

## Audio Transcript

### Pete Alcock - Social Policy within a UK context

*Julia Waldman:* If we talk about social policy within a UK context, what does that really mean internally?

*Professor Pete Alcock:* Well again it's an interesting question because I think a lot of people particularly first coming to study social policy, they might think about it as I said before about what the government does, what the government does for us and to us in order to improve our welfare and by government they probably think that were talking about the UK government at Westminster, the MP's elected in parliament and the civil servants, who work for them and of course that is part of how policy is developed and how policy is delivered. We do have a government in Westminster and they are very powerful although of course there are also actors that influence what happens in the UK were a member of the European Union and decisions taken in the European Union can also influence policy development within the UK. But actually within the UK it's quite a bit more complicated than just what happens at Westminster. For a start, particularly in this new century, particularly since 2000 of course there's been a significant move to devolve elements of political responsibility and indeed law making and policy making to the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so now there's a Scottish parliament, there's a Welsh assembly government and now recently reconstituted is a Northern Ireland Assembly. And they have quite a bit of autonomy of some aspects of politics and some aspects of political development and in particular actually, some of the key areas of social policy have been devolved to those administrations in those countries. Health, education, housing and social care for example, are predominantly devolved compared to those administrations and what we find actually some quite significant differences have developed in North or the border in Scotland and across in Wales and Northern Ireland. For example in Scotland there are no upfront tuition fees for students attending university which there is in the rest of the UK, and there is free long term care for the elderly. In Wales, they've just abolished prescription charges; there are no prescription charges for medicines and health service in Wales. And in Northern Ireland, something of a contrast perhaps, they still have a selective secondary school education. In Northern Ireland there still eleven plus and deciding whether children go to grammar and secondary modern school although it's possible that may change. So devolution is an important dimension there, increasingly actually we can't study social policy in Britain anymore we need to study different areas. But there's another sense in which it's not just what happens in the

national government at Westminster that matters because there's another sense in which power is devolved and policy making is devolved in the UK and that is the importance of local government and the role of local government in the developing and delivering some aspects of services. And in fact if you take a slightly longer historical view of this, if you go back over the last hundred, one hundred and fifty years of social policy development, what you find is that an awful lot of key social elements of social policy today, public housing, public health, public education, were actually developed not by national and central government but by local government. Interestingly were sitting here at the University of Birmingham, the city of Birmingham was one of the cities at the end of the nineteenth, beginning of the twentieth century that pioneered an awful lot of the local development and welfare provision. And Jo Chamberlain who was the mayor of Birmingham at the end of the nineteenth century was a key figure in the development of local municipal based policy development. And local government still does remain an important both developer and deliverer of welfare services, most of school education and public housing for example is administered at a local level. And so it's not just what happens nationally, as it were sub-nationally in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, in England there's also the importance of local dimension. So when we're studying social policy and social policy making there are a number of different dimensions within the country which we need to pay attention to. And it's also what makes it interesting actually because of course policy is happening right here in this city actually, and you can see, you can go along and attend the council chamber, you can see and watch the debates and students can see the policy making process.