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Discretion at the frontline of homeless service administration: Primary and secondary rationing by street level bureaucrats in Irish local authorities

Thesis presented by

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Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

Abstract

The number of people experiencing homelessness in Ireland has increased significantly in recent years, with almost 11,000 currently using homeless accommodation. In order to access services, people are required to present to their local authority as homeless. Subsequently, frontline workers are required to make decisions around whether a person is considered homeless, as well as the level of service that they will be offered. Despite the high numbers of people presenting as homeless, little is known about this process of assessment and placement. To guide determinations of eligibility, the statutory definition of homelessness is outlined in the *Housing Act, 1988*. However, owing to the legislation's ambiguity, local authorities can widen or narrow the definition as they see fit. As the definition is based on 'the opinion of the local authority' to determine whether someone is in accommodation which they can 'reasonably occupy', assessment staff must use substantial discretion when determining eligibility for services. In addition to the ambiguous statutory definition, the opacity of this area of welfare administration is compounded by the lack of additional formal guidance around determining eligibility. Likewise, this informal approach extends to decision-making around the type of accommodation offered to those who are eligible.

Due to the informal work environment, a high level of discretion is granted to these frontline workers. Accordingly, Lipsky's (1980) conceptual framework provides a useful means to examine the use of discretion among assessment and placement staff. Lipsky (1980) coined the term 'street level bureaucrat' to describe public service workers who have direct interaction with citizens and substantial discretion in the execution of this work. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with frontline workers based around Ireland, the research examined how discretion is used by these street-level bureaucrats to make decisions around rationing of homeless services at both a primary (assessment) and secondary (placement) level.

The research found that although the frontline workers had a high level of discretion available to them in making decisions, management could influence how this discretion was used in some circumstances. This was mainly done through applying scrutiny when discretionary decisions resulted in offers of services to people whose

eligibility was unclear, and through inattention when discretion was used to gate-keep services. Additionally, the research found that a narrow interpretation of the statutory definition of homelessness is being used by most of the frontline workers involved in the research, with rooflessness constituting homelessness that they described as genuine. People who presented to the local authority from living situations described as grey, for example couch surfing, were more likely to experience gatekeeping and denial of access to services. In some cases the frontline workers avoided the need to deny access to services through using an approach of covert deterrence. This involved presenting emergency accommodation in a negative way to an applicant so that they may be deterred from entering it, thus rationing demand for these services. Furthermore, significant differences were found in the approach of frontline workers towards homeless families and single people. Singles were more likely to experience gatekeeping behaviours than families were. This was most notable with regards to access to private emergency accommodation which the frontline workers stated was no longer available to single people except for in exceptional circumstances.

As the first piece of research in Ireland examining homeless service administration from this perspective, the thesis is a starting point to fill a gap in knowledge around this subject. As such, it has begun the process of making an opaque area of public service delivery more transparent and therefore makes a significant empirical contribution to knowledge in the fields of street-level bureaucracy and the administration of homeless services in Ireland.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the participation of the local authority workers who generously gave their time for interviews. Similarly, the contributions of my supervisors Professor Cathal O'Connell and Joe Finnerty were invaluable to me bringing this thesis to fruition.

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Finally, I would like to thank the Irish Research Council for funding this research through the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship, as without the scholarship, this thesis would not have been possible.

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List of acronyms

AHB	Approved Housing Body
APO	Assessment and Placement Officer
APS	Assessment and Placement Supervisor
B&B	Bed and Breakfast
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CWO	Community Welfare Officer
DRHE	Dublin Region Homeless Executive
ETHOS	European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
HHAP	Homeless Housing Assistance Payment
LA	Local Authority
NPM	New Public Management
NQSF	National Quality Standards Framework
NTQ	Notice to Quit
OECD	Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development
PEA	Private Emergency Accommodation
RAS	Rental Accommodation Scheme
RS	Rent Supplement
SLB	Street Level Bureaucrat
STA	Supported Temporary Accommodation
TEA	Temporary Emergency Accommodation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The research gap

When future generations read about issues of social policy during the present period in Ireland, homelessness, and indeed housing more generally, will stand out as one of the defining policy issues of this time. The number of people in local authority funded homeless accommodation has increased significantly between December 2014 and August 2022, from 2858 adults to 7585 (+165%) and from 880 dependents to 3220 (+266%) (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-a). Likewise, funding for emergency accommodation has increased significantly from €66 million in 2014 to €199 million in 2021 (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-b). Alongside these increases in service user numbers and expenditure, a raft of homeless policy documents have been produced by state departments since the early 2000s. However, the highly ambiguous legislation which sets the parameters for service eligibility through the provision of a homelessness definition has remained unchanged since it was introduced in 1988 and has garnered little attention in terms of research aimed to examine its interpretation at the frontline.

Bearing in mind the significant increases in the number impacted by homelessness, it is unsurprising that homelessness has been widely researched. This research has focused on areas such as homeless policy analysis (Kourachanis, 2020; O'Sullivan, 2016; Phelan and Norris, 2008; Watts, 2014); the evaluation of homeless services (Bevan *et al*, 2015; Greenwood, 2015; Lawlor and Bowen, 2017; Rhodes and Brooke, 2010; Simon Brooke and Associates, 2008) and homelessness from the perspective of those experiencing it (Finnerty *et al*, 2021; Keogh *et al.*, 2015; Mayock and Parker, 2020; Mayock *et al*, 2015; O'Shaughnessy and Greenwood, 2021; Share, 2020). There has been some research conducted at the frontline of homeless service provision. However, this has focused on the perspective of community-based homeless service providers or community workers (Devine and Bergin, 2020; Mostowska, 2014; Watts, 2014). There are many different and important perspectives included in this range of research. Nevertheless, what is missing is research from the perspective of those frontline workers or 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010) within local authorities

who are making decisions around both eligibility for services and placement within homeless accommodation.

In attempting to comprehend the impact of housing policy and legislation upon those who are homeless, as well as the influences that drive street-level bureaucrats to interpret and act upon directives in a certain way, it is necessary to examine how policy is interpreted and delivered at the frontline (Alden, 2015c). As Bannink *et al* (2016, p. 205) so succinctly put it, to fully understand the role of street-level bureaucrats, one must recognise that they:

> …do not simply implement given rules in cases that can be fully understood on the basis of these rules, but instead translate rules into client-level decisions, building upon information (not fully defined in the rule) on clients' conditions and upon expertise (also not fully defined) on client treatment.

In Ireland, there is a clear gap in research that focuses on the decision-making processes of street-level bureaucrats tasked with granting access to homeless services. Although there has been limited research examining the ways the local authorities are interpreting the ambiguous definition of homelessness as outlined in the *Housing Act, 1988* (Bergin *et al.*, 2005), no previous research has examined how this legislation, and subsequent homeless policy, is being implemented at the frontline, and thus, experienced by those who present to the local authority as homeless. Previous research by the current author did outline some of the issues associated with defining homelessness within one local authority (Murphy, 2016b). However, this research was focused on the perspective of Irish Travellers experiencing homelessness in one county in Ireland and therefore only included data from interviews with two local authority frontline workers. Likewise, street-level research using Lipsky's concepts as a framework is limited in Ireland and mainly consists of a handful of theses unrelated to homelessness (For example see: Coen, 2015; Connelly, 2013; James, 2011; Ryan, 2017). Specifically for homelessness, the street level bureaucracy approach has been under-utilised internationally (For examples see Alden, 2015a; van den Berk-Clark, 2020) in comparison to some other policy areas such as social work and social care (Some examples include Ellis, 2007; Evans, 2016b; Evans and Harris, 2004; Scourfield, 2015), and social welfare related to unemployment (Some examples include Brodkin, 1997; Buffat, 2016; Fletcher, 2011; Fletcher and Wright, 2018).

Thus, this thesis aims to fill the gap in knowledge around the street-level perspective on homeless service administration through an in-depth examination of both the motivations and practices impacting discretion use and decision-making at the frontline.

The local authority homeless units provide an interesting locale for undertaking street-level bureaucracy research as they fit comfortably within the parameters set out by Lipsky (2010) for those workers whom he intended his analysis to be relevant. These workers interact daily with members of the public, have considerable discretion in undertaking their duties and are limited by the work structure in the ways that they undertake their role, therefore they cannot carry out their duties according to ideal conceptions of practice. Additionally, homeless units constitute a locus of what Lipsky described as the 'fundamental service dilemma of street-level bureaucracies', namely, how to provide *individual* treatment on a *mass* basis. (2010, p. 44). In this sense, the goal of individual client treatment within homeless units conflicts with the organisational need for routinisation and mass processing. Likewise, the needs of the individuals' who present to the local authority as homeless conflict with the requirement of efficient agency performances (Lipsky, 2010). It is the processes through which these dilemmas and conflicts play out at the frontline that this research attempts to address. The following sections of this chapter will present the research question, aims and objectives, and the outline of the subsequent chapters.

1.2 Research question, aims and objectives

This thesis comprises research carried out to answer the following research question:

> In what ways does the use of discretion among frontline workers impact upon the assessment and placement of a person or household presenting to the local authority as homeless?

As such, the aim of the research is:

> To analyse the use of discretion among street-level bureaucrats within local authorities, in the assessment and placement of people presenting as homeless

The research question can be broken down into a number of objectives:

1. To assess how the statutory definition of homelessness, as outlined in the *Housing Act, 1988*, is interpreted by homeless assessment staff.
2. To review the ambiguous context in which local authority assessment staff are operating, paying attention to the dilemmas outlined by Lipsky including the conflicts between the aim of individualised responses and the need for routinisation and mass processing, as well as the conflict of meeting the needs of clients against the structures of services.
3. To identify the factors that influence discretion use in the allocation and rationing of homeless services, for example available resources, assumptions and biases towards service users, service targets/performance measures, supervisory pressures and institutional practices.
4. To analyse how the use of discretion among frontline workers impacts the outcomes of assessment and placement of households presenting as homeless and whether this results in differential access to services for particular groups of people.
5. To determine whether Lipsky's claim that discretion is mainly used in a negative way to ration demand on services, is replicable in the context of Irish local authority homeless units.

1.3 Outline of chapters

Chapter two outlines the development of homelessness policy in Ireland, from the origins of the welfare state to the present day. Rather than focusing primarily on the policies that were developed over this time, the chapter will focus on how homelessness as a social problem has been constructed and the elements that shaped these constructions. The impact of factors such as the wider approach to welfare and welfare regimes will be considered, as will influences on the way that homelessness as a concept is defined, both empirically and at a policy level. Finally, this chapter will discuss more recent aspects of the issue of homelessness and how this is addressed, both statistically and conceptually.

Chapter three will address the state of the art as it relates to street-level bureaucracies and the use of discretion and service rationing at the frontline. It begins by setting street-level bureaucracy against the backdrop of wider policy implementation analysis. In considering the objectives of the research it becomes clear that a bottom-up approach, more specifically Lipsky's (Lipsky, 1980) seminal work on street-level bureaucracy, provides the best fit for policy implementation research to answer the research question of this thesis. Chapter three then takes a deep dive into the complex concept of discretion examining the various definitions and caveats associated with studying this concept, as well as considering how it relates to welfare rights and the debate around discretion curtailment. Finally, as the rationing of resources is core to the use of discretion amongst frontline workers, chapter three will discuss a number of analytical approaches to rationing at the frontline.

Chapter four describes the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the research outlining an interpretivist approach rooted in social constructionism adopted to underpin the research process. The fieldwork was conducted through semi-structured interviews, the details of which will be outlined in this chapter. A discussion around data collection, ethical concerns and data analysis will ensue. Finally, some research limitations will be outlined, relating to both the research sample and the research method.

Chapter five presents the first of the three findings chapters. As context is imperative to studies of discretion, this chapter will outline the elements of the research that are necessary to contextualise the subsequent findings chapters. Namely, to provide context for *why* the street-level bureaucrats carry out their role of assessment and placement in the ways that they do. To this end, this chapter will include background information on these frontline workers, the discretionary environment in which they work, the ways that they use this discretion to both gate-keep and act as a gateway to services, moralising impacts on decision-making and the power dynamics between the frontline workers and those who present to access services.

Primary (assessment) and secondary (placement) rationing of homeless services constitute the core actions where the street-level bureaucrats are required to use discretion. As such, chapter six presents results relating to the primary rationing of resources. In other words, how decisions are made around the assessment process

when someone presents as homeless to the local authority. Therefore, this chapter will present the findings related to the way that homelessness is defined at the frontline of service delivery. Additionally, a significant issue that arose in these discussions around the definition of homelessness was related to more hidden forms of homelessness or what the frontline workers called grey areas which will be addressed here. The findings related to the ways that frontline workers make decisions around eligibility will be presented. Finally, the thin line identified between homeless prevention and gatekeeping will be discussed.

Chapter seven then turns to the results related to the secondary rationing of services. Once eligibility has been established through primary rationing, a person's experience of rationing does not end. Rather, decisions will then be made around the forms and level of assistance offered to those who are deemed eligible through secondary rationing. The chapter will first present findings related to the level of resources available for frontline workers' in carrying out their duties as this significantly impacts the rationing process. Next, the findings related to the differences in treatment of families and singles will be discussed. After this will follow a discussion around the practice of covert deterrence uncovered through the research, which involves frontline workers attempting to deter people who present as homeless from accessing homeless accommodation. Finally, the central role of 'selection' as a form of service rationing within homeless services will be discussed.

Chapter eight will present a discussion of the findings of the thesis and relate these to the research question and existing literature. This will follow the same outline as the findings chapters through discussing the work environment and discretion in Irish homeless service administration, followed by primary rationing and secondary rationing. Finally, the concluding comments will reiterate the theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions of the research, as well as outlining a number of policy and practice implications.

Chapter 2: Responses to homelessness in Ireland: From the origins of the welfare state to the present day

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will trace the development of Irish homeless policy responses from the early origins of the modern welfare state up to the present day, paying close attention to the conceptual underpinnings of these developments. It will begin by outlining the development of the welfare state by looking as far back as the 1500s to understand changing conceptualisations of poverty and homelessness. Social problems are socially constructed inasmuch as the ways that they are conceptualised (or not) and dealt with at a given time can change depending on a range of factors including, dominant ideologies, historical context and/or religious influence. These dominant ideologies will impact how a particular country compares to others in terms of policy responses. Therefore, Ireland's position within a range of welfare typologies will be discussed in order to better understand Irish policy responses to homeless and housing within a broader context.

The way that homelessness is defined is important for understanding how it is measured and addressed. As such, the next section will discuss this topic in terms of how it is socially constructed; how it has been defined at an empirical level; and how it is currently conceptualised and defined in Ireland. After laying out the issues around defining homelessness, the chapter will then turn to a discussion around the homeless situation in Ireland presently. This will involve three sections. Firstly, the structure of local authority administered homeless services will be discussed. This will be followed by a section on the available homeless data to aid a better understanding of the contemporary homeless situation. Finally, bearing the preceding sections of the chapter in mind, the final section will place Ireland within a framework of homeless service approaches ranging from those that are housing-led to those that involve a staircase of transition or treatment first for access to services.

2.2 The development of the welfare state and conceptions of poverty and homelessness from the 1500s to the *Housing Act, 1988*

Many of the concepts that are central to this thesis have their origins in the beginnings of the welfare state. Therefore, it is useful to discuss the origins of the modern welfare state in Ireland and how approaches to poverty, homelessness and welfare have changed over time.

2.2.1 The origins of the welfare state

As O'Sullivan states, 'the welfare state of a country is not simply the sum of all its social policies, rather it is a reflection of the historical relation between the state, religion, class and the economy' (2010, p. 67). Thus, it is useful to go back as far as the 1500s to fully appreciate how conceptualisations of poverty and homelessness have changed over time, along with the important role that discretion has played in the administration of welfare (Michielse, 1990). Michielse (1990) describes how the discourse around poverty was changing throughout Europe during the 1500s, which involved a move towards the policing of the poor. This entailed a change from a system of Christian charity to a new approach that focused on: the salvation of the recipients of relief as opposed to the spiritual salvation of donors; secular authorities as the agents of poor relief rather than the church; the idea of the "common chest" in which all alms were brought together for central administration; the prohibition of begging; and a change from a concern around benevolence to the 'subjection of the poor to a systematic and disciplinarian programme of education and improvement' (Michielse, 1990, p. 2). Piven and Cloward (1993) contend that this change in discourse was required to allow for the development of the relief systems that began to appear in western countries as a response to mass disturbances which erupted in the process of societal transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Distinctions were made between the deserving and undeserving poor in the distribution of poor relief. Those considered to be deserving included school attending children, the disabled, the elderly and the mentally ill or those who 'had lived respectably and lapsed into extreme poverty', whist the undeserving consisted of able-bodied drunkards and vagabonds who were 'condemned in the name of the moral law

of labour' (Michielse, 1990, pp. 12-13). Ocobock (2009) illustrated the plight of those labelled in ways such as vagrants, vagabonds, tramps and homeless through examining various laws and attempts to control the mobile poor throughout history. Ocobock concludes that, 'in general, the primary aim of vagrancy laws has been to establish control over idle individuals who could labor but chose not to and rootless, roofless persons seemingly unfettered by traditional domestic life and free to travel outside the surveillance of the state' (2009, p. 2). This power over the poor was a means of enforcing the work ethic as the dominant value system in society. To this end, moral responsibility for poverty was displaced from those who were rich on to those who were poor. The poor were conferred the status of deviant through notions of deservingness, which has had an enduring impact on Irish social policy (Powell, 1992).

Although there were many problems with poor relief through charity during the Middle Ages, according to Michielse (1990), poor people had more freedom at this time and were viewed less negatively than when poor relief was administered by the State. Likewise for people experiencing homelessness, those who were considered vagrants and moved from place to place were criminalised in order to deter them from mobility, initially to deal with labour shortages after the Black Death (Chambliss, 1964). This penalisation and criminalisation of people who are homeless has endured, for example, through incarceration, attempts to keep public spaces free of homeless people, and through the detention and deportation of migrants (Jones, 2013; Meert *et al.*, 2006).

The judgement of the poor and homeless persisted with the development of the Poor Law system firstly in England and later in Ireland. The stigma associated with the Poor Law test, together with the moral judgements which were made about people and their behaviour, were fundamental to welfare distribution (Titmuss, 1987a). By the 1830's the British establishment had grown tired of the Elizabethan Poor Laws, which were considered too generous, lax in administration, and a cause of dependency for large sections of the population (Burke, 1999; McCashin, 2004). The New Poor Law, which passed in 1834 for England and Wales, was based on a deterrent workhouse system and took a punitive approach that aimed to force the able-bodied poor to find work, whilst solidifying the distinction between the 'deserving' and undeserving' poor (Dukelow and Considine, 2017). Central to the deterrent nature of the workhouses was

the principle of 'less eligibility', which ensured that conditions inside the workhouse were worse than those of the lowest paid labourers who lived outside of the workhouses. It was therefore a deterrent system that shared with the mercantilist social policy that came before it the goal of regulating the poor (Powell, 1992). Theoretically, according to Titmuss, the Poor Law system, which was 'middle class in structure' and 'moralistic in application', consisted of a 'neat and orderly world of eligible and ineligible citizens; of approved and disapproved patterns of dependency; of those who could manage change and those who could not (1987a, p. 209). These values and attitudes to welfare that were established at this time, have continued long after the workhouse system came to an end, both in Ireland and further afield.

The rhetoric around the introduction of the Poor Law system into Ireland was very different from that in the UK. Many believed that it could not possibly work here as the core principle of the system, that of less eligibility, would not apply (Powell, 1992). As conditions were so bad for the lowest paid labourers, those against its introduction felt that it would be difficult to have a system where conditions were even lower, thus impacting upon both the less eligibility and deterrent nature of the workhouses (Powell, 1992). Significantly, The Royal Commission for *Inquiring into the Conditions of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*, which was chaired by the Archbishop of Dublin Richard Whately, recommended that the Poor Law system that existed in England at that time would not be suitable for Ireland (Gray, 2009). This was due mainly to their perception of the differences both in the culture of the populous and their willingness to cooperate with the workhouse system, and to differences in labour conditions (Whatley, 1836), as well as theological assumptions around the place of charity in Irish society (McGauran and Offer, 2017). Additionally, they voiced concerns around the significant numbers who might apply for such relief. Instead, the Commission recommended that employment through public works and a scheme of assisted emigration be used as a means to alleviate destitution (Dukelow and Considine, 2017).

Despite these concerns, the Poor Law system was introduced to Ireland in 1838 and resulted in a significant shift in the way that poverty was responded to by the State (McCabe, 2018). The 1838 Act allowed for the provision of indoor relief at the absolute discretion of the guardians of the workhouse. No matter how destitute a person was, they did not have a statutory right to this relief. Like the poor relief that

came before it, the Irish Poor Law system was a discretionary one based on notions of deservingness and dependency. The London-based central authority for the Irish Poor Law issued detailed and strict instructions on the running of the workhouses, for example, the segregation of families inside the house, the work to be done by the inmates, the food they ate, the discipline they endured and the clothes they wore (Burke, 1999). The poor were pauperised through this system which involved subordination through a total abrogation of rights, which constituted the crux of deterrence in Ireland (Powell, 1992).

However, the rigidness of the workhouse system was made more malleable by the scale of demand during the Famine years. The Poor Relief Extension Act, 1847 allowed for the guardians of the workhouse to grant a very limited form of outdoor relief, which was only available to special categories of people who were considered deserving, for example, widows with two or more legitimate children (Burke, 1999). Additionally, the Act permits the appointment of 'Relieving Officers' to administer this outdoor relief (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2004). The limitations to outdoor relief imposed by the Act were often ignored by the guardians due to the extent of destitution during the Famine, and a wider pool of people were aided (Burke, 1999). Although the provision of this relief was intended to be a temporary measure, Burke argues that the Irish people 'fought determinedly' to hang on to this limited form of relief, which became the 'mean and restrictive' ancestor of the modern social welfare system (1999, p. 16).

2.2.2 The liberal reforms and changing conceptualisations of poverty

With the publication of the surveys of Charles Booth (1889-1903) and Seebohm Rowntree (1901), causes of poverty were outlined for the first time which challenged the Victorian era myth that poor people themselves caused poverty. Rather, the causes identified through their works included old age, sickness, under-employment and unemployment caused by economic conditions (Burke, 1999). These changes in attitudes around the causes of poverty led to a period of liberal reforms in the UK and Ireland during the early 1900's. These reforms included the introduction of the National Insurance Act, 1911, which gave rights to insured workers to certain benefits when sick or unemployed. This Act represented a significant shift from Poor Law

relief based purely on discretion towards relief that could be relied on as a right, albeit once specific criteria were met. However, notions around 'deservingness' remained strong and discretionary benefits were still introduced after this. For example, the Public Assistance Act, 1939, which was discretionary and means-tested. Although it 'adopted the guise of "Home Assistance"', in its substance, it had not really changed from the Poor Law that came before it (Thornton, 2005, p. 11). Further reforms came after the publication of William Beveridge's report, *Social Insurance and the Allied Services*, which was published in the UK in 1942 but was very influential on Irish social policy. These reforms introduced more welfare based on rights yet some discretionary welfare remained.

At this time, opposition to the discretionary system of welfare administration was coming from the right and the left of the political sphere in Ireland, the UK and further afield. In social policy, the movement from discretion to social rights was associated with a movement away from *laissez-faire* forms of governing, towards the increased intervention of the state in human affairs, institutionalising the state's formerly residual role (Bradshaw, 2013b). The establishment of the Department of Social Welfare in 1947, along with the preceding introduction of a universal child benefit for third and subsequent children in 1944 illustrate this move away from a residual role towards more intervention in the provision of welfare to citizens (Burke, 1999; Kelly, 1995). The establishment of the Department of Social Welfare enabled better co-ordination and organisation of the various income maintenance schemes already in place, as well as those introduced in the succeeding years (Kelly, 1995).

Despite the introduction of more benefits based on rights, some discretionary benefits remained within the Irish system of social welfare. For example, with the aim to repeal the discretionary Public Assistance Act and introduce an improved scheme, the Social Welfare (Supplementary Welfare Allowances) Bill was introduced and passed in 1975, although it only came into operation in 1977 (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2004). These supplementary welfare allowances were administered by the regional health boards and consisted of both means-tested, non-discretionary payments to guarantee a minimum income or supplement housing costs and additional payments administered at the discretion of Community Welfare Officers (CWO). CWOs were previously known as Home Assistance Officers and before that, Relieving Officers; illustrating the schemes' position as a descendant of the Poor Law and its

function as a scheme of last resort for the least well off in society (McCashin, 2015; Mills, 1991; The Irish Times, 1996). The role of the CWO was often a controversial one, most notably around issues associated with equity of treatment and consistency in the discretionary decisions of CWOs in different areas (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2004; Mills, 1991; The Irish Times, 1996). More recently, the administration of supplementary welfare allowances were transferred to the Department of Social Protection, where CWOs became known as Designated Persons. Elements of the scheme remain discretionary and ineligible for appeal. However, unsuccessful claimants can request that their case be reviewed by a different member of staff.

2.2.3 The discourse of homelessness after the formation of the Irish State

Despite the welfare reforms outlined above, when it came specifically to homelessness subsequent to the discourse around 'vagabonds' and 'vagrants' during the Poor Law era, there was little discourse in Ireland around this issue, most notably after the formation of the new Irish Free State. For example, Harvey (2008) could only find one parliamentary question on the issue of homelessness for the entirety of the 1970s. The absence of homelessness in the public discourse was not related to an absence of homelessness in Ireland. Rather, there was minimal state recognition of homelessness as a social problem. Therefore, homelessness was generally addressed through the provision of charitable services from organisations such as the Simon Community and Saint Vincent de Paul. As a result of their experiences through this provision, the Simon Community began an advocacy campaign for a legislative basis for defining and responding to homelessness in Ireland (Harvey, 2008). They did this through supporting a candidate for the Oireacthas – Brendan Ryan – who was associated with Cork Simon Community and had pledged to introduce a Homeless Persons Bill. Although this Bill was ultimately rejected, it was a catalyst for discussions on homelessness within the political sphere which eventually led to the enacting of the *Housing Act, 1988* that legally defined homelessness (Harvey, 2008). The introduction of this Act constitutes the first time that a statutory definition of homelessness existed in Ireland. Although the Act legally defined homelessness and stated that that local authorities had a responsibility towards those experiencing it, it did not go as far as to oblige local authorities to provide suitable accommodation. Section 2.4.3 on defining

homelessness in Ireland will return to this Act in more detail and present a discussion on the statutory definition and how it is interpreted.

2.3 Welfare regimes, the welfare state and the policy response to homelessness

Conceptual comprehension of the Irish welfare state is aided both through tracing its development, as well as understanding its place within a broader framework of welfare regimes. Likewise, it is useful to consider the impact of a country's place within a welfare regime typology on its housing system and homelessness, in terms of incidence and policy responses. Esping-Andersen's (1990) seminal work – *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* – presents a welfare regime typology of 18 Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries based upon the principles of decommodification, stratification and public-private welfare mix. From this, Esping-Andersen presented three clusters of welfare capitalism: liberal, corporatist and social democratic. Within each country, the nature of class mobilisation, class political action structures and the historical organisation of state institutions are the most important historical factors in the formation of these clusters (O'Sullivan, 2010). Since the publication of his work, there have been many attempts to develop refined typologies (See: Powell *et al*, 2020 for an extensive review of the reviews). An evaluation of the reviews is not necessary here. Rather, table 2.1 presents a suitably robust update of Esping-Andersen's typology which differentiates the Southern European or Mediterranean countries and takes account of the EU accession states. It is a useful guide to aid understanding of Ireland's place within the broader regimes.

Ireland's position within both Esping-Andersen's and indeed wider welfare regime typologies has sparked debate amongst academics (Cousins, 1997; O'Sullivan, 2004). Broadly speaking however, it fits within a liberal welfare regime (O'Sullivan, 2010; Robért and Bukodi, 2007; Whelan and Maître, 2008). In a liberal regime, the market holds the prime position, with the state playing a residual role in welfare provision for those who are the least well off within society. Thus, social benefits are typically means tested and targeted at those who are least able to succeed within the market (Whelan and Maître, 2008).

Table 2.1 A typology of six welfare regimes

Welfare regime	Description	Countries
Social democratic	• Assigns a redistributive role to the welfare state • High level of employment flexibility • High security through generous social welfare and unemployment benefits • Guaranteed adequate economic resources independent of market or familial reliance	Sweden, Finland, Denmark
Corporatist	• Less emphasis on redistribution than social democratic regime • Welfare primarily viewed as a mediator of group-based mutual aid and risk pooling • Rights to benefits dependent on attachment to the labour market	Germany, Austria, France
Liberal	• Market holds prime position • Residual role for the state in welfare provision • Social benefits typically subject to a means test or targeted on those failing in the market	Ireland, UK
Mediterranean/ Southern European	• Central role for familial support systems • Poorly developed and selective labour market policies • Uneven and minimalist benefits system • Lacks provision of a guaranteed minimum income	Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal,
Conservative post-socialist	• Transfer oriented labour market measures • Moderate degree of employment protection	Slovenia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland
Liberal post-socialist	• More flexible labour market than conservative post-socialist • Due in part to the fact that employers (particularly in the private sector) are unwilling to follow legal regulation of the labour market	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

Devised from: (Whelan and Maître, 2008; Robért and Bukodi, 2007)

In recognising the unique nature of housing within the welfare state, consideration should be given to the impact that welfare regimes can have on the development of housing policies. Within the welfare state, housing has been described both as the

‘wobbly pillar’ (Torgersen, 1987) and a ‘cornerstone’ (Malpass, 2008 commenting on Kemeny's thesis on the relationship between housing and the welfare state). Although the thesis of housing as a wobbly pillar and cornerstone appear to be at odds with one another, Malpass (2008), argues that they are not as incompatible as they seem. Rather, they are focused on different aspects of housing and the welfare state; with social or public housing constituting the wobbly pillar, and the private sector playing an increasingly important role for the welfare state, albeit whilst outside of it. Whichever approach ones takes, housing is unique within the welfare state as Kemeny explains:

> Housing…differs from the other three pillars in being rarely, if ever, considered a universal form of *public* provision. While the other three pillars of benefit-based transfer payments, social security, education and health are often – though by no means always – provided by the state and paid for largely out of taxation, state provision of housing has hardly ever been so (2001, p. 54).

The exception for state housing provision is for a minority of the population at a price significantly higher than the costs expected for education and healthcare (Kemeny, 2001). In this sense, housing is largely determined by the market – although this differs between countries – and is therefore the least decommodified of the welfare state pillars.

In terms of homelessness, there has been a number of comparative studies that have examined its link to welfare regimes (for example see: Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010; Benjaminsen *et al,* 2009; Kourachanis, 2020; O'Sullivan, 2010; Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007; Stephens *et al.*, 2010). Although the relationship between welfare regimes and homelessness is not a simple one (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010), it has been argued that welfare regimes can shape not just the scale, but also the pattern of homelessness, including its causes, with those welfare states that are less generous tending to have higher rates of homelessness (O'Sullivan, 2010; Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007). However, one cannot assume a particular housing system from a country’s place within a particular welfare regime. For example, in a review of scholarship on welfare regimes, O’Sullivan argues that there is significant diversity of Nordic housing systems ranging from the largely homeowner countries of Finland, Norway and Iceland to the substantial public and private rental sectors of Denmark

and Sweden. The systems of housing in these countries have developed 'along different patterns resulting in a diversity of systems that have no parallels in their welfare state arrangements' (Benjaminsen *et al*, 2009, p. 27). As housing is key to ending homelessness, the nature of housing provision within a country is of significant importance, notably the rental system. However, as the above example shows for the social democratic countries at least, rental system structure cannot be inferred from the welfare regime within which a country is located (O'Sullivan, 2010).

Despite differences in housing systems within welfare regime categorisations, a major impact of welfare regime on homelessness is evident on examining its nature and causes. In a cross-national study on housing exclusion for the European Commission, Stephen's *et al* found evidence that countries with stronger welfare safety nets had homelessness that was more closely linked to housing systems and market conditions than with changes in the conditions of the labour market or social security systems. They found that even within countries with a strong welfare state and homelessness that was predominantly based on *individual* causes, access to housing for vulnerable groups remained a significant issue as housing providers often use discretion to exclude those with the most complex needs. Within these countries, Stephens *et al* argue, there is a relative lack of *structural* homelessness, unlike some of the more liberal countries where homelessness has more of a structural element. The importance of the welfare safety net for preventing homelessness in these countries is evident through a consideration of immigrants who lack access to this safety net and thus have a high exposure to homelessness (Stephens *et al.*, 2010). However, it is important to remember that 'housing matters' too and Stephens *et al* demonstrated that the scale and nature of homelessness can be impacted by housing conditions and systems irrespective of the particular welfare regime (2010, p. 227).

It is clear is that as a liberal country, Ireland has homelessness which is significantly impacted by structural causes, namely housing supply and affordability. Unlike some of the social democratic countries that have a homeless population (traditionally single men) concentrated with those who have complex needs such as addiction issues (Stephens *et al.*, 2010), in Ireland the homeless population is more diverse which is evident from the growing number of women and families experiencing homelessness (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-a). Despite these differences, a commonality across welfare regimes is the way that the 'housing

first paradigm' now plays a central role in the homeless strategies of most countries in northern and western Europe (Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2010, p. 123).

Whilst shedding some light on the development of policy, a focus on the macro-level tells us nothing of how these policies are implemented at the micro or local-level. Therefore, as O'Sullivan argues, caution needs to be 'shown in demonstrating how broader welfare policies are operationalised, filtered and interpreted by "street level bureaucracies"' (O'Sullivan, 2010, p. 71). This micro-level implementation is the focus of this thesis, and it is an aim of this research to examine how policy such as the government's commitment to taking a housing-led approach to homelessness plays out at the frontline, bearing in mind the liberal influences on policy in Ireland. Furthermore the impact of structural factors such as the housing market (including social provisions) in determining the actions of those workers at the frontline is of vital importance. This will include considering how issues such as the availability of housing, historical provision and attitudes toward individual causes of homelessness such as addiction, impact the delivery of homeless policy at the frontline.

2.4 Defining homelessness

This section will outline the dominant definitions of homelessness used in Ireland at a policy level, in order to gain an understanding how homelessness is conceptualised by the state. This section will firstly outline theoretical issues associated with defining a social problem, namely the social construction of homelessness and understanding of its causes, and the ways that this can impact policy responses. Secondly, an empirical approach to defining homelessness will be outlined as a baseline from which to discuss the understanding of definitions used in the Irish context. The third section will address the ways homelessness is defined in Ireland, as well as including a discussion on the statutory definition. Just as with the development of the welfare state, the ideological environment has a significant impact on the way that homelessness is defined and what is understood to be its causes (Jacobs *et al*, 1999).

2.4.1 Social construction of the causes and parameters of defining homelessness

The ontological underpinnings of this research are contextualised when addressing how homelessness is defined and understood in terms of its causes. Taking a social construction approach to the research means viewing social reality as constructed and recognising the need to analyse the processes in which this social construction occurs (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Therefore for homelessness and social policy more generally, it is important to remember that it is, as Kingfisher described:

> …not in any sense neutral, disinterested, or purely technical, nor are the social problems policy is designed to address obvious. Rather, both recognized problems and their solutions are specifically cultural in nature… (2007, p. 91).

Hence, problems and their solutions are based on the discourses within the cultural context and space that they occupy at a given time. Therefore, policy is not just a response to needs, but an interpretation of needs that are recognised, legitimised and transformed in a way that they can be dealt with through policy (Kingfisher, 2007). Recognising the centrality of this process of construction of social problems and their solutions, Jacobs *et al* (1999, p. 11) argue that in much of the literature on housing, homelessness is generally treated as an 'objective and objectifiable phenomena, within the positivist tradition of social enquiry'. However, they argue that homelessness serves as a useful example to show how vested interests can impact both on how a social problem is defined and how it is dealt with. Likewise, these interests can impact the location of a social problem on the policy agenda. Jacobs *et al* (1999) argue that there is a struggle between adherents to the ideological perspectives defining the causes of homelessness as a structural problem which requires broad welfare measures and those defining homelessness in terms of more individualised causes, who both wish to impose their approach on the policy agenda. These struggles are pivotal in the wider population's acceptance and understanding of homelessness as a social problem and whether they see it as a problem of individual or social welfare responsibility (Jacobs *et al,* 1999). As Cronley states, '…societal understanding of homelessness stems from a process of social construction in which, over time, differing groups have framed the definition and debate', with these groups ascribing more towards a structural or individual interpretation of homelessness as a social problem (Cronley,

2010, p. 319). Cronley's article serves as an example of how the public policy arena, along with the dominating political and socio-cultural trends can shift perceptions around the causes of homelessness, as she illustrates how the policy responses indicate a move between a focus on structural and individual causes. Therefore, our understanding of homelessness is not fixed and can change over time. As such, homelessness is a relative concept, and its nature is that of a social construction. As a field, our understanding of homelessness is 'constantly being shaped and reshaped' (Jarvinen, 1995, p. 11).

Bullen (2015) presents an example of this from Australia when she illustrates how the conceptualisation of homelessness in Australian policy has changed since the 1970s. Bullen argues that an analysis of the research and commentary shows a shift away from an understanding of homelessness based on structural factors towards an understanding focused on individual factors over this time in line with the wider neo-liberal shifts within western society. Similarly in Ireland, Phelan and Norris (2008) convincingly make the argument that a change in understanding of the causes of homelessness – from structural to individual – was necessitated in order to achieve the aims of the neo-corporatist governance structure of homeless services in Dublin. The governance structure, which mirrored the social partnership approach to policy of that time, involved more responsibility for the community and voluntary sector (who generally provided individualistically oriented services) and less responsibility on the state (the main provider of structural solutions). The lack of focus on structural causes resulted in a shortage in the provision of long-term accommodation for those experiencing homelessness. Whist the focus on individual causes and the structure of services has led to a focus on controlling service user behaviour and the risk of exclusion from services for those who do not comply (Phelan and Norris, 2008). Despite the lack of *action* on structural causes of homelessness, at the *policy* level there is more of a recognition of structural causes of homelessness in recent years. For example, as the following excerpt from *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* illustrates:

> Homelessness is a complex phenomenon which is often the result of a number of inter-related personal, social and economic issues. However, it is generally accepted that the supply shortage across the housing sector, which in turn is a result of the economic collapse and the associated contraction in the

> construction sector, has been a driving force behind the increased number of households presenting as homeless in recent times (Government of Ireland, 2016, p. 33).

Likewise, the *Homeless Policy Statement* published in February 2013 (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government) stated that housing is the best solution for ending homelessness and as such stated a housing-led approach, incorporating a move away from expensive emergency or shelter type accommodation is the best way to tackle the issue. The focus on housing-led solutions was restated in the most recent Government housing plan, *Housing for All* (Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage, 2021), which reemphasised the focus on building social housing and a focus on homeless prevention. However, this recognition of structural issues has not as yet significantly impacted frontline service provision or resulted in an increase of local authority or approved housing body (AHB) housing provision which comes close to meeting social housing demand. With all this in mind, it is fair to say that the problem of homelessness in Ireland is predominantly constructed in two ways. In the policy domain the state recognises the role that structural causes play in the issue of homelessness (albeit without giving priority to building social housing, rather they provide most support for provision through the private market). On the other hand, in service provision which is predominantly focused on an emergency hostel or other communal settings, as well as in the interactions between frontline workers and potential service providers, the problem is constructed as one with more focus on the individual and their behaviours or predicted future behaviours as the findings chapters of this thesis will illustrate.

As well as conflict over defining the causes of homelessness, there is conflict in terms of the parameters around which homelessness should be defined. Therefore, there is no one agreed definition of homelessness. Rather, many definitions exist both within and between countries. These can range from narrow definitions, which focus on visible homelessness, to broader definitions that take account of homelessness and housing exclusion where homelessness is viewed as a process rather than a static state (Busch-Geertsema, 2010). Few of the existing definitions of homelessness have a conceptual basis and they can vary significantly depending on who is doing the defining (Amore, Baker and Howden-Chapman, 2011). For example, Amore *et al* (2011) suggest that definitions produced by government agencies that are responsible

for addressing homelessness tend to be narrow and focus on the visibly homeless in order to minimise the population. On the other hand, they suggest that advocates and non-governmental service providers tend to use broader definitions that 'maximise the number of people identified as homeless', through the inclusion of those at-risk of homelessness in their enumerations of the phenomena (Amore, Baker and Howden-Chapman, 2011, p. 20). Another way that the parameters of homelessness are impacted is through what Carlen (1994) calls 'agency maintained homelessness. According to Carlen, agency maintained homelessness is not referring to an inability of local authorities to meet the needs of all who are homeless due to a scarcity of resources, rather it refers to

> …bureaucratic or professional procedures for the governance of homelessness which: deter people from defining themselves as homeless; deny that homelessness claims are justifiable under the legislation; or discipline the officially-defined homeless into rapidly withdrawing their claims to homeless status (1994, p. 19).

Carlen's conception, which focused specifically on access to homeless supports for young homeless people in the English legislative context, illustrates an example of how the parameters of homelessness can be impacted by actions at the frontline, thus impacting the number of people who access homeless services. Reflecting these constructions of homelessness, it is important to reiterate that definitions of homelessness are not fixed as they compete with each other through policy discourse. Rather, they change over time, reflecting the ideological influences, availability of resources, expectations on policy makers (Jacobs *et al*, 1999) and actions of street-level bureaucrats at that partiuclar time.

Of critical importance then, when considering homeless statistics, are the methodologies used in defining and measuring homelessness. This is due to the fact that the results will be dependent on the researcher's construction of who is counted as homeless and how they are counted (Novac *et al,* 1996). For example, as Pleace (2016) points out, it is important to question why in some countries someone on the street or in an emergency shelter is homeless, yet someone squatting in a building unfit for habitation or living in a shanty town is not? Therefore the methodologies used to define and measure homelessness can impact upon compositions of the population

such as the racial and gender profile of those considered homeless (Bentley, 1995). For example, in Ireland data on people in domestic violence shelters are not included in the homeless statistics published each month by the Department of Housing. Local Government and Heritage. This impacts the number counted as homeless, as well as the overall gender and ethnicity composition of the homeless population. Therefore, changes to the way that homelessness is conceptualised can have a significant impact on the statistics. In referencing the situation in Denmark during the 1990's, Jarvinen (1995, p. 5) argues that:

> The changes in the statistics on homelessness primarily reflect the fact that certain problems (such as violence against women) which previously were "private" and "invisible" have know *[sic]* been redefined as social problems that social institutions (such as those for the homeless) are expected to address.

These differences in conceptualisation both within countries and between countries can impact research. For example, within countries, meaningful statistics are crucial to the development of informed policy-making (Amore, Baker and Howden-Chapman, 2011). Between countries, some researchers have shown how the varying definition can make comparative research focused on homelessness prevalence difficult (Anderson *et al*, 2016; Stephens *et al.*, 2010).

2.4.2 The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS)

In response to issues surrounding the definition and measurement of homelessness cross-nationally, the European Observatory on Homelessness[1] developed a conceptually based definition of homelessness and housing exclusion. This was developed to allow Observatory members collate homelessness statistics more consistently across Europe (Edgar, 2012). Therefore, it was developed in the European context where consideration was given to the diversity of 'experience, governance and policy frameworks' across the EU (Edgar, 2012, p. 220). The ETHOS typology elucidates housing need as a continuum from rooflessness to living in inadequate

[1] The European Observatory on Homelessness is the research arm of FEANTSA which is the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless.

housing. The categories in ETHOS attempt to cover all the living situations across Europe which amount to forms of homelessness (FEANTSA, 2005):

- Roofless (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough).
- Houseless (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter).
- Living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence).
- Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding).

A key operational issue in need of consideration when defining and measuring homelessness is the temporal or time dimension. This is evident from the ETHOS definition which 'was developed to reflect the different pathways into homelessness and to emphasise the dynamic nature of the process of homelessness' (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010, p. 21). Homelessness can be episodic and have different durations between people and episodes, therefore people may experience the different categories at different times.

The typology is broadly accepted as a useful conceptual framework both in Europe and beyond. Although definitions of homelessness at a national level are not always identical to ETHOS, they are usually discussed with reference to the typology (Busch-Geertsema, 2010). Therefore, the typology can be used when discussing the definition of homelessness both within and between countries, for example, in comparative research where the definitions used in the individual countries are quite different (Anderson *et al*, 2016). However, the typology has come in for some critique (Amore *et al*, 2011; Amore, 2013; Pleace and Bretherton, 2013; Pleace and Hermans, 2020) most notably that of Amore *et al* (2011), who questioned its conceptual rigour. Their article in the European Journal of Homelessness in 2011 sparked a lively debate around the typology (Amore, 2013; Edgar, 2012; Garcia and Brandle, 2014; Roman, 2012; Sahlin, 2012), with a number of prominent homeless researcher defending its integrity and pointing out that it was developed as a tool to work at a cross national (EU) level. As FEANTSA state, the purpose of the typology is not to harmonise the definitions of homelessness used across the EU. Rather its purpose is to provide a 'shared language for cross national exchange' (FEANTSA, 2017b, p. 1). The critiques were not without impact, however, as the typology has been modified since the early

version (see Appendix 6) to provide a simplified version called ETHOS light to support measurement of homelessness at a European level. A significant difference of this version is the reclassification of people living temporarily with family or friends (ETHOS category 8.1), people living in mobile homes (11.1), non-conventional buildings (11.2) and temporary structures (11.3), as homeless (Busch-Geertsema, 2010).

Table 2.2 ETHOS Light: A harmonised definition of homelessness for statistical purposes

Operational category		Living situation		Definition
1	People living rough	1	Public space/external space	Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
2	People living in emergency accommodation	2	Overnight shelters	People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation
3	People living in accommodation for the homeless	3 4 5 6	Homeless hostels Temporary accommodation Transitional supported accommodation Women's shelter or refuge accommodation	Where the period of stay is time-limited and no long-term housing is provided
4	People living in institutions	7 8	Health care institutions Penal institutions	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing No housing available prior to release
5	People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	9 10 11	Mobile homes Non-conventional buildings Temporary structures	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence
6	Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)	12	Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence

Source: (FEANTSA, 2017a)

However, some argue that the impact of the development is limited in that, at a European level, definitional ambiguities remain 'around who is homeless and who is

experiencing housing exclusion or acute housing need' (Pleace and Hermans, 2020, pp. 38-39). Likewise, neither ETHOS or ETHOS light define unfit housing as constituting homelessness, which includes where accommodation is overcrowded, in very poor repair, or physically unsafe (Pleace and Hermans, 2020). Despite this, ETHOS serves a useful purpose for this thesis as it provides a conceptual definition of homelessness and housing exclusion against which comparisons can be made to the definition used in practice in Ireland.

2.4.3 Defining homelessness in Ireland

The statutory definition of homelessness in Ireland is outlined in the *Housing Act, 1988*. Under the terms of the Act, a person is considered to be homeless if:

a) There is no accommodation available which, in the **opinion** of the authority, he, together with any person who resides normally with him or might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can **reasonably** occupy or remain in occupation of; or
b) He is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a)

   and he is, in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources (*Housing Act*, 1988).

According to the national homelessness strategy – *The Way Home* – published in 2008, this definition is generally interpreted as including people living in temporary or insecure accommodation; people living in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation and in hostels or Health Service Executive (HSE) accommodation because they have nowhere else available to them; rough sleepers; and victims of family/domestic violence (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008, p. 17). However, there is no way to know if this is the case without research that examines the interpretation of the ambiguous statutory definition, which leaves open the possibility of varying interpretations between local authorities. The limited research that has already been carried out in Ireland has illustrated that the

broad definition outlined in *The Way Home* is not necessarily the interpretation used within individual local authorities. Rather, some are using much narrower interpretations than those outlined that focus mainly on rooflessness, which constitute operational categories one and two from the ETHOS typology (Bergin *et al.*, 2005; Murphy, 2016b; Community Law and Mediation, 2017).

The statutory definition of homelessness has been criticised for being too narrow as it does not include people threatened with, or at risk of becoming homeless (Lennon, 1998; Focus Ireland, 2015). Likewise, it has been criticised for its ambiguity as there is no commonly agreed definition of what constitutes homelessness among local authorities, homeless units and voluntary organisations (Bergin *et al.*, 2005; Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2006; Community Law and Mediation, 2017). According to Bergin *et al*:

> The way the Act defines homelessness leaves considerable ambiguity, allowing agencies to widen or narrow the definition of homelessness dependent on their perspectives and/or the individual that presents (2005, p. 5).

The research by Bergin *et al* found that the differences between local authorities in how they interpret the statutory definition of homelessness is mainly due to their interpretation of whether a person is considered to be in accommodation that they 'can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of' (2005, p. 11). In more recent research, Murphy (2016b) found that this was the case in the local authority included in her research into Traveller homelessness in County Offaly. In this local authority, which at the time was experiencing a high level of demand on homeless services, the interpretation of the definition used was very narrow and focused mainly on those who were roofless. However, as it was county-based, this research only focused on one local authority so it tells us nothing of the situation between local authorities or within the larger homeless units, and whether the interpretations still differ as widely as Bergin *et al* suggested in 2005. The exiting policy documents help in our understanding of the conceptual definitions of homelessness used at a national level. However, this tells us nothing of their interpretation and use at a local level. Chapter seven is focused on primary rationing and will attempt to fill some of these gaps in knowledge.

2.5 The structure of local authority administrated homeless services in Ireland

Having addressed the ways that homelessness is conceptualised and understood in the Irish context, this chapter will now turn to the structure of homeless services at the point of delivery, outlining the central role of emergency accommodation as the response to homelessness. In order to gain access to these homeless services, a person must present to their local authority and state that they are homeless. This is so that they can be assessed for eligibility for state funded homeless services which are overseen by the local authority. Some of the local authorities operate a counter-based walk in system, whereas in others people are required to make an appointment, during which they will undergo an assessment so that their eligibility for homeless services can be established. Additional to this assessment responsibility, local authorities are responsible for placement. People are granted access to homeless services through the homeless units of the 31 local authorities in Ireland. In Dublin, the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) operates a shared services approach across the four Dublin LAs. The overall structure of homeless services in Ireland follows the structure described by Stephens *et al,* who found that governance of homeless services follows a similar pattern across OECD countries:

- national/federal government establishes a national strategic and/or legal framework, and provides financial subsidies for homelessness services;
- local authorities are the key strategic players and 'enablers' of homelessness services; and
- direct provision is often undertaken by NGOs, particularly for single homeless people, with municipalities more often directly providing services to families with children (2010, p. 204).

Following this pattern, many homeless service in Ireland are provided through NGOs. However, a considerable proportion of emergency accommodation is provided through private businesses such as B&B and hotels. The main types of homeless accommodation available through the local authorities are:

- Temporary emergency accommodation (TEA), which is emergency hostel accommodation with no or minimal support;

- Private emergency accommodation (PEA), which may include emergency use of hotels, B&Bs and other residential facilitates. The Department state that supports are provided to service users in PEA on a visiting basis (although through this research it appears that provisions of this varies significantly between LAs)
- Supported temporary accommodation (STA), which includes family hubs and hostels with onsite professional support (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-a).

The most commonly used accommodation types are STA and PEA. Between January 2016 and January 2022 there was an increase of 111 per cent (+1875) in the use of PEA. As the second highest proportion of emergency accommodation, STA, saw an increase of 61 per cent (+1118) in its use over the same time period. TEA, however, actually decreased by 66 per cent (-254) (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-a). The use of PEA has been controversial with some criticising its suitability as a long term solution for homeless families (Nowicki *et al,* 2019; Walsh and Harvey, 2015), or describing it as a means of 'creeping privatisation' of homeless services (Humphreys, 2004). PEA consists of private B&B and hotel accommodation. As families often spend a considerable amount of time in emergency accommodation (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020) using PEA is often inadequate. This is due to the fact that families are generally placed together in one room, sometimes with less beds than people, leaving little space for privacy (Walsh and Harvey, 2015). As well as this, there are usually no cooking facilities available in hotels and limited facilities in B&Bs. Communal spaces are not usually provided. Some people have reported being banned from entering the rooms of other residents, as well as having a range of other rules placed upon them by the facility owner (Walsh and Harvey, 2015; Murphy, 2016b). The Government intended to end the use of this controversial form of emergency accommodation. Initially a deadline of mid-2017 was set (Government of Ireland, 2016). However, this deadline has long since passed and the statistics illustrate how an increasing number of households are placed in PEA. For people who are not allocated a place in PEA, the other option is hostel accommodation. This consists of TEA hostels, which are generally the first port of call for single homeless people and STA. Family hubs are

another type of communal living facility, where a family will usually have their own room and shared facilities.

Despite the commitment to end the use of PEA and for taking a housing-led approach to tackling homelessness, many people are spending long periods of time in emergency accommodation intended for short-term use. Figures from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage show how a large proportion of people are living in emergency accommodation for longer than six months. At quarter three in 2020, within the Dublin area, 66 per cent of those in emergency accommodation had been in it for over six months, with just 33 per cent of those in emergency accommodation being there for less than six months. Outside Dublin the proportions were 52 per cent having been in emergency accommodation for more than six months and 48 per cent at less than six months (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020). More detailed figures are available for the Dublin area and illustrate the extent to which families are getting stuck in emergency accommodation with 1,068 children having spent more than a year in emergency accommodation and 512 children having spent more than two years at the time of data collation. The corresponding figures for the adults in these families was 604 who were there for more than a year and 275 for more than two years (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020).

There are supports other than emergency accommodation that may be provided by the local authority to people who are experiencing homelessness, for example, the Place Finder service. The Circular: *Housing 4/2018* outlines the parameters of the Place Finder services and states that it can be made available to any household in homeless emergency accommodation. This service allows for the payment of a deposit and up to two months' rent in advance to secure a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) property (Ryan, 19th January 2018). As well as the financial support offered through Place Finder, the level of additional services offered through the Place Finder service differs between local authorities. With some offering support to source accommodation which is already available to the wider population (such as that available on daft.ie), whilst others offer support to access tenancies negotiated directly with landlords by frontline workers.

Additionally, frontline workers have the capacity to award discretionary HAP top-ups for households experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Nationally this discretionary

payment is capped at 20 per cent of the HAP cap. However, in the Dublin region this can go as high as 50 percent. Table 2.3 illustrates the significant growth in these payments from 2016 to quarter two in 2019. Overall, the proportion of HAP tenancies in receipt of a discretionary payment rose from 12.6% of all HAP tenancies in 2016 to 40% in 2019 representing an increase from 2,082 households to 19,052 respectively.

Table 2.3 Local authority awarded discretionary payments for HAP, 2016 and Q. 2 2019

	No. households		**% of HAP tenancies**	
Year	**2016**	**Q.2 2019**	**2016**	**Q. 2 2019**
50% discretion	683	4,716	4.1%	9.9%
20% discretion	1,286	13,486	7.8%	28.3%
Non-standard households[2]	113	850	0.7%	1.8%
Total	2,082	19,052	12.6%	40%

Source: Table from (Kilkenny, 2019, p. 15)

Having outlined how the services are structured and administered, the following section of the chapter will present some of the data that illustrates the extent of the issue of homelessness, and thus indicates the level of demand for emergency accommodation which must be rationed by the LA frontline workers.

2.6 Contemporary homelessness in Ireland

The following quote by O'Sullivan from an article dating to 2004, illustrates the significance and speed of the change in the field of homelessness and social housing since that time, likely accelerated by the great recession of 2008:

> Due in part to the ongoing political commitment to the provision of social housing and the initiation of a number of strategies to adequately fund and co-ordinate services for homeless households, the number of homeless households

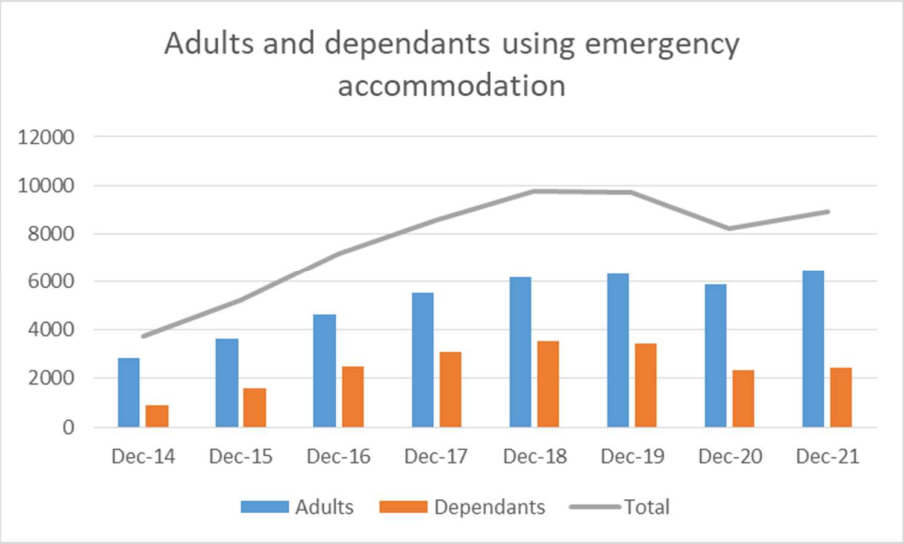
[2] Specified classes of qualified households to which differing maximum HAP payments are possible as set out under Section 43(2)(a) of the *Housing (Miscellaneous) Provisions Act,* 2014.

has stabilized in recent years. Such strategies and provision confound depictions of the Irish state embracing neo-liberalism, and highlight the difficulties of classifying the Irish welfare regime or indeed Irish housing policy within existing typologies'(2004, p. 323).

Presently the situation is vastly different from that described by O'Sullivan 18 years ago with a record number of homeless people in the State and extremely low levels of direct social housing provision.

Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage data demonstrates the extent of homelessness growth. There are issues with the way that homelessness is measured in Ireland in that the official statistics only include people who are accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation and excludes some categories such as women in domestic violence shelters and asylum seekers. However, using the numbers of people in emergency accommodation as an indicator, it is evident that the number of people experiencing homelessness has grown significantly in recent years.

Figure 2.1 Number of adults and dependants accessing local authority managed emergency accommodation, 2014-2021



Source: (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-a)

In the period from December 2014-December 2021 the number of adults accessing emergency accommodation more than doubled from 2858 to 6466 (+126%). The increase for dependent children was even more marked, increasing from 880

dependents in 2014 to 2451 in 2021 (+179%). The increase is significant despite the sizeable decrease (*n*=1,095) in numbers during the pandemic in 2020. The early pandemic decreases were ephemeral as numbers began creeping upwards during 2021 and have continued to increase monthly throughout 2022. Overall, the number accessing homeless emergency accommodation increased by 138 per cent (*n*=5179) between December 2014 and December 2021 and by August 2022, 10,805 people were using homeless services.

Homeless services have not suffered the severe cuts experienced in other sectors of the public service since the financial crash in 2008. Expenditure has increased substantially over the past number of years, from €66 million in 2014 to €212 million in 2020 (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-b). However, the resources necessary to deal with a homeless crisis are not just those that are spent on emergency accommodation (O'Sullivan, 2016). By their nature, the services are meant to be temporary. To move people on from this accommodation, the availability of adequate and affordable housing is vital. In order that Ireland can 'keep its head above water' in terms of accommodation provision, Sirr (2015) estimated that the country would need to add 10,000 units per year to the housing stock. More recent estimates from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2021, p. 75) put this figure at 33,000 per year. However, there has been a significant shift from direct social housing provision by local authorities and voluntary and co-operative housing bodies towards more market-based solutions, such as HAP. For example, the number of people accessing the HAP has increased from 485 HAP tenancies set up by the end of 2014 (the scheme commenced September that year) to 15,885 set up in 2020 and 13,095 in 2021. Increases in HAP were to be expected due to the transfer of recipients from rent supplement (RS). However, these transfers only constituted 17 per cent of the increase in numbers accessing HAP between 2016 and 2021. The increasing number of HAP tenancies has not prevented an increasing number of households experiencing homelessness. This increase in HAP provision, alongside decreased direct social housing provision illustrates how 'market based responses are seen as first order solutions' to tackling issues of housing need at a policy level (Kenna, 2013, p. 9). Minton (2017) has described this as a shift from bricks to benefits. Although she was writing about the situation in the UK, the phrase is equally applicable to Ireland as the increasing number of people in receipt of HAP illustrates.

There are indications of change at the policy level with the recently published *Housing for All: A new housing plan for Ireland*, which laid out the government's aspiration to provide 90,000 new social housing units by the end of 2030 (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021). However, it remains to be seen if these targets will be reached or remain unmet like the targets to end long-term homelessness (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2013) and the use of PEA for homeless accommodation (Government of Ireland, 2016).

Although social housing has long been considered the *wobbly pillar* of the welfare state (Torgersen, 1987) due to the high degree of provision by private means, traditionally the Irish state played a significant role in social housing provision for both rental and ownership (Murphy and Hearne, 2019). Byrne and Norris (2018) examined the role of social housing in Ireland's property bubble and the country's experience of the global financial crisis of 2007/2008. The article argued that in recent decades social housing has undergone a transformation that has changed it from a countercyclical measure that counterbalanced the market into a pro-cyclical measure which fuelled the housing boom in Ireland. For most of the twentieth century, social housing played a key role in housing provision in Ireland whether it was a time of growth or recession. However, Government funding for new social housing provision fell significantly between 2008 and 2014 – by 88.4 per cent – resulting in a decline in dwelling output of this tenure of 91.5 per cent concurrently (Byrne and Norris, 2018). Rather than acting as a counterbalance to a collapse in the private housing market, social housing provision collapsed alongside private provision. Byrne and Norris' (2018) research contradicts the consensus that the current housing crisis is rooted in Ireland's latest economic crisis and the impact of neoliberal ideology which impedes Government spending on social housing and thus led to a collapse in supply. Rather, they suggest that the roots of both the public and private housing crisis are older and more complex than this:

> …the argument must be situated within an analysis of the changing nature of the interaction between public and private housing over the last three decades. During this period, a series of policy reforms were initiated which amounted to a profound transformation of the relationship between the two sectors. As a result of these measures, the traditional countercyclical role of social housing was replaced by a new set of dynamics in which this tenure became strongly

> procyclical, and enhanced rather than alleviated the private housing market bubble, and accentuated rather than mitigated the social effects of the crash that followed the bursting of that bubble (Byrne and Norris, 2018, p. 51).

The combination of these factors has led to the current situation which has been deemed a homeless crisis, and therefore the frontline staff working in local authorities are experiencing unprecedented levels of demand. This increasing demand is coupled with the lack of move on options, which leads to many people getting stuck in emergency services for long periods of time, all of which adds to the pressure on frontline staff when rationing resources.

2.7 Policy delivery: From a staircase of transition to housing-led?

As a means to tackle the issues associated with homelessness, the government has set out an aim to take a 'housing-led' approach to addressing these issues (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2013), which indicates a recognition of structural causes of homelessness at the level of policy. However, the delivery of services is still very much focused around homelessness based on more individual causes. When there is a focus on individual causes, there is more focus on behaviour and thus, more likely to be a requirement to access treatment or deal with issues such as addiction before being offered long-term housing.

Sahlin (2005) used the analogy of a *staircase of transition* to describe the dominant approach to homeless services in Sweden. In this model of service delivery good behaviour is rewarded with a move up a step starting at the informal sphere towards more 'normal' housing. In Sweden this informal sphere constitutes the bottom of the staircase and is made up of people living in institutions, hospitals, staying temporarily with friends or family, and sleeping rough. The next step described by Sahlin is the shelter market and includes night shelters, welfare hotels and 24 hour shelters. The third step is where Sweden differs from Ireland somewhat in that the secondary housing market, which includes category housing, training flats and transitional contracts, constitutes a significant portion of the homeless response in Sweden. In Ireland, this step is less prominent as many of the transitional housing units, which were more in line with the shelter market in any case, have been reconfigured with the

policy goal of taking a 'housing-led' approach to homelessness (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008; Murphy, 2011). Although it would be inaccurate to describe Ireland as having a secondary housing market as was described by Sahlin, there is a limited amount of housing available which has similarities, specifically where local authority (owned or leased) housing is used to house families on an emergency basis, without gaining the tenure rights normally awarded as a local authority tenant. This step has appeared as a local authority generated response to a need for more emergency housing options in a few local authorities as opposed to a national level policy response. However, the recently published *Housing for All* plan has emphasised the need for such an approach to be taken by local authorities and AHBs (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021). Therefore, this is likely to become a national response in the near future. The top step in the staircase of transition model comprises the regular housing market, which includes owner occupied housing, co-operative housing and regular private rented housing.

Although Sahlin used the staircase of transition to describe the model in Sweden, it is a useful analogy to describe homeless service delivery in Ireland. However, it is more applicable to services provided to people who the frontline workers consider to have more complex needs, as the findings in Chapter eight will illustrate. As Dyb (2021, p. 251) clarified, the staircase differs from treatment first approaches in that the model in Sweden has been described as 'no treatment at all' as people are expected to deal with their issues of substance use and mental health themselves in order to be deserving of a tenancy. Indeed the issues of availability for both mental health services and substance abuse treatment would indicate that Ireland is similar to Sweden in this sense as there are many gaps in access to appropriate services (Alcohol Action Ireland, 2021; McDaid, 2013). It must be cautioned therefore that there are service options (albeit often after spending time on a waiting list) so whether the dominant model in Ireland should be termed treatment first or the staircase of transition is debatable. In any case, the staircase provides a useful analogy to describe both the service structure and the dominant service approach of those working at the frontline as chapter seven will illustrate. The availability of HAP (and even more so Homeless HAP which is a higher payment), means that in theory people are not stuck on the staircase in the way that they are in Sweden. Despite this, in practice, the high demand for housing and the

issues associated with securing a HAP tenancy, mean that people can get stuck within the lower steps for a significant amount of time and in reality do not have the option to leave the staircase as easily as written policy would indicate.

Bearing this in mind, and the previous sections illustrating the extent of emergency accommodation usage, it is fair to say that the Government's aim to have a 'housing-led' approach to homelessness is yet to be realised. As such, homeless services in Ireland are still geared more towards a staircase or treatment first approach as opposed to the housing-led ones which policy aspires to, thus for service delivery at the frontline the dominance of a focus on individual causes of homelessness remain, with structural causes occupying a subordinate position.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the development of homeless policy on a conceptual level, from the origins of the welfare state until the present day. It has illustrated how homelessness – as a social issue – is socially constructed, can change over time, and is influenced by the dominant ideologies and discourses at these particular times. The ways that shifting ideologies around poverty and homelessness have impacted policy responses was debated, illustrating how concepts such as deservingness, which continue to impact contemporary public policy administration, entered the discourse on poor relief. The ways that homelessness is defined both empirically in the broader sense and within Ireland was discussed. This illustrated how the ambiguous definition in Ireland is liable to be interpreted in quite a narrow way. For a study focused on the street-level, it is important not to consider the wider policy issues alone, but also the ways that services are delivered at the frontline. Therefore, the structure of local authority administered homeless services were discussed. This section outlined the options available to frontline workers for placing people within homeless accommodation, as well as provisions for additional supports to exit homelessness. As well as considering the services, the demand for these services is important for contextualising the pressures that frontline workers are under when rationing resources. Therefore, the extent of the issue of homelessness was outlined, showing how the number of people experiencing homelessness has increased significantly over

the past number of years. Finally, the chapter considered whether the current responses to homelessness were in line with the government's goal of providing housing-led approaches to homelessness. It was argued here that rather than being housing-led, delivery at the frontline remains more in line with the staircase of transition or treatment first type approaches to homelessness. More evidence to support this claim will be outlined in Chapter 7 which will detail research findings on the approach to placement within homeless services.

Chapter 3: Discretion and the rationing of social services: the street-level approach

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the use of discretion in the rationing of homeless services by local authority street-level bureaucrats (SLBs). As such this chapter will explore the key concepts relevant to this research, namely *discretion* and *rationing* use by street-level bureaucrats at the frontline. The chapter will situate the research question within the existing literature around these key concepts and focus on research that examines them from a street-level bureaucracy perspective.

The chapter will begin by situating street level bureaucracy as an academic field within the wider context of policy implementation and will serve as a rationale as to why street-level bureaucracy is the best approach for the current study. Next the concept of discretion will be discussed. As a complex and often misinterpreted term it is important to address issues of definition, as well as the necessity of a differentiation between discretion as it is granted to frontline workers and discretion as it is used by them, and the different forms that discretion may take. As such, the aim of this section is to illustrate how a term that is often taken to have one meaning, is more complex and nuanced than the way it is frequently presented. The debate around discretion, welfare rights and the law will be discussed in the next sub-section, focusing on the need for a balance between the use of unfettered discretion and strict rule-based systems of welfare administration. Central to determining eligibility for some benefits is the requirement for a front-line worker to establish the level of need of a potential beneficiary. The issues associated with determining need, as well as the process of assessment for a welfare applicant will therefore be discussed in the next sub-section. Subsequently, the impact of the professional background on decision-making will be discussed, as well as stress levels and peer support amongst SLBs.

Once the concept of discretion has been explicated, the concept of rationing will be explored. There are a number of ways that a researcher can study rationing. However, it is often studied in a way which does not make it obvious what approach the

researcher is using, if any. Therefore, this section aims to outline clearly the different approaches that one can take, whilst discussing research relevant to this concept, as well as providing a framework which clearly sets out these approaches.

3.2 Researching policy implementation

The next two sections will outline some significant approaches to policy implementation research to illustrate where street-level research sits within the wider field. This section will include a discussion on the protracted top-down verses bottom-up debate which preoccupied many in the field of public administration research throughout the 1980s and beyond. In the end, the debate was considered futile as it was based on normative assumptions. Nevertheless, it is useful to include as it provides a practical way of looking at issues of methodology and normative perspectives which can impact implementation research (Hill and Hupe, 2002). It is useful, however, to begin with a consideration of what constitutes 'public policy'. There is no simple or all-encompassing definition for this term. However, Hill and Hupe believe, having examined the range of existing definitions, that Hogwood and Gunn's identification of the following elements in the use of the term 'public policy' provides a good starting point:

> Although policy is to be distinguished from 'decisions', it is less readily distinguishable from 'administration'. Policy involves behaviour as well as intentions, and inaction as well as action. Policies have outcomes that may or may not have been foreseen. While policy refers to a purposive course of actions, this does not exclude the possibility that purposes may be defined retrospectively. Policy arises from a process over time, which may involve both intra- and inter-organisational relationships. (Hill and Hupe, 2014, p. 4)

As a subjectively defined concept, the question of what constitutes *policy*, or more specifically what is *the* policy, is defined by the observer (Hill and Hupe, 2014). Understanding the subjective and often nebulous nature of public policy, provides a starting point for this section. It will illustrate some of the complexities associated with the field of implementation research and discretion use by frontline workers.

Equally important is an understanding of what constitutes policy implementation. One of the most influential definitions of policy implementation was conceived by Marzmanian and Sabatier (1983, pp. 20-1), who stated that:

> Implementation is the carrying out of a basic policy decision, usually incorporated in a statute but which can also take the form of important executive orders or court decisions. Ideally, that decision identifies the problem(s) to be addressed, stipulates the objective(s) to be pursued, and in a variety of ways, 'structures' the implementation process.

This is a process which is complex, nuanced, non-linear and involves many factors. Often the study of implementation can be very prescriptive, most notably when taking a 'top-down' approach (Cairney, 2012). From this perspective, implementation research may be focused on the fact that decisions of policy-makers are not always carried out 'successfully', thus an implementation 'gap' is identified (Cairney, 2012, p. 34). However, as we will see in the following section, this focus on an 'implementation gap' has been criticised for a number of reasons including the fact that it focuses on what *should* happen ('top-down', prescriptive) as opposed to what *actually* happens ('bottom-up', descriptive). The relationship between public policy and the practice of implementation is rarely 'linear, clear or direct', as by its nature, policy cannot prescribe a definite course of action as the situations that present at its endpoints are specific and individual (Bergen and While, 2005, p. 1). Therefore, policy guidance 'tends to be couched in a degree of generality which is intended to provide principles for implementation' (Bergen and While, 2005, p. 1).

3.2.1 Top-down approach

The complexity of policy implementation research, and the normatively different approaches used by researchers, led to a debate between those who used a top-down approach to implementation analysis and those who used a bottom-up approach. Discussions of the top-down approach generally start with an account of the work of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), although other top-down studies had been carried previous to their publication (Saetren, 2005). They serve as a good starting point as their book was very influential and marked the beginning of the 'paradigmatic heyday'

of policy implementation research (Hupe, 2014, p. 164). Pressman and Wildavsky, along with other writers such as Bardach (1978); Hogwood and Gunn (1984), Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979); and Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), are the classic writers of the top-down approach to implementation analysis (Hill and Hupe, 2002). For these scholars, implementation is about a bureaucratic ideal, focusing on the importance of control of those at the street-level as a way of ensuring routine implementation, where the prevalence of discretion at the street-level indicates inadequate control of service administration (Maynard-Moody *et al,* 1990). This school of thought on policy implementation was informed by a 'compliance model', which sought out the reasons for interference in a linear progress of policy, as it made its way down from legislation to realisation (Brodkin, 2008).

The focus on control is evident from the title of Pressman and Wildavsky's seminal book: *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland; Or, Why It's Amazing that Federal Programs Work At All, This Being a Saga of the Economic Development Administration as Told by Two Sympathetic Observers Who Seek to Build Morals on a Foundation of Ruined Hopes*. The 'great expectations' of policy makers are 'dashed' by the street-level workers, pointing a finger at public sector organisations as the 'graveyard of good intentions' (Brodkin, 2008, p. 319). What you find in between these 'expectations' and 'ruined hopes', is the 'uncharted terrain of implementation, the so-called "black-box" into which policy ideas disappeared only to re-emerge in unrecognizable form, if at all' (Brodkin, 2008, p. 319). An issue with this approach is the focus on successful implementation as the direct translation of what happens at the top, down to the action at the bottom. However, this raises questions around the issue of success, who defines it; and from which perspective is it considered a success? In other words, qualifications of policy success or failure are largely normative and subjective. Likewise, it assumes that the policy objectives from the top are explicit and unambiguous and therefore, can be implemented in a uniform way.

3.2.2 Bottom-up approach: street-level bureaucracy

For some researchers the focus from the top and the implementation gap, ignored the realities of the work environment for those at the street-level. Therefore, bottom-up scholars argued that the focus should shift from central government, down to the street-level as a means to examine how implementing agencies operate (Barrett and Fudge, 1981; Hjern and Porter, 1981; Lipsky, 1969). Hill and Hupe describe Michael Lipsky as the 'founding father' of the bottom up perspective (2014, p. 53), with the relevance of his work continuing to the present day (For a discussion on continued relevance see Alden, 2015c; Ellis, 2011; Evans and Harris, 2004; Scourfield, 2015). Lipsky's work focused on his declaration that:

> …understanding public policies in street-level bureaucracies requires analysis of how the unsanctioned work responses of street-level bureaucrats combine with rules and agency pronouncements to add up to what the public ultimately experience as agency performance (2010, p. xii).

In other words, discretion use by street-level bureaucrats, combined with rules and regulations, are central to understanding the public's experience of policy. Consequently, the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, their established routines and the strategies invented to cope with the uncertainties and pressures of their roles, 'effectively *become* the public policies they carry out' (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii, italics in original). Therefore, although the 'legislators and top-floor suites' of the high-ranking administrators involved with public policy are important in considering policy formation, the 'crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level bureaucrats' should be added to the mix of locations in which policies are made (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii). By focusing on conditions of work and the resultant patterns of practice, SLB research analyses '*what* you actually get as policy and *how* you get it'; filling in the 'blanks' between policy activities and the actual outcomes of these activities (Brodkin, 2016, p. 31 Italics in original). Taken together, the considerable body of SLB research has confirmed much of Lipsky's framework, with some refinement, illustrating recurrent themes across the range of policy areas. For example, much research has shown that Lipsky's emphasis on resources and the resultant coping behaviours

associated with inadequate resources, was well founded (Alden, 2015b; Brodkin, 1997; Ellis, 2007; Pawson, 2007).

Brodkin has described Lipsky's street-level approach as a liberation for public administration analysts from the 'deeply held myth of hierarchy' (2008, p. 322). It allowed them to re-evaluate street-level practices to understand how frontline workers respond to the 'structural logic' of street level conditions, contextualising their actions that, from a top-down view, often appear deviant, wilfully obstructive, indifferent or incompetent (Brodkin, 2008, p. 322). Focusing on implementation from a street-view allows for a recognition of the fact that many public policies in the area of human services and beyond, have more than a 'technical character', where their substance matters (Hupe, 2014, p. 177). As a result, implementing policies such as these, means that one is *required* to make 'value-loaded judgements' (Hupe, 2014, p. 177).

3.2.3 A clash of approaches: an issue of methodology and normative perspectives

Hupe *et al* (2016) argue that, in a way subsuming street-level bureaucracy under the heading of 'implementation' is misleading as implementation involves the process of what happens after a Bill becomes law, and to this end is a vertical dimension of public administration. Street-level bureaucracy, on the other hand, with a focus on the dilemmas of the individual in frontline service delivery has a more horizontal view (Hupe, Hill and Buffat, 2016), albeit with attention paid to the environment in which these frontline actions, or inactions, take place. However, the clash of approaches led to what has been called the top-down/bottom-up debate in public administration. This debate had a strong focus on the issue of the separation of implementation from policy formation, and constituted one element of 'a wider problem about how to identify the features of a very complex process, occurring across time and space, and involving multiple actors' (Hill and Hupe, 2002, p. 43).

In the end, the debate was considered 'protracted and sterile' and based on two competing paradigms (Saetren, 2005, p. 572) or as Rothstein put it 'largely a waste of time' due to its nature as a normative and theoretical dispute which researchers were trying to settle through discussions around choice of research method (1998, p. 65). However, Hill and Hupe regard it as 'a useful way of looking at the implementation

literature as it highlights two important issues: about methodology and about normative or ideological perspectives that influence the study of implementation' (2002, p. 82). With regards to methodology then, the choice of which to use may depend upon the subject and circumstances of a research study, rather than pinning one approach against the other (Hill and Hupe, 2002), as is the case with the current thesis. Therefore, bearing methodological conditions in mind whilst returning to the research question for this thesis, it is evident that Lipsky's bottom-up approach to studying discretion use and policy implementation at the frontline, is highly compatible with reaching the aims of the current research. Before discussing the concept of discretion, it is useful to briefly discuss the concept of bureaucracy, as bureaucracies are the locus of SLB actions.

3.2.4 Understanding the concept of bureaucracy

The origin of the term bureaucracy can be traced back to the late 18th century in France in the writings of De Gournay and De Grimm in their descriptions of a form of government consisting of 'rule by officials' (Albrow, 1970 quoted in Hupe *et al,* 2016, p. 4). The word was initially used to refer to government officials. However, over time it was correspondingly used to refer to large organisations in general and was commonly used in a disparaging way, a view which has remained to the present day (Giddens, 1993). As the preceding section has shown, *street-level bureaucracy* has a horizontal focus in policy implementation; that is what happens at the point of service delivery, albeit with recognition of how the work environment impacts this delivery. However, *bureaucracy* in the broader sense has more of a vertical focus; the whole of the organisation and the hierarchies, rules and regulations within it.

Near the end of the 19th Century there was an emergence of a view of bureaucracy as a "'rational" device to ensure the efficient and just delivery of public policy' (Hupe *et al*, 2016, p. 5), a view that is embedded in the work of one of the most influential writers on bureaucracy, Max Weber. Weber viewed the expansion of bureaucracy as inevitable in modern society; as it provided the means to cope with large-scale social systems. However, he also recognised its failings (Giddens, 1993). Weber constructed an ideal type of bureaucracy, which serves as a useful starting point for studies of

bureaucracy in practice (Wright, 2003). 'Ideal' in this sense was never meant to refer to desirability, rather it is an abstract description and referred to a 'pure form' of bureaucratic organisation (Giddens, 1993), to serve as 'a point of departure for comparisons across historical periods and geographic settings' (Byrkjeflot, 2018, p. 13). In this ideal type of bureaucracy there is a clear hierarchy of authority with a chain of command that impacts decision-making at the various levels; written rules govern an official's conduct, with flexibility and discretion holding an inverse relationship to the street-level; roles within the bureaucracy are defined and salaried; separation exists between the organisational tasks of an official and their life outside of the organisation; and workers are separated from control of their means of production (Giddens, 1993). Bureaucrats in this ideal type bureaucracy 'see their jobs as a vocation of public service and are specially trained and qualified to treat their users in a standardised, unemotional, impersonal and unbiased manner' (Wright, 2003, p. 16-17).

Formal relations within organisations occupy a privileged position within Weber's analysis of bureaucracy. However, informal relations play a central role in actions which require flexibility (Giddens, 1993). It is this interplay between the formal and informal aspects of the practice of policy implementation within bureaucracies that Lipsky's work was concerned with: in essence understanding the paradox experienced by frontline workers within the bureaucracy who on the one hand work in a situation which is often 'highly scripted to achieve policy objectives', yet on the other hand are required to improvise and be responsive to individual cases (Lipsky, 2010, p. xii). In taking Lipsky's approach, the focus on the use of discretion and the requirement of flexibility is located at a level within the hierarchy well below that at which discretion features in Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy, where it more prominent at the top. That is not to say that Weber's approach to bureaucracy is irrelevant for street-level bureaucracy research. Møller *et al* (2022) argue that more engagement with the concept of bureaucracy by street-level bureaucracy researchers presents an opportunity to align the theoretical foundations of street-level research with its empirical findings. However, for the purposes of this research, an understanding of Weber's approach to bureaucracy will suffice, as it aids our understanding of Lipsky's perception of the paradoxical nature of bureaucracy at the street-level; rigid and rule-bound, yet as the same time responsive to individual needs.

3.3 Discretion at the frontline

This section will discuss issues associated with discretion at the frontline of public service delivery, firstly by outlining how discretion is defined, then by addressing the inevitability of discretion in the administration of public goods and later through a discussion of the definition of need and how this is assessed. Finally, the impact of professional background of SLBs on their use of discretion will be discussed, as will stress levels and peer support in the SLB work environment.

3.3.1 Defining discretion

Despite the fact that many social welfare payments are administered based on rights, the ubiquity of discretion in street-level bureaucracies remains (For example see Brodkin, 2016; Ellis, 2011; Evans and Harris, 2004; Hupe, Hill and Buffat, 2016; Kelly, 1994; Lipsky, 2010; Mostowska, 2014; Riccucci, 2002). Yet, much literature on discretion fails to clearly define this complex concept and presents it as if it has a uniform meaning**.** Dworkin sees the concept of discretion as being at home in only one place; that is 'when someone is in general charged with making decisions subject to standards set by a particular authority' (1978, p. 31). Likewise, Davis (1969, p. 4) describes how 'a public officer has discretion wherever the effective limits on his power leave him free to make a choice among possible courses of action and inaction'. This focus on rules and regulations or other sources that limit the power of a SLB; the factors that impact upon how they make decisions; as well as a focus on action and inaction; are key to understanding this complex concept. Therefore, the use of discretion within organisations and its implications, can be a labyrinthine area of study.

As a relative concept, discretion is always connected to the rules and regulations of a particular organisation. Dworkin (1978, p. 31) described it well in his much quoted metaphor when he stated, 'discretion, like the hole in the doughnut, does not exist except as an area left open by a surrounding belt of restriction'. As there are gradients of discretion, the size of the doughnut hole, therefore, can vary between public sector organisations and areas of frontline work, as well as between particular tasks to be

carried out by individual street level workers (Buffat, 2016). Lipsky (2010) maintains that the greater the degree of discretion held by a front-line worker, the more salient his street-level bureaucracy framework is for understanding the characteristics of their behaviour.

The gradients along which varying degrees of professional freedom operate within the complex set of organisational rules and regulations are illustrated through the different senses of discretion described by Dworkin (1978). The first sense refers to the use of judgement to apply a standard which requires interpretation. The second sense refers to the final authority to make a decision, which cannot be reversed by another official. The third sense refers to a situation in which an official is not bound by standards of the authority in question. Consequently, the decision and criteria for making the decision are granted to the official (Dworkin, 1978). The first two sense of discretion are classified as weak discretion by Dworkin, whereas the third sense is classified as strong discretion. Dworkin notes that the strong sense is 'not tantamount to licence', as it is still open to criticism (1978, p. 33). It is important to note that the discretion granted to an official is not necessarily either strong or weak across all of their duties. Rather, discretion can be highly task dependent. Buffat (2016) found that the use of sanctions on unemployment benefit in Switzerland is an area where officials have high levels of discretion as they are required to make judgements or interpret the complex situations that present. A high potential for complex cases increases the need for stronger forms of discretion. On the other hand, deciding if someone is eligible for an unemployment benefit, which usually has very clear guidelines around eligibility, has a weak discretionary element (Buffat, 2016). In other words, some tasks carried out by frontline workers may have very strict rules attached to them. Whereas other tasks may leave more room for interpretation and judgement.

Adler and Asquith (1981) approached the differences in discretion in a similar way to Dworkin. However, they described the differences between professional discretion (similar to Dworkins strong discretion) and administrative discretion (more closely related to weak forms of discretion). For Adler and Asquith, professional discretion exists in social services where providers are mostly professionals, most notably health, education and social work. The rights of individuals who are subject to this form of discretion are limited in that they have a right only for access to the service concerned. This could include the right to see a doctor, the right to go to school or college, or the

right to consult a social worker for advice (Adler and Asquith, 1981). Nevertheless, they do not have a right to any particular form of treatment, schooling or help. In contrast to professional discretion, Adler and Asquith (1981) describe how services such as housing and social welfare are administered through large bureaucracies staffed by administrators. In these bureaucracies, they maintain, the main form of discretion available to workers is administrative discretion which corresponds somewhat to Dworkin's (1978) weak forms of discretion. Adler and Asquith recognise that the distinction between professional discretion and administrative discretion is a neat, gross-oversimplification and theoretically difficult to maintain. However, they argue that the distinction between welfare service staffed by professional and administrators 'would seem to reflect a difference between those services which attempt to do things to people and those that mainly attempt to provide things for them' (Adler and Asquith, 1981, p. 14). A key difference, according to Adler and Asquith (1981), between professionals and administrators is their standing as an occupational group: professionals are socialised into the occupational ideology through long periods of training and apprenticeship, whereas administrators are often individuals who have merely been assigned to a specific administrative task:

> Thus, we would expect a professional to have a considerably greater personal commitment to an ideology of welfare than an administrator…professionals have largely unfettered discretion and make their decisions by reference to a body of esoteric professional knowledge. By contrast, administrative discretion is characteristically constrained by rules. Administrators make their decisions by reference not only to rules but also to guidelines which are intended to shape their decisions in circumstances which are not covered by the rules (Adler and Asquith, 1981, p. 15).

It is worth noting, that Adler and Asquith talk of rules and discretion as if they are opposites, or as they state 'alternative modes of decision-making and of allocating scarce resources' (1981, p. 15). However, this fails to recognise a very important feature of rules in public services. Very often, street-level bureaucrats have to use discretion in order to decide which rules they implement. As Lipsky (2010) stated, the rules governing their work can be so voluminous and contradictory that discretion is a necessity in order to implement them. Therefore, this is somewhat of a false

dichotomy as rules should always be considered alongside the possibility for discretion use in their implementation.

Another consideration that is often missing from research into discretion is clarification around the object of the research. In other words, what is being researched: the discretion which is *granted* to an official; the *use* of discretion; or both? Hupe's (2013) distinction between *discretion-as-granted* and *discretion-as-used* clearly illustrates how the one-size-fits-all approach misses out on the complexity of discretion in the public sector. In this sense, the former forms the context for the latter, in that the 'belt of restriction' or rules and regulations, will impact upon the discretion which a street-level bureaucrat can use (Hupe, Hill and Buffat, 2016). Hupe contends the usage of the term 'discretion' for both of these phenomena actually hides a fundamental difference to their meaning:

> On the one hand the term discretion refers to a determinant of output and thus regards an independent variable [*discretion as granted*], on the other to empirical variation in behaviour which needs to be explained [*discretion as used*]. Then discretion is a dependent variable (2013, p. 435).

Like Hupe, Molander *et al* (2012) and Wallander and Molander (2014, p. 1) differentiate between two dimensions of discretion: a structural dimension that consists of the discretionary space and an epistemic dimension which is related to discretionary reasoning comprised of 'cognitive activity which may take place within the discretionary space of professional judgement'. Bearing these distinctions in mind and returning to Dworkin's doughnut metaphor, discretion then comprises both the doughnut and the hole, in that it can be the space left open (discretion-as-used or discretionary reasoning) and the belt of restriction (discretion-as-granted or discretionary space). Hupe (2013) argues that definitions of discretion can be formulated once the difference between *discretion-as-granted* and *discretion-as-used* are understood. He views discretion much like Davis (1969) in that he describes it as 'granted freedom to act within limits prescribed in a given set of rules' (Hupe, 2013, p. 435). This authority to decide between courses of action or inaction, within rule-bound limits, is exercised by a multitude of actors in a variety of layers and is not just the prerogative of individual street-level bureaucrats (Hupe, 2013).

The ways that managers can impact upon the discretion available to street-level workers provides an example of the importance of the distinction between *discretion-as-granted* and *discretion-as-used*. Evans and Harris claim that for some managers, using discretion as a policy objective allows them to distance management and policy makers from the reality of the 'felt' experience of policy, as it is left to individual street-level bureaucrats to decide how to interpret policy when managing demands on resources from service users (2004, p. 888) Similar to Evans (2011; 2016b), Carson *et al* found in their research that managers are not simply 'disinterested policy implementers' who always follow policy guidance when it is set out for them (2015, p. 175). This is contrary to Lipsky's (2010) assertion that managers are concerned with the achievement of results that are consistent with the objectives of the agency. Consequently, Lipsky has been criticised for a lack of attention paid to the role of managers in street-level bureaucracies (Carson *et al,* 2015; Evans, 2016b; Evans, 2011; Scourfield, 2015). Evans (2016b) argues that, as managers are actors with significant discretion in the policy implementation process, their role should be given more prominence in street-level analysis. That is, the extent to which the decisions of senior managers may influence both policy and implementation directly, as well as in the context of discretion use by front-line workers (Evans, 2016b). Evans found in his research that the way managers used discretion in decision-making influenced the context of discretion at the street level. For example, managers told workers to ignore official eligibility criteria and apply tighter controls and narrower criteria (Evans, 2016b). Likewise, May and Winter (2009) found that higher-level political and managerial influences can shape the behaviour of street-level workers in the implementation of national policy reforms.

Discretion- as-granted can change significantly over time (Luc *et al.*, 2020; Walker, 2016), for example, through the impact of reforms and their ideological drivers (Hasenfeld, 2000); and the impact of increased or decreased demand or caseload (Schütze and Johansson, 2020). Walker (2016) showed in her analysis of UK discretionary payments in social assistance, how discretionary elements in social welfare payments can be virtually eliminated through policy reform which enacts a rigid system of rules and regulations. A policy shift from meeting needs to cutting total spending has transformed the role of these street-level social welfare officers in the UK, as their scope for discretion has been 'virtually eliminated as computerised

assessments have replaced the exercising of individual skill and judgement' (Walker, 2016, p. 60). Despite these attempts to curtail discretion in determining eligibility for a benefit or service in some areas of welfare provision, research has shown how frontline workers can still maintain a level of discretion in how they interpret more prescriptive eligibility criteria, for example, in determining eligibility for homeless services in the UK (Bretherton *et al*, 2013; Pawson, 2007). Similarly, Scourfield (2015) found that, even where very prescriptive guidelines and checklists are provided, frontline workers used discretion in deciding what to include, or not, in an assessment form. This included asking questions in a particular way, which differed from the wording used on the form, so as to elicit desirable responses from service users (Scourfield, 2015). In contrast to these attempts to curtail discretion, Davidovitz *et al* (2021) showed how street-level bureaucrats can experience significant increases in their discretionary powers during a time of crisis, through their analysis of the work context for police officers, teachers, and physicians in Israel during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In analysing literature related to discretion, Evans and Harris (2004, p. 881) have a similar assertion to Hupe (2013) in their contention that much of it takes an 'all-or-nothing' approach, where discretion is putatively good or bad, depending on the area of study. Brodkin argues that street-level bureaucracy research findings show that discretion is neither good nor bad, but rather, the 'wild card of policy delivery' which produces different results in different organisational contexts (2008, p. 327). Discretion can be used by street-level bureaucrats in a number of ways. However, Lipsky (Lipsky, 2010) maintains that discretion use by street-level bureaucrats is generally focused on gatekeeping; that is, rationing demand for or access to limited resources. Evans and Harris (2004) concur that discretion can be used in ways that run counter to the interests of service users. For example, using discretion to subvert policy through the denial that discretion exists so as to protect themselves from having to make decisions which are difficult and leave them open to blame. This could include deciding which equally needy people receive a service when resources are tight (Evans and Harris, 2004). Alden (2015b) found in her research on homelessness assessment in the UK that local authority staff working in English Local Authority Housing Advice Services (LAHAS) tended to use discretion negatively and acted as gatekeepers through rationing the information that they made available to service

users. This included a failure to explain service users' right to request a homeless application, or suggesting that they were ineligible to apply when this was not the case. Likewise, Pawson maintains that much of the reduction in post-2003 recorded homelessness in the UK is likely to have resulted from the informal channelling of service users away from homeless assessment under the guise of homelessness prevention, in ways that 'could be construed as unlawful gatekeeping' (2007, p. 879). In both cases, downward pressures to ration resources and meet performance targets played a role in how discretion was used. Therefore, although it may be important in research to identify 'types of decision situations in which discretion is more likely…making judgements about the desired or undesired, and intended or unintended, character of observed discretion is a matter of normative evaluation' (Hupe and Hill, 2007, p. 281).

3.3.2 The inevitability of discretion

Debates around discretion as inherently good or bad, led to calls among anti-discretionists (Galis, 1983) for its elimination and replacement with a purely legal approach to welfare distribution (Titmuss, 1987b). This approach to discretion, which views it as fundamentally bad in terms of welfare distribution, is summed up well in William Pitt's assertion to the House of Lords that 'unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it; and this I know my Lords, that where law ends, there tyranny begins' (1848, p. 94). Yet, as Lipsky (1980) and others (Bretherton iet al, 2013; Ellis, Davis and Rummery, 1999; Evans and Harris, 2004; Hupe, 2013; Scourfield, 2015) have shown, discretion is inevitable to welfare distribution, even within the most rule-bound systems. However, it is worth presenting the case for and against discretion which has been outlined in the literature, which will lead to the conclusion that what is required is not an elimination of discretion, but rather the need to find balance between discretion and a judicalised system, so that claimants are protected from arbitrary decisions, yet at the same time, allowing flexibility in the response of frontline workers (Adler and Asquith, 1981; Bradshaw, 2013b; Donnison, 1982; Titmuss, 1987b).

According to Bradshaw (2013b), proponents of the need for some discretion tend to make the distinction between proportional/equitable justice and creative/individualised justice. Proportional or equitable justice requires that people be treated equally. This means that 'persons whose circumstances are identical will be treated the same, while others whose circumstances are different will be treated differently but to a degree that is proportional and explicit' (Walker, 2005, p. 105). In this form of justice, transparency and published rules are paramount in order that applicants are aware of their rights. On the other hand, creative or individualised justice necessitates a more flexible response to human needs and the variety of complex individual circumstances which can be presented to welfare administrators (Walker, 2005). This form of justice 'permits a personalised response to the individual and the exceptional, but at the expense of weakening the influence or power of the applicant *vis-á-vis* the social security institution' (Walker, 2005, p. 106).

In discussing the critics of discretion who call for more of a focus on proportional (equitable) justice, at the expense of creative justice (individualised), Adler and Asquith state that they do not take issue with their broad arguments related to avoiding arbitrary and unequal decision-making. However, they do 'criticise many of the critics and their proposals for failing to question who benefits (and why they do so) from the existing mode of decision-making and not merely who loses out, and for failing to consider the political obstacles involved in moving away from a prevailing mode of decision-making' (Adler and Asquith, 1981, p. 11). As Bradshaw (2013b) concludes, attitudes around the question of legalism and discretion are inevitably influenced by an actors views about the nature of society and social policy. Even if the law outlines a right to a form of welfare, the 'mode of delivery might turn that right into a discretion' (2013b, p. 19). In other words, a specified category of the population may have a right to a particular benefit. However, the test of eligibility to determine a person's status as inside or outside this category may involve discretionary judgement (Bradshaw, 2013b). Whilst critiquing its use in some instances, some notable social policy analysts have recognised the inevitability of discretion in public service administration. For example, Donnison sees discretion as necessary in certain circumstances, including what he calls 'extreme cases' (1982, pp. 96-97). Both Donnison and Titmuss believe that discretion needs to be controlled and balanced with rules and regulations and only used in certain circumstances. They advocate for

parameters around discretion use, for example, adequate training of staff as well as having the time to deal with difficult cases; the need for continual administrative clarification and classification of rules; the need for people to know their rights in a transparent and open system; reducing or eliminating unnecessary discretionary power whilst recognising the need for some; and the need to reduce the scope and coverage of the mass of discretionary benefits payable during the 1980's (Donnison, 1982; Titmuss, 1987c). Therefore, taking on the view of Titmuss and Donnison of the need for balance between law and discretion, as well as Brodkin's assertion that discretion is neither inherently good nor bad, Davis' elucidation fits well:

> I think that in our system of government, where law ends, tyranny need not begin. Where law ends, discretion begins, and the exercise of discretion may mean either beneficence or tyranny, either justice or injustice, either reasonableness or arbitrariness (Davis, 1969, p. 3).

However, the difficulties in finding this balance led Thornton (2005, p. 16) to the pessimistic conclusion that it 'may simply be an unreachable aspiration'.

Despite this inevitability of discretion (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000), some researchers, mainly in the field of social work, have argued that the SLB framework's relevance is not what it once was due to the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) techniques (Cheetham, 1993; Howe, 1991; Jones, 2002; Lymbery, 2000). Howe argues that discretion has been curtailed due to the increased rules and regulations governing the work of social workers. However, this argument collapses all the gradients of discretion down into one (Evans and Harris, 2004), namely Dworkins (1978) 'strong' discretion category which gives both decisions and the criteria of decision making to professionals. This ignores the other weaker categories of discretion. It has been argued, therefore, that NPM may in fact create more discretion as more judgement is required to interpret these rules and regulations (Evans, 2016b; Evans and Harris, 2004). To Evans and Harris (2004, p. 883) the presence of more rules does not inevitably spell the 'death-knell for discretion'. Instead, it changes the situation in which discretion is *granted* and thus impact upon how discretion is *used*. As Evans (2016a, p. 281) described:

> …constrained freedom does not mean the elimination of freedom, and the constraints themselves can create new choices and freedoms – discretion is as

> much about spaces created in the wake of the unintended consequences of others' policy choices as it is about simply being left to one's own devices.

Blau touched on this many years previous with reference to goal displacement in his influential work *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*. Through this research, he found that as more performance measures were added to those used for assessment, workers began to be selective about which ones they paid attention to and shifted their work focus accordingly (Blau, 1963). More recently and related to homelessness specifically, Cowan *et al* (2006, p. 397) found that housing officers in their UK-based study described feeling a pressure to 'cut corners' in order that they could reach the performance targets set out for them in carrying out their role. Hence, they use discretion in deciding where to focus their work. On a more sinister level, Maynard-Moodey *et al* (1990, p. 835) argue that increases in bureaucratic control, in an effort to curb perceived abuses of street-level discretion, have worsened accountability problems within human service organisations as they drive street-level decisions 'underground'. Maupin had a similar finding when researching a new decision-making system for juvenile parole officers in Arizona, USA. Despite the role played by the parole officers in designing the system aimed at curtailing discretion, street-level behaviours, contrary to those desired by top-level administrators, continued to be practiced (Maupin, 1993).

However, retaining varying degrees of discretion can be a policy or political objective in some circumstance, even when policy reforms introducing more rules and regulations have taken place (Evans and Harris, 2004). This 'elbow room' may allow the system to work better. Or, as Evans and Harris (2004, p. 887) argue, allow for blame at the street level if something goes wrong as managers and supervisors can distance themselves from 'awkward day-to-day consequences of their strategic goals'. Ellis (2011) used the field of adult social care in the UK to illustrate how the introduction of NPM techniques in that sector failed to curtail discretion, through examining four empirical studies posthumously (Ellis, 2007; Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 1993; Ellis, Davis and Rummery, 1999). According to Ellis, 'the evidence is not just that street-level discretion flourishes despite managerialism but that technology designed to control frontline decision making produces fresh conditions and requirements for covert rationing' (2011, p. 235). For example, the proliferation of bureaucratic procedures such as paperwork generate higher workloads to manage. As well as this,

an excess of rules and tasks, which are often conflicting, creates policy and operational ambiguity, opening up the space and need for more discretion. The use of ambiguous terms such as 'choice', 'need' and 'empowerment' in eligibility assessments, contributes to this discretion continuation despite attempts to curtail it (Ellis, 2011). Therefore, Ellis (2011) argues that, without an understanding of the varying nature of discretion, it may appear that discretion has been curtailed, when in fact it is its 'granted' context which has changed, therefore changing how a particular street-level bureaucrat can use discretion. It is to the ambiguous term 'need' that this chapter will now turn, as this sub-section has indicated how the interpretation of need can have an important influence on the way discretion is used.

3.3.3 Defining need and assessment of claimants

When using discretion and rules to allocate scarce resources, frontline workers must determine whether a person is considered to be in 'need' of these resources. As a term that is both subjective and socially constructed, the concept of 'need' and how it is defined is core to social services. In fact, Bradshaw goes so far as to state that 'the history of the social services is the story of the recognition of needs and the organizations of society to meet them' (Bradshaw, 2013a, p. 1). However, it is rarely clear what is meant by 'need' in a particular situation. (Bradshaw, 2013a). Therefore, Bradshaw developed a taxonomy of social need as he felt that the identification of social needs was one of the 'most crucial problems facing the social services' (Bradshaw, 2013a, p. 1). The needs differentiated by Bradshaw are considered with reference to who is defining them, which is a relevant approach for this thesis. These include normative need which he explained as need which is identified by an expert or professional, social service administrator or social scientist. As such, normative needs are the ones which are identified by frontline workers in the local authority homeless units. Felt need on the other hand, is equated with want, and therefore represents what people say they need. Expressed need, Bradshaw explains equates to demand for services, or 'felt need turned into action' (2013a, p. 3). In this sense, the people who present to the local authority as homeless are expressing their need for services. Finally, comparative need is a measure of need that can be obtained through

studying the characteristics of the population who are in receipt of a service and comparing these against people with similar characteristics who are not in receipt of the service, who are therefore deemed to be in need (Bradshaw, 2013a).

Just like defining need in the general sense, defining need as it relates specifically to housing is a complex endeavour. The concept of need has been described as a 'key organising principle in the design and delivery of housing and homelessness policy' (Watts, 2013a, p. 45). Like Bradshaw, Clapham (2005) argues that it is difficult to define need in any objective sense. Using the example of management of public housing, one can see how the practitioner's view of housing need can differ greatly from that of the service users:

> The assumption of the role of arbiters of need is the cornerstone of many housing management policies and procedures, and is inherent in the use of individual discretion by housing officers. The effect is to render irrelevant people's own definitions of their circumstances and their needs and desires. The claim to be able to assess needs in this so-called 'objective and rational' way is at the heart of housing managers' conception of professionalism (Clapham *et al,* 2000, p. 79).

The process of decision-making may include making judgements around the perceived deservingness of service users. As such, Kenna argues that 'enormous power lies with the ultimate definers and arbiters of need, whether by public administrators, courts or political parties', raising questions about the conceptualisation, assessment and quantification of housing need (Kenna, 2013, p. 7).

Kenna suggests that there are three approaches to defining need as it applies to housing. The first is the Universalist approach, which places housing as a core element of human survival. At this level, 'needs refer us to essentials, to what is indispensable rather than to what we would merely like to have' (Kenna, 2013, p. 8). In this sense then, a need is something which ought to be met as there is an obligation to provide for it. The second approach is the relativist or normative approach, in which needs assessment requires 'the establishment of housing norms against which need can be measured' (Kenna, 2013, p. 9). This involves a higher level of satisfaction than basic need as it is related to a comparison of the general community. The third approach is the residual approach. This approach, which fits best within the current approach to

social housing provision in Ireland, 'arises when market-based responses are seen as first order solutions, and an inability of persons to have their housing needs met through the market becomes a filter for conceptualising and measuring need' (Kenna, 2013, p. 9).

A person's needs and eligibility for welfare are determined through the process of assessment. Assessments differ depending on the country, location within a country, and service or benefit applied for. Assessments may be needs led or service led, in that they focus on gathering information on the overall needs of the (potential) service user or they focus just on the needs that fit within the service criteria (Arksey, 2002; Brodkin, 1997; Ellis, 2011; Ellis, Davis and Rummery, 1999; Scourfield, 2015). Failing to ask service users about specific needs due to the concern that this will elicit service claims that are difficult or impossible to meet is one way that frontline workers can mass-process service users (Brodkin, 1997). For example, Ellis *et al* (1999) found that whether an assessment was needs or service led in social work teams in the UK was closely related to the need to mass process their clients when demand was higher in order to ration resources. Among the specialist teams, which experienced less demand than the generic teams, needs led assessment was the norm, with some workers recording unmet needs in order to illustrate any gaps in the service. On the other hand, the generic teams, which experienced much higher levels of demand were much more focused on the needs related to services available:

> The potentially risky ambiguity inherent in the concept of need had to be eliminated at the outset if the primary objective of cost-efficiency was to be accomplished. Despite the rhetoric of needs-based assessments, the concept of need was indistinguishable from criteria defining eligibility for service' (Ellis, Davis and Rummery, 1999, p. 269)

Likewise, Brodkin found in her observational research that, rather than identifying the actual needs of service users, their needs tended to be defined by caseworkers 'to fit the available slots, avoid eliciting claims, and pressure clients to accept the bureaucratic construction of welfare rights and obligations' (Brodkin, 1997, p. 15).

Another way that service users are mass processed can be examined with regard to Lipsky's notion of 'modifications of conceptions of the client' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 151). This can include making moral judgements around those who are deemed deserving

and undeserving of assistance (Ellis, 2011). Although it may not be an explicitly stated policy, wherever decisions are made around access to services, notions around deservingness can still feature in frontline worker decisions (Ellis, 2011; Ellis, 2007; van den Berk-Clark, 2016; Watts, 2013a). In an analysis of research in this area, van Oorschot (2006) formulated five central deservingness criteria that people use to assess a person or groups' deservingness. Control over 'neediness' is the first criterion. In this view, people who are seen as being personally responsible for their 'neediness' are seen as less deserving, if at all. The second criterion is related to the level of need. In this view people with greater need are seen as more deserving. Identity is the third criterion, in that 'needy people who are closer to "us" are seen as more deserving' (van Oorschot, 2006, p. 26). Attitude is the fourth criterion. This means that those in need who are likeable, grateful, compliant, and conforming to 'our' standards are viewed as more deserving. Finally, the fifth criterion is reciprocity, in that those 'who have contributed to our group before (who have "earned" our support), or who may be expected to be able to contribute in the future', are considered deserving (van Oorschot, 2006, p. 26). Considering the consequences of their decisions around a person's need, the impact of professional background on these decisions will be discussed next.

3.3.4 Professional background of street-level workers and its impact on discretion

Although discussed briefly in section 3.3.1, the professional background of SLBs is worth discussing in more detail here. There has been some recognition in the research of the impacts that a SLBs professional background can have on decision-making and their use of discretion (Adler and Asquith, 1981; Evans, 2011; van Berkel *et al,* 2021; van Berkel *et al,* 2010; van der Aa and van Berkel, 2016), with it recently being described as a 'hot topic' in public management (Zhang *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). The term 'street-level bureaucrat' covers a diverse range of frontline workers from very different backgrounds. These range from roles where considerable time would have been spent studying to work in a professional field such as social work or health, to roles where less extensive training is required such as when working in welfare agencies in an administrative street-facing role. Notwithstanding this diversity of

training and backgrounds, Molander *et al* (2012) assert that the delegation of discretionary power is based on an assumption that the person to whom it is granted is 'capable of passing reasoned judgements' (Pg. 219) based on professional knowledge, laws and generally accepted principles, through which they can justify their decisions. Indeed, discretion is viewed by some commentators as central to professionalism or as Wallander and Molander describe,'[i]n the literature on professions, *discretion* is frequently portrayed as lying at the heart of professional work' (2014: 1, italics in original).

The extent to which different street-level bureaucrats have access to established professional standards varies depending on their training and work experience. However, even those street-level bureaucrats who would fit within Alder and Asquith's (1981) notion of administrative discretion often have considerable levels of discretion available to them. As Lipsky put it,

> Clerks in welfare and public housing agencies, for example, may exercise discretion in determining client access to benefits, even though their discretion is formally circumscribed by rules and relatively close supervision. Rules may actually be an impediment to supervision. They may be so voluminous and contradictory that they can only be enforced or invoked selectively (2010: 14).

Thus, it vital that frontline workers have the relevant knowledge and skills to carry out their role as their professional background impacts how they make discretionary decisions (van Berkel *et al,* 2021; van der Aa and van Berkel, 2016). Evans has shown through his research that where eligibility criteria are not clearly defined, rather they refer to terms such as 'needs' and risks', there is an assumption that *professionals* 'will bring into play their own expertise to fill in the gaps' (2016a, p. 284). Thus, without sufficient training and professional standards on which to base decisions, frontline workers may be more likely to apply categorisations and stereotypes in dealing with the people for whom they must ration resources (Wright, 2003). Likewise, a lack of sufficient training can impact the SLBs personally, which will be discussed in the following section.

3.3.5 Stress and peer support in the SLB workplace

The context in which street-level bureaucrats' carry out their role is one that can be described as challenging. As Lipsky states, '[s]treet-level bureaucrats work with inadequate resources in circumstances where the demand will always increase to meet the supply of services. Thus they can never be free from the implications of significant constraints' (2010, p. 81). Working in such a challenging environment can impact the levels of stress experienced by frontline workers, which can lead to burnout and/or high worker turnover (Tummers, 2015). Conway *et al* (2020) found that workers in 'client-facing' roles have significantly higher levels of exhaustion than those in other types of roles, as this type of work places high emotional demands on the frontline workers, most notably when service users are demanding or abusive. However, the levels of stress experienced by street-level bureaucrats differs significantly depending on the level of 'restrictive structural constraints' that they experience in undertaking their role (Lipsky, 2010, p. 275). Lipsky suggests imagining street-level bureaucrats as lying on a continuum of work experiences:

> … ranging from those that are deeply stressful and the processing of clients is severely underresourced, to those that provide a reasonable balance between job requirements and successful practice. Workers' places on that continuum might change over time as they gain experience, as caseloads and assignments vary, or as the workplace itself adopts new approaches or engages new clienteles (2010, p. 275).

Partly as a response to this often stressful work environment, peer structures in street-level bureaucracies tend to be quite strong (Lipsky, 2010). It is in the nature of street-level work that frontline workers are dependent not only on their peers for social support, but also in carrying out their role (Nisar and Maroulis, 2017), for example for deliberation in decision-making (Blau, 1963; Møller, 2021). This deliberation is important for both the frontline workers and the potential service users as it provides a space for stressful situations or cases to be considered from more than one perspective. This helps the frontline workers to justify decisions and manage accountability 'toward the public-administrative system, the professional community, their immediate peers, and citizen-clients' as well as lessening the 'burden of discretion' so that they can deal with 'uncertainty, complexity, and emotional strain'

(Møller, 2021, p. 478). These peer structures can act as a form of support for street-level workers, as well as having a significant impact on their behaviour. This impact can be such that Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000, p. 342) argue that 'peer influence often trumps supervisory control'.

Despite the positive benefits of peer structures, Lipsky (2010) argues that the stresses associated with working in a street-level bureaucracy can impact the work practices of SLBs and lead them to develop the coping strategies discussed previously where they modify conceptions and work and the client. This is so that they can minimise or make tolerable the stress and/or conflict that they are confronted with (Thunman, 2016). Lipsky describes these coping strategies as a two-part process:

> First, street-level bureaucrats modify their objectives to match better their ability to perform. Second, they mentally discount their clientele so as to reduce the tension resulting from their inability to deal with citizens according to ideal service models. In short, street-level bureaucrats develop conceptions of their jobs, and of clients, that reduce the strain between capabilities and goals, thereby making their jobs psychologically easier to manage (Lipsky, 2010, p. 140-141).

The ways that coping strategies play out in the context of homeless service administration in Irish local authorities is a central focus of this thesis.

3.4 Discretion use in practice: rationing resources

This section of the chapter will address the ways that discretion is used in practice through a discussion of social welfare rationing and the ways that this can be studied by researchers.

3.4.1 What is rationing?

In 1985, Rory Williams argued that:

> The changes in resource levels experienced in the last decade have focussed considerable innovative attention on the theory of rationing without, however, a corresponding expansion in the study of discretion (Williams, 1985, p. 242).

Today, it could be argued, that the reverse is true. While considerable research focuses on discretion (For example see: Ellis, 2011; Evans and Harris, 2004; Hupe, 2013; Lipsky, 2010), less focuses specifically on rationing from a *theoretical perspective* since the 1970s and early 1980s (Coulton and Rosenberg, 1981; Foster, 1983; Judge, 1978; Oyen, 1980; Parker, 1975; Rees, 1972; Scrivens, 1982; Scrivens, 1979). Although rationing and discretion are, as Williams (1985, p. 242) described them, 'intimately related', the concept of rationing specifically is worthy of examination, whilst bearing in mind that for rationing, context always matters, a part of which will include the discretion granted to, and used by, frontline workers.

Within social services demand is potentially limitless and therefore tends to exceed the resources available, which results in a need to ration. Unlike free market services, when it comes to social services the price mechanism does not act as a means of distributing and allocating services. In other words, price will control the demand for free market services in a way that is not possible for social services (Parker, 1975). At the macro level, governments and authorities will set priorities and allocate specific resources to individual government departments or programmes (Klein *et al*, 1996). At the micro level, resources will be rationed by frontline workers, who act as the gatekeepers in order to decide who is granted access to services. Rationing, therefore, is the process used to divide limited resources between various competing bodies (Scrivens, 1979) or, for micro rationing specifically, as Arksey describes it 'the distribution of resources to individuals at the point of service delivery' (2002, p. 83). Klein *et al* describe rationing as a word that should be used with some care:

> It conveys a sense of proportionality, of dividing scarce resources fairly, of ensuring that everyone gets his or her share. But in practice rationing is an emotion-laden word. Depending on the context in which it is used, and the kind of rationing that is involved, it may invoke either approval or anger (1996, p. 7)

This interest in the study of rationing around the 1970s and early 1980s was likely piqued due to the increasing demand on social services around this time and concern

for how these services were administered during a period when the welfare state was considered to be in crisis (Joppke, 1987). Scrivens (1979) proposes that these concerns around allocation and eligibility came about due to demand increasing at a faster rate than available resources. Concerned by a perceived lack of attention in much of the rationing research to the different approaches one can take, Scrivens (1982; 1979 published two research papers with the aim of setting out these approaches in a clear and concise way, which will be discussed in the following section.

3.4.2 Approaches to studying rationing

There are a number of approaches that you can take when undertaking research and analysis on public service rationing. Scrivens (1979, p. 57) classifies the different approaches to rationing under four headings:

1. The rationing base or that part of the system upon which the rationing processes act
2. Taxonomy of the rationing processes
3. Properties of the rationing process
4. The specific aims of the rationing process

3.4.2.1 The rationing base or that part of the system upon which the rationing processes act

A focus on processes that act to reduce demand and those which act to reduce supply was classified by Scrivens as 'the rationing base' or that part of the system upon which the rationing processes act. This is the structure that Lipsky (1980) used when examining rationing in street-level bureaucracies. Demand inhibitors can act on a person before they have even applied for a service. For example costs such as time and money associated with accessing a service can prevent a person from applying. Likewise, deterrent factors can act as demand inhibitors, such as the stigma associated with a particular benefit or waiting lists and/or lengthy forms (Scrivens, 1979). If the demand inhibitors do not prevent a person from applying for public goods or services,

the supply inhibitors come into play. For example, processes such as establishing eligibility criteria, needs assessments and/or the waiting list, act upon the supply of services at the point of delivery.

An example of research on the rationing base is Berk-Clark's research that looks at discretion use by frontline staff working in a housing first project (2016). In this research rationing demand was found to play a significant role throughout the application and assessment process. Despite the fact that housing first projects are supposed to have very flexible admission policies, the admission for the programme was fairly arduous, which is essentially about finding individuals who are deemed to be 'good tenants'. The prolonged process teaches applicants how to be a good tenant by imposing orientation programme requirements and hurdles throughout. Applicants who are deemed to be bad tenants are filtered out at the later stages of the process. Demands such as weekly sign-ins (which could last eight months or more), significant paper work at the later stages, as well as an intensive two-hour interview with a property manager, were used to filter clients. Some clients saw this application process as 'jumping through hoops' (van den Berk-Clark, 2016, p. 115). However, van den Berk-Clark found that:

> …these processes establish the relationship between clients and [the housing provider] from the beginning by decreasing client demand and teaching the client his or her role in the organization. These processes also communicate to the applicant that there is substantial competition for the finite resources available (2016, p. 115)

3.4.2.2 Taxonomy of the rationing processes

The taxonomy approach to the study of rationing focuses on the different *forms* of rationing. These different forms of rationing have been examined by a number of authors (Coulton and Rosenberg, 1981; Klein *et al*, 1996; Parker, 1975; Rees, 1972; Scrivens, 1982; Scrivens, 1979; Stevens, 1972). The forms outlined vary slightly between these different authors. However, Klein *et al* (1996) outlined seven forms of rationing that incorporate almost all of the forms outlined by the earlier researchers. These include rationing by denial, selection, deflection, deterrence, delay, dilution,

and termination. Some writers have included eligibility as a separate form of rationing in their analysis (Parker, 1975; Stevens, 1972). Eligibility as Parker describes it, defines the limits of the service in quite a precise way' (Parker, 1975, p. 206) and is a formal process of rationing. For example, age, employment status and/or whether a person has dependents or not are all criteria that are used often to determine a person's eligibility. A failure to fulfil eligibility criteria can lead to a denial of services, and people who are still in need but do not fit the eligibility criteria are often deflected towards other services (Parker, 1975). Therefore, eligibility is an important concept for this thesis but is not considered as one of the forms of rationing, rather it is seen as a *process* that can have an impact on the seven forms of rationing outlined. The seven forms of rationing are discussed in the following sections.

Rationing by denial

Denial has been described as 'the most brutal (and visible) form of rationing' (Klein *et al*, 1996, p. 11). It involves turning away potential beneficiaries of service or programmes on the grounds that they are unsuitable or their needs are not deemed to be urgent. As well as directly turning people away, denial can take the more subtle form of denying access to information. In this case, it can involve allowing a continuation of ignorance on the part of the wider public around a public good or service (Scrivens, 1979). Likewise, frontline workers may ration the information they make available to individual beneficiaries (Alden, 2015a; Alden, 2015b; Brodkin, 1997; Ellis, 2011; Ellis, 2007; Focus Ireland, 2015; Lidstone, 1994; Rowbottom, Hey and Billis, 1974). This can involve the withholding of information, as well as failing to ask particular questions which they believe may uncover additional needs (Ellis, Davis and Rummery, 1999; Tomlins, 1997), or a reluctance to ask questions on need due to a mistrust of the applicants (Bretherton *et al,* 2013). For example, Brodkin found in her research into a welfare to work programme in the US, that caseworkers failed to ask clients about potential needs as this was deemed as opening the door to 'trouble' when the disclosed needs could not be met (1997, p. 15). Likewise, some frontline workers have been found to ask questions, even when they are predetermined

on an assessment form, in a way that elicits responses that limit the amount of additional demand on resources (Scourfield, 2015).

Through using denial, the threshold for eligibility of a programme or service can be raised or lowered so as to match supply and demand. Specific types of beneficiaries or forms of intervention may be excluded through a redefinition of the functions of a particular programme or service. There is some evidence of this form of rationing taking place when homeless people in Ireland attempt to access services (Bergin *et al.*, 2005; Focus Ireland, 2015; Murphy, 2016b; Walsh and Harvey, 2015) As Bergin *et al* (2005) stated, the statutory definition of homelessness in Ireland is such that it allows local authorities to widen or narrow their interpretation of the definition depending on their perspective and/or the individual that is seeking access to services.

Rationing by selection

Described by Klein *et al* as the converse of rationing by denial, selection involves service users or 'would-be beneficiaries' being selected based on the normative judgements of the street-level bureaucrats administering welfare (Klein *et al*, 1996, p. 11). For example, the selection of those deemed by the street-level bureaucrat as deserving cases, those considered least likely to cause problems, or those who are considered the most likely to benefit from an intervention and therefore improve the success rate of the programme. One way that this moralising of potential beneficiaries is rationalised is related to their perceived dependency (Ellis, 2011; van Oorschot, 2006). For example, Ellis (2007, p. 414) found in England that moral judgements were made by frontline workers around the 'right sort of person for direct payments'. This was despite government policy focused on widening the take-up of these payments in lieu of the provision of direct services. To determine who were deemed deserving or undeserving for direct payments, the frontline workers made normative judgements based on levels of dependency. For example, due to their high level of dependency and belief that 'they're entitled to everything', older people were viewed as undeserving of direct payment (Ellis, 2007, p. 415). However, informal carers as net contributors were viewed as more deserving for direct payments for their respite care services. In the case of Ireland, Watts (2014; 2013a) found that the issue of selection

is prominent in the administration of particular forms of homeless services. Official policy on homelessness states that a housing-led approach is to be used for homeless services (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2013). This approach to homelessness involves a focus purely on housing need as determining eligibility for housing as opposed to normative judgements around a potential tenant's deservingness or perceived ability to maintain a home. However, research has illustrated how rationing by selection based on 'housing readiness' and desert is still a feature of Irish homeless service provision (Watts, 2014; Watts, 2013a). Overall, deservingness as a determinant of access to welfare has been well established through the research (Buss, 2019; Cramer, 2005; Coulton and Rosenberg, 1981; De Swaan, 1988; Reeve, 2017; Thornton, 2005; Tomlins, 1997; van Oorschot, 2006; Watts, 2014; Wilkins and Wenger, 2016).

In order to avoid an over concentration of the most socially excluded people within the one area, Fitzpatrick and Stephens (1999) argue that an element of selection may be necessary when it comes to social housing allocations. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s in Ballymun, Dublin, the high concentration of vulnerable tenants in part contributed to the deterioration of conditions on the estate, although poor design and lack of services also played a role (Kintrea and Muir, 2009), as well as high levels of drug use and anti-social behaviour. Using selection to avoid this kind of residualisation means that those most in need of social housing are not always the first to receive it so that a social mix can be achieved within an area.

Rationing by selection can also be referred to as 'creaming', which is a strategy that involves 'skimming off the top' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 107) those service users who are deemed most likely to succeed as determined by a particular agency's or service's criteria. Brodkin has shown how a New Public Management approach to social service delivery, which focuses on performance goals and increased efficiencies, can have unintended consequences which lead to an increase in creaming, or rationing by selection, in order that performance targets are met (Brodkin, 2008).

Rationing by deflection

When rationing is done by deflection, would-be service users are steered towards another programme or service. In essence, this involves frontline workers

safeguarding the resources of their agencies by 'dumping the problem in the lap of someone else' (Klein *et al*, 1996, p. 11). Deflection, therefore can be described as a process through which a department or agency send potential services users to another agency for a 'perfect substitute service', (i.e. the same service) despite the fact that they offer this service themselves (Scrivens, 1979, p. 60). Redefining a problem can be used as a rationale for using deflection as a form of rationing. For example, an education problem can be redefined as a social services problem; a social services problem can be redefined as a housing problem; a housing problem can be redefined as a social security problem, and so on (Klein *et al*, 1996). Increasingly, instances of deflection can be found in research into rationing of resources in the homelessness sector in the UK (Alden, 2015b; Alden, 2014; Ellis, 2011; Pawson, 2007) and, in both Ireland and England, in social work (Gorman, 2018; Henwood and Hudson, 2008; Rogowski, 2015; Rogowski, 2012).

In England, Alden (2015b; 2014) illustrates through her research, how deflection is being used as a rationing strategy as a form of 'unlawful gatekeeping' of homeless services. People who had a legal entitlement to a homeless service were being steered towards homeless prevention in order that the target of reducing the number of homeless acceptances could be met. Similarly, Pawson (2007) maintains that much of the reduction in post-2003 recorded homelessness in the UK is likely to have resulted from the informal channelling of services away from people who were entitled to a homeless service, and instead were referred towards homeless prevention. In Scotland, Anderson and Serpa (2013) found similar instances of deflection to homeless prevention even when a person had a right to a homeless service. This deflection has the dual impact of rationing more costly homeless services, as well as impacting homelessness statistics. Thus it is possible that having a legal entitlement to homeless services has led to an increase of deflection of potential homeless service users to other services.

Rationing by deterrence

Unlike denial where potential beneficiaries are turned away, using deterrence as a form of rationing involves making access difficult. There are many ways in which this can

be done, all of which 'are apt to discourage use by raising barriers to, and the costs of, entry into the system' (Klein *et al*, 1996, p. 11). This could include unhelpful or unfriendly/dismissive staff, unavailability of information leaflets, incomprehensible forms, and/or long queues of people waiting for assistance in dreary surroundings (Klein *et al*, 1996). Likewise, benefit limits and benefit caps which have been introduced in some countries are specifically intended as a form of deterrence so that specific groups of people are more likely to seek work or support elsewhere rather than claim welfare (Cousins, 2019).

One of the oldest examples of deterrence within the social services is the principle of less eligibility which embodied the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834 (Scrivens, 1979). The purpose of this principle was to 'make those who received a service feel less eligible than those who did not' (Scrivens, 1979, p. 58). To this end, conditions inside workhouses were to be less attractive than conditions outside of them, as a means of deterring people from claiming poor relief. In this way, the stigma attached to certain programmes or services can deter some people from applying. Although less eligibility is no longer a stated policy aim, stigma can still have a significant deterring impact on social services (Scrivens, 1979). Examples of deterrence as a form of rationing abound in the research (Arskey, 2002; Brodkin, 1997; Blau, 1963; Cousins, 2019; Ellis, 2011; Lidstone, 1994; Murphy, 2016b; van den Berk-Clark, 2016; Walsh and Harvey, 2015; Wastell *et al.*, 2010).

Rationing by delay

Even when eligibility for a good or service has been established, a service user may still experience rationing through delay. This can involve granting appointments that are weeks, months or, in the case of Irish health services, years ahead. Likewise, potential beneficiaries may be required to undergo enduring correspondence before access to the service is granted, or through, as Klein *et al* have called 'the ultimate symbol of rationing by delay', the waiting list (1996, p. 12). Delay as a rationing tool can involve both planned or organised delay and unplanned delay (Scrivens, 1979). Organised delay allows for an agency to control access to a good or service and includes the aforementioned waiting list, while unplanned delay is due to an agency's

inability to cope with the immediate demands placed upon it. While in essence both forms of delay are due to a shortage of resources, the Irish health service provides a useful example to illustrate the difference between them. In order to access public health care in Ireland that requires a consultation or hospital visit, people are generally placed upon a waiting list that can range anywhere from a few weeks or months up to a few years depending on the ailment. These delays are planned in that they allow for workers in the health system to have an idea of how resources will be used on a given day. However, in the emergency departments of the hospitals unplanned delays are evident in that people just arrive to the emergency department as it is required and hospital staff have no control over how many people will present on a given day.

Delay is a well-documented feature of social housing where waiting lists have always played a role in gaining access (Bergin *et al.*, 2005; Fitzpatrick and Stephens, 1999; Focus Ireland, 2015; Murphy, 2016b; Robinson, 2013). Recently, some frontline workers have described delay as an increasingly prominent feature in social work and social care (Arskey, 2002; Burns and MacCarthy, 2012; Ellis, 2011). Although planned delay is a way to control access to a service and serves as a coping mechanism for frontline workers, without which their work could become impossible, it can have a significant impact on the frontline worker when they are unable to help someone who needs assistance immediately. For example, Burns and MacCarthy (2012) described the guilt that some Irish social workers felt due to the fact that they were neglecting cases that they knew needed more support, yet were further down the list of priorities as they had high caseloads and many complex cases. As these cases involved children who were at risk of abuse, the guilt that a preventative case would turn into a crisis intervention case was substantial.

Rationing by dilution

Another example of rationing that can happen after eligibility has been established is rationing by dilution. Using this form of rationing results in a situation where more has to be done with less resources (Scrivens, 1979). Public goods and services are still offered to would-be beneficiaries. However, their scale and depth are reduced (Klein *et al*, 1996, p. 12):

> No one is excluded but everyone gets less. Social Workers visit their clients less often; doctors order fewer tests; teachers spend less time with each child. If quantity cannot be cut, quality may be reduced.

One area in Ireland that has experienced significant dilution is child protection services. Due to the prominence of the reports into past failings of child protection services, an increased demand has been placed upon social workers for paper work related to their roles. However, there has not been a corresponding increase in resources so that this increased paper work could be carried out without impacting upon service provision. This has resulted in a dilution of services as social workers are required to provide the same level of service alongside carrying out this increased level of paper work (Burns and MacCarthy, 2012; Halpenny, 2012; Howard, 2012; Wastell *et al.*, 2010). Burns and MacCarthy found that some of the social workers who took part in their research described 'skimming' through cases; offering some services but not the depth that they felt was really required (2012, p. 31). Similarly, in the UK dilution is a key rationing strategy in social care (Arskey, 2002; Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2011; Scourfield, 2015).

Rationing by termination

Rationing by termination constitutes the final option for rationing resources as outlined by Klein *et al* (1996). Examples of termination include the decision to discharge a patient from hospital, the expulsion of a child from school or where a social worker makes a decision to close a case (Klein *et al*, 1996). In considering these examples, it is clear that termination involves subjective decisions by street-level bureaucrats around whether this termination is warranted or not. For example, a doctor may decide to discharge a patient from hospital even though they may not have found the cause of their illness due to a demand for hospital beds. Likewise, a social worker may terminate a case due to pressure from management to close cases (Wastell *et al.*, 2010), whereas another social worker, who is not experiencing the same pressures, may decide to keep this case open and thus provide more services to the recipient. As well as managerial pressures, wider policy changes can impact termination. Vulliamy's (2001) article on school exclusions explains how the right-wing Thatcher

government in the UK made changes to education policy that significantly impacted the way that education was rationed. The changes introduced by this government brought about a significant increase in the rate of exclusions in schools in England, which rose from around 3,000 to around 13,000 per annum. This illustrates a significant link between government policy and the impact on rationing behaviour by frontline workers.

In this section the forms of rationing have been discussed individually. However, in practice they are not always mutually exclusive and an action by a particular frontline worker can impact in a number of ways. For example the decision to place someone on a waiting list can both delay access to services and deter some people from applying in the first place. Similarly, potential beneficiaries may experience the different forms of rationing at various points in their attempts to access services, such as being placed on a waiting list and thus experiencing a delay in access to the service, only to be given a diluted level of service once the delay is over. Finally, the rationing strategies used by a particular frontline worker can be both task dependent and dependent on the work environment. In social work, Ellis (2011) found that different social work teams used different forms of rationing which was impacted by the level of discretion available to them and the type of team they belonged to. For example, assessment teams were tasked with eligibility and thus could use denial, whereas the specialist teams in the hospital were tasked more with order of assessment and therefore were more likely to use delay.

3.4.2.3 Properties of the rationing process

The identification of overt (obvious) and covert (hidden) practices in rationing, as well as formal and informal processes constitute the properties of the rationing process. Rees (1972) described the different forms of rationing as taking place along a continuum from overt to covert. On the overt end of the continuum lies rationing by price, the waiting list and eligibility. Whereas at the covert end lies rationing based on biases, time restrictions on cases and other forms of service deterrents. However, it is important to point out that eligibility can lie more towards the covert end depending on the criteria set out for determining it as these are not always clearly defined and can

involve considerable interpretation. Likewise, deterrents are not always covert and can be found more towards the overt end depending on the particular situation, for example the benefits caps discussed previously.

The properties of the rationing process can be defined as formal and informal, as well as overt and covert. Although similar, it is important to recognise that they are not the same. The official rules, regulations and procedures for access to public goods and services are considered by Scrivens (1979) as the properties of formal rationing. The formalised nature of these rules, which are usually explicit and overt, is that they tend to be 'written down and available for public scrutiny' (Foster, 1983, p. 12). Conversely, informal rationing tends to be more hidden and thus not open to the same scrutiny as formal rationing processes. Informal rationing can include withholding information, various forms of deterrence, including long and complicated forms or unfriendly staff, or delaying the delivery of services (Lidstone, 1994).

Research undertaken by Bretherton *et al* (2013) serves as a good example to illustrate how formal/informal can differ from overt/covert processes. This research shows how despite strict rules governing assessment for homelessness in the UK (formal processes), there is space for covert practices as the researchers found that there were normative influences on the process of decision-making among assessment staff, such as gut feeling, first impressions (e.g. whether the service user looked ill or appeared mentally unwell), and what they considered to be appropriate behaviour (for example, whether the applicant appeared to know the system 'too well'). So in this sense, the formal processes did not correspond to overt process, rather it had elements that were both overt and covert in nature. Likewise, Lipsky (2010, p. 88) outlines well how formal processes can be both overt and covert and dependent on the street-level interaction:

> While exclusion from client status is usually accomplished on the basis of legal grounds, the population of the excluded or discouraged includes many whose exclusion is a matter of discretionary judgement. The ineligibility of tenants evicted from public housing, students expelled from school, or welfare claimants deemed uncooperative depends not on fixed criteria alone, but also on interactions with street-level bureaucrats.

3.4.2.4 The specific aims of the rationing process

The specific aims of the rationing process is the final approach to examining rationing that was outlined by Scrivens (1982; 1979). These aims can be described as primary, secondary or tertiary (1982, p. 136):

1. Primary rationing: To turn away expressed demands which the service feels are not suitable for their treatment or which do not fall within their definition of need.
2. Secondary rationing: To hold off those needs which are accepted and recognised until resources become available to meet those needs.
3. Tertiary rationing: meeting needs by making provision to clients but at reduced levels of quality and/or quantity

A potential service user may experience primary rationing when they apply for a good or services. If they make it passed this first hurdle and are accepted as having an appropriate level of need, they may experience secondary rationing in the form of a waiting list. Finally, having waited to access the service, they may experience tertiary rationing where services are offered at a level that is much diluted from the ideal (Scrivens, 1982).

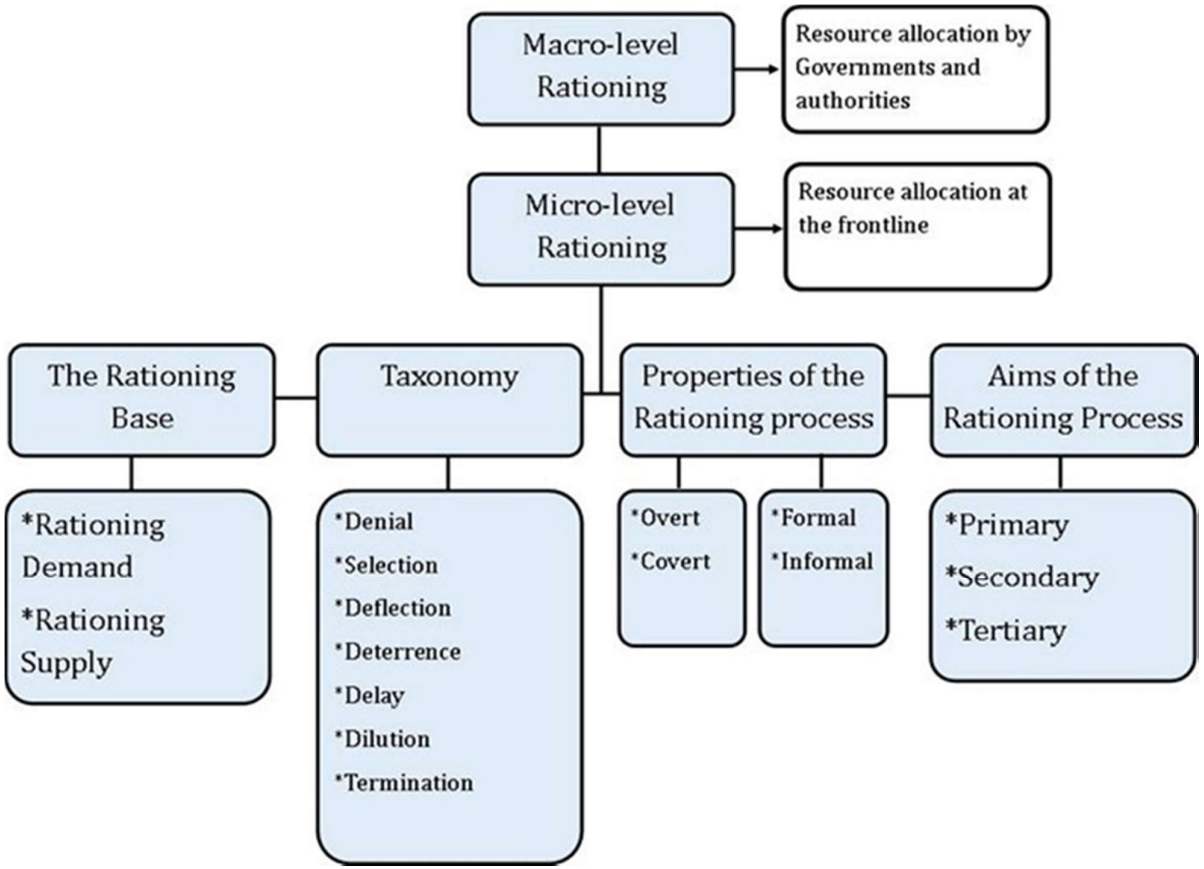
Within the administration of social housing and homelessness, Foster (1983) outlined two levels of rationing that occur at the frontline; primary rationing and secondary rationing. For Foster, primary rationing is related to whether a person is deemed eligible in the first instance and therefore relates to the definition of homelessness or determining housing need and any other factors relevant to eligibility (for example, having a local connection or homelessness intentionality). Secondary rationing on the other hand, relates to the type and quality of accommodation offered. As such, it is focused on decisions around who gets what and why. Foster's approach to the aims of the rationing process is central to answering the research question for this thesis as it is related to primary rationing (assessment) and secondary rationing (placement).

From Scriven's perspective, barriers that are designed to have a secondary function (such as the waiting list), can become primary in practice. The social housing waiting list in Ireland serves as a good example for illustrating this. Where a person overcomes any primary barriers to accessing social housing (for example, fulfils eligibility

criteria), the length of the waiting list can serve as a means to contain demands that may never be met (Scrivens, 1979). Another feature of secondary rationing is that its use in one part of the public system can have an impact on other parts (Scrivens, 1979). For example, a person who is unable to work until after they have back surgery could be eligible for a disability payment until they are able to return to work. In this situation, the longer they are on the hospital waiting list, the longer they will be in receipt of the social welfare payment.

Considering the four approaches to rationing, Scrivens (1979, p. 63) argues that the focus of research into rationing should not be on *whether* services are rationed, but rather on *how* services are rationed, in order to discern which forms are 'intolerable' and which ones are 'acceptable'. Figure 3.1 brings together the four approaches to rationing and serves as a framework for studying rationing at the frontline of welfare administration.

Figure 3.1 A Framework of approaches for studying rationing in the distribution of public goods and services



Devised for Murphy (2021) from Klein *et al*, 1996 and Scrivens, 1982; 1979

3.5 Conclusion

On account of discussing the concept of discretion in detail, it becomes apparent why a street-level approach to policy implementation is fundamental to research with the objective of examining how discretion impacts upon the implementation of policy at the frontline. An evaluation of the street-level practices of frontline workers, in order to understand how they respond to the 'structural logic' of their work conditions, contextualises their actions which could appear deviant, incompetent or disobedient from another view (Brodkin, 2008). An all-or-nothing approach often views discretion as inherently good or bad. However, a more nuanced understanding of the concept outlines how a discretion-in-context approach will provide fruitful data for understanding policy interpretation and implementation. In other words, examining the ways that discretion is used on the frontline, as opposed to research looking at 'implementation gaps' as a result of discretion use. Likewise, research on discretion must recognise the complex nature of this concept. This should include a recognition that the term discretion is often used to describe two distinct phenomena: discretion-as-granted and discretion-as-used. The different senses of discretion should also be considered as an all-or-nothing approach to discretion groups together both strong and weak forms, which has led some commentators to claim that discretion has been eliminated in some professions (Cheetham, 1993; Howe, 1991). However, what often occurs is a change in the sense of discretion as opposed to a curtailment of discretion *per se* (Evans and Harris, 2004). Without an understanding of the ways in which discretion is used in the work responses of street-level bureaucrats and the milieu in which this takes place, it is misguided for researchers to make conclusions around the place of discretion in the implementation of public policy.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Studying the wording of a definition of homelessness tells us nothing of how that definition is interpreted at the frontline and the resultant impacts of these interpretations. Taking a 'bottom-up' approach to the study of policy implementation involves a focus on those who are tasked with implementing policy and thus are the 'doers' of policy as opposed to the 'makers'. The objectives of this research are to understand the degree of discretion available to street-level bureaucrats; the ways that they use discretion in carrying out the tasks associated with homeless assessment and placement; the influences on the ways that they use this discretion; how this impacts their approach to homeless assessment and placement; and what this means for the people who present to them as homeless. The methodology for achieving these research aims will be the focus of this chapter. This chapter will firstly outline the research strategy and secondly the research process. Finally, the research limitations will be discussed.

4.2 The research strategy

This section will outline the research strategy for the research including the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the thesis, namely an interpretive, social construction approach to the research.

4.2.1 An interpretivist approach to public policy implementation

This thesis is concerned with examining discretionary decisions made by frontline workers in local authorities at both the primary (assessment) level and secondary level (placement) of rationing in administering homeless services. This process involves interpretations of both their understanding of what constitutes homelessness and

rationalisations around the process, and how this impacts the ways that they carry out their role. Consideration of epistemological and ontological claims are central to deciding how to approach these research objectives. Simply put, 'what is the way in which reality is known to us?' and 'what is the nature of reality?'(Sarantakos, 2005, p. 30). Following on from this then, the procedures of knowledge discovery (methods) will be shaped by the preceding considerations (Hatch and Yanow, 2005).

Taking the epistemological view of interpretative scholars, one perceives the subject matter of the social sciences as fundamentally different from the natural sciences and therefore requiring 'a different logic of research procedure, one that reflects the distinctiveness of humans against the natural order' (Bryman, 2004, p. 13). This involves interpreting how individuals and groups develop, express and communicate meaning, as opposed to objective, unmediated observation: 'Unlike rocks and atoms, humans make meaning, and so a human (or social) science needs to be able to address what is meaningful to people in the social situation under study' (Hatch and Yanow, 2005, pp. 66-67). As taking this approach involves interpretation, context is key; that of both the researcher and the research participants. To this end, elements such as prior knowledge or past experiences, or in the case of this research, educational background or past roles of the local authority worker, can impact the ways that meanings are interpreted and thus, implying that social knowledge and reality are subjective and not immutable (Cronley, 2010).

Bearing this in mind, a qualitative interpretive approach provides the most suitable means to examine the views, perceptions and values of street-level bureaucrats in order that the researcher can attempt to interpret the meanings of their actions. In attempting to understand, for example, values of research participants, interpretation is crucial. The meanings of such concepts are not always directly accessible to researchers. Rather, values or what is meaningful to the respondent can be inferred 'from the words spoken, the tone of voice, and other elements of nonverbal language, including dress, bearing, and facial expressions' (Hatch and Yanow, 2005, p. 68). Therefore, interpretation and inference are required to give meaning to that which is presented by the research participants to the researcher. For street-level workers, their values and beliefs can have a significant impact on the way that they approach their work and those that present to them in an attempt to access homeless services. It is essential for this research that the values of street-level bureaucrats are examined, as well as the

ways that these values may impact their use of discretion in their interpretation of the nebulous definition of homelessness and the subsequent allocation of resources. The use of in-depth interviews is a useful way to achieve these goals.

As with other research that has used a street level bureaucracy approach, the context (work environment) in which front-line workers are situated is key to understanding the interactions between the street-level bureaucrats and the people who present to them to access services (Lipsky, 2010). To this end, an interpretive approach is the best fit for this research, as it is a 'situated activity that locates the observer in the world' (2000, p. 3).

In recognising both the interpretivist and social constructionism approach to the research, the research interviews aimed to interpret how the issue of homelessness is constructed as a social problem by frontline workers. The following section will provide a rationale for taking this social constructionism approach to the research.

4.2.2 The social construction of reality and the recognition of social problems

Having discussed the interpretivist influence on the research, it is worth discussing the ontological underpinnings further and the rationale for using a particular ontological view as a basis for the research. Key ontological questions within social research, concern matters such as 'whether or not social reality exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations; whether there is a common, shared, social reality or just multiple context-specific realities; and whether or not social behaviour is governed by 'laws' that can be seen as immutable or generalisable' (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p. 11). Considering these ontological questions, the social construction approach is useful for this research, as it views social reality as constructed and recognises that research must analyse the processes in which this social construction occurs (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). A social construction position involves a 'critique of certain social institutions or practices that are deemed objectionable, but which, according to constructivists, receive some specious support from the mistaken belief that they are natural and inescapable' (Collin, 2016, p. 455). What a social construction approach aims to illustrate is that these social institutions and practices are actually human creations and therefore open to change (Collin, 2016). There is

considerable interpretation required for carrying out the role of street-level bureaucrats who are tasked with the administration of homeless services. Thus, a social construction approach can help to shed light on the ways that SLBs construct the 'reality' in which they undertake their role through interactions with other stakeholders (including service providers, service users and senior management), and their place within the institution in which they work.

From Berger and Luckmann's perspective 'reality' construction is a social process, which includes social actions, social interactions and institutions (Knoblauch and Wilke, 2016), where different understandings of 'reality' and 'knowledge' exist within specific social contexts. Therefore analysis of these contexts should include attention to the relationships between those with the different understandings (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). As the research population for this thesis were a relatively homogenous group, an aim of the research was to examine whether their construction of the meaning of homelessness, and thus the way they approached their work, differed significantly between workers or local authorities or whether there were more similarities in their approach as was found by Lipsky (2010) in his work on street-level bureaucracies.

In attempting to understand social policy at any point from conception to implementation, it is essential to remember, although not necessarily ephemeral, social problems and their relative importance at a given time are fluid in nature. As Jacobs *et al* put it:

> The question of why some issues become social problems at certain points in time and then lose salience at others or even fade away completely is rarely even acknowledged, let alone taken up and problematized (1999, p. 12).

Kingfisher (2007) and Pfohl (1977) argue that both the recognition of social problems and their solutions, are cultural in nature in that they are based on discourses of the social world that are culturally and historically framed within the relevant milieu. If the recognition of social problems is a social construct, developing policy involves an interpretation of what constitutes needs. The processes involved in this interpretation or construction of needs and the means to address them are in essence a series of power struggles as the various stakeholders strive to have their particular approach validated (Kingfisher, 2007). At the same time, other stakeholders continue to try and influence

this process of social policy formulation through attempts to get policy-makers to accept their particular approach:

> Social problems are thereby viewed in this perspective as being essentially unstable, capable of being redefined and moved up and down policy agendas as different interests succeed in gaining the upper hand in the ongoing struggle to define priorities on policy agendas (Jacobs *et* al, 1999, p. 13).

In essence then, taking a social construction approach to the study of social problems such as homelessness involves studying the exercise of power within a society, including the study of both decision-making and non-decision-making (Jacobs *et al,* 1999).

Frequently for frontline workers, the extent of interpretation involved in delivering policy is limited somewhat in that categories of need are predefined through these power struggles between competing stakeholders and therefore outlined at the legislative and/or policy level. However, when it comes to interpreting homeless legislation in Ireland, there is significant ambiguity. Consequently, interpretations of what constitutes need in terms of accessing homeless services is in policy left to the local authority through the legislation, yet in practice left to the frontline workers who make decisions about who is or is not considered to be homeless and thus eligible to access services. As such, the construction of homelessness in this context and therefore eligibility for services, becomes a power struggle between frontline workers and other stakeholders including the potential service users, as well as charitable service providers, private accommodation providers, local councillors, local authority management and the relevant government departments. Thus, a social construction approach to this research is a natural fit as this stance is useful for homeless research concerned with a topic as fluid and contested as the definition of homelessness.

4.3 The research process

In this section of the chapter the research process will be described. This will involve a detailed discussion of both the data collection and analysis process in order to add rigour and transparency to the research process.

4.3.1 Changes to the research process

In using a pragmatic decision-making approach to research, one is open to undertaking research in a way that will best answer the research question. Consequently, the initial plan for this research was to undertake it using a mixed-methods approach consisting of a survey followed by in-depth interviews. In the end the mixed methods approach was not used for a number of reasons. Firstly, in the initial research proposal, the survey was considered necessary in order to 'identify whether the characteristics of street level bureaucracies are present within individual local authorities' and to measure the level of demand on services (Murphy, 2016a). However, after undertaking desk-based research examining data from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, it was clear that this could be determined through analysis of homeless statistics and other relevant data as set out in Chapter two of this thesis. Secondly, it was clear from discussions with key informants that it would be difficult to encourage participation in the research as the target research population were stretched in terms of their workload and therefore possibly reluctant to give their time to both segments of the research. For this reason, it was concluded that successfully undertaking the survey could constitute a pyrrhic victory in that it had the potential to jeopardise participation in the in-depth interviews. From the initial stages of planning the research, the in-depth interviews were intended to make-up the core of the research as qualitative methods have long been used as an important approach to examining the use of discretion by street-level bureaucrats (For examples see: Brodkin, 1997; Ellis, 2007; Ellis, Davis and Rummery, 1999; Evans, 2011; Lens, 2012; Scourfield, 2015; Wastell *et al.*, 2010) and are best suited to answering the research question. After much consideration it was decided that qualitative interviews alone would be the best approach to gathering the data required to answer the research questions, in a way that would be agreeable to the research participants and therefore, would be most likely to encourage their participation. It is not maintained that the research results have suffered as a result of this change from mixed methods to qualitative interviews alone as the objective of the proposed survey was met through analysis of official statistics that were not required to be collected directly from the local authorities as they were already in the public domain.

4.3.2 Data collection

4.3.2.1 Access to the research population

Although employed in the public sector, frontline workers in Irish local authorities are a difficult to reach population for research. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is no available data on who constitutes the research population. Rather, research participants had to be sought within each individual local authority. Secondly, as other researchers have found, it can be difficult and time consuming to encourage local authority participation in research (Bergin *et al.*, 2005; Murphy, 2016b). The dearth of research in Ireland involving street-level local authority workers is an indicator of their status as a hard to reach and under-researched population. Added to this, are difficulties associated with public sector research on highly politicised subject matter (For example see the access issues outlined by: Wright, 2003).

This difficulty in encouraging participation was a feature of the current research. Gaining access to the research participants was an arduous process. Before contact was made with any local authorities to discuss the research, a number of informal meetings were held with key informants who were local authority 'insiders', to discuss the best way to approach local authorities. These 'insiders' included two people who had previously worked for local authorities and a researcher in a public sector agency who worked closely with local authorities. As local authorities have come under much scrutiny as a result of the housing and homelessness crisis, the consensus was that the best approach was to ensure that the objectives of the study were made clear from the outset. Furthermore, they felt that the researcher's independent status as someone undertaking public sector research should be made clear, as opposed to being a researcher attached to a homeless or other advocacy organisation. This was so that the researcher was positioned as an 'insider' in order to avoid a bulwark that could arise if the local authorities were anxious that the research was purely a search for malfeasance and misfeasance within the organisation. In her PhD research which involved interviewing frontline workers in English homeless services, Alden took a similar approach in making explicit in initial contacts with local authorities, the

researcher and research participants 'shared frame of reference to the topics under study' (Alden, 2014: 97).

In order for individual street-level workers to participate in the research, consent had to be sought from their managers, as this was the only way that individual workers could be contacted. In all but one interview where the researcher was contacted directly by a frontline worker who wanted to participate without the knowledge of their manager, access to participants was granted this way. Therefore, it was crucial that the research was explained in a non-threatening way as refusal to participate by a manager would cut off access to all the front-line workers within that organisation.

Once the correct contacts had been established through LinkedIn messaging and phone calls, letters were sent to each local authority in the sample outlining the research and requesting participation. Where email addresses were available, a copy of the letter was emailed too. In most case, follow up phone calls were required in an attempt to discuss the research with the person who the letter had been addressed to. All in all, in order to organise 15 interviews, over 100 individual attempts to contact were required including email, postal and phone call correspondence. The process was made more difficult by the Covid-19 Pandemic, with the nadir in the interview process coming in the months after the pandemic was declared, leading to a notable increase in the difficulty to organise interviews after restrictions were put in place, despite offering to do them online.

4.3.2.2 The research sample

Although the homeless crisis is impacting the whole of Ireland, the extent of the problem differs nationally. Some counties, especially where the larger cities are located, are experiencing a much higher demand for homeless services than others. For this reason, a selection of local authorities from around the country were invited to participate in the research. This was to illustrate any differences in how discretion is used and resources rationed between local authorities in urban and rural areas with varying levels of demand on services.

The sampling process used for this study was a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. The local authorities that were invited for inclusion were selected purposively. However, the selection of frontline workers was through convenience sampling in that the parameters for inclusion in the research were outlined to the contact person within the local authority and they suggested who would participate. The researcher had no say in deciding who would take part in the research within a particular local authority, although participants had to fit the criteria for inclusion. This was unavoidable as in most cases permission for inclusion had to be sought by the unit manager. Some managers asked staff if they would like to volunteer to participate, whereas other managers suggested specific people for participation.

The use of purposive sampling for local authority selection allowed for conceptual richness in that the most relevant local authorities for the research were included. Marshall describes the purposive sampling process well, stating that it is one in which:

> The researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question. This can involve developing a framework of the variables that might influence an individual's contribution and will be based on the researcher's practical knowledge of the research area, the available literature and evidence from the study (1996, p. 523).

Table 4.1 Number interviewed within anonymised local authorities and rural/urban coverage

Local authority code	Number of staff interviewed	Location coverage
1	4	Urban
2	1	Rural
3	2	Urban and Rural
4	1	Urban and rural
5	4	Urban
6	1	Rural
7	1	Urban and rural
8	1	Urban

As a form of non-probability sampling, the purposive approach is frequently used for qualitative research. Being a non-probability approach, it is not generalisable to the whole population. However, this is not a limitation as generalisability is not the purpose of qualitative research design. Rather, for a purposive sample, the goal is to concentrate on particular characteristics of the research population which will help in answering the research questions. In this sense, local authorities were selected based on their fit with the research question. The research question here is concerned with the use of discretion and its impact on the rationing of resources during the process of homeless assessment within Irish local authorities, and uses Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy analysis as a framework for the research. The local authorities are street level bureaucracies in which the housing officers are the street level bureaucrats, using discretion in order to ration resources (Lipsky, 2010). According to Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats, as he meant them to be defined, work in roles where they hold a high degree of discretion and have regular interactions with the public. As well as this, the following work conditions usually apply:

1. Resources are chronically inadequate relative to the tasks workers are asked to perform.
2. The demand for services tend to increase to meet the supply.
3. Goal expectations for the agencies in which they work tend to be ambiguous, vague, or conflicting.
4. Performance oriented towards goal achievement tends to be difficult if not impossible to measure.
5. Clients are typically non-voluntary; partly as a result, clients for the most part do not serve as primary bureaucratic reference group (Lipsky, 2010, p. 27-28).

Most of these conditions are present in all local authority homeless units due to the legislative and policy context in which they operate. However, the level of demand for services differs between local authorities. Therefore, to ensure that local authorities were chosen that fit best within Lipsky's definition of street level bureaucracies, homeless statistics were examined in order to select the local authorities that had the highest demand for services at the time of devising the sample (August 2019). Local authorities with less than 40 people presenting as homeless were excluded from the sample, as these were deemed to be of least relevance to this thesis.

Once the local authorities were selected, the next level of selection was focused on the types of workers within them who were appropriate for the research. The criteria for inclusion in the study was that the participants worked directly with the public in the process of homeless assessment. In other words, that these workers had interaction directly with the person presenting to the local authority as homeless and that they were in a position in which they were making decisions around someone's homeless status and/or access to homeless services. This included staff at lower grades and those who had more of a supervisory role but were still involved directly with the assessment process and could use discretion in making decisions around someone's homeless status as well as deciding what services (if any) people would be offered.

It was the final level of selection that involved the convenience element of the sampling method. A convenience sample involves the selection of the most accessible participants. Having discussed the criteria for inclusion with the contact person within the local authority, who was generally the unit manager, they suggested people who could participate in the research or asked their staff to volunteer. In some larger local authorities this was multiple people, whilst in the smaller local authorities just one person was interviewed.

The interviews took place between 26th November 2019 and the 28th September 2020, which serves as an indication of how difficult they were to organise. In the end, interviews were carried out in eight local authorities out of the 16 which were eligible for the research, giving coverage of 50% of the possible research sites.

4.3.2.3 Preparing for the interviews

In preparing to begin fieldwork, there were a number of important steps taken before the first interview was carried out. In order for qualitative interviews to be successful, it is important that careful planning is put in place, in which the focus and scope of the research questions and objectives is given careful consideration (McGrath *et al*, 2019). To this end, considerable time was given to developing the interview guide (See Appendix 4). In devising the guide, there was much reflection on Bryman's assertion that the crucial element of the interview guide is that it 'allows interviewers to glean

the ways in which research participants view their social world and that there is flexibility in the conduct of the interviews' (Bryman, 2012, p. 473).

After the guide was drafted and discussed with two supervisors, meetings were held with two ex-local authority frontline workers in order to discuss the interview guide in detail with people familiar with the process of homeless assessment. These served the purpose of indicating any potential issues with the guide as pilot interviews were not undertaken due to the fact that the pool of potential interviewees was very small and it was preferred that no one would have to be excluded due to taking part in a pilot. According to McGrath *et al* (2019, p. 1003) test interviews provide the opportunity 'to explore language, the clarity of the questions, and aspects of active listening'. Indeed, the test interviews helped in identifying some issues with the questions and ensured that appropriate language was being used, which was relevant to front line local authority workers. These insights were invaluable and ensured that an appropriate and relevant interview guide was used from the outset.

It is important to consider the cultural and/or power dimensions of the interview situation before an interview takes place (McGrath *et al*, 2019). As 'cultural beings' people may have different expectations of what the interview situation involves (McGrath *et al*, 2019, p. 1003). No power dimension between the interviewer and interviewees were considered to be an obstacle for this research. However, it was important to consider the fact that local authorities have undergone significant criticism where the homeless situation in Ireland is concerned. This has come from a range of commentators including the media and from NGOs involved in homeless service provision. The whole area of homelessness is an extremely political one at present. For this reason, it was important to consider how this could impact the interview process. Firstly, there was the potential that interviewees could give the answers that they felt would present them in the best light. And secondly, there was the possibility that they could get defensive or clam up when asked about issues that have been contentious in the past. However, the interview guide was developed with this in mind and great care was taken to keep the questions as neutral as possible whilst still managing to ask about the issues that were of importance to this research. In order to elicit responses to questions which could be viewed as most contentious, vignettes were used instead of asking questions directly. So for example, instead of asking

respondents about biases and stereotyping, this was allowed to emerge from the dialogue around the vignettes.

It was important to build rapport and trust with the interviewees before the interview where possible. Where the situation allowed, interviewees were contacted beforehand and given an explanation of the research and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Where it was not possible to speak to an interviewee before, as the interviews were arranged through their manager, it was ensured that they got a copy of an information letter which outlined the research to them. According to McGrath *et al* (2019) a sense of proximity is key to building rapport. For this reason, during the introductions, the interviewer explained how past research with a local authority led to the identification of the research gap. As well as explaining that the research was being undertaken for fulfilment of a PhD and was not affiliated to any organisation.

Interviewees were given a choice of venue for the interview to take place. Most opted to do the interview at the local authority offices, one decided that they would rather do the interview away from the workplace (in the participant's home), and one interviewee did the interview from home through Microsoft Teams. All the interviews were to be tape-recorded so the equipment was tested before the first interview was carried out to ensure good quality audio.

4.3.2.4 Qualitative interviews with frontline staff

McGrath *et al* argue that qualitative interviews can provide an opportunity to 'give voice' to groups that may not be heard elsewhere (2019, p. 1002). The participants in this research comprise a previously unheard from group of Irish public sector workers, as no research could be found that included them other than minimal inclusion in research which was undertaken by the author previously (Murphy, 2016b), which identified the gap in knowledge that was the starting point for this thesis. The use of qualitative interviews for this research provided an opportunity to explore in-depth the unique experiences of the interviewees (McGrath *et* al, 2019), whilst emphasising how the interviewees understand and frame issues and events (Bryman, 2012). In a sense this amounts somewhat to giving voice to the participants, but within the interpretative frame the researcher's role must be acknowledged in the decisions they make with

regard to selection, editing and use of pieces of data in order to form the thesis' argument (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the researcher's voice plays a comparably important role.

The fieldwork for this research used a semi-structured interview method. The interview guide was divided into the themes that the researcher wanted to cover during the exchange. Pre-prepared questions or topics were discussed through the interview and were interposed with probes to elicit further responses from participants when required (Qu and Dumay, 2011). This form of interview 'can produce powerful data that provide insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions and opinions' (Peters and Halcomb, 2015, p. 6). An important feature of this approach is that it allowed for a combination of structure and flexibility (Legard *et al*, 2003) which was important for answering the research questions posed for this thesis. The structural element ensured that the general topics of importance were covered, whereas the flexibility allowed for the participants to focus on the elements of these topics that they understood as most important.

A total of 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out in eight local authorities around the country. This consisted of five female and 10 male participants. All were involved in assessment and most in placement. Four had a supervisory role but were directly involved in the assessment and placement process, thus they were eligible to take part in the research. As the interviews were in-depth, their length ranged from 51 minutes to one 1 hour and 28 minutes, with an average length of 65 minutes. The first 14 interviews took place between November 2019 and February 2020. There was a significant break in the interview process due to the Covid-19 outbreak. The final interview was carried out in September 2020, at which point it was felt that data saturation had been reached. It is acknowledged that a major event such as the Covid-19 pandemic could have significantly impacted the working environment and thus impacted interview responses. However, attention was paid to this in the analysis in order to assess whether the pandemic impacted the responses during the final interview with regard to the discretion available to frontline workers and/or the way they defined homelessness. As only one interview was carried out after the pandemic was declared, the impact of this on responses was minimal and similar levels of discretion were found in both situations in any case.

4.3.2.5 Vignettes in qualitative research interviews

Vignettes were used as part of the semi-structured interviews, mainly as an aid for comparing the definitions or understanding of homelessness between frontline workers, although they did illuminate some findings around the allocation of services as well. The use of vignettes has proved to be valuable for other studies examining the work practices of front-line workers in the area of housing and homelessness (Bretherton *et al*, 2013; Hunter *et al.*, 2016; Watts, 2013a) and in assessing the perceived deservingness of welfare claimants (Buss, 2019; Gielens *et al*, 2019; Kootstra, 2017; Reeskens and van der Meer, 2019). Therefore, this technique comprised a useful way to examine street-level bureaucrats' responses to typical situations that can arise in their day-to-day work. Hughes describes vignettes as 'stories about individuals and situations which make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes' (1998, p. 381). Vignettes should consist of a 'descriptive sketch of an incident', which should be carefully designed so that it represents a realistic scenario of relevance to the research participant and elicits a rich response (Schoenberg and Ravdal, 2000, p. 63). According to Barter and Renold (1999), there are three main purposes for the use of vignettes in social research. Firstly, for the exploration of actions in context. Secondly, to clarify people's judgement. And thirdly, as less personal means to explore sensitive topics. All three of these purposes are related to the decision to use vignettes for this research.

In using vignettes, the social interaction element of the exchange, which is important for frontline workers in the process of decision-making, was missing and therefore they cannot be considered to directly reflect the participants' actions in a similar situation. However, they provided a useful tool for comparison between the research participants. Additionally they provided a focus for discussion between the researcher and the research participant around the ways that a particular case might be approached and the reasons behind these decisions, potentially uncovering any biases that may not emerge through direct questioning. Used alongside other forms of data collection, vignettes can 'provide a more balanced picture of the social world which researchers seek to understand' (Hughes, 1998, p. 384). As such, they fit well with the proposed research as a complementary tool for the semi-structured interviews.

4.3.2.6 Data saturation

When determining the number of interviews required for a qualitative study using in-depth interviews, data saturation is commonly used as a means to determine when fieldwork should come to an end. Data saturation refers to the point at which no further interviews are required as they are not adding any additional data to the study that would impact its robustness or validity (Hennink and Kaiser, 2019). However, the point at which data saturation is reached differs from study to study, therefore there is no 'one-size-fits-all' method to reach this point. Rather, it can be taken as the point in qualitative research when no new data, themes or codes are emerging and replication of the study would be possible (Fusch and Ness, 2015). As the participants in this study were fairly homogenous – in that they undertook a similar role in the local authority – data saturation was reached at around 13 interviews. An additional two interviews were carried out after this to ensure that no new major findings were emerging. Data saturation is usually reached at a smaller number of interviews when the group is a homogenous one than when they are heterogeneous. Through their research based on an empirical review of methodological literature on data saturation, Guest *et al* (2020) argue that 80 per cent saturation is reached after just six interviews with a homogenous group of research participants. To take the saturation higher, to over 95 per cent, they argue that 12 interviews are required. Therefore, having completed 15 interviews, it is likely that a high level of saturation was reached in this study.

As the interviews were in-depth, they produced a considerable amount of data. Therefore, it was felt that having reached saturation, there was no need to continue carrying out interviews as it would unnecessarily complicate the analysis process (Crouch and McKenzie, 2016). It is important to state that data analysis began before the interviews were completed as is encouraged for a valid claim of saturation (Faulkner and Trotter, 2017). This ensured that the conclusion that no significant codes were emerging from the data was a concrete claim, rather than being based on the interviewer's recollection of the interviews.

4.3.2.7 Transcription

Although their study was based on management research, Nascimento and Steinbruch (2019) make an interesting point when they critique the common inclusion of 'the interviews were transcribed' without an additional information in the methodology section of research papers. Rather, they argue that transcription is an important, yet neglected methodological technique 'which needs to be detailed in research reports, to contribute to the increase of methodological accuracy and to provide essential information to readers, allowing them to evaluate the rigor of the research' (Nascimento and Steinbruch, 2019, p. 413). In line with this suggestion, this section of the methodology will outline the transcription process for the current thesis.

At the outset, it was intended that the researcher would transcribe all the interviews as transcription can be viewed as a first step in data analysis (Bailey, 2008). However, after three interviews were transcribed, it became clear that the process was too time consuming and in the end would use up too much valuable time. To this end, the services of a professional transcriber were sought. Recommendations were pursued from colleagues within the University and a transcriber was chosen who had proved to be highly accurate in her transcriptions provided to others.

To overcome issues associated with a person other than the researcher transcribing the interviews, for example their judgements around data interpretation and representation (Bailey, 2008), and to place the researcher back into the process, all interviews were listened to by the researcher subsequent to transcription. Where it was felt that a detail would have been transcribed differently, for example, by using different punctuation, the relevant changes were made to reflect the researcher's style and approach. Thus, listening to the interviews and following them through on the transcriptions ensured accuracy in the data. It also allowed for corrections where jargon or other words related to the area under study were sometimes misheard and the wrong word used in the transcription.

4.3.3 Ethical concerns

As with all research involving people as subjects of the research, there were a number of ethical considerations that need to be addressed for this study, which will be outlined in the following sections. Ethical approval for this research was sought and granted from the Social Research and Ethics Committee (SERC) in UCC.

4.3.3.1 Informed consent

It was important that research participants understood what the research was about and what the data would be used for before they gave consent to participate in the study. Therefore, an initial letter was sent to the head of the homeless unit within the selected local authorities outlining the objectives of the research. Once participants were chosen for the research, they were given a consent form which outlined what the interview would involve, what was expected of them as participants, what their data will be used for, how it will be used, and how their data and identity would be protected. As well as the outline contained in the consent form, a verbal account of the above was given to them before the interview took place.

4.3.3.2 Confidentiality

The fieldwork was carried out in a confidential manner in that interviews with staff members were not discussed with other staff members either within the same local authority or in other authorities. Participants were given a choice of locations so that they could do the interviews away from the workplace if they so wished. There are, of course, limits to confidentiality which needed to be considered before the fieldwork. For example, limits in law related to the need to protect individuals from harm. However, it was not envisaged that there was a high risk of this occurring in the proposed research so no additional action was taken before the fieldwork with regard to this element of confidentiality.

4.3.3.3 Anonymity

All data is presented in an anonymous way in the thesis and participants were assured of this beforehand. No names of participants or local authorities appear anywhere in the thesis, rather codes were used to identify both authorities and participants. As the research population is very small, significant efforts were made to ensure that the data was presented in a way that both the authorities and the individual participants remained anonymous. For example, all references to the sex of a participant were removed to add another layer of anonymity to the findings, as identifiers of sex and role could make a participant more identifiable.

4.3.3.4 Voluntary participation

Interviewees were made aware that their participation in the research was on a voluntary basis. They were assured that they could refuse to answer any question if they wished. For this research, it was especially important that the voluntary nature of participation was explicitly explained to the interviewees as many of them were introduced to the research through their manager. Therefore, it was important that they did not feel obliged to participate in the research and understood that there would not be any repercussions from management if they refused to participate.

4.3.3.5 Data protection

It was important that any data collected through the fieldwork was treated appropriately and that the identity of the participants was protected. The interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed for analysis. Tape recordings have been deleted from the device which was used to record them and are now saved on a password protected laptop. Most of the interviews were transcribed using the services of a professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement and saved the transcriptions into a shared cloud file which has since been deleted. No copies of the transcriptions were saved by the transcriber. In line with the UCC Code of Research Conduct, data will be securely stored for ten years before disposal.

4.3.3.6 Access to the research population

It is important that consideration is given to the ethical implications of unnecessarily taking up the time of the people who take part in the research (McGrath *et al,* 2019). All the people who took part in this research were frontline workers in an area that has been under significant pressure for a number of years. Although it varied between local authorities, many of these workers described themselves as extremely busy when we were discussing their participation in the study. For this reason, it was important that only as many participants as were needed to answer the research questions were included in the study.

4.3.4 Data analysis

There are important considerations to be made before analysis of qualitative data is undertaken. This includes whether to take an inductive or deductive approach to coding, what framework will be used for the coding (for example thematic analysis), and how the analysis will be undertaken (for example whether computer software will be used or not). In order to ensure transparency and rigour in the research, these considerations will be outlined in detail in the following sections.

4.3.4.1 An inductive approach to coding with element of deduction

The approach to coding for this research was 'bottom-up' or inductive where the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Open coding was used and codes were developed that were strongly linked to the data, as opposed to using pre-defined codes. However, it is important to recognise the impact that prior knowledge around the research area can have on the analysis process, as well as in devising the initial guide for the interviews. Therefore, although open coding was used, the data was 'not coded in an epistemological vacuum' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84). This open coding approach is described by Elliot who states that emergent or inductive codes 'may be specific words from participants' own voices, or

they may be concepts which you as a researcher have been sensitized to in the process of reading the literature in preparation for your research (Elliot, 2018, p. 2855). Prior knowledge of the subject area was recognised so that attempts could be made to approach the data in a way that would not only illuminate what you would expect (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) for research focusing on street-level bureaucracy, but that the formulation of new ideas and connections was not constrained (Charmaz, 1990). Being such a politicised area of study, which has resulted in countless media articles and social media posts, generally taking place at the more negative end of the news spectrum, as well as the researcher's past experience of undertaking research with people who have been subject to these practices at the frontline and describe them often as negative or antagonistic encounters (Murphy, 2016b), it was important to be aware of the possibility of a 'negativity bias' in analysing the data. As Hood explains, 'negativity bias denotes a commonly observed cognitive tendency for more attention to be paid to negative than positive information and for losses to be valued more highly than gains of an equivalent amount' (Hood, 2011, p. 9). Therefore, equal consideration was given to the emergent themes that focused on practices at the frontline that could be considered positive, as well as those that appeared more problematic.

Thus, it is important for researchers to recognise their prior knowledge and experiences which they bring to the research process (Hatch and Yanow, 2005). Having worked for a housing charity and undertaken research with people experiencing homelessness, the researcher came to the study with a particular set of ideas. However, having also carried out some studies with local authorities, previous research has been focused across the spectrum. Added to this, having a social science background and belief in a right to housing, it would be impossible to approach the research with a blank mind. Prior knowledge and experiences impacted both the way that the interviews were approached in the first place, as well as how they were analysed in that having a particular background would make certain things stand out as important.

4.3.4.2 The Coding Framework: Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used for coding the data in this research. Maguire and Delahunt (2017, p. 3352) describe thematic analysis as simply 'the process of

identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data', which is used *across* the data set as opposed to within cases (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As a flexible method for qualitative data analysis, it is not tied to particular epistemological or theoretical perspectives (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) and thus was compatible with the methodological approach of this thesis.

Thematic analysis is not simply the act of summarising the data. Rather, it is a method of data analysis that assists the researcher in interpreting and making sense of their data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Within a social construction framework, thematic analysis 'seeks to theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are given' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 85). Using a well thought through thematic analysis approach can help in avoiding the concerns of Bazeley (2009), who argued that the simple presentation of themes supported by participant quotes, is too often depended on by qualitative researchers as their primary form of analysis and reporting of their data. Rather, Bazeley suggests that strategies, many of which have been used for this research, are used to support the researcher to deepen their analysis of qualitative data, and include:

> …improving interpretation and naming of categories; using comparison and pattern analysis to refine and relate categories or themes; using divergent views and negative cases to challenge generalisations; returning to substantive, theoretical or methodological literature; creating displays using matrices, graphs, flow charts and models; and using writing itself to prompt deeper thinking (2009, p. 6).

The use of thematic analysis is ubiquitous in qualitative research, yet the 'how to' of thematic analysis is rarely outlined in research articles (For useful examples see: Attride-Stirling, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Therefore, this research aims to be transparent and descriptive in outlining how the thematic analysis was undertaken. As a clear and straightforward, yet rich approach to the data analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was used for structuring the thematic analysis approach.

It is important to note the central place of writing throughout the entire six phases of the framework that is described below. For this research, writing began before phase one was commenced and the importance of the role of memoing for this research

cannot be overstated. Another precursor for understanding how to use the framework is the fact that the analysis was not, and should never be, a linear process as is it appears to be from table 4.2. Rather, there was backwards and forwards movement between the phases throughout the analysis process, as the process of meaningful qualitative research is a messier affair than that which is outlined (Saldana, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2006) stipulate this in their presentation of the six-phase framework. However, the benefits of outlining it in a linear way are clear.

Table 4.2 Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis including coding types used in the analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
2a. Structural coding	Broad coding
2b. *In Vivo* coding	Using participant's own language as codes
2c. Descriptive coding	To summarize topic (more focused than structural)
2d. Emotions and values coding	Coding emotions and values of participants
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
3a. Patterns coding	Grouping of codes into categories, themes or concepts
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

(Adapted version of: Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Phase one of the research involved listening to the interviews, getting them transcribed and reading and reading the transcripts. During this first phase, notes were taken on any initial thoughts around coding and analysis that arose.

The approach to coding used for the thesis is like that outlined by Elliot, who conceptualises 'coding as a decision-making process, where the decisions must be made in the context of a particular piece of research' (2018, p. 2850). For phase two, coding decisions were made based on the research question and the 'methodological needs of the study' (Saldana, 2016, p. 71). Codes comprised of either a word or a short phrase that reflected the essence of what was being captured in the portion of selected text (Saldana, 2013). As codes also reflect the researcher's encounters in the 'empirical world', they are not reflections of 'inherent truths', rather they reflect what is viewed as important and therefore defined at a particular point in time, thus leaving them open to change (Charmaz, 2017, p. 3).

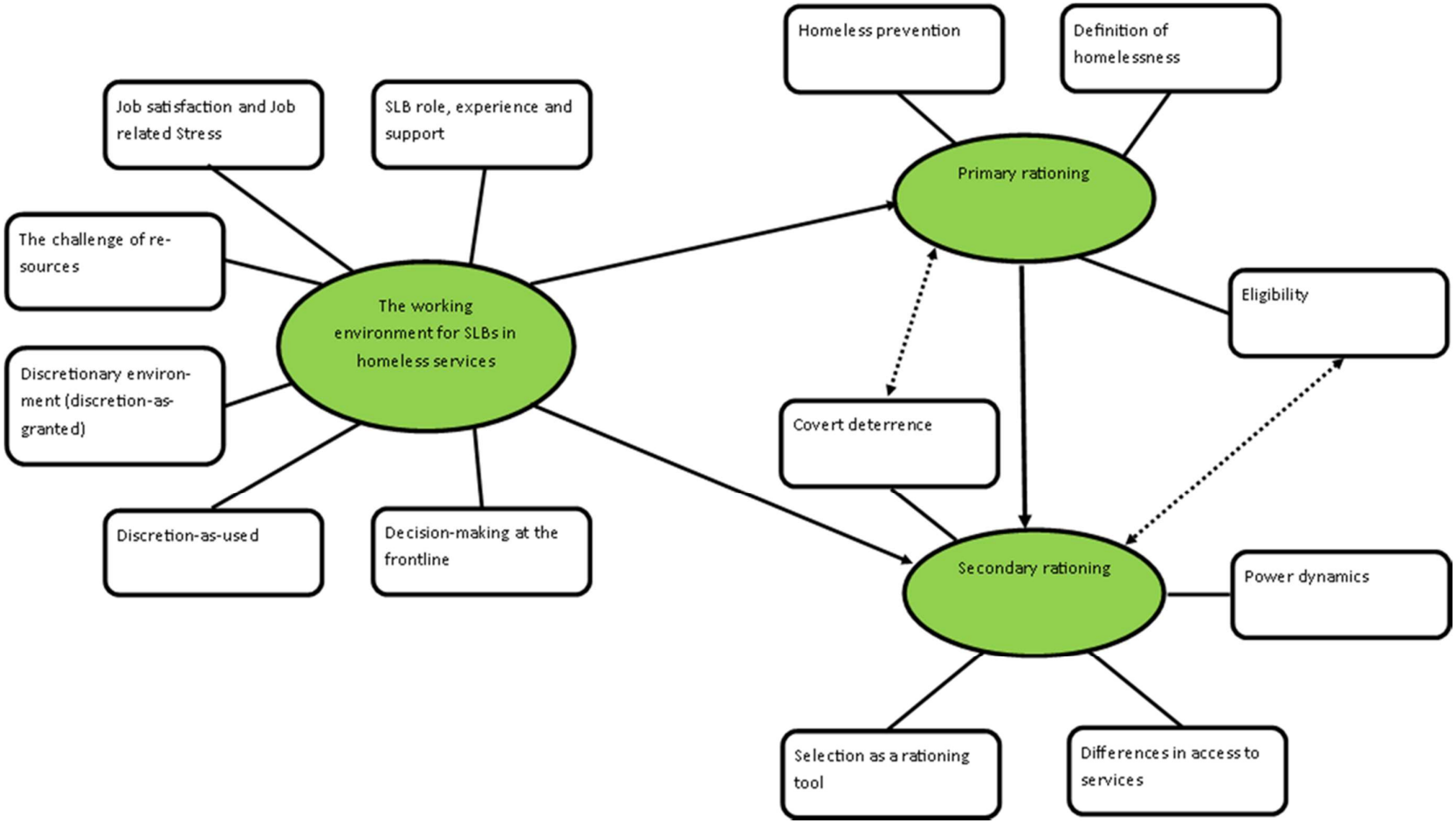
Phase three of the research involved searching for themes in the coded data. The purpose of a theme is to capture 'something important about the data in relation to the research question' and to represent 'some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Themes can be identified at a semantic or explicit level, or at a latent or interpretive level, with a research project usually focusing primarily on one. For this research, the focus was on the latent level of theme identification, as the identification of the themes came from interpretative work, with a theoretically focused analysis, rather than a descriptive one. If an existing theoretical framework is not used to anchor analytical claims made by the researcher using thematic analysis, the interpretative power is restricted in moving past simple description (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

It is imperative that qualitative researchers are aware that the relative importance of a theme is not necessarily related to quantification, rather it is more closely related to its relevance to the overall research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Crouch and McKenzie, 2016). Therefore, in assessing themes, researchers should ask, what does this theme tell us about our research question? Rather than focusing on the constituents and proportionate relationships identified within the data, qualitative research should 'scrutinizes the dynamic qualities of a situation' (Crouch and McKenzie, 2016, p. 489). As such, the themes were developed through a process of refinement which focused on their relevance to the research question. A thematic map was produced which was refined as the development of the themes progressed. The progression of the thematic map can be found in Appendix 5. Figure 4.1 presents the final thematic

map which illustrates the three main themes, their sub-themes and relationships to each other.

NVivo was used as a tool to aid the analysis of the data and the identification of themes. When you have a large volume of data that requires a deep level of analysis, computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) can act as a valuable means for organising your data and ideas and bringing them together in a way that is easily retrievable. CAQDAS can also aid theory building with the use of features such as queries and memos and the exploration of relationships among the data. Through using CAQDAS the process of data analysis is made more transparent and thus makes the data analysis process more visible.

Figure 4.1 Thematic map: Discretion at the frontline of homeless service administration



4.3.4.3 Memo writing

Much of the writing around the use of memos as a methodological strategy in qualitative research is focused on the grounded theory approach (Birks *et al*, 2008). However, memoing is a useful tool for all kinds of qualitative research approaches. According to Chamaz, 'memo-writing consists of writing about our codes, emerging categories, connections between these categories, and questions, concerns, and musings that arise along the way'(2017, p. 3). Memo writing played an important role at all stages of the data analysis process and served a number of purposes. The memos helped in tracking the rationale for methodological decisions that were made in deciding an approach to coding. As well as this, they facilitated deep engagement with the data. Even before the fieldwork began, voice recorded memos and typed memos were used as a means to remember ideas for/about the research, as well as reflections that might otherwise have been lost. To this end, they served both a procedural and analytical purpose for the research (Birks *et al,* 2008).

Birks *et al* (2008) argue that memos can assist the researcher in the process of making conceptual leaps from the data to abstractions that explain research phenomena within their relevant contexts. Likewise, Saldana views memo writing as an opportunity to document reflections on 'your coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data – all possibly leading toward theory' (Saldana, 2016, pp. 43-44). Saldana (2016) notes that coding and memo writing take place concurrently as the development of codes and a deep understanding of the research problem (aided by memo writing) have a reciprocal relationship. Memo writing provided a space for analytical reflections as well as reflexivity. The memos were related to methodological issues, coding, analysis and findings.

4.3.4.4 Rigour in qualitative research

The methodology chapter of this thesis is intentionally detailed in order that the rigorousness of the research is easily evaluated. Descriptions of data analysis are often absent or minimal in their detail in research articles and reports despite the fact that

the analysis of the data is a fundamental, and often the most complex, part of qualitative research (Attride-Stirling, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Nowell *et al.*, 2017; Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Passive accounts of the analysis process are all too often presented in articles where themes are described as having 'emerged' from the data, ignoring the active role of the researcher in this process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is significant as the researcher is involved in the identification of themes, the selection of the themes that they feel are of interest and the reporting on these themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As such, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that theory and method need to be applied rigorously in qualitative research, ensuring that a systematic method is used which is congruent with the conceptualisation of the subject matter under study. Thematic analysis is a flexible method for data analysis which fits with many different forms of qualitative research, including that with a social construction approach. To ensure it is undertaken systematically and thus rigorously, Braun and Clarke developed a 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis, all of which were checked against the data analysis process of this thesis.

Table 4.3 Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytical claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well organised story about the data and the topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

Source: (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

4.4 Research limitations

There were a number of research limitations related to the methodology for this study. However, none of them were so significant as to have a considerable impact on the ability to answer the research question. The first two are related to the research sample. In order to access the research population, the managers of potential research participants had an active role in the selection process. This was potentially problematic for two reasons. Firstly, this means that a convenience sample had to be used in order to access participants. However, the lack or rigour often associated with convenience sampling (Marshall, 1996) was mitigated through the use of purposive sampling to select the local authorities included in the study. Secondly, and related to the aforementioned sampling method, was the potential for managers to attempt to gate-keep information either by selecting the workers that they felt would present the local authority in the best light, or through participating themselves if they were still involved in the process of assessment (this happened in two cases of smaller local authorities where the manager of the unit participated). However, the responses of the frontline workers were not considerably different in local authorities where just one person (frontline worker or manager) was interviewed and potentially selected to gate-keep information, and those larger local authorities where up to four people were interviewed, which mitigated the potential for manager selection of the 'best' participants. Likewise, there was not a noticeable difference in responses between higher grade or supervisory participants and those who were in lower grades. These differences in the number of people interviewed between local authorities limited the ability to make local authority level comparisons as opposed to comparing the interviewees to each other. However, as the local authorities where less people were interviewed had fewer staff in the homeless unit who were undertaking the assessment and placement role, it was reasonable to make some conclusions about the overall approach to rationing of homelessness services within that local authority, and as such allowing for limited comparison between local authorities, as each member of staff made decisions for a considerable number of people trying to access services through their particular local authority. As such the individual workers represented a considerable portion of the overall local authority approach to assessment and placement. Likewise, it was possible to make local authority level comparisons where

responses related to something external to the frontline workers and their decisions, for example the availability of a particular service or the approach of their manager to granting discretion.

The third limitation is related to the research method. Lipsky's (1980) work, and much of the influential street-level research that came after him (For examples see: Brodkin, 1997; Cowan *et al*, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Evans, 2016b; Scourfield, 2015) was carried out using observational methods, often in combination with interviews. However, observation was not used in this research for two reasons. Firstly, from the outset (and partially based on past research experience) it was clear that engagement of the research population was going to be difficult. It was a concern that local authorities would be reluctant to engage with a topic that is so highly politicised. In addition, there was potential that access could be denied to all workers within a particular local authority if the unit manager was not happy about some element of the research. This was especially worrying with regard to the larger city councils were access to a large proportion of an already small and hard-to-reach research population could be lost. For these reasons, it was surmised, based on discussions with both supervisors and key informants that the less intrusive the research methods were, the more likely that frontline workers would agree to participate. Secondly, even if the local authorities had agreed to an observation study, it was important to consider the fact that the subject matter was extremely personal, stressful and often traumatic for the people and families who presented to the local authorities. As this research is the first of its kind in Ireland, it was not felt that this level of intrusion – when people were likely to be experiencing significant stress – was necessary to facilitate the production of research to a high standard with meaningful results. Rather, the semi-structured interviews provided good quality data that focused on the ways that the frontline workers perceived their workplace 'reality' with regard to the discretion available to them for assessing people who present to them as homeless, as well as placing them in homeless accommodation when they were deemed eligible. The focus was on their 'constructed' realities which could be sufficiently explored through talk with these street-level bureaucrats. Although observation is very often used in street-level bureaucracy research, it is not fundamental and examples of good quality SLB research where different methods have been used are easily sourced (For some examples see: Alden,

2014; Bergen and While, 2005; Bracci, 2014; Carson *et al,* 2015; Hunter *et al.*, 2016; Jessen and Tufte, 2014)

4.5 Conclusion

Although comprehensive in its scope, this chapter has presented a clear and easily evaluable methodology, including both the research strategy and process for undertaking and analysing the fieldwork associated with this thesis. The aim of the chapter was to make clear the research intentions, epistemological and ontological underpinnings, as well as the impact of these on the way that the fieldwork and analysis were carried out. The implications of taking an interpretive stance to the research was discussed, as was the impact of structuring the research and analysis based on the ideals of social constructionism. Having discussed the data collection techniques in detail, considerable discussion was included around the data analysis process, which constitutes an important, yet often absent component of the methodology chapter. Finally, the research limitations were outlined. The following chapters will outline the results that have been generated through carrying out this methodological process.

Chapter 5: The working environment for street level bureaucrats in homeless service administration

5.1 Introduction

Context is fundamental to an understanding of street-level bureaucracies and the street-level bureaucrats that work within them. As Lipsky explains:

> The persistence of rigid and unresponsive patterns of behavior results from street-level bureaucrats' substantial discretion, exercised in a particular work context. Like other policy makers, they operate in an environment that conditions the way they perceive problems and frame solutions to them. The work environment of street-level bureaucrats is structured by common conditions that give rise to common patterns of practice and affect the direction these patterns take (2010, p. 27).

As such, this chapter will outline both the environment in which the SLBs involved in this research undertake their often stressful and challenging roles, as well as outlining both their discretionary environment and the ways that they use this discretion. As Lipsky's framework is very comprehensive in its scope, a selection of the concepts that he discussed in his work will be used as a means to discuss the findings of this research in this and the following two chapters, alongside a consideration of the theory around rationing of resources as was discussed in section 3.4.

The chapter will begin by outlining the role and experience of those who participated in the study in section 5.2. The training and other supports that they have received for carrying out their role will be discussed in this section as well. Some of the interviewees described ways that they gain satisfaction from their job. However, they were more vocal in their discussions around the stresses related to the role than job satisfaction, both of which will be discussed in section 5.3. Additionally, the frustrations and challenges associated with carrying out the role will be outlined in section 5.4.

Underlying both the primary and secondary rationing of homeless services is the discretionary environment in which the frontline workers involved in this research work. It is important to differentiate between discretion as it is granted to frontline workers and discretion as it is used by them (Hupe, 2013). Thus, section 5.5 will discuss the discretionary environment (*discretion-as*-granted) in which the interviewees work, followed by a discussion around how they use this discretion to gate-keep or act as a gateway to services (*discretion-as-used*) in section 5.6. Finally, issues which impact how the frontline workers make these decisions around access to services will be discussed in section 5.7.

5.2 The street-level bureaucrats' role, experience and job support

This chapter on SLBs will begin with a discussion around the frontline workers' role, followed by an examination of their experience and training. After this, the process of organisational socialisation through peer structures and on the job training will be addressed. Finally, this section will outline the supports described by SLBs for undertaking their role.

5.2.1 The frontline workers role

Although the overall range of tasks required to be undertaken by the research participants varied, all of them were involved with the assessment and/or placement of people who presented to the local authority as homeless. Generally, the frontline workers described their jobs as being varied with no typical day, as the people who presented to them from different situations were in need of different responses:

> *No day is the same, like…Appointments after appointments, yeah. And then we try and keep, you know, a couple of hours for admin in the evening, but then you're just dealing with people that walk in off the street, a lot of telephone calls. It doesn't stop, like* (APO[3] urban and rural).

[3] The role titles varied slightly between local authorities but the catch-all title of Assessment and Placement Officer (APO) is used for this study (non-supervisory roles).

Along with their involvement in assessment and placement, which included a specified amount of time each day rostered to be on the public counter or at scheduled appointments, the participants described other elements to their role which often differed between workers. For example, some workers described spending much of their time on administrative tasks such as completing reports for management or the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, whilst three described more of a focus on increasing homeless exits through working to build relationships with landlords. For the four participants who had frontline supervisory roles, their additional work tended to focus on the tasks associated with managing staff.

5.2.2 Experience and training

The length of time that the research participants had worked in the homeless units varied from a few months to 18 years. Likewise, the training and work experience of those undertaking the role of assessment and placement varied between local authorities. In some local authorities these workers were required to have a minimum of a social care background. Whereas in most, the workers generally had an administrative background; with some coming from housing within the local authority and others from areas unrelated to housing or homelessness. Of those that had worked in a different section of the local authority before taking this role in the homeless unit, most described their current role as being more stressful and busy than their previous one. The stress associated with the role will be discussed in more detail in section 5.3.

When asked about the training that they received in relation to carrying out their specific role, most of the participants described this as either entirely absent or minimal and related to undertaking customer service elements such as dealing with aggressive customer behaviour. Many of the tasks that these frontline workers described have features one might associate more with a social care or related background than an administrative one. One participant described the benefits of having a social care background whilst acknowledging the difficulties of the role whatever the workers background:

> *Everyone's very vulnerable. But it doesn't prepare you for kind of incidents that happen or anything like that. Like we press the panic button here like ten*

times a month….So being prepared for that, no. But definitely for working with vulnerable individuals, yeah, I definitely think so, yeah (APS[4] urban).

Another participant, who had a background in administration but had undertaken some training related to working in homelessness outside of the local authority and on their own initiative, described the training that they received in-house for undertaking a role that they describe as emotionally demanding:

Interviewer: Did you receive any training for this role at all specific to this—

APO urban: Not about how to deal with people. All the training was procedures, policies, everything, you know, how to do this and do this and look at this and assess income. Not about—

Interviewer: The technical kind of stuff?

APO urban: Mm—not about a person presenting. And like if you go into the hatch, like, in our storeroom there's boxes and boxes, I mean big cardboard boxes, for tissues. We all have tissues on our desk, like, because most of the time, like, people are distraught. So you don't learn how to deal with that (APO urban).

A small number of the interviewees stated that they have received some mental health training, such as suicide awareness, whereas others stated that they had not received any mental health training, even though they described having to often deal with people presenting who have a range of mental health difficulties. Overall, the participants stated that although they had received training for *elements* of the role, none felt that they had received *comprehensive* training specific to the role:

Like we would do things like suicide awareness courses and—yeah, you would be sent to training, but nothing particular. Like nobody is trained to work in homeless services…It's like you're learning on the spot (APS urban).

Some of the frontline workers believed that further training would be useful as they felt that the needs of those presenting were more complex than some frontline workers were trained to deal with:

[4] Participants with a supervisory role are categorised as Assessment and Placement Supervisors (APS) for the purposes of the study.

> *Before, housing was about the bricks and mortar, if you know what I mean, and you dealt with clients, but, you know, the complexities were nowhere what they are now…And I suppose my point in that is if you're an administrator in the local authority, you signed up to be an administrator, you signed up to allocate houses…and next you're dealing with agencies who speak a different language…So I just feel like housing is turning into two things. It's managing bricks and mortar but it's also managing complex situations. And in any other sphere you have trained staff to deal with it. I don't feel local authorities are anywhere near that* (APS rural)

However, others felt that there was no training that could prepare them for dealing with the different situations that they are faced with daily, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> *Now, while there are training courses on how to deal with aggressive behaviour, there's no paperwork in the world that can tell me how to deal with somebody that's presenting as homeless. You can take them over to an office and you can remove the barriers as such, but they're still going to let you have it. So it doesn't matter what kind of training structure's in place and supports are in place. Unfortunately you're just going to have to take it on the chin* (APO urban).

In place of structured formal training for the role, most of the training described was on-the-job training provided by the previous person to hold the position and/or other members of the team, which constitute a form of organisational socialisation into the role. This will be discussed in the following section.

5.2.3 Organisational socialisation, on-the-job training and the peer structures

As the definition of homelessness that is used in practice is not formalised in the sense that there are no written guidelines formulating it, a process of organisational socialisation was central to new workers learning how to undertake the role (Borrelli, 2021). This happened through learning how to be frontline workers from their new colleagues and those who carried out the role before them. One important way that

this was achieved was through watching co-workers in their interactions with the people who present as homeless. The following excerpt provides an illustration of organisational socialisation as the worker explains how the perspective of those with a background in housing dominates in their unit's approach to homelessness as newer members of the team eventually 'embrace' it:

> *...anybody with a housing background that is up there kind of comes at it from that point of view. There may be other people coming from—like somebody else from a different—from outside of housing, outside the local authority, and they may have a different perspective. But I suppose anybody who kind of understands the way the housing works we'd all have that kind of mind-set...I suppose after a while you don't buy into it, but you kind of I suppose you just kind of embrace it and you kind of get more of an understanding for it, you know* (APO urban).

An example of the impact of this socialisation was evident in an exchange with one of this interviewee's relatively new co-workers who described wrestling with the conflict between their 'left-leaning' values and the requirements of 'working for the man':

> *... I'm a, I'm a cog in the machine like you know? And you can't be, you can't get personal about it because that's not my role you know? I wish I could but I'd be quite left-leaning, I'd be quite socially minded and, and here I am working for the man and you know I'm trying to get numbers down you know? It is frustrating but at the same time I'm confident that there is nobody who has come to the counter who hasn't been offered some accommodation you know? Some people might not like the accommodation being offered, which can be a problem you know? That's one of the major issues. But, if, generally if we fig –, think that somebody is going to be on the street tonight we'll put, we'll offer them somewhere* (APO urban)

The worker's description illustrates how they were able to align their values with the need to make gatekeeping decisions through the narrow understanding of homelessness which was focused on rooflessness. This focus on rooflessness allowed them to believe that they always helped those who were most in need, as they would always offer some form of accommodation if they thought a person would end up on the street without it. Additionally, the frontline worker described their values as an

individual, but described their workplace decisions in the collective through the use of 'we', thus distancing themselves from decisions somewhat. As Lipsky explains, the work setting is an extremely powerful agent in 'professional socialization' making it very rare for a newcomer to be able to assert an unpopular or unsanctioned value. Thus they are educated in what is considered acceptable, appropriate and what will enhance their careers within the street level bureaucracy, which has a significant impact on their future professional behaviour (Lipsky, 2010).

The process of seeking advice from co-workers continued long after their initial training period as the participants described how they rely on their colleagues for advice when they were unsure about a case. For some participants, this process was very important as it ensured that they were *'on the same page'* (APO urban) when it came to dealing with homeless presentations. However, despite the examples of socialisation into the role described previously, this process did not always result exclusively in assimilation from more experienced workers to the newer ones. Rather a small number described a process of mutual influence (Berkelaar and Harrison, 2019) as opposed to workers passively adopting the processes of those who worked there before them:

> *APS urban and rural: Having worked together now for nearly the bones of two years, we're pretty much on the same page.*
>
> *Interviewer: And you think that's something that's developed over time?*
>
> *APS urban and rural: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Oh, absolutely. You know, it's like I said to you earlier. I'm learning from them, they're learning from me. Have they changed my view about things? Yes, they have. Have I softened in some ways? Yes, I have. Have they hardened in some ways? Yes, they have. You know, it's—but, yeah, it's definitely developed without a doubt* (APS urban and rural).

Co-workers provided more than just training for these frontline workers when they started their new role, as almost every interviewee spoke about the strength of their team and the importance of co-worker support in doing their job. Although the interviewees tend to work in isolation, they still seek and receive support from their peers. During the interviews, the conversations about co-workers were

overwhelmingly positive when it came to the ways that the workers supported each other in carrying out their role:

> *You take a lot of abuse. You know, people have had their lives threatened. We get called every name under the sun on a frequent basis. So it's difficult enough. But, I mean, it's a great team and I honestly do think that if the team didn't pull together so well and work so well together it would be a very difficult job* (APS urban).

This peer support included providing an environment in which people were comfortable to let off steam after a particularly difficult encounter, or were able to 'debrief' (APO urban and rural) after an interaction with a member of the public:

> *And, look, the office is very casual. There's a lot of like people can come in and they can just start cursing afterwards and we're happy to open that—everyone can be themselves in our office and I think you need that. You can just—people can just get out their frustration when they come out or it's just like "I'm going out for a walk". That's no problem at all. There's a lot of freedom in terms of that because it isn't easy* (APS urban).

Co-worker support was often sought so that a frontline worker felt confident that they were making the right decision. As they had to make many decisions each day most, although not all, felt it would be inappropriate to check the validity of these decisions with management. Therefore, they used each other as a means to validate instead:

> *But look, this team is really good, so you do get a good bit of support. And when [my co-worker is] here as well, we can bounce things off each other* (APO rural).

> *That's one thing about this place, I have to say. And even though you know the answer—you're on the counter, even though you know the answer, and there's people working up there eight, nine years, I still hear them asking the same questions. Everyone bounces off each other* (APO urban).

Some of the interviewees spoke about their belief that working closely with their team in this way, through discussing their decisions with each other, ensured a level of consistency as they felt that similar decisions would be made by different members of the team if they were faced with the same case:

> *I think it's important to try and keep us all in the loop because we're all going to be probably dealing with this person so that there is, that everyone is on the same page and everyone knows the story with this person* (APO Urban).

Although the frontline workers felt that peer support ensured a level of consistency across the team, differences in approach were apparent between some frontline workers in the local authorities where multiple staff were interviewed. For example, differences in level of trust towards people presenting as homeless which are outlined in section 6.2.1.

5.2.4 Additional staff supports: team meetings, counselling and structured supervision

As well as the supports that they received from each other, some of the interviewees spoke about additional supports available to them from the local authority. These varied widely between the local authorities in which the participants worked, as did the interviewees' propensity to use them. At a minimum in all of the local authorities from which participants were interviewed, along with the informal support described above, there were more formalised team meetings held regularly (daily or weekly) in which cases and decisions could be discussed amongst the whole team. Another layer of support described by the interviewees included that which they received from their immediate supervisors/managers, especially when it came to making difficult decisions or dealing with threatening or abusive behaviour. However, there was a sense from some that the further you went up the chain of command or outside of the homeless unit, the less supported the staff felt in undertaking their role, as these managers were less likely to *'fight our corner'* (APO urban):

> *I suppose if people have a very bad day in work where they're, you know, shouted at and screamed at and called every name under the sun, we do incident reports, but staff would say to me, 'I do an incident report, but I never get anything back from anybody about it'. Nobody ever comes back to me and says to me, like, 'What's it like to be called "you ugly cunt"?'—or whatever you're going to be called, you know, on a daily basis…And then, you know, recently some lad was going and saying he was going to come out with a*

gun…So that was pretty traumatic for the staff member involved…she just felt when she put that initially in a report and sent it up, as we're supposed to do, through the channels, nobody at a senior level contacted her (APS urban).

Access to a specified number of counselling sessions per year for frontline staff was offered in two of the local authorities included in the research. Interestingly, in one of the local authorities almost all of the staff have availed of these. Whereas in another local authority, from which the interviewees described experiencing a high level of abuse and threatening behaviour, none of the four interviewees included in the study had availed of these sessions. For these workers, the lack of take up of support services may be related more to the attitude within the unit to the need for additional support or their perceptions around counselling, than to the high level of stress experienced in the job as section 5.3 will illustrate. Interviewees from two of the local authorities included in the research stated that they received structured supervision. In one of the local authorities it was considered part of the role, with sessions held once a month and was described as being very useful by the two participants who worked there. In the other local authority, although it was called supervision, what was essentially described was counselling sessions more in-line with those outlined above. The interviewee who worked in the local authority where this was offered said that take-up was very low of this service, but that was due to the people not liking the style of this particular counsellor. Overall, the support services offered were varied and patchy, despite a high level of work related stress being described by the interviewees, which will be outlined in the following section.

5.3 Job satisfaction and job related stress

Despite the generally stressful nature of their role in assessment and placement, some of the interviewees spoke about the ways that they derived job satisfaction from undertaking their work. Generally this sense of satisfaction came from the fact that there were sometimes tangible results and the general feeling that you were helping people. Three of the interviewees described this satisfaction as being linked to helping those they deemed to be genuinely homeless:

> *Like it's lovely to feel you help someone's life. Like we get thank you cards in here from clients, flowers delivered, chocolates. Like when you see vulnerable individuals or individuals that you know are genuinely homeless, like—we've people that are 70 years, 65 years of age, rented for 30 years and the landlord just decided to up the rent… They never went on a social housing list. They've nothing. They just rent and they're happy for their life and now they find themselves homeless. You know, and you just—you just—it can feel really good when you do—when you help people, but sometimes the negative outweighs the positives* (APS urban).

This frontline worker gained satisfaction through their perception of genuineness and deservingness based on a person's past dependency on social housing, with those who have been able to provide for themselves in the past being viewed more favourably and sympathetically. Another of the frontline worker described job satisfaction both in terms of helping those who they perceive as deserving and gatekeeping from those who they feel are not:

> *Yeh, it's great when you see a family that you have been involved with that get that house and get themselves out of homelessness. Its, you're going 'ah good for them, well done' and then on the other side of someone who is not playing ball at all and you get, go, no listen we are not providing accommodation for you, off you go, you know that you guarded the gate that way, there is great satisfaction out of that* (APO urban).

In contrast, for another of the interviewees the satisfaction was derived from helping those who are often the most difficult to assist due to the complexity of their needs. For this frontline worker, there was satisfaction in helping people who could be turned away from service due to their past behaviour which resulted in them getting barred from hostels:

> *So we're not just saying, right, you're barred for three months, go away, I can't help you. There's something we can do. There's something we can offer. So there's a lot more satisfaction in that* (APS urban and rural).

Despite describing some satisfaction, the participants were more vocal in discussing the stresses involved in the role. Almost all of the frontline workers described the role as one that could be very stressful:

> *By far and away the most stressful role I've have ever had* (APO urban).

> *And we do have challenging clients and we have people doing, you know, having kind of meltdowns in front of us. And it's difficult and it's stressful, but we have to deal with it* (APS urban and rural).

There were many elements to the role that were discussed as contributing to this feeling of stress. For example, some of the workers found it difficult to separate their work and home life. Rather, they felt that the mental load of dealing with vulnerable and sometimes abusive people throughout the day meant that it was hard to leave it all behind when they returned home. For others however, they felt that this got easier with experience and time:

> *…when I went home, it was just like, "Oh, my God, you won't believe the day I'm after having, like, what happened." Those stories became less and less and less even though they were still occurring. I think you just learn to accept it and deal with it* (APO urban).

Other stressful elements that were addressed in the interviews included, but were not limited to, dealing with very high volumes of people presenting, especially in local authorities where the participants felt that more staff were required; hearing the (often traumatic) stories of the people who presented as homeless; dealing with people who had a high level of need for mental health services and the fallout of this if they experienced a mental health crisis such as attempting or committing suicide; the responsibility associated with making decisions that can have such a significant impact on a person's life; and dealing with families with children, especially if the parents appeared to be dependent on alcohol or drugs. Alongside this was the worry of experiencing threatening or abusive behaviour.

> *I think you kind of—initially, at the start, I found it very hard because it was new and it was different. Now we kind of put up bit of a wall, you get a bit harder, and you just move on. But sometimes it can be quite intimidating when it's face-to-face. Like I've been threatened to get my eyelids slit, you know, to get my family. They'll tell me exactly what car I'm driving, what time I leave work at, what time I come into work at. They'll tell me that I walked through [omitted name of area]. They know a lot of details about you. And even though it's just words, that's more intimidating than anything…It's the fear that it can*

> *put on people. Like we've had people haven't worked for a couple of weeks due to fear* (APS urban).

> *I had a really bad situation a few weeks ago with a client, screaming at me. You know like, trying to pull my computer out…Oh I've had somebody threaten to drive their car through city hall and run me over like. Its, it gets crazy sometimes down there you know* (APO urban).

Soon after the research participant from the second quote made the statement describing some of the abuse that they had encountered at the public counter, very loud shouting could be heard from downstairs[5] in the public section of the local authority, to which they stated:

> *Yeah, like I'm fairly sure that's one of ours, you know? You would be very confident* (APO urban).

For this worker, the most likely scenario that someone would get abusive at the public counters was that they were dealing with someone from the homeless unit. Indeed, working the public counter (or interview rooms where relevant) was described as the primary locus of the stressful and/or abusive encounters between the frontline staff and the people who presented as homeless.

> *And then you're rostered on the counter, so like you need to make sure—me personally, I make sure that I have something to eat. I make sure I watch myself, my own emotions, have I had enough sleep? Because if you don't, if you go in there and you're not right, it's just going to blow up, you know, between you might get somebody who has serious mental health, you might get somebody who's in dire straits, or you might get someone who's just really angry* (APO urban).

In recognising this, managers usually try to limit the amount of time that any one worker has to spend each day on the counter. The research participants felt that this respite was necessary in order that they could continue to do their job and not get burned out:

[5] This interview took place at the local authority offices.

> *And sometimes what we would say to the front desk staff is…take respite from this today, you're off it. Because it is, it's constant…but we would have other staff would step in for a morning…because you can't do it—no matter how good you are, you cannot sit there five days a week every day you're inside here, and you shouldn't* (APS rural).

Additionally, many of the workers outlined how their managers supported them to take a short break from the counter if they had had a particularly stressful or abusive encounter, in order that they could decompress before meeting the next person. Some of the interviewees described how their homeless unit tried to stick mainly to an appointment-based system as opposed to a walk-in public counter. One of the participants who used this system described how it was beneficial to the staff as it gave some breathing space for the workers after an abusive encounter:

> *There's an awful lot of abuse in the role, verbal abuse in the role…it's tough to deal with, like it is. But again I think because the fact that it's appointment-based you get that opportunity to breathe after* (APO urban and rural).

How the frontline workers dealt with these stresses differed between interviewees. Two of the research participants believed that because staff in their particular homeless units generally had a background in social care, they had a high level of skill in de-escalating incidents during the assessment process and thus relieving some of the stress associated with the role. However, for others the stresses proved to be too much and some participants spoke about the impact this had on themselves and some of their co-workers. As one supervisor described:

> *So I suppose if you're getting phone calls like that and you're having a difficult day anyway—like, I mean, staff would say to me, "I'm going to look for a transfer out of this place. Like I'm getting paid the same as everybody else in the Council gets paid and yet I have to take this sort of abuse." And…since I've been there, four-and-a-half years…there's been four people who came into the section. Two tried to struggle on, but it was obvious that they just weren't—it wasn't working at all. And two just outright said after a couple of weeks, "I'm not doing this job. I can't do it, I can't do it"* (APS urban).

Another issue that some of the research participants' felt impacted stress levels was staffing in the homeless units. Some of the research participants felt that they had an

adequate level of staff, whereas other felt that they were short staffed. Of those that felt short staffed, some explained how they believed that the staff levels were impacted by a reluctance of people to work within the homeless unit:

> *And we also have massive staff shortage. No one wants to work here* (APS urban).
>
> *So it's not that easy to get staff to work in this section* (APS urban).

Whereas for others, it was more of a human resources issue as they believed that there was no desire to employ more people within the homeless unit. One of the participant's described the difference that hiring additional staff has made to their ability to carry out their role:

> *Well, the biggest impact so far this year was the hiring of all the new staff, like. That made a huge difference to us. I mean, at one stage I was coming in at 7 o'clock and leaving around 10 o'clock every evening, like, you know, and that's not sustainable, like, you know. So for me the biggest resource has been staff, like* (APO urban).

The working conditions made for a stressful workplace for many of the frontline workers, where some described having to put up with threats and abuse on a daily basis. As well as describing these stresses related to dealing with the public, additional frustrations and challenges were described that were related to access to accommodation and services. These will be discussed in the following section.

5.4 The challenge of resources

When asked about resources availability a range of challenges were discussed by the interview participants. Most spoke about three areas: frustration around opportunities for people to exit homelessness, availability of emergency accommodation and health service inadequacies.

5.4.1 Opportunities to exit homelessness

The main challenges outlined in relation to opportunities to exit homeless accommodation were focused on availability of properties and the level of HAP caps. Single people were seen as being particularly difficult to rehouse due to both a shortage of appropriate accommodation for them and affordability:

> *Like the hardest people to get rid of are the singles because there isn't one bed properties around the place. That's all they are approved for housing. So for HAP, even if there was one-bed properties around the place the rate, the HAP rate is fairly low. So they are the hardest ones to get rid of* (APO urban).

However, there were also issues for accommodating families and couples due to a general shortage of affordable private rented accommodation. The reliance on the private rental market was described by some as problematic due to lack of available properties:

> *The main challenge is, is moving people on into private rented accommodation because the accommodations aren't there, that is the biggest problem and every local authority will tell you the same thing* (APO rural).

Accommodation issues other than accessing the private rental market were also discussed, with some interviewees focusing on frustrations with issues in housing more generally:

> *I'm withered of hearing about it on the news, on the whatever, and nothing is happening. Like I suppose being here I'm getting frustrated, you know what I mean, with like why aren't houses being built? Why are the caps still the same? It's the same arguments we're having for the last like ten years or whatever and nothing is happening and it's frustrating, you know what I mean* (APO urban and rural).

Only one of the interviewees felt that the availability of accommodation for social tenants was not a major problem and that there was sufficient available online through choice-based lettings, but that people were not applying for them:

> *But generally too, I suppose, the housing provision is great now. You know, we're building houses. And like just to give you an insight, we have houses available in a certain part of the county and we hardly get applicants for them. People are not taking them. They're not going onto choice-based lettings. Now, whether that's out of ignorance or whether they're making that decision* (APO urban and rural).

This interviewee believed that the issues of moving people on from homeless services were because of individual problems of service users rather than more structural ones associated with housing provision:

> *Like they're on about building houses, hundreds and thousands of houses. I don't think that will cure homelessness. I don't think it will. It's the addictions, the alcohol. You know, that's a separate thing altogether, you know* (APO urban and rural).

Even when HAP tenancies became available for a potential tenant, sometimes issues associated with take-up could arise, which the interviewees found challenging to deal with. The first issue was the reluctance of some people to enter HAP tenancies because of negative experiences in the private rental market or due to a preference for local authority managed social housing, which is viewed as more secure:

> *I suppose basically, to be honest with you, I suppose everybody's probably saying just build more social housing. I mean, like all this thing about—like you can understand some people. They've gone from private rented to private rented to private rented and they'd often say to us, 'Look, I just want my forever home.' That is understandable, you know. They don't want to have to keep moving and be at a landlord's whim as to when, you know, they're going to be told to leave or whatever* (APS urban).

The second issue was the level of the HAP limits which were viewed as being too far below the market rent by the vast majority of those interviewed. For some people to take up a HAP tenancy and make up the shortfall between the rent amount and the HAP limit would leave them with little or no income:

> *There's no movement because of obviously the rent crisis and the HAP. No one wants to take HAP…The rents are too high, the rent caps are too low* (APO urban and rural).

> *In relation to the finances from my own personal side of it the HAP limits are a joke, asking people to go out and find properties at the HAP limits. I don't really know how we're doing it, you know? And we're not in most cases; we're asking tenants to top up. And that's very unfair because while HAP is considered a social housing support equal to any other one, it's not equal to any other one, like. The financial implications being a tenant under HAP are completely different to being a RAS tenant or a local authority tenant* (APO urban).

It is important to note that most of the frontline workers involved in this research were not directly involved with sourcing longer term standard housing for people who were using homeless services. However, they were acutely aware of the problem of exiting homelessness as the longer people spent in emergency accommodation, the less accommodation they had available for new presentations. To counter the lack of longer term move-on some of the frontline workers outlined strategies that their local authority was using to try and alleviate the problem of people getting trapped in TEA or STA. What they described was the development of a form of temporary housing, labelled by some as transitional housing, which could involve a person being housed in either a leased or local authority owned property on a temporary basis. However, the people accommodated this way did not enjoy the tenancy rights owed through HAP or as a local authority tenant. However, one participant that was involved with Place Finder as part of their role explained how the sheer volume of people using homeless services meant that it was extremely challenging to try and impact the number of people in emergency accommodation through HAP tenancies:

> *Yeah, and I suppose every time I feel that I've housed someone, there's two more coming in, you know. You're always—it's an uphill struggle and it doesn't seem to be easing any amount, like, you know* (APO urban).

Although the HAP limits were viewed as being inadequate, the higher rate of discretionary HAP was not viewed favourably by all of the frontline workers as they viewed it as a pull factor attracting people to present as homeless when the frontline

workers felt that they were not genuinely homeless. This is discussed in detail in section 6.2.2.2

5.4.2 Resources for homeless service provision: financial resources and emergency accommodation

In general, the frontline workers felt that they had significant financial resources available to them when it came to the provision of emergency accommodation. As one frontline worker put it:

> *Yeah well financial resources definitely we have, you know I think we essentially have a blank cheque for private accommodation you know, within reason* (APO urban).

There was a sense among many of the participants that no matter how much had to be spent on emergency accommodation, the expenditure would be paid by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Despite the availability of a significant amount of funds for emergency accommodation, there remained the general inclination within the public sector to gate-keep and ration public funds, with one worker describing a feeling that the purse strings were beginning to be pulled tighter:

> *I suppose we never felt that there was really a financial implication until fairly recently with the—now, I know they're forty million overspent on their budget and they have been saying reduce the accommodation financially and obviously reduce numbers by 20%. So I do feel that lately the finances are coming into it a bit more, which maybe it shouldn't, you know. We shouldn't be worried about oh, my God, we can't afford to keep people, you know, or we'll have to start looking at that* (APO urban).

In addition to discussions around financial resources, the frontline workers spoke about resources in terms of the emergency accommodation that these finances paid for. There were differences between the interviewees in terms of whether they described the available emergency accommodation resources as adequate:

> *I think in terms of accommodation, I mean, from the level to which I see it I think we certainly are at a place now where there is enough emergency accommodation for singles and couples* (APO urban).

Or whether they were viewed as inadequate:

> *Yeah, you could open up another couple of hostels in the city, like, definitely. There's definitely a lack. There's a lack for the youth anyway* (APO urban and rural).

Overall, there was generally a desire to eliminate the use of PEA and use TEA or STA in place of it, or family hubs where children were involved:

> *Ideally we'd have another family hub, if not two. So that we wouldn't have any families in B&B* (APO urban).

Where multiple people were interviewed from a local authority, their views of services as adequate or inadequate were fairly consistent across the team. Where services were deemed to be inadequate, the most commonly cited forms of services that were seen as being in short supply, was accommodation for single women, family hubs or accommodation and support services for people with mental health issues and/or complex needs:

> *We've loads of kids on the spectrum, autistic kids. We haven't a clue what to do with them. We've nowhere to put them…We kind of like we come together as a group. Maybe a supervisor might get involved as well at that point, say, look, what are we going to do? We ring everybody, ring every hub, begging them can you take them, have you got room?* (APO urban)

A small number of the frontline workers mentioned that even where there was adequate accommodation in terms of number of rooms available, it did not always meet the needs of those who required it:

> *We have a lot of accommodation. The only other resources I suppose we're screaming out for at the moment is wheelchair-accessible rooms. Single rooms. Fridges—but I'm getting them put in for people with insulin, to put their insulin in. We have a lot of facilities but not—we have a lot of accommodation, but not all of them have cooking facilities. So we'd provide*

> *the individuals with the food, and that can be hard for people that are different nationalities, like the Muslim religion. They want to cook their own food—which is absolutely fine* (APS urban).

When the frontline workers were asked how they cope if the demand for accommodation is higher than the supply of accommodation on a given day, there were some similarities in their responses. Many of the research participants' descriptions illustrated clearly the difference in approach to singles (or couples without children) and families (with children), which will be outlined in more detail in section 7.2. Although most participants stated that they tried their best to never have to turn people away, there were accounts of offering single people a sleeping bag on occasions where all the services were full. The situation for families was different as the approach described was to never turn away a family with children.

For families and single people who were considered vulnerable, some of the frontline workers described situations where they worked hard to source accommodation for them when all the section 10 funded accommodation and local PEA was full. For some this meant looking much further afield to source PEA, whereas other described situations where they have tried to book accommodation online for a person who had nowhere to go:

> *There's nothing you can do and you have to stay late till you've found something…Like we've been on booking.com. I was even trying to set up an Airbnb account one evening…Obviously it's not possible because a corporation can't set up an Airbnb account. I was half toying with using my own one, and then that's not feasible either, you know. But you just have to keep ringing and ringing and looking online until you find something and you will stay until it's found, like. And that has happened not regularly now, but on occasion, yeah* (APO urban).

The same frontline worker described with empathy, situations where they had to source accommodation in different counties on the rare occasion when nothing was available within their county:

> *It's difficult, like. And especially because it might be that family's first stay in homeless services as well and—this is a very bad service, like, you know. What a horrible day for that person, you know. They've just become homeless and*

> *now you're asking them to get on a bus and ship out of the county, like, you know, or even ship out to the county in [omitted name of area] or whatever, yeah* (APO urban).

This compassion was evident from other interviewees who described discomfort in having to turn people away due to a lack of accommodation.

Another approach described by some of the frontline workers in dealing with a situation where demand for emergency accommodation was higher than the supply on a given day, was to give the presenting person the option of self-accommodation. This was where a person was told to find their own accommodation in a B&B or hotel and it was paid for by the local authority. However, most of the local authorities involved in the interviews that had used this approach were in the process of phasing it out or used it only as an absolute last resort. An additional strategy to source accommodation described by a small number of the frontline workers involved moving people around in the different accommodation types in order to make space for a person to enter TEA. This usually involved looking to see who might be able to get moved from TEA in to STA and could involve a person from STA being sourced more permanent or independent accommodation. In essence, it meant moving people up a 'staircase' of accommodation (Sahlin, 2005) in order to make room at the bottom rung (TEA) for the newly presenting person who needed to be accommodated.

A final challenge that was mentioned by most of the participants with regard to accommodation issues was trying to accommodate people who have been barred from services. The way homeless services are set up means that people do not have the same rights as they would as a tenant, as they are generally licensees. Therefore, it is easy to exclude people from a service due to their behaviour. This leaves the frontline workers in the challenging position of trying to accommodate these people elsewhere:

> *Well, look, there's some people you can't put into B&B. Some people are chronic, and because they're repetitive like, more often and not the B&Bs know them and they won't take them. You know, they would have had an incident* (APO urban and rural).

> *And also, I suppose, like, you know, there'd be people getting evicted from hostels. So we're dealing with that and trying to place them somewhere else* (APO urban and rural).

Most of the participants only briefly discussed this issue. However, one participant went into detail about how they try to avoid barring occurring in the first place by matching people to accommodation where they are less likely to get barred:

> *And then if you have someone who might be a bit more chaotic in their life, you might want to find somewhere for them where you don't think they're going to get barred after one night and be back in the following day. You know, you want to match people to accommodation that will be suitable for them for as long as it's possible* (APO urban).

The ease at which a person can be barred from homeless accommodation can leave a person in a situation where they have no option other than staying on the street, as was stated in two of the interviews. As well as these accommodation resource issues outlined by the interviewees, a number of challenges associated with inadequate services were addressed, which will be discussed in the following section.

5.4.3 Service inadequacies: Mental and physical health

Frustrations were voiced with regards to health service inadequacies. There was a feeling among some of the participants that the services that are currently available for homeless people are not adequate to meet the needs of some of those presenting to the local authority with serious mental health issues:

> *Okay, we do have issues in dealing with clients directly from the mental health services. And I know this is a big thing in other local authorities. You know, I'm not going to go into it too deeply, but they have their own lack of resources and services, but homeless services aren't the step-down, you know. And it's an ongoing issue* (APS urban and rural).

> *Another massive shortfall in our resources is around mental health. The toughest cases we've had since we started…have been mental health cases. Like we are not equipped to deal with people with mental health issues (APO urban)*

This could lead to feelings of guilt for some of the frontline workers who were not quite sure how to provide for people with a high level of mental health needs:

> *Like so you feel like it's a fault of your own when you can't provide a service to someone for their level of mental health* (APS urban).

In recognising a need for additional services, some of the participants discussed ideas around what kinds of services they felt were required:

> *If there was more resources for mental health, what kind of halfway houses, you're not quite homeless, you're not quite, you're not bad enough to be sectioned, that would be a game changer* (APO urban).

> *And have some sort of a mental health focused facility that we could refer people to in extreme cases would be huge* (APO urban).

For two of the participants, the lack of community services if a person has been released from a mental health facility posed problems which they felt unable to deal with through the existing service provision, which could lead to a cycle of hospital stays and rough sleeping for some:

> *—one of the things we find very difficult, especially in relation to the singles, is hospitals, like especially our local hospital…they'd be very quick to discharge people who have mental health and addiction issues, and then you have this awful situation where because a person might have such bad mental health issues they go sleeping rough and—and then it's just this thing where they end up being sectioned by the outreach team or something and then they're back in hospital again* (APS urban).

> *I suppose there does need to be a better structure in place for people coming from…the likes of [omitted names of two mental health services], and people that are dealing closely with social workers in terms of mental health and stuff like that. It'd be very difficult for us to accommodate somebody in those kind of situations* (APO urban).

Despite the recognition of the issue of mental health amongst some of the people presenting as homeless, two of the participants were sceptical when people stated that they had mental health issues. For these participants, proof was needed to ensure that

the person was not lying or over-exaggerating mental health issues as a means to access accommodation:

> *Sometimes, if it was a mental health issue that somebody was being asked to leave the family home due to mental health issues, we may require consultants' reports; something substantial. I mean, a doctor's letter isn't going to kind of cut it. I mean, you can go in and say you're feeling a bit down or whatever and the doctor will write it down for you, unfortunately…So we would require something more substantial. Something like a consultant's report would be what we'd be looking for* (APO urban).

> *So like when someone tells you they are depressed now everyone just goes, you roll your eyes because they all are. Now when you actually, when someone pulls out a bag of pills then you kind of go, oh you really are and they're, those ones tend to be absolute bonkers* (APO urban)

As well as feelings of frustration around the inadequacy of mental health services, a small number of the participants spoke about issues for accommodating people with other health issues. For these participants, homeless services were not appropriate for some service users with health issues but like with mental health, they felt that the service or accommodation that these people needed was not available so they too ended up in inappropriate homeless accommodation:

> *I think the health service is failing on them, personally…I don't think I should be placing someone that's terminally ill, that's receiving treatment, chemo treatment on a daily basis, that receiving dialysis. They should not be in homeless accommodation…—like we've got people with COPD and they're in accommodation and people are entitled to smoke there* (APS urban).

> *Well, it's quite frustrating because, you know, when you're placing someone and you know you're placing them somewhere that isn't suitable…Or placing, you know, people that have serious medical issues that are placed in a hotel* (APO urban and rural).

Stresses, challenges and frustrations with their role and resource availability impacts the way that frontline workers undertake their street-level work. As well as the impact of some of these more structural issues that were discussed, for example the

availability of appropriate emergency accommodation, the discretionary environment in which they worked had an impact on their street-level interactions. Taken together, resources issues and granted discretion will impact the way that the frontline workers use discretion in their interactions with people who present to them as homeless. Both granted discretion and the use of discretion will be discussed in the following sections.

5.5 Discretionary environment: *Discretion-as-granted*

The frontline workers described the environment in which they carry out their role as one that allows for a considerable amount of discretion in how decisions are made at both a primary and secondary level of rationing**.** At the core of this is an ambiguous statutory definition of homelessness which leaves much to the local authorities in how they decide whether someone is homeless or not. However, in practice most of the interviewees felt that the statutory definition of homelessness had little bearing on their day to day duties, even though the ambiguity it confers followed through to the practices at the frontline. As one worker describes:

> *It's judgement, yeah. I don't know when it started out. There could have been guidelines, like. You know, single people could end up in family accommodation depending on their mental health conditions. You know, so it's about making the right decision, you know. There's nothing wrote down in homeless services, nothing defined, if you have to do A, B or C. So it's all about making decisions* (APO urban).

Despite this recognition of the significant discretion granted to them in carrying out their role, many of the frontline workers described their role as very structured. Yet, in describing different situations and scenarios it was clear that they have little formalised guidelines and a considerable level of autonomy for carrying out their work. Thus, there was a disjuncture between their focus on 'structure' and their assertion that they had a high level of autonomy as presentations needed to be approached on a case-by case basis. The only formal document seen by the researcher which gave structure to the process of assessment was the assessment form. However, the form gathers general information and does not illuminate how decisions are made using this information. Therefore, the structured environment which these frontline

workers stated that they operate within is not open to scrutiny to others outside of this process as it is not outlined in formal guidelines. In this sense, the decision-making environment is an opaque and informal one and depends much upon perceptions of the frontline worker around the person who has presented to them as homeless.

Despite describing their role as very structured, there was a clear preference amongst most of the frontline workers that the discretionary environment in which they had a high level of autonomy remains. In fact, some stated that their job would be impossible without it as they have to make too many decisions daily to have to check them with managers. This was related to their assertion that situations were generally not straightforward in homelessness, with every case having to be considered separately and decisions made on a case-by-case basis. In explaining why they felt that this level of autonomy was important for frontline workers, one supervisor stated:

> *I'll say as a manager I can make any of the decisions. So that's fine. But I try to give all staff the freedom to make their own decisions and not always have to come to me to get clarification or to get the go ahead. I believe if you're in the room and you're the one doing the assessment, it's your call. You're the one that's met the client. You're the one that can identify if they're vulnerable or not. That's your decision. I definitely allow people to give massive freedom to make their own decisions. I think to have to come in and plead their case to me I don't think is right when I'm not the person in doing the assessment* (APS urban).

Although the frontline workers mostly believed that autonomy to make decisions was a necessary element of carrying out their role, most felt that this was carried out within a structure that limited the extent of this discretion. So although there was *'nothing wrote down' (sic)* (APO urban), the workers tended to feel that they were clear on what the parameters of their discretionary judgements were. Some of the interviewees felt that having these parameters within which they could use their discretion provided them with an element of ease in carrying out their role. The reason for this was that they felt it took some of the decision-making responsibility away from them – especially in more difficult cases – and ensured that they would have the support of their colleagues or supervisors once they were working within these frames of reference.

> *I think there's a very clear framework in place that we operate within but within that framework there is room for movement and manoeuvring, which is good. It's good to have the framework and have the hard lines so we know where we stand, you know like and we can, you know, die on those hills you know if we need to…And you know, I know that the rest of the team will stand by those decisions, [my manager] will stand by that decision you know, once it's, once I'm following the hard lines. Within that, there is scope to, you know manoeuvre around it and be a little bit more lenient if you think a case warrants it* (APO urban).

In general, the frontline workers spoke about structure and rules as setting the parameters of their role. However, it was evident that these set parameters around which they worked, for example the rule that they described where singles should not be placed in B&B or hotel accommodation or that someone who is named on a tenancy is not homeless, could be overridden if the frontline worker felt that it was warranted. Usually this happened if they believed that a person was particularly vulnerable, for example if they were older, had medical needs, were perceived to be at risk by remaining in their current accommodation, or it was believed that they would find it difficult to cope in hostel accommodation. So unlike some other areas of welfare, for example income supports, there was more flexibility for these frontline workers in determining whether someone is eligible or not:

> *…we loosely apply rules, I suppose, because we have to have a bit of leeway in the rules, but generally speaking the clients know the rules better than we do in some cases, you know! Again, if a person is in need, we'd always help them. We'll always err on the side of caution, especially if there's children involved. You know, there's so many different categories, you know, with asylum-seekers and, you know, even people coming from…[Northern Ireland]…They're coming from a completely different jurisdiction* (APO urban and rural).

Although the frontline workers described situations within which they had a considerable amount of discretion, these 'rules' provided a means to gate keep resources when people were presenting from particular situations, for example, young people presenting from the family home or those leaving unsuitable housing, which

will be discussed in detail in chapter six. However as mentioned above, the 'rules' were not uniformly applied and the frontline workers were able to use their discretion to circumvent them if they felt that it was warranted.

A small number of the workers spoke about a change in the level of discretion available to them over time. Some felt that as the number of people entering homeless services grew, alongside the high number of people remaining in these services for long periods of time, there were more pressures put on them to strictly follow guidelines so as to better gate-keep services:

> *We used to have a lot more [discretion] than what we do now and I think they pulled it back a little bit. It's because a lot of people got stuck that weren't eligible for any supports…But we do have judgment. We do make calls based on mental health, kids' age, you know, whether or not someone's being discharged from hospital, whether or not they have mobility issues* (APO urban).

> *We like, we still have our definitions and if somebody is entitled to services and requires services, you know we will do our absolute best to find them somewhere you know. But when the department comes in and tells us we have to reduce numbers of people in B&B and hotel accommodation…like we are still dealing with the same number of homeless people coming into us, so we, you know it obviously has an impact, we will have to be a little bit stricter you know? (APO urban).*

Manager involvement in these decisions varied between the local authorities where the participants worked. From some of the interviews it was evident that management style had an impact on the level of discretion that the frontline worker believed they had available to them. Two of the interviewees, who held supervisory roles, stated that they make decisions as a team as opposed to frontline workers making these decisions individually. This was to avoid, as one participant put it, the frontline worker becoming the *'judge, jury, and executioner'* (APS rural), albeit whilst recognising the importance of the involvement of the assessing officer due to their perceptions having met a person face-to-face. However, this was the exception rather than the rule. In contrast to this, other interviewees described situations where they felt that they had a

significant amount of autonomy in making decisions around assessment and placement:

> *So, no, like, my manager doesn't micromanage me and say, why is this person in, why is this person in? Like [they don't] have targets to keep down numbers or anything like that…So, yeah, I don't feel that I'm under like any—like, you know, I have real autonomy in making the decisions, you know* (APO urban and rural).

> *I can use my discretion at any time I wish. You know, I have a boss in this building who trusts me to make the decisions. I'm not micromanaged, so I'm happy enough that I can use my discretion whenever I want* (APS urban and rural).

Interestingly, one interviewee described how they felt that their level of autonomy changed when they had a change of management, reemphasising the impact of management approach on the discretionary environment in which the frontline workers carried out their duties:

> *…I just had a change in management…So up until recently my direct boss would have had a very hands-off approach and just get on with it, you know, and that worked very well. The new person that's the grade—which is administrative officer, is [their] title, [they] would be—…sort of has a more hands-on approach. So sometimes there can be just too many people getting involved in the placement of families. It's not rocket science. It's no big deal. If it doesn't work out, you move people on, you know* (APS urban).

Where considerable autonomy was accorded to the frontline workers, almost all of the interviewees stated that managers were more likely to get involved when discretion was used to offer services to someone who would be otherwise excluded, for example making a case to place a single person in a B&B or placing someone who was already on a tenancy and had not received an NTQ:

> *I would be fully comfortable going to [my manager] too if I felt there was somebody who didn't match out the criteria and [my manager] will say…see if you can convince me why we should take this person in, you know? So there is a bit of leeway there* (APO urban).

> *Yeah, and like we've often—we place without putting it to management, you know what I mean. Sometimes you'd get a rap for something you might—somebody might place, but it's just something you have to take at the time, you know, make that decision. You know, it was an emergency…it'd be just like 'oh, why was it so quick?' as opposed to, you know—because there's so many families in B&B presenting as homeless* (APO urban and rural).

Generally, the frontline workers who spoke about their managers asking questions around certain decisions, felt that they were mostly supported once they could rationalise why they made a decision to place someone outside of the general rules around assessment and placement. When situations were described where management got involved in decisions where someone had been declared ineligible for services, this tended to be as a result of advocacy on behalf of the presenting person by someone from outside the homeless unit, for example a local councillor.

Some interviewees stated that they sought the involvement of management in making decisions when they were unsure of the right course of action. This tended to happen when the worker felt that there was too much responsibility attached to making a certain decision at their grade of employment:

> *And I suppose I'm very lucky with my management here that they're—now, they've given me autonomy, which is good and bad in certain ways because sometimes it's nice to shove things up…But that's not to say I don't pop up every once in a while, say, 'I'm stuck with this one.' And we have that constant conversation* (APS rural).

> *We have autonomy as long as we can carry out our work…But if there's something that we actually have a problem resolving, you go to management or the team* (APO urban and rural)

> *…you would in that case because there's a judgment call to be made that is quite literally above my paygrade, so, that you would want to get that referred* to (APO urban).

Overall, when it came to level of management involvement in decisions, in the local authorities where managers were more involved in the day-to-day assessment and placement decisions, there were fewer people presenting as homeless overall. Whereas

in the local authorities where frontline workers made more autonomous decisions, the number of presentations were much higher. In other words, more discretion was granted when demand for services was higher:

> *I always said that about being a homeless officer. You need that freedom, because…like the amount of presentations that we have on a daily basis* (APO urban and rural).

From the interviews, it was clear that the discretionary environment was one in which the frontline workers had a considerable amount of autonomy in making their decisions, albeit within what they described as set parameters. As the following sections will demonstrate, generally, this discretion was not questioned when used to gate-keep services, indeed it was encouraged by management. However, the parameters of this discretion were more tightly bound when it came to using this discretion to offer a service to someone whose homeless status involved a level of interpretation of their situation (primary rationing), or were generally recommended not to be placed within a particular service/type of accommodation (secondary rationing).

5.6 Street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion: *Discretion-as-used*

Street-level bureaucrats have opportunities to use their discretion in ways that can be viewed positively in the sense that they can potentially use it to grant access to services to a person who may be excluded when more structured guidelines are used to determine eligibility. However, Lipsky (2010) and others (Alden, 2015b; Ellis, 2011; Rashleigh, 2005) have found that the propensity of street-level bureaucrats is to use this discretion in more negative ways in order to gate-keep goods and services as a response to managerial pressures to ration resources, thus keeping people out who may potentially be granted access where more structured eligibility guidelines are used.

This section of the chapter will outline some findings of this research in relation to these uses of discretion. For clarity and ease in outlining the findings related to discretion use in homeless service administration, the sections will be divided into sub-sections focused on ways that the frontline workers use discretion in the negative sense

as outlined above in order to gate-keep resources and in a more positive way in order to act as a gateway to services. It is important to emphasise that these notions of positive or negative use of discretion are related to outcomes for the person attempting to access services as discretion outcomes are subjective in their nature depending on whether they are determined by those experiencing or administering policy. As the concept of discretion runs throughout the thesis, it will be discussed here with reference to the conditions in which frontline workers use their discretion to act as a gatekeeper of, or a gateways to, services for those presenting to the local authority as homeless, illustrating that the predominant province being that of gatekeeper. Although the term 'gateway' as a contrasting metaphor to gatekeeper has not, to the best of the author's knowledge, been used in the literature on street-level bureaucracy (although some research refers to gatekeepers and advocates (Lipsky, 2010; Foster, 1983)), it has been used in education research, (Alice, 2012; Dowd, 2007; Oyelude Adetoun and Bamigbola Murray, 2012; Trudell, 2012). Therefore, this research will present the findings through a gatekeeper/gateway dichotomy to illustrate how people may be excluded from or gain access to homeless services. It is important to note that through its definition, the term gatekeeper can be used to denote both the negative and positive discretion uses of SLBs as it is defined as 'the activity of trying to control who gets particular resources, power, or opportunities, and who does not' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). However, for the purposes of this analysis, in order that the motivations to act in one way or another can be delineated, gatekeeping will denote situations were rationing and discretion are used more negatively in order to keep people out of services, whilst gateway will be used for situations where discretion is used more positively in order to offer services to people who are viewed as exceptional cases.

5.6.1 Frontline workers as gatekeepers

When people present to a local authority as homeless, they can experience gatekeeping at two different points in the process: the point of assessment (primary rationing) and, if deemed eligible, at the point of allocation of services (secondary rationing). In line with previous research, the use of discretion for gatekeeping was found to play a

significant role within the local authorities included in this research. This was often due to managerial pressures to ration resources. These pressures were sometimes related to reducing the number of people entering homeless services overall, and thus relate to primary rationing:

> *At the end of the day we're are being told…we need to reduce the number of homeless people. But that's not really within our control at all you know, so we've had to sort of adapt our definition of homelessness as we've dealt with more and more people. So as to basically be gatekeepers and keep more people out of homeless services, whereas when we first started the service, it was everyone who came up we try to put them up somewhere because we were scrambling just to try and get people sorted…we also looked at what other local authorities do and realised we were being probably a little bit light handed, whereas other local authorities aren't as, so we started tightening up a little bit there* (APO urban).

However, some interviewees described it as being more evident with regards to lowering the number of people entering PEA and therefore related to secondary rationing as the person would likely be offered a place in TEA if one was available. An interviewee from a local authority where PEA was only offered through a process of 'self-accommodation', which involves the presenting person sourcing PEA themselves with the local authority paying for it, described how pressures were put on staff to keep people out of this form of accommodation as much as possible:

> *So, like, I suppose the self-accommodation thing is just for some reason it's a real stickler in [the local authority] and they're so proud of the zero number in self-accommodation that it's nearly—you know, at one stage we had to let a lady go into self-accommodation…So when the figure went up to one, like, I was getting email saying, 'Can you get the figure down to zero?' I thought they were taking the mick, you know that kind of way, but they actually were quite serious* (APS urban).

As the first quote illustrates, some of the frontline workers recognised how these managerial pressures had a direct impact on the way that they approached assessment and the need to be gatekeepers or, as some described, to get stricter. This was rationalised as having been too lenient in the past when they would accept anyone who

presented as being homeless. In other words narrowing the definition to a level that they viewed as focusing on those they believed were experiencing genuine homelessness, rather than narrowing it to a level where people who they believed were in need were excluded. However, some interviewees believed that they approached assessment the same way whether they felt more pressure to gate-keep or not:

> *So, no, look, you're either homeless or you're not. It doesn't skew our decision. Like I think if I'm going that way in my work, I need to leave my work, okay, like, do you know what I mean?! That's when you lose your compassion. So no, I really don't think that that—like, yeah, we are really—like resources are poor, okay, but that doesn't affect whether you're homeless or not. You're homeless or you're not, you know. So no. Now, placing people is an issue, you know, but it doesn't affect whether you're—* [trails off] (APO urban and rural).

Despite this belief, this worker still described similar actions, for example towards young people presenting as homeless from the family home, which would indicate managerial pressures towards gatekeeping of resources. In some cases the pressure to gate-keep was subtle as opposed to being more overt, as the following quote illustrates, where the frontline worker is congratulated on not granting access to a particular form of accommodation:

> *Well, it's just that, I mean, literally on a weekly basis I was having more senior management saying, "Well done, there's nobody in [PEA]."...I mean, that is nearly saying to you, "Keep it at that level"* (APS urban).

As will be discussed in detail in chapter six, during the interviews it became apparent that much of the gatekeeping at the primary level of rationing was directed towards young people who were presenting as homeless from the family home stating reasons of conflict or overcrowding as causing their homelessness. There was a significant amount of distrust and suspicion aimed at this group of people, who were believed to be presenting to either gain access to the higher discretionary rates of HAP or were hoping to gain access more quickly to local authority social housing. As there are no clear eligibility criteria guiding the work of these frontline workers, it is left to them to use their judgement to decide on a case-by-case basis if these people are in fact homeless or not:

> *I'm certainly stricter with people you know? I'm more hard-line. Especially with people in cases where they're, you know, we feel that they can be happily accommodated in the family home, you know?* (APO urban).

Although there appeared to be a lot of suspicion around these presentations, in some of the interviews this approach to gatekeeping towards young people was rationalised in quite a paternalistic way as being in their best interests. These best interests were decided by the frontline worker as opposed to the presenting people themselves as there was a sense that they did not know what they were getting into by entering homeless accommodation, therefore they were pushed back towards the family home. Additionally, some frontline workers felt that because the accommodation that the local authority could offer them, which was usually emergency hostel accommodation, was viewed as being worse than where they were staying currently, that they should remain in the home.

At the secondary level of rationing, the group of people who were most likely to experience gatekeeping behaviours were single people. For this group, every local authority has taken a similar approach in that all the frontline workers were told not to place single people into B&Bs or hotels. As there is informal direction[6] on this, acting as a gateway for this group resulted in scrutiny from management, which was expressed by most of the interviewees. Therefore the system exerts a pressure to use their discretion to gate-keep when it came to PEA. What this sometimes meant in practice was that single people were asked if they could find somewhere temporary to stay if there were no TEA or STA beds available when they presented. This generally involved asking family and/or friends if they could give the person a bed for a period:

> *Like I could contact family members and say that I'll organise a placement for them but could they keep them for another, you know, another amount of time. Or I'd speak to like just not directly the family, maybe aunts or uncles they mightn't have contact with. You know, so there'll be a lot of link-in there. Or talking to friends… So there's a lot of phone calls back and forth to various people. Look, if there's nowhere for someone to go and all the beds are full, we'll have to fund them for, you know, whatever amount of time it is. So they're not going to be told to go away if they've nowhere to go. You know, before I*

[6]No formal direction outlining this action could be sourced by the researcher.

> *offer that, I will try alternative options, like family, like the direct family, the mother and father maybe, and outside of that then siblings, cousins, friends, or whatever* (APO urban and rural).

There was the possibility to offer a single person a placement within PEA if the SLB sees fit. However, some of the participant's spoke about how questions are always asked by management when they take this course of action. Therefore, they only do so in circumstances that they described as exceptional or special.

In order to stem the flow of people into homelessness and avoid opening the 'floodgates', for some of the interviewees strict gatekeeping of PEA was viewed as a necessity. A small number of the participants described this gatekeeping as a deterrent which they felt has impacted the number presenting. They viewed the use of B&B and hotel accommodation as something that pulled people towards homeless services. This was through the belief of some that PEA attracted people who were not genuinely homeless:

> *So up until last year we decided we're not going to do B&B anymore for single people, you'll have to get on to get alternative arrangements. And lo and behold, the presentation stopped nearly within a week of single people. So we decided then, well, if it works for single people, are we able to do anything about the families?* (APO urban and rural)

> *So since we really clamped down on the self-accommodation, yeah, there's definitely less people coming* (APS urban).

Some of frontline workers described gatekeeping behaviours towards people who they viewed as undeserving due to their behaviour. These frontline workers explained how they found it difficult to act impartially and not automatically gate-keep services from service users who they viewed as less deserving or unlikeable:

> *... I found it very hard to work to engage with people who had raped women; that are sex offenders. That can be very difficult, especially if you have a family member or a friend or anything that it happened to. It's very hard to treat them the same and still provide them with the same service and still be caring and everything* (APS urban).

> *There's definitely a personal, a certain amount of like personal element to it as well you know? We do have people who, like I have people who have threatened me like, threatened to kill me like you know. And then when it comes to assigning accommodation to people and I see them on a list, I'm less inclined to offer that person accommodation over somebody else you know? So like I have to come to terms with my own biases about people you know?* (APO urban)

A few of the interviewees vocalised their view of themselves as gatekeepers. They viewed gate-keeping as central to their role and were conscious of spending public money. One particular worker, described his/her gatekeeping activities as 'challenging homelessness', which they contrasted to other agencies such as NGOs who he felt 'embraced' homelessness, in order to access more funding:

> *…we're probably the only organisation who challenge homelessness. All other agencies—as I say, embrace it, you know, for different reasons, you know, for good reasons, for monetary reasons, may I say so? So we challenge. And I suppose we would have a huge amount of presentations every day, every week, every month. Huge, like, compared to a lot of counties. And the amount of actual people who will be placed in homeless services it would be small in comparison to the amount of people who are presenting. You know, like we could have ten individuals or families presenting every day* (APO urban and rural).

In contrast to this practice of gatekeeping, in certain circumstances frontline workers acted more like a gateway to services for people. The factors that impacted this will be discussed in the following section.

5.6.2 Frontline workers as gateways

Whilst it is true that the proclivity of frontline workers was to use their discretion to gate-keep, their advocacy tendencies were not entirely absent and examples of them using discretion to act as a gateway to services were found. These instances were often described as happening when the frontline worker had some form of positive feelings

towards the service user, for example people who appeared similar to the frontline worker as they were considered to be 'normal' or 'decent' or people who appeared trustworthy:

> *What type the person is, is probably the biggest influence on it. If it's, if they seem like a normal decent family I suppose, that might sound very vague, but they are a decent family, you are more likely to let them in. Where if its Jonny who looks like Jonny is a bit of a drinker and Maura is strung out of her head your, you would be a bit more hesitant…* (APO urban)

> *I suppose I would have felt that they were occupants in a tenancy but they were homeless, you know what I mean. And again, if they're an occupant on the tenancy, our procedure is not to place them. But…because I had sent them away for a good few days and they were ringing every day and coming back and they were dropping stuff in and, you know, you could see the desperation* (APO urban and rural).

As well as the impact of perceived similarities on the propensity of the interviewees to act as a gateway for a presenting person, perceived vulnerabilities also had an impact and sometimes resulted in a frontline worker advocating for someone to receive a service that they would not generally be offered :

> *I suppose if you had like a man in his eighties. You know, 85-year-old, you're not going to move him up to a 9 to 9 bed. You know, and then if the hostel wasn't available, we would put a case forward to management, put them into B&B for the time being until that placement became available, because you couldn't put someone like that, vulnerable like that into a hostel like that* (APO urban and rural).

However, as discussed in section 5.5 some of the interviewees remained cautious in offering services where eligibility was not clear-cut due to the resultant managerial scrutiny it brought about. Although they felt that these decisions were usually ok with management as long as they were able to justify them, they reserved these uses of discretion for exceptional circumstances. Likewise, there was a reluctance amongst some to act as a gateway to offer services outside of the set parameters in case it set a precedent and resulted in more people seeking a similar outcome:

> *I suppose the issues of single people is always going to be contentious. If you put a family into a B&B, nobody asks any questions. Put a single individual into a B&B, there's going to be questions on it regardless…It could be because there was absolutely no room and you felt that that individual was very vulnerable…and you'd feel that putting them into the likes of a night-to-night shelter maybe they're just too vulnerable for it…But unfortunately by doing that you set a precedent. And I suppose if you're looking at it from a councillor's point of view or an elected official, they're going to be saying, well, you've done it for X, now why can't you do it for Y?* (APO urban)

In recognising the difficulties faced by frontline workers in fulfilling their role as both an advocate/gateway to services and gatekeeper (Rummery and Glendinning, 1999), one of the participants, who managed the homeless unit, did not allow the workers on the front desk who were meeting people who presented as homeless to make decisions related to a person's eligibility or placement:

> *My belief in this is you should never put anyone on the front desk in the decision-making role because they need to build up that relationship in that short space of time and they need to be seen to be working on behalf of rather than against the person who's presenting. So we've worked an awful lot around strategies, around even though you might know the decision, use the wording… in respect of look, I have to speak with my management, but I feel they're going to say this…My management aren't around at the minute, but this is what I think they're going to say…That gives them the ability to detach a little bit from the organisation, to feel like they're advocating on a client, but they know the answer* (APS rural).

This approach was the exception rather than the rule, however. As this participant points out, the frontline workers most likely know what the outcome for the presenting person will be but as they state, this approach 'lets them feel like they're advocating' rather than allowing them to truly advocate. Despite the fact that the outcome might be similar for the presenting person whether the frontline worker makes the decisions or not, this participant still felt that it was important for both the protection of the staff and the service users that this approach was taken to the assessment:

> *But if they can show that actually part of my job here, even though I'm sitting at the desk, is I'm here to advocate for you also. I'm here to relay what you're saying to me. I'm here to really put your case forward, so work with me here. That's an awful lot different to say whatever you tell me I'm going to catch you out on it* (APS rural).

The structures in place within the local authorities limit what the frontline workers can do in terms of advocacy. In describing a situation where they were contacted by an organisation advocating on behalf of a service user, one interviewee described feelings of stress when they cannot do what is being requested by an advocate, even when they know it would be best for the service user:

> *So there's, I feel, when it comes from advocacy point of view because sometimes you just can't do what they're asking to do, you know. And you know, you want to do it. You know, like the best scenarios just sometimes are not possible* (APO urban)

In lieu of an ability to advocate for service users for the service ideal, some of the workers described ways that they tried to make the accommodation offered to others as suitable as possible. For example, ensuring that hotels or B&B placements were close to a child's school or working hard to source accommodation for a large family so that they could all stay together. To this end, even where they felt that their hands were tied, they showed compassion towards some service users in the way that they approached their work. This compassion was most notable when it came to dealing with service users who the frontline worker considered to be vulnerable or they had sympathy towards:

> *Like if you're sitting doing an assessment with somebody and you hear that they've had a shocking life, that they've come from the care system, there's never been any support from whoever, like, you can't help but, you know, wanting literally to help that person* (APS urban).

Despite describing these instances of compassion, only one worker described their role in terms of being a gateway or advocate, whereas more described their role in terms of being a gatekeeper. More of the factors that impact the SLBs approach to decision-making will be discussed in the next section.

5.7 Decision-making at the frontline

This section will outline findings related to decision-making at the frontline of service delivery. Firstly through examining moralising influences and the way that a person's perceived deservingness or perceived vulnerability impacts the frontline workers decisions and secondly through examining findings related to the impact of the burden of discretion (Molander and Grimen, 2010).

5.7.1 Moralising influences on decision-making: deservingness and determining vulnerabilities

Throughout the interviews, the interviewees spoke about ways that they determine whether someone is considered to be deserving and/or vulnerable, both of which impacted the decision-making process for the frontline workers. Specific categories within which people were often seen as vulnerable included those who were older (or in some cases young), were not heterosexual, had medical needs, mental health problems, were pregnant and/or had a disability. However, not all people within these groups were necessarily considered vulnerable as other elements of deservingness played a role in determining vulnerability as are outlined below. The frontline workers' perception of a person's vulnerability could impact the way that they respond to that person and the decisions that they make with regards to their eligibility and placement. Being vulnerable was often related to a person's perceived ability to cope in emergency hostel accommodation:

> *… just this morning even we had a case of somebody with a mental health issue and we don't know where to put them because it's like [TEA] and [STA] while they are great, you need to have your wits about you there you know, you need to be a little bit hardy and these are very vulnerable people but they are vulnerable people who aren't capable of looking after themselves* (APO urban).

Thus a determination by a frontline worker that a person is vulnerable could mean that they are not placed into TEA, as they were viewed as being unable to cope within it.

In terms of deservingness, both age and family status could impact where someone fell on a spectrum from deserving to undeserving with older people and families with children featured more at the deserving end:

> *And even at that it's hard putting them to the hostel sometimes as well because you'd have an awful lot of people that would be in the hostels who would have drug and alcohol issues as well, you know what I mean, that would have been hidden I suppose on assessment. And an awful lot of people with mental health. And then a lot of the hostels are sharing rooms and you're asking someone that's in their eighties to share with someone in their twenties. Like that's so inappropriate, you know. They're at the end of their years. You know, they should be a priority for [the local authority] to house them* (APO urban and rural).

> *I've never, never left a family out* (APO urban).

However, single and young people featured more at the undeserving end:

> *We literally used to have people coming to the public counter with a letter from the mammy saying they can't stay there and they'd say to us, 'Well, I know there's a vacancy in the [PEA] across the road. I know I can get into the [PEA].' So they'd have checked these out before coming to us. Which obviously you can't have that either, you know, just a whole crowd of young ones with their kids having a great old time up at the [PEA]!* (APS urban).

> *Oh, yeah, there is, yeah. No, there is. There's particular guidelines that you'd follow. Like singles aren't placed in B&B. There may be three or four singles that are in B&B around the city at the moment, but they're special cases. They're only placed there because you had left—like mental health, so many different people advocating for them on their behalf…* (APO urban and rural)

Likewise, those that were viewed as being dependent were seen by some of the interviewees as less deserving than those who were perceived as making more of an effort to find accommodation themselves:

> *Like when I started…it was I don't want to be kind of saying genuine homeless, but you wouldn't have as many presentations. People then that were in the hostels, you know, they worked towards rehousing themselves. There was an*

> *awful lot more I suppose independent people. Like I find there's an awful lot of people that present now that are so dependent on the system and dependent on people to come in and kind of save them, do you know what I mean, like* (APO urban and rural).

A final issue that had a strong bearing on whether a person was considered to be deserving or undeserving of services and significantly impacted the decisions that the frontline workers made was related to peoples' behaviour. This included instances of past problematic behaviour, for example a history of addiction, and their perceived future behaviour. Additionally, a small number of the frontline workers explained how a person's behaviour on presentation could also impact the decisions that they make. When it came to the impact of behaviour on secondary rationing (placement), there were two main considerations that were addressed by the frontline workers. Firstly, how their placement could impact the relationship that the LA has with a private accommodation provider (for example B&B owners) and secondly how the placement could impact the other people already living in a particular accommodation. The frontline workers made these decisions based on their assessment of risk as they strove to maintain the highest possible number of units within the current structure of services. The ways that this plays out in practice will be discussed in more detail in the section 7.4.

Whether people were categorised as deserving or undeserving was not just based on front line worker biases. Rather, these moralising impacts on decision-making were described as being shaped both by personal and societal attitudes, as well as the work environment which structured services in a way that includes some and excludes others. For example, one interviewee described the focus on families as being influenced by media concentration on them, which in turn influenced the frontline workers categorisation of them as deserving:

> *In particular there's a huge amount of concentration on the families because of the, you know, the kind of concentration in the media on the number of children in homeless services* (APS urban).

For single people, there was a sense among some of the frontline workers that it was very difficult for these people to exit homelessness due to the structure of the Irish housing system and the level of social housing assistance available to them. Therefore,

it was the system, rather than frontline worker preferences around deservingness, which afforded them no choice other than entering TEA and offered them HAP limits that were generally viewed as being significantly inadequate. Consequently, at the policy level they are rendered undeserving of adequate assistance, which filters through to the practices at the frontline.

5.7.2 The 'burden of discretion'

Whilst recognising that they had a high level of autonomy in making assessment and placement decisions, in general, the frontline workers felt confident in these decisions. Some described the 'right' decision as the one that felt right to them based on their experience of the interaction they had with a presenting person:

> *But as I do say to my two colleagues there, like, you don't make a mistake in homelessness, like, you know. Like whatever you decide, that's the decision you make at any given time* (APO urban and rural).

However, along with this high level of autonomy, came a high level of responsibility, what Molander and Grimen (2010) call the burden of discretion, therefore the level of decision-making confidence was lower when it came to dealing with people who were deemed to have a high level of needs additional to their housing need. As was shown in section 5.2.2, a number of the participants felt that the frontline workers were not always qualified to make decisions around a particular person's needs, most notably when it came to the issue of mental health. One of the interviewees believed that this resulted in a quick burnout of staff when they were tasked with making decisions for which they had no training. Although this was not the direct experience of any of those interviewed, there were a small number of incidents outlined where colleagues had made a decision with tragic consequences:

> *But none of our staff have mental health training, do you know what I mean. So like we had one staff member who did an assessment that the person had mild mental health, provide them with accommodation. The person committed suicide and she nearly got in trouble for it. 'Why didn't you do this?' But she's not trained in that either* (APS urban).

> *There's people died and people didn't place them. You know, there was a gentleman that died in [omitted name of area], a Polish man. God love him, they found him the next day. And he'd been here. And somebody just followed the procedures. He wasn't eligible, so they said—…'I can't give you a bed because you're not eligible'…And then he died and then that person was called in. 'Why didn't you give him a bed?' You know, he said, 'Well, he didn't meet the criteria, you know.' So you can't really—now, that person was fine in the end. Nothing came back on that person* (APO urban).

Despite these decision-making concerns and displays of compassion when discussing some of the people who presented to them, a level of cynicism, apathy or emotional detachment from the service users was evident in some of the interviews. Much of the cynicism or apathy displayed in the interviews was around determining eligibility in terms of whether they believed that someone was genuinely homeless or not. This is covered in detail in Chapter six on primary rationing. The cynical approach appeared to be fostered by the environment of suspicion that exists where the parameters for access to services were so ambiguous and required significant interpretation and where the gatekeeping of resources from particular groups was expected. It was most notable when it came to discussing the assessment of people presenting who are experiencing the forms of homelessness described as grey in the following chapter, who were sometimes viewed as 'playing the system':

> *But coming in and talking to them, saying, look, you're on the priority list, do you want to go back home to your ma's, like, you know? You're not going to move…You don't have to live in this hotel. 'Really?' I say, 'Yeah,' and off she goes back to her mam's, like. Believe it or not, like, it happens, like, you know. A lot of people are playing the system as well so* (APO urban).

The issues associated with becoming too cynical, apathetic or emotionally detached were recognised by some of the participants. For these interviewees, it was important to manage the precarious balance between empathy and apathy:

> *If you're not trained and you've got to a burnout stage, you either start to detest everyone who comes in through the door and see them as the same or what happens is you over-empathise—you go the other direction is that you over-empathise. Both of them does the same. It's the same amount of damage*

you will cause. And I've seen that with people who don't have the training (APS rural).

Well, I mean, I'll go as long as I go. As I said, once I lose the compassion, that's when I have to leave, you know. And I'm not trying to big myself up there. That's kind of what I believe or whatever. It's not like, oh, I have compassion, I'm such a good person. I get paid for my job, like! But I just feel when you lose that— (APO urban and rural).

Despite the level of emotional detachment evident in some of the interviews, some frontline workers described situations where they felt emotionally impacted by the people who presented to them as homeless, especially when the service user reflected in some way a member of their own family:

So there's people coming in to us they're 75 years of age, into homeless services. Like it's very hard when you try to—when that reflects on your home life or you have a granddad that's the same age, do you know what I mean. It's very, very—it can be very difficult I think on people's mental health in here. So it's very hard, like any other job, to go home and put up your boundary wall and not allow that to affect your family life, do you know what I mean (APS urban).

So like I have kids, you know, and people are desperate and they have kids. It's really difficult… You do put yourself in their position, and sometimes it makes it harder, you know, makes the job a little bit harder (APO urban).

Overall, the decisions that the frontline workers had to make daily impacted them in different ways, with a number of them describing difficulties leaving their work behind at the end of the day. The ambiguous nature of their work environment meant that they felt a lot of responsibility in making these decisions but they used their co-workers and immediate supervisors as a way to feel more confident about these decisions and share this responsibility amongst the team. This level of discretion in making decisions impacted not only the frontline workers, but also the service users who were generally powerless within these interactions. The dynamics of this power relationship will be discussed in section 7.5.

5.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the environment in which the frontline workers involved in homeless assessment and placement undertake the tasks associated with their role. To this end, it serves to contextualise their work practices which will be discussed in the following two chapters as any study examining the use of discretion at the frontline should also examine the context in which this use occurs.

The chapter focused not only on the work environment, but also on the frontline workers own work experience and training. The level of experience and work backgrounds of the participants varied. Some of the participants had a background in social care or social work. However, most had an administrative background, yet were required to carry out tasks that require a level of training beyond that for administration. Despite this, the training offered to these frontline workers specifically for undertaking this challenging role was minimal in most of the local authorities.

In lieu of clear guidelines for determining eligibility for services, the frontline workers worked closely with their teams and collectivised this responsibility as a means to lessen the 'burden of discretion' (Møller, 2021, p. 477). Additionally, this approach was used as a means to counter the absence of training in that it provided a form of organisational socialisation where new employees learned the acceptable approaches to assessment and placement within their local authority from those who worked there already. Although a level of satisfaction with the role was described by some of the frontline workers, they were more vocal when discussing the level of stress associated with the role. In general, the job undertaken by these frontline workers was described as one which was very stressful, often frustrating and challenging. However, they found solace in the strength of their teams, indeed this strong level of co-worker support was viewed as crucial to undertaking this role.

Research examining discretion must recognise the complex nature of this concept. This should include a recognition that the term discretion is often used to describe two distinct phenomena: *discretion-as-granted* and *discretion-as-used* (Hupe, 2013), as the former sets the context for the latter in that the rules and regulations will impact upon the discretion that frontline workers use (Hupe, Hill and Buffat, 2016). Through this research, it is evident that a considerable amount of discretion is available to most

of the frontline workers in making decisions around assessment and placement. However, the dominant pressure from management is to gate-keep. Therefore, in line with the findings of Lipsky (2010) and others (Alden, 2015b; Garot, 2005), it is mainly negative use of discretion that occurs, with positive use tending to be reserved for helping those who were viewed more sympathetically or as more deserving. Whether someone was considered sympathetically or genuine could be based on a trait such as older age, or whether the person came across as believable to the assessing officer. Some frontline workers described situations where they would use discretion positively so that a person could be offered a homeless service when *'the letter of the law'* (APO urban) would mean that they were not eligible. In these cases their moral categorisation overruled their (informal) administrative categorisation (Wright, 2003), for example, being considered believable or vulnerable overruled being single in terms of granting access to PEA.

This moralising of service users allows the frontline workers to rationalise their decisions to grant access or not to services, through differentiating between service users based on their perceived deservingness. However, the frontline workers were acutely aware of the scrutiny that these more positive discretionary decisions would garner from management and as such used them only in limited circumstances.

Chapter 6: Patterns of practice in primary rationing: defining homelessness and determining eligibility

6.1 Introduction

This chapter of the thesis will focus on the work practices described for the primary rationing of homeless services. Specifically, focusing on the ways that homelessness is defined at the frontline; issues associated with determining eligibility; and the thin line between homelessness prevention and gatekeeping. The section on defining homelessness will firstly examine the interpretation of the statutory definition of homelessness and its impact on the work practices of SLBs. The interviewees generally felt that the statutory definition was more of a legal matter than one that impacted them in their day-to-day work. Thus, the subsequent section will outline the definition of homelessness used in practice, as described in the discussions around peoples' different living situations and through the vignettes. Some living situations were described as clear-cut in terms of determining a person's homeless status. However, those living in more hidden homeless situations constitute what was described as a considerable grey area when it came to determining whether someone was homeless or not. Therefore, the following sub-sections will discuss the clear-cut and grey areas that came up most frequently in the interviews.

The definition of homelessness alone did not determine someone's eligibility for homeless services. Unlike many other areas of welfare, there are no clear eligibility criteria outlined for people who present as homeless. There were, however, some situations where people's eligibility was viewed as being more straightforward to determine than others. The criteria that were used by the frontline workers in order to determine eligibility will be outlined and grouped into those that were more objective to determine (for example establishing a local connection or being on the social housing list), and those that were more subjective with a higher requirement to use discretion (for example, determining homelessness intentionality or whether the person was genuine).

The final section will comprise a discussion around the thin line between homeless prevention and the gatekeeping of services. Examples of actions viewed as homeless prevention will be outlined, including making contact with family members to see if the presenting person/s can stay with them; formalised family mediation; access to the Homeless HAP payment, and/or access to the HAP Place Finder service. The practice of homeless prevention described by the interviewees differed significantly between the interviewees working in different local authorities, as did the level of resources available for undertaking preventative measures.

6.2 Defining homelessness at the frontline

This section will outline the findings related to the process of interpretation of the statutory definition of homelessness in order to explore a number of factors. Firstly, whether this definition plays a significant role on the process of assessment on the frontline? Secondly, in lieu of clearly defined guidelines around what constitutes homelessness, what living situations are included in the frontline workers understanding of homelessness in practice and do these differ between them? Thirdly, how are the issues associated with hidden forms of homelessness dealt with at the frontline of local authority service administration?

6.2.1 The statutory definition of homelessness

As was outlined previously, the statutory definition of homelessness is unquestionably ambiguous and therefore requires considerable interpretation in its implementation. For most of the interviewees, the statutory definition of homelessness was something that they viewed as distant from their role on the frontline. Indeed, they viewed themselves as separate from policy in general, even the locally devised Homeless Action Plans. Policy was viewed as something for managers to deal with, whilst they viewed themselves as responding to the individual needs of those who presented to them.

Most of the interviewees described this distance from the statutory definition as necessary so that they could respond flexibly to cases that presented, without being restricted by a statutory definition that they believed could overlook the nuance of homeless cases. The following quote encapsulates this view of the statutory definition as prescriptive:

> *I suppose, yeah, we'd refer to the statutory one, I suppose, do you know what I mean. But it's very hard to just stick with something like that. You're dealing with people's lives, do you know what I mean. There's nothing clear cut, or no policy for that. And I think its case-by-case is how we deal with it…no case is the same, basically. So it's more sort of background, but its case-by-case really* (APO urban and rural).

Some potential difficulties and contradictions associated with this approach are illustrated through the passage above, where the quoted frontline worker states that although they may refer to the statutory definition, in practice the approach is generally individualised. However, when asked if they feel that the staff within the homeless unit have the same understanding of what constitutes homelessness, this interviewee replied *'yeah, a hundred percent'* (APO urban and rural), a sentiment echoed by most of the other respondents. The belief that the team had a very similar understanding of what constitutes homelessness and thus delivered the service in a consistent way, is in some ways at odds with the frontline workers' rejection of the statutory definition as being too prescriptive due to their need to deal with presentations on a case-by-case basis.

Another contradiction is illustrated through the following two responses when asked about how homelessness is defined:

> *So, yeah, it's not really complicated. It's not legislative. I'm sure—obviously it is covered in legislation, but we never refer to it in any way, shape or form* (APS urban).

> *The, it would probably be our, our own sort of understanding of it. It's very, a lot of the situations are very nuanced and there, there's no black and white case really, especially in those 10 per cent who tend to be the more difficult cases* (APO urban).

The notion that the way to determine homelessness status is both straightforward and complicated at the same time was a recurring theme in the interviews. However, the workers were confident that there was cohesion in the way that the team approached their work. In the local authorities included in the research where multiple workers were interviewed from the same team, there was evidence that some of their approach was consistent, which was facilitated through frequent team meetings and general team interactions. However, there was evidence that in some cases, when a person presents to the local authority as homeless, their outcome may be impacted by the luck of which worker greets them at the counter or in an interview room. For example, in one local authority, one of the workers stated that they take people at their word if it is difficult to prove their homeless status (high level of trust), whereas another of the workers spoke about having to dampen their high level of trust in those that presented due to a need to ration resources, with the final two workers already approaching assessments with suspicion or a much lower level of trust.

One frontline worker described the statutory definition of homelessness as theory and the realm of someone else (of a higher grade) within the local authority. Whereas their view of themselves was as a practitioner who needed to respond to cases that presented to them:

> *Yeah, look, homelessness is—it's different when you're—you can sit in the back office all day and talk about that type of thing. I wouldn't particularly be into that end of it too much. I'm more face-to-face dealing with it at the time. Assess and take direction myself, you know. If you're on the housing list and you're active, or if you're not active, if I want to place someone, if I deem a fit, I'll place them, that's the end of it* (APO urban).

Overall there was a sense that the frontline workers favoured the ambiguous approach to the definition of homelessness over a more prescriptive one. Other workers echoed the sentiment of those quoted above and felt strongly about their need to be able to use significant discretion in making decisions during homeless assessment.

Some potential implications of this ambiguity were revealed throughout the interviews which presented numerous examples that illustrated issues in defining homelessness without an empirical basis. The statutory definition, as outlined in the 1988 legislation, did not appear to play a significant role in the thought process of the frontline workers,

with only four interviewees making reference to having to determine whether someone was in accommodation that they could 'reasonably occupy'. The lack of discussion around reasonable occupation does not mean that issues of reasonableness are not considered by the frontline workers, as this is essentially what they are tasked with doing: determining whether someone has accommodation that they can reasonably go to or remain in. Rather, the language they used to discuss their approach to determine a person's homeless status was different to that outlined in the legislation. One interviewee did acknowledge the issue of differing responses and approaches between frontline workers in determining reasonableness. When asked how they would determine reasonableness around a living situation that they had mentioned during the interview – a person who presents and states that they have had a fight with their parents and have been asked to leave the family home – they responded as such:

> *I can't. I can't really answer that question. You know, we might ring granny and granny says, 'Yeah, I have a room. Yeah, it's fine.' Is that reasonable? In my mind it is. To someone else, you know, a 27-year-old man going to live with his granny for a few months they might say that's not reasonable. I think it's reasonable…If someone says to me, 'I've a small couch, they can stay on that,' is that reasonable? No, I don't think so. I'm not going to sleep on a small couch for months on end, so I wouldn't expect anyone else—it's a personal interpretation, I suppose…You know, we're not going to be sending people into substandard accommodation where there's mould and damp and stuff like that. That's to me not reasonable. To other people they might say, well, there's a roof over their head; that is reasonable. So it's an interpretation, isn't it?* (APS urban and rural).

For those who stated that they did not consider the statutory definition of homelessness to be core to their role, they were not guided by alternative formal guidelines for rationing these services. The following exchange illustrates this well:

> *APO urban: I'm not sure whether there is a clear understanding of the statutory definition of it but like we have our policy set out and that's what we stick with so you know…So we have our own policies, we actually wouldn't know what the statutory definition of it was.*

> *Interviewer: So do you know are they clear, like would it be written anywhere or would it be an understanding amongst staff?*
>
> *APO urban: It would be an understanding* (APO urban).

There are many other examples of the informal nature of homeless service rationing throughout the research, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. The inconsistency associated with a highly discretionary and informal approach was illustrated by the same interviewee when they were asked if this understanding of homelessness changes at all or remains standard. At first they responded that it is 'pretty standard' but they went on to say that it could depend on who presented to them or how they were feeling on a given day:

> *Yeah, as I said, you know, depending on a certain case, like some days, some days you might be feeling a bit softer and be more amenable to others and other days it's like no, I'm officer hard ass today* (APO urban).

This interviewee stated that their mood could impact how they approach the assessment process on a given day, and thus, could impact negatively upon a person who presents as homeless that day if they are *'officer hard ass.'* The nature of determining homelessness in this context is a subjective affair and therefore open to being based on the value judgements of the assessing officer.

6.2.2 The definition of homelessness in practice

Considering the ambiguity of the statutory definition of homelessness and the perceived distance from the frontline workers role, this section will address which living situations were considered to constitute homelessness in practice among the research participants. Most felt that there was a similar approach and understanding of homelessness within their own team. However, some believed that there were differences in the approaches of individual local authorities:

> *Well, again, by talking to other counties, like—you know, we are involved in the network, you know, the Homeless Network, with all the local authorities. When you ask that, each authority has their own way of assessing. And even*

> *within the legislation, like, they have their own way of assessing that, you know* (APO urban and rural).

This same frontline worker described how other local authorities sometimes question his/her local authority's practices, but that those same local authorities do things their own way too:

> *Now, again, I'd say if you were to—sometimes the other counties will ask, where is that in legislation, like? Have you got that under your scheme of letting priorities? I say, no, no, that's the way we work…You know, but then when you go to that county and you ask them, you know, why they do it this way, 'Well, that's the way we work, you know.' And I don't think anyone's going to query it either. I don't think anyone's going query it because nobody has the answer for homelessness yet* (APO urban and rural).

The interviewees were not asked directly to list all the situations which they considered to constitute homelessness. Rather, they were asked about their understanding of the statutory definition of homelessness and prompted to discuss further the areas that they considered to constitute homelessness.

6.2.2.1 The clear-cut areas

Presentations from three living situations were seen as the most clear-cut in terms of determining homeless status. These were people presenting with a Notice to Quit (NTQ), people who were rough sleeping and people who were staying in emergency accommodation.

Notice to quit (NTQ)

Throughout the interviews, the presentations described by the interviewees as the most clear-cut was when a person arrived to the local authority with an NTQ from their private landlord. Most of the interviewees mentioned that this notice should be validated by the housing advice and support charity Threshold. An NTQ was seen as

proof that a person was, or was at high risk of becoming, homeless. This document was seen as the most explicit proof of homelessness of all the different situations that were discussed. Terms used to describe NTQs in discussions around defining homelessness included obvious, clear or clear-cut. This contrasts with the term grey which was used often in discussions around forms of homelessness viewed as being less clear. When a person or family present with an NTQ, some of the interviewees stated that access to additional support – for example the HHAP where available, the HAP 20 per cent discretionary payment, or the Place Finder service – would be immediate. This would happen without the need to enter hostel accommodation first as is often required for others who present to the local authority as homeless from the areas described as grey:

> *Yeah, but even with the family, like, if she's coming in with a valid Notice to Quit and she's on the housing list, we will provide her with homeless HAP. We'd encourage her to try and find private rented with the extra amount we're giving her in that she mightn't have been able to do herself. If she doesn't have anything by that, come back to us the day before her eviction date and we'll provide her with accommodation* (APS urban).

Therefore, access to additional supports is sometimes more straightforward for those who find themselves facing homelessness due to an NTQ than, for example, those who have been told that they must leave the family home.

Rough sleeping

The other area of homelessness that was often considered to be relatively clear cut was when someone stated that they were sleeping rough:

> *We would put up anybody that presents as homeless that have not a roof over their heads tonight* (APO rural)

> *But really it's anyone that has nowhere to live we would consider homeless, yeah, rough sleeping* (APS urban)

This usually needed to be verified, however, often by someone on an outreach team. Of course, it is only considered clear-cut if the outreach team can find the person sleeping rough:

> *So that can be a little bit grey and there could be a little bit of—you know, we'd have people saying that they're rough-sleeping but yet when we send out the rough-sleeper team we can't find them* (APS urban).

This most literal form of homelessness was viewed by some as the most legitimate form of homelessness in that, if you were not in a position that you would have to rough sleep without being offered a service, then you were not genuinely homeless. In other words, what was considered to constitute more hidden forms of homelessness, was not really considered to be homelessness at all by some of those interviewed.

Persons living in emergency accommodation

Finally, people who are using homeless services were considered to be homeless. However, this is not as clear-cut as it seems as in order to be offered emergency accommodation, you generally have to be considered to be homeless in the first place. Some of the frontline workers described cases where there was doubt as to whether a person was homeless or not so they would be offered TEA and their willingness to enter it or not was taken as proof of their homeless status:

> *Again, like, they don't seem to understand the nature of emergency accommodation. If you're being offered emergency accommodation, you take it or you don't take it. If you take you're coming into services, if you don't take it you're refusing services, it's as simple as that* (APO Urban).

Yet others described denying services to people who they felt were not homeless or convincing them to stay in the living situation that they had presented from, therefore emergency accommodation was not available for all.

From the discussions with frontline workers, it appears that in practice, most of the people who presented to local authorities, had a local connection and insisted that they had nowhere to sleep that night were offered TEA at the very least. Some mentioned having to turn people away in the past but it was not discussed as being a significant

issue at the time of the interviews. A failure to accept an accommodation offer, for example if the person did not feel safe staying in communal accommodation, was taken by some frontline workers as proof that the person was not actually homeless at all. This was especially the case for new presentations. Therefore, emergency accommodation often plays a significant role in determining homeless status.

6.2.2.2 The grey areas

The less clear-cut or *grey* areas of homelessness that were discussed during the research interviews covered areas generally considered to constitute more hidden forms of homelessness. Although there is a lack of consensus on a definition of the concept of 'hidden homelessness' (Deleu *et* al, 2021), it is used here as a means to categorise the living situations that the interviewees described as grey, which span the insecure and inadequate ETHOS categories. The issue of hidden homelessness and how it is dealt with by frontline workers tells us much about the attitudes of local authority staff towards groups of people living in certain situations. An approach of suspicion, scepticism and mistrust was more evident in accounts of hidden homeless as the frontline staff tried to determine which of these presentations they viewed as genuine and which ones were not. The main grey areas that came up repeatedly during the discussions on defining homelessness, were couch surfing, family conflict and overcrowding. As these cases were less clear cut than, for example, rough sleeping or presenting with an NTQ, these were the interactions where frontline workers tended to use significant discretion in the assessment and placement process. These living situations that constitute hidden homelessness will be discussed in turn in this section, with the discussion culminating in a focus on the narrow understanding of homelessness within local authorities which focuses on street homelessness.

Couch surfing

Staying on a friend or family member's (non-parental) couch was discussed in detail in the interviews as this living situation was included in the vignettes[7] used in the

[7] See Appendix 4 for vignette details.

interviews. It also arose organically in many of the interviews during the discussion on defining homelessness, which took place before the vignettes.

Whether a frontline worker considered couch surfing to constitute homelessness was not a yes or no answer. As with all the grey living situations discussed, context mattered and essentially it came down to determining whether the person could reasonably (although this term was only used once in these discussions around couch surfing) stay in their current accommodation or not, in the opinion of the frontline worker assessing them. The differing responses of the same worker in relation to couch surfing during their interview illustrates the importance of context clearly. When asked about how they define homelessness, they responded:

> *Like we wouldn't consider sofa-surfing as someone being homeless. Obviously, the definition does define that if someone is without a home, they're homeless. But we wouldn't consider someone sleeping in their friend's and then going on to another friend's home is homeless* (APS urban).

However, later in the interview, in response to a vignette, their response was very different. This vignette was 'a man aged 38 with a history of drug use and mental health issues. He spent some time in prison. He's been asked to leave by the friend whose couch he's currently sleeping on. At this point all of his family or friends have been exhausted as a source of accommodation'[8]. To this situation, the same frontline worker, gave the following response:

> *APS urban: Yeah, so first of all we'd see if he's currently engaging in drug use. We don't deter people from doing drugs if they want to do drugs. We just prefer to do it safely. So we'll put things in place where it's better for that.*
>
> *We would first of all see if he's on the housing list, encourage him to get up on the social housing list. We'd want a letter from his friends stating that he can no longer live there and we'll provide him with accommodation where if he's engaging in drugs, like, he can do his drugs safely and that there's supports there with mental health.*

[8] Adapted from Watts, B. (2013b) *The impact of legal rights to housing for homeless people: A normative comparison of Scotland and Ireland.* Doctor of Philosophy, University of York, York.

> *Interviewer: Okay, so you would—in terms of the sleeping on the couch, it would be just a case of the friend providing a letter to state—*
>
> *APS urban: A letter, yeah, just stating that he can no longer live there* (APS urban).

Other interviewees also stated that a letter from the person whose couch the homeless person was staying on, which declared that they had to leave, would serve as part of the proof of the person's homeless status. Whilst others stated that they may try to contact the person directly who is currently providing accommodation to the presenting person in order to discuss the situation with them further:

> *Sofa-surfing is very difficult as opposed to being in a family—mother or father or granny. We might make some attempt to contact, but then again, if we accept that it's sofa-surfing and they've run out, everyone's going to run out sooner or later. We probably have prior knowledge of the client anyway. You know, it's all about your skills and experience again* (APS urban and rural).
>
> *Look, with a case like that we would do a lot of work around speaking with the friend to see where are things at? The second part we would do with that is if he's involved in the services or if he's waiting for us to speak with them, just to see, look, what more can we do. I'm predicting the outcome of that is if the friend is, well, look, I've had enough…we'd be looking at that guy, taking him into services* (APS rural).

One frontline worker explicitly stated that they would base their decision on the word of the person who presented as opposed to looking for outside proof of the person's homelessness, as they don't have the resources to investigate everyone who presents. However, this approach was rare amongst the participants with most viewing themselves as having an investigative role in which they needed to uncover proof of a person's homeless status, as opposed to just taking their word for it. As one of the research participants explained:

> *…it's an investigation process, like, you know what I mean. So that's what they want you to do. They want you to investigate. They don't want just for someone to present and you place them on the day. There has to be investigation in relation to the process* (APO urban and rural).

Some differences in determining homeless status of someone who is staying temporarily on a friend or family member's couch is illustrated in the responses to the two vignettes that outlined this issue in different contexts: vignette one (outlined previously) and vignette three. Vignette three involved 'a young woman of 20 who's left State care aged 18 and has been unable to find secure accommodation since. She's currently staying on her brother's couch and although she hasn't been asked to leave, she feels she's outstayed her welcome as there's a history of family conflict'. Vignette one was explored with 14 of the interview participants[9]. All but one participant gave a straight 'yes' response to whether the person in this situation would be considered homeless – with eight stating that they would look for proof such as a letter from the friend. Most stated that this person would be offered TEA straight away and put on a waiting list for STA. The final participant stated that it would depend on the assessment and whether they could find somewhere else for the person to stay, for example, with other friends or family. Vignette three, which was also explored with 14 participants, garnered very different responses. For this vignette, the frontline workers were more likely to suggest 'prevention' as a first form of action in this situation, with seven of the participants suggesting that the person would be advised to stay where they are if possible and additional supports would be provided. These supports included linking in with her aftercare worker (if applicable), providing a discretionary HAP top up, or linking in with other youth support services. An important difference between the vignettes is that in vignette one the man was asked to leave by the friend. However, in vignette three, the young woman decided that she should leave due to family conflict. Only one of the participants made reference to the fact that concerns around family conflict were a factor in the young woman's decision to present as homeless, stating that they would advise her to stay where she was unless she disclosed concerns around abuse. Finally, one of the participants stated that because she has not been asked to leave that she is essentially making herself homeless:

> *I'd be saying…if you're deciding to leave and you haven't been put out, well, you're making yourself homeless* (APO urban and rural).

[9] It was not possible due to time constraints to cover every one of the four vignettes in every interview.

The issue of family conflict and how this impacts homeless assessments will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Family conflict: 'I had a fight with my mother'

One of the most provocative issues discussed throughout the interview process, which was brought up in twelve of the interviews, was around the issue of family conflict, or more specifically summed up in the quotes *'I had a fight with my mother'* (APO urban) or *'my mam's kicked me out of the house'* (APS urban). Young home leavers had a high probability of experiencing gatekeeping of services when they presented to the local authority as homeless. Some of the research participants tended not to view this particular situation as constituting homeless:

> *...people coming in to us and going 'ah I had a fight with my mother', not a reason for homelessness…* (APO urban).
>
> *So what I'm finding is a lot of people are saying, 'My mother kicked me out,' or 'My father kicked me out.' And why have they kicked you out? It's due to an overcrowding issue. And that doesn't fall under the remit of the definition of homelessness if you're looking at it that way* (APO urban).
>
> *Like we've a big issue with people presenting as homeless and family dispute where they're an occupant on their parents' tenancy or they're an occupant within the house but they can't return there. But, you see, if they're an occupant on a tenancy, they're technically not homeless* (APO urban and rural).

Like couch surfing, presenting due to family conflict is not a straightforward situation in terms of determining a person's homelessness status. Like the other hidden homeless situations, the frontline workers have to approach this on a case-by-case basis and thus have to use more judgement and discretion than when they are making decisions around cases that are seen as more straightforward. If someone presents with a protection order or a barring order, then the situation is different – as this is seen as proof of homelessness – and they would be offered accommodation straight away. However, this was by no means the situation of the vast majority of people who present to the local authority stating that they have been asked to leave the family home.

Rather, they present with or without a letter from their parent/s stating that they have been asked to leave. If they present without a letter, some frontline workers requested that they got one as part of the assessment process.

There were four responses that were outlined by the participants in the interviews when someone presented stating that they had been *'kicked out'* (APS urban and rural), which tended to be viewed by the frontline workers as forms of homeless prevention. Firstly, to outright deny services; secondly to deter these (mainly) young adults from entering homeless accommodation; thirdly to offer mediation services, and fourthly, to try to find them somewhere else to stay with extended family. For some of the people who present to the local authority stating that they have been asked to leave the family home, the response of the frontline worker was to tell them they have to return there, thus denying them access to homeless services, as one frontline worker bluntly put it:

> *If you had, if you were staying with your mother and she's after kicking you out, I'd say, go back to your housing officer and sort out your problems you know cause we're not here for family mediation* (APO urban).

Whereas for others, rather than outright deny access to a services, the frontline worker would try to convince them that returning home is the best solution, where they should try to access a rental property through mainstream HAP, therefore deterring them from entering homeless services:

> *Like from, you know, a housing perspective we would be pushing HAP, pushing HAP all the time for people to go and get, you know, private rented, that type of thing. We'd be as much as possible trying to deter people from coming into homeless services, which is reasonable enough, especially, you know, young people in particular. We'd have quite a lot of young women presenting from the mother's and father's house, whatever parent's house, with a letter and affidavit saying that they had to leave. And they'd have, you know, maybe one or two small children as well. So like we'd be under pressure as a team to kind of dissuade them from coming into homeless services as much as possible, but yet obviously they need to come into homeless services* (APS urban).

Often, this deterrence was described as being in the best interests of the young person as there was a sense among some frontline workers that they did not understand the impact that TEA would have on their lives.

One of the frontline workers viewed mediation as the best solution to dealing with these young people as they did not consider them to be homeless, rather to be in need of family support:

> *If somebody comes and they're fighting with their mother, we'd say, well, we'll offer you mediation and review it, you know. So it is—because people will say they're homeless now and when you delve a bit further they're not. And they'll say, 'I have no nowhere to go,'…When someone doesn't have a place to call home, that's homelessness. But that's not what presents to us* (APO urban and rural).

This is in stark contrast to the frontline worker quoted above (APO urban) who stated that mediation was not within the remit of the homeless unit.

The final approach which was outlined involved phoning around extended family to see if someone could take the young person in rather than them entering homeless services. Although participants spoke at times about taking this approach due to a desire to keep young adults out of homeless services for their own good, the following research participant described trying to find alternative accommodation was more a need to ration resources as opposed to being based on other concerns:

> *So if we have someone coming into us saying, 'I've been kicked out by a mother/father, I have nowhere to go,' we have to explore that, okay. We have to be sure that they reasonably have nowhere else to go. We will contact grannies, aunts, uncles, and then once we've exhausted all avenues we're happy that that person has nowhere else to go, okay…That's more of a reaction to the lack of accommodation. It's easy in the old days when I had 25 beds in the men's hostel and there is only 12 people in it to just go, 'Oh, sure, listen, just go down the hostel.' Those days are gone, okay. We stick to the local authority—the legal definition of homelessness. But having said that, we accept that there are hidden homelessness. And a huge part of our work we do here is about prevention* (APS urban and rural).

Likewise, a similar narrowness of those accepted as homeless was illustrated in conversation with another frontline worker who stated that they were less likely to accept these presentations as the number of them increased:

> *So we used to have a lot of that, like, and we used to take it as read. Okay, well, sure, go down to the [omitted name of service provider]—but when we had to put them into a B&B with no supervision or no record being kept of them really—because there was so many of them coming up, we had to say, look, unless there's a very good reason, unless you can come up with a letter from your mother that you're—you know, and in some cases, like, these young people might be arriving with a child, you know. And I'd say, well, is granny going to put their grandchild out on the road? Is she going to put her daughter out on the road? If she is, I need a letter* (APO urban and rural).

In general, there was a sense that presenting due to being told that you had to leave the family home was not genuine homelessness. Rather, some respondents felt that people were being attracted into homelessness, as one participant put it:

> *So a lot of people are—see, there's so much of like social media that creates this influx of people coming in with 'my mam's kicked me out of the house'. So if the person had a child, we would send a prevention team out to the house. The reasoning behind—'Oh, we're overcrowded.' 'You're living in a four-bedroom house with one daughter and her one child. You know, there's no overcrowding. They're coming in to get homeless HAP. They're not getting homeless HAP unless they use homeless services. And we're very strict on that. We're trying to prevent people from kind of using this as an excuse…We've got about 40% of people that are entering homeless services that have been kicked out by their mam* (APS urban).

For some of the research participants the use of B&B accommodation, the discretionary HAP rates, and/or a belief that you may access social housing faster when you are homeless, were viewed as factors that contributed to the increase in the number of young adults presenting as homeless. Two of the frontline workers believed that these presentations were sometimes due to a sense of entitlement to social housing for some young people who had been brought up in that tenure. One of them described

it as a 'culture in social housing' of accessing this form of accommodation once you turn 18, with a small number of the frontline workers echoing these sentiments:

> *Yeah, well, like there is a culture, there is a culture in social housing that as soon as young Jimmy becomes 18 or Mary becomes 18, oh, you have to go out and go down and get your—get onto the housing list, you know, like. If mammy had a council house, well, then the child should have a council house. But they'd always come down and they'd say, 'Mammy's put me out' or 'Daddy's put me out. I'm not getting on with my mother. I'm not getting on with parents and that.* (APO urban and rural)

Despite the practice of deterrence outlined above, if these young people who presented to the local authority as homeless persisted in declaring that they could not return to the family home, they were generally offered a place in TEA. The use of TEA as a deterrent for these young adults will be discussed in more detail in the section on covert deterrence (section 7.3).

Overcrowding

Like sofa surfing and family conflict, the frontline workers differed in their approach to dealing with people presenting as homeless due to overcrowding. Some of the frontline workers specifically stated that overcrowding was not a reason to present as homeless:

> *"The place is overcrowded", not a reason for homelessness* (APO urban).

> *What I've noticed recently is people are stating that due to overcrowding issues there has seemed to be kind of an increase in people presenting as homeless. Overcrowding isn't a reason for coming in as homeless. Most of [omitted county name]…all these properties are overcrowded. It's not a reason to present as homeless* (APO urban).

Likewise, one participant discussed how they did not see overcrowding as a homelessness issue but recognised that it could result in a person becoming homeless if all other avenues have been exhausted. In this sense, they viewed it as a local authority issue, but for the housing department rather than the homeless unit:

> *Yeah, so it's not—but like to be honest, we don't deal with overcrowded. We're homelessness, okay. So like we'd be telling them to get onto the local authority. You know, and try and exhaust all those options. And it's not that it's a blanket no. It will be reviewed. But we don't deal with overcrowding. That's not homelessness* (APO urban and rural).

There was a sense among some of the frontline workers, whilst recognising that living in overcrowded conditions was not ideal, that it was superior to entering into homeless services:

> *And I suppose when I sit down and my focus is when it's families, look at the children. And my question always is: is it better to be living in an overcrowded situation with family where you have—where in the majority of cases there are supports? And we find when we burrow in, that breakdown is over something* (APS rural).

Similarly to the approach outlined when people present due to family conflict, concerns were raised by the frontline workers that entering homeless services would have a negative impact on your life and that you were better off to stay in the *'not ideal'* (APO urban) situation. However, this was not the only rationale for deterring people from entering homeless services. Like with family conflict, some frontline workers stated that they have seen an increase or an *'influx'* (APS urban) of people presenting stating that they are living in overcrowded conditions and that they have had to become more choosey about who they offer services to:

> *Often we would have people coming from overcrowding and it's gotten to the stage where I'll go and speak to the housing officer and be like right how many bedrooms are in the house and how many people are registered there…and if we think it's not too outrageous, I mean you know like 6 people in a 4-bedroom or something, you know it is overcrowded but you know we'd say no you know stay there, you won't qualify for emergency accommodation* (APO urban).

The responses to people presenting from overcrowded situations were not uniform across the different local authorities, or sometimes even within them. For example, in one local authority, two research participants stated outright that overcrowding was not a homelessness issue, whereas another participant from the same local authority stated that they are stricter with people from overcrowded situations than they were in

the past (due to increasing numbers). However, they outlined the steps that they would take to determine if the person was in fact living in overcrowded accommodation, thus accepting that some people in this situation are in need of homeless services.

In another of the local authorities, two of the participants stated that outreach would be offered to people who present as living in overcrowded situations as a means to prevent people from entering homelessness. Where relevant, this prevention intervention could sometimes result in the person being offered the discretionary HAP top-up or the Place Finder service without the requirement that they enter emergency accommodation first – as is expected of many others who present as homeless.

With regard to the three grey areas outlined – couch surfing, family conflict and overcrowding – it is evident that there is a mixture of approaches being used across the different local authorities included in the study. There are various factors that impact the ways that the frontline workers are making these decisions about how different people are treated, which were discussed in chapter five.

'How homeless are they?'

Overall, when it came to the more hidden forms of homelessness, there was a sense among some of the frontline workers that this was not really homelessness in the way that these people were not experiencing or at immediate risk of rooflessness. Their feeling towards these grey area cases links back to the focus on being out on the street or at imminent risk of being on the street as genuine homelessness. There was a clear distinction made between people living in these more hidden forms of homelessness and those who were out 'on the street':

> *It's kind of become like a sort of an inside joke amongst the team where we will say, 'well how homeless are they?' you know? And that's not meant in a dismissive way it's just like, you know, are they going to be on the street tonight, you know? Anybody who is assessed as yeah there is a risk of them being on the street, yeah we will look after it. But, I do think people are, we have a lot of people and it's often those 10% who come up to the counter, you know 'I'm after having a fight with my mam, so you have to put me in a hotel'*

and you know, it has changed that perception of what homelessness is (APO urban).

As was discussed previously, there was a belief amongst some of the frontline workers that a proportion of people are presenting as homeless when they are not genuinely homeless in order to access a higher rate of HAP payment or in the belief that they will gain local authority housing priority. Of the frontline workers interviewed, most view their role as investigative in that they have to make informed decisions around which of these people presenting are deemed to be genuine and which ones are not. This process involved a mixture of investigation (for example, calling friends, family and discussing their housing history) and of making judgements around the person's situation (for example, their presenting behaviour, whether they were willing to enter a homeless hostel, whether they make repeat presentations). The following quote illustrates this differentiation between easily proven homelessness such as an NTQ and these greyer areas where there may be doubt around the person's housing situation, which was deemed as requiring more investigation:

> *But it's the people that present, I suppose, off the bat, "I've have nowhere to go, you have to put me somewhere," you know, it's those ones then that kind of take up the time from your NTQs and stuff like that…They actually would have somewhere you go. It's just in that moment they're like, you know, heightened…But when you kind of push them out and say, you know, you're going to have to find somewhere tonight—because you can't just place people off the bat like that. You have to investigate it. Now, there is people that have been placed like that and have been genuine, but then there's people that haven't, that may have a property and not telling me that they have a property, you know. So there's an awful lot in the investigation part of it. You know, it's very important to do that, yeah* (APO urban and rural).

Although situations were described where the frontline worker was doubtful of the homeless status of a person who presented to the local authority, the opposite was also described. A number of situations were described by the interview participants where the actions of a person, who on the face of it would appear not to be homeless, lead them to believe that the person was in fact homeless. In these cases the frontline

workers made a case to their manager for the presenting person to be offered services, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> *Just about placing someone. I suppose I would have felt that they were occupants in a tenancy but they were homeless, you know what I mean. And again, if they're an occupant on the tenancy, our procedure is not to place them. But…I had sent them away for a good few days and they were ringing every day and coming back and they were dropping stuff in and, you know, you could see the desperation…I contacted family to see would they take them back. You know, I had ticked every box…Young couple that were half between his mam's house and half between hers. And just family issues within the house, you know. Living in a small room with a brother and your child and your girlfriend for three days a week and then you're at the other—you know, and it's just not appropriate, like, you know what I mean, especially when they were trying their best to try and get rented accommodation. They couldn't. So I would have contacted both families and they both would have said, no, I don't want them here, you know* (APO urban and rural).

As seen in the above example, the fact that this couple continued to present was proof for this particular worker that they were homeless. This was not the only case where this happened as other mentioned repeat presentations as proof of homelessness or lack of repeat presentation as proof that a person was not actually homeless:

> *And you find people are just refusing it and you may not hear from them for weeks then. So again how homeless are they?* (APO urban)

This need for repeat presentations can result in some being excluded from an offer of services if they fail to present repeatedly within a timeframe that indicates urgency to the frontline worker, or fail to make follow up phone calls.

Another way that frontline workers were found to be testing whether a person (in their opinion) was homeless or not is through only being offered temporary emergency hostel accommodation, as it was felt that they would only accept this if they were genuinely homeless and in significant need of shelter. Although offering TEA appears to be a reasonable and expected response, this is worthy of discussion as it was not a uniform response for everyone as a first port of call. Some people who presented were offered access to the higher HAP payments, Place Finder or STA accommodation

without having to enter TEA first. This issue will be outlined in more detail in section 7.3.

In summary, determining *'how homeless are they'* is a matter decided at the discretion of frontline workers who use their judgement in determining whether someone has a need for homeless services or not. Although the workers tended to feel that there is a clear understanding within their teams around what constitutes homelessness, there were no formalised guidelines that they could refer to or that could be scrutinised by members of the public. This means that much of the process of determining homelessness is both covert and informal. A level of discretion for this role is important as people's lives and situations are vastly different and determining homelessness is not always straightforward. However, what is essential is the exploration of how frontline workers make these decisions and their suitability to determine whether a person is at risk of abuse or violence or whether they are in fact *'better off'* staying where they are, as opposed to entering homeless accommodation, as some people are told when they present to the local authority. The need to utilise a narrow definition and thus question 'how homeless' are people in specific living situations, is determined by the context within which these workers operate. Pressures from management around resources, as well as an increasing number of presentations, invariably lead to a situation of significant selectivity in determining who is eligible for services or not. The ways that this eligibility is determined will be discussed in the following section.

6.3 Eligibility

Determining eligibility for access to homeless services was not always a straightforward task for the frontline workers and was not simply related to a person's current living situation. Rather, there were additional criteria to be met to determine eligibility. Some welfare goods and services have clear eligibility criteria, for example determining eligibility for most social welfare payments involves ascertaining whether the applicant meets a number of clearly defined criteria, such as age, employment status, PRSI contributions in the case of social insurance payments, or level of income from all sources in the case of means tested payments. There are no such criteria

available to the frontline workers in determining whether a person is considered to be homeless or not. The research participants were generally in favour of this as they felt that the nature of homelessness meant that they needed to consider each case individually, without strictly circumscribed categories of eligibility. In examining the determination of eligibility through the research interviews, there were some situations described where people were generally granted immediate access to services once there is availability, for example if they are known to be rough sleeping and are from the area (and are not barred from the available accommodation), or present with a verified NTQ. However, considering the variety of areas described as grey by the research participants, determining eligibility was in many instances a more complex task for the frontline workers than just assessing the person's current living situation. Due to the lack of formalised eligibility criteria for primary rationing of homeless services, the frontline workers developed their own ways of determining if someone was deemed eligible for services or not. By their own admission, this was a process that involved a great deal of discretion and using their judgement around whether a person required access to homeless services.

In general, the interviewees viewed the assessment form as giving structure to the assessment process when someone makes a claim that they are homeless. This form, which differed between local authorities[10], sought information such as housing history, PPS Number, information on dependents, reasons for homelessness, employment status, medical history, past offending or anti-social behaviour, and alcohol and drug use. The form in itself, however, would not usually determine whether a person was considered to be homeless or not, except in those most straightforward of cases such as presenting with a verified NTQ. Rather, the judgement of the assessing officer played a crucial role in making this determination. Most of the frontline workers mentioned an initial screening process that took place before the assessment form was commenced. This varied but tended to include establishing a local connection, whether the person was on the housing list or not and/or, as in the case of the worker below, establishing whether the person had a place that they could go back to stay in that night:

[10] The forms differed at the time of the interviews, although there was talk of introducing a more standardised form to use across local authorities.

> *Yeah, so like name, address date of birth, PPS number, housing application, children, ethnicity, medical problems, children, we go through that with them. But before, we even get that we will go through generally, as I said, do you have a housing application, where were you last night? Can you go back there? And so on* (APO urban).

Based on this initial screening a number of steps may be taken before assessment begins. For example, the person could be told that they need to apply to be on the social housing list, or they could be sent to another local authority if a local connection is not established.

Some of the factors that the frontline workers used to determine whether a person was considered to be eligible for services were more liable to objective determination than others. For example, whether a person had a local connection, was on the social housing list in that area or had an NTQ. Whereas others were more subjective and required judgement by the frontline worker, for example determining if they were intentionally homeless, were considered to be genuine, or could prove that they had nowhere else to go. In considering the somewhat more objective factors used to determine eligibility, it was evident that the need for a local connection was a requirement of all the local authorities included in the research as it arose in every interview. The way this tended to be established was through firstly checking if the person was on the housing list for the particular local authority area, which some stated as a requirement for accessing services. Failing this, the address for the presenting person's social welfare payment would be checked if applicable. In one local authority, the frontline workers stated that they would accept that the person has a local connection if they have been receiving a payment to an address within the area for at least six months. It is not clear from the data if this is the case in all the local authorities. One of the frontline workers stated that the reason that the local authority required that a person have a local connection to the area was due to funding. They stated that funding would only be available to provide services for a particular person if that person was living within the local authority area:

> *Well, like if you had someone that's from a different county, obviously their local authority is getting the budget to place them, to provide them with any supports or anything like that* (APS urban).

However, this reason was not stated by any others. Rather, they discussed how the local connection was a rule that they needed to implement without offering a rationale for the rule's existence. There were a few instances where the interviewees outlined cases that led them to offer services (albeit limited in time or service quality) to people who did not have a local connection. These were usually based on the vulnerability of the presenting person, for example, based on their medical needs or if the frontline worker felt sure that they would be on the street that night without a bed.

Although all of the local authorities had a requirement for some form of local connection in order to be eligible to access homeless services, the approach differed when it came to a requirement that a person be on the social housing list. This differing approach is illustrated through the following two quotes that show vastly different perspectives on whether the social housing list is relevant for homeless service eligibility or not:

> *At this moment in time we follow the rule if you're eligible for social housing you're eligible for homeless services because what we tend to feel here, or what our understanding is, it's hand-in-hand. At the moment. So if you're out of social housing, homeless services, emergency services is a form of social housing support. So once that criteria is met then you're eligible for homeless services* (APO urban).

> *…homelessness and being on a housing list is two different things…as long as they're living in the area…for six months or more and are established in the area, no, I've no issue placing them…in some local authorities they just say no if they're not in the housing list…that's not the case here. Now, look, it might come in because it's gone out of control kind of. But no, we don't—like it's two different things, okay* (APO urban and rural).

Of those that required that applicants be on the social housing list in order to access homeless services, some stated that they would still grant access to services to people if they were not on the list but they had reason to believe that they would be accepted on the list once they applied. In these cases the person was then told that they would have to make an application for social housing as a requirement of their access to homeless services.

The frontline workers interviewed spoke about having proof of homelessness as a means to determine eligibility for homeless services. Examples of proof of homelessness that were mentioned by frontline workers included having a verified NTQ; a letter or affidavit from a parent or friend who had asked you to leave their property; a Garda Information Message (GIM) if the cause of homelessness is a threat due to feuding; a protection or barring order; a consultant's report in the case where a person stated that their homeless status was related to their mental health; repeat presentations over a short period of time; knowledge of the rough sleeper team that you are sleeping rough and/or acceptance of an offer of Temporary Emergency Accommodation in a homeless hostel. These examples were discussed by individual frontline workers and do not necessarily constitute accepted proof of homelessness across all the local authorities.

Where the more easily verifiable forms of proof are not applicable, there are differences between the research participants in how they approach establishing proof of homelessness. For example, in the following interview the emphasis of proof was focused on the presenting person proving their homeless status:

> *They need to prove it. They need evidence that they're homeless. Now, we would take special circumstances. New-born babies, young people we'd always red-flag straight away and try and gather as much information, and we place new-born babies no questions asked, stuff like that ...So people would come in, "I can't find anywhere. I'm living with my mother. I'm in an overcrowded situation." They won't say, "I want homeless HAP," they say, "I've nowhere to go." But I know they're homeless HAP, you know. So I'll kind of just straight away say, "Are you willing to go into emergency accommodation?" just to see what's what. You know, it's like a game. I know what people want, but we kind of have to follow up the different procedures. So we'd kind of say, "You need to prove you're homeless"* (APO urban).

In another interview, the frontline worker who worked in a different local authority placed the emphasis on their investigative work in proving whether a person is homeless or not when they are presenting from the grey area discussed previously:

> *We do a lot—like outside of the assessment as well we'd contact families. Like they sign at the end, you know what I mean. We make everybody aware that*

> *we're going to have to contact—so I spend a lot of my time chasing up with parents to see if people are actually out of the property or—so outside of the assessment there's a lot of phone calls, you know, whether like to the local authority, to parents, to treatment centres, you know* (APO urban and rural).

Finally, in one interview the interviewee, who worked in a local authority that was different from the previous two examples, stated that in absence of proof outside of that which is easy to verify, they would take the person at their word that they were experiencing homelessness:

> *Like, yeah, if you presented to me now and said—like we don't contact the friend, like, you know. It's not something we do. We would try and get some sort of history. Why did you end up on your friend's couch? So we'll try and track back to where the homelessness actually started. But if I'd no way of verifying the story and this was the story, the only bit of it I had, yeah, he would get a referral to [TEA]* (APO urban).

As well as evidence being collected that could be used as proof of homelessness, there were examples cited that constituted proof that a person was not homeless. These included being named as a tenant on a social housing tenancy agreement (for example, a young person named on their parent/s tenancy), a failure to present repeatedly if told there is no accommodation on that day or refusal of a place in TEA.

The issue of leaving a property voluntarily and thus been seen as making yourself intentionally homeless came up in six of the interviews. For five of the respondents this was seen as a factor that generally rendered the person ineligible for homeless services, unless they felt that the person was experiencing exceptional circumstances, in which case they would use their discretion to grant access. Examples that were given of people considered to be intentionally homeless included a man who checked himself out of a mental health unit in hospital rather than being discharged; a pregnant woman who had left her property without receiving an NTQ and was sleeping in her car; leaving a property that was in disrepair without going *'through the right channels'* (APO urban); surrendering your council house; leaving a property before your landlord issues you with an NTQ (after stating their intention to do so); and leaving the family home after a family conflict if you haven't been told to leave. Only one of

the interviewees questioned this notion of intentionally homeless and pointed to its implications/causes:

> *But the reality is—and there are some things, like, that other local authorities use and—right, have you made yourself homeless? That fundamental question. Now, what is making yourself homeless? You didn't pay your rent. But hold it, why didn't you pay rent? Because I couldn't afford to pay rent. And this blame thing of they didn't pay their rent. But they're in addiction, they're after having a breakdown* (APS rural).

The final, and most subjective of all the criteria that frontline workers used to determine a person's eligibility for homeless services was whether the frontline worker thought that a person who presented as homeless was genuine or not. Their understanding of genuine depended on each particular situation. For example, in one interview the participant outlined estimates of the proportion of people presenting that they felt were genuine or not, with this notion of genuineness based on whether a person was actually homeless or simply trying to access Homeless HAP:

> *So I'd say 40% of people coming in, [family conflict] will be the reasoning behind them becoming homeless. And I'd say only—out of that 40%, I'd say only 50% would be genuine and would actually start to use emergency accommodation. The other 50% would only be for homeless HAP purposes* (APS urban).

Another way that being genuine was evaluated was based on the frontline workers impression of the person who presented – whether they felt that they were being truthful or not, which could be based on their presenting behaviour:

> *So there was somebody who presented to us who was coming from an abusive relationship and she had left her house, her council house. I was able to see on the system that she was still in, that she was still registered to the council house…You know, the correct route for her to take would have been to get a barring order out so that the partner would have to leave the house and she could be in the house but because of the circumstances around the house it was completely in disrepair at the time, the neighbours were abusing her as well…And even though she had this house, you know the letter of the law says that she needs to go back there she has a house you know and I immediately,*

like I could tell, the way she was telling the story, I could tell it wasn't her trying to work around any systems or trying to get through. She was being 100 per cent genuine; she didn't even want to be there looking for homeless accommodation, you could tell that like you know? Whereas sometimes you can tell somebody is trying to play up a story or trying to exaggerate stuff, there is none of that and I knew within you know, 20 seconds of talking to her (APO urban).

Although being seen as genuine could be based on a frontline workers perceptions of the presenting person, it was also strongly linked to the eligibility criteria outlined above. So for example, someone who repeatedly presented to the local authority stating that they were homeless was often viewed as being genuinely homeless:

See, I suppose it's over time. If they keep presenting, there's a need. But if you say to them obviously you're an occupant on a tenancy and they leave and they don't present again, the need isn't as high as someone that's ringing every day, going, 'She won't let me into the house. You know, I'm on my friend's couch.' Like you know by their presentation, the need, how high the need is…Like people that really need it will keep coming (APO urban and rural).

The cases that were not deemed genuine were viewed by some frontline workers as consisting of people who were trying to work the system in some way and gain access to services that they were either not entitled to (discretionary HAP rates) or to get pushed up the queue for social housing. There was a sense among some of the frontline workers that the perception of what constitutes homelessness has broadened in recent years amongst services users. However, the frontline workers felt a need to challenge this perception and sift out the genuine cases from those that were not considered to be genuine. Thus there were oftentimes considerable trust issues when it came to determining someone's homeless status, as many were viewed as trying to game the system. This was most notable when it came to young adults who were presenting with a claim of having been told they had to leave the family home. Only one of the frontline workers pointed to the issue of housing exclusion and questioned why so many people would be presenting as homeless if they are not:

So I suppose you've got to break that down in a sense that when somebody presents and tries to pull the wool, to use want of a better word, why are they

doing that? Because they have to or they feel they have to. And at the end of the day nobody wants to come in and sit down with any staff member here and tell their life story…because if they could, they wouldn't be here. And that's my reality on it. But it doesn't mean we can't—we have to make our decisions because it comes back to another thing as well: resources (APS rural).

6.4 The thin line between homelessness prevention and gatekeeping

Some examples of homeless prevention discussed by the frontline workers have been outlined in the previous sections of this chapter but it is worthy of further discussion as prevention plays an important role in the primary rationing of homeless services. There were instances in the research where the use of prevention appeared to constitute a form of gatekeeping of services. This involved either a denial or delay in accessing accommodation and services, most notably among those experiencing hidden forms of homelessness. These people were often convinced to either stay put – being told that they are better off where they were, without the offer of additional supports that may improve their living situation – or another temporary arrangement was sought for them amongst extended family or friends. The paternalism briefly discussed in the previous chapter was evident when it came to homeless 'prevention' for young people who were told that they would be better off to stay in their current living situation than to enter TEA. These decisions were described as being needs-led in that they were in the best interests of the young person who had presented:

> *So I'd always encourage somebody to stay out of emergency accommodation because it is going to affect their life, unfortunately. And you know that. When you're placing someone, you know that's going to have a negative impact on their life, and that's difficult to manage as well, like, you know* (APO urban).

However, it is important to consider the pressures on these frontline workers to prevent people from entering TEA and thus give equal consideration to the service-led element of their decision-making. In essence, whether it is about preventing a person from remaining/becoming homeless, or is it about preventing people from entering homeless services? This question will be addressed further in the section 7.3.

Research participants from some local authorities mentioned offering family mediation or family support to young people who had presented having being asked to leave the family home. However, frontline workers in different local authorities specifically stated that family mediation was not within their remit. Another approach discussed, which was often used for people living in situations of hidden homelessness, involved someone from the homeless unit meeting face-to-face, or calling on the phone, the person that was asking the homeless applicant to leave their home. This was to see if something could be worked out so that the homeless applicant could stay living with them. The difference between local authority approaches in terms of the homeless prevention services that are available is illustrated well in the following excerpt:

> *But, you see, I know that in [Omitted name of county] Council they literally have—I don't know what the people are called, but they have people who literally go out to families who have given their son or daughter an affidavit saying they have to leave and they will negotiate with the parent, saying, 'Is there no way they can stay here?' We don't have that sort of thing…We don't have that. And I have to say it must be a dreadful job, so fair play to them for doing it. But no, we don't* (APS urban).

Access to the discretionary higher HAP rate was an area of homeless prevention that was useful but very unevenly distributed and often based on a discretionary decision of the frontline worker around the presenting person's eligibility. As the standard HAP payment is so far below market rents, the higher rate can increase a person's potential to gain access to the rental market, although the payment still often requires a top-up by the recipient. However, there were no discernible formal criteria outlined to the researcher for whether a person would be offered immediate access to the higher HAP rate or would have to enter TEA for a period of time first in order to prove their homelessness. Informally, this tended to happen when the frontline worker felt that the presenting person's homelessness was proven either by objective means (for example having an NTQ) or subjective means (for example, their presenting behaviour). Where there was deemed to be a lack of proof of the person's homelessness, they may be required to enter TEA before they are offered Homeless HAP as entry to this form of accommodation is in itself considered proof of homelessness.

Another means of homeless prevention that differed in its application was the HAP Place Finder service. Two of the interviewees spoke about undertaking considerable work with local landlords in order that accommodation could be made available to people who were experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Whereas in other interviews, Place Finder was described as assistance to bring awareness to homeless people or those at risk of homelessness of tenancies that already existed, for example, on DAFT.ie, rather than working with landlords to secure additional tenancies. Overall the homeless prevention services appeared to be patchy in their application. However, examples of good practice were evident that both prevented a person from entering homelessness and improved their living situation at the same time.

The analysis of the data on homeless prevention illustrates a mixture of both beneficial strategies that prevented some people from entering homelessness and ones that constituted a form of gatekeeping of resources. The beneficial strategies included family mediation where appropriate, access to a higher rate of HAP payment and assistance in gaining a tenancy. The main gatekeeping strategies involved convincing people who presented that they were better off to stay where they are without offering them any service that may improve their living situation or make it more sustainable; or attempting to source another place for them to stay which was no more sustainable than their last one, mainly through calling on extended family or friends to take them in.

6.5 Conclusion

With homeless services constituting a form of residual welfare (Wilensky and Lebeaux, 1965), the selectivity evident in the analysis of primary rationing is to be expected. However, there is no test (means-based or otherwise) for accessing homeless services. Therefore, as the findings have shown, the ambiguous legislation and the lack of formal guidelines on determining homeless status, has left a wide gap that the frontline workers need to fill through using their judgement and discretion to determine eligibility for services. The workers do this using a narrow definition of homelessness which focuses on rooflessness as the parameter against which all other presentations are judged. However, as the research shows, the issue of hidden

homelessness is a significant one, with many people presenting to the local authorities from a variety of living situations on a daily basis.

It is important to address in this research the grey areas between housing exclusion and homelessness. It is crucial that the difficulties faced by many people in their attempts to access social housing are acknowledged. The experience for many of the young adults who the frontline workers described as presenting because of family conflict or overcrowding is that the frontline workers attempts to *'push people back'* into the situation that they presented from in order that they can *'try and sort out their own problems'* (APO urban). These actions were sometimes viewed as homeless prevention, yet they did little to resolve the housing issues that brought these people to the local authority in the first place. A fundamental question that needs to be addressed is the question of what level of housing exclusion will be accepted in Irish society and whether it is right to expect people to stay living in the family home indefinitely if they are cut off from accessing the housing market independently? It is interesting to note that in these cases, the focus of homelessness was very often on individual causes, such as the behaviour of the presenting person, and the need to sort out their (or their family's) problems, which provided a rationale to the frontline worker for denial or delay of services based on a person's perceived deservingness. However, when it came to the more easily verifiable 'proof' of homelessness such as presenting with an NTQ, the focuses shifted to structural causes of homelessness and services are usually provided to overcome these structural issues.

Chapter 7: Patterns of practice in secondary rationing: The placement of people within homeless services

7.1 Introduction

Whilst the primary rationing of homeless services discussed in the previous chapter involves making decisions around a person's eligibility for homeless services, secondary rationing is concerned with decisions focused on the level or type of services offered to the person deemed eligible (Foster, 1983). In some sectors of the welfare state a defined benefit or particular service is offered to a person once they fulfil specified eligibility criteria, for example eligibility for a social welfare payment, a student grant or a medical card. In this case, no secondary rationing is required as once a person is deemed eligible, they are entitled to, for example, a specified level of payment. Yet in others sectors, like administration of homeless services, there is no uniform defined benefit having been determined eligible. In these circumstances, secondary rationing is necessary as frontline workers must decide who gets what in terms of the services available to tackle homelessness. These decisions are based on many factors including, but not limited to, the perceived level of need, the frontline workers' perceptions around a person's ability to function (or behave) in a particular form of accommodation, deservingness and/or their family status.

Accordingly, the first section of this chapter will examine differences in access to services. Most notably, the difference in approach to placement of single people and placement of families. Secondly, the findings will show how a deterrent approach underlines much of the decision-making of frontline workers in their pursuit to ration homeless services and financial resources. As a result of this, a process has been uncovered – which will be defined as *covert deterrence* – in which these frontline workers covertly deter people (mostly the young) from entering homeless services through their emphasis on ways that it may negatively impact their life. Thirdly, with regard to the taxonomy approach to welfare rationing, the important role of 'selection' as a form of secondary rationing of services will be explored. Both the service approach of the staircase of transition as a mode of homeless service delivery, and the significant use of private providers of both emergency and more long-term housing

options, have resulted in selection playing a central role in decisions around the placement of people who are deemed eligible for services. Finally, power dynamics in the frontline worker/service user relationship will be discussed.

7.2 Differences in access to services: Singles and families

In describing the processes that the frontline workers used in the placement of people who presented to them as homeless, it became clear that there were significant differences in the access to services between different groups of people, most notably between single people and families with children. This was due to pressure from management to keep single people out of B&B and hotel accommodation and to only use this accommodation for families. In total nine frontline workers explicitly stated that they do not place single people into B&B accommodation, with most stating that this is because they have been told not to by management:

> *If it's a single person the first port of call is always [TEA], [STA – female] or [TEA – male], if they have room there because they have section 10 funded beds…lately you know our sort of line has been no single people in hotels or B&B's, they're for families only, because we're kind of at maximum capacity* (APO urban).

> *So up until last year we decided we're not going to do B&B anymore for single people, you'll have to get on to get alternative arrangements* (APO Urban and rural).

> *So if it's a family presenting and there's no room in the hubs or the hostel, it would be B&B. If they met the need it would be B&B. We don't normally put singles into B&B. It's only special circumstances, special cases. If it's a single presenting, it's either the male or female hostel or it's the 9 to 9. That's the only options we have…* (APO urban and rural).

The stark difference in the possible outcomes for a family and a single person who presents to some local authorities as homeless is outlined clearly in the following excerpt, where the frontline worker describes the lengths they would go to in order

that a family with children was accommodated, in contrast to the situation where single people have been sent away with the offer of a sleeping bag:

> *We're never going to turn away family. We are never going to turn away children. And if we ran out of our [temporary] houses, we'd ring [omitted name of hotel] or something. You know, we have to. Okay, children on the streets a no-no. And we have, as I said to you, we've had to operate waiting lists. And as bad as it sounds or bad as it feels, we literally were sending people out the door with the offer of a sleeping bag. We haven't done that for a good while now because things have calmed down, but yes, we were turning people away* (APS urban and rural).

Through the interviews it was clear that families are more likely to be offered private rooms (albeit ones where the whole family have to live together), whereas single people are more likely to be required to live in communal dorm rooms. Recognising the issues associated with communal dorm room accommodation for some people, there were examples discussed of where the frontline workers would use their discretion in a positive way to offer private room hotel or B&B accommodation to a single person who they felt was vulnerable and would be unable to cope in hostel accommodation. However, as was discussed in section 5.6.2, acting in this way as a gateway to services often resulted in increased managerial scrutiny for the frontline workers when they were required to justify their decision to management:

> *The hostels like, I mean, they're suitable for some people and they're not suitable for others, you know what I mean. And like I'd be very aware of when I'm placing somebody. Like, look, I suppose there has been instances where we've gotten B&B for someone that we feel is completely unsuitable. Or if there was no room availability and we couldn't put them on to the emergency beds. You know, I mean, you can't put a 70-year-old woman with no addiction issues up in the emergency beds. You have to—you know, so—So yeah, like, we can come up with other solutions, do you know what I mean, and just like you're supported to do that in a way. Sometimes, now, it's like we'll just do it anyway!* (APO urban and rural)

As well as older people, women were another group that were sometimes viewed by some of the frontline workers as being vulnerable in TEA. A few frontline workers

spoke about trying to get them straight into STA when they presented so that they did not have to place them within the temporary emergency hostel. Rather, they wanted them to be placed somewhere that they felt would be safer for them, such as women-only supported temporary accommodation. However, the focus on not putting single people into B&B or hotel accommodation meant that for some women, if there is no place available in STA, then they will have to be accommodated in TEA, unless the frontline workers feels that they are particularly vulnerable and makes a case for them to be accommodated in a hotel or B&B:

> *If it's a lady and there is no space in [STA] unfortunately it's [TEA], it's our only option* (APO urban).

> *If we had a vulnerable young girl, pregnant girl, we'd put into hotels* (APS urban).

One of the frontline workers described the reasons why they decided to make a case to their manager for a particular woman who presented to the local authority as homeless. Despite the fact that this woman had a history of drug use, the impression that the frontline worker got from her was that she was 'sincere' due to the way that she told him about what was happening to her. She described a situation of abuse, which the frontline worker felt left her in a very vulnerable position. Therefore, this worker decided that it was worth approaching their manager to make a case that this woman should be accommodated in a B&B as there were no spaces in the supported accommodation:

> *She had a really solid housing history, she was, she looked after her place. Any rent arrears she had, she paid off, you know, she was kind of trustworthy. We didn't have any room in [STA]. She was kind of rough and she did have a drug history and you know, and she had been in prison. And normally we try why not to put people like that into B&Bs because it's a risk. And that could be a risk to all the families there. But just from speaking with her I could tell she was kind of sincere and she hasn't had trouble recently, you know, she should have been a referral to [TEA] at most but I was able to kind of argue with [my manager] and say we should put her into a B&B* (APO urban).

Another of the interviewees went further in describing how they make these decisions in describing a scenario where two different women present. This worker outlined how

they might decide how one is suitable for TEA, whereas they see the other woman as too vulnerable for this form of accommodation. In this example, the person who is using drugs is seen as more suitable for TEA, while the person who has become homeless due to the non-payment of rent, is seen as being less able to cope in TEA:

> *Again it's based on the assessment and the whole kind of rules and regulations that we have, I suppose. Again, look, let's just say there's two women presenting. One is after getting kicked out of her property because of non-payment of rent or, again, the landlord's selling up. Another one is just saying she was staying with her friends, but on the assessment you would kind of feel that maybe she's, you know, using drugs or she's incoherent due to alcohol. Then you may say, okay, that person may be a better fit for [TEA], while the other person who presented to you, you feel like that she would be too vulnerable for [TEA]* (APO urban).

This same worker stated that the sympathy they feel towards an individual can impact whether they place them in TEA or feel that they need to be accommodated elsewhere. This sentiment was echoed by some of the other interviewees too, where the workers felt compassion towards a particular person and felt that they would have difficulty coping in TEA:

> *You do feel sympathy towards a number of individuals and you'd feel that putting them into the likes of a night-to-night shelter maybe they're just too vulnerable for it* (APO urban).

A person's perceived ability to cope in TEA was discussed by a number of the frontline workers in outlining the ways that they make decisions around placement within homeless accommodation. Generally, those who had a history of homelessness or drug use were seen as more able to cope in TEA. In discussing one of the vignettes based on a 38 year old man with a history of drug use and mental health issues, one of the interviewees felt that his history meant that he was able to 'look after himself', whereas, more 'normal' people would find it harder to cope there:

> *APO urban: It would depend, 38, did you say 38, drug user?*
>
> *Interviewer: Yeah history of drug use and mental health issues*

APO urban: He can look after himself so I wouldn't have too much here about placing him in [TEA] so off he'd go

Interviewer: So you would be reluctant if he was younger is it?

APO urban: If he was younger or a bit more vulnerable you would be a bit more hesitant about placing him in [TEA]. If he was (pauses), a more normal guy like, I know I wouldn't stay there, I'd find something (APO urban).

This differentiation between the newly homeless and those seen as more traditional homeless (for example, those with drug issues) was discussed by other interviewees as well. The fact that TEA was the main form of accommodation available for these people (if they were single), troubled some of the workers. Therefore, for most of the frontline workers, they felt that it was important that they could use their discretion in these circumstances so that they could make decisions around whether they felt that a particular type of accommodation was suitable for a particular person or not. As the following passage illustrates, just as they felt it was important that they could approach assessment on a case-by-case basis, the same was true for placement:

You need to be able to use your own discretion and you need to be able to make executive decisions. Like people are only entitled to certain accommodation depending if they're on the social housing list or not. But if we feel this individual is very vulnerable, he will be eaten alive in homeless accommodation, we will provide him with an alternative accommodation. Or based on their medical needs we'll go against protocol and provide them with certain accommodation (APS urban).

Even for the frontline workers who stated that placement was simply down to the availability of accommodation (*'Well, like, I mean, where we place them is completely what we have available to us'* APO urban), discretion played a role in decisions around placement for people who were deemed too vulnerable for a particular type of accommodation, namely TEA. However, as the selection of accommodation differed depending on the level of homelessness within the local authority, there were less options for the frontline workers in placing someone where the homeless numbers were lower. For example, in the local authorities that covered more rural areas where there could be just one or two hostels available.

For one of the frontline workers, the reason they gave for not using B&B accommodation for single people was related to their belief that single homeless people presented with more complex issues than the families did, therefore they felt that placing a single person into a B&B was more likely to cause issues within that accommodation:

> *And I think that comes back to what I was saying to you about we don't place single people in B&Bs, okay. If you're going to place a single male or female who has issues and you place them in a B&B, you are taking a chance that that B&B owner is going to say, 'I've had enough of this.' So you're potentially jeopardising five rooms for families for the sake of one single person. So that's why we never placed singles in B&Bs* (APS urban and rural).

The issues associated with building and maintaining relationships with providers of privately owned accommodation will be discussed in more detail in section 7.4.2.

As a result of not using PEA accommodation for singles, some people were placed in TEA even when the frontline worker felt that this was inappropriate for them. One worker described their frustration at having to place people who had worked hard to get off drugs back into the night-only hostel, where they would be exposed to drug use again:

> *I suppose the singles when they're presenting and they don't fit the criteria of going up to a 9 to 9 where there's active drug and alcohol use, or people like are being released from prison and that have got clean over three or four years and then you're putting them into a 9 to 9, back into that situation. We've had a few that that's happened to and that have after two or three days went back on drugs, and you just feel that the system is so bloody wrong there, do you know what I mean* (APO urban and rural).

It was clear in the interview that this troubled the frontline worker. However, they felt that they had no choice in this situation other than to place these people back into TEA, as the only other option was to turn them away. As a positive use of discretion that resulted in a single person being offered B&B or hotel accommodation was almost always put under the management spotlight and thus required justification, the frontline workers only used this discretion in exceptional circumstances, generally for

the placement of some older people, those with medical issues, or women who were deemed too vulnerable for hostel accommodation.

The age dimension to differing treatment touched on in this section will be discussed further in the following section which outlines an approach taken by some of the frontline workers in their interactions with young people who present to the local authority as homeless.

7.3 The practice of covert deterrence at the frontline

Wherever there is a staircase of transition type structure in homeless services, the lowest entry-level rung – i.e. emergency hostel accommodation – can act as a deterrent to people from entering homeless accommodation. In analysing the data, a practice of covert deterrence became apparent as a coping mechanism devised by the frontline workers to deal with their workload and pressures to ration resources. It was a way that the frontline workers attempted to deter people from accessing emergency homeless accommodation, thus gatekeeping services through their interactions during the assessment and placement process. The existing homeless services, where hostel accommodation is used as an option of absolute last resort, meant that deterrence was already engrained in the structure of these services. This was used by the frontline workers as a means to determine if they felt that someone was genuinely homeless or not through the belief that those who they described as not genuinely homeless would be deterred from entering emergency accommodation and only those that were truly homeless would accept this form of accommodation once all the negative aspects of it were explained to them. The focus on rooflessness meant that people living in situations they described as better than the available hostel accommodation were sometimes not considered to be homeless at all, with these assessments focused mainly on the physical domain of housing (Edgar *et* al, 2004). The following quote from a discussion on the Vignette featuring a young care leaver who was staying temporarily on her brother's couch demonstrates this well as there was no consideration of the social or legal domain in determining this person's homeless status:

> *I suppose my opinion I would say no, I wouldn't necessarily take them in. Where she's staying at the moment is better accommodation than what we would be offering them as a single person. It's a no* (APO urban).

The practice described in this section is covert in that it is generally a hidden practice that only takes place within the spaces where the encounters between frontline workers and people presenting as homeless take place. However, it is a covert way of using a formalised policy to deter people from entering TEA. A small number of the frontline workers made reference to having to fill Section 10[11] funded properties before any other type of emergency accommodation was offered. This was more relevant to single people than families, as families with children were often offered hotel or B&B accommodation on presentation with hubs being used for those who were deemed as being in need of additional support. The requirement to fill Section 10 beds first means that it is a formal policy that single people are offered hostel accommodation on presentation. However, what is of interest to this research, is how this was presented to some, mostly young people, with an aim to deter them from entering the accommodation, as it was portrayed as being worse than most other situations that one could find themselves living in, other than the street. It was not that this accommodation was simply offered to those who were eligible. Rather, there was often a discussion around what the accommodation would be like, how it might impact their life, what kinds of people would be staying there and so on. Some frontline workers explicitly stated that the aim was to put people off entering hostels and for them to either remain where they were currently or to find another (often temporary) form of accommodation. It should be mentioned that despite stating in these interactions with young/single people that section 10 funded accommodation was the only option available, this was not the case as frontline workers could use their discretion to offer alternative accommodation other than TEA to a person if they felt that it was warranted.

The use of covert deterrence was evident in a number of ways throughout the interviews. One way that the frontline workers attempted to deter people from entering homeless accommodation was through the process of convincing them that they were

[11] 'Section 10 funding' refers to Section 10 of the Housing Act, 1988 which enables local authorities to provide to voluntary bodies for the provision of emergency accommodation and longer term housing for people experiencing homelessness.

better off to stay where they were than to enter homeless accommodation, even if they are living in overcrowded or other temporary situations such as sleeping on someone's couch:

> *If you can be accommodated in the family home, that's probably going to be better than some of the accommodation that we're going to offer you* (APO urban).

> *And, and like I do think a lot of the time I would be encouraging people to take the not ideal scenario because it's better than being in homeless services* (APO urban).

When people were told that they would be better off not to enter homeless services, they were essentially pushed back into the accommodation situation from which they had presented or towards another temporary one. Usually one of two reasons was described for taking this approach with a person who presented as homeless: either the frontline worker felt that the accommodation they were staying in was of better quality than TEA (in other words as described above that they were better off where they were), or the frontline worker did not believe that the person was genuinely homeless and they used this as a way to deter them from attempting to enter homeless services. Pushing people back to the accommodation from which they had presented could simply involve encouraging them to remain where they were. However, if the person stated that they had been told that they had to leave, in some cases this resulted in the frontline worker making phone calls to parents, other family members or friends to see if the person could stay with them.

The means by which people who presented as homeless were convinced to stay in their current living situation was through presenting TEA in a way that deterred people from entering it, as the following interviewee evocatively describes:

> *But again, if it all—you offer them the [TEA]. And sometimes that can be a leveller, you know…I do say if you're not involved in anything—"No, no, no"—it mightn't be too long until you are, because that's the client now that's down there…You know, so you have to use it as a deterrent as well as a provision* (APO urban and rural).

The same interviewee described using family hubs as a deterrent to try and sort those that were genuinely homeless from those that they felt were not:

> *What we decided then is that we would open a hub. We have a family hub. And what we say to people is, "Okay, I see have I got a place for you." So you might offer them the hub and the experience of what the hub is and the rules and regulations about it. And lo and behold, when the options are given out to them, they say, "God, I don't think I could do that, I might be able to stay with my sister." So you keep pushing them back. And that's basically our job. Now, it doesn't mean, you know, we're free of homelessness, but it just means that we have got I suppose an expertise in not giving out homeless services and emergency accommodation as easy as it used to have been, you know* (APO urban and rural).

Likewise, the quote below illustrates how a similar approach was taken by a frontline worker from a different local authority to ensure people knew what they were getting into by entering emergency accommodation. In this example the interviewee is discussing the process when young families present. Simply describing the reality of emergency accommodation was enough to deter some people from accepting a place in the accommodation:

> *We do our little spiel. We try to say to them, look, you know, do you understand that you're taking you and your young family into homeless services; there's, you know, a diverse range of people using homeless services; you could well be [city] based for a period until we get you out to a local hub* (APS urban).

Where the practice of covert deterrence did not work, some of the frontline workers described how the reality of staying in hostel accommodation sometimes worked instead to get people back to the living situations that they had presented from:

> *But it's this belief that they'll get 1800 rent and they have to go out and rent and we'll pay for it. So we would make them use homeless services for two weeks and usually that pushes them back. They continue to stay in their mam's* (APS urban).

Although a few of the workers described this approach specifically as a deterrent, others described it as being in the best interests of the presenting person as the worker advised them on how entering homeless accommodation might impact their lives:

> *We always say to them, "Can you stay?" Because I always say to people going into emergency accommodation is going to have a negative effect on their life. Like it's matter of fact. And they say, "Well, it can't be any worse than the situation I'm in." I say, "Okay, we'll place you somewhere in the contingency until Prevention meets with you"…Other times I'd say, "Look, do everything you can to stay there…" They'll say, "I might be able to stay for a week or two."…And they'll go there. So I'd always encourage somebody to stay out of emergency accommodation because it is going to affect their life, unfortunately* (APO urban).

> *But we, you know, as, as I said, we always try and stop people coming into the homelessness because, it's hard, it's just not great* (APO urban).

One of the workers discussed the issues associated with the structure of homeless services and having an emergency hostel approach so engrained within it. For this worker, options of alternative accommodation to TEA were a preference so that those who live less chaotic lives than the 'traditional homeless' could have other accommodation options:

> *And sometimes I do feel that we're asking people who have just newly become homeless to go to facilities like the [TEA] and I think it's probably a very traumatic chaotic time in someone's life and then you're asking them to go sleep on a mattress with what we call traditional homeless people who have real problems. I'd like to see that changed, you know. Maybe that means another facility like [STA] where we've more one-bedroom accommodation, you know. The problems aren't half as bad. At least you can go into your room and lock your door, you know* (APO urban).

For other workers however, the structure of homeless services within a tiered system of accommodation was important so as to not make homeless services attractive and thus opening the floodgates. In this sense the use of B&Bs and hotels was viewed by some participants as impacting the deterrent function of homeless accommodation and thus acting as a pull factor into homeless services. Therefore, some interviewees

emphasised the deterrent function of homeless services by ensuring the presenting person knew how 'bad' the experience of staying in TEA may be and how it could impact their life.

A small number of the interviewees believed that they have already seen the benefits of using the approach of only offering hostel accommodation to single people in that they felt that the floodgates have been shut and that the number presenting had decreased since they stopped using PEA for this group. Although this may be the case for some individual local authorities, overall the number of single homeless people has increased throughout the country (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-a).

7.4 Selection as a tool for the secondary rationing of homeless services

As was outlined in the literature review, selection as a form of welfare rationing involves service administrators selecting potential beneficiaries based on normative judgements around their likelihood to succeed within a programme or service, their deservingness, or how likely they are to cause problems (Klein *et al*, 1996). In analysing the data for this thesis, it was evident that the use of selection as a form of rationing is important for the frontline workers in undertaking their role within the existing service environment in which they work. There are two main areas where the use of selection is evident: within the dominant service approach used at the frontline which involves earning your way to more secure accommodation and through the use of private providers for accommodation. Both of these approaches are service, rather than needs-led in that they require that *'the best'* (APO rural) of those using homeless services were offered placements where they are deemed mostly likely to succeed, or in some cases, most deserving, rather than being based on a person's need.

Therefore, this section will firstly discuss the dominant service approach of those administering homeless services, which is based on the staircase of transition model of homeless service delivery. Although the service model at a policy level is housing led, this has not yet filtered down to the structure of services and the frontline of service delivery in terms of impacting how frontline workers think about homelessness. As such, the service model in place is based around selection, as it is

focused on choosing those deemed most likely to succeed for access to the services closest to independent housing. Or offering people a means to 'earn' their way up the staircase towards an independent tenancy.

Some of the frontline workers rationalised this approach by framing it as being in the best interests of the homeless person; that they would be '*setting them up to fail'* (APO rural) by offering them longer term, independent accommodation if they were not ready or capable to live within it. This is based on normative judgements made by the frontline workers when using their discretion around placement of people within homeless services. Thus, they can rationalise their decisions as being in the best interest of the service user even if it is contrary to their needs.

Finally, the use of private sector providers for both emergency accommodation and more long term (HAP) accommodation was shown through the interviews to impact decision-making amongst the interviewed frontline workers around the process of placement of people who were deemed eligible to access homeless services. This was due to the need to build and maintain relationships with private sector providers, which will be discussed in the following sections.

7.4.1 A staircase of transition as the dominant service approach at the frontline of service delivery

Despite the national policy priority of taking a 'housing-led' approach to homelessness (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2013; Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021), the dominant service approach amongst the frontline workers interviewed was that of a staircase of transition or treatment first approach. The significant length of time some people spend in homeless accommodation due to a lack of move-on options, taken together with the findings of the research on the approach of the frontline workers to the provision of homeless services, provides some evidence as to why the policy ideal of a 'housing-led' approach to homelessness has as of yet, not been realised. Twelve of the research participants, who worked in seven of the eight local authorities included in the research, outlined work practices that were clearly indicative of a staircase of transition approach to service delivery. This, of course, is not surprising as this is how the

services in Ireland are run at a local level, despite a focus on housing-led approaches to homeless service provision at a national policy level. Although many transitional units have been reconfigured or closed (Murphy, 2011) the length of time that people are spending in emergency accommodation has meant that some forms of accommodation have, by default, become like transitional units in terms of the length of time people spend within them. Through the interviews it was clear that for single people TEA, especially on a night-only basis, sat at the bottom of the staircase in terms of desirability of accommodation (with some TEA providers being more or less desirable depending on different characteristics of the service), with one interviewee describing it as the *'bottom rung [of] homeless accommodation'*, *'where nobody wants to be*' (APO urban). After TEA came STA services, B&B and hotel (in limited cases), temporary housing (in a small number of local authorities) and finally, independent living, mainly through HAP.

The situation was slightly different for families. Families were often placed in B&B or hotel accommodation first or other shelter/hostel type accommodation if it was available in that area, then sometimes moved on to a hub, and finally independent housing. It is important to mention that in theory, an exit from homelessness is possible at any stage for someone *if* they can secure a HAP tenancy. However, the fact was repeatedly discussed in the interviews that HAP tenancies are very difficult to come by and it can take a long time for someone to find one, even if they are eligible for a discretionary top up payment of 20 or 50 per cent. Coupled with this, is the fact that the HAP rates were described as being well below the market rate. Therefore, these tenancies are beyond the reach of many on the lowest incomes, which means that their chances of exiting homelessness this way are limited. Finally, some of the interviewees spoke about their belief that some families were not interested in a HAP tenancy and rather, were willing to remain longer in temporary accommodation in an attempt to access a local authority owned property.

The service approach of the staircase of transition was clearly evident in the research in a number of ways. For example, the following quotes illustrate well the focus on the need to earn your way or 'prove' yourself in order to be eligible for better quality, longer term or more private accommodation:

> *Yeah like, especially well for families like there isn't much we can do like there, we have two places, [the Supported temporary accommodation provider] will accept families and the family hub. [The other supported temporary accommodation provider] will only accept female, single mothers and boys up to the age of 12 so, and then then the family hub but places in there now come up very rarely so, it's all about…B&Bs and we have nicer B&Bs, we have I won't say rougher but you know, places where we would go, alright we'll put them in there and see how we go and then once we kind of, once the person kind of proves them self we of course move them on* (APO urban).

> *As I say, you've the [TEA], you've got the three here, you've got the TEA. Start off with that. Then they progress to the main house, the community house, and then they progress to the transitional, then they progress to maybe Housing First or a social house. So yeah, like that's the way we would do it* (APO urban and rural).

The final sentence in the first quote where the frontline worker states that once the person can 'prove' themselves, then 'of course' they are moved on illuminates how the quality of accommodation can be tied to notions of deservingness. As people prove themselves, in terms of their behaviour, they are seen as more deserving of higher quality accommodation, in this example moving from the somewhat 'rougher' or less desirable B&Bs to the 'nicer' B&Bs. If people can't prove themselves, they risk getting stuck within the lower tier emergency services. As one frontline worker explained, they use selection of clients in order to ensure that they are moving people on from emergency services by picking out the 'best' and leaving behind the others:

> *Like we have 100 and, I don't know, is it a hundred and thirty or something now, single people like it, I just pick the best of them all of the time* (APO rural).

The extent of the impact of a person's behaviour on their move-on options is evident from the following excerpt where one of the interviewees, who works closely with landlords to try and secure HAP tenancies for homeless people, describes how they have to use their judgement about a person's potential to be a good or successful tenant when offering people these tenancies:

> *Someone might be on homeless services a week and I'll go, "Look, actually I can take them out of the services completely because they're going to be a good tenant in this"—you know, there won't be a long process for them. But more challenging clients, like, I can't in all good conscience expect a landlord to take someone in where I know the tenancy's going to fail immediately. So I do have freedom to ask that person more to continue, keep looking yourself, you know. But, yeah, I suppose in the aspect of my role, like, I feel I've a lot of freedom, yeah* (APO urban).

In a perverse way, this example illustrates how those who may need help the most, could end up receiving the least support in order that responsibility for their behaviour is not associated with the frontline worker. Therefore, rather than getting help to source a tenancy, they are told *'keep looking yourself'*.

When single people present to the frontline workers they tend to be placed in TEA first and placed on a waiting list for STA. Placing people straight into STA did happen on a rare occasion when there was availability but this tended to be reserved for certain groups of people as was discussed in section 7.2. Some of the frontline workers described how they made decisions around the selection of people for particular allocations of accommodation placements based on the behaviour of people using the services, as one worker described:

> *...even though we're not supposed to have single people in B&Bs under the Cold Weather Initiative, that has to happen to free up the beds. So depending then on his behaviour and the staff working there, he might stay a considerable time in [TEA] depending on his behaviour, he might move to [STA – male] quite quickly, or if he was felt suitable for B&B, he could end up in a B&B* (APO urban).

A person's behaviour could impact their movement towards independent living, not just through getting stuck at a particular level of the staircase or even being moved down a rung, but also, in some cases, in their total exclusion from homeless services for a period of time, as the following quote illustrates:

> *APO urban: Say if somebody had previously been in homeless services and had disappeared for a while and they're very iffy about telling us where they've been. But by far and away the most challenging is if they have been refused*

services. Like if they have been asked to leave the likes of [STA –female], if [TEA] are refusing them. And then we're kind of looking at a person, going, 'I actually don't know what to do with you, like, you know.' And by their own admission and volition it has been their own behavioural issues that have caused this. But I do find that's the most challenging aspect of it, like.

Interviewer: So what kind of options do you have available to you?

APO urban: Very limited. None, actually.

Interviewer: And what have you to do then in that situation?

APO urban: I have to tell them it's their behaviour caused this, you'll have to over a period of time show willing with these agencies and try and work with them so that the barrier's lifted or whatever, like, you know (APO urban).

As this quote demonstrates, the staircase approach and notions around housing readiness were not just the preserve of the frontline workers in the local authorities as a similar approach is often taken by the non-local authority accommodation providers. In the following example, the frontline worker explained how the key worker was an important contact point in order to gain information about the homeless person/family's progression towards independent living:

And so for the singles we would really rely on whoever their keyworker is coming forward to us and saying, 'Look, this particular man or woman they're doing really, really well. We think they're capable of independent living at this stage. Certainly we're going to give you a progress report to support that.' They pay the rent on time. They do all this sort of stuff. You know, they manage themselves…So we'd have a look at that person, have a look at their length of time in the housing list, how long they used the homeless services. So with the singles we're very largely driven with their keyworkers because there's so many of them and you just wouldn't have that much interaction with them, you know…They'd move them from [accommodation] into kind of stepdown other accommodation until they feel that they're housing-ready. Then they do progress reports for us and then we can put them forward for homeless priority (APS urban).

As the service providers were taking a similar approach to homeless service provision as the LAs, the staircase of transition approach towards service provision could also work against the desires of frontline workers preferences. For example, one worker described a situation where they decided that a particular homeless service was most appropriate for a woman who presented as homeless. However, the service manager, refused entry to this particular woman on the grounds that she was not ready to access this service, much to the frustration of the frontline worker:

> *I had met this girl at the counter, brought her back in for a full assessment. She had possibly one of the worst stories I've ever heard. I thought I've heard most stories. I hadn't heard anything like this. She was the victim of both physical and sexual violence and I felt that the best place for her would be supported accommodation. And when she was assessed by the people inside in the building, I suppose, and inside the institution, they decided that she wasn't quite ready to—she wouldn't be suitable for a bed at that time. And that was heart-breaking…the accommodation manager basically stated after the assessment she's not ready for it.* (APO urban).

A small number of the frontline worker revealed that when it came to decisions around placements for the accommodation that was viewed as more desirable, selection was used to choose people for these placements based on the frontline workers perception of when they are likely to exit homelessness, so as not to take this accommodation long-term:

> *Yeah, in our local services we have—so we have [accommodation], which is like the most desirable place, where I put people if they're going to move on. We also then have two independent apartments, one in [omitted name of area] and one in [omitted name of area], that are also run by [an NGO]. So we would tend to give them to families who would be kind of well-behaved because, you know, they're privately rented all around them. People are looking at them ready to complain if there's any kind of noise issues or whatever, so* (APS urban).

This worker rationalises their decisions based on a need to maintain the support of those living close by to the emergency accommodation and avoid complaints due to the behaviour of the homeless families living in the accommodation.

In discussing decisions around the placement of people that the frontline workers believed had a very high level of needs, some of them rationalised their decisions not to place someone through the notion that to offer a tenancy or specific placement before they are *'ready'* (APS urban and rural) or without adequate support would essentially be *'setting it up to fail'*. (APO rural). This approach fits well with the paternalistic staircase of transition service approach as it provides a justification for moving on those who have less complex needs first as they are seen as being more likely to succeed in a placement or tenancy. Therefore, there is a justification for the situation in which those who are viewed as having higher needs get stuck lower down the ladder in emergency hostel accommodation or rough sleeping. As one interviewee put it:

> *People with addictions and that, like everybody knows, like you can move them on but you're setting up to fail. And you're using an apartment that you could use for somebody else that would have a greater chance of maintaining it* (APO rural).

In essence, this is about using selection as a tool for rationing in order that the frontline workers can place both those who they feel will be most likely to be able to maintain a placement or tenancy in the longer term, as well as those who are viewed as being more deserving (*'could be used for someone else'*) of the placement or tenancy.

It is possible that implementing the policy goal of taking a housing-led approach to homelessness could attenuate some of the negative impact of selection or creaming by making accommodation available to those with the most complex needs who are left behind through this form of rationing. However, when Housing First was discussed in the interviews, some of the frontline workers retained their tendency towards selection in that their view that some people were incapable of independent living remained:

> *So I honestly don't think that housing—like if I get twenty houses in the morning, I couldn't take the thirty people out of [omitted name of service provider] or [omitted name of service provider] and put them into them. They wouldn't be fit for them. They wouldn't be. Even with Housing First they wouldn't. Like you're always going to have that hard-core. But that's what [omitted name of service provider] was founded in, you know, the hard-core*

> *of street drinkers and—but of course there's more drugs and—but I don't think it's going to be solved by providing houses* (APO urban and rural).

One worker described a formalised process through which people were selected for placement into Housing First tenancies, which completely eliminated the use of selection. This interviewee described a process where rough sleepers are offered a place in Housing First as a priority. However, due to the success of the programme, they have accommodated all the people who were rough sleeping in this area. Therefore, they use a vulnerability index to determine who should benefit from the Housing First Programme that they have in place:

> *After that what we started doing was as a general guide using the Vulnerability Index…And we set a benchmark of 70 as the number, that if you're 70 or over you're more than likely looking at being a Housing First client…Regardless of what that scores, rough sleepers come first. When we've capacity, it's all about Vulnerability Index, and we look at who is our most chaotic client—dual diagnosis, mental health, addiction, and a high score* (APS urban and rural).

It was unclear from the data whether this approach was used within the other local authorities where participants in this research worked, as the people who were interviewed for this research were not generally the people who were directly involved in Housing First projects. However, it is clear from the following excerpt that there were significant difference between some of the local authorities in the way that they approached Housing First, as this response from an interviewee working in a different local authority from the person quoted above contrasts sharply with the process described previously in which rough sleepers were accommodated first, in line with the way that Housing First was designed to work:

> *You know, the Housing First model, that's all about taking—literally you could take somebody from the street and put them into a housing that's going to work. There's been one or two tenancies that have failed and failed very badly and our estate management have had to pick up on that and maybe go to court and end the tenancy and all that kind of stuff, so they've probably had their fingers burned a few times. But at the same time I would think that's a really good model. But, I mean, you know, if I ever suggested putting forward somebody*

> *who was literally on the street for housing, direct housing, they'd be anti that, so I know that's really a nonrunner for us to go down that route* (APS urban).

Although the Irish context is in many ways different from the Swedish one described by Sahlin, the staircase of transition serves as a useful analogy to describe the service approach of the frontline workers in their approach to service delivery. Like in Sweden, here too relationships with private providers are central to homeless service provision. It is important to recognise the impact that failed tenancies and placements can have on the relationships that frontline workers build up with the private sector providers who they are accessing accommodation from. The use of PEA constitutes a significant proportion of homeless service provision and the extent of private provision for social housing through the HAP scheme, means that the use of selection is likely to remain a dominant rationing tool in the foreseeable future. The ways that these relationships with private providers are built and maintained will be addressed in more detail in the following section.

7.4.2 Building and maintaining relationships with private sector providers of accommodation for the homeless

The use of privately owned accommodation for PEA and for HAP tenancies has an impact on decision-making by frontline workers around the placement of people into this type of accommodation. The use of these providers means that selection is an important tool for rationing decisions. For this kind of placement, the *'best'* (APO rural) are chosen so as not to jeopardise the relationship that has been built up with the provider as this could impact the availability of the accommodation for other families or single people who are living there. The following two sub-sections will discuss the issues brought up through the interviews in building and maintaining these relationships with providers of both temporary emergency accommodation and, for the few interviewees for whom this was relevant, with landlords who provide HAP tenancies.

7.4.2.1 Private emergency accommodation (PEA)

Some of the frontline workers described the use of private providers of accommodation as something that caused them stress within their role. This was due to the need to build up relationships with these accommodation providers and then maintain these relationships through successful placement or tenancies. In other words, placing people who behaved in a way that was acceptable to the accommodation provider. As one of the workers described, having spent time sourcing B&B accommodation and building relationships with the owners, they were reluctant to place anyone into this accommodation who they felt could possibly jeopardise this relationship:

> *… as I said like we are placing people into B&B's, we have, we worked hard to build up a relationship with B&Bs and we can't, you know, we know that we can't risk that relationship by sending off some, two loopers into the B&B and them to wreck, so that's probably a major factor* (APO urban).

Other frontline workers described this reluctance to place people that they felt may jeopardise access to the accommodation for a larger number of people due to the property owner withdrawing access to their accommodation for homeless people:

> *Yeah, I mean, if we had a history of the person and we knew that there was social problems with them, like, you know, you wouldn't be happy jeopardising your relationship in a B&B by placing this client in because you know trouble's going with them.* (APO urban).

Despite these descriptions of factors that may impact their decision-making around placement, in general the interviewees felt much like their approach to assessment, that the approach to placement was quite a structured process. For example, in one interview the frontline worker described how they felt that the local authority had clear criteria around the process, albeit criteria that were not formalised or available for public scrutiny. However, they believed that they needed to be able to use discretion in order that they could make moralistic decisions around a person's suitability for a particular placement outside of the criteria:

> *Generally it's very structured. As I said, we'd have our criteria of whether you are homeless, we have our criteria of where we are going to place someone. But then like you know, I could meet someone and think, do you know what, they weren't too bad, we have to place them in a B&B, we can't and you could be in a room and I'm going, 'Jesus, your one was a fucking head de ball, absolute nutter. No way could we [inaudible] so there is always that kind of personal perception into it* (APO urban).

One of this frontline worker's colleagues went further in describing what determines their decision-making around placement in place of clear, written guidelines:

> *There's no, there's no written guidelines but generally it's you know, is there a risk that this person will get kicked out of a B&B or a hotel? That's basically what it boils down to you know? Have they got an addiction history? Have they, how are they presenting, how are their presenting behaviours at the counter? Are they being aggressive? Are they being violent, you know? If we think there is a risk that we put them into a B&B and they get kicked out and that can compromise other people we have in that B&B, then we won't put them in B&B accommodation.* (APO urban).

One of the frontline workers, who held a supervisory role, outlined the way that they were trying to overcome these issues of using private providers for people with complex needs. For this worker, it was important to build up links with the other agencies within their local authority area, such as the HSE, so that they could work more closely in accommodating people with a higher level of need. This was so that the other agencies could have a role in making a placement successful. For example, through providing community mental health services where they may benefit a person's chances of maintaining a placement, rather than simply sending someone to the local authority to be accommodated:

> *We're going over to do a presentation to mental health in the coming weeks…Because again if you're used to a situation whereby they used to discharge over here someone who was handed a cheque and disappeared, it was seen as, well, you were doing nobody any favours. I suppose now what we're speaking to is—and whether it's domestic violence, whether it's anything else—we have a process. We work within your process, but you've*

got to understand ours and you've got to understand that we have limitations as well…Because there is the reality we are dependent on private hoteliers, we're dependent on B&Bs, and that's a work in itself having to maintain those relationships, having to—Now, I suppose the thing about us is that we outreach all of our clients in hotel and B&B. We have the staff on the ground making those—working on those relationships constantly. So what we have found now is that when issues arise, they ring the support workers, say, look, there's something coming up here, and they're more communicative with us (APS rural).

This worker felt that it was crucial that people staying within private emergency accommodation had access to supports so that any issues that they could potentially face would be flagged to the local authority and they could try to intervene before a crisis situation arose. However, they felt that there are limitations in who they can accommodate through private emergency accommodation, even with support services. The risk of breaking down these relationships with private providers was just too great for all the others dependant on this form of accommodation.

Using private providers for accommodation with either limited visiting or no support – depending on the local authority – for people with complex needs, could lead to a situation that was stressful for all involved: the person with complex needs, the frontline worker, the property owner and the other people living there, as the following two interview excerpts illustrate:

We had a death in one of our B&Bs and I got the phone call as they were resuscitating the person, a young person. And again that day you have two hats on. There's the huge empathy for what's going on, but there's the other side of I have twelve other families inside there and what the hell are we going to do? Because there was their trauma, there was theirs, there was the provider who couldn't find—'I just can't do this anymore', and you're feeling—like I remember coming out that day feeling completely exhausted, going, today I'm after managing—and you're managing a situation (APS rural).

Like we are not equipped to deal with people with mental health issues, we just don't have that. But we can't risk putting people into B&Bs if they have a serious mental health, we've had people climb on scaffolding outside of B&Bs

> *and threaten to throw themselves off because they are depressed, you know. Like we don't, and that's not, that shouldn't be on the B&B owner to manage that but we don't, we're also not meant to be managing that either, you know…I'm not gonna turn up outside this B&B at 3 o'clock in the morning because this B&B owner rang me to say you know, this person you put in here is standing, you know?* (APO urban)

In considering the factors that the frontline workers outlined for maintaining successful placements within private accommodation, one of the interviewees described it like getting married, in the sense that consideration has to be given to how a particular placement might impact not just the owners of the property, but also the existing families or people already placed there:

> *It's like having the wedding table. Who doesn't sit beside who?...That's what's we're doing constantly. And you know how stressful that is* (APS rural).

Other frontline workers spoke about this aspect of placement and how they felt that the wrong placement of a person or a family could upset the placement for the other people or families that are already living there. As the following interviewee described:

> *No you can't, no. like if you have 10, 20 properties from a landlord and you put this client in and like the other thing is, apartments here in [omitted name of county] and [omitted name of town] would be mainly three, four, five or six within one block. And like one person could upset the whole lot of that block and create a riot there. So you have to be cautious of all those things* (APO rural).

The use of 'self-accommodation' was a way that local authorities sometimes avoided this requirement to build and maintain relationships with private sector providers as this form of accommodation placed the onus onto the homeless person to find their own private temporary accommodation. However, this practice had generally been phased out, or was in the process of being phased out in most of the local authorities included in this research. One worker stated that their local authority would continue to use this practice but in exceptional circumstance. However, another frontline worker, who was in a different local authority, stated that they have just started to use

this form of placement recently where B&B or hotel accommodation is required, to avoid this issue of conflict with owners:

> *And then we also turned that around as well because we used to be in awful trouble with the B&Bs. We'd send a family up to a B&B. There'd be war in the B&B…So we changed that around and we said we'll pay for a B&B if you'll find it. So we sent them all—again it's kind of it's probably cheating a wee bit. You know, we're putting the onus on them to go and find their accommodation* (APO urban and rural).

7.4.2.2 Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) tenancies

When it comes to sourcing HAP properties, the onus is generally on the homeless person in finding one of these tenancies. However, the levels of assistance available for this varied between the local authorities in which the research participants worked. In some LAs the Place Finder service was described as offering assistance in locating potential properties (which were advertised online or with estate agents), as well as paying the deposit for tenants. Whereas, in others the Place Finder service was described as being more active in seeking out the tenancies and building relationships with landlords in order to secure properties for homeless HAP tenants.

When homeless people try to source independent accommodation, selection can be an issue that they face from the landlords as well as from the local authority workers as landlords are under no obligation to house the most vulnerable. Rather, the landlords are likely to have a preference to accommodate those who will maximise their rental income and who they perceive will make the best tenants, as one frontline worker explained, when discussing the difficulties faced by single people trying to access HAP tenancies:

> *Well, again, landlords want the higher money, so they're going to take the mother and one child, or the dad and one child, do you know what I mean, over taking a single individual. They're getting double the amount, you know. So it is tough, like* (APS urban).

Another of the frontline workers, who explained how they work closely with landlords to build relationships and secure HAP tenancies, outlined the pressures that they face in maintaining these relationships. They described how important it was for them to use their discretion and make normative judgements around a person's likelihood to be able to maintain the tenancy:

> *Well, the pressure to try and house people. The lack of accommodation out there. You know, you can see it from the point of view of the applicant. You can see why a landlord wouldn't be interested in taking on a social client. And then there's a fine balance that you have to walk. You have to keep your landlord contacts and you have to try and place people who are presenting with social issues. So I do have to use my judgement on a person, homeless person, you know, all the time. Every person I meet I am judging them, going, what sort of tenant would you be, you know?* (APO urban)

In an attempt to maintain these relationships, this interviewee described how they have adapted their role so that they can maximise the possibility of sustaining tenancies and therefore, keeping landlords 'on side'. Although tenancy sustainment was not part of the role of the following frontline worker, they incorporate it into their work in order to maintain the relationship with the private sector providers:

> *Now, to keep landlords on side, of course, I'll be ringing tenants and will go, 'pull your socks up here, the landlord's complaining to me,' you know. Because that landlord will have other properties and—you know, it's a fine line you're walking. So while I don't officially have a tenancy sustainment role, I do. It is part of my job…otherwise my name would be mud around [omitted county name]. It's too small. Landlords talk to each other and they'd be like, 'Oh, my God, [omitted name] gave me this tenant and stay away from [them].' I can't afford to have that go out there into the general public. I need them to know [omitted name] got me a tenant, and it's working out great, you should ring [them] if you have a house. And most of the way I get my tenancies is through word of mouth between landlords, like* (APO urban).

Most of the frontline workers did not have this level of involvement in sourcing HAP tenancies for the people who presented to them as tenants. However, it is a useful passage to include in the discussion as it illuminates how frontline workers have to

adapt in order that they can maintain the support of private sector providers in the provision of accommodation for homeless people. Two of the frontline workers described how they work with landlords that provided them with multiple HAP tenancies and thus, they felt pressure to maintain these relationships, as a breakdown would have such a significant impact. However, another of the frontline workers, in recognising the issues associated with using these landlords that provide a large number of tenancies, stated that they tend to build up their relationships with individual landlords who provide a smaller number. They felt that the multiple provider landlords were more difficult to work with as they were *'too tough'*, whereas the smaller scale ones were almost *'too caring'* which worked to their advantage when it came to placement and tenancy sustainment (APO urban and rural). Overall, placement of people who presented as homeless was a stressful element of the role of the frontline workers as they tried to accommodate people as best they could, whilst maintaining good relationships with the private providers of both private emergency accommodation and – in some local authorities where they spoke about working with local landlords – longer term, independent housing.

7.5 Power dynamics

As the findings discussed in this and the preceding chapters demonstrate, the relationship between the frontline workers and the people who present to them as homeless is a very uneven one in terms of power. The main ways that this power was illustrated through the interview process was through the power to deny access to services; the power to supress the autonomy of the presenting person; power used through paternalistic actions; and the power to discipline or coerce.

As the section on gatekeeping illustrated and the chapter on primary rationing discussed in detail, the frontline workers had the power to deny access to services for people presenting as homeless. As this is discussed in detail elsewhere, it will only be mentioned briefly here. However, it is worth mentioning that although frontline workers held this power and were ultimately responsible for making decisions around when to use it or not, it was very much shaped by the environment in which they worked. For example, direction from management on the ways that families and

singles should be treated led to an almost universal acceptance amongst the participants that a family should never be denied access to emergency accommodation. This was not always the case for singles who sometimes found themselves denied or deterred from entering homeless services and sent back to the living situation from which they came. However, it should be mentioned that there were some frontline workers who stated that they would never deny access to hostel accommodation for anyone:

> *I mean, obviously, like, anybody who comes in like that we would offer them emergency accommodation. We don't ever say to anybody you can't get emergency accommodation* (APS urban).

Despite this, in terms of autonomy and choice, the people who presented to the local authority as homeless had almost none when it came to their placement and were expected to take what they were offered. A small number of the interviewees described irritation when someone who was homeless placed demands upon them in terms of the accommodation offered, as there was a sense among these workers that the person should be happy with what they are given:

> *…we get complaints, no Wi-Fi, or you know, the breakfast you know, the breakfast isn't to our liking and you're going sweet Jesus like, where, where are these people, some people with a sense of entitlement would drive you bananas, absolutely bananas* (APO urban).

> *I would love for people to understand if you're being placed in emergency accommodation by the emergency accommodation providers, you kind of don't get a choice, unfortunately, because what you're being offered is what's available to us. But you'd be surprised how many people would kind of—'I wouldn't stay there.' It only happened yesterday. There was a family told me that they don't want to stay in such a place. So where do I go from there then?* (APO urban)

> *Well, clients react differently, you know. Some people are more difficult to deal with than others. Some people don't want you ringing their family and saying that they're down here. You know, I'm an adult, why do you need—you know, I'm an adult in my own right. And my answer, you know, is I have to do a*

> *comprehensive homeless assessment. I have to. That's my job. That's my role. This is what we do* (APS urban and rural).

The structure of homeless services based on hostel accommodation demands that people surrender much of their autonomy (O'Shaughnessy and Greenwood, 2021). Through the discussions in the interviews, it became apparent that if a person declines to surrender their autonomy and questions being placed within a temporary emergency hostel, they are often viewed by the assessing officer as not being genuinely homeless. If they do take the place in the hostel, or if they are offered a place in PEA, they will find their autonomy restricted as they are bound to live by the rules within this accommodation.

Another way that the unequal balance of power was evident in the interviews was through the frontline workers' descriptions of their interactions with young people who presented from the family home. As was described earlier in the chapter, they often approached these interactions in quite a paternalistic way. In these interactions the frontline workers often had the attitude that they knew what was best for these young people who they believed did not understand what they were getting into by entering homeless services. Although it appeared that this paternal approach was mainly directed towards young people, it was evident in discussions about other people who presented as well where the frontline worker described either knowing what was best for the person or focused on the person not understanding what they were getting into by entering homeless services:

> *So in some cases we have to place people in, you know, what is best for them. As I say, you've the [TEA], you've got the three here, you've got the TEA. Start off with that. Then they progress to the main house, the community house, and then they progress to the transitional, then they progress to maybe Housing First or a social house. So yeah, like that's the way we would do it* (APO urban and rural).

> *They don't understand what they're putting themselves into* (APO urban and rural).

The final area where considerable power was evident on the part of the frontline workers was through the use of discipline or coercion as a means to control service user actions. Coercion in this sense involves 'securing compliance through the threat

of deprivation' (Watts, 2014, p. 795). What this means in practice includes the withdrawal of funding for services if a person refuses to enter a specific accommodation:

> *And often we will have people refusing to take HAP properties we've found if, you know and so we'll have to tell them if you don't take this property then you're refusing accommodation and you know, so we'll have to remove you from homeless services like, you know, cos If we can't find a reason why* (APO urban).

These disciplinarian actions were not only used by the frontline workers but could be used by the service providers too – through barring people from services – as well as estate management within the local authorities:

> *And so estate management would interview them and decide that they're deferred for a year, deferred for two years, deferred indefinitely. So unless they move on with HAP they're really stuck in homeless services for the time being until that defer is lifted* (APS urban).

It is important to mention that the actions discussed here are not uniformly used across all the local authorities involved in the research. Rather, they serve as examples to illustrate the dynamic of the power relationship between the frontline workers making decisions about a person's homeless status and placement, and the person who has presented as homeless. In all it is just as Lipsky described in that the power lies with the street-level bureaucrat. However, their use of this power is very much shaped by the environment in which they work. Thus they were limited in holding real power as their actions were so strongly linked to the structure of the organisation in which they worked. Therefore, their patterns of practice were determined more by higher level priorities within their organisation than by the desires of individual frontline workers.

7.6 Conclusion

In practice, for homeless service administration in Irish local authorities, primary and secondary rationing do not always occur in sequence. Rather, elements of secondary rationing are sometimes used to determine whether a person is considered to be

homeless or not, for example, will they accept a night only bed, or temporary emergency accommodation? However, for the purposes of this analysis a clear separation was made between primary and secondary rationing and elements that impacted both were placed in the chapter from which they were discussed most frequently during the fieldwork.

At the time of the interviews, a recent practice had emerged, due to pressures from management, that single people were no longer placed in B&B or hotel accommodation other than in exceptional circumstances. This resulted in significant difference in the ways that people with or without children were treated when they presented as homeless. Although B&B and hotels are generally considered inappropriate for emergency accommodation use and disruptive to the lives of those who inhabit them for long periods of time (Nowicki *et al*, 2019), the fact that they offer a private room as opposed to the communal nature of most TEA, places them a rung above emergency hostel accommodation in terms of attractiveness. Indeed, by their own admission, some of the frontline workers described how they were using the offer of TEA as a means to deter people from entering homeless accommodation, especially young people who they felt were attracted to services due to the use of hotels and B&Bs as a form of accommodation. Thus, they viewed PEA as a pull factor into homelessness and TEA as a push factor away from services. Therefore, it is fair to say generally single people were offered emergency accommodation which is of lower desirability to that generally offered to families. Likewise, situations were described where discretion could be used in order to offer PEA to exceptional cases which included people that the frontline workers felt sympathetic towards or believed would be too vulnerable for TEA. In this sense, the impression that a presenting person made on the frontline worker, or the closer they appeared to the workers primary reference group (*'normal, decent family'* APO urban) could have an important impact on the services that they were offered subsequently.

As the policy was to place single people who present to the local authority as homeless into TEA, it became apparent in analysing the data that many of the frontline workers had developed a practice of covert deterrence as a means to ration resources. In this sense, they discussed the prospect of entering TEA, or in a small number of examples a family hub, in a way that would deter people from taking up a space within it unless they had absolutely no alternative. Alternatives could include seeking out another

unsustainable form of accommodation, including sleeping on someone's couch. Some described this deterrence from the perspective of using it to gate-keep resources, whereas other described this practice as being in the best interests of the presenting persons, who they felt did not always understand the ways that entering homeless services would impact their life.

It is of course important to mention that the frontline workers are just working within the system that already exists – they are using the system in ways that will allow them to gate keep and deter so that they can respond to pressures to control access to services. For example, even where they are using the practice of covert deterrence, they are describing a service as it exists: entering hostel accommodation can impact a person's life negatively. However, it is important to know what is happening at the frontline, as it clearly shows that there are a group of people, namely young people attempting to leave the family home for different reasons, for whom policy is not providing for adequate services. If they cannot access the housing market independently and homeless services are not the right place for some of these people – although clearly it is the only option for many – where is appropriate for them to seek assistance? This issue will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

Likewise, the current structure of homeless services and the types of accommodation available leave the frontline workers little choice other than to use selection as a rationing tool for deciding who to place where. Even where the accommodation providers were not private, for example in charity run emergency accommodation, selection was used as a rationing tool where those with the most complex of needs could be left in the 'bottom rung' accommodation for long periods of time, some of whom were viewed as being impossible to accommodate in independent housing as they were viewed as incapable of maintaining it. However, Sahlin (2005) has convincingly illustrated how a frontline workers perception around a person's capability to live independently is not always accurate.

Although the government stated an intention to cease the use of hotels and B&Bs for homeless accommodation, since June 2019 PEA has overtaken STA as the most frequently used form of emergency accommodation for homeless people (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-a). Therefore, the patterns of practice identified in this chapter are likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

Chapter 8: Discussion and conclusions

8.1 Introduction

An aim of this study was to build on the work of street-level bureaucracy researchers interested in the use of discretion. However, it was correspondingly concerned with the specific policy area of homelessness, namely how homeless services are administered. Consequently, the core question that drove the study was:

> In what ways does the use of discretion among frontline workers impact upon the assessment and placement of a person or household presenting to the local authority as homeless?

The framework used to guide the study was Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy framework which is a useful approach for studying discretion use at the frontline of public service delivery (Alden, 2014; Brodkin, 2016; Davidovitz and Cohen, 2021; Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2016b; Hupe, 2013; Ryan and Power, 2020). Bearing this in mind, the aim of this chapter is to discuss and make conclusions around the findings of this research with reference to both the research question and previous research carried out on street-level bureaucracies. It will outline the contribution of this thesis to existing knowledge on the use of discretion within public services as well as its contribution to knowledge around practices at the frontline of homeless service provision. As this is the first time that a study utilising a street-level bureaucracy approach has been used as a means to examine the homeless assessment and placement process in Ireland, the thesis contribution is significant in this regard. As the research has illustrated, this is an opaque area of service delivery. Therefore, very little is known about the practices that take place at the frontline. Although there is some research in Ireland that discusses frontline interactions from the perspective of service users (Focus Ireland, 2015; Walsh and Harvey, 2015) and service providers (Watts, 2014; Watts, 2013a), there has been none undertaken, to the best of the author's knowledge, that has focused on the practices of those who administer and grant access to homeless services.

In answering the research question, the findings have shown that the discretionary context in which the frontline workers carry out their role is one in which they have a

high level of discretion available to them. Along with this, their work tends to be guided by informal and oftentimes ambiguous guidelines. However, this should be considered alongside managerial pressures to ration resources, for example through the scrutiny applied to positive uses of discretion and limited action on gatekeeping decisions. Through using a narrow definition of homelessness that focuses on those that are considered most in need (i.e. those who are roofless) and using a practice of 'covert deterrence' which aims to deter (mainly young) people from accessing homeless accommodation, the frontline workers have more control over the number of people accessing services. Thus, the research has shown how the use of discretion permeates the process of assessment and placement as frontline workers navigate their often informal working environment. The implications of the findings will be discussed in detail in the sections below with reference to the existing literature.

This chapter will firstly discuss findings related to the work and discretionary environment as this impacts how discretion is used by street-level bureaucrats. The main ways that the workers use discretion will be discussed next focusing on their propensity to act as a gatekeeper of, or gateway to services. Further discussion will address the implications that this use of discretion has at both a primary and secondary level of rationing, through outlining the main routines and behaviours that the frontline workers use to cope with the demands of their role. Finally, some concluding comments will be discussed.

8.2 The work environment: 'professionals without a profession'

This section of the chapter will outline the findings around the work environment that are most relevant to the research question. Frontline worker training will be discussed, as will competency in decision-making and stress levels of these workers, as both impact the ways that they use the discretion.

8.2.1 Frontline worker training and competency in decision-making

Evans (2011; 2016a) critiques Lipsky for not giving the impact of professional background on SLB decision-making sufficient attention. For Evans, Lipsky's

approach is 'intriguing' as his use of the term professional for street level workers covers workers ranging from service/white collar workers to the 'narrower conception of a recognised occupational group with status and authority' (Evans, 2016a, p. 282). As such, Adler and Asquith's (1981) differentiation of professional and administrative discretion, which was outlined in Chapter three (section 3.3.1), provides a useful means to examine the findings of this research related to professionalism and discretion use. The findings of this thesis would indicate that despite the majority of the participants having an administrative background, they mostly held positions more closely aligned with those who hold professional discretion, as they dealt with very complex cases without clear guidelines around how they should proceed. These frontline workers make potentially life-changing decisions for the people who present as homeless, including making decisions around whether a person may be at risk by remaining in their current living situation. These decisions require a level of expertise in identifying and appropriately reacting to such risks. Therefore, it is essential that they have the knowledge and skills to carry out this role as discretionary decision making is influenced by a frontline worker's professional background (van Berkel *et al,* 2021; van der Aa and van Berkel, 2016). For example, in research by van der Aa and van Berkel's (2016) which was focused on Dutch job activation services, the workers had much in common with the participants in the current research in terms of their working background as administrators, in comparison to some Scandinavian countries, where activation and homeless assessment (Sahlin, 2005) are carried by social workers. As such, rather than having established professional standards upon which they can refer to in undertaking their role which involves a high level of discretion, the workers themselves must confront the challenge of professionalism through their own individual actions (van der Aa and van Berkel, 2016). This led van Berkel *et al* to describe activation workers as 'professionals without a profession' (2010, p. 462), a term which could similarly apply to many of the frontline homeless staff included in the current study. The finding that the frontline workers had mainly administrative background despite the nature of their work is not unexpected as the position of local authority personnel in Ireland as 'generalists' has long been the approach as opposed to one of specialisation (Boyle *et al.*, 2003, p. 87). Recognising issues associated with the generalist approach in this context, a small number of the local authorities had recognised the value of frontline workers having a relevant

professional background and as such required a minimum of a social care qualification for those tasked with assessment and placement.

8.2.2 The impact of work-related stress and staff support on frontline workers and their patterns of practice

Although some of the research participants outlined ways that they gained satisfaction from their role within the local authority, they were more vocal about the stress they experienced. Some of the main causes of stress described by the participants included a high workload, inadequate resources, the responsibility of dealing with people who had a high level of need and/or were often very vulnerable, and the experience of threatening or abusive behaviour. These findings are consistent with Lipsky's analysis that street-level bureaucrats generally work in situations which 'tend to maximize the likelihood of debilitating job stress', which is made more probable under the threat of experiencing violence (Lipsky, 2010, p. 32). The violence experienced by street-level bureaucrats can be physical (Antão *et al.*, 2020; Shier *et al.*, 2021). However, for frontline workers such as teachers and social workers, it is more likely to consist of non-physical forms of aggression such as bullying, intimidation and verbal threats (Davidovitz and Cohen, 2021; Longobardi *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, these non-physical forms were the type described by the frontline workers in the interviews.

Alongside the threat of aggression and violence, the interviewees described considerable stress due to the responsibility of dealing with people with complex needs and the lack of resources, such as mental health resources, to deliver an ideal level of service. As the assessment process involved a detailed analysis of a person or family's current living situation, oftentimes the stories told to the frontline workers were traumatic. This could impact both the frontline worker and the person retelling their story who were described as sometimes becoming very upset or having 'meltdowns' during the process. Additionally, these situations sometimes resulted in feelings of 'moral stress' when the frontline workers' felt that the course of action which is ethically correct was unachievable within the parameters of their work environment (Thunman, 2016).

The findings of this research are consistent with Lipsky's assertions that stresses can impact the work practices of SLBs. For example, through accounts of withdrawal from work in response to job stress. This included both withdrawal 'in fact' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 142) through accounts of co-workers looking for transfers out of the homeless unit or through the issues associated with attracting people to work in the homeless units in the first place, as well as withdrawal psychologically through accounts of emotional detachment. However, these accounts of emotional detachment were not recounted by all of the frontline workers with a small number, who were trained in social care or social work, recognising emotional detachment as an indicator of burnout or psychological withdrawal. Additionally, examples of modifications of conceptions of the client are central to the thesis findings. This includes, the propensity to act more favourably towards some service users than others through moralising service applicants and through a tendency to 'blame the victim' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 152) by focusing on individual causes of homelessness over structural causes, most notably with young and/or single people. Although structural causes of homelessness were discussed by some of the interviewees, the staircase of transition approach to service provision, which emphasises individual causes of homelessness, prevailed for the frontline workers, wherein often people had to prove themselves deserving of particular services or were viewed as incapable of independent living. As this placed a focus on individual causes of homelessness for these service users, it located 'responsibility in a place that absolves the helper from blame' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 153).

As a result of this high level of job stress, peer support has become a central feature of the frontline workers' role. As such, a positive finding of this research was the strength of the peer support network, with some of the interviewees pondering if their job would be possible without this support. A deliberative process amongst peers was found to constitute an important feature of the work practices within the local authority homeless units, through practices such as sharing the burden of discretion (Molander and Grimen, 2010). The absence of formal guidance around decision-making, coupled with the considerable discretion granted to these frontline workers, meant that they turned to each other as a means of validating their decisions, or as Møller (2021, p. 477) describes it 'collectivizing responsibility' so as to lessen the burden of discretion (Molander and Grimen, 2010). As such, a practice of self-regulation has emerged in which frontline workers often discuss their decisions with their co-workers in order

that they feel confident that these decisions are correct; to share the responsibility for taking a particular course of action; to evaluate whether their co-worker would make a similar decision in the same circumstances; as well as a means to ensuring that their decisions are acceptable practice within their particular local authority. Likewise, the frontline workers share this burden of discretion with their co-workers as their position within the organisational hierarchy means that they are 'forced to resolve any ambiguity, vagueness, or conflict that exists in public policy—for they cannot delegate it any further' Zacka, 2017: 25). In essence then, what is occurring at the frontline of homeless service administration is a routine of practice which can be usefully termed *discretion-as-shared.* In keeping with Hupe's (2013) distinction between *discretion-as-granted* and *discretions-as-used*, *discretion-as-shared* constitutes a practice within discretion as it is used by street-level bureaucrats, and will be shaped within the context of discretion as it is granted to the frontline workers in question. As such, the concept of *discretion-as-shared* is relevant within the context of the current research. However, that is not to say that this practice would be evident in all street-level bureaucracies. Specific work environments of street-level bureaucrats may render difficult the sharing of discretion, for example in situations where more formal guidelines exist than do in the informal context of homeless units in Ireland, alongside differences due to professionalism within specific street-level bureaucracies. Indeed, Møller *et al* (2022) describe similar collective uses of discretion as a response to a high turnover of staff and the resultant low levels of experience within the Danish child protection units included in their study. As such, discretion was used collectively to increase accountability in a situation where there was a misalignment between complexities of the tasks they were required to undertake and the professional training and experience of the workers.

As well as helping the individuals involved in these frontline roles, strong networks can mitigate some of the impacts of work stresses on the organisation, for example, through the positive impact of a strong network on worker turnover (Moynihan and Pandey, 2008). In this research it was found that despite the strength of the peer support, the stress associated with the role meant that turnover of staff was still described to be an issue by some of the participants. However, it is possible that turnover could be even higher without this strong peer support. Likewise, research has found strong peer support facilitates on the job-learning (Maynard-Moody and

Musheno, 2003; Nisar and Maroulis, 2017), which was shown to constitute an important element of peer support for the workers in the homeless units as they learn much of the role from each other. Therefore, it was clear from this research that the findings were in line with those of Maynard-Moody and Musheno's who found that street-level workers 'have strong cultural bonds to fellow street-level workers' and that in contrast to the often conflictual relationships that they have with service users, the relationships with their co-workers are ones of mutual support (2003, p. 352).

8.3 Discretion in Irish homeless service administration

This research illustrates the value of Hupe's (2013) distinction between *discretion-as-granted* and *discretion-as-used*. Through analysing the data in this way, the research could distinguish between the discretionary environment and the ways that discretion was used by street-level bureaucrats, with the former setting the context for the latter. The main contributions to knowledge with regard to these dimensions of discretion will be discussed in the following two sections.

8.3.1 Discretion-as-granted

As was demonstrated through the findings, street-level bureaucrats within homeless units work in an area where there is little formal guidance around the ways that they should determine homeless status and make placement decisions. The ambiguous nature of their role and the discretion this confers starts with the legislation which sets out the requirements of local authorities in regards to both their obligations towards homeless people and in how homelessness should be defined. It continues down to practices at the frontline, described so starkly by one of the frontline workers when they stated that 'there's nothing wrote down in homeless services' (APO urban). As such, and despite some describing their role as very structured, it was clear that the frontline workers have a high level of discretion granted to them in order to undertake the role. They have considerable power in deciding who is or is not eligible for homeless services, as well as deciding what services a person will be offered.

However, it became apparent through the interviews that in line with Lipsky's (2010) findings, various managerial pressures are applied in order to shape how this discretion is used. Thus in lieu of formalised guidelines which are open to scrutiny, managers employ a number of tactics to impact how decisions are made. The frontline workers' line managers had a significant impact on the level of discretion available to them, which varied across the local authorities in which the research participants worked. This is an example of Lipsky's assertion around managers being the 'key regulators of discretion' (Evans, 2011, p. 371), as the findings illustrated stark difference between the homeless teams where the frontline workers were granted the ability to make decisions around a person's eligibility and placement, and the two teams where the managers did not allow this to happen and decisions were made at the team level. Thus the line managers clearly had a significant impact upon the discretion granted to those workers tasked with making decisions at the frontline. Evans critiques Lipsky's treatment of managers stating that he 'brackets off managers from critical analysis, treating them simply as a homogeneous group, committed to the implementation of organisational policy' (2011, p. 371). The four managers involved in this research were at the level just above the frontline workers and were all involved in the assessment and placement process like the workers under them. Thus, they too had similar client-processing goals to the non-supervisory frontline workers, albeit with focus on organisational goals too. Therefore, they were not as Lipsky describes them with a focus entirely on organisational policy, rather they had a dual focus as they were concerned both with organisational goals *and* the routines of practice developed to cope with the realities of working at the frontline. Whether managers further up the chain of command have similar goals or are more in line with Lipsky's assessment of managers is unknown as they were not included in the current research.

Another important finding with regards to the informal nature of the homeless units and the granting of discretion is around the ways that workers were directed to take a specific approach to assessment and placement even though formal guidance on taking particular actions was indiscernible. Thus, the findings here are somewhat in line with Liodden's (2021) assertion that social norms and work routines can have the impact of making caseworkers feel that their discretion is limited despite being able to make highly discretionary decisions from a legal perspective. Although in the current study the frontline workers did recognise the high level of discretion available to them, they

also discussed ways that this was impacted by organisational norms and work routines. Covert limits on discretion were achieved through the focus of management on particular actions and a lack of focus on others, so for example scrutinising gateway actions whilst paying little attention to gatekeeping ones, or through management congratulating workers when they kept numbers at a low level. These actions allows management to subtly and informally guide frontline workers to gate-keep resources without stating it in formal policy.

Despite the responsibility that this high level of discretion placed upon them, the workers involved in this thesis were reluctant to relinquish any of their discretion. They felt that their job would be too difficult without it as the nature and complexity of homelessness cases required them to be able to approach assessment and placement on a case-by-case basis. Just as was found by Thomann *et* al (2018) the frontline workers were motivated through the ability to adapt policy to suit local conditions. Therefore, the findings of this research are in line with Lipsky (2010) who identified a resistance amongst street-level bureaucrats to efforts to curtail their discretion. Indeed, Thomann *et* al (2018) conclude in their research that academics and scholars should move away from questions around whether street-level bureaucrats should be granted discretion or not, towards questions around how best they can make use of this discretion. The impact that the discretionary environment has on the way that frontline workers use discretion will be discussed in the following section, illustrating why the differentiation of the dimensions of discretion is important for a complex understanding of discretion *use* at the frontline.

8.3.2 Discretion-as-used: Gatekeepers and gateways

The gatekeeper in public housing has been studied internationally (Alden, 2015b; Deutscher, 1968; Foster, 1983; Garot, 2005; Lidstone, 1994; Niner, 1989; Rashleigh, 2005; Sahlin, 1995). However, the subject had not been researched in the Irish context until the current study. As the previous section demonstrated, there are motivations expressed through the discretionary environment encouraging frontline workers to use discretion in one way (gatekeeping) over the other (gateway). When pressures like this are put upon street-level workers, their propensity is to work in the ways that are in

line with these pressures rather than against them. As Brodkin asserts, 'caseworkers generally operated as rational actors, taking the path of least resistance, that is, using discretion in ways most consistent with the logic imposed by the organizational pressures and incentives existing at the street-level' (2008, p. 330; 2009). Thus supporting Brodkin's assertion, the findings of this thesis associated with the use of discretion in the local authority homeless units found that the frontline workers were more role orientated towards gatekeeping than acting as a gateway to services. Despite these pressures to gate-keep, instances of gateway actions were still evident.

The understanding of gatekeeping here involves those actions by frontline workers that actively hinder access to services and is a result of a focus on resources. As such, resources are generally offered only to those who the frontline worker believes to be roofless, or living in the most extreme manifestations of homelessness, thus interpreting the statutory definition in its narrowest form. In contrast, to act as a gateway involves using discretion more positively in order to act as an advocate for the applicant, especially when their eligibility for services is not immediately apparent, thus interpreting the statutory definition more broadly. In these cases, services are opened up to people that the frontline workers would not generally view as homeless, but are viewed in this instance as exceptional circumstances. The positive uses of discretion were found to occur like those outlined by other researchers, where a decision to use discretion positively often arose due to the impact of 'a mixture of personal attributes, lifestyle, and the likability of a service user' (Alden, 2015c, p. 14), perceived similarity (Lipsky, 2010) and/or feeling sympathy towards the applicant (Jörg *et* al, 2005). However, the finding of this thesis and other research (Alden, 2015b; Garot, 2005; Lipsky, 2010), that gatekeeping is the predominant use of discretion when it comes to rationing resources, is to be expected. Within the local authorities involved in this research, as demand for services grew so too did the need to ration resources resulting in an increased propensity to gate-keep, which was found by others researching gatekeeping in social housing in the UK (Alden, 2014; Niner, 1989). Similar to the findings of Ellis *et al*, the participants in this research used 'their discretionary authority defensively to manage an otherwise overwhelming workload' (1999, p. 262). Therefore, gatekeeping is an inevitability as it is so closely bound to the ever present need to ration resources. However, as instances of altruism were found, although they tended to be reserved for those deemed to be exceptional cases,

the factors that influence a frontline worker to use discretion to act as a gateway to services for a presenting person will be discussed as frontline workers can act both as suppressants and advocates for people who are trying to access a service (Foster, 1983; Hall, 1974).

8.3.2.1 Orientation towards service users: Advocate/suppressant

Through the findings it became apparent that when frontline workers acted as a gateway to, or gatekeeper of services, their orientation towards service users was that of advocate or suppressant respectively (Foster, 1983). As a gateway they acted as an advocate for the service user when they accepted an applicant's expressed needs (Bradshaw, 2013a) and often had to 'make a case' to management as to why this person should be considered homeless or offered a particular type of accommodation. In contrast, when they were gatekeeping services, they were acting as suppressants, for example, through using deterrence as a means to put people off accessing homeless services, or through denying services to someone based on a discretionary decision around whether they could 'reasonably' remain in their current accommodation,. In this sense, it was a rejection of expressed needs. Lipsky's contention that the structure of street-level bureaucrats' work renders a *truly* altruistic approach as more of a myth than reality or as he calls it, the 'myth of service altruism' (2010, p. 72) is relevant to the findings of this research. He states that despite the tendencies of many street-level bureaucrats to act as advocates for service users, the structure of street-level bureaucracies is such that it makes this impossible in practice. However, as was stated previously in relation to cases where eligibility was not seen as being clear-cut in the current and other research, perceived similarities, likeability and/or sympathy towards a potential service user impacted a frontline worker's decision to act as a suppressant or advocate during the assessment and placement process (Alden, 2014; Jörg *et al,* 2005; Lipsky, 2010).

8.3.2.2 Approach to assessment: Trust/suspicion

When making decisions around whether to act as a gateway or gatekeeper, the level of trust that the frontline worker felt towards the person or people presenting had an

impact on this decision. This was evident throughout the findings where people who were likely to experience gatekeeping were sometimes seen as trying to game the system in their attempts to access services that they were not considered to be entitled to. The clearest example of this was towards young people who presented as homeless from the family home and were generally approached with suspicion. Often the frontline workers did not believe that they were homeless or felt that they were only presenting to try and get a hotel or access to the higher discretionary rate of HAP. In contrast, people whom the frontline worker advocated for were described in ways that viewed them as more trustworthy or believable. This could be due to a number of factors including appearing 'normal' or 'decent' (APO urban), making repeat presentations which emphasised a high level of need for the frontline worker or appearing very vulnerable, for example due to old age. The impact of suspicion on SLBs has been studied by others, most notably those studying police discretion (Alpert and Dunham, 2008; Constantinou, 2016; Fagan and Geller, 2015; Stroshine), and includes some research that found it to be rooted in middle class biases (Deutscher, 1968; Sahlin, 1995). In contrast, Garot (2005) found in his research that the prevalence of suspicion was related to the frontline workers' efforts to find the most destitute applicants for limited funds. The findings of the current study had elements of both of these previous findings. For example, feelings of suspicion or trust were often related to an applicant's closeness or distance from the primary reference group of the frontline worker (Lipsky, 2010); where the 'normal' person was more likely to experience the gateway behaviours than those who are 'strung out of their head' (APO urban). However, suspicion similar to the findings of Garot was found in a few instances as some people who presented to the local authorities as homeless were considered suspiciously due to the belief that they were not *really* homeless due to living in one of the grey areas outlined in section 6.2.2.2. The discussion in the referenced section around 'How homeless are they?' demonstrates this well as the frontline workers question whether some people are homeless enough for services? The link between an approach of suspicion and resource availability for some of the frontline workers is evidenced through the assertion of some participants that as demand increased, they've found a need to get 'stricter' (APO urban) in terms of who they offered services to.

8.3.2.3 Moralistic assumptions: deserving/undeserving

These feelings of trust or suspicion constituted one element in the decision-making process of the frontline workers when determining the approach that they would take to a particular applicant, and could be impacted by the moralising assumptions of the frontline workers which classify applicants in ways that view them as deserving or undeserving of services. The study found that as well as the level of trust that a frontline worker felt towards a person or family applying for homeless services, there was both an age and family status dimension to the moralistic assumptions that they made around deservingness, with older people and families with children tending to occupy the domain of deserving (although this was stronger when they were presenting from private rented accommodation than when they presented from the home of a parent/grandparent). The domain of undeserving was more likely to be occupied by young and/or single people. Along with the age and family status dimension, issues such as level of dependency, perceived vulnerabilities and previous or perceived future behaviour all played a role in determinations of deservingness. As such, the findings of this research are in agreement with Lipsky and others' (Alden, 2014; Cramer, 2005; Ellis, Davis and Rummery, 1999; Gielens *et al*, 2019; Liddiard and Hutson, 1991; van Oorschot, 2006;) notions that moralistic assumptions or as Lipsky (2010, p. 151) calls it 'modifications of conceptions of clients', perform an informal rationing function through deciding who will be assisted based on both structural and personal perceptions of their moral worth (Ellis, 2011). As Lipsky argues, despite an expectation that frontline workers will treat everyone in common circumstances alike, the structure of modern bureaucracies are such that favouritism and unequal treatment comprise part of its characteristics. Likewise, Lipsky argues that these moralisations and their impact on decisions serve a psychological function for the SLBs as a coping strategy, which allows the frontline workers to 'do for some what they are unable to do for all' (2010, p. 151). As such they can respond 'flexibly and responsively' to a limited segment of those whom they deal with (Lipsky, 2010, p. 151). This understanding clarifies the apparent contradiction in the accounts of the frontline workers interviewed for this research who felt that they had an individualised response to those who presented and viewed themselves much like Maynard-Moody and Musheno's (2000) depiction of the 'citizen-agent', yet described a response which

appeared to be less flexible and influenced by organisational and managerial pressures, thus reflecting Lipsky's (2010) conception of the street-level bureaucrat rather than Maynard-Moody and Musheno's citizen-agent. Indeed, the flexibility tended to be evident only in those accounts where they described using discretion positively for a person whom they felt was deserving of it.

8.3.2.4 Allocations orientation: needs-led/service-led

When the frontline workers discussed gateway actions for allocation decisions they were more likely to speak about the needs of a service user than focusing on available resources or services. For example, when they placed a single person into PEA they spoke about issues such as a person's vulnerabilities or inability to cope in hostel accommodation, rather than focusing on available resources. In contrast, when gatekeeping activities were discussed, the frontline workers were more likely to talk about the requirement to fill section 10 funded accommodation before any alternatives will be considered, even though they had often outlined instances of when this did not happen. In this sense, gateway decisions were more likely to be *needs-led*, whereas gatekeeping decisions were more *service-led*. The service-led approach involves assessing an individual's needs 'with respect to current service provision and defined eligibility criteria' (De Poli *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). Whereas a needs-led approach is focused around a person's needs *per se,* irrespective of currently available services (De Poli *et al.*, 2020). What this meant in practice was that some situations were described where a focus on a person's needs meant that they were offered a form of accommodation of which the frontline worker knew they would attract managerial scrutiny to justify their decision. In contrast, situations were described where there was less of a focus on a person's needs and more of a focus on the available services and therefore a person could be sent away if they did not fit into the eligibility criteria for the available accommodation, for example sending away a single person if section 10 beds were full rather than sourcing PEA for them. Therefore, in line with findings in other areas of welfare provision, in this research it was found that the types of services or accommodation available usually determined the outcome of the assessment and placement process, where the realisation of 'need' tended to be based significantly on

administrative categorisation (Sims and Cabrita Gulyurtlu, 2014; Ellis, Davis and Rummery, 1999), which in this research was informally defined. In other words, needs were recognised once the available services could meet these needs, unless the person was deemed a special case.

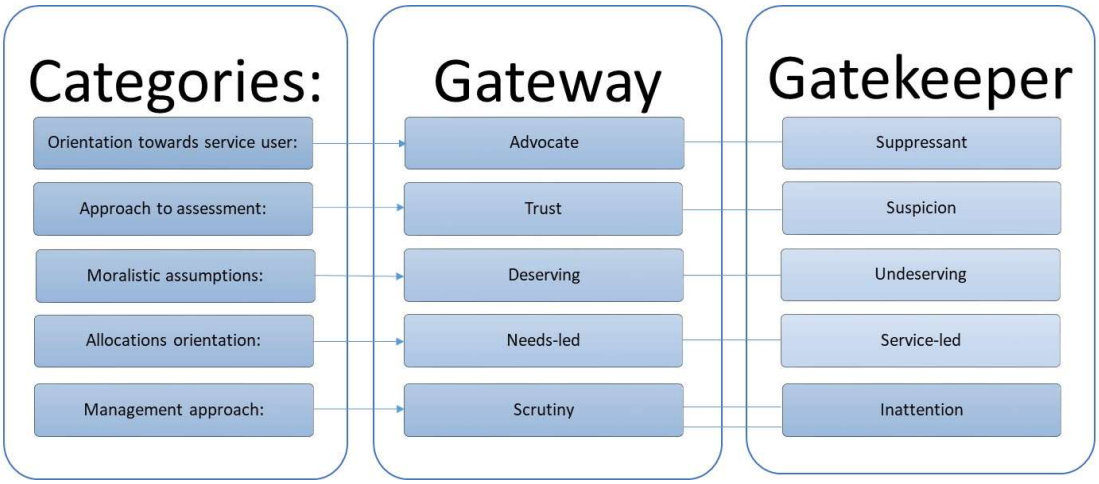
8.3.2.5 Management approach: Scrutiny/ inattention

Finally, the approach of management towards frontline workers acting as a gateway or gatekeeper of services differed. Just like the findings of Brodkin (2008) and Lipsky (2010) gateway decisions were more likely to garner scrutiny as questions were asked around decisions to use discretion positively. Lipsky outlines an example in *Street Level Bureaucracy* when he details quality control systems used in the 1970s and 1980s in welfare agencies in the USA. In this example, States were penalised by federal governments for errors in wrongful spending that were associated with using discretion more positively, for example, admitting ineligible people to the rolls. In contrast, where discretion was used more negatively, for example if eligible clients were denied access by frontline workers, these instances were not counted as errors of stringency (Lipsky, 2010). A similar approach was found in the current research, most notably if there was informal direction from management on the preferred approach to a particular group of people. Instances of gatekeeping decisions being scrutinised by management were not described unless the person who was refused services had approached a local Government representative to advocate on their behalf. This focus on positive uses of discretion, by those who grant the discretion to frontline workers, helps to explain why gatekeeping is more prevalent than gateway actions as managerial and organisational level goals have a greater impact than personal biases in terms of factors that determine the ways that street-level bureaucrats carry out their roles (Alden, 2014; Lipsky, 2010). Therefore, it is evident from the frontline workers' use of discretion, that the often times informal or covert pressures exerted by management impacts their work in significant ways. For example, although many felt that they were objectively responding to the needs of the person in front of them, the management technique of applying scrutiny when discretion was used positively

(gateway), and inattention when used negatively (gatekeeping), had an impact on their behaviour towards service users.

Bearing the findings in mind, figure 8.1 presents a dichotomy of the general approach of frontline workers when they act as gateways or gatekeepers of services. It is possible that these findings are related to the informal discretionary environment in which the research participants work. Further research examining gateway and gatekeeping actions could indicate if this dichotomy is similar or different in other areas of welfare provision, as well as in different discretionary environments, such as those with more formal guidelines on eligibility. It is important to recognise that the dichotomy of gatekeeper/gateway is a crude depiction of a nuanced and complex process and in practice, the decision-making process is unlikely to fit within these neat categorisations. However, it serves as a way to examine the factors that can impact a frontline worker's decision to help or hinder people to access services.

Figure 8.1 A gateway/gatekeeper dichotomy of approaches to administering homeless services



8.3.2.6 Power exercised through discretion

The assertion that the frontline workers involved in this research held significant discretion could lead one to conclude that they held a relatively powerful position in terms of the distribution of homeless services. However, this needs to be considered within the discretionary environment in which these street-level bureaucrats work.

Thus, it is clear from the findings discussed previously that whilst the frontline workers did hold discretionary power, this was limited through the impact of organisational priorities. Therefore, the findings of this research are consistent with those of others in England (Alden, 2014; Loveland, 1991; Rashleigh, 2005) who claimed that gatekeeping in the process of homeless administration was a reaction to these higher level priorities as opposed to an exercise of power *per se.* Despite this limit on power, it did not render the frontline workers entirely powerless as the practice of acting as a gateway to services serves as an example of the exercise of power in opposition to organisational pressures.

What is clear from the discussion around the use of discretion in homeless service administration, and indeed within the wider area of welfare provision, is that the distribution of power between the street-level bureaucrat and the potential service user is an unequal or 'unidirectional' one, which often works exclusively in favour of the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). This is due to the fact that the capacity to make decisions related to eligibility and level of services is almost exclusively held by the frontline worker (Lipsky, 2010). Thus the available evidence from this research, coupled with that of previous researchers, illustrates how the ability of service users to impact outcomes is very limited (Bretherton *et al*, 2013; Ellis, 2007; Lipsky, 2010; Wright, 2003). However, despite the priorities and preferences of frontline workers impacting this process, the limits of the job has a substantial impact in addition (Lipsky, 2010), therefore their power over service users was restricted somewhat.

The conclusions that can be made from this research around the impact of the discretionary environment on the exercise of discretionary power are significant as there is clear evidence illustrating the impact of management approach on the use of discretion. However, where the research is more limited is in making conclusions around the nature of the power-relationship between the frontline workers and potential service users as these interactions were not observed, nor were service users included in this research. As such, whilst there are conclusions that can be made with regard to the place of service users within this power relationship (Garland, 1990), further research would be required to make conclusions around the way that these power relationships impact the service user.

8.4 Primary rationing: The implications of ambiguity in defining policy

This section of the chapter is concerned with the ways that discretion impacts the primary rationing of homeless services through the process of assessment. A reminder of the social construction influence on the research is useful here. As O'Sullivan states:

> The framing of homelessness is the outcome of the complex interactions between, for example, how the public perceives the issue, how the media report the issue, how we measure homelessness and how these presentations and measurements are interpreted by policy makers (2021, p. 17).

Viewing homelessness in this way illustrates how homeless definitions used at a national, local government and street level are constructed within a particular context. At the street level, this context has been described in the findings chapters and is one in which the frontline workers experience pressures to ration resources and therefore keep their understanding of homelessness as narrow as possible, most notably where demand for services is high. It is within this context that the following sections outlining the dominant understandings of homelessness should be understood. As such it can be argued that the definition of homelessness used in practice is one formulated through the requirement to ration access to resources as opposed to having an empirical basis.

Considering the narrow definition and the discretion that frontline workers have to implement it, it may be tempting to recommend a prescriptive definition of homelessness. However, it is important to consider Lipsky's assertion that: 'First, street-level bureaucrats often work in situations too complicated to reduce to programmatic formats'. And '(s)econd, street-level bureaucrats work in situations that often require responses to the human dimensions of situations. They have discretion because the accepted definitions of their tasks call for sensitive observation and judgment, which are not reducible to programmed formats' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 15). The following sections should be read bearing these considerations in mind.

8.4.1 Assessment: Defining homelessness, policy ambiguity and discretion

This research has shown how the interpretation of homelessness that is being used at the frontline in the local authorities involved in this research concentrates much of its focus on the ETHOS 'roofless' category, with those presenting from insecure and inadequate situations occupying the areas described by the interviewees as grey. For some of the frontline workers, a focus on rooflessness acted as a coping mechanism through which they could justify their rationing decisions which they believed focused services on those who were most in need. Although those in the 'houseless' category were also considered to be homeless, generally a frontline worker had to determine that you were roofless before you would be granted access to one of the living situations in which you would then be considered houseless. In other words, they had to determine that you were homeless in order to offer you a place in emergency accommodation. In some cases however, offering a person a place within those institutions that make up the houseless category was used as a means to determine whether they were roofless or not as it was felt that a person would only stay in a hostel if they were genuinely homeless. Similar was found by Carlen (1994), Garot (2005) and Sahlin (1995) who showed that responses by service users towards offers of unattractive accommodation options were used by frontline workers as a means to test the urgency of their housing need. Likewise, as was found in the current research, dismissal of an offer of hostel accommodation, or a failure to make a repeat presentation could result in a person being considered intentionally homeless or not homeless at all (Sahlin, 1995), despite the fact that accessing emergency accommodation is not stated as a prerequisite to being determined as homeless in the statutory definition of homelessness (Community Law and Mediation, No date).

The living situations described by the interviewees as clear-cut, which included people known to be rough sleeping, those staying in shelters or those presenting with an NTQ, were seen as constituting genuine homelessness. Whereas, those described as living in more grey situations were questioned more often in terms of their genuineness and were approached with suspicion. It was not the case that all of those presenting from the grey areas were excluded from access to homeless services. However, bias and subjective decision-making were more likely here. Likewise, they were described more often in accounts of gatekeeping or other forms of informal or covert rationing.

By necessity, discretionary judgement was required as there was an absence of guidelines around determining the homeless status of these people. Lipsky sees this determination of eligibility, which is 'negotiated between street-level bureaucrats and clients through interpersonal strategies and implicit manoeuvring', as part of the process of constructing the client profile (2010, p. 61). This is important in determining eligibility as people come to, for example, homeless units, as unique individuals with different backgrounds, experiences and current circumstances. However, through their interactions with street-level bureaucrats, they are 'transformed into clients, identifiably located in a very small number of categories, treated as if, and treating themselves as if, they fit standardized definitions of units consigned to specific bureaucratic slots' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 59). As such, and despite the interviewees assertion that they took a case-by-case approach to determining eligibility for services, the responses to people who fit into different categories determined by their current living situation or demographic characteristics appeared uniform in many cases. This differed of course if the frontline worker felt for some reason that someone from a group usually considered to be ineligible, for example someone who was couch surfing, was deserving of services for some reason.

The main policy documents dealing with the issue of homelessness which were published in recent years (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021; Government of Ireland, 2016) have not included any reference to defining homelessness. However, as was stated in section 2.4.3, the definition from *The Way Home*, published by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2008, stated that the interpretation of the statutory definition is usually wider than focusing on those who are roofless and houseless and includes those living in temporary or insecure accommodation, although no evidence of this was provided in the strategy. Despite this statement, the current research confirms the findings of Bergin *et al* (2005) and Murphy (2016b), which stated that in practice, the definition is usually a narrow one focused on those who are roofless. Additionally, Bergin *et al* found that differences between local authorities in how they interpret the statutory definition of homelessness was mainly due to their interpretation of whether a person was considered to be in accommodation that they 'can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of' as is outlined in the *Housing Act,* 1988 (2005, p. 11). In their research, the interpretation of reasonableness maintained a central role in their

findings, unlike the findings of this research where it was only briefly discussed by a small number of participants. However, their research was focused on an overall local authority view on defining homelessness rather than focusing on the practices of the individual workers tasked with homeless assessment. As this and previous research has illustrated, an advantage for the government and local authorities in maintaining the ambiguous definition is that the parameters of it can be narrowed or widened depending on the prevailing homelessness situation and the available resources. As Carlen (1994) argued, defining homelessness has clear policy implications, with the adoption of broader definitions increasing the level of responsibility of local authorities for housing the homeless, thus cementing the appeal of ambiguity.

8.4.2 Young people, homelessness and access to the housing market

The treatment of one group that was prominent in the findings was young people who became homeless due to being asked to leave the family home or who were staying temporarily with family or friends. The differential treatment of this group is not limited to this study as it has been found by other researchers examining issues of homelessness among young people (Carlen, 1994; McLoughlin, 2013; Niner, 1989; Rashleigh, 2005). Despite the fact that family conflict and/or breakdown is widely acknowledged in research as having a significant impact on entries into homelessness amongst this group (Mallett *et al*, 2009; Mallett *et al.*, 2005; Mayock *et al*, 2014; Ross-Brown and Leavey, 2021; Tyler and Schmitz, 2013) most of the interviewees did not view people experiencing these family breakdowns as being genuinely homeless, as they were often viewed as gaming the system. As such, there was a denial of the experience of youth homelessness in line with the findings of Carlen that it was *'other than it is'*, for example through claiming that their homelessness was intentional or not genuine, and through an unspoken belief that 'young persons have no right to leave the family home and claim independent accommodation' (1994, p. 23). Often the frontline workers focused on whether they believed that a presenting person's current living situation was better than what the local authority could offer them, for example that sleeping on a couch was better than TEA. However, this focus on determining which accommodation was better or worse was mainly focused on shelter as opposed

to a person's need for safety and security, with some of the frontline workers using their own family experiences as a reference point or 'contrast structure' (Smith, 1978) for rationalising why these young people were better off to stay where they had presented as homeless from. Smith (1978, p. 39) defines contrast structures as a description of behaviour preceded by a 'statement which supplies the instructions for how to see that behaviour anomalous'. As such, the frontline workers' own familial experiences were viewed as the norm and decisions were sometimes based from this reference point. In considering this tendency of the frontline workers to send young people presenting from the family home, or sometimes when staying temporarily with family or friends, back into the living situation from which they presented, it is likely that this group constitute a significant proportion of those experiencing what Carlen (1994) termed 'agency maintained homelessness'. Carlen argues that agencies' routines of deterrence, denial and discipline mask the real number homeless within a given area, thus allowing housing agencies to maintain that they are discharging their statutory duties without actually providing housing for the majority of young single people at all.

It is important to consider the complex interaction between individual and structural factors that combine to form the reality of the living situations in which young homeless people find themselves. As Ross-Brown and Leavy (2021) found, family conflict, poor housing, traumatic experiences, domestic violence, relationship breakdown, and experiences of being in care featured strongly in their research into young adults' homelessness pathways. The complexity of these issues warrants more of a response than many will receive on presentation at the local authority. The frontline workers' involved in this research focused on the individual-level causes of homelessness for the young people who presented with very little focus on the structural factors that contribute to their homelessness. An important consideration here is the conclusion of Gambi and Sheridan (2020) which states that if a dysfunctional housing market is seen as the cause of family homelessness rather than a dysfunctional family, policy responses would reflect this in increased investment and focus on effective homelessness prevention, social housing investment, tackling affordability issues in the private rental sector, as well as other system-level changes. The sentiment can extend beyond issues of family homelessness and is relevant to young people who find themselves homeless (Mayock and Parker, 2020). As was

argued by McLoughlin (2013), there are both social and political inequalities that limit the resources available to young people in order that they can negotiate adult life. However, the conversation in the interviews was limited or in many cases absent around the issues that these young people face in attempting to access housing, which could be leading them towards homeless services.

In some local authorities, young people who presented as homeless were often directed towards homeless prevention interventions. It is important to note that 'prevention' can be used as a means to gate-keep in order to deny or delay access to services and thus act as a form of primary rationing, as opposed to offering genuine preventative services that improve the living situation of those who encounter it (Alden, 2014). In the UK context, a number of researchers found evidence of prevention being used as a means to gate-keep homeless resources (Alden, 2015b; Bretherton *et* al, 2013; Pawson, 2007). The legal context in Ireland is different in the sense that gatekeeping is not unlawful as it is in the UK where people have a right to make a homeless application. However, the 'gatekeeping critique' (Pleace, 2018) of homeless prevention is relevant as a number of instances in this research found that the use of prevention for some of those presenting to local authorities as homeless, appeared to comprise a form of gatekeeping as opposed to making a difference to their living situation, as was outlined in section 6.4.

One of the preventative measures outlined in the research in a small number of local authorities was family mediation. In the UK context, Pawson (2007) poses the question of whether offering family mediation is a useful preventative strategy or a denial of rights? Pawson discussed how family mediation can be a useful preventative tool, citing case studies that show relatively successful use of family mediation as a means to enable people to stay in the family home. However, Pawson points to family mediation's interrelatedness with the assessment process and, thus whether the service is offered on a voluntary basis, as a potential issue. For example, where a refusal to engage could impact a homeless assessment where mediation was run in place of assessment as opposed to alongside it. However, the legal context is different in Ireland. Therefore, the use of family mediation does not constitute a denial of rights. It is, of course, important that family mediation is only used in situations where it is appropriate, the presenting person is not at risk by returning to the family home and the meditator is suitably qualified. Therefore, whilst useful in some cases, family

mediation should not be the stock response to all people presenting from these circumstances. Additionally, the mediation situation should be avoided where, as a response to housing scarcity, homeless young people are converted into 'unruly teenagers' who simply need help to 'make-up' with their family (Carlen, 1994, p. 27).

Some of the young people who present to the local authority and have never held a tenancy before may find themselves in a difficult position with regards to finding independent accommodation. Whilst recognising the difficulties faced by people coming from all living situations in trying to secure a HAP tenancy, for some who have received an NTQ it is potentially easier for them to access rented accommodation. They have previously been in the rental market and therefore, if they did not have issues with their tenancy, have access to references. Likewise, many of the interviewees stated that they would offer access to the Place Finder service and the discretionary HAP top-up to people with an NTQ that were having difficulty finding accommodation independently. Whereas someone who is living in another type of living situation, for example couch surfing, could be very vulnerable, yet usually was not offered this same immediate access to the discretionary HAP payments. Rather, they are often required to enter hostel accommodation first in order to prove their homelessness. Some people are resistant to entering TEA due to fears for their safety or if they are recovering from addictions (Kinsella, 2012; Mayock and Parker, 2020; Mayock *et al*, 2015; Robinson, 2003). If these people have not been in the private rental market before they are doubly disadvantaged in accessing private rental accommodation as they are generally only eligible for the standard rate of HAP payment and they will not have access to references from previous landlords, something that many landlords require to provide a tenancy. As such, people who may be in need of the most assistance to access independent housing were often those who were the least likely to receive it as will be further demonstrated in section 8.5.2.

Overall, family solutions to homelessness appeared to be the preference for young people presenting to the local authority as homeless. Very often the frontline worker attempted to convince them to stay wherever they were living or in some cases, to find another temporary living situation with family or friends. Therefore, it is practice amongst most of the participants of this research that people are told that they are better off to stay with family or friends than to enter homeless accommodation. The benefits of family support for young people attempting to exit homelessness has been

found by numerous researchers (Braciszewski *et al*, 2016; MacKnee and Mervyn, 2002; Mallett *et al.*, 2009; Mayock and Corr, 2013; Mayock *et al*, 2011). However, the expectation that young people faced from local authorities that they should stay within the family home indefinitely without any regard for their autonomy or desire to become independent adults could impact relations within families and fracture the level of family support available in the long term. Whilst co-resident adult children may positively impact parental wellbeing, there is evidence too that this living situation can also be a source of conflict and stress (Tosi and Grundy, 2018). Likewise, denying the existence of this form of homelessness makes illegitimate the reasonable aspirations and desires of young people to transition from childhood to independent adulthood (Carlen, 1994).

The current treatment of young people presenting as homeless is likely to have materialised due to the lack of attention to the specific issues they face at a policy level (Mayock and Parker, 2020) which outlines what is viewed as an acceptable level of housing exclusion for young people trying to access independent housing. For example, in considering the statutory definition of homelessness, at what point is it no longer 'reasonable' that a person can remain in the parental home without access to independent housing? Unfortunately, these same issues of how local authorities deal with young homeless people go back many decades (Carlen, 1994). Therefore, it is not surprising that the frontline workers reacted to the young people presenting as homeless in the ways that they did as there is limited recognition of this group's housing needs at a local and national level. This research has provided a starting point for further research examining the issue of access to homeless accommodation and supports specifically for young people who are living within the areas defined by the frontline workers as grey, namely those living in inadequate and insecure accommodation.

8.5 Secondary rationing: Deterrence and selection as the main forms of rationing access to homeless services

This section of the chapter will discuss the practices identified in the secondary rationing of homeless services, namely decisions around placement of people once

eligibility has been established. Two forms of rationing dominate at this secondary level: deterrence and selection. The frontline workers often use deterrence in an attempt to convince certain people not to take up a place in TEA. Whilst selection is used so that those who are seen as the least likely to cause trouble are placed within PEA, a form of emergency accommodation which is often viewed more positively by service users than hostel accommodation (Mayock *et al,* 2014). The following sections will illustrate how the frontline workers can use their discretion to gate-keep services in covert ways, as well as using this discretion to ensure that they place 'the best' within PEA and therefore are able to maintain relationships with private sector providers.

8.5.1 Covert deterrence through a focus on 'less eligibility' as a form of rationing homeless services at the secondary level

The results of this study show that some of the frontline workers used a process of covert deterrence, through a focus on TEA as a form of accommodation with a 'less eligibility' function, as a means to avoid having to deny services to young people who presented as they covertly convinced them to withdraw their demand for emergency accommodation. There are many examples of the use of deterrence in research on welfare provision (Arskey, 2002; Blau, 1963; Brodkin, 1997; Cousins, 2019; Ellis, 2011; Lidstone, 1994; Murphy, 2016b; van den Berk-Clark, 2016; Walsh and Harvey, 2015; Wastell *et al.*, 2010;). As was stated in section 7.3, the practice is termed covert in this research as it is a hidden practice that takes place in the interaction between the frontline worker and the person who has presented to access services, in contrast to the more overt deterrence built into the structure of hostel accommodation. For example, a propensity of young people to avoid stays in temporary hostel accommodation was noted by Carlen (1994) as a major deterrent to them for presenting to their local authority as homeless in the first place. However, for those that do present, some may experience a process where the frontline worker attempts to deter them from entering TEA through emphasising the negative aspects of this form of accommodation. Whilst covert deterrence is secondary in nature as the frontline worker is discussing accommodation options with the young person as

opposed to denying them access to services, it is primary in function as it keeps people out of homeless services. However, where covert deterrence is successful, it allows the frontline worker to rationalise this form of rationing through determining that the person's refusal to enter TEA means that they were not genuinely homeless. Tactics which persuade would-be-beneficiaries to withdraw their claims for homeless services are not unique to this study (Carlen, 1994; Niner, 1989; Rashleigh, 2005).

As was argued by Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, there are ethical and rational reasons to avoid taking the approach in which hostels are used as punishment, a deterrent or as a 'worse alternative' for homeless people who are accommodated in ways presented as better than the hostel:

> If they are, the hostel cannot be expected to serve as an emergency solution at the same time, since the punishment function unavoidably stigmatises both the hostel and its residents (2007, p. 88).

Consequently, taking this punitive approach is comparable to the principle of less eligibility used as a means to deter people from entering workhouses in the 1800s. The basis of this principle was that conditions in the workhouse had to be worse than what was available to the lowest paid workers outside of them. The premise being that this would deter people from entering the workhouses unless they had no other choices. Like the workhouses, some hostels were portrayed by some of the interviewees as being worse than most other situations that one could find themselves living in, other than the street. This was similar to the findings of Sahlin (1995), who illustrated through her research how the housing social workers involved in her study changed their minds from their belief in the early years of undertaking their role that night only dormitory shelters should be replaced by 24 hour, single room shelters, to believing that these shelters were actually important for them in undertaking their role. This was due to their deterrent structure, or as one social worker described it 'we need some alternative which is bad enough to be refused by the clients' (Sahlin, 1995 No page number). Although this study was undertaken in Sweden 26 years ago, the findings of the recent research indicate that TEA often holds the same function in Ireland currently. Indeed the negative impact of this form of temporary accommodation on wellbeing has been illustrated in research (Boyle and Pleace, 2017; Harris *et* al, 2020; McMordie, 2021).

There are two important considerations in light of the thesis findings. Firstly, presenting the accommodation in this deterrent way could potentially result in a person remaining in an unsafe living situation as they believe that TEA would be more unsafe. Secondly, if these deterrent actions of frontline workers are warranted due to TEA being as poor a form of accommodation as it is described to be by some of the interviewees, questions need to be addressed around why such accommodation is being provided by the state to some of the country's most vulnerable people? Thus the deterrent nature of TEA is not limited to the ways that the frontline workers describe it to those trying to access homeless services. Rather, there is an element of deterrence built into the structure of emergency hostel accommodation, most notably when its use extends beyond very short-term stays. They are presented as an option of last resort that provides a step up from the street – although some choose to stay on the street rather than enter them (McMordie, 2021) – and a step down for most other accommodation options. In this sense, they deter people from attempting to access them unless they have no other choice. As Cloke *et al* argued in their discussion of hostel accommodation:

> …residents still sleep in dormitories and are subject to a myriad of restrictive rules and regulations that would seem to mark out such spaces as more obviously articulating a space of containment and control rather than compassion and care. In short, such projects might best be characterized as operating according to the principles of "less eligibility" – "a subtle school of thought which postulates low-grade accommodation in order that there shall be no general desire to 'settle down' or 'set up home'" (Stewart, 1975: 41-42) (2010, p. 149-150).

Through the interviews, it became clear that some of the frontline workers felt that the deterrent function of TEA has been damaged through the use of PEA as a response to homelessness, as they viewed PEA as making homeless service more attractive to people, thus acting as a pull factor into homelessness. This perception solidifies the deterrent nature of TEA described by some of the interviewees, as their perception was that PEA is viewed as offering a higher standard of accommodation than TEA, despite the considerable issues which have been identified for those living within hotels and B&Bs due to homelessness (Nowicki *et al,* 2019; Walsh and Harvey, 2015). Thus it is plausible, yet beyond the scope of the current study to conclude, that the

deterrent nature of TEA has kept some homeless people from presenting if they feel TEA is the only option, with the likelihood of being offered PEA making them more likely to present. Indeed, some of the frontline workers commented on a decrease in the number of presentations among single people since the LA stopped offering PEA to this group, citing a belief that this change has reduced presentations from people who were not genuinely homeless, although single person homeless presentations have increased since the interviews took place (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Various years-a). What is possible to conclude is that for those who do present despite the overt deterrence inherent in communal hostel accommodation, most notably if they are coming from the family home, they may experience a process of covert deterrence through which the frontline worker emphasises negative aspects of entering this accommodation in the hope that they will withdraw their claim for homeless services.

8.5.2 Selection as a form of rationing homeless services at the secondary level

Section 7.4 outlined the findings in relation to selection as a form of rationing used by frontline workers who make homeless placement decisions. Selection used in this way for allocations is service-led in orientation, as opposed to being led by the needs of those who are assessed. As such, services are focused on those who most closely fit the service ideal of a well behaved inhabitant as opposed to being focused on those who need them most. Therefore, notions of deservingness are intertwined with the use of selection as an approach to rationing. In this research, selection was found to be used predominantly in two areas. Firstly, when decisions were being made around a person's readiness to move up a rung of the homeless service staircase and secondly, when decisions were being made around placement of people into accommodation owned by private providers such as B&B, hotel or some HAP placements. Thus the following empirical claims can be made:

1. Despite a focus on housing-led responses to homelessness within the policy documentation at a national level, at the local level of delivery and implementation, the staircase of transition model dominates.

2. Where private providers of accommodation are used as a primary provider of accommodation for the homeless, selection will constitute an important form of rationing for allocation within this accommodation.

In relation to the first claim, the findings illustrated how this prevalence of the staircase of transition model is related to the structure of homeless services and a shortage of longer term solutions to homelessness rather than simply being a result of frontline worker preferences. However, resistance to the housing first model of service delivery was evident in a small number of the interviews, and has been found elsewhere (Manning *et al,* 2018). Housing First programmes have been shown to alleviate some of the issues associated with staircase of transition or 'treatment first' responses to homelessness through providing an exit from homelessness to the most entrenched homeless who are traditionally difficult to house (Padgett *et al,* 2016; Tsemberis *et al,* 2004). Therefore, in theory, eliminating the need to use selection for homeless accommodation allocation. However, some of the interviewees were resistant to more housing-led approaches to accommodating the homeless as they felt that some people will never be capable of independent living, therefore for them selection was an important tool for rationing accommodation. Sometimes these views around capability were based on their knowledge of a person's homeless accommodation history which could include being barred from homeless accommodation. However, it is important to recognise that being barred from hostel accommodation, could be more about a person's ability to live communally than being about their ability to live independently (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007). Despite this, it is important to acknowledge that there may be people who are unable to maintain a tenancy or live within a homeless accommodation setting, especially if the level of supports is not at the level they require. However, as Sahlin (2005) found through assessing longitudinal studies in Sweden, in municipalities where the staircase of transition was the model of service delivery, more people were homeless and/or deemed 'incapable' than in the municipalities where this model was not used. This indicates that the classification of 'incapable', which is similar to the notion from the findings that you would be setting a person up to fail by moving them closer to independent living before they are deemed to be 'ready', could be related to the model of service delivery as opposed to being a useful response to the issue of homelessness *per se*. In summary, Sahlin (2005) argues that the use of selection in this way has implications for service users, which are

relevant to the current research, as it can worsen a person's situation rather than improve it due to them being deemed incapable of independent living based on their perceived failure within the staircase system. Likewise, Watts (2014) argues, through a comparison of responses to homelessness in Scotland and Ireland, that clear and simple legal rights can minimise provider discretion and crowd out considerations in the response to homelessness which are non-needs related, therefore eliminating the need for selection to determine housing readiness in order to access longer term accommodation when homeless.

In considering the second claim, it is clear from the findings that the frontline workers felt that they had no choice other than using selection as a tool for placing people within accommodation provided by private providers. This was due to the perceived risk of withdrawal of accommodation by the provider if issues arose with someone they had placed there. This included both PEA and to a lesser extent, the provision of HAP tenancies where landlords provided multiple tenancies. Therefore, for the interviewees, the predominant motivator for using selection as a rationing tool in these instances was based around previous and/or current perceived behavioural patterns, through which they make inferences about hypothetical future behaviours (Juhasz, 2020). They made these decisions based on a utilitarian rationale, in that they felt that their actions were justified by their consequences in the sense that they ensured accommodation access for the greatest number of people, even if it was to the detriment of the few. Fitzpatrick and Watts describe this utilitarian approach as one which 'supports actions that maximise the sum total of societal "welfare"' (2010, p. 108), that is, the greatest happiness for the greatest number. The utilitarian teleological theory of ethics argues that specific actions should be performed if their consequences warrant such actions, to wit, it is consequences rather than intention, universalism or equal justice which hold a central role in morality. As Osmo and Landau suggest:

> Utilitarian principles have traditionally been the most popular guides to social workers' ethical decisions, at least in part because they appear to foster generalized benevolence; a principle that requires one to perform acts resulting in the greatest good appeals to professionals whose primary mission is to provide aid to those in need (2006, p. 872).

Therefore, whilst one could argue that selection is an undesirable form of rationing as it removes a focus from those who are most in need, it has been argued that an element of selection can be useful when it comes to allocating social housing in order that the most vulnerable are not overly concentrated within the one area (Fitzpatrick and Stephens, 1999; Pawson and Kintrea, 2002). However, this is in the context of state built social housing rather than HAP or homeless accommodation. In these cases, where accommodation is offered through the private market, selection is not so much about social mix as it is about keeping out those perceived as difficult or unreliable tenants and likely to cause trouble. The LA workers used selection in these instances as a way to avoid conflict with accommodation providers over issues arising within their properties so that they could maintain good relationships with them. One can easily see the appeal of a utilitarian approach. However, this fails to respect people as ends and not just means (Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2010). Likewise, an extreme interpretation could result in the justification of 'trampling on the rights of a vulnerable minority in order to benefit the majority' (Osmo and Landau, 2006). Therefore, the potential consequences of the utilitarian approach for the most vulnerable illuminate the appeal of deontological ethics and a human rights-based approach to welfare provision (Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2010).

Overall, the engagement with third parties for the delivery of services can have a considerable impact on the use of discretion when services are no longer delivered by publically employed street-level bureaucrats (Carson *et al,* 2015). Instead, the services are delivered through third parties who in some cases become the holders of front-line discretion or at the very least, impact how it is used. Third sector organisations, such as homeless charities, have long been involved in the provision of homeless services in Ireland, although this has increased as homelessness has become more prevalent. Likewise, the involvement of private sector providers of homeless accommodation has become more widespread in recent years. Access to these services in the first instance is still decided by the local authority housing officers who undertake homeless assessments. However, as the research has shown, these decisions were not undertaken purely based on the needs of the presenting person. Rather, the service requirements of third parties was taken into consideration when placement decisions were made, most notably when a person was being placed into private sector provided accommodation.

As such, the increased use of private sector providers of accommodation can have governance implications for homeless services similar to those found by Darling (2016) in his examination of the privatisation of provision for asylum seekers in the UK, where the balance of power shifts away from local authorities towards the private service providers. Thus the use of selection as a tool for decision-making around placement into PEA serves as an illustration of the agenda-setting impact of private providers on policy responses to homelessness. Where frontline workers are using selection in order to keep private providers on side, the response to homelessness is being determined through the needs of privately run businesses as opposed to being focused on the needs of those who are homeless. Although it is arguable that service-led determinants of eligibility were already in place through the use of third sector organisation for homeless accommodation provision or even through the requirements of estate management within local authorities, it is evident from this research that the eligibility determinants and threshold for maintaining a place within emergency accommodation are more stringent for private providers of accommodation.

Although it would be easy to simply criticise this use of selection in providing homeless accommodation and state that placements should be needs-based, there is the ethical dilemma of whether the frontline workers are just in taking this utilitarian approach? In other words, would it be ethical to jeopardise accommodation provision from a private owner, due to making a placement with a high risk of breaking down, when there are so many people homeless and limited accommodation in which to place them? Therefore, the wider issue here is the use of private providers for this form of accommodation, as opposed to the placement decisions that the workers have to make in using this system. The use of selection in placing people into privately owned accommodation is another example of the coping behaviours (Lipsky, 2010) that frontline workers devise so that they can undertake their role within the limits of resource availability.

8.6 Issues of transparency in homeless service administration

Throughout the research, issues of transparency were apparent in both the process of undertaking the research and through the findings. From the inception of this PhD,

issues of transparency were evident where homeless placement and assessment was concerned. As was outlined in section 4.3.2.1 gaining access to the research participants was an arduous process. Previous work by the author with local authorities, as well as advice from supervisors and other local authority 'insiders' made it clear that gaining access to the sample population would be this research's biggest obstacle. This raises questions around transparency and accountability of frontline workers in terms of participation in research, and providing access to knowledge around the process of administering public goods. It is important to consider the implication of this in a democratic society where accountability is a concern in the provision of public services. Research with local authorities can provide an opportunity to foster interaction between those that govern and are governed and to make the invisible, visible. When the inner workings of government (be that at a local or national level) are opaque and impossible to scrutinise it damages democracy and adds to the feeling of voicelessness experienced by many in contemporary society (Rosanvallon, 2018). As such, it is imperative that these implementers of policy at the local level are open to engagement with those who wish to understand their practices. Particularly when the legislation that guides them leaves a significant space for interpretation and leaves those that experience this policy implementation with little understanding of how frontline workers make their decisions around eligibility. However, it is important to recognise the propensity of public sector organisations towards 'blame avoidance' (Hood, 2011) and the ways that this can impact their willingness to participate in research examining the ways that they work. As Hood explains, blame is a variable rather than a constant. Variations in concern about blame can be attributed to, in part, social settings and institutional backgrounds at particular points in time. As Hood put it, 'if social developments make blame risk more or less salient over time, we might expect the incidence of such behaviour to vary accordingly' (2011, p. 8). Therefore, with the considerable focus on the issue of homelessness at both a political and societal level – through both media and social media – it was of little surprise that local authorities were cautious around participation in the research when the subject matter is so politicised.

The issue of transparency was not confined to methodological issues, as the research findings have shown. Practices such as covert deterrence which were uncovered through this research illustrate just how opaque the process of homeless assessment

and placement are. The opacity in the process identified here has been illustrated by other researchers (Bergin *et al.*, 2005; Murphy, 2016b; Watts, 2014; Watts, 2013b). Indeed, much of the assessment and placement process was an informal one with very little formal guidance available for public scrutiny. Naturally the interactions between frontline workers and potential service users take place within the 'crowded offices' where the street-level bureaucrats work (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii). By their nature they take place out of the gaze of other interested parties. This reinforces the need for practices which make frontline workers and local authorities accountable for their decisions, particularly when there is significant ambiguity around determining eligibility for services. Therefore, an element of transparency in service provision is key. In Ireland, youth policing and diversion has an informal and discretionary approach similar to that used for homeless service delivery. In examining this issue of discretion in youth policing, Kilkelly argues that the informal and discretionary approach to the youth diversion programme means that it falls short on international human rights standards of transparency, accountability and professionalism, with the root of this problem lying in the 'lack of published criteria to guide the discretionary decision-making at several stages of the programme', along with an insufficient complaint and review system (2011, p. 133). Similar could be concluded around the statutory administration of homeless services in Ireland, where little is known about the means of determining eligibility by those outside of the individual interactions. Although she was writing about youth homelessness in England in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the following quote from Carlen is in some ways applicable to the opaque system of homeless service administration used within Ireland today, bearing in mind the practices uncovered through the current research:

> In conditions of severe shortage of affordable housing and hostel places, local authorities, in combination with a variety of professionals involved with homelessness, have developed a very fine interdisciplinary mesh for the deterrence and denial of homelessness and the disciplining of the homeless. Such creative and coercive interdisciplinary accounting has resulted in the manufacture of an agency-maintained homelessness which, at its moment of birth, is either rendered invisible or translated into something other than it is (1994, p. 21).

This research has illustrated how the ambiguous and informal nature of the delivery of policy in this area has allowed for similar to happen in Ireland as some of the interviewees recounted having to 'get stricter' as demand for services rose. This illustrates how access to services for some is related to demand levels rather than need.

In considering the attraction of Government and higher levels of management within local authorities to opaque and informal approaches which grant considerable discretion over the development of more formalised guidelines for frontline staff, it is worth returning to Hood's (2011; 2002) thesis on the propensity of both politicians and public sector agencies towards blame avoidance. As such, the granting of discretion by politicians and senior management can at times constitute a form of blame avoidance in order that they can distance themselves from decisions made at the frontline (Evans and Harris, 2004; Meers, 2019). For Hood (2011, p. 5) 'blame risk' is an ever present facet of government and the public sector as politicians, managers, professionals and frontline workers alike attempt to avoid personal blame associated with their work. Thus, with homelessness being such a contentious and politicised area of social policy, it was felt by a small number of the interviewees that the tough decisions around determining eligibility were pushed down to the frontline by those higher up the chain of command. In this way, higher management can avoid holding 'moral responsibility' (Bartling and Fischbacher, 2008) for delegated decisions made around access to homeless services. The value of delegation for blame avoidance was demonstrated by Bartling and Fischbacher in their experiments which demonstrated how responsibility for a decision could effectively be delegated: '(w)hen an unfair outcome is the result of a delegated decision, then the person who makes the allocation decision is punished much more than the person who delegated the decision' (2008, p. 31). To this end, the government and/or those higher up the chain of command can avoid conflict over eligibility, whilst the frontline staff deal with it on a daily basis. In this sense, the frontline workers may be rendered scapegoats for both unhappy service users and the policy-makers or the managers of the departments in which they work (Deutscher, 1968). However, these are hypotheses rather than conclusions around management motivations. Thus research involving higher levels of management would be necessary to understand their motivations with regard to the discretionary environment granted to the frontline workers and determine the full impact of blame avoidance and delegation.

8.7 Concluding comments

This thesis explored the use of discretion at the frontline of administration of local authority homeless services and showed how it impacted rationing at primary and secondary levels. It focused on the ways that frontline workers navigated the often informal and highly discretionary environment in which they worked as there is little known to date in this area. Therefore, it is the first research in Ireland to apply Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach to examine practices in local authority homeless units. As such, it provides unique insights into the processes of assessment and placement and the factors that impact discretion use and decision-making during these processes. Additionally, it demonstrates the ways that the practicalities of delivering policy at the frontline can result in an experience of policy implementation which differs significantly from the ways that policy is outlined at a national level. The main examples of this were demonstrated through the difference in approach to service delivery at the frontline where the approach in practice was more in line with the staircase of transition than a housing-led approach as is outlined in current homeless policy documents; and through the narrow interpretation of homelessness uncovered through the research in contrast with the broader definition outlined in *The Way Home.* The remainder of this section will conclude the thesis by reiterating the main contributions of the research with regards to methodology, theory and empirically, as well as some policy and practice implications.

8.7.1 Methodological contributions

The methodological contribution of this research is important owing to the fact that it is the first research of its kind in Ireland. It has provided a useful starting point for others interested in undertaking similar research in the field of homeless service administration. However, the issues of transparency and a willingness of public sector workers to participate in research remain. The research has demonstrated a hesitancy among some frontline workers to take part in the research, potentially as it was focused on an area in which local authorities have experienced considerable critique. This signifies the need for conversations more broadly around accountability of public

servants towards academics and the public who want to know more about an area of service delivery which is both opaque and informal in nature.

With regard to the research method, although more observational methods are viewed by some as the gold standard of street-level bureaucracy research (Brodkin, 2008), this research has demonstrated the value of undertaking qualitative interviews when observation is not possible. Researchers should not be put off by an inability to access research participants in an observational study. As street-level research more broadly, and more specifically within the area of homeless administration, is lacking in an Irish context, these qualitative interview studies can add rich and valuable knowledge to an area where little is known. The use of vignettes greatly aided this process as it elicited insightful data around the ways that homelessness is defined at the frontline and provided a means for comparison between the individual workers and local authorities. As the direct observation of the frontline workers was not possible in the interactions through which they determine who is or is not considered to be homeless, the vignettes provided a useful way to approach this sensitive subject. Thus, this research reaffirms the value illustrated by other researchers (Bretherton, *et al,* 2013; Buss, 2019; Hunter *et al,* 2016; Kootstra, 2017; Watts, 2013a) of using vignettes for this kind of research.

Finally, the research has demonstrated the value of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework which was used for structuring the thematic analysis approach. As the 'how too' of thematic analysis is often absent from research papers, this research aimed to make the process clear, straightforward and more transparent and thus make the data analysis approach more replicable for future researchers, as well as demonstrating its rigour. The rigour was aided through the use of the 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a tool against which the data analysis process could be validated. The steps used for data analysis are outlined in section 4.3.4, and the thematic map progression is included in Appendix 5, in order that the progress from initial to final themes is included in the thesis.

8.7.2 Theoretical contributions

Overall, this research is in keeping with the main tenets of Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy framework. Lipsky's assertions around discretion mainly being used as a

means to gate-keep resources held true in this context. Despite the high level of discretion granted to the frontline workers, the research has illustrated why this focus on gatekeeping is to be expected within the environment in which these rationing decisions are made. This is due to a focus on high demand for resources, as well as the management techniques uncovered which impact the way that the SLBs use their discretion, most notable applying scrutiny to gateway decisions and inattention to gatekeeping ones. This clearly conveys the message to frontline workers that gateway actions will require a level of justification that will not be applied for gatekeeping decisions. Thus, the thesis has presented an approach that others may find useful for studying the work practices of street-level workers through their actions as both gatekeepers and gateways to services. The dichotomy of approaches to administering homeless services presented in section 8.3.2 provides a useful means through which to examine both the actions and motivations of frontline workers when rationing resources and the pressures that impact their actions.

The findings of the research related to managers were more in line with Evan's than Lipsky, and warrant a more nuanced approach to the study of manager motivations, as the managers in this research were found to be motivated by both the street-level practicalities of undertaking the role *and* the organisational objectives. As management involvement in this research was limited, more concrete conclusions around the managers' place within the street-level bureaucracy framework could only be made if further research was carried out in this area.

As was outlined at the beginning of this thesis, Lipsky (1980; 2010) argues that it is the use of discretion, combined with the rules and regulations of individual agencies that make up what the public directly experience as agency performance. As Lipsky illustrates throughout his book, these actions effectively become the public policies that street-level bureaucrats carry out. Therefore, the spaces where these actions take place – the locations of street-level encounters, provide the best understanding of public policy implementation (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii). The findings of this research demonstrate that this is most certainly the case for the public in Ireland as they experience policy related to accessing homeless services. As this research included interviews across a number of different local authorities, it was able to show how the discretion available to frontline workers, coupled with the rules and regulations placed upon them by those higher up within the organisations, shaped the experience of the

public who presented to the local authorities as homeless in their interactions with these frontline workers and ultimately whether they gained access to services and which services they were able to access.

8.7.3 Empirical contribution

The empirical contributions of this thesis were discussed throughout this chapter. However, as this is the first time that knowledge in this area has been cultivated in Ireland, it is worth summarising here. An aim of this research was to make the invisible visible and add to the scant knowledge around the process of homeless assessment and placement within local authorities in Ireland. To this end, the thesis makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the ways that decisions are made by frontline workers who are charged with deciding whether a person is deemed to be homeless or not, and therefore entitled to services, as well as deciding what services they will receive.

Owing to the ambiguity in both the statutory definition of homelessness and the lack of formal guidelines around determining homeless status, it appears as though the frontline workers have very high levels of discretion. Although it is true that a high level of discretion is granted to the frontline workers, this must be considered alongside the findings that illustrate the ways that the work environment and management can impact how this discretion is used. For example, when the SLBs act as a gateway to services for people, they attract attention from those higher up the chain of command, and much less so when they act as gatekeepers. Therefore, the approach of management within the homeless units has a significant impact upon both the level of discretion that they have available to them and how they use it. Thus a high level of scrutiny on gateway activities is likely to ensure that the frontline workers only use these in exceptional circumstances. In contrast, the lack of scrutiny around gatekeeping activities, and the praise afforded in some circumstances when numbers in particular services are kept low encourages gatekeeping behaviours. The impact of this need to gate-keep is visible in practice through the approach identified in a number of the local authorities of the practice of covert deterrence being used as a means to discourage mainly young people from accessing services. This shows a direct impact of the more subtle actions of management, who determine ‘discretion-as-granted’, in

the way that this discretion is used at the frontline. Bearing these findings in mind, the empirical contribution of this research is significant as it has made more transparent, the opaque actions of the frontline workers, alongside examining the factors that impact why they act is specific ways. Therefore, in concluding, it is useful to reiterate Lipsky's assertion that:

> …the patterns of practice that develop in this work are rooted in the fundamental coping requirements of the job. These are not easily abandoned or changed because they are experienced by workers and outside observers as virtual job requirements. People do not readily give up survival mechanisms. This is one of the reasons it is easier to change articulated policy from the top than to change practice from below. Policy articulated from the top is not rooted in defense mechanisms developed to cope with the job, while the policy that emerges from practice is rooted in survival' (2010, p. 187).

As such, this research has shown that rather than providing examples of deviance and personal bias, the biggest factor impacting the routines, work practices and coping mechanisms developed by the frontline workers involved in this research are the pressures related to their requirement to ration both the demand for, and supply of resources. However, as this research has shown, the frontline workers tasked with the assessment and placement of people presenting as homeless make life changing decisions for those that present to them as homeless. As such, it is reasonable to question the ways that they approach this assessment and placement and the ways that they use the considerable discretion available to them in making these decisions, as well as bringing to light the higher level actions within the organisation that impact street-level bureaucrat actions. Likewise, the absence of clear criteria around which they must base their decisions adds to the general issues of transparency uncovered through this research in the decision-making process for homeless assessment and placement.

8.7.4 Policy and practice implications

There are a number of policy and practice implications of this research which will be discussed in this final section. Although this section is not exhaustive of the potential implications of the research, a few that stand out will be addressed.

8.7.4.1 Training needs

There is evidence that the provision of further training for some of the frontline workers tasked with homeless assessment and placement would be useful (Jakobsen, *et al,* 2019). Better training could provide some protection for both the frontline worker, for example in learning to protect their own wellbeing in dealing with complex cases, and the person presenting, for example through the frontline worker being able to better recognise risk or vulnerability.

Following the lead of the homeless units who have taken the approach to hire workers with a background in social care or social work rather than continuing with the generalist approach to staffing could prove beneficial. The cases that the frontline workers deal with on a daily basis are complex enough to warrant a specialisation approach. However, at a minimum, those with an administrative background could receive additional training as the research found a gap in the training provided to these workers, some of whom described the training received to date as being inadequate for carrying out their role or not relevant to the more difficult tasks associated with dealing with homeless people. A National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) is already in place for the homeless sector, which was developed by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) on behalf of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. Although formulated for homeless service providers, it would be useful for local authorities to implement the NQSF to cover their staff in homeless units. Similar staff competencies to those that are outlined in the NQSF could be used for frontline workers within the local authorities. For example, staff should have competency in person-centred assessment and planning; communication, equality practice, and child protection. It is important to note that there are influences on street-level bureaucracy behaviours of frontline staff other than their work background, most notably their work environment (Lipsky, 2010). Thus, the propensity towards gatekeeping and other issues associated with their attitudes towards clients may only be impacted in a small way through further training (Weissert, 1994), unless changes to the work environment occur concurrently (Lipsky, 2010).

8.7.4.2 Support

Although the frontline workers are providing important support for each other, the stress that some of them described in undertaking their role warrants consideration of further employee supports. Some additional supports were described by the interviewees but they appeared to be patchy in both delivery and take-up. However, structured supervision was described by a very small number of the interviewees as a useful support for undertaking their role, indeed this has been confirmed through a body of research (For a meta-analysis on the impact of supervision on worker outcomes see:Barak *et al.*, 2009). Again, implementing the recommendations of the NQSF for homeless units could help to bolster support for workers through providing supervision in a structured way, for example as is outlined in section 7.3 of the document which stipulates that 'services have a written policy on the support and supervision of frontline staff' and that the following occurs:

a) Supervision of frontline staff occurs at regular intervals.
b) There are signed and dated records of supervision which reflect practice issues discussed and support training needs raised by either party.
c) Services have a policy on the support of staff.
d) Staff are encouraged through supervision to be cognisant of their own health and support needs (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2019, p. 45).

8.7.4.3 Eligibility

As the research has shown, the statutory definition of homelessness is ambiguous and there is a distinct lack for formalised guidelines on how frontline staff should make their decisions around eligibility for services. However, the introduction of additional eligibility criteria for access to homeless services over and above those covered in Irish law can leave the local authorities in a precarious legal position. For example, the issue of eligibility criteria around making oneself intentionally homeless which was discussed by a small number of the interviewees. Mercy Law Resource centre have taken cases on behalf of people who have been refused emergency accommodation on the basis that they are considered to have made themselves homeless. In one such case, a family who had returned to Ireland after a year living in

the UK were refused emergency accommodation on the basis that their decisions to return had caused their homelessness. In corresponding with the local authority, Mercy Law pointed out that:

- the statutory definition of homelessness does not oblige an applicant to prove any prior residence in the administrative area of the Council;
- does not provide for any assessment by the Council of the circumstances in which an applicant became homeless, intentionally or otherwise; and
- there are no regulations which add to or expand on these requirements in relation to providing emergency accommodation to people who are homeless. They referred in particular to the High Court decision in *Kinsella v Dun Laoghaire County Council*, where the Court held a housing authority cannot introduce additional eligibility criteria over and above those provided for in relevant legislation (Mercy Law Resource Centre, 2017).

The final point here is important as it indicates that some of the practices to determine eligibility identified through the interviews, may actually be unlawful. Thus, it is imperative that homeless units address this issue of determining eligibility to ensure that they are lawfully carrying out their duties in assessing people for homeless services.

8.7.4.4 Transparency and consistency

As was discussed previously, there is considerable opacity in the area of homeless assessment and placement. Considering the implications of this in a democratic society, as discussed in section 8.6, it would be prudent for local authorities to address some of these transparency concerns. Although Bauhr *et al* concluded that the empirical evidence around the idea of transparency as a means to improve public service delivery is inconclusive, they argue that transparency is more likely to improve the quality of service provision in situations where street-level discretion is high, as 'discretion increases information asymmetries, and, in the absence of transparency, allows officials to target public services in suboptimal ways' (2021, p. 500). As the current research has illustrated, homeless service administration is an area where frontline workers are awarded a high level of discretion with little formal guidance on

how to use it, thus in considering the findings of Bauhr *et al* (2021), applicants for homeless services are likely to benefit from any changes which increase the transparency of service administration.

The main areas that would benefit from increased transparency at the local authority level include making local authorities more accessible to researchers examining areas of public service delivery; formalising some of the approach to assessment; and, linked to this, making the process more consistent within and across local authorities. Enhancing the consistency at a local and national level in the approach to assessment, placement and preventative services would improve the service for people who present as homeless, give the public some expectations around the types of services they can access, and take some of the burden of discretion away from the frontline workers.

At a national level, revisiting the statutory definition of homelessness could prove beneficial to ensure it is fit for purpose in light of the current homeless crisis where the number homeless are significantly higher than they were at the time that the definition was devised. Likewise, there has been much work undertaken on developing empirically based definitions of homelessness since the Housing Act, 1988 was introduced. As such, it would be useful to revisit the statutory definition of homeless giving consideration to the research on defining homelessness in the interim years. The purpose of this re-examination, however, should not be the total curtailment of discretion as the nature of homelessness necessitates an element of discretion. Thus transparency is required without being overly prescriptive.

Appendix 1: Bibliography

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Appendix 2: Interview information letter

Niamh Murphy
PhD candidate and IRC Scholar
School of Applied Social Studies
University College Cork

7th November 2019

Dear…,

I am writing to inform you of research that I am undertaking as part of my PhD in University College Cork, which has been funded through the *Irish Research Council (IRC) Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship*. The research is being undertaken with the guidance of my two supervisors, Professor Cathal O'Connell and Joseph Finnerty.

The study is concerned with the process of assessment of people who present to the authority as homeless from the perspective of public facing staff. The study aims to understand how frontline workers negotiate the task of managing demand for services. This research will give local authorities a voice in which they can discuss the realities of the day-to-day tasks of working within the area of homelessness at a time when there is a high level of need. The research will involve conducting in-depth interviews with 20-30 local authority staff nationally, who are involved in homeless assessment. If further information is required after the interviews, an online survey may be conducted.

All data collected through this research will be anonymised and names of individual local authorities will not appear anywhere in the final report. Names will not appear with any quotes used in the thesis. The location of local authorities will not be included, rather they will simply be categorised as rural or urban local authorities. If staff agree to be interviewed this can take place at a location of their choice. Interviews will be tape recorded and will take approximately 45 minutes – 1 hour. Participations is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research if they change their mind.

The results of this research will be presented in a final thesis. This will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and an external examiner. The thesis will be available for future students on the course and the study may be published in a research journal. However, as mentioned above, all data collected through the research will be anonymised and names of participants and the local authority, will not appear anywhere in the final thesis.

I feel that this research is very important as there has been no similar research, to the best of my knowledge, which has explored the perspective of local authority staff in managing resources in a time of unprecedented demand for homeless services and social housing. Rather, the research that has been undertaken on homelessness in Ireland to date has focused on homeless policy analysis at a national level, the evaluation of homeless services and the experience of homelessness.

If you have any questions at all about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me at the above mobile number, email or address and I would be very happy to put you in touch with my supervisors in UCC if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Niamh Murphy.

Appendix 3: Consent form

What is the purpose of the study? You are invited to take part in a research study that I am undertaking as part of my PhD in University College Cork, which has been funded through the Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship. The study is concerned with an examination of the process of assessment of people who present to the local authority as homeless from the perspective of public facing staff within local authorities.

What will the study involve? The study will involve an interview that will take up to one hour. During this hour you will be asked about various aspects of the assessment process. The interview will be tape recorded so that it can be transcribed later.

Why have I been asked to participate? A selection of local authorities from around the country have been invited to participate. As your local authority is one of these and you undertake homeless assessments you have been invited to take part.

Do I have to take part? Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to participate if you so wish.

Will my participation in the study be kept confidential? All data collected through this research will be anonymised and names of participants will not appear anywhere in the final report. Names will not appear with quotes used in the thesis. The names of local authorities will not be included, rather they will be given a code and categorised as rural or urban local authorities.

What will happen to the information that I give you? All data will be kept confidential, including from third parties (for example, co-workers and/or managers). The data will be available only to myself and my research supervisors. It will be securely stored on a password protected laptop. Any hard copies of transcripts and any other printed material related to the interview will be locked in a filing cabinet and will not have names on them. On completion of the project, data will be retained for a further seven years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research? The results of this research will be presented in a final thesis. This will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and

an external examiner. The thesis will be available for future students. The study may be published in a research journal.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I do not envisage any negative consequence for you in taking part in the study.

Who has reviewed this study? Ethical approval for this study has been sought and granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) in University College Cork

Consent:

*I have read the consent sheet above and agree to take part in this research and that the data I provide can be used anonymously in the final thesis:

Please tick box ☐

*I do not consent to use of data and therefore will not continue with the interview:

Please tick box ☐

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 4: Interview guide

Introductions

My name is Niamh Murphy and I am a PhD candidate in University College Cork. I am undertaking this research with a Scholarship from the Irish Research Council. My research is focused on the process of homelessness assessment within local authorities. I want to look at the different factors that can impact this process and the ways that services are allocated to the people who present to the local authority as homeless.

The interview will comprise a number of sections. I will start by asking you about your role in the local authority. Then we will look at the way that homelessness is defined within the local authority. After that we will turn to the level of freedom you have in your role to use your judgement and discretion in undertaking your work. The following section will cover questions around any goals or targets that are set out for you in your work, followed by a section looking at the ways that resources are divided among people who present to the local authority as homeless. The final section will involve a discussion around a number of different scenarios of people in varying situations who could potentially present to the local authority as homeless. There are no right or wrong answers. I am just interested in your opinion on these topics and how you feel that they impact your day-today work.

The interview should take around one hour and, as I mentioned in my letter, I am going to tape record it so that I can focus on our conversation now and transcribe the interview later. Everything you say in this interview will, however, remain completely anonymous and names of participants, or the local authorities that they work for, will never appear in the report. I will not discuss your participation with anyone either inside or outside of the local authority in which you work.

Role, experience and training (Approx. 5 minutes):

Firstly, I am just going to ask you a bit about your role within the local authority.

1. *Can you tell me about your role within the local authority?*

Prompts: title of position, day-to-day work, tasks involved, length of time in role, previous role?

2. *Can you tell me about any training that you have received since you have been in this role?*

3. *How does this role compare to other roles you have held within the local authority?*

   Prompts: More/less/similar levels of difficulty/stress/feelings of satisfaction/rewarding

Defining homelessness and homeless assessment (Approx. 10 minutes):

This section is going to focus on the definition of homelessness and the process of homelessness assessment.

4. *Can you tell me about the way that the statutory definition of homelessness is understood within the local authority?*

   If not answered through this question, ask: Do you feel that there is a clear understanding within your local authority of what is and is not considered to be homeless? Can you give examples?

   Prompts: Can you tell me more about this? Does this always stay the same or in practice, can available resources impact this?

5. *Can you tell me about the process when someone presents to the local authority as homeless? I.e. When someone arrives at the LA office and states that they are homeless, what happens next?*

   Prompts: how is the process of assessment carried out? Specific structure or it varies depending on the situation? Outline steps if structured. How are a person's needs identified? Are there specific priority needs? What are the most challenging aspects of assessment for you as a frontline worker?

Freedom to use your judgement and discretion (Approx. 10 minutes):

So now I would like to turn to the ways in which you feel you can use your own judgement in carrying out the duties associated with your role.

6. *Can you tell me a about the level of freedom that you feel you have to use discretion in carrying out your work?*

   Prompts: Do you feel that your job is very structured or that you have a lot of control over the way that you carry out your work? Can you explain your answer to me please? How do you feel that this impacts your day-to-day work and the decisions that you make?

7. *Can you tell me about the involvement of supervisors and managers in the process of assessment?*

   Prompts: Are they involved at all? Do you have the final say on cases or does your manager? All cases or just some? Can you tell me about a time when a decision you made was changed by someone in a higher position?

   Prompts: For example, in cases that are not so clear cut (i.e. person is not sleeping rough), do you feel that you can use your own judgement in making these decisions? What impacts decisions? Managers? Guidelines? Other?

Priority setting (Approx. 10 minutes):

8. *Can you tell me about any goals or targets that you are expected to reach in your workplace? For example, objectives set out through the PMDS?*

   Prompts: Where are these set out? (Homeless action plans? Through managers? More informal goals?) Do you feel they are attainable? Why?

9. *Can you tell me about any ways that these objectives impact your day-to-day work?*

10. *Are there any sanctions /implications if objectives are not met?*

11. *Can you talk to me about whether or not the Homeless Action Plan impacts your day-to-day work?*

Prompts: Do you feel it is a realistic plan? Are its goal attainable with current resources? What gets in the way, if anything, of reaching goals? Have past homeless action plans impacted your work? Do these have any real bearing on your role?

Distributing resources and coping mechanisms (Approx. 15 minutes):

This section is focused on the different resources available within your unit/section for dealing with homelessness and the ways that these resources are distributed. I will also ask about the ways that you, as a frontline worker, cope with the demand for services.

12. *Can you tell me about all the different resources available to you in dealing with homelessness? These could be, for example, financial resources, emergency accommodation, personnel, etc.*

    Prompts: Do you feel these resources are adequate? What resources do you feel you could do with more of? Do you feel that the level of resources available impacts how you can do you your job (which resources impact)?

13. *Can we talk about the ways that services are distributed among those that are assessed as homeless? In other words, when someone is considered homeless, I want to ask about what happens next when it comes to allocating resources/services. I have three sub-questions on this*

a. *Can you tell me about what happens when the level of demand is higher than the accommodation resources available on a given day? Are there any strategies in place to deal with this? (Prompts: waiting lists, referrals elsewhere, etc.)*

b. *What shapes decisions around the type of service offered to a particular person (for example, hostel accommodation, B&B, hotel, etc.). Are there guidelines or is it left to you to decide using your judgement of each particular case?*

c. *Can you tell me about any other challenges you face in making decisions around how to distribute the resources available for homeless people?*

Is there anything that you would like to add around the ways that resources and services are allocated amongst service users?

14. *Are there any other barriers to carrying out your role in the way that you would like to? What are they?*

15. *Thinking of these barriers you have identified, what would you change about the system if you could? What would you change specifically (3 things)?*

Vignettes (Approx. 10 minutes):

In order to get more of a sense of how homeless assessments are carried out, I am going to run through some scenarios with you. Can you tell me a bit about the way that you would approach this case if they presented to you? Would they be considered to be homeless if they presented to this local authority? What kinds of services might they be offered? Can you tell me some reasons for your reply?

a) A man aged 38 with a history of drug use and mental health issues. He has spent some time in prison. He has been asked to leave by the friend whose couch he is currently sleeping on. At this point, all other family and friends have been exhausted as a source of accommodation (Adapted from (Watts, 2013b)

b) A single mother of two children (age 5 and 8) who has one week left in her current accommodation and has been unable to secure alternative affordable accommodation. She has no family which she can stay with.

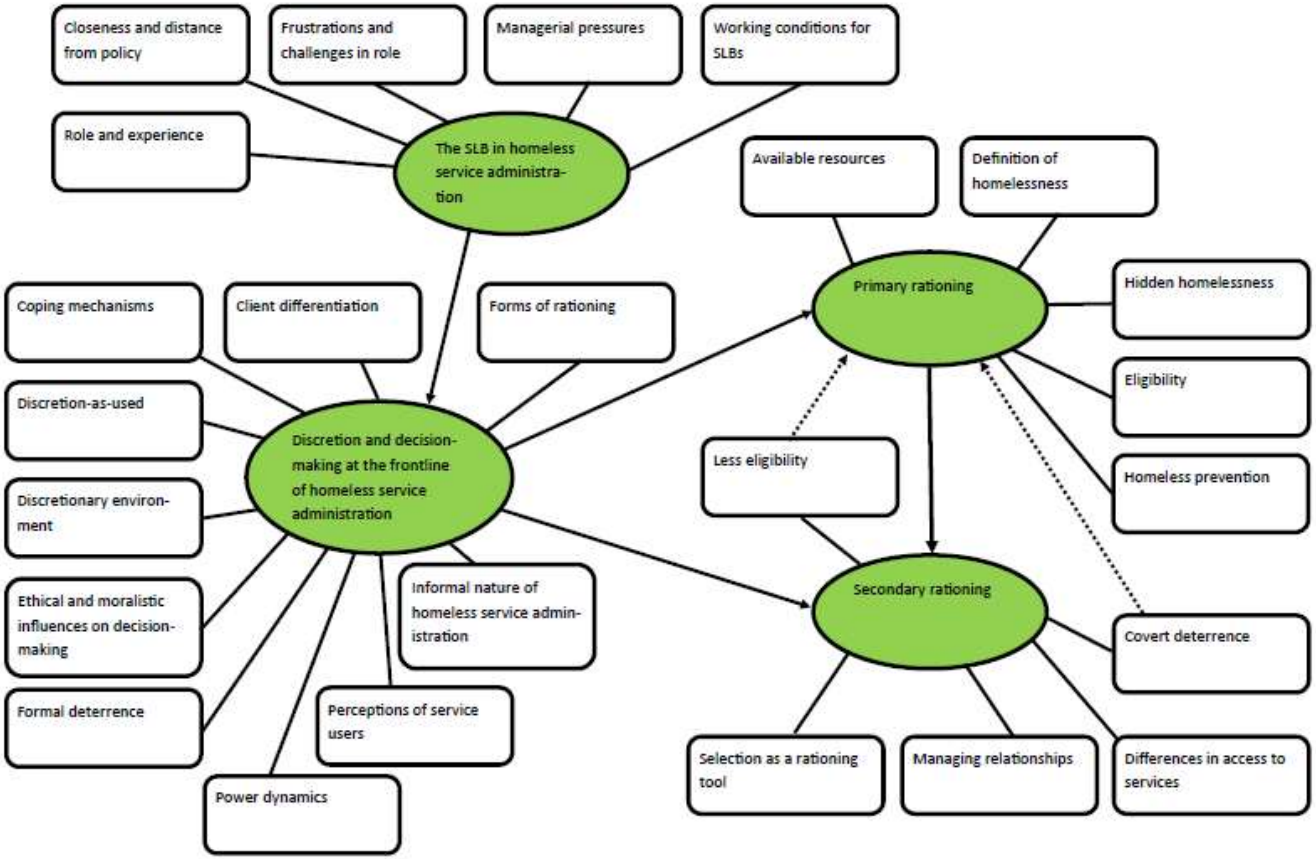
c) A young woman of 20 who left state care aged 18 and has been unable to find secure accommodation since. She is currently staying on her brother's couch and although she hasn't been asked to leave, she feels that she has outstayed her welcome as there is a history of family conflict.

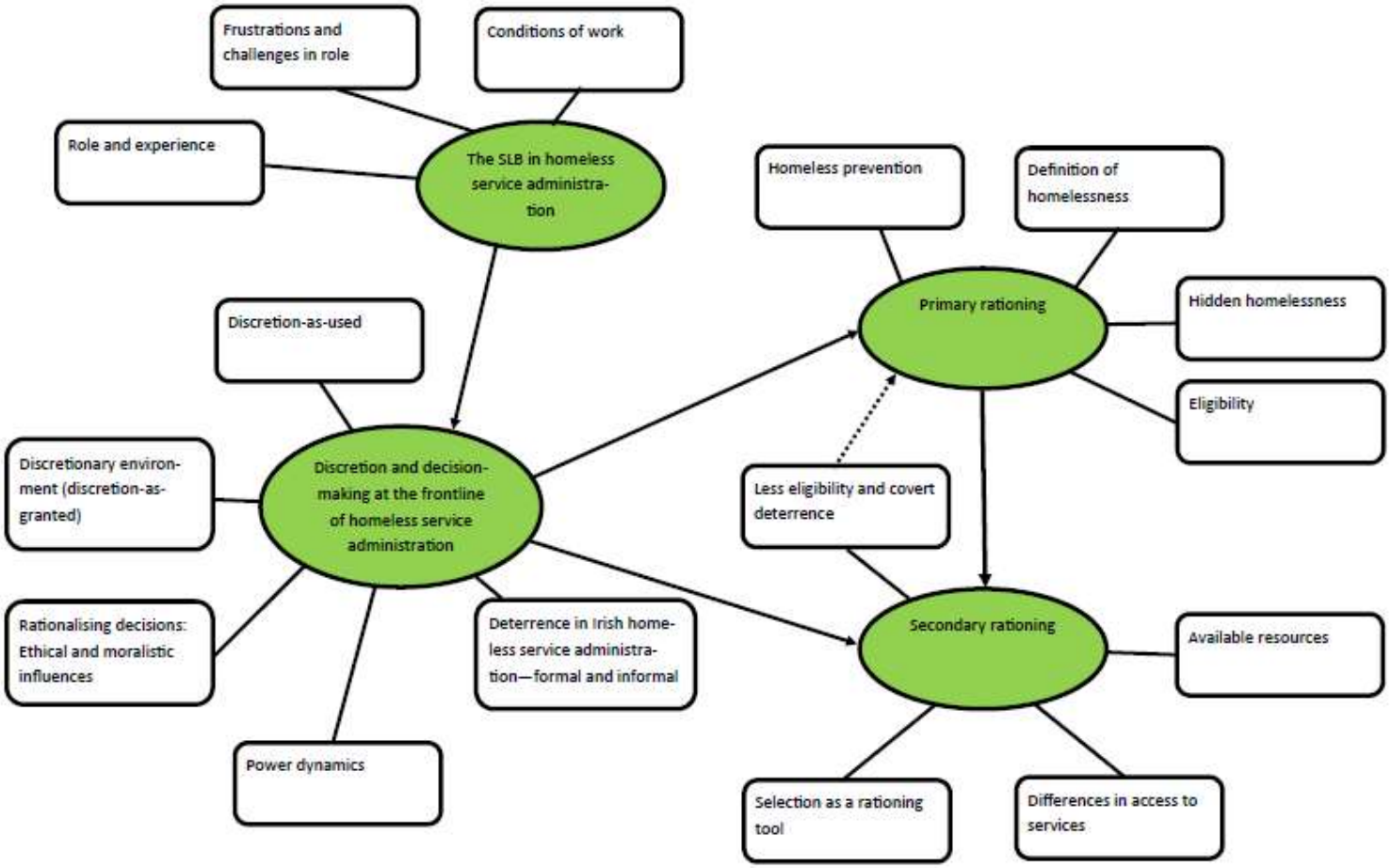
d) A Traveller family consisting of a husband and wife and five children aged 2, 5, 8, 10 and 11. They have been living in overcrowded accommodation on an unofficial site and have arrived at the local authority offices stating that due to issues on the site, they have nowhere to stay tonight.

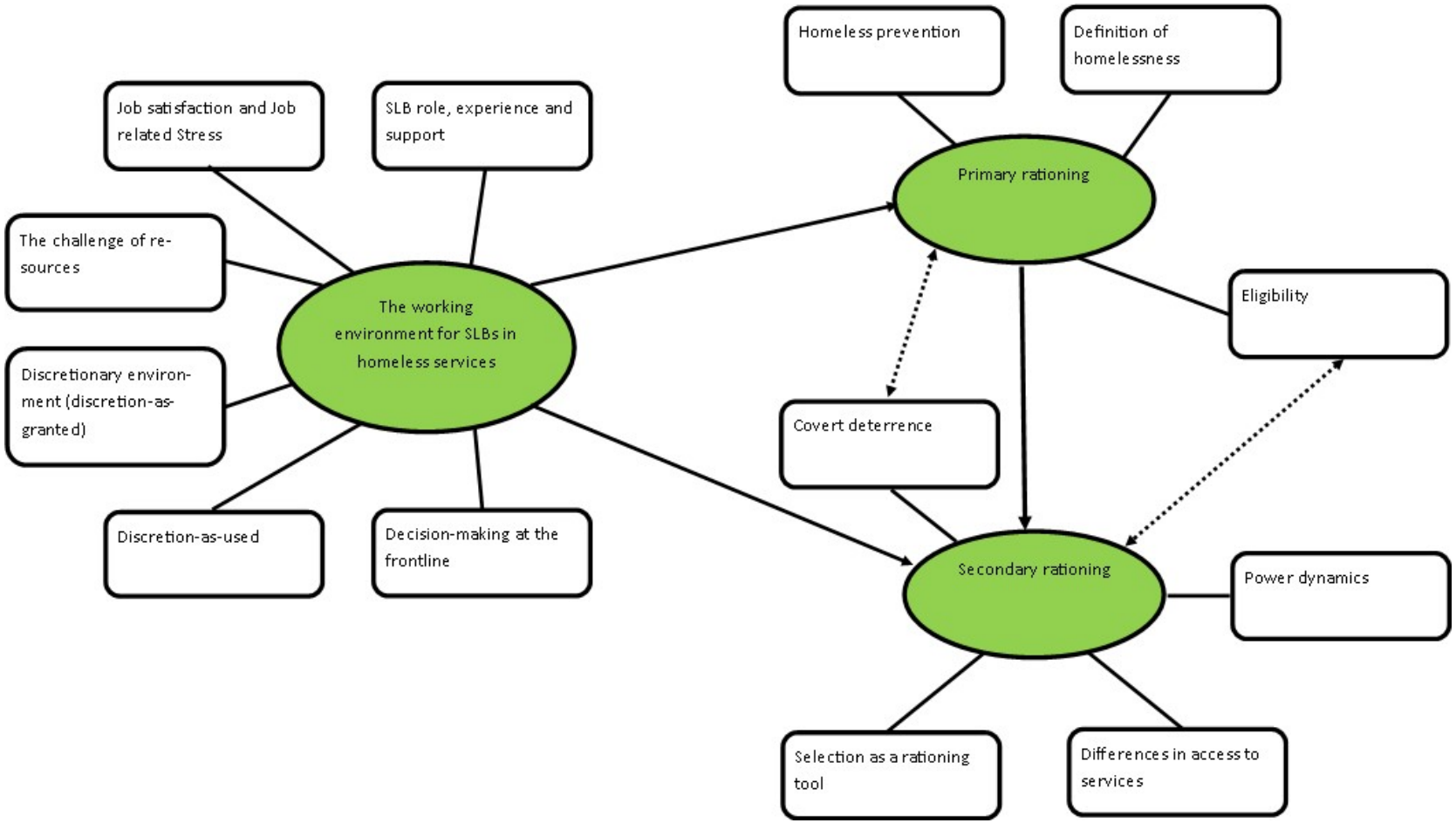
Is there anything else that you would like to add that we have not talked about?

Thank you so much for your time. Your contribution is invaluable for my research.

Appendix 5: Thematic map progression




Frustrations and challenges in role
Conditions of work
Role and experience
The SLB in homeless service administra-tion
Homeless prevention
Definition of homelessness
Primary rationing
Hidden homelessness
Eligibility
Discretion-as-used
Discretionary environ-ment (discretion-as-granted)
Discretion and decision-making at the frontline of homeless service administration
Less eligibility and covert deterrence
Rationalising decisions: Ethical and moralistic influences
Deterrence in Irish home-less service administra-tion—formal and informal
Secondary rationing
Available resources
Power dynamics
Selection as a rationing tool
Differences in access to services


Homeless prevention
Definition of homelessness
Job satisfaction and Job related Stress
SLB role, experience and support
Primary rationing
The challenge of re-sources
The working environment for SLBs in homeless services
Eligibility
Discretionary environ-ment (discretion-as-granted)
Covert deterrence
Discretion-as-used
Decision-making at the frontline
Secondary rationing
Power dynamics
Selection as a rationing tool
Differences in access to services

Appendix 6: ETHOS – European typology on homelessness and housing exclusion

		Operational Category		Living Situation		Generic definition
Conceptual Category	Roofless	1	People living rough	1.1	Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
		2	People in emergency accommodation	2.1	Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
	Houseless	3	People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 3.2 3.3	Homeless hostel Temporary hostel Transitional supported accommodation	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
		4	People in Women's shelter	4.1	Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term
		5	People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 5.2	Temporary accommodation/ reception centres Migrant workers' accommodation	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status
		6	People due to be released from institutions	6.1 6.2 6.3	Penal institutions Medical institutions Children's institutions/ homes	No housing available prior to release Stay longer than needed due to a lack of housing No housing identified (e.g. by 18th birthday)
		7	People receiving longer term support (due to homelessness)	7.1 7.2	Residential care for older homeless people Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)
	Insecure	8	People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 8.2 8.3	Temporarily with family or friends No legal (sub)tenancy Illegal occupation of land	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy, Illegal occupation of a dwelling Occupation of land with no legal rights
		9	People living under the threat of eviction	9.1 9.2	Legal orders enforced (rented) Repossession orders (owned)	Where orders for eviction are operative Where mortgagee has the legal order to repossess

		10	People living under threat of violence	10.1	Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence
	Inadequate	11	People living in temporary/ non-conventional structures	11.1 11.2 11.3	Mobile home Non-conventional building Temporary structure	Not intended as place of usual residence Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty Semi-permanent structure, hut or cabin
		12	People living in unfit housing	12.1	Occupied dwelling unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations
		13	People living in extreme over-crowding	13.1	Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms

Source: (Edgar, 2009, p. 73)