## The future for Scotland’s cities: sustainable mixed communities or preserve of the rich?

### Draft AQMeN blog

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Successive governments in Scotland have put forward their visions for the future of Scotland’s cities. [REF] They have celebrated the role that urban areas are playing as drivers of the national economy and centres for innovation. And they have identified the opportunities which cities offer for more sustainable forms of living.

In doing so, they reject the current urban model, marked by deep social divisions where more affluent groups live in low-density, car-dependent suburbs and beyond while the inner cities are home to above-average levels of poverty. In the future, these visions suggest that higher income groups will be attracted back to higher density areas, reducing the need to travel and increasing public transport use – both better for the environment. Importantly, these movements will also contribute to the formation of more socially-mixed and cohesive communities.

A range of policies have been pursued to try to realise this ‘urban renaissance’, such as planning policies which direct housing development towards ‘brownfield’ land and requirements for larger developments to provide a mix of housing to suit different income groups.

And in some ways, these efforts appear to be successful. In all four of Scotland’s cities, the population has been growing faster closer to the centre in recent years.

[Figure – % of total popln within 8k/5m of centre]

But far from creating social mix, the movement of more affluent groups into central areas is pusing out more deprived groups. That is the evidence provided by new data released today by Scottish Government as part of the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation [link]. In all four of Scotland’s largest cities, the proportion of the income deprived population living within 8km (5 miles) of the city centre has fallen steadily between 2004 and 2016, at the same time as the proportion of the non-deprived population living in the same area rose.

[Figures – poor and non-poor 8k/5m]

If we look at the neighbourhoods within 5km (3 miles) of the city centre, the contrast is even greater.

[Figures – poor and non-poor 5k/3m]

These findings confirm and extend earlier work by AQMeN researchers which showed that poverty in Glasgow became more ‘suburbanised’ between 2001 and 2011 [Link to Gwilym’s briefing]. Greater detail on the current analysis is available in this report [link to JM/NB paper].

So what is driving this change? Put simply, lower income households are finding it harder to compete for housing. In large part, this is a direct consequence of the progressive reduction in housing subsidies available to lower income households. Recent decades have seen dramatic reductions in social housing and, as a result, greater reliance on private renting for those in poverty. More recently, welfare reforms have resulted in reductions in Housing Benefits – the maximum rent which Housing Benefit will cover has been reduced (from the median local rent to that at the 30th centile) and some groups, notably those under 35, have seen their entitlements reduced even further. With less support, lower income groups are pushed towards lower cost areas, away from the centre.

This is a steady but largely hidden process, but it is something policy makers will need to respond to if we are to avoid an urban future which central locations have become the preserve of higher income groups. This is about ‘reserved’ welfare benefit reforms but it is also about devolved powers relating to social housing construction and sales.