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1. Introduction

Over the decade since the global financial crisis and the great recession that followed, poverty, deprivation and socio-economic inequalities have re-emerged as high-profile issues across a range of policy areas. One way in which this has manifested itself is in concern with the uneven geographies of deprivation and spatial inequality. At the national scale, this is seen most prominently in debates around places that have been 'left behind' (Goodwin and Heath, 2016) or 'don't matter' (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018), in the UK linked to concerns around highly uneven regional development. There is also, however, a long-standing interest in more localised and persistent concentrations of disadvantage at the neighbourhood level; this has tended to focus on inner-city neighbourhoods or urban peripheries (Atterton, 2017). Ever more sophisticated area-based deprivation indices have been developed to measure these, and although criticised for being less useful for rural areas, these measures have gained in prominence as tools for national and local government to target policies and interventions at particular apparently disadvantaged places. There are of course also extensive debates about the effectiveness of this type of targeting (e.g. Crisp et al., 2014)

This growing concern with localised inequalities has emerged in the context of two parallel trends for local governance. On the one hand, in the name of community empowerment or localism agendas, central government has sought to promote a shift towards 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' focused service provision as part of a transition towards an 'enabling state' (Markantoni et al., 2018). In Scotland, as part of the UK with devolved responsibility over a range of social policy, this is linked to a 'return to place' (Matthews, 2012), based on a recognition that outcomes for individuals are both highly geographically variable and highly geographically clustered (Mair et al., 2010), and as a practical step towards developing more integrated and 'joined up' approaches as part of a broader agenda of public service reform (Bynner, 2016; Atterton, 2017)

On the other hand, local government, which is in many cases at the front line of delivering these shifting priorities, has also been disproportionately affected by cuts in public sector expenditure resulting from the pursuit of austerity since 2010 (Gray and Barford, 2018). There has been a tendency to view these impacts through the lens of 'austerity urbanism' (Peck, 2012) that sees cities as the key sites of fiscal consolidation, although there is evidence that – at least in Scotland – some rural local authorities have experienced greatest per capita reductions in spending (Hastings et al., 2015).

Taken together, the intersection of these issues – a pressure to demonstrate action on socio-economic outcomes at local level, the hollowing out of local government through austerity, and high-profile indicators focused on typically urban concentrations of deprivation – presents significant and specific challenges in rural areas, not least of which is how to target resources at both more traditionally deprived neighbourhoods in their larger towns and a more dispersed and sometimes remote disadvantaged population. This paper attempts to explore and illustrate this based on the example of two largely rural regions in the South of Scotland, and proceeds as follows. Firstly, the Scottish policy context is briefly set out, with a focus on responses to inequality and to the developing mechanisms for local governance. Secondly, there is an examination of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation as a typical example of an official and nationally applied indicator, and of some of the conceptual and practical difficulties with its application to rural areas. Evidence from the case study regions is then presented, based on analysis of poverty and deprivation indicators, policy documents

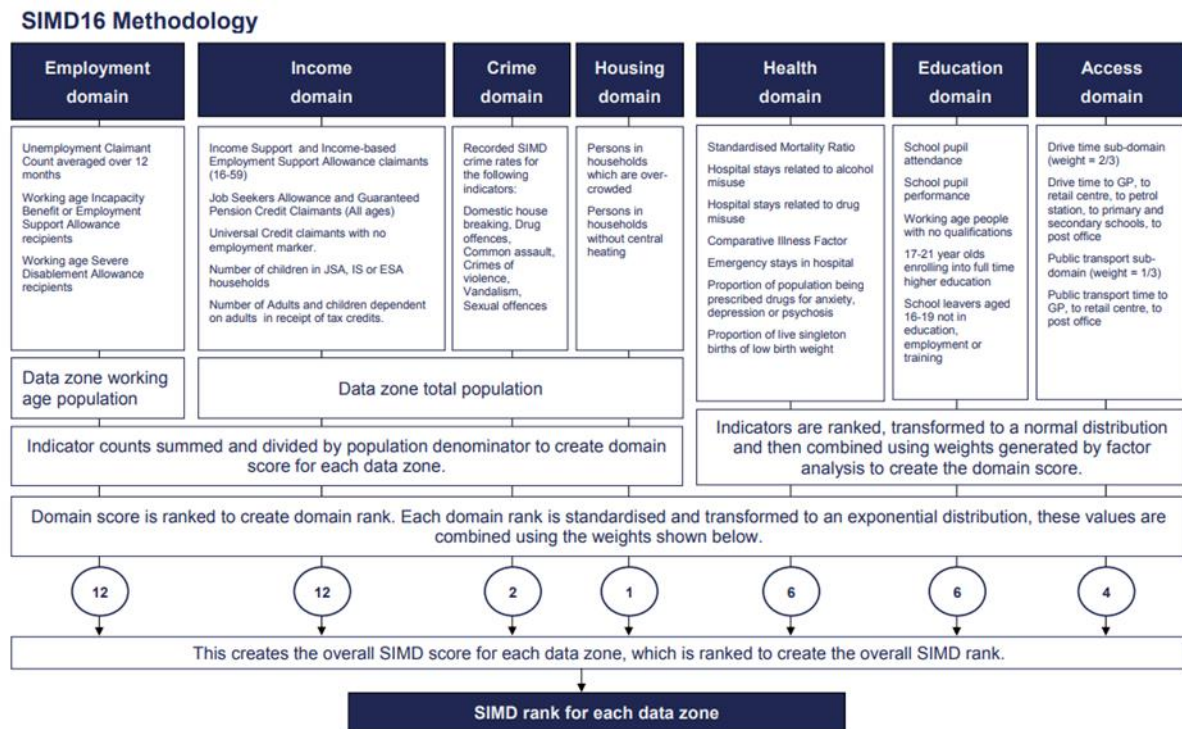
and interviews with local authority officers and elected members, illustrating some of the ways in which local interventions are targeted at particular places, followed by a discussion of the role of this particular 'official' national indicator in shaping approaches to addressing spatial inequalities and how this relates to the rationale for these interventions. The paper concludes by setting out the conflicting pressures and dilemmas for rural local authorities in this policy area, in the context of an increasing emphasis on the need for 'place-based' approaches, but where the allocation of public funding, and the indicators used as evidence for this, remains largely centrally determined.

2. Area-Based Deprivation and Rurality

In the decade since the great recession that followed the global financial crisis, the long-term trend of falling poverty in the UK has levelled off (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017), the number of people experiencing severe poverty has increased (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016), and growing precarity in employment, income and housing has led to the widespread experience of financial stress (Bramley and Bailey, 2017). At the same time, welfare reforms, with increased conditionality and use of sanctions, have led to a disproportionate reduction in the incomes of the poorest households (Hood and Waters, 2017), and vulnerable groups (Etherington and Daguerre, 2015). This has, in turn, resulted in greater demand for emergency assistance from services (such as food banks) in the most affected areas (Loopstra et al., 2015). While there is a tendency for terms such as poverty, disadvantage, deprivation, social exclusion and inequality to be used interchangeably to refer to aspects of the same overall phenomenon, each can be defined and measured in particular ways. As a result, there is no single indicator that can capture the extent of 'deprivation', and different measures are available at different geographical scales. Nevertheless, area-based indicators of multiple deprivation have emerged as high profile national measures, gaining public attention and being commonly used by local and central government as a guide for targeting resources. Building on the foundational approaches based on census data (Townsend, 1987; Carstairs and Morris, 1989) progressively more detailed measures have been developed since the 1990s, initially for England (Noble et al., 2000), with similar indices adopted across a range of territories, including Wales (Welsh Government, 2015), Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2010), New Zealand (Exeter et al, 2017), and South Africa (Noble et al., 2010).

In Scotland, the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is the "official tool for identifying those places in Scotland suffering from deprivation" (Scottish Government, 2012, p2). This is based on seven 'domains', with a score calculated for each from a variety of indicators, with the overall SIMD score a weighted sum of these domains (Figure 1). Scores are calculated for datazones, the basic unit of statistical geographies in Scotland, and roughly equivalent to Lower Super Output Areas in England and Wales. These are intended to be of similar population size, each containing between 500 and 1,000 households (Scottish Executive, 2005). The headline result of the SIMD is therefore a ranking of each of Scotland's 6,976 datazones from most to least deprived.

Figure 1: The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation



Source: Scottish Government (2016a)

These types of indicator have been subject to extensive critique as they have developed in complexity and popularity over the past two decades. From the rural perspective, two characteristics of these measures are potentially problematic.

The first of these concerns the construction of these indices. While they are grounded in the concept of multiple deprivation that goes beyond simply low income (Townsend, 1979), the choice of specific indicators remains subject to researchers' value judgements and the availability of reliable data sources at the desired geographical level (Gordon, 2003). Similarly, the way in which individual indicators and domains are weighted in the calculation of the index has been criticised as essentially arbitrary (Deas et al., 2003). In the Scottish context, the SIMD has been subject to persistent criticism on the grounds that the 'access' domain (see Figure 1) both includes only a very limited assessment of geographical access, being based only on estimates of travel time to services, and receives insufficient weighting in the overall index relative to the central role of access to services and economic opportunities in defining rural experiences of deprivation (McKendrick, 2011; Skerrat and Woolvin, 2014). At the same time, however, it has been argued that the exclusion of physical environment indicators, such as derelict land and air quality (Deas et al., 2003), risks undervaluing experiences of inner city deprivation. Such debates highlight the subjectivity and therefore contestability of such choices; while it would be possible to add additional measures of, for example, the cost and frequency of public transport (if such data existed), or to assign greater weighting to a rural-focused access domain (Robson, 2001, this would not address these underlying tensions. There is therefore a fundamental question of whether it is possible to design any single index that can be meaningfully applied to both rural and urban areas if the inherent experiences of deprivation in each are held to be significantly qualitatively different (Bertin et al., 2014).

The second and possibly more fundamental limitation of such measures from a rural perspective is that any area-based measure will tend to neglect the significant number of people who experience deprivation but do not live in those areas identified as most deprived (Holterman, 1975; Tunstall and Lupton, 2003). As these measures are essentially indicators of geographically concentrated deprivation (Bramley, 2005), and rural deprivation tends to be more widely dispersed than in urban areas (McKendrick et al., 2011), it is argued that rural areas are inherently less likely to feature amongst those ranked as most deprived. This can be exacerbated by the specific geographical units used as a basis for these indicators, as the size and boundaries of these areas will influence the calculation of scores and ranks (the 'modifiable areal unit problem', see Fotheringham and Wong, 1991). In Scotland, datazones, designed to include broadly similar populations across the country, vary in size from small neighbourhoods in urban settings to large areas where population density is low, with some small settlements, or parts of settlements, included with much larger rural hinterlands. As Bramley (2005) notes, therefore, there is a tendency in Scotland for "urban datazones to be more homogeneous, and hence more polarised in the socio-economic characteristics, than rural zones". Previous work exploring this issue in the Scottish context (Clelland and Hill, 2019) found wide geographical variations in the extent to which the SIMD acts as an effective guide to where deprived people live. At a local authority level, the 'most deprived' quintile of datazones can include as few as 27% of that region's income deprived individuals; at the national level a highly uneven distribution of these most deprived neighbourhoods (concentrated in urban areas) conceals a much lower variation in the proportion of local populations who could be regarded as deprived.

While such limitations are directly acknowledged in the Scottish Government's own analysis (e.g. Thomson, 2016) and in official guidance (Scottish Government, 2016a), these often seem to be overlooked in how the SIMD is used in practice (Clelland and Hill, 2019). For example, coming from an area in the first and second SIMD quintiles is used as the primary indicator of students' disadvantaged background in measures of widening access to higher education (Scottish Funding Council, 2016). This example of an ecological fallacy infers socio-economic characteristics of individuals from their place of residence in a way that is clearly problematic (Weedon, 2014; Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016) given that most deprived households lie outwith these (predominantly urban) areas. With regards to the composition of the indicator, a review of the SIMD (Scottish Government, 2013) came to the conclusion that rural and urban deprivation shared sufficient commonalities in terms of structural forces (Pacione, 2004), triggers (Commission for Rural Communities, 2006) and minimum acceptable standards of living (Hirsch et al, 2013) that they should not be considered as qualitatively different. Taken together, these illustrate the ongoing national application of an indicator that reifies a particular urban-centric notion of deprivation.

3. Socio-Economic Inequality in Scotland: Local Governance and Policy Responses

At the Scottish level, there have been a variety of responses to issues of poverty, deprivation and inequality in recent years, with tackling the 'significant inequalities in Scottish society' identified as one of the National Outcomes in the Scottish Government's (2016b) National Performance Framework. In parallel, the goal of 'inclusive growth' has been introduced as a priority in the most recent Government Economic Strategy (Scottish Government 2015). This represents "a significant change to the public sector's approach to supporting economic growth" (Audit Scotland, 2016, p8) in that it sees reducing inequality (both between individuals and areas) as integral and complementary to better economic growth. This ambition to create 'a fairer Scotland' is also reflected in a number of commitments in the current programme for government (Scottish Government, 2017a) including the

exercise of newly devolved powers over aspects of social security; the establishment of a Poverty and Inequality Commission; measures to enhance the life chances of young people; financial advice for those on low incomes; and supporting pilots of 'citizen's basic income' schemes.

There has also been a specific focus on reducing child poverty. While this was initially stimulated by the UK Government's Child Poverty Act 2010, the subsequent abolition of this act (following a change of government at Westminster) prompted the Scottish Government's introduction of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. This sets as its primary aim the ambitious goal of reducing absolute and persistent child poverty rated to below 5% by 2030. This developing Scottish approach to child poverty is also notable for the increased emphasis on the role of the 'local' in delivering a national reduction in child poverty, with the 2017 Act introducing a requirement (rather than just an expectation) for local authorities to demonstrate how they are seeking to address child poverty in their areas (McKendrick, 2018). This reflects an acknowledgement that "many of the key levers to drive the changes needed ... are at a local level" (Scottish Government, 2011, p3).

This approach – of increasing the requirements on public bodies to address disadvantage – is also evident in other developments. The Fairer Scotland Duty, which came into force in 2018, places a legal responsibility on public bodies in Scotland to actively consider how they can reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage when making strategic decisions. Likewise the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 introduces a requirement for Community Planning Partnerships (which operate at local authority area level) to 'act with a view to reducing inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage' and in particular to produce Locality Plans targeted at particular geographic or interest communities that experience disadvantage (Scottish Government, 2016c). This is one aspect of a broader agenda of reform in public service delivery in response to the report of the Christie Commission (Scottish Government, 2011) which, among other recommendations, stressed the need for 'place-based' approaches built around people and communities.

In parallel with these centrally-driven requirements, local authorities and their partners have sought to develop strategies for addressing poverty or inequality in their areas. In some areas this has been undertaken through the establishment of quasi-independent 'commissions' to review the available evidence and to make recommendations. In broad terms this has seen local authorities articulate their own strategic approaches and priorities, although these are sometimes framed in terms of their contribution to the delivery of national goals.

The array of national and local initiatives aimed at addressing deprivation and inequality must, however, be seen within the context of the pursuit of fiscal austerity, the impacts of which have been disproportionately felt by local government. Revenue funding from the Scottish Government to local authorities (which constitutes over 60% of their income) has fallen by 7.6% in real terms since 2010, while at the same time they face inflationary pressures, growing demand for some services and bearing the costs of delivering policies set at a Scottish or UK level (Accounts Commission, 2017). In response to these financial pressures, local authorities have adopted a variety of strategies, including retrenchment from service provision (Hastings *et al.*, 2015). The impacts of austerity policies have exacerbated existing challenges for vulnerable groups in rural areas, and young people in particular (Black *et al.*, 2019).

Taken together, increasing requirements to address localised and geographically concentrated inequalities, shrinking resources, and a need to conform to centrally-determined priorities and measures, present a number of pressures and dilemmas for local government. These have the potential to be particularly acute for those authorities covering rural areas.

4. Methods and Study Area

This research project aimed to investigate how deprivation and deprived areas are viewed by local authorities in rural regions, how they have attempted to address these issues and how the results of the SIMD, and other sources of evidence, are used to inform approaches to targeting deprivation. This was approached through case studies of two local authority areas – the lowest tier of formal government – in the South of Scotland. Both Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders are largely rural regions – in each, just over half of the population lives in rural areas (defined as ‘remote small towns’, ‘accessible rural’ and ‘remote rural’ in Scottish Six-Fold Urban-Rural Classification). While many people live in more accessible small towns, the only settlements with populations of over 10,000 are Dumfries, Stranraer (both in Dumfries and Galloway), Hawick and Galashiels (in Scottish Borders). The areas have the lowest population densities in Scotland outside the Highlands and Islands and share a number of the socio-economic issues common to many peripheral regions - including low wages, an ageing population with net out-migration of young people, distance from large markets, low population and business densities, and the high cost of public service provision (Davies and Michie, 2011).

Quantitative data on the nature and spatial distribution of poverty and deprivation across the two areas was accessed from the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and other sources. National and local policy and strategy documents were reviewed, and publicly available council reports, working papers and committee minutes were accessed from each council’s website. Some additional documents – for example on specific programmes and local data sources – were also provided by research participants.

The central element of the research was a programme of face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus groups with council officers, managers and elected members. These represent “the ‘closest’ we can get to our research subjects” (Hughes, 1999, p365), while acknowledging that they can offer only a snapshot of how processes are viewed, and that there is a risk of uncritically adopting of assumptions, language and potentially ‘promotional’ accounts of this insider group (MacKinnon et al., 2000). While there are a variety of bodies with roles in addressing poverty and deprivation (Bennett and Clegg, 2013), local authorities represent the most significant actors at this level in providing services, allocating resources and leading partnerships. Participants were asked to reflect on a number of questions around how their local authority addresses poverty and deprivation in a spatial sense, the evidence that was used to make decisions around targeting, and challenges for rural areas. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In total 17 council employees and elected members across the two local authorities participated in the research. Interviewees were speaking on condition of anonymity, so are identified only by their broad role.

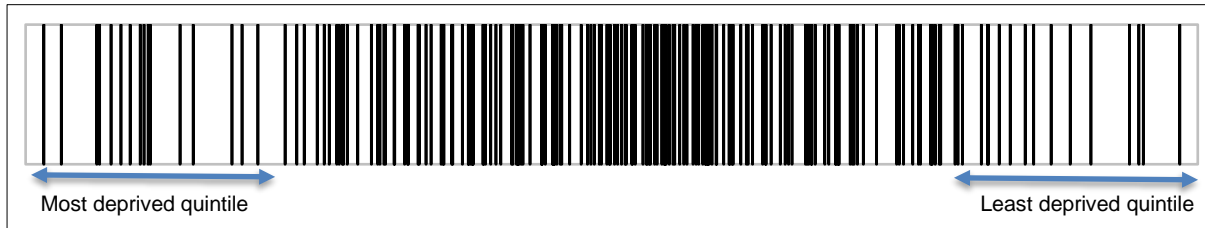
5. Results: Area-based Deprivation and Targeting in the South of Scotland

5.1: Area Deprivation

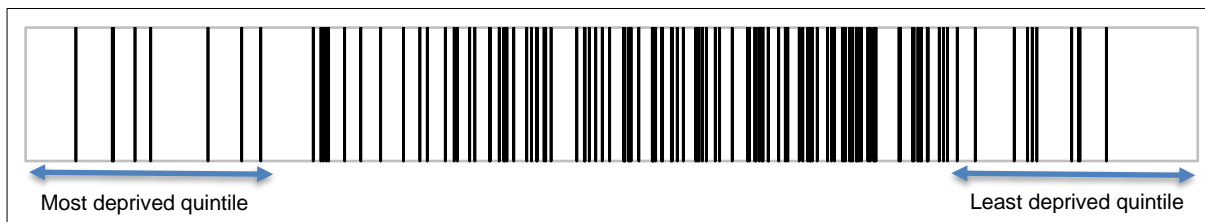
Based on the headline SIMD scores, datazones in both local authority areas are clustered around the middle of the national rankings. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the place of each datazone in the two local authority areas on the national distribution from most to least deprived. Dumfries and Galloway, having a larger population, has more datazones overall, with a slightly greater proportion of these than the Scottish Borders in the national most deprived quintile.

Figure 2: Datazones in the National SIMD Distribution

Dumfries and Galloway



Scottish Borders



Source: Scottish Government – SIMD16 Barcode Chart Generator

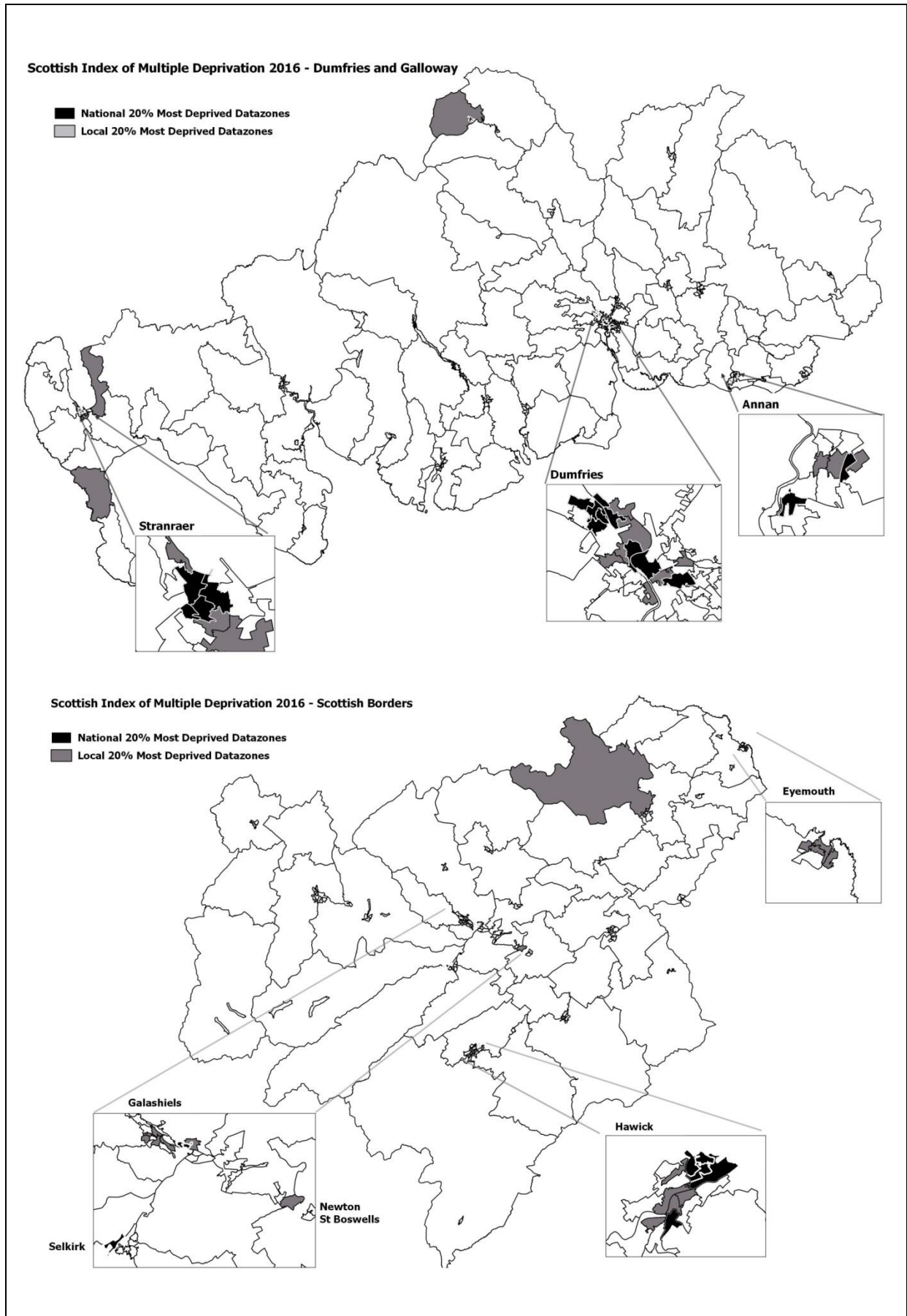
(<https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/SIMD/analysis/tools> accessed 12/12/20)

Note: Each vertical line represents a single datazone and its place on the national ranking from most to least deprived. A concentration of lines (i.e. datazones) together shows as a black block.

There are, however, datazones amongst the most deprived in Scotland in both of these regions. In Dumfries and Galloway, 17 of the region’s datazones are in the national 20% most deprived. The majority of these are clustered in north-west and central Dumfries, with others in the towns of Stranraer in the far west, Annan in the south east and Kirconnel in the north of the region. In the Scottish Borders, 8 datazones are in the national quintile. Half of these are clustered in the Burnfoot area of Hawick, with others in central Hawick, Selkirk and Galashiels. In both areas the majority of these datazones are in the largest towns – areas of relatively high population density within areas that are more broadly rural. This reflects the SIMD’s identification of areas with concentrated deprivation.

These ‘most deprived’ places nevertheless account for only a minority of deprived people in the South of Scotland. Only 38% of income deprived people in Dumfries and Galloway, and 36% in the Scottish Borders, live in each region’s most deprived datazones (i.e. the local quintile – the top 40 in Dumfries and Galloway and top 29 in the Scottish Borders).

Figure 3: SIMD Results for South of Scotland



5.2 Approaches to Targeting

Both local authorities, have, like the Scottish Government, come to place an increasing strategic emphasis on addressing issues related to poverty, deprivation and inequality. In Dumfries and Galloway, addressing poverty was identified as a priority by the Council administration in 2014. This led to the development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy for the region (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2015). The Anti-Poverty Strategy and associated action plan do not make explicit reference to spatially targeting services or particular areas of concentrated deprivation, although there is an emphasis – based on background research undertaken to support the development of the strategy (Hill and Clelland, 2015) – on recognising the dispersed nature of the deprived population and the different types of deprivation that are most prevalent across the region’s four committee areas. Likewise, in the current Scottish Borders Council administration’s vision, ‘Connected Borders’, there is a strong commitment to “ensuring that the vulnerable and marginalised are included and considered in every action we take” and that ‘no-one and no community is left behind but that we grow and develop together” (Scottish Borders Council 2017, p3), and the Council produced a tackling poverty strategy in 2014 (Scottish Borders Council, 2014). In both of the regions, these documents emphasise distinct aspects of rural deprivation including fuel poverty exacerbated by high fuel costs, access to transport and the predominance of low-wage and seasonal employment.

The two Community Planning Partnerships in the South of Scotland have also responded to the requirements of the Community Empowerment Act in strikingly different ways. In the Scottish Borders the CPP are adopting five Locality Plans for the areas of Berwickshire, Cheviot, Eildon, Teviot & Liddesdale and Tweeddale – these are in line with existing administrative subdivisions and together cover the entire region. In contrast, Dumfries and Galloway appears to be unique in adopting a thematic, region-wide plan based on food sharing (D&G CPP, 2017), rather than plans based around specific geographic areas. This is however compatible with the requirements of the Community Empowerment Act for CPPs to develop “locality and thematic approaches as appropriate” (Scottish Government, 2016c).

One manifestation of this has been a variety of initiatives that seek to target interventions or resources at particular populations on a geographical basis (see Table 1). Three broad approaches to targeting can be identified from the examples examined here.

Firstly, interventions or support can be made exclusively available to those living in particular geographic areas. Dumfries and Galloway Council’s Poverty and Social Inclusion – Community Outreach programme, for example, identifies workless, lone parent and low-income households and supporting them to progress into and through the labour market. This support is specifically and exclusively targeted at those living in datazones in the SIMD most deprived national quintile, initially in North West Dumfries (D&G Council, 2017a). This is designed to meet the criteria of the European Social Fund which supports the programme by treating residence in these areas as a barrier to labour market participation.

Secondly, additional revenue can be assigned to those services on the basis of their provision to disadvantaged groups. As part of its efforts to address the ‘attainment gap’ in education associated with poverty, the Scottish Government has instigated a number of policies aimed at providing additional resources or support to pupils from deprived backgrounds. One of these initiatives is Pupil Equity Funding (PEF), which is allocated directly to schools on the basis of the number of their pupils that are registered for free school meals, where eligibility is determined by their parents receipt of certain key benefits. This funding can be used at the discretion of headteachers to provide targeted

support for children and young people affected by poverty, although additional children may be included in targeted interventions where appropriate.

Thirdly, particular measures or indicators can be incorporated into funding formulae in a way that favours those areas with higher levels of poverty or deprivation. At a national level, local authority core funding allocations in Scotland are influenced by a variety of indicators including of individual and area deprivation (Scottish Government, 2018); although this relationship is not as strong as it historically has been in England (at least until austerity) (Hastings et al., 2015). At a local level, similar mechanisms can operate. In Dumfries and Galloway, as part of the delivery of the region’s Anti-Poverty Strategy, funding of £350,000 was assigned in the 2017/18 budget to a Tackling Poverty Local Fund. This was divided – according to a formula based on SIMD results and population – between the four sub-regional areas that are the legacy of the pre-1995 District Councils, with local committees allocating funding to local projects that addressed the strategic objectives (D&G Council, 2017b).

Table 1: Examples of Targeted Interventions

Initiative	Description	Targeting	Funding	Evidence
Home Energy Efficiency Programmes for Scotland: Area-Based Scheme	Provides the installation of insulation to improve energy efficiency. Intended to ‘clearly target fuel poor areas’	Datazones in Dumfries, Stranraer and Kelloholm	Scottish Government	Datazones in the SIMD most deprived national quintile
Poverty and Social Inclusion – Community Outreach (Dumfries and Galloway)	Strategic intervention aimed at identifying workless, lone parent and low-income households and supporting them to progress into and through the labour market.	Datazones in North West Dumfries	European Social Fund (managed by Scottish Government)	Datazones in the SIMD most deprived national quintile; evidence that the region’s lone parent families were disproportionately found in urban areas
Scottish Borders Town Centre Regeneration Action Plan	Supporting activities and projects supporting town centre regeneration	Priority Towns (Hawick, Jedburgh, Galashiels and Eyemouth)	Local Authority	SBC Town Centre Index; based on a range of indicators including population in SIMD most deprived quintile datazones
Pupil Equity Funding	Funding allocated directly to schools by the Scottish Government; used at the discretion of headteachers.	Schools	Scottish Government	Number of pupils eligible for free school meals
Dumfries and Galloway Tackling Poverty Local Fund	Allocation of funding to initiatives supporting delivery of DGC’s Anti-Poverty Strategy	Four sub-regions (‘committee’ areas)	Local Authority	Formula combining SIMD and population

Source: Interviews and programme documentation

5.3 Drivers of Place Targeting

A number of interviewees articulated a concern with small ‘pockets’ of deprivation in their areas. These could be separated into three broad categories. Firstly, those areas where concentrated deprivation was felt to be visible and recognised – most prominently areas like the neighbourhoods in North West Dumfries in D&G or in Burnfoot, Hawick in the Scottish Borders. These areas are large enough to feature in area-based indicators of deprivation, for example the national most deprived quintile of the SIMD, and are broadly acknowledged locally as being ‘deprived areas’. Secondly, there are smaller ‘pockets’ where deprivation of some kind is thought to be visible – for example in terms of poor quality housing stock – but as they fall within areas that are less deprived overall, these may not be highlighted by statistical measures. Thirdly, there are areas where it is felt that specific types of deprivation do exist but that these are hidden or invisible – for example where older people are experiencing fuel poverty. There was a perception amongst some respondents that this type of hidden deprivation tended to be more prevalent in rural areas, where, for a variety of reasons, some groups might be less able or willing to access support.

A common theme raised by all interviewees was the impact of cuts in public spending on the context within which local authorities were attempting to address deprivation. Both case study areas are identified as amongst those experiencing greater than average reductions in funding, having reduced by 7.7% and 6.0% in real terms for Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders respectively between 2013/14 and 2018/19 (Burn-Murdoch, 2018). One of the responses to greater financial pressures is to look at targeting from the perspective of efficiency – i.e. generating the maximum possible impact from a reduced amount of spending. This necessarily implies attempting to direct resources at particular groups or areas. At the same time, local authorities have certain statutory responsibilities that require them to deliver services to all of their residents.

“We’re not about growing services now, we’re about targeting to have the biggest effect”
(Council Officer, Dumfries and Galloway)

“you’re put in this straightjacket ... you’re told you must comply with the law, but by the way we’ve given you extra responsibilities ... but by the way we’re cutting your budget” (Elected Member, Scottish Borders)

A further driver for interventions to be targeted at specific areas (or the residents of these areas) is a tendency for this to be a condition of specific funding streams that local authorities seek to access. The majority of local authorities’ income is revenue funding from the Scottish Government. While a 2007 agreement with the Scottish Government substantially reduced the extent of ringfencing in centrally allocated funding to local authorities, there is a perception, voiced by several interviewees, that this settlement has been eroded over time, with more pressure on local authorities to deliver nationally determined priorities and more conditions attached to the use of funding allocated through specific programmes. The Home Energy Efficiency Programmes for Scotland: Area Based Scheme (HEEPS: ABS) for example, is a national scheme to which local authorities apply for funding to promote energy efficiency in private sector properties; these proposals are expected to target ‘fuel poor’ areas. In other cases local authorities are now being bypassed altogether in the allocation of locally targeted resources. In the case of Pupil Equity Funding, this is allocated directly to schools by the Scottish Government on the basis of nationally determined criteria. This represents a further erosion of local authorities’ control over how to target resources.

5.4 Evidence

A number of interviewees spoke of the importance of being able to demonstrate evidence locally when presenting proposals and policies – both from the perspectives of officers delivering reports to committees of elected members, and of the local authorities in making decisions that were likely to be subject to public scrutiny and criticism. This reflects a perceived “increasing imperative politically to be data driven” (Council Officer), as part of a broader trend towards being able to demonstrate evidence-based policy-making – not just on the basis of good practice, but as a way of justifying recommendations and decisions to elected members and to other groups (and potential critics in the public arena). The widespread recognition of the SIMD as a credible source of evidence in this context – stemming from its status as the Scottish Government’s ‘official’ measure of deprivation and resultant high profile – was seen as an advantage in this regard.

“SIMD is quite well known, so councillors understand what it is when you’re looking for funding and you go to a committee and you’re taking a paper, councillors will know what you’re on about” (Council Officer, Dumfries and Galloway)

However, there is also widespread awareness, amongst both council officers and elected members, of the limitations of the SIMD, particularly for rural areas. There was reference made to several of the broader rural critiques of mentioned above, sometimes explicitly citing some of the research that has been done in the Scottish context (e.g. Skerrat and Woolvin, 2014), as well as their organisations’ own analyses.

“The SIMD is a good starting point, but it’s not the be all and end all and it doesn’t always reflect our communities the way we think it should” (Council Officer, Scottish Borders)

“its a very blunt instrument” (Elected Member, Scottish Borders)

In the Scottish Borders, this reflects the local authority’s position, articulated in its strategic plan on reducing inequalities, that “In the Scottish Borders the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation does not provide a true and accurate picture of deprivation” (Scottish Borders Council, 2015, p18). There was particular concern that the use of the SIMD by the Scottish Government as a basis for the allocation of resources at a national level tends to disadvantage the region. One example of this is the Scottish Attainment Challenge Fund, which allocated additional education funding to the seven (later expanded to nine) local authorities with the highest proportion of primary school pupils living in the national 20% most deprived areas (APS Group Scotland, 2018). In response, SBC have pointed to the Scottish Government’s (2017b) own estimates of child poverty levels that place the Scottish Borders as having the eighth highest level in Scotland, arguing that this represents a more accurate representation of disadvantage. They have also developed a Child Poverty Index to provide additional insights into the levels of child poverty in the region at a local level. This uses local data from HMRC on proportions of children in low income families along with SBC’s administrative data on pupils in receipt of free school meals, clothing grants and Educational Maintenance Allowance. These indicators are combined to generate index scores for datazones that are then applied on a ‘best fit’ basis to school catchment areas.

Similarly, Dumfries and Galloway Council has commissioned research on deprivation on the region based on a range of measures (Clelland and Hill, 2015) that demonstrated the extent to which different deprived groups were widely dispersed rather than concentrated in the most deprived areas based on the SIMD. This was referenced by a number of D&G interviewees. It has also clearly been influential in the CPP's decision to develop pursue a region-wide and thematic Locality Plan, rather than a geographically-based approach. Stakeholder engagement undertaken as part of LOIP development revealed "unanimous agreement that Locality Plans focusing on smaller area geographical communities across our region was not suitable", with one of the factors behind this that "our pattern of poverty is such that 80% of people in financial poverty live outwith the SIMD" (D&G CPP, 2017c, p16).

More broadly, the interviews revealed a broadly shared belief in the qualitatively different nature of rural deprivation – with regard to factors such as transport and social isolation – and a common perception that the nature of rural datazones – i.e. larger and less homogenous than urban – is a fundamental barrier to the usefulness of the SIMD to their areas. With regard to the former, as already noted, the Scottish Government's position is that experiences of deprivation in urban and rural contexts have sufficient commonalities for a national index to be meaningful, and the inclusion of the access domain provides an effective recognition of specific issues of remoteness. With regard to the latter, there is scope within the Scottish Government's periodic production of updated datazone geographies for local stakeholders to suggest boundary changes that align more closely with what they perceive to be natural communities, although the broad population thresholds mean that wide variations in geographical size are inherent. In the last review, 65 datazones in Dumfries and Galloway and 78 in the Scottish Borders had their proposed boundaries amended based on responses to the consultation (Scottish Government, 2013). While it has therefore been possible to address some concerns around rural representation in the SIMD – and these have been increasingly acknowledged in the associated guidance and dissemination material – more fundamental challenges to the understanding of 'multiple deprivation' are difficult to accommodate within the framework of a single national index.

6. Discussion

The growing prominence of IMDs and other indicators is at least in part associated with the discourse of evidence-based policy making, which itself is a central issue in public service reform in Scotland (Coutts & Brotchie, 2017). As noted in the variety of critiques from the policy studies literature, however (e.g. Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017; Sanderson, 2011), public policy emerges from a range of competing values and priorities, including the construction of what is considered as 'evidence'.

The analysis presented here suggests a variety of processes by which appropriate 'evidence' is identified at the local level. Most obviously, the Scottish Government retains a strong influence through its role as the primary source of funding for local authorities and through the specific requirements attached to ring-fenced funding streams. These tend to privilege the SIMD. Furthermore, the status of the SIMD as an official, national measure, produced by the Scottish Government with a high level of recognition amongst decision makers appears to have lent it considerable weight as a data source among local authorities. In addition to the examples illustrated here, a survey of local authorities' place-based interventions (Baczyk *et al.*, 2016) shows the majority using the SIMD for at least partial, and sometimes sole, justification of identifying specific areas.

There is potential here to view these types of deprivation indicators from a neo-Foucauldian perspective as ‘governmental technologies’ that are employed as “concrete devices for managing and directing reality” (Mackinnon, 2000, p296). In this case, the spatial manifestation of socio-economic inequality is made measurable and ‘governable’ through the construction of the SIMD as a statistical tool; this acts to define deprivation as an object of policy in a particular way that corresponds to more visible concentrations of ‘urban-type’ disadvantage.

This dominant, urban-centric conception of deprivation, is however open to contestation. Both council officers and elected members in the rural local authorities here are taking an increasingly critical approach to the SIMD and other indicators, and seeking to look beyond these ‘headline’ figures. This has seen them seeking to challenge decisions about national resource allocation on the basis that they are based upon evidence inappropriate to rural areas, with reference to other nationally recognised ‘official’ datasets as potential alternatives. There is also a shift to consider the development of alternative deprivation indices specifically tailored to the measurement of rural deprivation (for example Burke and Jones, 2019). This acts to reframe decisions seen to favour the urban over the rural as political choices rather than the inevitable consequence of neutral evidence. Such a framing sits within wider political narratives around the perceived disadvantaging and disenfranchisement of the ‘local’ by a government with centralising tendencies, seen as being to the particular detriment of rural and peripheral regions. The potential to challenge this has, however, been facilitated by the efforts of the relevant division within the Scottish Government to promote understanding of how the SIMD should be used (Scottish Government, 2016a; Thomson, 2016).

These tensions highlight a fundamental ambiguity in the grounds upon which this type of area targeting is employed. It is not clear in some cases whether such interventions aim to target resources at people who live in deprived areas in an attempt to address specific area-based problems, or whether an individual’s residence within particular datazone boundaries is being used as a proxy for their likely experience of specific types of deprivation. This ambiguity has particular implications for rural regions, where residence is less closely linked with individual- or household-level deprivation – although it is important to avoid the adoption of a simplistic urban/rural binary that “ascribes causality to place and obscures the gradations between each category” (Sherry and Shortall, 2019, p338).

If policies are genuinely seeking to address or mitigate multiple deprivation with a spatial element then there is clearly a case for utilising IMD-type measures to inform this. The problem for local authorities is that existing national measures are formulated to capture particular types of ‘urban’ deprivation, and their administrative areas often include both this type of concentration and more dispersed patterns of ‘rural’ deprivation that is more difficult to measure and is more strongly related to issues of transport and geographical access to services. At the same time, they are pushed to deliver reductions in spatial inequalities while constrained by centrally determined priorities and reliance on accessing national funding streams that themselves promote the use of these urban-privileging measures. This links to more fundamental questions about an approach to public policy that is developing a greater focus on localism, ‘communities’ and place-based interventions that can encompass a spectrum of approaches, from attempts to target interventions at particular places to more sophisticated and holistic interpretations based around utilising local assets, preventing negative outcomes, and enabling public bodies to become facilitators (rather than necessarily providers) of service provision at the local level (Improvement Service, 2016; Bynner, 2016; McBride, 2018).

The logic of place-based approaches suggests firstly the importance of tailoring interventions to local circumstances, and secondly the emergence of decisions from the interaction of internal and

external sources of knowledge. There has, however, been little articulation of how such approaches might operate differently in Scotland's urban and rural areas (Currie, 2017). Furthermore, the diverse set of contexts within these two broad categories, and the contingent ways in which place can influence outcomes (Brown and Cromartie, 2004), suggest that the urban/rural binary (although used in the analysis presented here) may not be particularly useful in understanding local conditions or in designing appropriate policy (Sherry and Shortall, 2019). Simply designing an alternative or additional index of multiple deprivation for rural areas might therefore be of limited value. Instead, although they are potentially useful for some circumstances, there should perhaps be less emphasis on national indices that are used as the basis for interventions across a range of policy areas, and openness to a more diverse array of evidence as appropriate to specific places.

There are broadly shared concerns amongst stakeholders in rural areas that the currently available small-area data across a range of policy areas is currently not adequate to inform effective place-based approaches at the locality level (Hopkins et al., 2019). As such, promoting the availability and accessibility of good quality data for small geographies should be one element in any attempt to enhance the effective targeting of interventions aimed at deprived populations. Alongside this, however, actors at the local level require the resources and capacity to analyse this data and to develop their own evidence appropriate to local circumstances, needs and priorities - Scottish Borders Council for example have developed their own indices to inform local decision-making, and the Scottish Government's (2016a) guidance stresses the importance of combining SIMD results with other sources of data. This is, however, somewhat at odds with a situation where the resources over which local authorities have discretion is diminishing, in favour of funding pots allocated by central government on the basis of national measurements.

7. Conclusions

This paper has explored how rural local authorities have sought to address issues related to socio-economic deprivation within the 'straightjacket' of being asked to do 'more with less'. Although there are both national and local strategic approaches to addressing poverty and deprivation, there are also an array of relevant policies and interventions cutting across the traditional 'service'-based structures of local authorities.

Local authorities serving rural areas face particular challenges in attempting target resources at deprived people and places. On the one hand, area-based indicators, such as the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, may be less relevant and effective where populations are more widely dispersed. There can be difficulties in gathering data and evidence at the level of detail necessary for small rural communities. Even datazones can cover large areas and may not align with the areas relevant to local decision making. It can also be argued that the qualitative experiences of poverty and deprivation in rural areas are distinctive. Most notably, issues of transport, access to services and social isolation are seen as being more significant in the experience of deprivation than in urban areas. The Scottish Government are very clear about the strengths, limitations and appropriate use of the SIMD, and have undertaken extensive engagement activity to communicate these to users, including hosting workshops in both of the case study areas prior to the release of SIMD 2016. Nevertheless, this demonstrably remains a privileged source of evidence.

At the same time, however, in common with many rural regions, the areas examined here do have some smaller neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation in the largest towns. At a local authority level, decision makers therefore are faced with both urban-type concentrations of deprivation and deprivation that is more widely dispersed – i.e. present in every ward and datazone,

but in a way that may not be 'visible', either physically or through statistical measures. This means that local authorities have to balance the targeting of conspicuously 'deprived' areas with those of less visible and less concentrated groups. The ways in which they do this are shaped and constrained by, on the one hand, the progressively tightening financial settlements that local government has been subject to, and on the other, centrally set priorities and conditions. These include statutory duties to provide certain universal services, increasing requirements to demonstrate a local response to socio-economic and spatial inequality, and the privileging of specific indicators as widely recognised and legitimate evidence for justifying policy and resource targeting.

Based on the examples presented here, despite the ostensible promotion of overarching approaches based in localism and community empowerment, centrally designed programmes and indicators shaped with urban patterns of deprivation in mind remain influential. While there are opportunities for rural actors to adapt, and perhaps contest these, there is a risk that their ability to do so may be further diminished by the continuing impacts of austerity on local government. Greater capacity at a local level to identify and develop the evidence appropriate to the characteristics of particular places and particular policy goals would be an essential element in the ability to target resources most effectively at different types of deprived households and areas.

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