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On the frontline: the ‘gatekeeper’ in statutory homelessness services¹

Abstract

This paper applies an implementation perspective to revisit the topic of gatekeeping in statutory homelessness services. It is undertaken in light of an ongoing economic crisis and related austerity agenda whereby practitioners face the twofold challenge of diminishing resources, alongside an increase in service users. Following earlier research it was found that practitioners unlawfully impeded homelessness applications due to a mixture of scarcity, lack of comprehension around housing law, personal values, peer pressure and organisational directives. It is argued that gatekeeping practices may be reduced by ensuring practitioners have access to adequate legal training, but this is not sufficient without tackling the overriding lack of resources and target driven pressures. These findings ultimately show that some households continue to be denied the assistance they are lawfully entitled to, which may lead to preventable homelessness.

Introduction

Problem definition and aims of research

This article draws on an implementation perspective to explore the practice of gatekeeping in contemporary English Local Authority Housing Advice Service’s (LAHAS’s). It adopts a two stage methodological approach in an attempt to understand how frontline delivery may impact on the quality of service provided. Although recent research has examined the interpretation of statutory homelessness law within a specific area (Bretherton, Hunter and Johnsen, 2013), as far as the researcher is aware, none has focused on gatekeeping per se since the economic downturn and related political austerity agenda. It is not suggested that investigations undertaken prior to these events has necessarily become any less robust, only that LAHAS’s are now facing different challenges, and the effects these may have on potential users of the service need revisiting. In summary this research aimed to investigate whether gatekeeping still persists, and if so, what determinants ensure its endurance; seeking to uncover:

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- What factors are present which encourage or discourage gatekeeping practices?
- Do gatekeeping behaviours appear to be linked to comprehension of the Housing Act, or are other factors responsible?

An implementation perspective

It is now generally accepted that to view Central Government as the primary determinant of policy outcomes from inception to implementation is fundamentally flawed (Lindblom and Woodhouse, 1993; Hill, 2009) and most scholars now agree that in respect of social policy issues effectual research must evaluate the aggregate influences manifest at the frontline (Evans, 2010). It is argued that to comprehend the impact of housing law on those at threat of homelessness, and the forces that drive LAHAS's to interpret or act upon directives in a particular way, it is necessary to investigate how that policy is delivered. It was found that Lipsky's (1971, 1980) street level bureaucrat implementation perspective, which gives credence to the critical role that statutory workers play in policy formation and dissemination, provided the best fit for the purposes of understanding the operation of LAHAS's.

Local authority housing option services

The role of LAHAS's entails the provision of statutory homelessness assessments alongside a strong emphasis on advice and prevention (CLG, 2006). The Housing Act 1996 (amended 2002) forms the main underpinning and is fleshed out with regular caselaw updates. By law a household has a legal right to make a statutory homelessness application if they are homeless or threatened as such within 28 days. Once an application is made a household is generally required to meet five tests before an authority will accept a duty to provide settled accommodation; these are that of eligibility, homelessness, priority need, intentionality, and local connection. Briefly, priority need refers to households containing dependent children, a care leaver, a pregnant person, or those which require more subjective interpretation, such as vulnerability as a result of ill health, older age, violence, or institutionalisation (ODPM, 2002). In respect of the test of intentionality, an authority needs to be satisfied that the applicant did not lose their last settled accommodation due to a deliberate act. Local connection is normally gained through settled residency of the applicant or relatives, employment, or for a special reason, such as fleeing violence (Parliament, 1996).

Back in 1980 homeless acceptances in England stood at just over 60,000, this figure increased exponentially until it reached an all time high of 135,590 by 2003 (Pawson, 2012). It was this dramatic escalation that triggered central political targets aimed at reducing statutory acceptances and use of temporary accommodation, alongside the provision of extra funding to pay for prevention initiatives, such as accessing private rented accommodation, or assisting with mortgage arrears (ODPM, 2003). Concomitant to these main objectives, and seemingly running counter to the overriding objective of reducing statutory homelessness, the Labour Government of the time introduced additional priority need categories (ODPM, 2002). Despite the obvious challenges these amendments posed by 2009 homelessness acceptances had reduced to a record low of less than 50,000 (Pawson and Wilcox, 2012, p. 206). It has been argued that the so called “prevention agenda” emerged as a political cloak, whereby the actual catalyst was to reduce politically damaging homeless statistics, rather than a genuine desire to assist those in housing difficulty (Lund, 2011, p. 169). This may at least partly explain why prevention initiatives tend to focus on groups who are classed as being in priority need (Jones and Pleace, 2010; Pawson et al, 2007).

In the last few years statutory homelessness acceptances (CLG, 2013), and households requiring help due to the threat of homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al, 2012) have once again followed an upward trend. Since the Coalition Government came into power in 2010 its policy objective of reducing public spending has meant cuts to both central budgets and local authority departments, and public outlay toward housing and welfare has decreased to its lowest rate since 1945 (Nevin and Leather, 2012, p. 14). LAHAS’s have further been charged with identifying cost savings which in some cases have led to the reduction of frontline staff (Office National Statistics, 2011, p. 2). However, despite this challenging environment, at the time of writing political pressure on LAHAS’s to reduce homelessness acceptances or the use of temporary accommodation has not eased (CLG, 2012).

Evidence of Gatekeeping

For the purposes of this article practices adopted by frontline workers to impede statutory presentations are collectively referred to as gatekeeping. As stated above, in legal terms if a household is deemed to be threatened with homelessness within 28 days they have the right to request and be granted a homeless application regardless of perceived priority. Yet research evidence suggests that LAHAS users are at times effectively denied this legal right by the adoption of a number of strategies. For example it was found that areas of the law

around intentionality, priority need and local connection were misappropriated (Bowpitt et al, 2011; Rashleigh, 2005), and that households were signposted to prevention rather than statutory provision (Pawson, 2007; Rashleigh, 2005), despite this practice being unlawful (EWHC52, 2007). Moreover, it has been shown that practitioners at times adopt aggressive strategies to discourage service users from requesting a formal homeless application (Cowan, 2011), or withhold information on how to apply based on the notion that applicants will be unaware of their statutory rights (Lidstone, 1994).

It has been argued that prior to the prevention agenda households presenting as homeless were normally taken on face value and automatically completed a homeless application, but its introduction meant that service users were required to undergo a filtering process (Pawson and Davidson, 2007). Scholars have further maintained that it has become progressively problematic to communicate with a practitioner qualified to conduct a legal assessment (Rashleigh, 2005; Reeve and Batty, 2011). However, earlier research has shown that these arguments underplay the role gatekeeping played prior to the prevention agenda (Anderson 1999, p. 166; Evans, 1999; Jacobs et al, 1999). For example Evans (1999) found that staff routinely discouraged applications from single people, many stating that this was to limit their workload and reduce expectations of non priority applicants. Niner (1989) found evidence that specific tactics, such as requesting vast amounts of evidence to support claims, or advising an applicant that they would likely be found intentionally homeless, were adopted in a bid to discourage applications. These earlier findings are likely to reflect the underlying lack of resources which recurrently plague the service (discussed below), and due to the nature of the Housing Act itself, which invokes a set of hurdles that must be satisfied before an applicant can be conferred the status of statutorily homeless (Evans, 1999).

Although a few investigators provided direct evidence of gatekeeping, most uncovered it via the anecdotal evidence of service users (Bowpitt et al, 2011; Reeves and Batty, 2011) notably through mystery shopper exercises (BHUG, 2009; Cheeseman, 2011). Rashleigh (2005) disseminated the results of a survey commissioned by Shelter to 60 LAHAS's and found that many practitioners were unwilling to reveal to a researcher ways in which they may flout the law. For example, asked if they had refused to allow someone to make a homeless application despite knowing they were legally entitled to do so, most declined to answer, of those who did all admitted they had done so. Perhaps due to the sensitive nature of the topic under study, in that it aims to investigate potential unlawful practices, an unwillingness to respond was not surprising.

Although the previous administration publicly warned LAHAS's not to adopt gatekeeping practices (EWCA1122, 2007), an Ombudsman (2011) report confirmed that homeless applications continued to be unlawfully obstructed. Despite the introduction of an internal procedure whereby service users could request a judicial review if it was deemed a given LAHAS had erred in law (Parliament, 1996), no LAHAS has actually faced a legal challenge on the basis of employing gatekeeping, but rather, due to maladministration (Pawson, 2009, p. 103). A final point is that households who receive insufficient help may not necessarily recognise this. Service users will not generally possess detailed knowledge of housing policy (Crisis, 2009; Reeves and Batty, 2011), or have access to the mechanisms at play within statutory housing services (Lidstone, 1994; Lipsky, 1980, p. 53).

Factors that may lead to gatekeeping

Attempts to dissect the causations of gatekeeping can be complex, as practitioners will base their homeless decisions less on legislative rules than on contextual considerations and networks relevant to their local environment (Hupe and Hill, 2007; Loveland, 1991). Complex interactions take place and mutual influences can occur in both a horizontal and vertical direction (Hupe and Hill 2007; Tummers et al, 2012). For example, some LAHAS's may have localised codes of guidance that are utilised to a greater or lesser extent than central legal directives (Bramley, 1993).

It has been argued that gatekeeping is not necessarily an exercise of power on the part of employees, but rather a reaction to top down pressures and policy ambiguity (Lipsky, 1980), underpinned by an overriding lack of resources (Niner, 1989; Evans, 1999: 138; Bowpitt et al, 2011). More specifically, pressure to meet organisational performance measures (Halliday, 2000; Rashleigh, 2005), workload (Evans, 1999), uncertainty around particular areas of the Housing Act (Niner, 1989; Rashleigh, 2005; BHUG, 2009), subjective judgment (Bretherton, Hunter and Johnsen, 2013) and the adoption of stereotypical frames of reference (which in turn may be in response to a heavy workload) (Cramer, 2005; Halliday, 2000; Loveland, 1991; Rashleigh, 2005; Sacks-Jones, 2009) were all found to play a part.

In respect of resource shortages some investigations found that a lack of accommodation proved to be a causal factor in interpreting vulnerability, whereby authorities with plentiful housing stock may apply a looser criterion (Niner, 1989; Evans 1999, p. 138). It was further found that pressures to minimise use of temporary accommodation caused some officers to gatekeep (Halliday, 2000). In terms of a target culture Rashleigh (2005) found evidence to

suggest housing law was repeatedly and flagrantly broken due to the pressure to meet organisational objectives (Rashleigh, 2005, p. 18). Most participants advised that as long as there existed pressure to reduce homeless acceptances, gatekeeping would persist. It was further disclosed that officers who had higher acceptance rates were labelled as “soft” and that this hardened culture had resulted in many people entitled to assistance being turned away (Rashleigh, 2005), this type of peer pressure was also identified in respect of limiting the use of B&B’s (Halliday, 2000). Finally, Chun and Rainey (2005) maintained that multiple or conflicting goals will lead practitioners to exercise judgements around which are the most important. So perhaps in the case of LAHAS’s organisational objectives may take precedence over those that relate to ensuring all are provided with acceptable advice and assistance.

Overview of research and critique

The researchers above have provided informative insights into the ways in which LAHAS practitioners may interpret and endorse housing policy at the local level, but a few did not necessarily recognise more deliberative practices in the conduct observed. For instance Rashleigh (2007) argued that an officer’s repeated refusal to take a homeless application from a priority need household demonstrated lack of understanding in how to apply legislation. Similarly, following BHUG’s (2009) findings that LAHAS were not adhering to housing law Crisis recommended that practitioners better equip themselves to grasp it. These arguments suggest that an enhanced comprehension of housing law would improve the quality of help offered to service users. Although this argument is sensible, improved knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient. We learned above that LAHAS’s have been found to be secretive when their actions are questioned, so it may be difficult for an agency such as BHUG (2009) to be confident they can draw conclusions that contravention is due to ignorance rather than obstructive practices. This argument further does not give regard to evidence that practitioners within the public service sector are aware they breach policy, but for various reasons choose to do so, rather than through ignorance of a law (Lindblom and Woodhouse, 1993; Lipsky, 1971). However, it is not suggested that LAHAS’s are necessarily well versed in housing law, accepting that practitioners may fail to keep up to date with legal developments (Cowen, 2011, p. 151), but rather, that the evidence outlined above suggests other factors are at play.

On a final note, it is not the intention of this paper to argue that homelessness prevention is applied primarily as a result of legal manipulation and negative practices. It is recognised that

achieving prevention objectives can make a positive impact by assisting households to remain in their homes, or securing suitable alternatives (Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick, 2008; Pawson and Davidson 2007, p. 15). Rather, the aim is to highlight areas where policy may be misappropriated to handle specific pressures, and the ways in which these may affect the quality of help service users can expect to receive. It is further informed by research which has found that many instances of homelessness (at least in respect of single people) could have been avoided if adequate statutory services had been available (Reeve and Batty, 2011).

Research methodology

Theoretical positioning

This study broadly follows a social constructionist epistemological perspective, as this was found to be effective in identifying how policy is re-shaped during the implementation stage (Ravenhill, 2008, p. 37). It has been suggested that constructionism itself has two broad spectrums, one in which wider social structures exist, but can only be effectively explored via the meanings in which actors assign to it, the other underplays the influence of such structures, focusing exclusively on micro discursive practices (Sayer, 2002). This research can be said to rest within the former end of this spectrum; that is, it incorporates meanings within its methodology, with the overriding acceptance that these are shaped within the structures for which they are imbedded. To this end a survey was designed to provide an overall shape to the meso structure of LAHAS's, which informed the micro, deeper meanings that qualitative interviews then sought.

The methods

The project took a two stage approach; a baseline survey was forwarded to a representative of all LAHAS's in England and this was followed up with qualitative interviews. The research has been guided by the author's direct professional experience, gained in the statutory and third sector. Although this may lead to questions relating to whether personal bias impinged upon the research process (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 75) this extensive knowledge and experience in the topic under study proved to be an asset (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 194). Following Lucchini (1996, p. 169) it is argued that: "without a deep experience of the field even the best methods are nothing". It was found that ensuring interviewees were aware of the researcher's professional experience appeared to allow, in some cases, an empathic

relationship to develop. This dynamic was extremely beneficial to the interview flow, and seemed to assist in practitioners being able to open up and discuss more sensitive areas relatively freely. It was felt that this was important in line with findings that practitioners may be reluctant to discuss practices deemed undesirable, and even unlawful in some cases.

The baseline survey, the first of its kind, provided a comprehensive overview of current English LAHAS provision. It also assisted in identifying determinants which were utilised for the purposes of selecting authorities for follow up interviews. As the response rate to online questionnaires tends to be low (Becker, Bryman and Ferguson, 2012, p. 134) the researcher made the decision to contact all LAHAS's to provide a comprehensive distribution of authority types. A total of 271 practitioners completed the survey, which represented over two thirds. The main results were analysed with the help of SPSS software.

Based on the results of the baseline survey the LAHAS's approached for interview had a mixture of sizes, geographical location, and other variables which appeared to represent differences in how a given LAHAS may operate a service. A total of 25 practitioners in 12 LAHAS's were interviewed, these were restricted to the North East due to practical issues resulting from a limited research budget. One third consisted of line managers, and the remainder were frontline practitioners. Very large and rural LAHAS's were slightly underrepresented based on the survey mix, whereby small, medium, and large authorities alongside urban and rural authorities' broadly reflected the survey demographics. The majority of employees were interviewed in two of the authority's, to gather information on how views and practices may differ endogenously; for the remainder between one and two practitioners were interviewed in each. The interviews were analysed with the assistance of NVIVO software. Although it is accepted that the sample represents a small sub section of LAHAS's in England, and therefore cannot be generalised to the whole population of homelessness services, the aim was to provide a more in-depth analysis that could not have been achieved if resources had been stretched to incorporate a larger number of authorities. In summary the literature suggested the following determinants may impact upon the likelihood of a practitioner adopting gatekeeping practices:

- Personal and peer views
- Lack of Resources
- Target culture
- Ambiguity around the Housing Act

- Use of screening

Due its closed ended nature and the requirement to keep length to a minimum, topics relating to training, personal/peer views and targets were not addressed in the survey, but were explored during the qualitative interviews. When peer pressure is discussed it normally refers to both frontline practitioners and senior officers.

Discussion of research findings

Most practitioners were able to recount instances where service users had been given an inadequate service and sent away with limited help. Although gatekeeping was linked to the application of individual and organisational discretion, it was normally viewed as occurring due to circumstances outside of a practitioner's control, such as top down pressures, resources or workload; the following sections discuss each in turn.

Personal and peer views

It was found that alongside peer, managerial, and organisational pressures, personal views played an important role in shaping decisions. One officer stressed that in her experience people who came to work for LAHAS's could be split into those whose intention was to help people, and those who deemed it their primary goal to gatekeep and protect statutory resources. A few practitioners felt that subsequent behaviours and decision making would then be determined, at least in part, by this dichotomous split. In a similar vein just under half of the interviewees referred to themselves and colleagues as "hard" or "soft" decision makers, in line with Rashleigh's (2005) findings discussed above. One practitioner felt that housing law could be interpreted tightly or loosely based on which category you fitted into. It seemed in many cases statutory homelessness applications were frowned upon by more "hardline" officers, and one referred to a colleague who boasted about her record of taking no applications in several months. Another recalled an incident where her colleague had turned away a service user fleeing violence, incorrectly advising her to return home and fight for the joint tenancy. When the service user subsequently returned a different practitioner provided accommodation immediately. Some practitioners suggested that they and their colleagues would adopt stereotypes and bias, gained both within the role and outside of it. Many felt that this impingement of personal views in the decision making process was unavoidable and "a part of human nature". In line with previous findings (Niner, 1989; Loveland, 1991;

Rashleigh, 2005; Sacks-Jones, 2009) young people being asked to leave the parental home, or women fleeing violence, were frequently deemed to be colluding in order to gain social housing. One interviewee suggested that when a young person approached claiming they had been asked to leave the family home, a homeless application would be discouraged due to an assumption that they could in fact return.

Although softer decision makers may wish to apply more generous criteria, it was found that in some cases senior officers were in a position to prevent them from doing so. For example a few practitioners advised they felt pressured to send priority need households away, or refuse temporary accommodation (this is considered further below). It was found that senior officers could have a marked impact on the service delivered, particularly if staff were unable to make specific decisions without seeking their approval. In one particular example a manager stated that since taking the post she had reduced use of B&B to zero and homelessness acceptances by three quarters. She felt that staff had been taking the “easy route” by readily allowing statutory applications and providing temporary accommodation. A few practitioners explicitly accused a line manager of encouraging gatekeeping, one, for example, advised that a senior officer would advise staff to fob people off, and even pretend advice case questionnaires were homeless applications. In one particular instance, this led to a service user who was deemed to meet the priority need threshold for mental health being sent away, on the proviso that “further checks” would be made. It is important to note that in most LAHAS’s senior officers did not approve homeless decisions, and in these cases practitioners could apply discretion. But officers had less autonomy in terms of allocating temporary accommodation, which was where managers asserted greater influence, for example by disagreeing with an officer’s interpretation of vulnerability.

Lack of resources

The evidence discussed above linked the adoption of gatekeeping practices to limited resources. The baseline survey found that the majority of LAHAS’s had experienced a recent increase in service users at threat of homelessness, and nearly all reported a number of challenges in the current climate. Four fifths stated they were struggling to provide an adequate service due to accommodation shortages in both the private rented and social sectors, and over 80% felt that this was exacerbated by current welfare reform measures. The highest percentage (90%) responded that cuts to housing benefit had negatively impacted on their ability to secure accommodation. It was further found that in many LAHAS’s the

availability of prevention schemes were reserved for households deemed to reach the threshold of priority need. For example payment of rent in advance was only available to non priority service users in 18% of authorities.

A shortage of private and social rented accommodation was reported by an equivalent number of the LAHAS's involved in the interview process. Further, nearly all reported a higher workload due to the impact of welfare cuts, and many felt this would continue as austerity measures continued to take hold. It was found that practitioner's in many cases viewed their role as being to protect limited resources, with a few acknowledging that service users could expect differing treatment on the basis of limited time and budget. The vast majority confirmed that allocation of resources to assist in prevention was focused on priority need groups, to prevent the latter making a homeless application. Further, a few officers reported that service users deemed to have no local connection would at times be illegally sent away. The main reasons given were lack of accommodation, but also workload issues, whereby officers were reluctant to "pick up another case". It was found that all but two of the authorities interviewed had experienced staff sickness due to stress associated with a heavy workload, further impacting on the officers who were expected to cover their duties. An officer iterated that the issues around stress were not being effectively tackled in her authority and that as long as heavy workloads remained the norm service users would not always be provided with a sufficient service. This sentiment was echoed by a senior officer who felt that gatekeeping was becoming more prevalent as authorities were becoming shorter staffed.

Some practitioners perceived that larger authorities were more likely to act outside of the law to protect their resources, and were correspondingly judged as more likely to get away with it, particularly if legal representation for service users was scant in their area. It was further found that the likelihood of an authority making an adverse decision was highest in the LAHAS's who reported the scarcest resources. Three interviewees admitted that negative decisions had increased due to necessity, as accommodation was simply not available. One stated that even if it was accepted that someone was homeless and in priority need they would be sent away, being advised that there was nothing for them. In terms of taking a homelessness application, some officers were either aware anecdotally or seemed to suggest that they would require evidence prior to placing in emergency accommodation, despite this practice being unlawful. In respect of the survey results it was found that non vulnerable households were less likely to be eligible for prevention schemes in the LAHAS's who reported inadequate social and private rented availability. For example, rent in advance (where it was available) was only offered to households with priority need in 64% of

LAHAS's who reported a shortage, compared to 55% of those who did not. The corresponding figures for the rent bond were 49% and 32% respectively. However, these figures need to be treated with caution for two reasons; firstly the number of authorities who reported no shortage of accommodation only represented 40 of the weighted sample, and secondly, it did not reach statistical significance, so may have been reached by chance.

Ambiguity around the Housing Act

As stated above, some researchers suggested that a more comprehensive grasp of housing law may assist in ensuring practitioners were less likely to engage in unlawful gatekeeping. Only a quarter of survey respondents viewed the Housing Act as adequate; of those who felt it needed to be more explicit two thirds identified three or more policy areas (this represented 50% of the total sample who responded to this question), and just over a quarter cited five or more. The policy areas that it was felt required clarification were definitions around vulnerability, with three quarters referring to at least one priority need area. These findings suggest that regular legal training and updates are vital, yet only four authorities reported that they had a good training structure. Even in cases where it was theoretically available, time resources were still an issue. For example, one authority reported that even though they had good training in place, they were unable to keep abreast of caselaw changes due to its frequency, and the associated difficulties of working "on the coalface". One practitioner advised that prior to starting the role colleagues were given a one day "housing act in a nutshell" training session, and as a result did not feel adequately prepared. It seems the paucity of formal training structures may be nothing new, and was found in Niner's (1989) earlier case study of nine local authorities.

Target culture

All but one authority operated some form of scrutiny or performance measure in relation to the role. It was found that even if practitioners were not explicitly given targets to work toward, management may be required to adhere to them, and this would correspondingly permeate through to the frontline. When asked when a statutory homelessness application would be taken, responses differed, even within authorities. It was found either that each practitioner applied a different rule, or some were not willing to disclose that a homeless application would be avoided in some circumstances. For example in one authority around half of respondents claimed that a homeless application would be taken from anyone who

was homeless within 28 days, but the other half refuted this, stating that homeless applications were not taken as a rule.

One LAHAS allowed applicants to be “homeless at home” pending the availability of suitable accommodation, but for the rest the ball would only start rolling if households were placed in temporary accommodation. However, most LAHAS’s were required to keep usage of emergency accommodation to a minimum. To add to this all authorities reported a shortage of temporary accommodation and three had none in their local area. In respect of one of the latter authority’s a practitioner reported that officers had been taught not to allow people access to emergency accommodation for the simple reason that they did not have it. Another stated that some LAHAS’s would send service users elsewhere even though they presented to their authority, due to a lack of available accommodation. It further seemed that sourcing temporary housing outside of the local area could be used as a kind of gatekeeping mechanism, whereby one LAHAS’s emergency accommodation was over 20 miles away, and in a place that service users did not trust as it was away from kin. Because of the unsuitability of this accommodation the practitioner disclosed that they were more likely to sofa surf or impinge upon others for somewhere to stay rather than present as homeless.

However, even in cases where emergency accommodation was available the pressure to keep statutory acceptances to a minimum seemed to impact on the service offered. For instance in one case a practitioner recounted a story where an authority placed a family in emergency accommodation, but still refused (illegally) to take a homeless application. It seemed that the requirement to minimise statutory applications was ubiquitous, and only one interviewee presented a differing view. In this latter case the manager interviewed was concerned because her authority had manipulated homelessness figures for too long, “artificially” representing the local area as having no homeless problem. To deal with this issue her authority was taking the unusual move of “reintroducing” homelessness applications. In contrast to this a manager in a differing authority advised that they were introducing a new system which would be able to track the prevention numbers of each caseworker, so they could monitor if some officers were less likely to prevent than others.

Use of screening

The survey found that in most cases when a service user first approached services, regardless of whether they were threatened with, or literally homeless, they were seen on the front desk, or offered an options interview. In respect of households with nowhere to go that night, less

than a quarter of authorities stated that they would offer a homeless application in the first instance (this reduced to less than 7% for households deemed not to meet the threshold of priority need).

It was found that all LAHAS's interviewed expected service users to use initial front desk or telephone services before they could see an officer. One practitioner advised that they previously allowed service users directly into their offices, but due to a recent increase in demand this had ceased, and people were now required to visit the main reception so their enquiries could be assessed prior to referral. Another authority stated that in the near future service users would no longer be able to contact them directly by telephone, as a central office was to be set up which would field all calls. Another advised that parts of their work had been handed to generic customer service advisors since they had moved to a new building, and that if someone came in for general information, such as that relating to private landlords, they would not get to see an officer, but instead be given a landlord list.

Discussion

As all but one practitioner reported gatekeeping behaviour, often providing more than one example, this would suggest its practice is widespread, and unlikely to be unique to the 12 authorities interviewed. Of particular concern was the number of examples given which referred to blatant contravention of the Housing Act. The findings broadly followed Rashleigh's (2005) whereby practitioners tended to feel that hard decision makers were more likely to send someone away unlawfully. As highlighted by one interviewee and reiterated here, it seems inequitable that if a household seeks help, they may be unwittingly entering a bureaucratic lottery, whereby the type of decision maker they see, or the priorities of a given senior officer within an organisation, may dramatically affect the outcome. Although discretion and differing interpretations were viewed as an inevitable consequence of dealing with human beings as opposed to machines, it highlights the importance of ensuring that practitioners are making decisions for the right reasons, and not due to prejudice, or lack of training (see below). One of the main determinants of gatekeeping was connected to workload, which for many had increased in recent years; pressures to limit temporary accommodation and homelessness applications further seemed to increase the likelihood of gatekeeping practices. These findings inevitably lead to questions around who is likely to lose out as a result; although non priority households were less likely to gain access to services, households assessed as vulnerable were also turned away.

Rashleigh (2005) suggested that the government, rather than organisational superiors, were the main causation of gatekeeping behaviours. In line with this it was found that central pressures underpinned many elements of the role, particularly the push toward prevention, which seemed to be embedded in the psyche of practitioners and their supervisors. Although senior officers were reported as contributing toward gatekeeping, this seemed to relate to their own particular pressures and objectives, which were in turn set by those at the higher echelons. Preventions were for the most part seen as the gold standard, with many interviewees stating that statutory homeless applications should only be taken if they were completely unavoidable. When applications are viewed as the absolute last resort, questions need to be asked as to how this translates on the frontline when service users present as homeless.

In line with previous findings (Rashleigh, 2005) it seemed to be the case that some practitioners were less willing to discuss areas where they may be interpreted to have misappropriated areas of the law. The researcher was always aware that due to the sensitive nature of gatekeeping it would be difficult to get interviewees to open up, and the differing responses received within the same authorities suggested this was the case. It seemed that practitioners viewed gatekeeping type behaviours that were performed by colleagues or neighbouring authorities as deliberate, yet perceived it to be more justified if similar types of behaviours had been undertaken by themselves. For example where LAHAS's were specifically named as culprits, it was found on subsequently interviewing the said authority that they would often direct the same charge of gatekeeping toward the accusing authority.

What was of concern was the lack of sufficient legal training for most practitioners. One authority was given the choice of losing a member of staff, or foregoing training for the next few years, which the analyst would argue is removing the basic toolkit required to undertake the role. Although consistency, as stated by all interviewees, is not always possible, should steps not be taken to supply a level of uniformity on at least some levels? Ensuring all practitioners are legally trained and well versed in the Housing Act is a necessary (though not sufficient) way to help ensure that decision making is fairer. One manager suggested that staff could look on Google as an alternative; others responded that emails relating to new areas of caselaw were forwarded to staff; but it is unlikely that practitioners will be able to keep track of more complex case law without some specific guidance. Caselaw changes frequently, and more importantly, sheds important light on areas in the Housing Act that may be a little fuzzy. The lack of internal consistency in respect of how assessments were made

concerned a number of practitioners, who recognised that their decisions could potentially have a life changing impact on households who present as homeless.

As touched upon above (Halliday, 2000; Rashleigh, 2005) the persistence of a target culture may increase the likelihood of gatekeeping, and although the current Government advised that there will be less regulatory demands on local authorities (Parliament, 2011) it was still very much in existence. LAHAS's felt the pressure to keep statutory acceptances low, and many adopted their own localised (and as the interviews indicated, unofficial) mechanisms to track this.

It was found that all authorities adopted some kind of initial screening; sometimes this was viewed as a necessity due to the sheer volume of work. One interviewee stated that the use of a separate reception service had increased gatekeeping within her authority, as service users did not initially speak to a specialist officer. The greater use of screening devices, and the move toward less initial contact with housing option advisors was a concern. For example the authority that now allowed more "basic" areas, such as landlord lists, to be dealt in a reception area meant that option officers may miss those early cues that someone is at threat of homelessness. Only one authority interviewed was looking to ensure there were less barriers in place for service users; however, this had not been put in place due to resource shortages.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research findings showed that despite official warnings, at least in respect of the sample interviewed, gatekeeping continues to persist. [[There was found an inherent contradiction within service delivery in LAHAS's, that is, by re-shaping policy directives, they in fact satisfy the main political goals, at least on the surface. It appeared that frontline workers were required to contravene policy in order to satisfy central policy makers, who in turn appeared unwilling to alter housing law in case policy objectives were no longer met. This inertia ultimately means that behaviours which could be judged as unlawful, such as gatekeeping, will continue unchallenged, save for a few Ombudsman reports which award small fines to the minority of victims who may challenge a service outcome.]] The main determinants uncovered mirrored that of earlier findings and related to resources, targets, personal views, peer pressure, training issues, and the use of frontline screening. Although all households were affected, non priority groups were more so due to the limited options available to them. It was found that in respect of priority need households, particular circumstances, such as

fleeing violence or being asked to leave the parental home, may increase the likelihood of gatekeeping behaviours. Based on the findings the following is recommended:

- One of the most pertinent issues, perhaps predictably, was the issue of inadequate resources. It is argued that as a minimum central Government must ensure that practitioners can access comprehensive legal training around housing law. This is to ensure that decision making, at the very least, is based on an informed perspective. If we accept that discretion is a natural and even desirable part of the service LAHAS's provide, it needs to be ensured that they can perform that role furnished with the knowledge and confidence to do so to the best of their ability. The ultimate aim should be to ensure a fairer, more equitable service to those who require help due to the threat of homelessness.
- Policy makers need to consider that central government targets may be, albeit unintentionally, contributing toward gatekeeping. The emphasis on minimising statutory homelessness and reducing the use of temporary accommodation are particular areas that need to be looked at, as both directives appeared to create pressures within organisations, which in turn led to gatekeeping. These pressures further meant that prevention funding was focused on vulnerable groups to the detriment of those without priority.
- Although uncovering the extent to which practitioner views were formed internally or externally to the role was not a realistic aim in this research project, behaviours such as stereotypical frames of reference had at least some relation to organisational pressures around workload and targets. Therefore, if the more obvious causations of biased decision making are tackled, this may foster an environment where there is less cause to gatekeep. Ultimately this will require not only an injection of funding and relaxation of performance measures within LAHAS's, but also a commitment to tackle the underlying lack of available accommodation which inevitably leads to service rationing. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that these ambitions will be realised in the current austere climate.

Although the present outlook is rather pessimistic, it is argued that research around causations of gatekeeping is an important way to highlight why inequity in service provision may occur, and should be brought to the attention of not just policy makers, but service users, and the third sector organisations who advocate on their behalf. In respect of the latter an

increased awareness of the pressures that may negatively impact on service delivery could potentially help inform challenges when it is deemed an authority has erred in law.

Recommendations for further research

Due to practical limitations this investigation focused on North East authorities, and although those with scarce resources were included, research into the delivery of homelessness services is needed in Southern areas, particularly London, where pressures may prove starker due to the intense shortage of accommodation.

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