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Welfare Reform and the Street Level Bureaucrat in Homelessness Services

Abstract

Local authority housing option teams (LAHAS's) are a perennially lean service and the recent austerity agenda and corresponding rise in households at threat of homelessness mean resources are stretched to the limit. This article draws on Michael Lipsky's street level bureaucrat conceptual framework to seek an understanding of how frontline practitioners interpret and deliver policy directives in a challenging political environment whilst assessing their ability to influence service outcomes. It will discuss the results of a baseline national survey and follow up interviews with a selection of LAHAS practitioners in England. It was reported that effective service provision for all who required it was becoming increasingly difficult, which in turn fostered an environment in which unlawful gatekeeping practices could thrive. Further, it was found that a service user's position may be additionally weakened due to the new powers conferred in the Localism Act. In summary, if a household seeks statutory housing assistance, they may be unwittingly entering a bureaucratic lottery, whereby availability of accommodation or organisational led priorities may dictate the outcome.

Introduction

This article draws on Michael Lipsky's (1971, 1980) street level bureaucrat conceptual framework to assist in an understanding of how frontline homelessness officers are interpreting policy and delivering a service in the context of political austerity. It further explores the ways in which service users may impact upon this process. Local Authority Housing Advice Services (LAHAS's hereafter) are currently facing an environment where footfall has increased (CLG, 2013, Fitzpatrick et al, 2012), yet resources to tackle this are not rising to meet demand (Nevin and Leather, 2012). This paper draws on the results of a research project which undertook a baseline survey of all LAHAS's in England, followed by qualitative interviews with a selection of practitioners and managerial staff. Statutory homelessness services in many developed countries are operating within an austerity driven environment (FEANTSA, 2012), and the challenge this poses to frontline delivery will not be unique to the English model. However, English LAHAS's are the focus due to its unique evolution of homelessness law, and the specific policy areas which have been created, or transformed by the current Coalition Government. A street level bureaucrat perspective, which as far as the author is aware has not been applied to LAHAS's in England, was adopted to assist in an understanding of how political changes are being implemented in practice. In summary this article aims to answer the following questions:

- Can the street level bureaucrat framework, specifically relating to service rationing and the political behaviour of frontline officers, help form an understanding of LAHAS delivery in the context of political austerity?

- How does an austere political climate affect the coping strategies adopted by practitioners in light of tight resources? Does it contribute toward unequal service provision?

- Do LAHAS users have the ability to influence service outcomes?

Homelessness in the contemporary political climate

In broad terms LAHAS's stated aims are to prevent homelessness, provide housing advice, and make statutory homelessness assessments. The Housing Act 1996, amended 2002 (Parliament, 1996) and related code of guidance (CLG, 2006) form the main underpinning of the role and regular caselaw updates aim to flesh this out. For a household to be accepted as statutorily homeless and be owed a main housing duty they must be eligible, homeless within 28 days, have not caused their homelessness intentionally, hold a local connection and reach the threshold of priority need. In respect of the latter a household would be deemed vulnerable if it contained dependent children, a pregnant person, a person under 18, or a care leaver under 21; alongside these are categories that require more interpretation, such as vulnerability due to health issues, institutionalisation, violence, or older age (Homelessness Act, 2002). The Coalition Government's economic policy and related austerity measures have been described as "radical fiscal retrenchment", whereby housing and welfare spending has fallen to its lowest level in over 60 years (Nevin and Leather, 2012, p. 14). Correspondingly, recent research has found that homelessness acceptances have grown by 11 percent in the last three years (CLG, 2013), and between January and March 2011 and the same period in 2012 B&B use by local authorities rose 44 percent (National Housing Federation, 2012). Similar increases have been reported in respect of households requiring help due to the threat of homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al, 2012). Moreover, it has been predicted that homelessness will continue to escalate as austere measures become more deeply engrained in the political psyche (Crisis, 2012). Although the target driven directives to reduce statutory homelessness acceptances and use of emergency accommodation are not as explicit as they once were, it remains a primary political objective (CLG, 2012; Parliament, 2012).

The Localism Act

This article chiefly considers implementation in general terms, as opposed to focusing on specific areas of welfare reform. However, some attention is given to the Localism Act, as particular elements have a direct impact on LAHAS delivery. An overriding theme of the Localism Act is the notion that local authorities will have increased discretionary powers to target resources where they deem it to be required (Parliament, 2011). More specifically relevant to LAHAS delivery are measures which mean they can now discharge duty into private rented accommodation whereas accepted homeless households previously held a lawful entitlement to a secure social tenancy. This latter component is nothing new, and has in fact been reintroduced after it was repealed by the Labour administration during its time in power (Homelessness Act, 2002). Yet this amendment comes at a time when the viability of a private rented tenure has abated due to local housing allowance (LHA) reductions. Ultimately, if LAHAS's choose to implement this part of the Localism Act it will weaken the position of statutorily homeless households, and potentially place them in a cycle of insecure accommodation (CIH et al, 2012, p. 15; Fitzpatrick et al, 2011, p. 10). Of particular pertinence to this paper is that due to its discretionary nature not all LAHAS's are required to implement this part of the Act, which is likely to result in dramatically differing outcomes for households who present as homeless to a given authority.

An implementation perspective in homelessness services

It is now generally accepted that to view Central Government as the primary determinant of policy outcomes from inception to implementation is fundamentally flawed (Hill, 2009; Lindblom and Woodhouse, 1993). Further, in respect of social policy issues it has been maintained that effective research must evaluate the aggregate influences manifest at the frontline (Evans, 2010). Therefore, if we hope 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 associated policies are delivered. The literature emphasised a contemporary political environment whereby LAHAS users are increasing, yet resources to meet this demand are correspondingly decreasing (see above). It has been found that these conflicting pressures can lead to specific types of policy contravention at implementation level (Baldwin, 2000; Ellis, 2007; Evans, 2010; Rashleigh, 2005; Sullivan, 2009). Researchers who have undertaken investigations into the operation of LAHAS's found that many authorities did not sufficiently investigate service users circumstances (BHUG, 2009; Bowpitt et al, 2011; Reeve and Batty, 2011), or put various

barriers in place to discourage an applicant from making a homeless application (Niner, 1989). It was additionally found that practitioners would attempt to bypass a statutory presentation, and direct eligible homeless applicants toward prevention initiatives (Pawson and Davidson, 2007; Rashleigh, 2005), despite this being unlawful (EWHC52, 2007). Practices developed to hinder homelessness applications are collectively referred to as gatekeeping. Of particular relevance to this paper are findings that gatekeeping is underpinned by an overriding lack of resources (Bowpitt et al, 2011; Niner, 1989). But pressures to meet organisational performance measures (Halliday, 2000; Rashleigh, 2005), a heavy workload (Niner, 1999) and the ambiguity around housing law (BHUG, 2009; Niner, 1989; Rashleigh, 2005), also play a part. These findings demonstrate that frontline workers, for a number of complex and localised reasons, have the ability to manipulate and re-shape policy, or at the very least exercise wide discretion in determining the outcomes of those affected by housing problems.

When Lipsky (1980) referred to service users, he viewed them in a pejorative light, arguing that practitioners, as a condition of their work, were required to dehumanise the individual. The service user became a quantified, processed, and ultimately, socially constructed client who could be fitted into the ideology of the bureaucracy (Prottas, 1979). The literature overwhelmingly reflected an imbalance of power, whereby service users were viewed as being at the mercy of organisational directives, with a limited ability to shape service outcomes (Ellis, 2007; Sullivan, 2009). Although Marvasti (2002) warned against viewing frontline delivery processes as necessarily predetermined or unidirectional, his findings nevertheless showed that service users were generally limited to presenting a particular narrative to ensure favourable treatment. This ultimately demonstrated that the balance of power rested with frontline officers who for the main, steered outcomes toward the rules of the organisation (Marvasti, 2000). In a similar vein Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) found that positive service outcomes were heavily reliant upon how households were perceived by the decision making officer. Alongside arguments that service users have limited ability to influence the process, it has further been maintained that they tend to tolerate inadequate assistance due to a limited comprehension of how policy directs the system to work (Lipsky, 1980, p. 53).

The street level bureaucrat

As stated above, this article draws upon a specific conceptual framework, that of Lipsky's (1971, 1980) street level bureaucrat, to examine how frontline LAHAS officers interpret and

deliver housing policy and how this impacts upon their interaction with service users. Lipsky (1971) coined the term street level bureaucrat to refer to those at policy delivery level who exercised discretion by manipulating interpretation of law in the course of their day to day role. This exercise of discretion was predominantly conceptualised as a negative action as it was primarily in response to pressures embedded within the organisation to ration demand (Lipsky, 1971). Alongside a perennial lack of resources, the necessity to ration services may be driven by related issues such as performance targets or workload pressures. In turn bureaucrats have the ability to reshape law to fit these requirements due to the ambiguous and contradictory nature of policy directives (Lipsky 1971). Due to this interpretive capability Lipsky (1980) argued that public service employees held a political role and that in a heuristic sense, created policy due to this relative autonomy in terms of delivery function. However, he did not necessarily view this in a positive sense, and recognised that practitioners often re-shaped legal directives in response to top-down pressures and as a coping strategy to deal with the inherent contradictions underpinning the role. In other words practitioners are required to adapt to the reality that the requirement to assist eligible households who require help cannot realistically be achieved with the tools available to deliver it (Lipsky, 1980).

  Lipsky conceived of his framework over forty years ago and American public services were the focus of enquiry. Although Lipsky (1971) coined the term street level bureaucrat, the assertion that frontline workers manipulate policy outcomes is nothing new, and its roots can be found in organisational sociological theory dating back to the 1950's (Merton, 1957). But Lipsky's unique conceptualisation of a street level bureaucrat has been widely utilised by commentators interested in statutory policy implementation. Many contemporary explorations have sought to test if the model can be applied outside of America and in the wake of new political ideologies and management structures. For example, in England it has been successfully applied to investigate the frontline operation of social work departments (Baldwin, 2000; Ellis, 2007; Evans, 2010; Sullivan, 2009), demonstrating the continued relevance of a street level bureaucrat perspective in the wake of a neo liberal political reality (Hoyle, 2013, p. 2). A small number of scholars have argued that the street level bureaucrat framework no longer held validity due to managerialist developments and an associated drive to scrutinise the public sector (Howe, 1991). But it has been countered that although enhanced scrutiny may stem flagrant abuse of policy, it does not erode the undercurrent of discretion that is embedded in statutory organisations (Hudson, 1989, p. 49). Lipsky (2010) revisited his original work in recent years, concluding that although changes such as

managerialism had reshaped local government, the organisational pressures and subsequent coping mechanisms that create an environment for street level bureaucrats to thrive continues to persist.

What tends to be more customary among commentators who employ Lipsky's analysis is that they concur with the overall framework, but modify particular elements to reflect specific research findings, or contemporary developments. For example in his case study of four social work departments Evans (2011) suggested that the street level bureaucrat model overemphasised a managerial desire to secure hegemony over staff and did not take sufficient account of the professionalism that existed between senior and frontline employees. A few researchers argued that the term "bureaucrat" did not adequately reflect modern frontline service delivery. For instance Durose (2011) claimed that following developments resulting in policy delivery becoming more attuned to localised concerns the term "civic entrepreneur" better reflected the reality of practitioners who considered the needs of communities and individual service users alongside those of bureaucratic objectives. In a similar vein Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) found that official directives proved secondary to assisting service users and argued that street level bureaucrats were better described as "citizen agents". Yet in line with Lipsky's (1980, p. 109) findings, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000, p. 340) conceded, as highlighted above, that motivation to ensure the best outcome for service users was generally reserved for those viewed as more responsive or "worthy" of provision.

Although Lipsky (1980) made brief reference to homelessness services in an American context, he believed that his framework was applicable to any public service organisation that had extensive face to face contact with the public and exercised discretion (Lipsky 2010, p. xvii). LAHAS's were assessed as representing a good fit for Lipsky's model due to a combination of its statutory function, tight budget, discretionary element in service delivery and its position as a "stigmatised" service, which Lipsky (1980) believed would be especially prone to street level bureaucrat type behaviours. Further the gatekeeping literature touched upon above provided specific examples of how service rationing can result in the negative exercise of discretion in LAHAS's. Of particular interest to the aims of this article is Lipsky's (1980, p. 193) argument that as a result of their relative autonomy street level bureaucrats will not necessarily distribute available resources evenly, leading to some service users experiencing differential treatment to others (Lipsky 1980, p. xi).

Research methodology

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 baseline survey, the first of its kind, provided an 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 et al, 2012, p. 134) all LAHAS's were contacted to provide a comprehensive distribution of authority types. A total of 271 practitioners completed the survey, which represented over two thirds. The survey questions were designed in a close-ended, multiple choice format, with space given so respondents could provide further information if they wished. This question type was chosen to increase response rate, and to aid in interpretation, which was suited to the purpose of providing a broad overview of service delivery. The 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 type, and other variables which appeared to represent differences in how a given LAHAS may operate. A total of 27 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. A larger number of employees were interviewed in three of the authorities, 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 adopted a semi structured approach, whereby the main themes covered in the survey and literature were adopted as broad topic areas. Interviewees were allowed to determine the direction of discussion, which meant that more weight was given to specific issues in some interviews. All interviews were tape recorded and analysed with the assistance of NVIVO software. A deductive approach was adopted when initially constructing the broad themes, but additional concepts were developed based on information gathered during the interview discussions. The majority of interviews took place in an official setting, but two, at the request of the practitioners, took place in a neutral backdrop. Although the sample represents a small sub section of LAHAS's in England, and therefore cannot be generalised to the whole population, 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.

The following sections outline the main challenges currently faced by LAHAS's before considering if the coping mechanisms identified by Lipsky are adopted. It finally questions Lipsky's assertion that public sector employees engage in political behaviour.

Findings

Service delivery in an age of austerity

The survey results supported the findings that statutory homelessness acceptances are increasing, with three fifths of LAHAS's confirming they had risen in their area. Around 40 percent of practitioners surveyed felt the ability to undertake the role was adversely affected by the resulting heavy workload, and nearly half due to departmental budgetary decreases. In a similar vein nearly all interviewees reported a higher workload due to the impact of welfare cuts and many felt this growth would continue as austerity measures continued to take hold. When asked to consider the current challenges faced the most common survey response was LHA reform, cited by nine out of 10; this was closely followed by welfare reform/general effects of the downturn and lack of private rented accommodation, with each being cited by over four fifths of respondents. An equally high number of challenges were reported in the minority of LAHAS's where statutory acceptances had not increased; the follow up interviews suggested that this likely reflected a growth in households seeking help who were not necessarily owed a full housing duty.

Service rationing

As discussed above Lipsky (1980) maintained that the need to ration services tended to underpin street level bureaucrat types behaviours. All practitioners surveyed were asked how current challenges to service delivery impacted upon their ability to effectively undertake the role. Over half felt unable to give appropriate advice and assistance to all who required it, and a similar number reported that unacceptable alternatives may be offered to some service users. During the interviews practitioners in many cases saw their role as being to protect limited resources, with a few acknowledging that service users could expect differing treatment due to limited time and budget. Furthermore, resources tended to be focused on priority need groups due to the pressure around avoiding statutory homelessness applications where possible.

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In line with the findings discussed above most interview respondents affirmed that rationing was applied through the use of gatekeeping:

> In the many years I have worked in this area and worked alongside people doing this job, I have seen this authority pack other people off before, where I have thought, if I had picked up that case, I think I would have done a bit more with that, you know, I know people who have come here for advice and been told you would be better off jumping on a train and going to blah, so, it does happen, and it is going to cause tensions...(Interviewer: so why does it go on) maybe the pressures of keeping your particular homeless numbers down, your budgets, certainly the pressures on temporary accommodation (Officer 5, LAHAS B)

In most cases practitioners would discuss anecdotal evidence, or directly observed behaviours, both within their own, and other LAHAS's

> I have worked with, or witnessed some really shocking practices, it tends to be that you get to hear about it through your customer, so for example I took a phone call the other day, of a women who wanted to make a presentation to a particular authority, but she was told to ring us, she did have a local connection to that authority, she rang, though she didn't need it, as she was fleeing domestic violence anyway, but she wasn't given that information, she wasn't told, and she wanted to live in that area, she didn't want to live in the area that she was living in, so that's pretty bad (Officer Two, LAHAS B)

That said, a significant minority readily disclosed that they had resorted to actively impeding homelessness presentations, for the main part this was attributed to specific organisational objectives:

> In the last authority (in which the practitioner was employed) no-body was allowed to be homeless, it was basically a bit of a competition between us, the officers, I remember one officer boasting that she hadn't taken a homeless application for months, can't say I did that well (Officer 4, LAHAS B)

The likelihood of reaching an adverse decision was highest in the authorities with the scarcest accommodation resources, who admitted an increase due to necessity, as accommodation was simply not available:

> We have to be quite harsh in our decision making process because, as I say, we have got very limited accommodation (Manager, LAHAS C)

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<u>Client Differentiation</u>

Lipsky (1980, pp. 105-106) pointed out that to manage workload and resource scarcity it is generally necessary for street level bureaucrats to differentiate, focusing on the "eligibility, culpability, and suitability for bureaucratic intervention", which in turn encourages the necessary reduction of individual service users into 'processing categories'. This practice will necessarily have a negative outcome for some (as not all can be assisted) as certain service users will be subject to stereotypes and bias (Lipsky, 1980). Differentiation thus forms part of the overarching task of socially constructing service users into categories for the purposes of efficient processing (Lipsky, 1980, pp. 59-60). Investigations around the use of stereotypes are particularly important in an austere climate, as rationing due to limited resources was directly associated with its use (Lipsky, 1980). Stereotypical frames of reference were in evidence in all but a few of the interviews; practitioners admitted that their opinion of particular service users would be based around their own worldview, life experiences, and personal values. For instance an officer advised that perceived similarity may result in more favourable outcomes:

> I think your personal experience and your personal situation, does influence the way cases will stand out for you, I think some people with children can really empathise with other customers with children... different stories so as to speak, will hit, you know, will not appeal, but will have different weight to different advisors dependant on their situation (Officer One, LAHAS A)

This is in line with Lipsky's (1980, p. 108) argument that perceived similarity may lead to preferential treatment and is further reminiscent of Maynard-Moody and Musheno's (2003) "worthy" client. On the other hand more negative assessments were applied to specific circumstances. A few interviewees suggested that young people who presented to services after being asked to leave home were likely to be colluding with family members:

> It's like with the family licence terminations, I think the guidance around that that we work to, I think it need to be an awful lot harder for those people to get through, because it is like, they know, kids are a certain age, so we have to house them, yeah, I think we need to get a lot stricter on that (Officer Five, LAHAS B)

 The same view was found in respect of women who claimed to be fleeing domestic violence:

> I think we have the thought that lots of people can manipulate information and systems to get what they need in terms of homelessness and unfortunately sadly domestic abuse is a classic case of that because the threshold of evidence is so low (Manager, LAHAS L)

In both these latter cases this behaviour was believed to take place in order to access social housing. Further, a significant minority of interviewees seemed to allude to the rhetoric that people on welfare benefits were taking from the state, and many held a negative view of a service user's ability to manage money. For example some suggested that when universal credit is rolled out, and social rent becomes the responsibility of tenants, this would likely result in due rent not being paid in some cases:

> when we all had the first bit of training on the fact that everyone was going to have this universal credit, and their rent was going to be included in this one off payment once a month, we just cringed, because people don't pay their rent now, let alone giving it to them in one lump sum once a month, and they are going to think, oh great, a wad of money, let's go out and spend it, and then realise that they haven't paid their rent (Officer Four, LAHAS I)

Related to this, around half of the interviewees agreed with the current political imperative to cut welfare benefits, with a significant minority maintaining that it was a necessary measure to reduce expectation:

> The welfare reform act, when you have done the training, you understand why a lot of these changes were brought in, and it shouldn't be a culture that a life on benefits is the expected norm... how many years have you tried to get people out of the culture of 'if you have a baby you will get a council house' (Manager, LAHAS B)

The excerpts above highlight how in some cases practitioners held predetermined views, either relating to specific reported circumstances or indicative of a more all encompassing attitude, whereby potential reasons for losing one's home were more likely to be attributed to individual causes as opposed to structural factors resulting from welfare reform measures.

Delivery of the Localism Act

Although administration difficulties due to lack of staffing resources and suitable landlords were commonly reported, most scarce authorities at least planned to embrace elements of the Localism Act. Of most direct relevance to LAHAS's are the new powers to discharge duty

into private rented accommodation, which if utilised essentially weakens the position of a household in terms of the security of tenure they can expect if accepted as homeless:

> Yes, I think we have used it already a few times [the Localism Act], so you can get an offer of private rented, because, before it wasn't a qualifying offer, but now it is a qualifying offer, and if you refuse it, then you can be out on your ears (Officer One, LAHAS B)

A few interviewees stated the Act could be used to prevent people making a homeless application in the first place, as households may be discouraged if led to believe social housing would not be awarded if they were accepted as statutorily homeless:

> I think we would like to discharge into private maybe, don't think there is the properties out there to do it with, we can say it to people though, I mean, people who might see homelessness as the route into council housing, we can explain that if they go down the homeless route, well, you know, they could just be offered private, to be fair that would probably put some people off, especially people in the parental home, it helps get away from that culture of expecting a council house (Officer Three, LAHAS B)

The view that the Localism Act could be operated for the dual purpose of "managing expectations" and assisting with service rationing in respect of social housing was expressed by a few interviewees:

> Localism I do agree with because we have brought in flexible tenancies because we are trying to break the idea of a tenancy for life... why should you get a house and get to keep it for the rest of your life when you don't need it, at best now, they get to keep a tenancy, they don't get to keep a property, which, we hope in time will better use our stock, but may even influence people who actually present as homeless, as they are not getting that house for life, and that mentality may slowly be broken (Manager, LAHAS C)

The idea that the Localism Act may impede a perceived "culture" of dependency was reminiscent of the views some interviewees held with regard to welfare retrenchment generally, such as in the quote above relating to universal credit. However, not all interviewees viewed this element of the Localism Act as positive and one made the point that it was easier to place vulnerable homeless households in social housing, as they were better able to monitor progress and pick up if there is any issues. Another pointed out that if an

accepted homeless household were placed into private rented and subsequently evicted, they would likely return as a repeat homeless case.

Practitioners as political actors

Nearly all interviewees suggested a detachment from the central context of the policy for which they delivered and many, including managers, viewed themselves within a linear top down reality with little opportunity to influence policy. Many expressed what could perhaps be described as a fatalist outlook; policy happened to them, and there was nothing they could do to prevent whichever trajectory the Government chose to pursue:

> Top-down, and I think that aint going to change, its all well and good having consultations [around] welfare reform... I guess to say, this is how it works, this is what is happening, tough...you knew what was going to happen and there was never anything local authorities could say that was going to change it ... on the team level, we can make suggestions that change things for our particular team, it isn't going to change things in the organisation, it just isn't the way it happens (Officer Six, LAHAS B)

Another interviewee advised that despite politicians limited comprehension of who the homeless actually were, and the work LAHAS's did, they were uninterested in listening to the views of frontline workers who possessed this important knowledge:

> I would like to think the frontline staff had some influence but I don't think we do, I think it is very much, I think it is top line that need to acknowledge the work and I am not convinced that that is always the case, I think they are happy as long as the figures aren't too high, and there is nothing particularly bad happening, you know, I think it is a, a service that's a necessary evil rather than them doing anything to help greatly (Manager, LAHAS K)

There could be identified two worlds, one in which LAHAS's actually operated, and the other, a political hierarchy which underpinned the backdrop of that role. In many cases interviewees seemed to occupy a contradictory space, one in which they held some (albeit limited) power on the micro level, yet were relatively powerless on the macro level. Most interviewees did not view the role they undertook in a political light, locating themselves within their own organisation and the service users whom they dealt with on a day to day basis.

Discussion and Conclusions

Service rationing

Although there was more evidence of rationing in scarce authorities, most LAHAS's in the interview sample reported this type of behaviour. Interviewees advised that departmental budgets were lean, and for many, this meant that not all service users could be helped. This inevitably led to decisions around who to assist which is where rationing and associated gatekeeping or stereotyping behaviours came to the fore. It was further found that the prioritisation of homeless prevention and the corresponding avoidance of statutory homeless applications were entrenched and meant that some service users were unlawfully sent away. Political austerity had caused further pressures as service users were increasing, yet budgets remained lean. These findings suggest that the gatekeeping practices found in LAHAS's, as discussed above, are likely to be exacerbated in the current political climate. The reason for this argument is that LAHAS's are expected to meet the same organisational objectives pertaining to the limiting of statutory homelessness, but with less resources to fund other alternatives, such as private rented.

This research supported findings that service users occupied a relatively powerless position in LAHAS delivery, whereby assessment of eligibility to provision may be determined by stereotypes relating to individual circumstances, or due to their overarching status as a homeless household. In line with Lipsky's (1980) street level bureaucrat some practitioners held predetermined views around specific categories of service user. Supporting earlier research, the groups more likely to experience negative discrimination were young people leaving the family home (Rashleigh, 2005) or women fleeing domestic violence (Quilgars and Pleace, 2010). It further affirmed that an overriding causation of specific attitudes could be linked to the protection of scarce resources or workload considerations. However, client differentiation could not merely be explained by linking its use to the protection of resources and following Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) a mixture of personal attributes, lifestyle, and the likability of a service user all played a part. Alongside this and as highlighted by Lipsky (1980, p. 108) it was suggested that perceived similarity may also influence the decision making process. In summary these findings show that the attitude toward or service provided to households at threat of homelessness may be negatively impacted if they approach LAHAS's with particular characteristics or circumstances.

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The Localism Act: a passport to insecure housing provision?

The essence of localism is conceptualised as giving LAHAS's more freedom to implement policies based on localised concerns. Lipsky (1980, p. 196) himself suggested that a decentralised, local focus on statutory provision may enhance the likelihood of service users becoming more involved in the public services they use. Yet it is argued that far from empowering local authorities, implementation of the Act was related to protecting limited resources, rather than providing choice. Although adoption of the Localism Act was still a work in progress, scarcer authorities in particular aimed to utilise new powers to discharge duty into private rented accommodation. These findings highlight that a postcode lottery may come into operation whereby households who become homeless in areas with more plentiful accommodation or scarcity of private rented options will achieve more favourable outcomes than those who reside in LAHAS's where implementation is less feasible. Of perhaps greater concern was the suggestion that execution of this part of the Act, even if viewed as unworkable due to shortages of private rented accommodation, may potentially be treated as a weapon that could be brandished to discourage households from presenting as homeless. It is argued that the option to weaken tenure security for accepted homeless applicants could be adopted as an additional gatekeeping mechanism in at least some authorities.

Political actors or lieutenants?

As discussed above Lipsky described the role of frontline workers as politicised, and moreover, that the wide discretion afforded to them in delivering housing law contributed toward the making of policy. Yet although practitioners undoubtedly influenced policy at the delivery level, they had little overall input into the reform of those said policies (McNeil, 2009, p. 9). Furthermore, in terms of executing the Housing Act interviewees generally agreed that policy makers gave LAHAS's freedom to interpret the law as they saw fit, yet interspersed with this was the conditions, centrally set, to reduce statutory homelessness and use of emergency accommodation. The findings broadly followed Hill (2009, p. 9) who argued that many frontline professionals can exert power over service users, but not over the overriding purposes of their role. In summary street level bureaucrats have the potential to "shape" policy, but not "create" policy, as decisions are too localised and disparate to form a recognisable policy as such (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000, p. 341), even then, the shaping is moulded into organisational, and by extension, political, aims. However, as stated above, the perceived lack of ability to change existing parameters was not necessarily perceived in a negative light by LAHAS workers, as many did not identify with their role as

one that should contribute toward political behaviour. One manager stated that each employee, from the upper to lower echelons, had their own role to play; and hers focused on the micro, service level, not the macro task of making policy. This echoes Maynard Moody and Musheno's (2003) argument that practitioners generally viewed themselves as advocating on behalf of their service users and did not see themselves as political agents. However, this so called "advocacy" cannot be realised in respect of all who need help due to resource scarcity, which inevitably involves decisions about who is more worthy of receiving limited resources. In an updated version of his original work Lipsky (2010) suggested that scholars had overemphasised the significance of his argument that practitioners adopt a policy making role, stressing that this must be understood within the context of the wider political process. Nevertheless, he still maintained his earlier position that street level bureaucrats were political actors who contributed to the policy making process. Perhaps the issue is one of conceptualisation; that is, the suggestion that practitioners can "make" policy tends to evoke a powerful image of a frontline worker as an essential cog of policy formulation. Yet as highlighted above, Lipsky (1980) recognised the constraints which underpinned these actions, acknowledging that organisational pressures, as opposed to choice on the part of the practitioner, tended to lead to reshaping of policy directives

Finally, the findings did not support those of scholars who argued for a reconceptualisation of the street level bureaucrat to reflect an enhanced focus on service users and communities. Although a few practitioners stated that when they commenced the role, they did so to help others, implementation was very much geared toward the needs of the organisation. Examples of positive discrimination were few and far between and more geared toward specific types of individual rather than the community of homelessness applicants as a whole. Therefore terms such as "civic entrepreneur" (Durose, 2011) or "citizen agent" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000) did not reflect the reality of policy delivery, at least as far as LAHAS's were concerned. However, as research into frontline policy implementation tends to be qualitative and micro focused in nature, differing interpretations are to be expected. This article therefore follows Evans and Harris (2004) who contended that street level bureaucracies may ensue to a greater or lesser extent, commensurable on each situation and its context.

*Can Lipsky's framework assist in a*n understanding of frontline homelessness service delivery?

Lipsky's street level bureaucrat principle provided a sound implementation lens to assist in an exploration of the ways in which LAHAS practitioners are engaging with political change in the contemporary climate, offering an important insight into service delivery in a shifting political landscape. Current welfare reform has presented a challenging environment in terms of delivering a service and scarce authorities in particular have reacted to this by more strictly rationing the service. The findings suggested that welfare reform is causing greater pressures to service delivery, and is increasing the adoption of the coping mechanisms identified by Lipsky (1980), whereby gatekeeping and client differentiation remains ubiquitous due in large part to the necessity of working with limited resources.

Limitations, recommendations and further research

Due to practical limitations the interviews 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. As stated above this project cannot be said to be representative of all LAHAS's in England. However, it has illuminated why delivery mechanisms may differ, and the heavy demands that practitioners find themselves under on a day to day basis. Due to space issues other causations of the re-shaping of policy intentions, such as ignorance due to a lack of training (BHUG, 2009), were not covered. However, the interviews suggested that insufficient legal training for the most part emanated from resource shortages relating to both affordability and staffing issues. This final section offers a few suggestions as to how policy makers could seek to address the issues highlighted in this paper, but it does so with an acceptance that austerity is likely to remain a political reality for at least the intermediate future. For example, as discussed above most practitioners reported a growth in service users, yet far from funding being made available to meet the higher demand, departmental budgets had been frozen or reduced.

It was found that vulnerable households in many cases were prioritised for prevention funding to ensure that statutory homelessness acceptances were kept low, which in turn limited access for non priority groups. Central Government should aim to ensure that at least some allocated funding is targeted to ensure the latter can be better assisted. It is further recommended that political pressure on LAHAS's to impede statutory applications is lessened, which may help to reduce gatekeeping and perhaps free up more resources for non

vulnerable households. On the whole Lipsky (1980) seemed fairly pessimistic when he considered how central policy makers may quell the less desirable behaviours of a street level bureaucrat. One suggestion was to look at ways of fostering greater client autonomy by attempting to demystify the process, and ensure there are available advocacy services on hand to assist service users. This could potentially limit certain unlawful gatekeeping practices, as at present service users have a limited understanding of housing law and what service they can expect to receive (Reeve and Batty, 2011). However, cuts to third sector organisations that assist the homeless (Homeless Link, 2012, p. 28) will essentially limit the supply of potential advocates. Moreover, the findings suggested that far from policy makers suppressing gatekeeping or similar rationing behaviours, they offered tacit approval as long as the desired objectives were being achieved. This latter charge is made in light of the fact that gatekeeping has been well publicised in the past, but no steps, save for verbal warnings, have been taken to stem it. Could it be argued, following Foster (1983) that in certain circumstances policy makers intentionally fail to legislate in respect of rationing behaviours which result in policy contravention, in an attempt to hide the extent of what is ultimately an unpopular political problem? This is a cause for concern as it suggests that the needs of households at threat of homelessness is secondary to how homelessness itself is represented exogenously, meaning that pressures linked to reducing it are unlikely to cease. In line with Lipsky, this paper cannot advance any definitive solutions to the operation of policy contravention in LAHAS's. Moreover, gatekeeping is likely to worsen as the coping mechanisms adopted in the current austere political climate foster an even tighter rationing environment.

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