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Legal Compliance in Street-Level Bureaucracy: A Study of UK Housing Officers

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Legal Compliance in Street-Level Bureaucracy: A Study of UK Housing Officers

Abstract

Street-level bureaucratic theory is now at a fairly mature stage. The focus on street-level bureaucrats as ‘ultimate policymakers’ is now as familiar as it is important. Likewise, the parallel socio-legal study of the implementation of public law in public organisations has demonstrated the inevitable gap between law-in-the-books and law-in-action. Yet, the success of these advances comes at the potential cost of us losing sight of the importance of law itself. This article analyses some empirical data on the decision-making about one legal concept - ‘vulnerability’ in UK homelessness law. Our analysis offers two main contributions. First, we argue that, when it comes to the implementation of law, the legal abilities and propensities of the bureaucrats must be taken into account. Bureaucrats’ abilities to understand legal materials make a difference to the likelihood of legal compliance. Second, we must also pay attention to the character of the legal provisions. Where a provision is simple, it is more likely to facilitate legal knowledge and demands nothing of bureaucrats in terms of legal competence. Where the provision is also ‘inoffensive’ and ‘liveable’ it is less likely to act as an impediment to legal conscientiousness.

Keywords: street-level bureaucracy; legal compliance; homelessness

Introduction

Street-level bureaucracy has long been an important focus for scholars of public policy and public administration. Foundational work by Prottas (1979), Brown (1981) and, perhaps most significantly, Lipsky (1980) has led to a burgeoning field of enquiry within the political sciences (Maynard-Moody and Portillo, 2010). Such research has revealed the significance of the structure of street-level work to the nature of the policies that are delivered on the frontlines of public services. Thus, researchers have revealed the significance to policy administration of organizational culture (e.g., Riccucci, 2005a), organisational settings (e.g., Jewell and Glaser, 2006), limited resources and excessive demand (e.g., Prottas, 1979; Lipsky, 1980), and the emotional demands of direct client contact (e.g., Guy, Newman and Mastracci, 2008). These conditions trigger various coping mechanisms that structure routine work (Nielson, 2006; Tummers et al, 2015). The inevitable discretion of frontline work (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000; Riccucci 2005b) also creates a space into which wider cultural morality flows (Hasenfeld, 2000). Perceptions of deserving and undeserving citizens/clients can channel street-level work (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). Studies have also shown that the gender (e.g., Wilkins and Keiser, 2005; Wenger and Wilkins, 2009), ethnicity (e.g., Schoenholtz et al, 2014) and social status (e.g., Portillo, 2012) of street-level bureaucrats and clients can affect individual decisions on the frontline. In light of these myriad findings, street-level bureaucrats, rather than senior policy-drafting officials, have been deemed the “ultimate policymakers” (Lipsky, 1980).

In addition to political science, however, street-level bureaucracy has also been a significant focus for socio-legal studies (e.g., Cowan and Hitchings, 2007; Halliday et al, 2009; Pratt, 2012; Alpes and Spire, 2014). Lipsky’s distinction between the formal policies of senior officials and the actual policies delivered by street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) resonates particularly well with socio-legal scholars, mapping nicely onto one of their own core sets of

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2
3 distinctions: that between the law-in-books and the law-in-action (Pound, 1910; Halliday et
4 al, 2012). In keeping with street-level bureaucratic theory, socio-legal scholarship has
5 similarly stressed the significance of discretion (e.g., Hawkins, 1992), routinisation (e.g.,
6 Silbey, 1980), working conditions (e.g., Baldwin et al, 1992) and cultural morality (Hawkins,
7 2003) to the nature of the law-in-action produced at the frontline.
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11 Yet, a distinct feature of socio-legal work on frontline service delivery has been the particular
12 concern with the question of *legal* compliance (e.g., Loughlin and Quinn, 1993; Sunkin,
13 2004), querying the reasons why public service organisations fail to comply, not just with
14 legislative rules, but also with the guidance of the courts (e.g., Mullen et al, 1996; Halliday
15 2000; Hertogh and Halliday, 2004). Such studies – unsurprisingly in light of street-level
16 bureaucratic theory – have exposed the numerous barriers that stand in the way of legally
17 compliant behaviour on the part of governmental bodies (e.g., Sunkin and Le Sueur, 1991;
18 Loveland, 1995; Cowan, 1997). However, they have also been useful in pointing to the
19 significance of what might be termed the ‘legal abilities and propensities’ of street-level
20 bureaucrats for the extent of legal compliance. In particular, Halliday has set out a framework
21 to help us understand the gap between the law-in-books and the law-in-action within street-
22 level bureaucracies (Halliday, 2004). He has argued that the extent of the gap is determined,
23 in part at least, by the extent of street-level bureaucrats’ legal knowledge, legal competence
24 and legal conscientiousness. In other words, the law-in-action produced by the everyday
25 activities of street-level bureaucrats is affected by the fact that the bureaucrats are
26 implementing *law* and not just policy. Thus, the street-level bureaucrats’ varying ability to
27 understand and work with legal materials and their varying attitudes and stances towards the
28 importance of lawfulness is part of the broader context that affects the nature of the law-in-
29 action (Hertogh, 2010).
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3 In this paper, we draw on qualitative research of street-level bureaucracies in the UK housing
4 sector to add further depth to the socio-legal scholarship on legal compliance. The paper is
5 founded on a puzzle that emerged from the empirical findings. For, unusually in light of the
6 thrust of street-level bureaucratic research, we discovered a small oasis of consistent legal
7 compliance across our three case studies – in the application of the legal concept of
8 ‘vulnerability’ within the context of homelessness law. In this way, we have been forced to
9 turn the common socio-legal research question about street-level bureaucracies – “how do we
10 explain non-compliance with law?” – on its head. Instead, the core research question of this
11 paper is: Why, amidst non-compliant street-level bureaucrats’ practices, do we find legal
12 compliance in relation to one particular aspect of their work? The answer, we suggest, lies in
13 the character of the particular legal provision demanding compliance and the effect this has
14 on the likelihood of street-level bureaucrats’ legal knowledge, legal competence and legal
15 conscientiousness. In this way, whereas much street-level bureaucratic theory focuses (in
16 broad terms) on the conditions in which bureaucrats work and on their identity and
17 characteristics, our study urges us additionally to maintain a focus on the legal provisions
18 demanding compliance. For the character of the law, in some circumstances, can decrease the
19 extent of the gap between the law-in-books and the law-in-action.

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41 This article proceeds in five main stages. First, to provide some context for our study, we
42 offer some descriptive background to the public administration sector that we examined –
43 English housing law as it affects homeless people. Second, we describe the research methods
44 that we employed in the study. Third, we then set out our findings descriptively in order to
45 substantiate the foundational empirical claim that, in one particular aspect of the legislative
46 scheme being implemented, we discovered a small oasis of consistent legal compliance.
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55 Fourth, we then analyse those findings in the light of existing socio-legal scholarship and
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3 seek to explain them. Lastly, we conclude with a consideration of the implications of our
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5 study for future research on the production of law-in-action in street-level bureaucracies.
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9 **The Context: English Homelessness Law**

10 In international terms, Englandⁱ is unusual in giving homeless people a set of justiciable
11
12 rights (Fitzpatrick and Stephens 2007). The right to housing is enshrined in a specific piece of
13
14 legislation. The original legislation dates from 1977 and, despite amendments and re-
15
16 enactments, remains largely unaltered in its basic structure. The UK Parliament has devolved
17
18 the task of implementing what is known as ‘homelessness law’ to the most local level of
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20 government, known as local authorities. When someone applies for housing, the local
21
22 authority must conduct certain stipulated enquiries if it has reason to believe that the
23
24 applicant may be homeless. The housing duty is triggered only if applicants are assessed as
25
26 being (1) eligible to apply (in relation to their immigration status); (2) legally ‘homeless’; (3)
27
28 in priority need; and (4) not intentionally homeless. Thus the legislation has been described
29
30 as constituting something of an “obstacle race” for housing applicants (Robson and
31
32 Watchman 1981). The focus of our project and this article is on the third of the ‘obstacles’ set
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34 out above: the notion of having a “priority need” for housing.
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39 The concept of ‘priority need’ is defined in the legislation.ⁱⁱ It includes the dependence of
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41 children. However, if there are no dependent children, the status of having a ‘priority need’
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43 will generally only be granted to an applicant:
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48 who is vulnerable as a result of old age, mental illness or handicap or physical
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50 disability or other special reason...ⁱⁱⁱ
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54 Accordingly, local authority decisions on whether a housing applicant without children is
55
56 legally ‘vulnerable’ often turn on the use of medical evidence.
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3 The notion of “vulnerability” is not further defined in the legislation. Instead, its meaning has
4
5 been developed and refined through case law. At the time of our fieldwork, the leading case
6
7 was that of *R. v Camden LBC, ex p Pereira* (1998). Here, the Court of Appeal stated that
8
9 vulnerability means an applicant being:
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11
12 less able to fend for himself than an ordinary homeless person so that injury or
13
14 detriment to him will result where a less vulnerable man will be able to cope without
15
16 harmful effects (per Hobhouse L.J., 330).
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19
20 The Court of Appeal gave further clarification six years later in *Osmani v. Camden L.B.C.*
21
22 (2004):
23
24

25
26 One has only to attempt to apply the *Pereira* test to any particular case by asking the
27
28 question whether the applicant would, by reason of whatever condition or
29
30 circumstances assail him, suffer greater harm from homelessness than an ‘ordinary
31
32 homeless person’, to see what a necessarily imprecise exercise of comparison it
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34 imposes on a local housing authority ... For the purpose of applying the vulnerability
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36 test a local housing authority should take care to assess and apply it on the assumption
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38 that an applicant has become or will become street homeless, not on his ability to fend
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40 for himself while still housed. (per Auld L.J., para. 38)
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45 Both of these case law developments on the meaning of vulnerability were reflected in
46
47 subsequent governmental guidance for local authorities implementing the legislation (CLG
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49 2006). Generally speaking, where legislation gives public officials discretionary decision-
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51 making powers, it is common in the UK for that discretion to be the subject of governmental
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53 guidance via statutory codes. The specific terms of such codes are not legally binding, but
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55 must nonetheless be taken into account by local authorities when making their decisions.
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57 Thus, they are best thought of as ‘soft law’ documents (Sossin, 2004). At the time of our
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3 fieldwork, the Code of Guidance relating to homelessness law, which had been in place since
4
5 2006, reiterated, albeit without naming them, the decisions in both *Pereira* and *Osmani*.
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9 10.13... the local authority should consider whether, when homeless, the applicant
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11 would be less able to fend for him/herself than an ordinary homeless person so that he
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13 or she would suffer injury or detriment, in circumstances where a less vulnerable
14
15 person would be able to cope without harmful effects.
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18 10.14... The applicant's vulnerability must be assessed on the basis that he or she is or
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20 will become homeless, and not on his or her ability to fend for him or herself while
21
22 still housed.
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25 26 **Rights of Review / Appeal**

27 Applications for housing under the homelessness legislation are quite high – over 100,000
28
29 each year in England alone (CLG, 2014). Only about 50% of applications, however, are
30
31 successful. Those whose housing applications are rejected have a right to an internal
32
33 administrative review of that decision, though the take up of these rights of review has been
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35 surprising low (Cowan, Halliday and Hunter, 2006). If the original decision is upheld at
36
37 internal review, applicants may then appeal to the county court on a point of law. Thereafter,
38
39 appeals may be made to the Court of Appeal, similarly only on a point of law. There are no
40
41 available data on the number of homelessness appeals in the County Court. However, given
42
43 the low level of take up of internal review, it seems likely that proportionately very few cases
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45 go to this very first stage of appeal. Even fewer will reach the Court of Appeal.
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49 Virtually all decisions of the Court of Appeal are published and available via legal websites.
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51 Decisions of the county court, however, are generally not published and so are much less
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53 visible. These differences in visibility reflect the difference accorded to them in terms of their
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3 importance. In terms of the definitional development of legal terms and concepts, the key
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5 cases are those that proceed to the Court of Appeal.
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8 9 **Research Methods**

10 The public administration of homelessness law has been a popular site for socio-legal case
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12 studies of street-level bureaucracy in the UK (Loveland, 1995; Mullen, Pick and
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14 Prosser, 1996; Cowan, 1997; Cowan and Halliday, 2003; Halliday, 2004; Watts, 2013). This
15
16 is because, despite the fact that the number of court cases is very low relative to the number
17
18 of applications made for housing, the incidence of homelessness court cases relative to
19
20 judicial reviews about other matters has traditionally been very high (Sunkin, Bridges and
21
22 Meszaros, 1996). Accordingly, a focus on homelessness decision-making has provided fertile
23
24 ground for exploring issues of street-level bureaucratic compliance with the dictates of the
25
26 courts, in addition to the legislative rules.
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31 Our data reported here comes from a study funded by the UK's *Economic and Social*
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33 *Research Council*, which examined the decision-making of homelessness officers for
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35 applicants who were vulnerable. The study focused particularly on the use of medical
36
37 evidence. It employed a mixed-method qualitative case study approach with the case studies
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39 located in three different local authorities across England. The authorities (London Borough,
40
41 Northern City and Eastern Town)^{iv} were purposively selected to include both urban and rural
42
43 jurisdictions, large and small authorities (in terms of the annual number of homelessness
44
45 applications), and different approaches to assessing medical evidence. Two of the local
46
47 authorities employed the services of external medical advisors, albeit to different degrees,
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49 while the third did not. Experience of legal activism was not a selection criterion of the
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51 fieldwork sites. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that our three case study authorities were quite
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53 different in this respect too. In both London Borough and Northern City there were a number
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3 of cases that proceeded to internal administrative review of decisions on vulnerability. In
4
5 such cases, the applicants were usually represented by lawyers, who would write lengthy
6
7 letters setting out the relevant case law in some detail. There was no such evidence in
8
9 Eastern Town.
10

11
12 In each of our fieldwork sites, the implementation of homelessness law was conducted in
13
14 municipal offices. Generally speaking within the UK, applications for housing under
15
16 homelessness law are sufficiently high that most local authorities have dedicated teams of
17
18 officers whose work is entirely devoted to dealing with homelessness applications. This was
19
20 certainly the case in our three fieldwork sites. Each had a team of specialized frontline
21
22 officers supervised by managers (albeit of differing sizes: 4 in Eastern Town; 14 in London
23
24 Borough; 6 in Northern City). Frontline officers would interview homeless applicants,
25
26 conduct inquiries where necessary, and make a determination about whether applicants
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28 qualified for assistance under the legislation. These frontline officers were generally career
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30 civil servants (at a local government level).
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35
36 Fieldwork took place between 2011 and 2012. The case studies in each fieldwork site
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38 comprised four elements. Firstly, a semi-structured in-depth interview was carried out with
39
40 the local authority manager (or senior representative in an equivalent role) responsible for
41
42 assessing homelessness applications. Interviews explored each local authority's
43
44 organisational policies and procedures as regards the use of medical evidence (in both
45
46 applications and internal administrative reviews), and explored the rationale behind the
47
48 different approaches adopted.
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52 Secondly, a focus group was undertaken with frontline homelessness officers who had
53
54 handled applications and/or reviews involving medical evidence. These involved between
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56 four and six participants, depending upon the size of each local authority. Vignettes – short
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3 written scenarios intended to illicit responses to typical situations (Hill 1997) – based on
4
5 ‘real’ anonymised cases, were used across all three case studies. This enabled consistent
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7 comparison of different organisational cultures.
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11 Thirdly, individual homelessness application case files were examined in detail. Across the
12
13 local authority areas forty-one case files of the most recent decisions (including both cases
14
15 that were accepted and rejected), where a decision on vulnerability involved taking into
16
17 account applicants’ medical issues, were examined. In addition, nine of these cases
18
19 proceeded to internal administrative review and this review stage of the case file was also
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21 examined. This enabled the research team to analyse real cases and assess the actual medical
22
23 evidence that was requested and provided in the case and how influential that medical
24
25 evidence was in the final decision.
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27

28
29 Finally, following the case file analysis, a semi-structured in-depth interview took place with
30
31 the officer(s) handling each individual case. The researchers conducted forty-six interviews
32
33 with decision-making homelessness officers regarding the individual decisions on each of the
34
35 case files, including those that went on to internal administrative review. With reference to
36
37 each case, interviews explored: officers’ understanding of the application of the law to a
38
39 particular case; their understanding of and response to the medical evidence before them;
40
41 whether they sought particular types of medical evidence; how and to what extent medical
42
43 evidence (from various sources) influenced their decision on the case; any other factors taken
44
45 into account.
46
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49 The interview and focus group data were subject to thematic analysis, having first been
50
51 transcribed. The coding scheme aimed to capture the bureaucrats’ perceptions of the role of
52
53 law and legality in relation to their routine decision-making about ‘vulnerability’. This
54
55 included references to a legal test of vulnerability, as well as references to relevant court
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3 cases, and the legal test developed in these cases (or phrases similar to the test). Additionally,
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5 drawing particularly on prior socio-legal work on homelessness decision-making (e.g.,
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7 Loveland, 1995; Mullen et al, 1996; Cowan, 1997; Halliday, 2004), these data were coded for
8
9 the features of the broader decision-making context that militated against legal compliance. A
10
11 similar exercise was also undertaken with all the documentation from the different
12
13 authorities, both from the individual cases and from policy/procedure documents.
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18 Findings

19 As noted already above, previous empirical studies of the general implementation of
20
21 homelessness law have highlighted the unlawful features of routine bureaucratic practices
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23 and the barriers that stand in the way of full legal compliance (Loveland, 1995; Mullen, Pick
24
25 and Prosser, 1996; Cowan 1997; Halliday 2004). In many respects, and unsurprisingly, our
26
27 findings were similar. We observed a variety of practices that could be characterised as
28
29 legally dubious. For example, at the time of fieldwork, as a matter of procedure, Northern
30
31 City asked medical practitioners for their view of whether an applicant was vulnerable and in
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33 practice took this view as decisive. Case law has long made it clear that such practice is
34
35 unlawful. The decision on vulnerability is squarely one for the local authority itself and not
36
37 external advisors.^v
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42 Nonetheless, in one respect, our data marked something of a contrast. Whereas the general
43
44 thrust of research on street-level bureaucracy has been to document and explain failure to
45
46 comply with law and formal policy, our data revealed a small oasis of legal compliance – in
47
48 relation to the substantive test to be used when determining whether an applicant was
49
50 vulnerable. In this respect, despite being purposively sampled to represent different size,
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52 locality and decision-making arrangements, our three local authorities were all legally
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54 compliant.
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3 So, for example, in Northern City, the letter template asking the external medical advisors for
4
5 their opinions included a statement of the “Test of Vulnerability”:
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7

8 In some areas of law, “vulnerable” is used without much in the way of further
9
10 definition. However, in homelessness cases vulnerability means that an applicant is
11
12 “less able to fend for himself than an ordinary homeless person so that injury or
13
14 detriment will result were a less vulnerable man will be able to cope without harmful
15
16 effects”; that is to say a person is vulnerable if he has a lesser ability than that of a
17
18 hypothetical “ordinary homeless person” to fend for himself that he would suffer
19
20 greater harm from homelessness than would such a person. The test must be applied
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22 on the assumption that he is or will become street homeless not on his ability to fend
23
24 for himself while still housed.
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28
29 As we can see, this directly reproduced part of the decision in *Pereira* and also reflects the
30
31 decision in *Osmani*. The same was true as regards Northern City’s decision letters to
32
33 applicants where priority need was denied. Among the 11 cases we examined, three different
34
35 formulations were found. All three formulations set out “the test”:
36
37

38 when homeless, would you be less able to fend for yourself than an ordinary homeless
39
40 person so that you would be likely to suffer injury or detriment in circumstances
41
42 where a less vulnerable person would be able to cope without harmful effects?
43
44
45

46 In two of the formulations, the *Pereira* case was referenced in full. Further, it was apparent
47
48 that the above paperwork represented more than shallow technical compliance for the
49
50 purposes of appearances. Rather, it reflected the officers’ convictions about the appropriate
51
52 test to be used. Northern City’s officers made reference to the case law when discussing how
53
54 to make vulnerability decisions:
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3 Again it's looking at *Pereira* – would he be any less vulnerable than any other street
4
5 person? Would he be more vulnerable on the streets than an average Joe Bloggs
6
7 really? (NC focus group)
8
9

10 ...on the balance of probabilities would this person be just as able to cope as the
11
12 average homeless person. (Case officer NC/7)
13
14

15 We've got to look to the test and we've got to...use the test to see whether or not
16
17 they're vulnerable. (Case officer NC/11)
18
19

20
21 The same legal compliance on this point was found in Eastern Town. Its senior manager
22
23 asserted:
24
25

26 We use the *Pereira* test [...] and we apply the *Osmani* rules. So hopefully most of the
27
28 time we get it right.
29
30

31 At frontline level, local authority officers made frequent reference to these cases in discussing
32
33 how to make vulnerability decisions:
34
35

36 ...when you look at the *Pereira* test, you're looking at the different issues, and I
37
38 believe he was more than capable of dealing with most things in everyday life. (Case
39
40 officer ET/3)
41
42

43 My biggest concern in all of this is what would happen if he would become street
44
45 homeless and with the *Osmani*. It's not how he is coping now, I've got to look at how
46
47 he will be if he becomes street homeless.... (ET focus group)
48
49

50
51 In relation to some of Eastern Town's cases we were able to see front-line officers' full
52
53 reports of their decisions. These too revealed compliance with the legal test for vulnerability.
54
55 For example, in ET/1 the report noted:
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3 I have carried out a Pereira Test and the indication would be that this is not a priority.
4
5 However, I am of the opinion that the combination of his medical issues would lead to
6
7 him being vulnerable if he became street homeless.
8
9

10 In interview, the officer explained further:
11

12
13 I quickly changed my mind once I researched into [his medical condition] [...] In my
14
15 opinion he wouldn't have passed the *Pereira* test, it was mainly the *Osmani* bit that,
16
17 the effect that if he was street homeless, obviously his mental health would have
18
19 suffered, in my opinion, because he needed the toilet facilities for the Crohn's disease,
20
21 ... if he'd been street homeless that would have brought on his OCD. (Case officer
22
23 ET/1)
24
25
26

27 As regards London Borough, the legal requirements of vulnerability decisions were designed
28
29 into the day-to-day documentation used by its front-line officers. For example, the internal
30
31 guidance produced for officers included a section on determining vulnerability:
32
33
34

35 Determining vulnerability is a matter of judgement and all relevant factors must be
36
37 taken into consideration before making a decision. In all cases one must apply the test
38
39 of vulnerability: *By law, when deciding whether someone is vulnerable, you must look*
40
41 *at whether they are unable to fend for themselves, when homeless, so that they will*
42
43 *suffer injury or detriment in circumstances where a less vulnerable person would be*
44
45 *able to cope without harmful effects. R v London Borough of Camden ex parte*
46
47 *Pereira (1998) (italics in original).*
48
49

50
51 Equally, in each of its decision letters about vulnerability exactly the same italicized section
52
53 was included. The centrality of the legal test was reflected in how frontline officers discussed
54
55 the reasoning behind their decisions, albeit without direct reference to the legal cases:
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3 [The test was whether the applicant was] vulnerable when compared to someone else
4
5 who might have less significant problems or less of an impact on themselves... (Case
6
7 officer LB/11)

8
9
10 As a double amputee I would just, I would imagine he would certainly be in priority
11
12 need as somebody who was less able to fend if left without accommodation. (Case
13
14 officer LB/8)

15
16
17 based on the further information that we received, it, it, it was pretty clear that he, he
18
19 wouldn't be able to fend for himself, you know, if he, if he was to become homeless.
20
21 (Case office LB/3)
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25 26 27 **Analysis of Findings**

28 Our findings above present themselves as an interesting puzzle: why amidst variable and
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30 unlawful practices do we find a small oasis of consistent legal compliance in relation to the
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32 vulnerability test? The answer, we suggest, lies in the character of the legal provision
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34 demanding compliance, and the significance of that character for the likelihood of street-level
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36 bureaucratic legal knowledge, legal competence and legal conscientiousness (Halliday,
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38 2004). More specifically, we suggest that the vulnerability test within the homelessness
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40 legislation is (1) simpler than other aspects of the legislative scheme; (2) less offensive to
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42 frontline officers; and (3) more accommodating of the pressures within the decision-making
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44 environment that countervail against legal compliance – what Sunkin (2004) has called the
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46 “liveability” of law. We flesh these arguments out below.
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50 51 **Simplicity**

52 The vulnerability test articulated in the key cases of *Pereira* and *Osmani* lent itself easily to a
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54 short and straightforward abbreviation. When compared to other legal elements demanding
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56 compliance from the local authorities, the vulnerability test had an attractive simplicity about
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3 it. A comparison with one of other ‘obstacles’ (Robson and Watchman, 1981) within the
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5 legislation - that of the “intentionality” of homelessness - is instructive. The concept of
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7 ‘intentional homelessness’ has been the most heavily litigated aspect of the homelessness
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9 litigation (Loveland, 1991). The basic idea underscoring this provision was that an applicant
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11 for housing may be deemed intentionally homeless:

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14 if he deliberately does or fails to do anything in consequence of which he ceases to
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16 occupy accommodation which is available for his occupation and which it would have
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18 been reasonable for him to continue to occupy. [...] [A]n act or omission in good faith
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20 on the part of a person who was unaware of any relevant fact shall not be treated as
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22 deliberate. (Housing Act 1996, s. 191)
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26 In contrast to the vulnerability test, this intentionality test was rather complex. As we can see,
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28 it involved questions of intention, causation, availability of accommodation, reasonableness
29
30 of accommodation, good faith and relevance of facts. Each of these has given rise to litigation
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32 where the statutory concept has been developed through case law. The case law on
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34 intentional homelessness has been extensive and, in places, rather convoluted (Arden, Orme
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36 and Vanhegan, 2012). As a legal concept, it was far from simple and did not lend itself to
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38 easy abbreviation. Indeed, its abbreviated discussion in the central government’s Code of
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40 Guidance (CLG 2006) extended to seven full pages of text.
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46 Likewise, if we consider the legal demands of natural justice or due process in the decision-
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48 making process, they are much more complex than the vulnerability test. The case law – even
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50 that restricted to homelessness law - is sufficiently expansive to accommodate competing
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52 models of bureaucratic justice (Halliday, 2004). Accordingly, much depends on context
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54 (Elliott and Thomas, 2012). The legal requirements of natural justice are best thought of as
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3 contingent rather than clear. By way of contrast, the vulnerability test was both contained and
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5 straightforward.
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8 This is not to say, of course, that the legal test of vulnerability is not *contestable*. The notion
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10 of the “ordinary homeless person” has been the subject of much critique by those who
11
12 represent homeless applicants (see, e.g., Madge-Wyld, 2013). Although the meaning was
13
14 settled at the time of our study, we must recognize that stable and relatively straightforward
15
16 legal provisions can be rendered more complex and uncertain through litigation. Indeed, the
17
18 vulnerability test has recently been subject to such litigation in the Court of Appeal and the
19
20 Supreme Court.^{vi} In the light of this decision, local authorities will have to rethink how they
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22 approach decision-making on vulnerability. However, our point here is that at the time of our
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24 fieldwork, the test was short, easily intelligible and thus straightforward to apply.
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29 The significance of legal simplicity for the existence of legal compliance lies, first, in the
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31 affect it has on the likelihood of legal knowledge on the part of street-level bureaucrats.
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33 Knowledge of the legal provision demanding compliance is clearly a fundamental pre-
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35 requisite of legal compliance (Loveland, 1995; Mullen et al, 1996; Halliday, 2004). Legal
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37 simplicity aids the translation of case law specifics to general bureaucratic guidelines and
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39 templates. We can see this in the encapsulation of the abbreviated vulnerability test in the
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41 central government’s Code of Guidance (CLG 2006) and in the London Borough practice
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43 manual for frontline officers. It is also evident in its inclusion in the decision-letter templates
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45 in London Borough and Northern City.
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49 Secondly, legal simplicity also has significance for the legal competence of street-level
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51 bureaucrats. Halliday’s discussion of ‘legal competence’ referred to the fact that much of the
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53 English public law aimed at regulating public administration operates at a level of general
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55 principle (Halliday, 2004). Whereas the courts are clearly adept at applying legal principles to
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3 the particular facts of litigated cases, it is a very tall order to expect street-level bureaucrats
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5 similarly to be able to extract the relevant principle from a case law judgment and then re-
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7 apply it to their full set of work tasks. However, where the particular aspect of public law
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9 demanding compliance is sufficiently simple and contained, legal competence in the way
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11 described by Halliday is not required. In other words, legal simplicity extinguishes legal
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13 competence as a necessary condition of legal compliance. As we can see, in relation to the
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15 vulnerability test, the requirement for doctrinal reasoning skills are absent. The test invites
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17 easy application rather than skilled interpretation.
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20 21 **Inoffensiveness**

22 As was noted in the introduction to this article, street-level bureaucratic theory stresses,
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24 amongst other things, that the inevitable discretion of street-level bureaucrats opens up a
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26 space into which cultural morality can flow (Hasenfeld, 2000). Perceptions of deserving and
27
28 undeserving citizens/clients channel street-level work (Cowan, 1997; Maynard-Moody and
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30 Musheno, 2003). Thus, legal provisions that militate against cultural norms are less likely to
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32 attract compliance (Hawkins, 2003). Equally, in policy contexts that have an excess of rules,
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34 street-level bureaucrats make discretionary choices about which rules to apply (Prottas, 1979;
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36 Sainsbury, 1992), often influenced by the dictates of cultural morality.
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41 However, our focus on the vulnerability test demonstrates that fidelity to law and fidelity to
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43 cultural morality are not always in opposition. As Maynard-Moody and Portillo remind us:
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45 “we must move beyond the false dichotomy between street-level discretion and rule-based
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47 implementation” (Maynard-Moody and Portillo, 2010: 13). The vulnerability test set out in
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49 the legislation and further articulated in the key cases of *Pereira* and *Osmani* did not, in and
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51 of itself, ‘offend’ the cultural morality of our research subjects. Rather, it was structured in
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53 such a way that it could be applied faithfully without coming into conflict with any
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55 convictions based on cultural morality. It preserved the discretion of the street-level
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3 bureaucrats, in other words. The vulnerability test, including its development by the Court of
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5 Appeal, required the street-level bureaucrats to conduct a comparative exercise (that is, about
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7 whether the applicant would be less able to fend for himself than an ordinary homeless
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9 persons if street homeless); but it did not determine the outcome of that comparative exercise.
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11 In this way, legal compliance was not positioned in opposition to the dictates of cultural
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13 morality.
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17 The vulnerability test, then, was not likely attract the ‘legal cynicism’ observed by Hertogh in
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19 his study of Dutch public administration, whereby, even though street-level bureaucrats were
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21 knowledgeable of the law, they felt alienated from its terms: “They generally [did] not feel
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23 that their own values [were] sufficiently reflected in the law” (Hertogh 2010, 218). Rather, in
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25 relation to vulnerability decision-making, it was more likely that officers would be ‘legal
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27 loyalists’ (Hertogh, 2010), feeling free to be ‘legally conscientious’ (Halliday, 2004). In other
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29 words, a basic commitment to legality, to acting lawfully, would not be overwhelmed or
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31 dislodged by the demands of cultural morality.
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34 35 **Liveability**

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37 As we saw above, Halliday’s discussion of ‘legal conscientiousness’ (Halliday, 2004) and
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39 Hertogh’s discussion of ‘legal cynicism’ (Hertogh, 2010), both point to the fact that law is
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41 but one of the normative pressures – or “social spheres” (Galligan, 2007) - under which
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43 street-level bureaucrats operate. In addition to cultural morality, there are other normative
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45 systems within the environment, such as performance audit, financial management, local
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47 political accountability, etc., that may similarly dislodge a street-level bureaucratic
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49 inclination towards legal compliance.
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53 Nonetheless, our argument here is that certain legal provisions may have an unusually
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55 accommodating character within the decision-making environment – what Sunkin has
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57 described as the “liveability” of law (2004). Specifically, we suggest that the vulnerability
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3 test has a kind of Teflon quality, whereby it can enter the public administration environment
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5 without causing any friction. Thus *notwithstanding* the existence of general competition
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7 between legality and other normative pressures within the street-level bureaucratic
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9 environment (Halliday, 2004), the character of the vulnerability test managed to avoid that
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11 competition and so facilitate legal compliance.
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15 Much like the findings of previous studies, the local authorities we studied in this project
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17 were subject to a range of environmental pressures that would ordinarily militate against legal
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19 compliance. For example, there were clearly some financial pressures at play that in turn gave
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21 rise to time pressures for the decision-making process. This came out much more in the
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23 interviews with managers than in the interviews with front-line officers around individual
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25 decisions. For example, in Northern City, the manager explained that the officers were
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27 working to “numbers in bed and breakfast and temporary accommodation”:
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31 I would be expecting some feedback on anybody who we’ve had in bed and breakfast
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33 for more than a couple of weeks, what we’re doing, where we are, so that they would,
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35 they would need to prioritise and, and provide information and make sure they were
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37 chasing up the information in order to make a decision.
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41 In London Borough the manager referred to the pressure of having targets for investigation
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43 times and occupancy of temporary accommodation. The importance of target time of
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45 investigations was also reflected in the focus group:
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49 ... if these specialists or the GPs are taking forever to come back with the information,
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51 obviously we are certain times when we have to make decisions. We may be basing
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53 the decision just on the information that we have in front of us.
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3 However, although these financial and time pressures impacted on the investigative process
4 leading up to a decision and so threatened compliance with the legal requirements of due
5 process and procedural rationality (Halliday, 2004), they did not impinge on the application
6 of the vulnerability test itself. Rather, the correct legal test would still be applied, albeit
7 sometimes to a more limited range of evidence in order to comply with time pressures. In
8 other words, an abandonment of the legally correct vulnerability test was not required in
9 order to be responsive to the alternative normative pressures. Adherence to the correct
10 vulnerability test did not endanger the meeting of financial or efficiency targets. Given that
11 the test was irrelevant to the routine competition between law and the other normative
12 systems within the decision-making environment, there was no temptation or pressure on
13 street-level bureaucrats to move away from a commitment to legal compliance.
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29 **Conclusion**

30 Street-level bureaucratic theory is now at a fairly mature stage, given that it is now almost 40
31 years since the political sciences turned their attentions towards the frontlines of public
32 services in an attempt to fully grasp the realities of policy delivery (Maynard-Moody and
33 Portillo, 2010). The focus on the inevitable distortions of formal policy and the depiction of
34 street-level bureaucrats as the “ultimate policymakers” (Lipsky, 1980) are now as familiar as
35 they are important. Likewise, the parallel socio-legal study of the implementation of public
36 law in public service organisations, much of which has drawn explicitly on street-level
37 bureaucratic theory, has demonstrated the inevitable gap between the law-in-books and the
38 law-in-action (Halliday and Scott, 2010). And yet, the success of these empirical and
39 theoretical advances comes at the potential cost of us losing sight of the fact that, in some
40 circumstances and in some respects, the policy drafters can still be the ultimate policymakers.
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42 The aim of this article has been to analyse some empirical data that revealed one such
43 instance – the application of the concept of ‘vulnerability’ in UK homelessness law.
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3 Our analysis has offered two main contributions to street-level bureaucratic theory. First,
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5 drawing on the socio-legal scholarship on the implementation of public law, we have argued
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7 that scholars of street-level bureaucracy must pay attention to the fact that, when it comes to
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9 the implementation of public law, including its developments in the courts, the legal abilities
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11 and propensities of the bureaucrats must be taken into account. Bureaucrats' abilities to
12
13 understand and work with legal materials, and their attitudes towards the importance of
14
15 lawfulness make a difference to the likelihood of legal compliance. In their review of street-
16
17 level bureaucratic theory, Maynard-Moody and Portillo suggested that:
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21 The expression of street-level agency occurs in the context of three core relationships:
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23 with the immediate supervisors, with peers, and with clients and citizens. (2010: 13)
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27 To that list we would add of fourth relationship: that with legality. Thus, the study of street-
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29 level bureaucrats' legal skills as well as their 'legal consciousness' (Cooper, 1995; Halliday
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31 and Scott, 2010; Hertogh, 2010) is an important direction for research.
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35 Our second and related contribution has been to argue that, in addition to studying the
36
37 structure of street-level work and the identities and characteristics of street-level bureaucrats,
38
39 we must also pay attention to the character of legal provisions demanding compliance. We
40
41 have demonstrated that the character of a legal provision can alter the likelihood of legal
42
43 compliance – by virtue of the effect it has on the legal abilities and propensities of street-level
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45 bureaucrats. Where a legal provision is simple, it is more likely to facilitate legal knowledge
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47 on the part of street-level bureaucrats and demands nothing of them in terms of legal
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49 competence. Where the provision is also 'inoffensive' and 'liveable' it is less likely to act as
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51 an impediment to legal conscientiousness. Thus we can expect legal compliance rather than
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53 deviations from the terms of the law.
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3 Of course, the intricacy of our argument serves also to demonstrate how difficult it can be for
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5 law makers, whether the legislature or the courts, to create law that matches the conditions
6
7 we have outlined. Studies of legislative process in the UK have demonstrated that much
8
9 legislation is the result of political negotiation and compromise (Page, 2001), where concerns
10
11 of simplicity, inoffensiveness and liveability are likely to be difficult to anticipate and easy to
12
13 sacrifice. And the primary concern of the courts is to resolve retrospectively a specific claim
14
15 of unlawfulness, rather than to prospectively create law for future and general application. In
16
17 short, there is much in the routine business of lawmaking that stands in the way of crafting
18
19 legal provisions that facilitate compliance. And yet, our study shows that it is not impossible
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21 and some such provisions do exist. They may be exceptions to the rule but, in some respects,
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23 are all the more important because of that. In any event, if we want to understand the reality
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25 of policy delivery on the frontlines, we must not close our eyes to their existence and
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27 possibility.
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31 *Research and Theory*, (16), 87-102
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38 ⁱ The Housing Act 1996 applies in both England and Wales, and there is similar legislation in Scotland.
39 However, post devolution homelessness law is diverging across the three jurisdictions. This study focuses on
40 three local authorities in England.

41 ⁱⁱ Housing Act 1996, s.189

42 ⁱⁱⁱ In 2002 the priority need categories were extended to include some other groups of single people e.g. all 16
43 and 17 year olds and 18-21 year old care leavers, together with others who also had to be “vulnerable” as
44 defined such as former prisoners or members of the armed forces. Equally, a single person may be in priority
45 need by virtue of being homeless as a result of an emergency. None of these were included in the study.

46 ^{iv} These geographic descriptors are used as pseudonyms for each of the study areas throughout the rest of the
47 paper so as to preserve their anonymity.

48 ^v *R. v. London Borough of Lambeth, ex p. Carroll* (1987)

49 ^{vi} In December 2014 the Supreme Court heard three appeals from Court of Appeal decisions on the
50 meaning of “vulnerable”: *Kanu v London Borough of Southwark* [2014]; *Johnson v Solihull MBC* [2014] and
51 *Hotak v London Borough of Southwark* [2013]. The decision of the Supreme Court was given in May 2015.
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