

Implementing the Benefit Cap: Local Housing Officials' Identities and Service Delivery in London / **HSA** **CONFERENCE 2017**

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Benefit Cap

Welfare Reform

GETTING PEOPLE

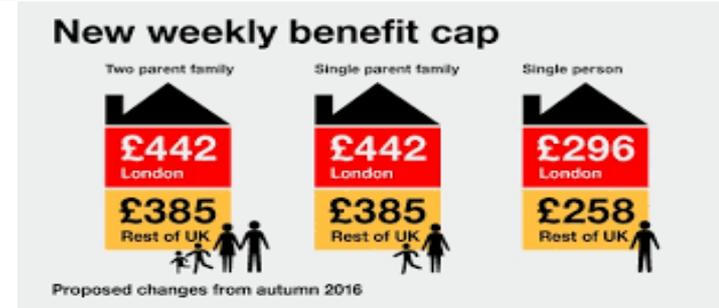
BACK INTO WORK

HOMELESSNESS
IN LONDON

Why the Homeless?



What is the Benefit Cap?



- A housing-related welfare reform policy.
- Aimed at activating able-bodied, unemployed 16 to 64 year-olds.
- Effective April 2013.
- Limit on welfare benefits of £26,000 (£23,000 from 7 November 2016) to cover all welfare benefits including housing allowance.
- Cap applied to unemployed peoples' housing allowance entitlements.

Identities in Crisis

“So, ... we’re now referring people for work, we’re doing debt counselling. Now pointing out the obvious like parents to most of the households coming through our door. We’re having to relocate them, we’re having to resettle them, all of these things that years ago, who did all that for people? I don’t know, it wasn’t housing officers. I know that much.”

Housing Operations Manager in
north-west London authority

In this presentation I share the findings of my project which showed that the identities of local housing officials are in flux in the wake of the benefit cap policy.

Typology of Participants' Roles

- 'Social worker'- frontline officers
- Efficiency strategists – back office senior managers

Assumed Roles

- Firefighter
- Frustrated Intermediary



Firefighter

- “We’re fighting fire. And we’re supposed to be contributing to strategy and policy and we’re so jaded by the day-to-day stuff that goes on, you know... I think we’ve worked it out that to keep someone in B & B [temporary accommodation] for a year - and we’re averaging about 300 people at any one time - is about £10,000. So, if we’re going to spend money to keep people out, I’ve always got that figure in my head”

- “All placements...all temporary accommodation costs us about £8,000 [a year], so you’re looking at it costing £8,000 for somebody on benefits and £13,000 to somebody who’s affected by the benefit cap”.

HOUSING CRISIS

Housing Needs
Manager in north-
east London
authority



Temporary Accommodation
Procurement Manager in
south-west London
authority

Frustrated Intermediary

- “But the third thing is just an unwillingness to go to work that we’ve found among some of the people affected and almost a belief that we won’t evict them and that the DHP is going to be there forever. For those people, the hard-core people ... [they] don’t want to work, not interested in work, they’ll just assume DHP will cover [their rent]”

**WELFARE
WAS NEVER
INTENDED
TO BE A CAREER
OPPORTUNITY**

Senior Income Manager
in south-west London
authority

- “I think we’ve had some who’ve made excuses not to work, but I also think there’s some who’ve been out of work so long they’re probably quite fearful of what to expect if they go back to work. I think there’s some people that don’t want to work”



Housing Options Officer in
north-west London
authority

Research Methodology

Data Triangulation to Improve Research Quality



- Qualitative research methodology.
- Document identification and selection
- Three research sites in London – north-east, north-west and south-west.
- 15 in-depth interviews conducted with key health practitioners.
- Interviews lasted 35-75 minutes.
- More than 350 pages of transcribed interview data.



Who were the participants

Designation	Role
Assistant Director and Housing Needs Managers	experts in providing the overall policy implementation framework and preparing strategies for the provision of homelessness assistance or prevention
Senior Income Manager	expert in rent collection from noncompliant social tenants and providing support for their engagement in the employment market
Temporary Accommodation Procurement Managers	experts in procuring short-term accommodation for noncompliant applicants who have become homeless as a result of the policy
Housing Benefit Managers	experts on applying the benefit cap to unemployed individuals' housing allowance

Who were the participants

Designation	Role
Housing Options Managers/Officers	experts in working with and providing options to noncompliant homeless applicants to solve their housing problems
Accommodation Manager	experts in assessing the housing needs of noncompliant homeless applicants and securing provision to fulfil that need
Welfare Benefits Managers/Officers	experts in assisting noncompliant, homeless applicants to seek employment so that they could fulfil the objectives of the policy; or to find alternative, affordable accommodation; or to apply for other welfare benefits that will either exempt or alleviate some of the effects of the policy.

Implications

- The implications of the findings were that professional identities were found to be in flux but traditional public sector values had not been wholly discarded.
- The findings suggest that, whilst the housing professionals perceived and acted with reference to the law's authority, it did not mean that the rule of law was paramount.
- The study contributed to the literature on professional identities by opening up new ground for research on housing worker identities to highlight the contemporary transformations in their work roles and the expectations thereof.



Thank you for listening

Any Questions?

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