

Fixed Boundaries, Dynamic Housing Policy: a Necessary Tension?

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ABSTRACT

Despite the significant academic attention focused on the merits of particular area based initiatives (ABI) and the ABI approach in general, there has been rather less attention to the process of defining the actual geographical boundaries which delimit the areas where these programmes operate. Determination has traditionally been an expedient, pragmatic activity, yet is arguably as much an important starting point as clarifying policy aims, objectives, terms of reference and responsibilities within wider policy development.

As with the need to ‘fix’ concepts and thought when moving from policy to practice (Harvey, 2000), by definition, ABIs have required a fixing of space, identifying the scope of interest and legitimacy for governance, decision-making and the exercise of power. How does such fixing accommodate the ever-increased connectivity and complexity that shapes our cities, and recent policies that seek to be dynamic and iterative, responding to changes in context over time? Against this fluidity, the act of delimitation would appear a rather perverse enterprise: seeking to fix places which are constantly renegotiated by factors and drivers operating at scales not coterminous with those boundaries drawn. Or indeed, disrupting existing flows and negotiating new ones.

This paper explores the process of boundary definition for fluid, dynamic policy, drawing on a range of recent UK and US housing market and neighbourhood renewal initiatives. In particular, early negotiation of the nine ‘pathfinder area’ boundaries for the UK Housing Market Renewal programme is considered: an initiative defined by the tensions between citywide and sub-regional drivers and actions necessarily focused at the neighbourhood level. While the geographies established were sub-regional, and the programme intended to respond as markets changed, ‘spatial fixing’ was a core to policy development. The back door was always left open for boundaries to shift as the programme evolved, and the 2006 Report of Pathfinder Chairs moots that the next scheme update round (2008) may be an appropriate time to do so. The implications of shifting boundaries within the context of the future trajectory of HMR policy will be discussed, with considerations put forward for the ‘matter of geography’ in future spatially defined policy.

Key Words: boundaries, market dynamics, neighbourhood renewal