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**The time-spaces of austerity urbanism: narratives of  
'localism' and UK neighbourhood policy**

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## The time-spaces of austerity urbanism: narratives of ‘localism’ and UK neighbourhood policy

### Abstract

This paper examines the impact of urban policy change through an attention to shifting feelings about time and place among those affected by such changes. The focus is the shift from ‘Neighbourhood Renewal’ under the UK Labour Government (1997-2010) to ‘localism’ under the Conservative Coalition Government (2010-2015), as part of its programme of austerity. The article draws on longitudinal research with policy officials and resident-activists in two neighbourhoods in one UK city, and examines their narratives about policy change and wider shifting feelings about time and place. From an official perspective, discourses and practices of localism were embraced to an extent, but uncertainty was also present. From the perspective of resident-activists, the changes in policy were experienced as a loss of past services and support, senses of pessimism about the future, and fragmenting and inequitable trajectories for different localities. Temporalities of crisis were also apparent in responding to the material needs of residents undergoing deepening poverty. The failure of the localism discourse to provide everyday meaning can be seen as an example of the incoherent and fragmented nature of contemporary austerity urban governance. A time-space perspective, in particular focusing on how both policy actors and citizens use narrative to organise their spatial and temporal experiences, therefore offers resources for the wider analysis of urban governance.

**Keywords:** austerity, temporality, governance, localism, narrative.

### **Introduction: searching for policy in a crisis era**

This paper examines how changes in urban policy and governance shape citizens' lives, via a focus on experiential dimensions of time and space. It draws on research in two neighbourhoods in one UK city, undertaken during 2004-5 and again in 2013-14. This embodied experience of returning to communities after eight years forms one of the temporalities that shapes my analysis. I was there to research the effects of economic and political change, including shifts from a welfare-orientated UK Labour government (1997-2010), to a Conservative-Coalition one (2010-2015) whose social policy programme oversaw large reductions in public spending. Much was different about the second round of research. On my return, other than seeing the impacts of austerity and cuts, it was much harder to detect in what ways policy shaped what was actually happening in the neighbourhoods. As Matthews (2012) observes in relation to urban 'neighbourhood regeneration' in Scotland, previous rounds of policy had identifiable empirical referents, including material spaces (such as new houses) and interventions which sought to bring about change. For all the problematics of these programmes, there was a sense that 'something..had occurred' (Matthews, 2012: 157) that had a purchase on everyday experiences.

However, in what has been referred to as an era of 'crisis social policy' (Hancock et al, 2012) contemporary UK Conservative policy discourses seem to have a less direct relationship with times and spaces. This is partly a question of austerity, and the 'hollowing out' of a state which simply does less. However, it can also be seen as a qualitative shift in the nature of policy-making and governance, and thus the ways that the state is experienced by citizens. The current era in the UK is characterised by policy terms which, whilst powerful, have a diffuse quality. For example, notions of 'co-production' and 'personalisation' (Needham, 2011) have been invoked as designating a new approach to care services, negotiated between professionals and users. Another term which falls into this category is 'localism', which forms the focus of this paper. These terms shape imaginings, possibilities and narratives, as much as signal actions. Such terms function through a logic of invitation (Allen, 2006), suggesting that policy actors and citizens see their actions as part of such categories, categories which nonetheless re-direct attention and close down other possibilities by degree. As the paper will argue, these terms narrate certain versions of past and present in relation to places. Yet citizens and policy actors are not necessarily seduced by such narratives.

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3 This paper will explore what is at stake in such changes, through a focus on conflict, rupture  
4 and disconnect in how time and space are imagined within policy discourses and how they  
5 are experienced and narrated by residents. As Cameron (2012) has argued, paying attention  
6 to the stories that are used by diverse groups to organise experience, can allow researchers to  
7 consider not just language and discourse but also affect and emotions. In considering  
8 political change, such a perspective enables insights into the felt dimensions of living under  
9 shifting policy regimes and aspects of inequality and power at stake (Pain 2019). Indeed  
10 ,whilst the notion of contestation over space in relation to urban policy change is well  
11 established, contestation over temporality is less so (Prior and Hubbard 2015). The next two  
12 sections focus on firstly, debates around localism and austerity, and secondly using a time-  
13 space perspective to understand policy change, before moving on to introducing the research.  
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### 25 **Localism, austerity and neoliberalism**

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28 ‘Localism’ as recently invoked within UK urban policy, signals a renewed interest in the  
29 neighbourhood or ‘the local’ as a site of services and social action, away from discourses of  
30 ‘the big state’ (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). Wills (2016: 9) offers the following definition:  
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34 Localism is about engaging local people in local civic life, but less obviously, it is  
35 also about the nature and purposes of the central state.  
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38 As she points out, localism within UK policy debates did not begin with the advent of the UK  
39 2010 Conservative Coalition government, and instead was redefined at that particular  
40 moment. The preceding UK Labour government (1997-2010) had also made a focus on the  
41 ‘local’ a key aspect of public policy, particularly urban social policy aimed at deprived  
42 neighbourhoods. Indeed ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘community’ featured strongly within Labour  
43 policy at that time, within a broadly ‘communitarian’ or ‘third way’ approach to policy, that  
44 claimed to empower marginalised communities as the state nonetheless withdrew from wider  
45 forms of intervention (Imrie and Raco 2003). Urban policy programmes such as the New  
46 Deal for Communities involved local residents in partnership working on programmes  
47 concerned with both physical ‘regeneration’ and local investment in employment, health and  
48 other services (Lupton, 2003). New neighbourhood workers were employed to engage local  
49 people in these projects. The programmes were fraught with difficulties, relying as they did  
50 on instrumental notions of ‘community’ (Newman, 2001). Nonetheless, as will become clear,  
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3 at a straightforward level the programmes involved some new resources for disadvantaged  
4 neighbourhoods.  
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8 Aspects of the localism agenda under the UK Coalition government (2010-2015) can be seen  
9 as a critical response to this local ‘empowerment’ under Labour, although there are  
10 significant continuities in the ultimate shifting of responsibilities for inequality onto  
11 communities themselves. Nonetheless, the Coalition approach presented itself as a break  
12 from the past, promising less government, within a rhetoric of removing ‘red tape’ and  
13 ‘freeing up’ communities. As such the Coalition government discourse involves setting out a  
14 particular narrative around both the past and future of relationships between citizens and the  
15 state.  
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22 This is a UK government policy definition of localism (DCLG, 2010: 3):  
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- 24 • To lift the burden of bureaucracy—by removing the cost and control of unnecessary  
25 red tape and regulation, whose effect is to restrict local action;
- 26 • To empower communities to do things their way—by creating rights for people to get  
27 involved with, and direct the development of, their communities;
- 28 • To diversify the supply of public services—by ending public sector monopolies,  
29 ensuring a level playing field for all suppliers, giving people more choice and a better  
30 standard of service;  
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36 Of particular interest here are the ways that these (potentially conflicting) aims narrate  
37 visions of the past and the future. The past is associated with an oppressive state, of ‘red  
38 tape’, and ‘public sector monopolies’ which have a stifling effect on communities, ‘crowding  
39 out’ other forms of provision. Instead a ‘freeing’ of bureaucracy is promised, enabling new  
40 ‘rights’ and ‘choices’ for citizens, within a broadly neoliberal discourse, in which ‘the  
41 presence of the future’ (Anderson, 2010) shapes the politics of the present. Such a discourse  
42 also has a set of geographies, framing a vision of autonomous communities, directed by the  
43 efforts of citizens.  
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51 As already indicated, this new approach largely signalled an invitation rather than a concrete  
52 set of actions at a local level. As will be explored, whilst residents in the neighbourhoods  
53 were aware of ‘Neighbourhood Renewal’ during the Labour government, the era of  
54 ‘localism’ was much less apparent. Localism for the Coalition government in concrete terms  
55 involved designating new ‘rights’ which communities could choose to take up. These were  
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3 set out in the Localism Bill (DCLG, 2011) and enabled groups to bid to take over the running  
4 of public services, to own assets such as local buildings and spaces, and to undertake new  
5 forms of local planning. The enjoyment of these new rights was voluntary and dependent on  
6 resources in communities.  
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11 Given the relatively limited scope of these policies, 'localism' has nonetheless attracted a  
12 high amount of academic commentary (Blanco et al 2014; Dagdeviren et al 2019; Lowndes  
13 and Pratchett 2012; Williams et al 2014) . Commentators have made different substantive  
14 claims associated with its emergence as a policy discourse, reflecting interest in 'the local'  
15 from different branches of the political spectrum (Painter, 2012). Whilst some have focused  
16 on the fit with localism to a neoliberal agenda of a 'hollowing out' of the state (Lowndes and  
17 Pratchett, 2012) others have emphasised its potential to frame new spaces of local progressive  
18 action, through the taking up of the powers as outlined (Willis, 2016). This has led to  
19 proposals about different 'varieties' of localism, for example 'progressive localism', which  
20 Featherstone et al (2012) see as potentially emancipatory, as opposed to 'austerity localism'  
21 which they see as invoking 'an anti-state populist agenda' (2). Penny (2016) argues, through  
22 an analysis of one London borough, that 'austerity localism' is becoming increasingly  
23 'hierarchical and coercive....whist small and relatively inexpensive experiments in local  
24 service provision may continue, the pressures towards the centralisation of governance and  
25 towards outsourcing to large private providers.. are great' (ibid: 19) . As Penny (2016) also  
26 notes, the election of a UK Conservative majority government in 2015 further undermines the  
27 progressive potential of the localism discourse.  
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### 43 **Time, space and policy: foregrounding narratives**

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45 The research therefore set out to understand how the shift from 'neighbourhood renewal' to  
46 'localism' had been experienced by officials and residents in neighbourhoods in one UK city.  
47 Whilst the research was initially framed by questions of space, scale and locality, the focus  
48 on experiences of time and temporality developed in response to interview data generated.  
49 Indeed whilst it was the experiences of the *present* which was the intended focus of my  
50 research project, it was notable that temporalities of *the past and future* were increasingly  
51 pressing within the experiences of the research participants (see Knight and Stewart 2016).  
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58 In linking a time-space perspective to the experiences of my research participants undergoing  
59 political, economic and social change, I have foregrounded the idea of *narrative* or story, as a  
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3 way of organising meanings of time and space. ‘Narratives’ have been used within social  
4 science analysis extensively, more recently moving beyond a discursive approach to take in  
5 space, place and embodiment (Heavey, 2018). As Cameron (2012) argues, narratives and  
6 stories involve questions of language and speech, but also affect, emotion, and relationality.  
7 Narratives position position the story-teller both in time and space.  
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12 In relation to *place*, urban policy and governance has always involved competing imaginaries  
13 and narratives of place – often thought about in terms of the re-branding of high profile  
14 central city places where there are clear stakes in terms of the attraction of investment (eg  
15 Wallace, 2015). The ways in which urban policy symbolically constructs poorer  
16 communities has been less researched, although Crossley (2017) traces the ‘imagined  
17 geographies of poverty’, which have powerful effects in shaping interventions. In the case of  
18 discursive shifts such as ‘co-production’ and ‘localism’, it is not just places themselves that  
19 are being re-imagined, but the relationships between different tiers of government and  
20 communities, in other words the relations which make up places - the responsibilities and  
21 flows of power (Massey 2004),. How places are seen in policy terms also intertwines with  
22 how residents see and experience their own emplaced identities (Lombard 2013). Deprived  
23 communities, often areas of social housing or ‘housing estates’ in a UK context can be  
24 thought of as symbolically ‘over-determined’ for both government and for residents, carrying  
25 a weight of imaginings and emotions including stigma, pride and ambivalence (Jupp, 2013).  
26 These ambivalences may be particularly acute in post-industrial communities where the  
27 relations of power and practices that gave those places their identity have been lost, and the  
28 future feels uncertain (Bennett 2013).  
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43 Considering place in policy therefore inevitably brings *temporality* into view. A starting  
44 point for analysis of temporalities has been the different dimensions of time: on the one hand  
45 time a set of rhythmns and tempos that order everyday life in material ways, but also a set of  
46 normative discourses that are part of the organisation of social, political and economic life  
47 (Bryson 2007). As Cooper (2013: 33) writes, policy discourses (such as that related to  
48 localism) ‘fold in particular narratives of the past and present’. Policy narratives seek to tie  
49 the past and the future to a particular analysis of the present, for example in relation to links  
50 between citizens and government. However, research in cultural geography (eg Till, 2012)  
51 and feminist sociology (eg Bryson, 2007) has drawn attention to the co-existing temporalities  
52 which contest such narratives of governance. Such temporalities may be tied up with  
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3 different ways of narrating experience, for example around the lifecourse, work and care.  
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5 Importantly, diverse temporalities will be linked to different forms of power.  
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8 Indeed, whilst the production of spatial inequalities under neoliberalism has been well  
9 documented, it is only recently that temporal inequalities have been focused on (Sharma  
10 2014). Sharma (ibid) calls for attention to ‘power-chonographies’ to unpick the unequal  
11 values assigned to different groups’ experiences of time. Similarly, Agbiboa (2019) draws  
12 attention to conflict between ‘capitalist’ vs ‘everyday’ times, including who has the power to  
13 imagine different futures, and Raco et al (2008) analyse the disjunctures between ‘official  
14 imaginaries’ of time and place within urban development projects and more everyday  
15 experiences. Other research has focused on time as well as space in relation to the category  
16 of ‘community’ (eg Bastian 2011). Such an approach therefore has the potential to bring  
17 into focus the inequalities and ruptures between policy and governance on the one hand, and  
18 everyday life and experience of times and spaces on the other.  
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27 Policy discourses and narratives thus relate to experiences of the present, versions of the past,  
28 but also anticipation of the future. In relation to ‘austerity’, while the term calls up certain  
29 visions of a past moment in UK history post WW2 (Brammall, 2013), it may be senses of the  
30 future that are particularly affected (Anderson and Adey, 2012; Knight and Stewart 2016).  
31 Horton (2016) points out that young people occupy a vivid role in fears about the future,  
32 because of their embodied presence as adults-in-becoming. In interviews with youth workers  
33 and services users, he draws attention to the refrain of ‘the current climate’ which shapes  
34 feelings and narratives about the future, the ‘anticipatory anxieties’ that had: ‘impacted  
35 substantially on friendships, working practices, service provision.’ (ibid: 364).  
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44 The analysis that follows considers the narratives that are used to understand the past, present  
45 and future of particular places. A related term to narrative is that of ‘trajectories’. Although  
46 this term was not necessarily used by research participants, for both the residents and  
47 officials, the question of the future of the neighbourhoods, the kinds of ‘pathways’ they were  
48 on, and whether they would ‘get better’ or ‘become worse’, was an ever present one. These  
49 imagined trajectories therefore linked questions of place with questions of the past, present  
50 and future, that might be experienced as the ‘intergenerational inheritances’ (MacLeavy et al  
51 2018) of a place. The notion of ‘cycles’ was also invoked, both by residents and officials:  
52 were the communities in a cycle of decline or regeneration? Were they moving ‘forwards’ or  
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3 ‘backwards’? Another key question was how the ‘trajectory’ of a particular neighbourhood  
4 related to others; was a certain area being ‘left behind’ whilst life in others ‘improved’?  
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### 10 **Introducing research: methods and fieldwork sites.**

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12 The research was undertaken during 2013-2014, and was part of a wider project that involved  
13 revisiting two UK local authority areas where I had undertaken research on community  
14 projects under the previous government. The research sought to understand how the shift  
15 from an era of intensive neighbourhood policy to localism was experienced, against a  
16 background of austerity and wider economic and political change. For the new project I  
17 interviewed twelve local authority officials and both professionals and residents working on  
18 projects at a neighbourhood level. In relation to the two small community groups which form  
19 the focus of this paper, I undertook two group discussions and participant observation at three  
20 sets of activities, as well as a depth interview with two key actors, discussed below.  
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29 For the purposes of this paper, I focus on just one of the sites, a post-industrial city in the  
30 Midlands, UK. Between 2004-2006 I spent extensive periods of time in two neighbourhoods  
31 in this city, that I refer to as Riverlands and Southfields, for a previous research project. Both  
32 these neighbourhoods could be classified as ‘disadvantaged’ and were areas of social housing  
33 on the outskirts of the city. Whilst Southfields was a larger area, and closer to the city centre,  
34 they shared many similar characteristics. Within these neighbourhoods, my research focus  
35 was two small community groups. These were resident-led, directed by two women, Sandra,  
36 the chair of the Riverlands group, and Jill, the chair of the Southfields group (both these  
37 names are pseudonyms). At the time of my original research, they had both been based in  
38 ‘community houses’, ordinary houses given over to the groups by the council. The  
39 community groups ran a range of social projects on the estates, often focused on different age  
40 groups and especially young people, as well as being involved in redeveloping public spaces  
41 (for example a new children’s playground and community gardens), and campaigning for  
42 more resources for the localities. At the time of my original research, both groups’ work was  
43 supported, and to some extent resourced, by a network of officials, programmes and  
44 partnerships that formed part of the Labour government’s programme of neighbourhood  
45 policy.  
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3 On return visits during 2013-14, I undertook group discussions with volunteers involved with  
4 the community groups, including Sandra and Jill, and spent time doing participant  
5 observation at some of their activities including a library drop-in session at Southfields, and a  
6 community gardening and nature activity session at Riverlands. I also undertook two  
7 interviews with officials: as will become clear, the earlier network of officials linked to  
8 neighbourhood policy no longer existed. Whilst this paper draws on understanding from the  
9 project as a whole, I focus on two particularly rich pieces of interview data. These are one  
10 interview with a senior official directing neighbourhood policy at local government level,  
11 whom I call Claire, and one extended depth interview with Sandra and Jill. At the end of this  
12 second round of fieldwork I arranged to speak to my two key research participants together,  
13 as I was interested in how this might spark new reflections. Their neighbourhoods were at  
14 opposite ends of the city, and did not know each other well although had met before. This  
15 interview was a long discussion over several hours, during which we spoke about the past,  
16 present and future of the two groups, the neighbourhoods, and their own experiences of  
17 activism. Analysis of the data is informed by the wider context of, first my original research  
18 seven years earlier, and then the other interviews and data gathered around neighbourhood  
19 policy and localism. The previous project adds a longitudinal element to the research and  
20 shaped my analysis, especially of the research participants' overall feelings about decline or  
21 optimism about their communities. My presence as a researcher who had spent time with  
22 them in the past also inevitably prompted a reflexivity about time from the participants.  
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### 41 **Governing the contested time-spaces of localism**

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43 Discussing localism with Claire involved wider questions of what it now meant to be in local  
44 government in a context of 'austerity'. The resources available to local authorities, and  
45 especially those in economically deprived areas, has fallen dramatically since 2010 (Hastings  
46 et al 2017). As Horton (2016) notes, this context formed an all-pervasive background  
47 'noise' that permeated narratives of the past and future. As Clarke (2013) has pointed out, a  
48 narrative of the past as 'irresponsible' seems to have become part of a new 'truth' within  
49 policy discourses at various levels that, 'you can't solve problems by throwing money at  
50 them'. Claire spoke about the 'mistakes' made in spending 'too much money' in deprived  
51 communities, within a sense that this had encouraged overly dependent relationships between  
52 the local state and communities.  
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3 The financing is some of it, not everything. I think we became too hung up probably  
4 in the past on it has to be funded, but some things... you know the money does give a  
5 kick start.  
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9 This quote nonetheless conveys unease about how important 'the money' had been in  
10 supporting community activity in the past. The discourse of 'localism' as outlined, of a new  
11 era in which communities and citizens became less dependent on the local state, was being  
12 accepted as a new narrative of place and time in uncertain ways. On the one hand, in the  
13 city, 'localism' and 'locality' had become key terms in new structures and ways of working.  
14 A 'localities framework' had shaped a restructure of council services around three large  
15 spatial areas, yet this framework appeared to primarily involve the loss of posts and services.  
16 Claire reported that their localism approach was about 'a lack of duplication and replication'  
17 signalling both cuts to service and staff and also a discourse about better customer service.  
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25 ...in order to do that it was no good having a Libraries Manager anymore, we  
26 needed Locality Managers so they moved to a much more integrated approach,  
27 so for example the Libraries Manager is now the Central Locality Manager  
28 overseeing the development of a range of services  
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33 This more 'integrated approach' spoke of a future council that was 'leaner' and less wasteful,  
34 rather than the cumbersome bureaucracy which was seen to have created too much  
35 dependence in the past. In relation to neighbourhood support, this new landscape involved a  
36 drastic reduction in the previous infrastructure of neighbourhood workers at a range of scales.  
37 Claire talked about this very reduced service (three community workers, replacing  
38 approximately 30 at the time of my earlier research):  
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44 Their role now...it's more signposting and working alongside trying to create  
45 the autonomy in organisations. .. I would say the work now is very much  
46 about trying to encourage more independence. We can't any longer do the.. I  
47 don't know whether hand-holding is the right word but we don't any longer do  
48 that kind of support for those communities that we would have done in the  
49 past  
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55 This quote begins with the a narrative of 'localism' ('trying to create autonomy', 'encourage  
56 more independence'), through perjorative notions of 'hand-holding', but ending with a more  
57 straightforward acceptance that they can no longer provide 'support' to communities. Both  
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3 Claire and others appeared caught between feeling compelled to provide a positive narrative  
4 of change and yet feeling aware of the problematics of localism as a narrative to justify  
5 austerity cuts and essentially abandon deprived urban communities.  
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### 10 11 12 13 14 **Trajectories of decline and fragmenting futures**

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17 As can be seen, the interview with Claire highlighted the difficulties of narrating the policy  
18 changes that she was working under. Sandra and Jill, as figureheads for their community  
19 groups, were also often tasked with narrating the trajectories of their communities within time  
20 and space, for example during council meetings. Yet the stories they were now telling were  
21 much more pessimistic than in my previous research, when they had often spoken about  
22 community spirit and optimism (Jupp 2013).  
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29 Indeed, whilst official perspectives suggested an uneasiness about the shift to ‘localism’ and  
30 its impact on neighbourhoods, the perspectives of Sandra and Jill were more stark around a  
31 dramatic experience of loss in relation to the neighbourhood support and funding that had  
32 been available to them. These losses were felt to have had material impacts on their work,  
33 within a context of growing poverty as well as benefit changes and cuts in already  
34 disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The current moment was also related to a marked divergence  
35 of ‘trajectories’ within the two neighbourhoods, as explained below.  
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42 A focus for both groups had been engaging with perceived and material problems associated  
43 with young people and neighbourhood spaces, linked to low level disturbances, so-called  
44 ‘anti-social behaviour’ or ‘gangs’ (both groups were critical of these terms). As already  
45 mentioned, feelings linked to young people could be seen as playing a particularly potent role  
46 in narratives of time and space in the neighbourhoods (Horton 2016). Both groups had, in the  
47 past when more resources had been available to them, run a range of creative and sustained  
48 projects with both young people and older people to try and tackle the negative effects of  
49 inter-generational tensions. The following quote encapsulates a sense of narrative as  
50 disrupted, as the visions of the future held in the past seemed to be rupturing (Knight and  
51 Stewart 2016), and a feeling of loss and of ‘going backwards’ permeates, linked to the  
52 ‘cycles’ already mentioned:  
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3 Sandra: (In the past..) there were large groups hanging about the streets and the  
4 people in the houses were intimidated, so we had to do a lot of inter-generational  
5 work to ease those barriers, and it got an awful lot better, as we had the Youth Clubs,  
6 we had all these projects, we had the Play Club and everything else. We now don't  
7 have a Youth Club, because we don't have the facilities to have a Youth Club. It's  
8 resurfacing, those issues are coming back, and you can see the next generation,  
9 they're going to have the same issues that the last one did.

16 Jill: I do feel quite sad for our area in respect as I feel we're going back... we're taking  
17 steps back instead of steps forward

20 Sandra: Yeah, it is regressing

23 Jill: I feel that we're starting completely from scratch again.

25 Whilst both Jill and Sandra had always been critical about the neighbourhood programmes  
26 under the Labour government, they spoke about the difference that the embodied presence of  
27 neighbourhood support workers had made in the past, compared to the current situation under  
28 'localism':  
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33 I wouldn't say there's any real support network for any community groups at the  
34 minute. There's something called a Community Matters Group that consists of three  
35 people who cover the whole of city basically [the Localities framework], but  
36 obviously you can't get support. All the support's been withdrawn, so  
37 Neighbourhood Renewal, the Area Implementation Teams they've all gone, so there  
38 is nothing left (Sandra).  
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44 These losses were also experienced as a sense of 'going backwards', or 'going full circle',  
45 returning to a situation before the investment which came with the Labour government :  
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48 See for us in the early days this is how it was. This is how it was. When we first set  
49 up as an residents association this is how it was and then they started Play Services,  
50 they started Neighbourhood Services, so really I feel you've gone full circle now  
51 (Jill).  
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56 Localism was therefore experienced as loss, but also often confusing shifts in governance  
57 arrangements and fragmenting public services. As Hitchen (2017) has argued, narratives of  
58 localism and the wider language of 'service improvements' may obscure the material losses  
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3 of austerity, rendering it harder for them to make sense of the changes they are subject to.  
4 For example, on Riverlands, the loss of facilities for a youth club was linked to the loss of  
5 the relationship that the community group had developed with the local secondary school,  
6 who had let them host the youth club on the school site. This school had since become part  
7 of a chain of ‘academy’ schools that bring together private money and public services, and  
8 had severed ties with the community group according to Sandra: ‘now it is the academy..  
9 there is not relationship whatsoever, none’. This example highlights the ways that ‘localism’,  
10 through drawing (non local and commercial) ‘new providers’ into the field of public service  
11 delivery, actually has the potential to sever local relationships and identifications (Clayton et  
12 al 2016), and create affective disconnect and distance.  
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21 Relatedly, such a reconfiguring of neighbourhood governance through a withdrawal of *public*  
22 investment and the growing prominence of *private* investment (Penny 2016), had also had a  
23 marked impact on the overall ‘trajectories’ of the community groups and neighbourhoods.  
24 Whilst both neighbourhoods had experienced the loss of infrastructures of neighbourhood  
25 policy, as well as the overall impacts of growing poverty, Southfields had, since my previous  
26 fieldwork, attracted private sector investment in housing, and, through planning gain and the  
27 involvement of a housing association, investment in community buildings and open spaces.  
28 The estate had been part of a scheme (initiated under the Labour government) to lever new  
29 investment into areas that had potential for ‘housing market renewal’ (Webb 2010), based  
30 essentially on the neighbourhood’s position in relation to the city centre.  
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39 Indeed, when returning to Southfields after seven years, new housing, and a number of new  
40 community projects including a cafe operating as a ‘social enterprise’, meant that walking  
41 around it felt quite different. A derelict shopping centre, previously described as ‘Little  
42 Beirut,’ had been transformed, including a new glass, steel and coloured render community  
43 ‘Hub’ building, which the Southfields community group had been instrumental in planning  
44 and were now key partners in managing. The interview with Jill and Sandra took place in  
45 the Hub, which was bright and modern, and very different from the community houses they  
46 had both previously been in. Whilst operating within a framework of overall service  
47 reductions, the Community Hub had nonetheless become a focal point for local services,  
48 including for example, a new police post in the building. This made the joint interview  
49 uncomfortable at times, as the different trajectories of the neighbourhoods and groups were  
50 materially apparent. For example, Sandra mentioned that they no longer had a police officer  
51 in their neighbourhood:  
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3 Sandra: We've got another difficulty with police cuts, we don't have a neighbourhood  
4 bobby anymore.  
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7 Jill: Don't you?  
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10 Sandra: No, we haven't got one.  
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12 Jill : I don't feel guilty because we've worked so hard for it. There have been times,  
13 Sandra, when the boot has been on the other foot, hasn't it?  
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16 Sandra: Things change  
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19 Jill: In ten years time, you could come and speak to us and things could be completely  
20 different  
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23 Sandra: What you do is you adapt to the situation you're in at that moment in time.  
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26 This is quite a poignant interaction and one of a number of moments in the interview where  
27 the different and inequitable presents (and futures) of the neighbourhoods were brought into  
28 sharp focus. When I first visited the neighbourhoods, in both the look and feel of the areas  
29 and within the deprivation statistics, Southfields felt relatively more deprived than  
30 Riverlands. Seven years later that situation had been reversed. At both this and other points  
31 in the interview there was a sense that Jill *did* feel guilty about the situation where, without  
32 market-led investment, Riverlands had been fully exposed to the impacts of austerity cuts.  
33 Indeed whilst under 'Neighbourhood Renewal' there was some desire to allocate resources on  
34 the basis of need (although the housing market renewal programme was also initiated under  
35 Labour), the new era of 'localism' seems blind to inequality, in a discourse that 'constructs  
36 places in isolation (and) avoids an engagement with the marked inequalities that exist within  
37 and between places' (Featherstone et al, 2012: 3).  
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41 Of course, a market-based welfare economy also depends on a viable market at whatever  
42 scale. Both community groups had been supported or perhaps coerced into becoming 'social  
43 enterprises', in order, in theory, to move away from an era of 'hand-holding' and become  
44 self-sustaining within the localism narrative. In relation to the Southfields group, this meant  
45 leasing the Hub building to other 'service providers' so that it could become financially self  
46 sufficient and not reliant on public funding. However, the service providers themselves were  
47 public services or reliant on public services, and therefore austerity cuts de-stabilised these  
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3 plans. For example, there had been plans for a library to be based in the Hub. but there had  
4 been huge cuts to library services:  
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7 The Library now is run completely by volunteers with the support of Library  
8 services... that's another rental income we'll lose this year, and that's another £8,000  
9 a year that we've got to find from somewhere else so we take two steps forward and  
10 always taking four steps back (Jill)  
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15 There had been similar experiences with other service providers, meaning that many of the  
16 spaces in the (large) new building were empty whilst I was doing the interview, and a sense  
17 of fragility about its future and sustainability pervaded, with Jill's ability to construct a  
18 narrative about it uncertain.  
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### 25 **The time-spaces of crisis**

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28 A sense of fragmentation and inequality in relation to the trajectories of different  
29 neighbourhoods can be seen as one of its empirical markers of localism (Williams et al 2014).  
30 Unlike Southfields, Riverlands seemed to have been exposed to the worst impacts of austerity  
31 and deepening poverty, and this was evident in the feel of the neighbourhood on my return  
32 visits. Sandra described a community in social and economic crisis, and this meant that in  
33 terms of temporality, short term needs had become dominant and undermined the group's  
34 previous investments in the future, in what Knight and Stewart (2016) analyse as a 'slowing  
35 down of the present' under austerity.  
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42 The agenda used to be, say traffic calming, people were worried about kids getting  
43 knocked over, now it's just, there's not going to be food in bellies... the social and  
44 economic situation of households now is so bad, we can't really address anything  
45 else.  
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50 The group were now focused, for example, on children going hungry over the summer  
51 holidays.  
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54 Over the summer, there are real issues with hunger as the kids won't be getting the  
55 free school meals you see, six weeks.. it doesn't bear thinking about.  
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3 This focus on the short-term present as the dominant temporality and the experiential realities  
4 of supporting families in dire material need, meant that the group's supposed aim of  
5 becoming a self-sustaining 'social enterprise', and charging for their 'services' had quickly  
6 become unviable.  
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11 All activities with kids we give out food, we charge 60p per head for playgroup but  
12 for that we have to pay £19 per evening to the church hall. Then some people haven't  
13 got 60p, I'm not gonna turn them away am I. .. so the whole thing just doesn't add up  
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17 In response to these issues of hunger, the group was now running a food redistribution project  
18 working with an organisation that collected excess food on a regional basis. Again this was  
19 supposed to be charged for, and to be a 'self-sustaining' project. However, Sandra said that  
20 they struggled to ask residents for money for the food, and were funding it through other  
21 activities including running events for other community groups.  
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26 The problem with ours, the food redistribution project is a sticking plaster. . It will  
27 alleviate an immediate need and that's all it does, and a lot of people that come in  
28 haven't got £2 to pay for a food parcel, so you're having to give it away, which  
29 continually adds pressure on our group to fund raise and subsidise that project, that  
30 need, so we do events all over the city... Now the majority of it would go directly on  
31 the food redistribution project. There's very little left for any other projects and that's  
32 the one project we cannot allow to fail, it has to continue.  
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39 The time-spaces of crisis therefore involved responding to immediate needs around hunger  
40 and wider issues of poverty, yet the group were still being pushed to narrate their activities  
41 within a language of self-sufficiency and independence promoted by the localism discourse.  
42 This created an irreconcilable sense of temporal conflict (Sharma 2014). Sandra was  
43 painfully aware of the demands of these discourses of longer term self-sufficiency, as the  
44 quote below shows, at just the time when residents needed short term basic forms of welfare  
45 more than ever:  
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51 Like I said, it's a sticking plaster and it's never going to achieve the outcomes of  
52 making somebody self sufficient. You're not going to get to the stage where they  
53 don't need that service. Until they get a job, until the benefits are paid properly, until  
54 they're not ill anymore, until the families are grown up, there are so many things that  
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3 impact on why people can't feed their families that we're never going to solve that, so  
4 we're not going to reach those outcomes.  
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7 The 'sticking plaster' phrase was used by both groups as an analogy for operating within this  
8 context of responding to embodied and painful experiences of poverty with a short-term fix.  
9 The temporalities of crisis relate also to a wider crisis in social relations in the  
10 neighbourhood. Sandra reported that the anger circulating within the community because of  
11 the loss of services and wider experiences of poverty was now being directed at the  
12 community group themselves.  
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18 As more and more things are withdrawn from people they get despondent,  
19 disheartened and apathetic. Now they will either walk away, or they will become  
20 angry, and expect us to provide all the things that were provided by the statutory  
21 services but we're not there to do.  
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26 Whilst localism is supposed to act as a catalyst for community action, experiences of  
27 austerity, as Hitchen (2016) writes, 'fatigue the body' and undermine community cohesion  
28 and action, as well as positive hope for the future (Pain, 2019).  
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### 35 **Geographies going on?**

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37 Despite this increasing 'affective distance' (Clayton et al 2016) and disconnect between the  
38 temporalities and narratives proposed in policy and the temporalities of lived experience,  
39 time and space do also simply 'go on' (Horton, 2016), with different futures unfolding in  
40 mundane and sometimes hopeful ways (Agbibo 2019). Although the focus of this article  
41 has been losses and fragmentation associated with policy change, the depth interview with  
42 Sandra and Jill was also infused with accounts of successful trajectories, often around the  
43 volunteers themselves, and within the lifecourses of young people they had worked with. Jill  
44 recounted a recent encounter in a local supermarket with a young person with whom the  
45 group had worked previously:  
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53 'this was one of those kids who was getting in trouble at school all the time, he was  
54 close to being expelled... and he just said, 'hi, how are you?' and I looked at him, and  
55 I thought, "is that the person we started with all those years ago?" And yes, it  
56 obviously wasn't one thing that had made a difference to their life, but those small  
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3 steps and someone actually believing in them, and that it wasn't all bad that they were  
4 doing...just them small things, that small encouragement off somebody.'

7 This sense of small scale changes bubbling below the surface, that might only become visible  
8 in the long term, denotes a very different temporal orientation to that imagined by discourses  
9 of localism, instead connecting with relations and acts of care (Bryson, 2007). Sandra also  
10 gave examples of how the work of the group *went on*, a persistent forward motion, however  
11 fragile. When she had told me about the loss of the facilities at the high school for the youth  
12 clubs, she mentioned that they had started running activities outside

15 ..so we lost all those facilities. We didn't let that stop, we delivered projects in open  
16 space, whether it be overgrown doesn't matter, you know if the grass is four foot high  
17 you can go bug hunting. If its cut down nicely you can play cricket and ball games, it  
18 doesn't matter there's going to be some sort of green space somewhere that can be  
19 used, which is what we did.

22 During the period of fieldwork with the community groups I joined in on a summer holiday  
23 'bug hunting' session, when a crowd of local children and parents joined volunteers on a  
24 patch of wasteland at the edge of the estate - searching for creepy crawlies in the long grass,  
25 pond-dipping for water boatmen in the brook and modelling hedgehogs from clay and twigs.  
26 It was a happy sunny afternoon of small pleasures and triumphs.

29 This is not to overstate the power of these temporary and contingent moments in the face of  
30 the powerful political and economic changes that were impacting on the communities.  
31 Nonetheless, both examples point to divergent time-spaces which might be either longer or  
32 shorter term than those imagined within policy – growing up, care and the lifecourse, or the  
33 rhythmns of a summer afternoon.

## 36 **Conclusions**

37 This paper has demonstrated how temporality how can been viewed as a contested aspect of  
38 governance, and how temporality is connected to feelings and emotions, identifications and  
39 imaginaries (Jupp et al 2016). Adopting a time-space perspective, and analysing the  
40 narratives used by policy actors and citizens, enables a focus on how urban policy change  
41 *feels* (Pain 2019), and how different this might be from official discourses. This is  
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3 particularly important in the face of seemingly consensual policy terms such as ‘localism’.  
4 Indeed, contemporary policy has been discussed via notions of the ‘post-political’ (Nolan and  
5 Featherstone, 2015), an era in which conflict has been sidelined through discourses that  
6 appear to promise empowerment to citizens but essentially promote a neoliberal project.  
7  
8 However, as Nolan and Featherstone (2015) argue, any ‘post-political’ settlement can only  
9 ever be partial: a time-space perspective allows for the ruptures and uneasiness around this  
10 settlement to be exposed, the ways that policy discourses fail.  
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16 As the article has shown, the notion of localism seeks to organise and narrate *time and space*.  
17 This paper has demonstrated the failures of the localism narrative, through a focus on rupture,  
18 fragmentation and conflict. Localism was experienced primarily as loss, often obscured  
19 within new governance arrangements and restructuring, as well as fragmentation and a  
20 divergence within the trajectories of communities, tied to increased exposure to market-led  
21 investment. Whilst localism discourses and practices encouraged small community groups  
22 and citizens to set out on a path of ‘self-sufficiency’ and a future away from ‘dependence’ on  
23 the state, the reality of community work, at least in one of the neighbourhoods, had become  
24 increasingly about providing immediate support around poverty and hunger.  
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32 Within this context, rather than attending critically to its use, it is perhaps more pressing to  
33 consider why ‘localism’ continues to be taken up by local government officials at all. One  
34 way to understand this is the absence of an alternative narrative about the future: ‘localism’  
35 suggests a meaningful trajectory rather than local governance being reduced to managing  
36 cuts. The politics of austerity is such that UK local authorities must both manage budget cuts  
37 and retain local electoral support (Penny, 2016). This then means that local communities are  
38 left to navigate this increasingly stark dissonance between policy narratives and temporalities  
39 and everyday experience.  
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47 The lens of temporality and narrative from the perspective of citizens also provides a  
48 different perspective on previous policy regimes, in this case the ‘New’ Labour government’s  
49 neighbourhood policy. Whilst this policy did bring resources of various kinds into the  
50 neighbourhoods, in other ways they set the broader neoliberal economic and political  
51 direction of travel that was continued under the ‘localism’ agenda. The residents I worked  
52 with often criticaled the complex partnerships in their neighbourhoods during that era that  
53 often seemed to achieve little. Yet, they did appreciate the embodied presence of  
54 neighbourhood workers who did not necessarily follow the approaches of the programmes  
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3 (Jupp, 2013), and provided practical forms of help and signposting to other services. As  
4 Sandra said, ‘in the past, if you needed something, there was someone you could ask how to  
5 go about it, someone would help you’. Austerity localism has involved the local state  
6 completely withdrawing from various aspects of people’s lives in communities.  
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11 This loss of embodied and relational understanding between workers and communities can  
12 only lead to more affective distancing and divergence between policy discourses and lived  
13 experience. Ultimately a new progressive and expansive welfare settlement is needed that  
14 offers convincing narratives of past, present and future, and that residents of marginalised  
15 communities can place themselves within. Until then research -and activism - is needed that  
16 can critically unpick the stories that contemporary urban policy seeks to tell.  
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