Fixed boundaries, dynamic housing policy: a necessary tension?

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introduction

• Paper explores conceptual issues regarding the process of boundary definition and determination for fluid and dynamic urban regeneration policy

Overview:

• Set up the tension between our increasing academic/policy awareness of cities as a series of flows, networks and connections on the one hand, and Area Based initiatives – fixed, bounded spaces – on the other.

• Draw upon recent housing and regeneration ABIs in England to consider their relationship with their boundaries

• Focus upon the experience of negotiating the pathfinder areas for the Housing Market Renewal pathfinder programme. This is a useful case study in a number of regards
  – An innovative approach both in terms of scale and detail
  – Can consider the role, impact and implications of boundaries on an evolving policy and programme

• The role of spatial ‘fixing’ in translating policy into practice – still important to think about morphology as well as relationships
‘the spatial turn’

Traditional ... notions of geographical scale as a fixed, bounded, self- enclosed and pre-given container are currently being superseded – at least within the parameters of critical geographical theory and research – by a highly productive emphasis on process, evolution, dynamism and sociopolitical contestation.

(Brenner, 2001, p. 592)

• The ‘spatial turn’ has challenged notions of distinctiveness, otherness, bounded entities. Boundaries are seen to be full of holes – blurred, fluid, partial, splintered

• Much debate has focused on impact of globalisation and information technologies in undermining and recasting spatial networks and relations

• Instinctively boundaries, and certainly fixed boundaries, appear counter to the complex nature and challenges facing our cities

• Housing and urban policy has also reconnected in a big way with scale and the spatial – e.g. the cities/city-region agenda

But the actual implementation of programmes continues to struggle in negotiating these flows and renegotiating networks
policy’s spatial credentials

• Increasing re-engagement: NSNR, social exclusion, ‘neighbourhood effects’, strategic spatial planning, integration of housing and planning, cities agenda

  – Recognition that markets and drivers do not subscribe to administrative boundaries, nor are they fixed
  – Different policymaking appropriate at different scales. There is no spatial nirvana at which complex and comprehensive policy should be positioned
  – Emphasis on integration, interrelationships and collaboration
  – More openness, more discussion, more about influencing agendas
  – Less central performance management, more devolved responsibility and flexibility

• Hard to argue with. But:
  
  What happens as policy moves to practice?
  Why do lines continue to get drawn on the map?
... but practice requires a spatial fix

Free-flowing processes become instantiated in structures, in institutional, social, cultural, and physical realities that acquire a relative permanence, fixity and immovability. Materialised utopias of process cannot escape the question of closure
(Harvey, 2000, p. 185)

... between the rising power to overcome space and the immobile spatial structures required for such a purpose
(Brenner 2004, p. 34).

• Translation from policy to practice needs ‘closure’ and ‘lock in’: it needs to establish parameters, establish accountability, otherwise it remains strategic and hypothetical. Practice requires stability and spatio-temporal fixes (Harvey, 2000; Jessop, 2006)

• Area Based Initiatives have provided a longstanding response in the UK for housing and urban renewal as a means of targeting resources to need.

• The ABI approach acts as a form of closure. Boundary setting is another.

• The appropriate shift from ‘morphology to relations’ is not disputed. But this paper argues that we need to also retain sight of morphology and why ‘spatial fixing’ occurs
ABIs and boundaries

*Area-based approaches where particular areas of opportunity or need in cities receive concentrated attention should be encouraged.* (ODPM, 2006, p.240)

- Boundaries integral to ABI approach
  - Clarify aims, scope, terms of reference and responsibilities
  - Provide legitimacy, accountability
- From both practice and evaluation activity we’re also aware of their problems
  - Seen as arbitrary, exclusionary, split up communities, cohesion and respect issues, lack of integration with other delivery and implementation geographies, the bane of urban researchers re: data issues
- While considerable academic interest in delimiting cities/city regions, relatively little critical engagement as to how boundaries are determined and delimited, or indeed challenging their application in ABIs
- This lack parallels the expedient and cursory nature in which delimitation often takes place, the varied levels of guidance provided, and the ‘Cinderella’ status of space
- Recent ABI arguably more responsive to dynamic and fluid policy and engagement with the ‘spatial’ – however boundary fixes remain
selected English ABIs: boundary morphologies

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<th>Selected ABIs</th>
<th>Boundary morphology</th>
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<td><strong>Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)</strong></td>
<td>There were no boundaries or restrictions on the objectives or spatial areas that could be covered in the SRB bid. This therefore represented a dramatic approach from the policy initiatives of the past that has traditionally focused on delivering a fairly standard package to an area defined by Government. (DTLR, 2002, p.34)</td>
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<td><strong>Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRA)</strong></td>
<td>Setting the boundaries of the NRA is often a difficult task … The NRA process is not just about housing but about creating sustainable solutions for neighbourhoods. Therefore boundary setting needs to take into account communities, not just the housing stock. Boundaries are not just means of putting lines on a map. Boundaries are part of the process of translating the aims and objectives into a strategy and programme for action. (ODPM, 2004, p. 26)</td>
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<td><strong>New Deal for Communities (NDC)</strong></td>
<td>NDC boundaries were drawn in different ways. Most were decided within the local authority with nominal consultation. Some were selected because previous regeneration programmes had not been located before in a particular area … Others were drawn to maximise the benefit of previous and current programmes focused in one area … Often neighbourhoods with no affiliations were incorporated to make up the bid … (Musgrave, 1999, p. 5-6)</td>
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the case of Housing Market Renewal

• If any recent ABI has required flexible, dynamic spatial credentials, Housing Market Renewal would be it
  – Long-term, working with the dynamic of housing markets, subregional in extent but needing geographical credibility across a range of scales

• Yet the policy has been accompanied by one of the most complex spatial fixes of all

• Critical engagement considers:
  – the question of scale: the logical scale of enquiry and inclusion
  – the process of detailed delimitation: drawing lines on the map
  – Impact/effect/role of boundaries on evolving policy and programme

CAVEAT: where not otherwise attributed, any issues, questions raised reflect the views of the researcher. They no not necessarily represent the views of DCLG
The boundaries for the HMR areas did not follow established administrative contours but were largely shaped by the scale and incidence of market failure, as identified through the raft of studies by CURS ... The HMR programme was shaped according to a much more 'bottom-up' process in which the results of data analysis defined the territory, though this was then followed by local negotiations with ODPM over the precise delineations of the HMR areas (Cole and Nevin, 2004, p.19)

CURS/DTLR evidence applied to detailed geographies in nine pathfinder areas, mediated to reflect each pathfinder had specific challenges, aims

Adjacent areas of market risk: a principle of contiguity where feasible

A process of negotiation:
- Identified geographies for each area mapped as a starting point for discussions
- Market renewal team visits to pathfinders - local knowledge and expertise incorporated
- Evidence and information provided in support of suggested changes

Result: shared responsibility for agreed boundaries
- Pathfinders liaison with local partners, take responsibility for dissemination
- DTLR/ODPM responsibility for evidence-based methodology used for boundary determination
boundary outcomes

Pathfinder boundaries: Transform South Yorkshire reproduced from Audit Commission (Audit Commission 2006b).

Transform’s area (shaded grey) is almost contiguous across parts of Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster.
boundary observations

• In terms of policy process, boundary development brought a number of positives
  – Getting off the mark: one of the first tangible outputs of the policy, central to Ministerial agreement and formal pathfinder status
  – Set down a clear marker regarding the evidence-led nature of the initiative and the importance of housing market intelligence
  – Boundary meetings provided an early focus for partnership working, helping reiterate the subregional perspective of the initiative
  – Evidence-base rigor provided assurances to Government re: scale and funding

• However the resulting outcomes are undoubtedly complex – while some of the pathfinders boundaries were relatively straightforward and contiguous, those across more dispersed urban forms are fairly fragmented

• Interesting to speculate whether boundary negotiation would have been different had all prospective pathfinder areas been ‘up to speed’ on drivers/issues shaping their markets at the time of negotiation
**boundary effectiveness**

- Beyond acting as a spatial container for aligned expenditure, what did the boundaries actually mean in terms of strategy development and delivery?
  - Strategically, have still needed to look outward and make partnerships beyond the confines of HMR boundaries/extent of HMR pathfinder authorities
  - In terms of delivery, subregional geographies required disaggregating in order to meaningfully plan in detail and actually deliver

- Tensions between different scales of activity: pathfinder bodies have strategic led within the pathfinder boundaries, but mainly local authorities with legitimacy for delivery and accountability to communities.
  - Issues of governance, accountability (Audit Commission, 2006)

- Spatial disparities: frameworks for interfacing with plethora of other/existing initiatives

- Impacts
  - Evidence of adjacency/displacement issues
  - Community cohesion concerns
adapting to change – what role do boundaries play?

• 3 key interrelated challenges where fixed boundaries will have an impact

1. Changing nature of the housing market

2. Shifting parameters and programme’s complexity makes it difficult to sell, easy to critique

3. Policy agendas move on – often rapidly. Even if always intended as a long-term programme and remit remains relevant, may need to regroup and reframe

The current pathfinder approach of dealing with much larger areas crossing local authority boundaries and seeking strategic integration of policies and programmes at a regional and sub-regional level to achieve a holistic regeneration remains sound and with no viable alternative in view.

(Audit Commission, 2006, p.47)

Following six years of intervention and market change by 2010 … the Pathfinders should be prepared to work with government to assess whether the original boundaries of the market renewal areas are still robust given changing market conditions, or whether they need to be reassessed given the evidence


I think Yvette Cooper [Housing Minister] has signalled quite strongly she wants a retreat from areas where prices have risen and she feels the job is done

conclusions

• What role have boundaries played/continue to play for HMR?
  – At the time of initiation, can be argued that the absence of effective frameworks at the appropriate spatial levels meant that the policy itself had to create conditions which would enable translation into practice
  – Would it have been undertaken that way now, certainly where Cities/city region agenda up to speed?
  – Question of separating different policy and delivery roles at different spatial levels
  – Should they be redrawn, refocused, or dissolved in response to policy and market change? Would it make much difference?

• More generally, do their flaws render boundaries obsolete?
  – Impetus to fix and lock in space to achieve particular goals likely to face the same pressure and same tensions as new initiatives emerge – particularly where the drivers underpinning need for intervention are across a range of spatial scales
  – Tensions will always exist between spatial scales – there is no spatial nirvana, and no perfect boundaries. Boundaries do however provide a framework to mediate those tensions
  – Need to acknowledge demands of delivery versus relative comfort of strategy and process
  – If boundaries are here to stay in this increasingly fluid and connected world, worth investigating and seeking to maximise their value as well as begrudge their difficulties