Hard to reach or easy to ignore? Seeing similarity and difference in deprived neighbourhoods in Wales and Scotland – Dr Peter Matthews, Institute for Building and Urban Design, Heriot-Watt University.

Key messages

- Scotland and Wales are similarly recovering from de-industrialisation with all the challenges of socio-economic inequality and poverty that entails;
- The Scottish and Welsh governments have used place-focused policies to alleviate and tackle poverty and deprivation;
- Policy and policy-makers often presume these neighbourhoods and communities are homogeneous;
- Evidence from Scotland demonstrates their diversity – both expected and unexpected;
- The separation of "communities of interest" and "communities of place" in policy-making means we fail to respect this diversity – we almost ignore it;
- Policy also fails to understand the nuance of how different individuals and groups experience places because of their identity;
- A key challenge is how we respond to this diversity in individual and community experience based on identity associated with: socio-economic status; place; and protected characteristics.

As a researcher based in Scotland, I was immediately struck by the similarities in the challenges of socio-economic inequality and equalities and diversity between Wales and Scotland. The present constitutional settlement means that both the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government use place-based regeneration policies to meet policy outcomes – particularly around tackling poverty and reducing socio-economic inequality. Without tax and benefit policy levers to directly tackle income poverty, improving life chances and alleviating material poverty through neighbourhood-based projects are key policy tools.

Changes to welfare-benefits since 2010, without any change to the constitutional settlement, may produce a further focus on place-based policies to target poverty and inequality. This has already been the case in Scotland with the launch in 2011 of *Achieving a Sustainable Future,* the first new regeneration strategy for five years.

These types of neighbourhood-focused anti-poverty policies, typified in Wales by Communities First, make a number of presumptions: that there is something about the neighbourhood that reduces life chances; that the neighbourhood just needs to "pull up its bootstraps" to return to being "normal"; and that the majority of people experiencing poverty live in these neighbourhoods. None of these statements are supported by research evidence – neighbourhood deprivation is a result of wider trends of de-industrialisation and market mechanisms. To put it simply, deprived neighbourhoods tend to exist because we put all of our socially rented housing in one place.

Because individuals, and households with individual problems and challenges, are concentrated in some neighbourhoods problems are more visible and obvious including:

- Poor health and wellbeing, including in health behaviours such as smoking and diet;
- Worklessness and unemployment, even though a majority of the working age population may be in employment;
- Poor quality housing and poor environmental quality due to poor housing maintenance and insufficient investment in mainstream services;
- Anti-social behaviour linked to a lower age profile, poor mental health and wellbeing and the stress of income and material poverty.

Regeneration policies aim to tackle these problems, but also make a presumption that these neighbourhoods and the people who live in them are all alike – non-immigrant, white and working class. Our analysis of data from the Scottish Health Survey demonstrates that in Scotland this is clearly not the case. Table 1 presents this data. This looks at the percentage of any group with a protected characteristic that live in most deprived 15% of neighbourhoods in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. To understand this table it is important to recognise that if a group were evenly distributed in Scotland there should be 15% of them in the most deprived 15% of neighbourhoods.

Table 1: Percentage of equalities groups in the most deprived neighbourhoods

Individuals	Percentage of whom live in bottom 15% SIMD areas
All	
Men	14.4%
Women	15.7%
Health problems / disability	
Disabled	22.0%
Long-term illness	22.5%
Disabled AND long-term ill	27.5%
Neither long-term ill nor disabled	12.8%
Ethnicity	
White	15.0%
All non-White ethnicities	22.9%
Religion	
No religion	14.8%
Church of Scotland	12.4%
Roman Catholic	26.3%
Other Christian	8.6%
Buddhist	9.3%
Muslim	27.1%
Other religions	14.4%
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	13.4%
Gay / lesbian / bisexual / 'other'	17.0%
Refused	17.6%

The interesting figures are those in cells coloured yellow and orange – over-represented groups. Key findings to take from this table are:

- The concentration of people who are disabled and/or have long-term ill health. People who are both disabled and have long-term ill health are twice as likely to live in the most deprived neighbourhoods (**27.5%**).
- All non-White ethnicities are over-represented in the most deprived neighbourhoods (**22.9%**).
- Of faith groups, Roman Catholics (**26.3%**) and Muslims (**27.1%**) are particularly over-represented.
- Non-heterosexual sexualities are over-represented (**17%**)

These neighbourhoods are in fact very diverse; much more diverse than I or most policy-makers have ever considered.

This diversity is not reflected in regeneration policy. For example anti-poverty policies focused on deprived neighbourhoods rarely take into account the gendered experience of poverty; that women are entering a different labour market from a different starting point, often with care responsibilities. The tailored support women need is rarely acknowledged by neighbourhood-based projects to tackle worklessness. The unpaid work of women in developing what is termed bonding social capital – strong friendship networks and help to get by – is rarely recognised in policy focused at engaging and helping communities.

What regeneration policies are effective at doing is making people who share protected characteristics a problem:

- Women become the object of policy because of spatial concentrations of lone parents who are seen as problematic and something to be sorted out.
- Disabled people are a problem as we need to reduce the welfare benefits bill, not remove barriers to them getting sustainable, well-paid, skilled employment.
- Neighbourhoods with a high number, or even a majority, of residents from ethnic minority communities are seen as a problem for social cohesion or at worst a focus for islamaphobic concerns around terrorism.

The fact that policy makes people who share protected characteristics a problem demonstrates a lack of sophistication in how we think about the connections between equalities, socio-economic inequalities (particularly poverty) and place. Because equalities groups can be relatively small and therefore difficult to measure it is easy to separate out "communities of place" and "communities of interest". This presumes neighbourhoods are homogenous, denies the complexity of identity, and ignores that where people live interacts with other experiences of inequality to affect their life chances.

To work through a scenario from a gender perspective, I would like to take the example of a regeneration policy whose objectives include rebuilding housing to improve a neighbourhood. Many evaluations have demonstrated this will improve the residents' perceptions of the neighbourhood; will reduce material poverty and the impacts of income poverty; fuel efficiency may improve household income; and it may improve mental health and wellbeing. However, the burden of community engagement in deciding what gets built is likely to fall on women. Lone, female parents are likely to find the process of moving house

particularly disruptive and unpleasant. Women are unlikely to be able to access the construction jobs or apprenticeships that might be delivered to local residents. Women are much more likely to feel the benefits of better urban design making a neighbourhood feel safer. As they are more likely to be carers or work part-time they are going to spend more time in the neighbourhood and thus derive more benefit to their mental health and wellbeing from the improved environment.

It is this nuanced relationship between protected characteristics, place and socio-economic status that is so lacking from place-based policies targeting poverty and socio-economic inequality. I'm interested in knowing has this complexity been recognised in policies? If it has not, how can we do it? How can we bring equalities to the fore? Are there examples where we have moved away from the divide between communities of interest and communities of place to fully engage with the multiple dimensions of people and places? Do we fully understand how people who share protected characteristics experience different places? Do we even know where they live?