Research article

Local authority austerity and place-based working: a qualitative exploration of a pilot policy implementation in a market town

Mel Steer*
Northumbria University

Abstract

English local authorities manage services including education, refuse, libraries, social services, housing and social care. Central government grants provide most of the income for these services and grants have been cut due to austerity measures. Attracting increased interest since austerity measures were implemented in 2010, place-based working aims to streamline services to reduce expenditure, improve effectiveness and value for money.

This article adds to the literature on austerity, local government and place-based working. It examines the perspectives of fifteen staff who were involved with a local authority's place-based working pilot initiative that was implemented in a market town serving a rural area in northern England. Findings suggest that place-based connections may influence engagement with, and attitudes towards, place-based working. These connections may be enhanced in small towns and rural areas. This article extends considerations of place-based working beyond discussions of place leadership, away from institutions towards the personal, embedded connections of people and the relational dynamics existing at the interface between people, place and policy implementation.

Keywords: Austerity, local government, places, towns.

Introduction

In England and Wales, the proportion of people living in towns (56 per cent) is greater than those living in cities (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Yet cities have dominated the policy arena and discourses relating to towns, especially less prosperous ones, are often characterised by pessimism and degeneration (Pennycook, 2020). However, towns, which are diverse with different economies, prosperity, residential and commuter

profiles, have attracted increasing interest (Office for National Statistics, 2019), especially since the UK's advisory Brexit vote where many towns suffering adverse economic issues favoured leaving the EU (MacLennan and McCauley, 2018). Deprivation levels in some coastal towns, with their declining (pre-Covid) appeal as shopping centres and holiday destinations and their increased visibility since Brexit, have been identified as communities under pressure from economic, health and social challenges (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). In the 2019 UK General Election, some constituencies incorporating the former industrial towns swung from Labour to Conservative for the first time, demonstrating that towns can sway nationwide conclusions (MacLennan and McCauley, 2018).

Despite the growing profile of towns, interest in austerity's effects has focused on cities. Austerity's effects in rural areas have also received less attention (Black et al., 2019) where the distance from city regions and different labour market profiles means austerity impacts may vary. This paper addresses a gap in the research about austerity and place-based working implementation beyond cities and city regions and considers this from the perspectives of fifteen staff and stakeholders who were involved in the development and implementation of place-based working in a small pilot area in a market town. It begins by introducing austerity and local authorities, the aims of place-based working, the implications for staff (street-level bureaucrats) and stakeholders, and considers if place-based connections and community ties to the area influence engagement with, and attitudes towards, place-based working.

Austerity and local government

Central government austerity has affected how councils operate and their services. The Localism Act (2011) increased the visibility of local authorities and made them more accountable for the effects of the cuts (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013), an approach that has been criticised as obscuring central government responsibility (John, 2014). Although local authorities have adapted to financial and operational changes before (John, 2014), sustained cuts by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition (2010 - 2015) and the Conservatives since 2015, are exceptional (Hastings et al., 2015b). The 2018 National Audit Office report (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2018) revealed a bleak picture of large reductions (almost 50 per cent) in central government funding and of local government's disappearing reserves. Prolonged austerity - 'super-austerity' (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016: 357) - means potential bankruptcy and an inability to cover the costs of essential services (Butler, 2018), threatening the welfare state (Gardner, 2017).

Individuals, communities and local authorities have experienced austerity in different ways. Northern England experienced greater proportional cuts (Hastings et al., 2015a). Its legacy of lost industry, lower economic activity, poorer constituents and increased levels of ill-health, means changes to state welfare have been felt intensely (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). Those already experiencing health and social inequality have been most at risk from adverse health and economic issues resulting from the pandemic (Bambra et al., 2020). Local government has a legal duty to balance its budget and local elected representatives (councillors) can be fined for failing to comply with audit regulations (indeed, councillors' levels of accountability exceed levels that are applied to Members of Parliament (Spicker, 2020)). Bankruptcy is a real possibility (Butler, 2018) and, since the Covid-19 pandemic, more councils have highlighted this issue (Proctor, 2020). A greater likelihood of cash flow issues also exists for authorities who speculated on business enterprises to generate money for services due to austerity cuts (Butler and Barr, 2020). Furthermore, local authority financial vulnerability has widely been

acknowledged to be further exacerbated by currently high and volatile levels of inflation, energy, fuel costs and increased wage demands. The Covid-19 pandemic also increased financial pressure on local authorities, coinciding with a fall in their income as tourism and leisure spending ceased or reduced (Taylor-Collins and Downe, 2022) due to pandemic related lockdowns and social distancing measures. Cutting public sector budgets severely and relentlessly to the bone, however, means that ultimately, it becomes apparent to everyone as the fabric underpinning public sector service provision is eroded:

> *Eventually, this impacts not only those governmental functions that neoliberal critics choose to construct as 'fat', such as welfare, social services and bureaucracy, but also those basic, essential and 'skeleton' services often deemed indispensable (even) to the neoliberal state, such as policing, prisons and public safety. (Peck, 2012: 630).*

Place-based working and street-level bureaucrats

Place-based working refers to delivering services in a different, rounded, less siloed and streamlined way (Public Health England, 2019). Aiming to deliver better coordinated services in a responsive, flexible way to improve outcomes (Munro, 2015), it originated from New Labour's Total Place initiative that emphasised holistic and coordinated services to minimise duplication and develop services through partnership working (HM Treasury and Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010). It is an approach that has attracted renewed interest since austerity and is rooted in earlier area-based initiatives such as Health Action Zones implemented under the New Labour administration (Sullivan et al., 2006). Place-based working's appeal also increased as public services were devolved from the town hall to neighbourhood offices (Horlings et al., 2018). It was adopted by the UK Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government into Whole Place Community Budgets which shared an emphasis on partnership working, lowering expenditure and achieving better outcomes (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2013).

Partnership and place-based working aimed to locate service users at the centre of services, where their requirements, not organisational borders, drove delivery to develop a holistic, systems and place-based approach. This study principally sought to explore the perspectives of staff involved in the initiative rather than those in senior leadership roles because staff in customer-facing roles, termed by Lipsky (1969) as 'street-level bureaucrats', are intrinsic to place-based working. Frontline public sector workers have direct contact with citizens and internal and external colleagues, where they have some autonomy (decision-making and discretion) for policy implementation, representing the interface between policy implementation (Lipsky, 1969) 'on the ground' (Sabbe et al., 2021: 208) and 'the freedom to decide what should be done in a particular situation' (Thomann et al., 2018: 583). Citizen interactions with street-level bureaucrats, as noted by Lipsky (1969), often are through necessity not choice (such as contact with teachers, planners, police officers), and for some citizens, especially those in disadvantaged circumstances, they have little alternative choice outside the public sector (e.g. housing). Lipsky (1969) is credited with considering policy analysis from the perspectives of those implementing it and the development of a 'bottom-up approach' (Hupe and Buffat, 2014: 549). Relationships between different people and organisational structures affect policy development and administration (Haynes, 2015), and the context in which these occur counts if changes are to be understood and explained (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Place-based working is based on collaboration and partnership working where informal and formal associations and relationships ('social dynamics') affect street-level bureaucrats'

decision-making (Raaphorst and Loyens, 2020: 32). 'Pragmatic improvisation' involves overcoming tensions between regulations and seeking solutions in the real-world (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2012: 519) and this study sought to explore the real world of implementation, situated away from policy makers' and senior managers' direct oversight.

Brodkin (2011) emphasised the manner in which policy is implemented and delivered matters, and although the focus on street-level bureaucrats' decision-making (discretion) was principally between frontline workers and service users, partnership and collaborative working foregrounds relationships, negotiation and discretion within and between staff and those using services (Raaphorst and Loyens, 2020). Furthermore, the agility, adaptability and innovation that place-based working suggests is necessary to overcome silos and improve outcomes, is by extension, vested in those workers in frontline jobs with some autonomy in how they operationalise policies. These decisions are moulded by the wider organisational, professional and social position of the street-level bureaucrat, levels of co-operation and collaboration between networks of colleagues and their perceptions of each other (Raaphorst and Loyens, 2020) as well as by the organisation's ethos (Brodkin, 2011). Hence, the experiences of frontline workers are important to understanding local authority austerity (Hastings and Gannon, 2021), place-based working and how austerity affects collaborative working. This paper firstly considers how integrated, collaborative working is harder to achieve during austerity, and secondly, how place-based connections may influence partnership and place-based working, especially in closely connected areas like small towns serving rural areas.

Case study: pilot project's purpose and implementation

The town where the place-based working pilot was implemented was a hub town in a built-up area in a largely rural local authority (Bibby and Brindley, 2017) in northern England, situated between two city regions, away from the local authority's headquarters. The town had a predominantly seasonal, service-sector, agricultural and tourist based low wage economy with pockets of poverty and deprivation.

The study area was small and to prevent the possible identification of participants by their colleagues (Costley et al., 2010), the local authority and the market town's identity are withheld. Given the local authority was undergoing reorganisation and posts were at risk, anonymity was important for participants to openly discuss (Hastings and Gannon, 2021) the initiative.

The pilot project

The pilot project involved three main community-based work streams – Early Intervention, Estate Services and Community Intelligence. Reflecting the developmental stage of the project, these streams evolved and covered distinct and sometimes overlapping geographies. However, the Total Place model of service delivery underpinned what the council aimed to achieve.

Early Intervention, a voluntary participation scheme to support children and families who were initially identified by schools as being likely to benefit from additional support over the school holidays, started first. Holistic support was provided through a multi-agency voluntary common assessment framework, led by a professional allocated to the family to coordinate support and to provide a main point of contact. Early Intervention covered the school catchment areas of the town and surrounding rural areas and was aimed at families below the levels of statutory engagement to prevent their needs escalating, improve outcomes and save money.

Estate Services was a small, estate-based workstream in the town incorporating street cleaning, grass cutting and some local road maintenance and aimed to actively engage local residents to determine priorities, standards, and response times. It involved some workforce changes to incorporate generic working to avoid multiple trips to the area by staff and aimed to improve standards, as well as saving costs, through broad, area-based working.

Initially piloted in the town, Community Intelligence aimed to capture local, soft intelligence through a reporting-in-confidence scheme to the local authority to gain information that residents (or staff) may not have reported to the police yet had the potential to escalate and impact negatively on crime and wellbeing levels. Issues could be reported in confidence to a designated, specialist member of staff. Due to the location and intersecting connections that people often have in relatively small towns and rural areas, it sought to exploit the informal, community surveillance this provided.

Methodology

This study's methodology was influenced by realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), complex realism (Harvey, 2009) and complexity theory. Realist evaluation recognises the salience of contextual conditions, and realism and complexity theory recognise that people are situated in complex social structures which they interpret (affecting agency), aspects relevant to place-based working. The research strategy enabled detailed views of contextual conditions and place-based working to be explored. Place-based working recognises that areas and organisational contexts vary due to economic, industrial and socio-demographic characteristics (HM Treasury and Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010) and contextual conditions are intrinsic to realist evaluation's approach and to appreciating why and how, when and where interventions may work or not (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

Realist evaluation advocates the research design and methods most pertinent to the research questions (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Solitary case study research designs are not unusual (Yin, 2013) and involve an in-depth exploration, often with a qualitative research design (Bryman, 2012). The local authority for this study was predetermined due its pilot implementation of place-based working so avoided some of the considerations and difficulties associated with case study selection (Yin, 2018). Other local authorities have experienced austerity and place-based working, but the contextual conditions and experiences may differ to those experienced by the local authority in this study. Case study designs offer the potential to develop understanding that may be transferable in theoretical or conceptual ways to research and practice, offering 'analytical generalisation' but not generalisations or statistical inferences based on probabilities (Yin, 2018: 38). They offer the potential to add to the knowledge base of what works and why (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 147). This local authority, like other local authorities, was subject to austerity measures and the study offers the potential to provide insights to other organisations under financial constraints, an important feature of case study selection (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, should austerity end for local government and the public and voluntary sectors, funding is unlikely to be restored to pre-austerity levels. Enduring financial pressures will remain which are exacerbated by the social and economic fallout of Covid-19, current economic pressures, increased demand for services and the war in Ukraine, impacting locally, nationally and internationally.

Qualitative face-to-face interviews facilitated a thorough consideration of participants' views (Bryman, 2012) within the context of the locality and organisation. This provided an opportunity to obtain different views (Lewis, 2003) about the pilot

project. Views on partnership working and the place-based working pilot were elicited. Interviews were most likely to obtain frank responses from participants who had various roles with differing levels of seniority (Lewis, 2003), and where some were in precarious and vulnerable positions due to organisational restructure involving job losses (Robinson et al., 2013). Participants were people who were involved with the development, implementation or delivery of the pilot project. Rhodes (2018) advocates an ethnographic approach to understand policy from the perspectives of those staff directly involved. Rhodes states this is a 'decentred' approach that differs from an organisational perspective being sought. This study did not employ an ethnographic approach but seeking the perspectives of staff working on the project provided an opportunity to explore motives and explanations in detail from the bottom up.

Seventeen people were contacted for interview and fifteen face-to-face semi-structured qualitative interviews were completed between September 2012 to May 2013. Ten participants were identified purposively (Carter and Henderson, 2005) from a relatively small pool through the project board. Board members consenting to interview then identified others to approach (snowball sampling) (Carter and Henderson, 2005) and another five were recruited. This snowball sampling (Carter and Henderson, 2005) enabled other participants to be identified when project board meetings ended as the approach became operational in the pilot area. When no new findings were identified, interviews stopped (Ragin, 1994).

Ethics approval for the study and participant consent for interview were secured. An information sheet was issued, participants advised that involvement was voluntary, of their right to revoke consent and that results would be anonymised and their participation not disclosed. Recorded interviews ranged between twenty-eight and ninety-five minutes, a topic guide directed the discussion and there was flexibility for participants to identify wider issues (Taylor et al., 2016). Twelve interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and three consented to interview but not to recording and notes were made during these interviews (Denscombe, 1998). A line by line reading of the transcripts and notes occurred, themes were identified, data were coded into themes (Robson, 2011) using the software package Nvivo 10 and were then considered in terms of the Context, Mechanism and Outcome Configurations associated with realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Transcripts were reviewed in detail and key verbatim quotations noted, appreciative of the case study setting (Maxwell, 2012). Data presented relate to the implementation and delivery of the place-based working pilot.

Experiences of place-based working and implementation

This section presents the results under two main headings – austerity and place-based working and place, partnership working and implementation.

Austerity and place-based working

Study participants demonstrated they were aware of austerity and risks to services. Their accounts conveyed hope that place-based working could safeguard services and optimism that it may lead to service improvements:

> *...we spent a lot of time as a group of multi professionals multi agency teams looking at how we could make things better. And then, I think the idea ...got a lot of validity because other people were looking at a shrinking public sector, less money to do more... And...we've always looked in [Area], doing things differently. It just seemed a really good opportunity to not only how we deliver services to families*

could be made better and done differently but also how we operated across the County Council. (Participant 15)

Well, my concept of is, is to one, to make [local authority] but particular [town] a better place to live for the community...how can we make this better for the community? ...Secondly, how can we provide a better service to the community but at the same time reducing our costs? (Participant 3)

...doing nothing is absolutely not an option because doing nothing means we lose more and more posts so we deliver fewer and fewer services if we continue to do them in the way that we've been doing them...What we're trying to do is deliver services in a more cost effective manner by being more integrated. (Participant 6)

...if I can maintain the same service standard that we've got now but with less resource then that's a victory on my part... (Participant 10)

...we're in financial constraints it's just ridiculous ...over 1,000 people jobs lost in this organisation over the last few years so we've got to be smarter, work better and work together so that we're not duplicating the work... (Participant 1)

It also suggests that austerity arguably created a sense of tempered urgency. This perhaps changed some participants' perceptions regarding the nature of their jobs, roles and responsibilities, potentially exposing them to the risk of becoming '*shock absorbers* of austerity by internalising and dampening its damaging effects' (Hastings and Gannon, 2021: 14, italics in original).

Although senior level support for strategic policies like place-based working is key, implementation rests with frontline staff. Their engagement is critical as staff are more likely to implement policies they favour (Thomann et al., 2018):

...I do know that a Director saying make it happen is a long way from it actually happening. Fifteen layers down the food chain when those people are knocking on that person's front door. (Participant 6)

I probably feel better about the, the aims currently because I was involved in shaping them and you always feel better about something that you're engaged with. (Participant 8)

Austerity, however, meant collaborative working became more difficult (Hastings and Gannon, 2021). This is important because collaboration and shared responsibility ('alliancing') to develop 'whole systems' approaches have gained traction as a mechanism to potentially alleviate financial austerity and pandemic related pressures in the public sector to develop integrated services (Redgate et al, 2022: 49). Participants described willingness to engage with collaborative practices and the difficulties associated with this:

So this is really about instead of the [council] folks all working in silos they work better together...and if you followed it based on the Total Place philosophy it's not just about one organisation integrating its internal delivery mechanism, it's about organisations across the piece. (Participant 6)

...there are big financial challenges for the council. The council isn't doing some of this out of choice... it's shed hundreds of staff... (Participant 8)

...your inclination if there's a budget cut ...is to internalise and say right we've just got to protect and keep doing what we're doing, keep doing well the things that we know we need to do but that will...that will just keep perpetuating the problem ... and the challenge of the [Name] Project is yeah we've got to really go against that grain and try and externalise because that's the only way we're actually going to change the way we do things and make savings, but not only make savings but make it a better service to the beneficiaries out there. (Participant 5)

...all the organisations we approached expressed an interest from the police, from the health, from the social care side, internal stakeholders and external ones... the only difficulty was maintaining that engagement and that's the job in itself almost that we're constantly having to work with those different partners, keep them updated... draw them along, get their input. (Participant 11)

Place, partnership working and implementation

Although participants were supportive of the initiative, a number of issues were identified that may have affected its implementation. Unfavourable issues included staff changes and redundancies. More favourable ones included a relatively stable local workforce, perhaps due to limited, accessible alternative employment opportunities and some locally embedded and connected frontline staff:

...being in the job quite a few years now, you get to know professionals very well. (Participant 14)

[Some staff] ... are related to them [service users], are married to them, have been out with them in the past... (Participant 15)

There was also a perception of the area as separate with a discrete identity, and limited opportunity, due to its location:

...there was a town wide sense of we're being left out here... (Participant 5)

...they complain about being isolated but they don't like their independence being threatened either... (Participant 11)

There's an element of the social isolation because you know, if your, you haven't got a car... there's no university...there's a limited amount of FE [further education] ... there's no higher education. If you want to go to Uni, you have to move...if you want to go to college and you live in [Area], you've got to be prepared to get up early, get on the bus. (Participant 15)

Local connections, and their influence on engagement, were identified by some participants in this study:

...when you're doing something for the benefit of the area you're as much doing it for yourself... (Participant 8)

...being a local person...I suppose it's a long way for the people in [Headquarters] to come...and...there's key players in [town] who are frontline staff who will, if we need something done, will not wait for...Council...we'll get on and do it... There's always been key people that you can always rely on that if there's something that

needs done we'll pull together and put the extra work in to get it done… (Participant 9)

A thread running through the pilot initiative was a distinct sense of place where the policy was being implemented and that the connections in the local community were seen as a potential aid to the initiative's aims and implementation:

The ability to work in a small community with families and be able to follow those families and understand the wider family context as well is a big opportunity…because of that closeness of the community. (Participant 11)

… in a small community, you know, everybody knows everybody else…. (Participant 1)

Moreover, some of the operational staff (street-level bureaucrats) saw their embeddedness as an asset to place-based working and expressed disappointment that the opportunity to influence strategic decisions of the project board were limited:

…it would have been nice …personally to have been involved in some of it …because I think the people who're working in the area have all the knowledge of the people, and of the services …that … would have been useful. (Participant 14)

I wasn't part of the meetings and I think I should have been…the demands that they made, they kind of need to get into the real world…they just had no concept really of actually the work…. (Participant 9)

Implementing the initiative during austerity occurred alongside re-organisation and losing experienced staff to redundancy, often at short notice, suggesting a stressful environment to work in. Before austerity, in 2009, the local authority had experienced the shift from a two-tier authority (comprised of a County Council for the whole area, responsible for the majority of services with District Councils at the second tier, responsible for local services covering smaller areas) to a single tier (unitary) County Council. Creation of the unitary authority resulted in the removal of the second tier of District Councils. One member of staff, newly assigned to the area following local government reorganisation, remarked they experienced a more pleasant working environment following the acrimonious restructures, a legacy that preceded the place-based working's pilot implementation:

…I found actually once I'd got down outside the barriers of districts and county and was working with colleagues I found actually a positive momentum on the ground…because actually the work up to LGR [Local Government Reorganisation] was very unpleasant. A lot of backbiting, a lot of sniping and a lot of people felt very isolated and ignored particularly in the districts. (Participant 8)

Local government reorganisation meant that elected representatives (district councillors) who live in the areas they represent, became part of a larger group with consequent loss of influence and command (and perhaps an associated reduction in democratic accountability and an increased feeling of detachment from the administrative centre) within the new unitary authority:

…the ambitions that had been there originally about reinventing the whole way that services were delivered in [town], not just Neighbourhood Services but all services and moving into people based services had been lost, I think largely because of

> *staff savings, reductions, budget reductions that a lot of people or key people in that project had left… you've maybe got [number] councillors covering [Area] … who are very small voices because they're part of [Number] members covering the delivery of services across really wide areas… so even if they had maybe when it was a small [district] council had a feeling that they could influence them they certainly wouldn't have felt that whilst we were looking at new ways of delivering services… (Participant 11)*

This study focused on people involved with designing and implementing the pilot initiative instead of focusing on place-leaders and senior strategic staffs' role, adding a different and valuable perspective. Being away from the local authority's headquarters may have affected how participants viewed their role in implementation. Insights, perhaps from staff using their agency, as indicated earlier, to 'get on and do it' (Participant 9) at an operational level if not at a strategic one, were rooted in feelings of connection to the place:

> *…there is a [Headquarters] culture … and I don't think that [Headquarters] culture has been broken … by LGR [Local Government Reorganisation]…you're either in [Headquarters] in which case you're seen at the corporate centre in which case you're seen as being a player in the organisation or you're out in the areas in which case you feel like you're in second class accommodation and marginalised from all the decision making processes and influencing and changing things. (Participant 8)*

Another participant cautioned that the distance from the council's headquarters could, however, be detrimental in terms of work productivity and accountability:

> *…it's about changing mindsets and attitudes to people within, people who work for the council in [town]. The attitude seems to be, I work for the council, I can do what I want…And I think that the further that you get away from the centre and the further away from management, then people seem to think that they can get away with doing less and less work…I'm not saying everybody's like that but certain people. (Participant 3)*

Discussion

Reviewing policy adoption and implementation at a micro level involves accounting for the different roles of individuals in their capacity as residents, staff delivering services or councillors (Bochel, 2012). People may fulfil multiple, relational, overlapping roles as residents, staff and councillors which may be more likely in smaller areas and market towns. Often, participants in this study highlighted the need to make resources stretch, improve services and of the need to meet services users' needs. This study suggests that for some frontline staff, especially those who live and work in the areas where austerity is impacting most, there is potentially a greater risk of being detrimentally affected by austerity's effects as they witness the impacts of austerity on people, and in the communities where they live, as a direct consequence of the austerity policies that they are implementing. This is central government 'offloading' and 'displacing responsibility' identified by Peck (2012: 632), that filters down to local government and their teams, manifesting in some staff as the shock absorption recognised by Hastings and Gannon (2021).

Combining resources, capability, capacity and knowledge creates conditions to enhance services to benefit those using them, relying on relationships, structures and

power relations between people and organisations (Strokosch and Osborne, 2020). Historic reasons relating to the legacy of district or borough (two tier) council governance and the shift to a single tier County Council structure may also affect place-effects and place-based working. Connections between staff and residents in small towns may be an additional dynamic that could bolster (or impede) the development of citizen based, co-produced approaches. However, practices based on resident involvement and co-production do not guarantee a beneficial re-shaping of power relations between officials and service-users (Farr, 2018). Nor does involvement of the community (as staff and/or residents) in developing and implementing services necessarily improve them (Alcock, 2016). Street-level bureaucrats may have different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, life experiences, live in different areas and have few connections with the people they serve (Camillo, 2017), yet in small towns and those serving rural areas this may differ.

Questions this study raises relate to the social frameworks (Raaphorst and Loyens, 2020) that street-level bureaucrats operate in and whether there are any differences, and implications for, place-based working and place effects. It raises the consideration that street-level bureaucrats' engagement with, and attitudes towards place-based working and their agency, may be influenced by place-based connections. This study suggests that some street-level bureaucrats may be less remote from the interface of policy implementation, delivery and its effects. Hence, the dynamics of discretion may operate at different, relational levels that permeate traditional, professional boundaries that may be more difficult to maintain in more closely connected towns or rural areas and where any effects are experienced at professional, personal and neighbourhood levels.

Collective working may represent an example of 'agent-centred' power (Wright, 2012: 12), and deliver positive changes for the public good and where frontline staff's agency helps to achieve this. Some participants in this study spoke of maintaining services and improvement and of putting 'the extra work in' (Participant 9), suggestive of being for the public good. However, Hastings and Gannon's (2021) research identified that frontline workers' motivations for accepting workload expansion during austerity could be to avoid redundancy, not for philanthropic reasons. A cautionary perspective has also highlighted that policy changes may result in professional and personal advancement for individuals through enhanced pay, power and profile (Newman, 2014) and improved social status rather than for the public good (Haynes, 2015). Moreover, street-level bureaucrats' discretion is intrinsic to policy implementation and can have welcome effects, but unwelcome effects such as discriminatory and unfair practices and failures of policy implementation could result (Thomann et al., 2018). Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012) suggest that the rationale behind decisions is more important than considering bureaucrats' discretion because agency drives decision-making and needs consideration, especially regarding poor decisions so that learning occurs to avoid repeating mistakes, negative practices, discrimination and poor policy outcomes. In smaller market towns and rural communities, professional and personal connections may be more likely to overlap. Philanthropic or personal motivations may become more difficult to disentangle and place-based connections may become an additional facet of place-based working that could enhance, or inhibit, implementation and outcomes.

Place-based working relies on collaborations within local government, between the third sector and external organisations and these networks may be more embedded in relatively small towns with a fairly stable workforce and where people are more likely to live and work in the same area. The context of place-based connections may affect policy implementation and the agency (discretion) of street-level bureaucrats may correspond or conflict with organisational objectives and values. In this study, the town's remote location, being away from the local authority's headquarters, may also have some

bearing. The prominence of place and local connections emerged as a theme during the data analysis and residency or length of service in the area were not systematically collected from the participants. Any further research on place-based working and place-based connections should consider more clearly defining, and collecting, data on the nature and extent of these connections and depth of feelings and if and how policy engagement, implementation and outcomes are affected. Place-based working is not just defined and directed by those in leadership roles. Alliances are not confined to staff at senior levels and informal and formal networks and relationships exist amongst frontline staff. These may exist and occur naturally by virtue of living, working and socialising in the same locale and networks, transcending organisational boundaries and work affiliations. Alliances aid commissioning and are based on shared aims to develop integrated, place-based services (Redgate et al., 2022). As a study participant remarked, those designing and directing the services are not the ones implementing them. Investigating the implementation of place-based services and exploring any place effects in the allegiances that are formed from the perspectives of those on the frontline and comparing perspectives between urban and rural geographies may be instructive and be worth further investigation.

Brodkin (2011: 269) recognised that 'Policy work is not just about paper pushing: it is also people work' and asserts 'how' policy work is done matters. *Where* policy is done and extending considerations beyond leadership, away from institutions towards the personal, embedded connections of people and the relational dynamics existing at the interface between people, place and policy implementation may also warrant further consideration.

Conclusion

This small-scale qualitative case study involved in-depth interviews with fifteen participants in a discrete area to explore place-based working's aims and implementation. The study captures a partial view from those closely connected with the initiative as staff and stakeholders in strategic and operational roles were considered best placed to answer the research questions.

This article considered place-based and partnership working during austerity. Findings suggested participants recognised the impacts of austerity and drivers to implement place-based working. Place–based working relies on collaboration and partnership working which were acknowledged as being more difficult to achieve during austerity. Place-based connections emerged as an important theme and findings suggest that place and place-based connections may be an important dynamic affecting policy implementation and service delivery as staff are invested in the implementation and outcomes in different ways. This topic may benefit from further research exploring the place-based connections of staff, providing scope to study any people, place and policy dynamics that operate in towns in detail. This, perhaps, is especially important in rural and coastal towns where people may be more likely to live and work in the same area.

Acknowledgements

*Correspondence address: Mel Steer, Northumbria University, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Department of Nursing, Midwifery and Health, Coach Lane Campus, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE7 7XA. Email: m.steer@northumbria.ac.uk

References

Alcock, P. (2016) *Why we need welfare: Collective action for the common good*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Bambra, C., Riordan, R., Ford, J. and Matthews, F. (2020) The COVID-19 pandemic and health inequalities. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 74, 11, 964–968.

Beatty, C. and Fothergill, S. (2013) *Hitting the poorest places hardest: The local and regional impact of welfare reform.* Sheffield, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research: Sheffield Hallam University. Available at: https://shura.shu.ac.uk/15884/1/hitting-poorest-places-hardest.pdf [Accessed: 02/10/20].

Bibby, P. and Brindley, P. (2017) *2011 Rural-Urban classification of Local Authority Districts and similar geographic units in England: A User Guide: ONS.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/591465/RUCLAD2011_User_Guide__January_2017_.pdf [Accessed: 02/10/20].

Black, N., Scott, K. and Shucksmith, M. (2019) Social inequalities in rural England: Impacts on young people post-2008. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, 264-275.

Bochel, H. (2012) The Policy Process. In: Alcock, P., May, M. and Wright, S. (eds) *The Student's Companion to Social Policy 4th edn*. Oxford: Wiley-Black.

Brodkin, E.Z. (2011) Policy work: Street-level organizations under new managerialism. *Journal of Public Administration*, *Research and Theory*. 21, 2, 253-277.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social research methods 4th edn*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Butler, P. (2018) East Sussex council set to cut services to bare legal minimum: Tory-run authority reveals plan to avoid following Northamptonshire into bankruptcy. *The Guardian*, [online] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/aug/03/local-council-funding-crisis-east-sussex-cuts-services [Accessed: 23/09/20].

Butler, P. and Barr, C. (2020) English councils poised to make cuts amid loss of commercial income. *The Guardian*, [online] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jul/13/english-councils-poised-cuts-services-job-losses-loss-commercial-income [Accessed: 01/11/20].

Camillo, C.A. (2017) Street-level bureaucracy. In: Farazmand, A. (ed) Global encyclopedia of public administration, public policy, and governance. Springer, Cham. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_654-1 [Accessed: 12/10/20]

Carter, S. and Henderson, L. (2005) Approaches to qualitative data collection in social science. In: Bowling, A. and Ebrahim, S. (eds*) Handbook of health research methods investigation, measurement and analysis.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Comptroller and Auditor General (2013) *Case study on integration: measuring the costs and benefits of Whole-Place Community Budgets.* HC 1040 2012-13, 13 March 2013. The Stationery Office.

Comptroller and Auditor General (2018) *Financial sustainability of local authorities 2018*, *HC834, Session 2017-2019, 8 March 2018*. London: National Audit Office.

Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Financial-sustainabilty-of-local-authorites-2018.pdf [Accessed: 23/09/20].

Costley, C., Elliott, G. and Gibbs, P. (2010) *Doing work based research: approaches to enquiry for insider-researchers*. London: Sage.

Denscombe, M. (1998) *The good research guide for small scale research projects*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Department of Health and Social Care (2021) *Chief Medical Officer's annual report 2021: Health in coastal communities*. London: Department of Health and Social Care. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-medical-officers-annual-report-2021-health-in-coastal-communities [Accessed: 10/08/21].

Farr, M. (2018) Power dynamics and collaborative mechanisms in co-production and co-design processes. *Critical Social Policy*, 38, 4, 623-44.

Gardner, A. (2017) Big change, little change? Punctuation, increments and multi-layer institutional change for English local authorities under austerity. *Local Government Studies*, 43, 2, 150-69.

Harvey, D. L. (2009) Complexity and case. In: Byrne, D and Ragin, C. (eds), *The Sage handbook of case-based Methods*. London: Sage: pp.15-38.

Hastings, A., Bailey, N., Bramley, G., Gannon, M. and Watkins, D. (2015a) *The cost of the cuts: the impact on local government and poorer communities*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. [online] Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/cost-cuts-impact-local-government-and-poorer-communities [Accessed: 23/09/20].

Hastings, A., Bailey, N., Gannon, M., Besemer, K. and Bramley, G. (2015b) Coping with the cuts? The management of the worst financial settlement in living memory. *Local Government Studies*, 41, 4, 601-21.

Hastings, A. and Gannon, M. (2021) Absorbing the shock of austerity: the experience of local government workers at the front line. *Local Government Studies*.48, 5, 887-906.

Haynes, P. (2015) *Managing complexity in the public services 2nd edn.* London: Routledge.

HM Treasury and Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) (2010) *Total Place: A whole area approach to public services.* London: DCLG.

Horlings, L., Roep, D. and Wellbrock, W. (2018) The role of leadership in place-based development and building institutional arrangements. *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit.* 33, 3, 245-268.

Hupe, P. and Buffat, A. (2014) A public service gap: capturing contexts in a comparative approach of street-level bureaucracy. *Public Management Review*, 16, 4, 548-569.

John, P. (2014) The great survivor: the persistence and resilience of English local government. *Local Government Studies*, 40, 5, 687-704.

Lewis, J. (2003) Design Issues. In: Ritchie, J. and Lewis, J. (eds) *Qualitative research practice: a guide for Social Science students and researchers*. London: Sage.

Lipsky, M. (1969) Toward a theory of street-level bureaucracy. Institute for Research on poverty. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the *American Political Science Association*, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI. Available at: https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp4869.pdf [Accessed: 28/10/20].

Lowndes, V. and Gardner, A. (2016) Local governance under the Conservatives: super-austerity, devolution and the smarter state. *Local Government Studies*, 42, 3, 357-75.

Lowndes, V. and McCaughie, K. (2013) Weathering the perfect storm? Austerity and institutional resilience in local government. *Policy and Politics*, 41, 4, 533-549.

MacLennan, D. and McCauley, H. (2018) *New powers, new deals: remaking British towns after Brexit*. Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust. Available at: https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2018/09/27135823/LOW-RES-3478-CUKT-Brexit-and-Towns-Report.pdf [Accessed: 06/11/20].

Maxwell, J. A. (2012) *A realist approach for qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Maynard-Moody, S. and Musheno, M. (2012) Social equities and inequities in practice: street-level workers as agents and pragmatists. *Public Administration Review,* 72, 1, S16-S23.

Munro, F. (2015) *Place-based working*. Glasgow: The Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services. Available at: https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/irisson/place-based-working [Accessed: 23/09/20].

Newman, I. (2014) *Reclaiming local democracy.* Bristol: Policy Press. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/10088-002_Whole-Place-Community-Budgets.pdf [Accessed: 25/10/20].

Office for National Statistics (2019) *Understanding towns in England and Wales: an introduction*. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/understandingtownsinenglandandwales/anintroduction [Accessed: 06/11/20].

Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic evaluation*. London: Sage.

Peck, J. (2012) Austerity urbanism: American cities under extreme economy. *City*, 16, 6, 626-55.

Pennycook, L. (2020) *Talk of the town: supporting place-based storytelling*. Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust. Available at: https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2020/05/28145738/Talk-of-the-Town-Final-Report.pdf [Accessed: 06/11/20].

Proctor, K. (2020) Covid-19 crisis means England's local authorities could go bust warn mayors: Councils say they need financial help now from government to avoid devastating hardship. *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/11/covid-19-crisis-means-englands-local-authorities-could-go-bust-warn-mayors [Accessed: 23/09/20].

Public Health England (2019) *Place-based approaches for reducing health inequalities: Foreword and executive summary*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-inequalities-place-based-approaches-to-reduce-inequalities/place-based-approaches-for-reducing-health-inequalities-foreword-and-executive-summary [Accessed: 20/09/20].

Raaphorst, N. and Loyens, K. (2020) From poker games to kitchen tables: how social dynamics affect frontline decision making. *Administration and Society*, 52, 1, 31-56.

Ragin, C. C. (1994) *Constructing social research: The unity and diversity of method.* California: Pine Forge Press.

Redgate, S., Spencer, L., Adams, E.A., Arnott, B., Brown, H., Christie, A., Hardy, C., Harrison, H., Kaner, E., Mawson, C., McGovern, W., Phillips, P., Rankin, J. and McGovern, R. (2022) A realist approach to understanding alliancing within local government public health and social care service provision. *European Journal of Public Health*, 33, 1, 49-55.

Rhodes, R. A. W. (2018) What is decentred analysis? In: R. A. W. Rhodes (ed), *Narrative policy analysis: Cases in decentred policy.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Robinson, G., Priede, C., Farrall, S., Shapland, J. and McNeill, F. (2013) Doing 'strengths-based' research: appreciative Inquiry in a probation setting. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 13, 1, 3-20.

Robson, C. (2011) *Real world research 3rd edn*. Chichester: Wiley.

Sabbe, M., Moyson, S. and Schiffino, N. (2021) Citizen-agency versus state-agency at the frontline in prisons and probation services: a systematic literature review. *Social Policy Administration,* 55, 1, 206-225.

Spicker, P. (2020) *Social policy in the UK, an introduction to social policy*. Available at: http://spicker.uk/social-policy/uk.htm [Accessed: 20/09/20].

Strokosch, K. and Osborne, S. P. (2020) Co-experience, co-production and co-governance: an ecosystem approach to the analysis of value creation. *Policy and Politics*, 48, 3, 425-42.

Sullivan, H., Barnes, M. and Matka, E. (2006) Collaborative capacity and strategies in area-based initiatives. *Public Administration,* 84, 2, 289-310.

Taylor, S., Bogdan, R. and Devault, M.L. (2016) *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource 4th edn*. New York: Wiley and Sons.

Taylor-Collins, E. and Downe, J. (2022) The local government response to austerity in a small devolved country: the case of Wales. *Local Government Studies*, 45, 5, 929-950.

Thomann, E., van Engen, N. and Tummers, L. (2018) The necessity of discretion: A behavioural evaluation of bottom-up implementation theory. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory,* 28, 4, 583-601.

Wright, E. O. (2012) Transforming capitalism through real utopias. *American Sociological Review*, 78, 1, 1-25.

Yin, R. K. (2013) Validity and generalization in future case study evaluations. *Evaluation*, 19, 3, 321-32.

Yin, R. K. (2018) *Case study research and applications: designs and methods 6th edn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage