental maintenance are similar to other major cities. (Sunday Herald analysis of Improvement service data on Austerity Scotland, 19 MAY 2013)
9 Mason, P., A. Keams, et al. (2013); “Influence of local crime, perceptions of disorder and safety from crime, and aspects of neighbourhoods and community on walking in deprived urban areas.” Social Science and Medicine.
Community Planning Partnerships can be vehicles for understanding differences in levels of need and in determining “additional support” requirements.\(^4\)

Arguably, the Statement emphasises solutions which involve the integration of resources more than solutions which might imply that resources should be re-balanced towards needier areas. Indeed, the Statement notes that “spend from such mainstream resources tends to be much higher in disadvantaged areas”\(^5\) appearing to imply that the level of resources spent on deprived areas is not a central concern. To a large extent this reflects the analysis presented in the Report of the Commission on the Future of Public Services, which also notes high levels of “reactive spending” on the consequences of disadvantage.\(^6\) However, on the issue of the distribution of mainstream resources relative to disadvantage – particularly those related to the quality of place agenda - the national evidence we have is mixed. Spending on policing, for example, favours disadvantaged areas. However, spending on street cleansing and refuse collection has largely been neutral with respect to area deprivation and there is evidence that spending on roads and parks has, historically at least, tended to benefit less deprived localities.\(^7\)

In the latter part of the 2000s, attempts were made to ‘bend the spend’ in a targeted way towards needier areas. This was seen as a means to use mainstream services to close the outcome gap. The technical challenges, and organisational barriers to achieving this approach have been well documented.\(^8\) Public spending constraint is also argued to make targeting approaches appear unaffordable in the foreseeable future. As a result there are few indications that the substantial targeting of mainstream resources on deprived places will be fundamental to the Scottish approach to regeneration.

However, this Inquiry asks about how we are to achieve maximum impact from the better use of existing funding. I would argue that efforts to re-balance mainstream services between better-off and disadvantaged neighbourhoods – particularly those services which support quality of place – would achieve more with less. My argument is not that poor neighbourhoods necessarily require additional support or ‘targeting’. Instead, what is needed is to ensure that better off neighbourhoods do not capture higher levels of environmental services than their objective neighbourhood characteristics would suggest they need.

Underpinning this argument is evidence from a series of research studies - on the provision of environmental services in disadvantaged and better off neighbourhoods - conducted with colleagues at the University of Glasgow and Heriot Watt University for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.\(^9\) This research exposed a clear national ‘problem’ in terms

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of a gap in neighbourhood cleanliness between better off and more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Across the country, more affluent neighbourhoods tended to show a cleanliness level above the standard expected in national performance monitoring, while less affluent neighbourhoods tended to perform much worse. Indeed, some local authorities were achieving high average scores, but failing to maintain more deprived neighbourhoods to the desired standard. Key findings of this research of relevance to this Inquiry were:

1. The distribution of environmental services can directly favour better off over disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

One research study analysed patterns of expenditure on street cleansing relative to street-level deprivation for three local authorities. It found that in one of the three authorities, expenditure on street cleansing was currently distributed in a regressive manner relative to deprivation. This meant that dwellings within the authority's most affluent decile of streets enjoyed around twenty per cent higher expenditure on routine programmed services than dwellings in the most disadvantaged decile. A second authority had previously had a similar distribution, but had reversed this distribution in an attempt to improve outcomes in disadvantaged streets. (For the effects of this reversal see point 4 below). Senior managers within the authorities explained that there was not a deliberate strategy of skewing resource to better off areas, but that patterns of expenditure were likely to be a consequence of numerous small adjustments to workloads made over a number of years to accommodate the demands of articulate and well-connected service users. The fact that two of our three case studies had either a current or historic pattern of resource allocation which favoured affluent over deprived neighbourhoods would suggest that middle class ‘capture’ of this key public service could be a widespread problem.  

2. Even when resource allocation for environmental services does not directly favour better off neighbourhoods, services are not provided proportionate to levels of need.

A separate but related issue is whether mainstream service provision takes full account of variations in need when services are devised and delivered. Our research revealed a range of 'risk factors' predicting levels of need for environmental services. These factors include but are not reducible to the socio-economic characteristics of the neighbourhood. For example, nationally across Scotland and England, housing density and child density predict environmental problems independently of deprivation. And in another study other aspects of the built form were found to have an impact on cleanliness, such as the lack of gardens and the presence of disused buildings. The former study found that, at a national level, resources tended to be skewed towards deprived areas and those with high density housing. However, it was not apparent that the level of skew was proportionate to variations in need. Further, as point 3 below shows, it was not clear that simple assessments of the volume of resources offered an accurate picture of the extent to which needs were being met.

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22 To be clear, the case studies were not pre-selected on the basis that they distributed resources in this way. This was discovered in the course of the research. Hastings, A., N. Bailey, et al. (2009). *Street cleanliness between deprived and better-off neighbourhoods. A Clean Sweep?* York, York publishing services.; p33

23 The ‘CityForm’ survey (see Bramley et al, 20011).
3. **The particular problems of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are too often addressed by ‘reactive spending’ rather than by ensuring that routine services are properly provided.**

The Christie Commission makes some important points about the problems created by spending on the consequences rather than the causes of inequalities: what it labels as ‘reactive spending’. However, our research showed that additional, ‘top up’ spending in deprived areas is also caused by the failure of services to provide an appropriate level of routine, basic services to neighbourhoods. For example, the authority which spent twenty per cent more on programmed street cleansing services in affluent areas, used much more expensive responsive ‘trouble shooting’ services to compensate for the lack of basic services in its more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Another authority spent five times as much on cleansing streets in the most deprived decile compared to the least deprived decile once the resources provided by special regeneration initiatives were taken into account. Crucially however, this use of additional resources masked an inadequate basic service which used inappropriate machinery for the task and fell below benchmarks for the frequency of service. It is important therefore for a careful examination to take place of the nature and appropriateness of levels of spend on mainstream services in deprived areas. Such an exercise may challenge assumptions that disadvantaged neighbourhoods enjoy higher levels of resource allocation yet persist in having poor cleanliness outcomes.

4. **Adjusting environmental services to make provision more commensurate with need can improve outcomes in poor areas (without necessarily damaging those in better off areas)**

In one authority, the relative workloads of street cleansing operatives were engineered to take account of the diversity of needs across neighbourhoods. Staff operating in areas with higher levels of the ‘risk factors’ associated with environmental problems had fewer dwellings or shorter street lengths to service. This authority had the most equal outcomes of the three case studies when measured in national monitoring exercises. In addition, very few streets failed to meet the standard, and those which did were not in affluent areas.

5. **Adjusting environmental services to make provision more commensurate with need is relatively cheap.**

For the authority described in 4 above, the study estimated the relative direct cost of achieving the nationally approved acceptable cleanliness standard in streets in the most deprived decile, compared to streets of average deprivation. To achieve the authority spent approximately 35% more in the most deprived streets relative to average streets. It is worth recalling that environmental services are among the least expensive of mainstream services. The Improvement Service estimates that, on average, Scottish local authorities spend £19 per head on street cleansing and £34 on maintaining parks and open spaces. Re-balancing these services would appear not to represent a large shift in the absolute level of resources spent on poor and better off localities.

6. **When the level of service provision is not commensurate with need, there is a damaging impact on front line staff and their managers. Adjusting workloads increases efficacy and morale.**

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26 Sunday Herald analysis of Improvement service data on ‘Austerity Scotland’, 19 May 2013
The capacity of environmental operatives to work effectively in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is undermined when levels of service result in challenging workloads. Operatives rarely perceive that excessive workloads are the result of strategic decisions over resource allocation. Instead they blame residents for the challenges encountered in their jobs. There was evidence that operatives cope by cutting corners, by performing sub-standard work and by discriminating between what they see as ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ clients. However, the study found that in neighbourhoods where service improvements had been implemented which led to manageable workloads, operatives were much more positive in their attitudes to their clients and jobs.

7. When the level of service provision is not commensurate with need, there is a damaging impact on the efficacy and morale of residents. Better services can improve both efficacy and morale.

Focus groups with residents in disadvantaged areas revealed the emotional cost of living in a problematic environment and the sense of powerlessness it invoked. Those who took part in the focus groups were those who had self-identified as interested in local environmental quality. They were offered no incentive to attend the groups. Yet even these most motivated of residents – the kinds of people who might be expected to lead community-led regeneration - felt that they had very limited control over environmental cleanliness and, indeed, that their very sense of efficacy was undermined by the littered and disordered environment. However, converse trends were also evidenced. The testimony of focus groups in areas where service improvements had been implemented was that some residents at least had been re-energised.

The findings of this research on environmental services chimes closely with research more generally which suggests that non-poor groups can be the “main beneficiaries” of the welfare state and which draws attention to the idea that an “inverse care law” can operate in relation to needs and service levels. A recent synthesis of research evidence from the UK, US and Scandinavian countries provided the first systematic account of the ways in which the ’sharp elbowed’ middle classes benefit from local public services such as schooling, health and neighbourhood planning. It showed that affluent individuals and groups are often advantaged in their use of local public services and that even in service arenas where the pattern of overall resource distribution is pro-poor or neutral, middle-


class service users can enjoy disproportionate benefits. These can include taking account of middle-class concerns about the siting of affordable housing or of environmental hazards in land use planning; prioritization for care by health professionals or privileging middle-class parents and pupils in decisions about schooling.

The synthesis also revealed the variety of means by which middle class advantage is secured. It can be gained as a result of the deliberate actions and strategies of affluent individuals and groups. However, it can also be an unintentional consequence of the actions and attitudes of service providers, as well as a product of broader policy and practice. Middle class service users tend to have the kinds of ‘cultural capital’ (education, networks, skills and resources) which are useful in practical sense for negotiating with service providers. Importantly, this cultural capital also corresponds with the value set of bureaucrats and politicians with power and influence. There is the potential for an alliance to develop between middle class service providers and users which is detrimental to the interests of less affluent service users. A key outcome of this evidence review was that middle class advantage should be afforded more prominence as a policy problem.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that mainstream public services can exacerbate inequalities between neighbourhoods and between social groups as well as help to resolve them. In the sphere of environmental maintenance, service provision can be adjusted fairly cheaply and readily: it is not inevitable that poorer areas will have worse outcomes. There is a case for re-thinking basic environmental management as a form of preventative action in disadvantaged areas. This would not only make other forms of regeneration investment more sustainable but could have the capacity to set in train a range of additional improvements to well-being as well as to influence the nature of external perceptions. By affording these services this kind of priority, an emerging situation in England might be avoided. As a result of budget contraction, some local authorities are paring back significantly levels of environmental maintenance and passing responsibility for environmental quality onto communities and households.

There is already evidence on the damaging impact of even small withdrawals of service on the sense of community efficacy in deprived areas of Scotland. This is not to argue that there is no place for


increased community responsibility and involvement in this sphere. However, for community–led approaches to work, there is a need to have the state ‘on your side’. There is evidence that – perhaps all too often – the state can be on the side of better off communities. Ensuring that it works effectively to support all communities would be a key way of fostering national solidarity.