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'Rising demand and decreasing resources': Theorising the 'cost of austerity' as a barrier to social worker discretion

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Abstract

The Munro Review of Child Protection asserted that the English child protection system had become overly 'defensive', 'bureaucratised' and 'standardised', meaning that social workers were not employing their discretion in the interests of the individual child. This paper reports on the results of an ethnographic case study of one of England's statutory child protection teams. The research sought to explore the extent of social worker discretion relative to Munro's call for 'radical reform' and a move towards a more 'child-centred' system. Employing an iterative mixed methods design – encompassing documentary analysis, observation, focus group, questionnaire, interview and 'Critical Realist Grounded Theory' – the study positioned the UK Government's prolonged policy of 'austerity' as a barrier to social worker discretion. This was because the policy was seen to be contributing to an increased demand for child protection services; and a related sense amongst practitioners that they were afforded insufficient time with the child to garner the requisite knowledge, necessary for discretionary behaviour. Ultimately, despite evidence of progress relative to assertions that social worker discretion had been eroded, the paper concludes that there may still be 'more to do' if we are to achieve the 'child-centred' and 'effective' system that Munro advocated.

Keywords: austerity; child protection; discretion; discretionary space; Munro Review; social work

1. Introduction: Austerity as a concept

Whilst 'austerity' remains a 'slippery' concept that is 'hard to define' (Mort, 2017: 312), The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) considered it:

> [an] economic and social policy . . . result[ing] in reduced public and welfare spending, lower taxes, a smaller state . . . (Mort, 2017: 1).

Similar definitions position 'austerity' as an economic theory (or a 'flawed economic theory' according to the International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2016: 1) leading to the notion that economic difficulties justify a reduction in the citizen's standard of living (Blyth, 2013). However, in respect to the

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UK, Jones (2018a; 2018b) argued that austerity is better conceived as a politically chosen strategy fostered by the Conservative Party, and underpinned by their desire to create a smaller welfare state. Indeed, Devaney (2019) asserts that in the context of the UK:

> The term austerity . . . needs to be understood as an ideology, representing the roll back of the state, under the premise that the country can no longer afford to do the things it previously did (p. 464).

This point is supported by the UN Special Rapporteur (UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 2019), who, following an eleven-day investigatory visit to the UK, observed:

> The bottom line is that . . . [despite] a booming economy, high employment and a budget surplus [the UK Government] have not reversed austerity, a policy pursued more as an ideological than an economic agenda (p. 1).

This adds weight to Jones' (2018a; 2018b) assertion that austerity in the UK is not the 'necessary' and 'inevitable' step to 'economic recovery' (Osborne, 2009: 1) that the Conservatives have consistently purported it to be (see Osborne, 2010). Yet until the 'financial stimulus' offered in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, England as a country had, for nearly ten years, been trying to reconcile increasing demand for public services with the decimation of funding for these services (Jones, 2018a; 2018b; Webb and Bywaters, 2018; Devaney, 2019).

For example, Webb and Bywaters (2018) chronicled the level of reduction made to England's statutory children's services expenditure between 2010 (with the emergence of 'austerity' as a national policy) and 2015, despite concurrent increases in demand for their services (i.e. surging referrals rates; child protection plans; and children in care of the local authority). Specifically, the authors outlined that areas of provision such as family support, early years centres and youth justice had been particularly impacted – identifying an average reduction in spending of 38.3% over the five-year period. This was aligned to the £2.5billion cut in local authority funding announced soon after the Coalition Government came to power, and contrasts with assertions made by the Department for Education (DfE) (2016b) that local authorities responded to pressures on services by prioritising prevention.

Defining 'Discretion'

Like 'austerity', 'discretion' can be hard to define in that it can take different forms and can mean different things, in different contexts (Evans, 2010). This can help to elucidate why, within the social work literature, there is a general tendency not to define discretion as a concept, despite it often being *the* central topic for discussion and analysis (e.g. Lipsky, 2010; Baldwin, 2000; Munro, 2004; 2005; 2009).

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Helpfully, Anders Molander (2016) draws from Hobbes' idea of discretion as a civil liberty, to introduce the notion that discretion, in one sense, can involve the possession of a 'negative liberty'. That is: an 'area for choice and action consisting of those options that are neither forbidden nor prescribed' (p. 9). It affords the bearer a freedom to decide and act without interference by other persons, including external restraint (Molander, 2016).

Developing this idea further, Molander (2016) distinguishes between 'discretionary space' and 'discretionary reasoning' (p. 4), or, to use Robert Alexy's (2002: 393) terms, discretion in a 'structural sense' and discretion in an 'epistemic sense'. 'Structurally', discretion is the space for decision-making and action-taking on the basis of discretionary judgments (Molander, 2016: 10). In 'epistemic' terms, 'discretion' is a form of reasoning that results in judgments about the properties of various kinds of objects under conditions of indeterminacy (p. 10).

Taking this analysis further still, Hupe et al. (2015: 17) positioned discretion as a multi-dimensional concept and distinguished between structural discretion 'as granted' and 'as used'. The former was defined as the 'degree of freedom as prescriptively granted' by someone with the power to do so (p.17). However, discretion 'as used' was identified as the degree to which discretion 'as granted' – or, indeed, as acquired – is employed by the 'actor'.

Moreover, Ellis et al. (1999: 264) considered that 'discretion involve[s] both power and choice', or as Young (cited in Ellis et al., 1999) affirmed 'the power to make choices between different courses of action or inaction'. The implication is the sense of agency available to the practitioner and that, upon encountering a discretionary space, the individual is able to choose whether to employ their discretion (Lipsky, 2010; Evans, 2016).

Discretion within English Child Protection

It is notable that the existing social work literature has largely focused on 'discretion' in the context of statutory adult service provision (e.g. Baldwin, 2000; Evans, 2010; 2016; Ellis, 2011; 2014). In terms of statutory children's services, authors have historically sought to explore social worker discretion in the context of existing social policy initiatives. For example, several papers have considered the discretionary space available to social workers within the Integrated Children's System (ICS) – a 'national specification' against which software suppliers developed 'compliant' computer software implementations (White et al., 2010: 408). The aspirations of the ICS can be aligned to at least seven distinct policy aims (Shaw and Clayden, 2009) generally associated with efforts to managerialise children's statutory social work (Wastell et al., 2010). These included: to increase accountability and transparency; to deliver better management of services; and to standardise the practice of those undertaking statutory social work tasks with children (Shaw et al., 2009; Pithouse et al., 2011).

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A series of papers highlighted continued evidence of discretionary space observed within a series of 'informal processes' (Broadhurst et al., 2010: 3); 'expedient manoeuvres' and 'workarounds' (Pithouse et al., 2011: 173) designed to resolve the tensions which emerged from the restriction imposed by the ICS. However, the authors also critiqued what they considered was the reduction in the 'scope' for 'intelligent discretion' when using the ICS (White et al., 2010: 412); citing:

> examples where the pressure to obey the all-powerful machine is compromising the ability of professionals to practice as they think best (Wastell et al., 2010: 316).

Expanding the focus of discussion, Munro (2004; 2005; 2009) analysed how statutory children's social work in England had adapted to the increasing influence of neoliberalism and managerialism since the late 1970s. She criticised increasing 'mechanisms of control' (Munro, 2009: 1020), epitomised by the ICS – but observed more generally in the form of targeted prescription and audit, performance indicators, and standards of performance. These, Munro (2005: 39) argued, had led to the 'erosion' of social worker structural discretion.

Similar themes propagate into Munro's (2010; 2011a; 2011b) formal review of the English child protection system, where she categorised the restriction of discretionary space, and the social workers propensity to reject discretion, as being symptomatic of a general 'defensive' practice mentality within English child protection (Munro, 2011b: 20). Furthermore, she asserted that the needs of the organization (i.e. to appear compliant with national prescription and achieve a favourable inspection report) had become a greater focus than those of the children that the system purported to protect – limiting innovation and flexibility, and increasing the risk that tragedies would occur (Munro, 2011a; 2011b).

In this context Munro (2011b) called for 'radical reform' (p. 13) so as to transform the system from one that was 'defensive' (p. 20), 'over-standardised' (p. 38) and 'over-bureaucratised' (Munro, 2010: 18), to one that was more focussed on meeting the needs of individual children. At the centre of her image for a more 'child-centred' (Munro, 2011b: 1) and 'effective' (p. 23) system was that social workers would be better able and motivated to employ their discretion in the best interests of the individual child.

It is noteworthy that despite the call for 'regular reviews of progress' (Munro, 2011b: 22) relative to realising Munro's image of a 'child-centred' system, there has been a notable absence of any subsequent enquiry seeking to explore the extent of social worker discretion within contemporary English child protection – including in the context of current social policy initiatives.

It is in this context that this paper reports on the findings of an ethnographic case study of one of England's statutory child protection teams, which

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identified the pervasive impact of a national policy of 'austerity' as a continued barrier to social worker discretion.

2. Methods

This study adopted an investigative framework aligned to critical realist ethnography. Specifically, it aimed to identify the general 'tendencies' (Houston, 2001: 851) in respect to the social workers' discretionary space and choice, but also the barriers to social worker discretion underpinned by social structures and mechanisms (Bhaskar, 2014). Identifying and challenging these structures provides critical realist enquiry with an 'emancipatory' focus (Bhaskar, 1998: 17), which in turn compliments both the 'systems approach' advocated within the Munro Review (2010: 1) and social work values more broadly (Houston, 2001).

The setting for the ethnography was a North of England statutory Child Protection Team (CPT), located within a local authority Children's Services Department (CSD). Situated within mainly rural terrain, the local authority served a population of approximately 200,000 (where roughly 50,000 were children) dispersed across several small towns.

The sampling approach assumed a mixture of 'purposive' and 'criterion' techniques: 'Purposive' in that the focus was on the CPT, specifically because the remit of the team – the implementation of child protection statutory guidance and legislation – made it the most pertinent focus for achieving the research aims. 'Criterion', in that the sample consisted of only those practitioners who had been employed on the CPT as either a social worker or team manager for a period of at least 6 months – the rationale being that a different role, or less experience, could restrict a prospective participant's ability to comment on the issues that were the focus of the study.

Every member of staff who met these criteria were invited to participate within the study and, in total, 25 different CPT staff – comprising of 21 social workers and 4 team managers – participated in the focus groups (10 participants); questionnaire (18 participants) and interviews (8 participants). Such was their limited time availability that the team managers only participated within the focus groups. However, 6 of the 21 social workers participated in two stages (e.g. the focus group and questionnaire), but none in three stages.

The participants' age ranged from 24-47 years old; all had a first language of 'English'; all bar one classified themselves as 'White British'; and 23 identified as 'female'; whereas 2 identified as 'male'.

The data collection followed an 'iterative' (Greene, 2007: 126) mixed methods design. Separated into three distinct parts, it aimed to achieve the distinct retroductive processes characteristic of critical realist enquiry (see Rees and Gatenby, 2014). The first stage comprised focus groups seeking to develop

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definitions of 'discretion' and 'discretionary space' (see Murphy, 2021) that would be embedded within the following stages of enquiry. Further, the focus groups aimed to identify the themes that would inform and become the focus of the second and third stages. The second stage comprised a questionnaire, which sought to build on and compare the themes derived from the focus groups. The final stage constituted interviews with social workers. It aimed to explore the main themes pertaining to discretionary space and choice more comprehensively and to better identify those 'causal' mechanisms and processes underpinning these phenomenon (Houston, 2001; Bhaskar, 1998).

The importance of the focus groups, questionnaire and interviews was that they allowed the author to venture into areas that can remain otherwise 'unseen' in traditional models of ethnography, where the emphasis is on observation and documentary analysis (Bryman, 2012: 494). That being said, both the latter two components, whilst distinct from the iterative element of the design, were an integral part of the research methodology – offering a layer of context and pertinent examples, to consider against the data emerging from the other sources (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This was important in the context of achieving retroductive analysis (i.e. 'reasoning about why things happen' including why data appears as it does – Olson, 2007: 1), and ultimately, the explanatory element of this study (Bhaskar, 1998).

In total, the author drew from 85 field notes and 118 documents during the data analysis. The latter comprised a mixture of contextual (e.g. policies and emails) and quantitative data (e.g. statistics on local indicators of 'need'); as well as that which was available within (e.g. press releases), and outside of, the public domain (e.g. data on intradepartmental spending).

The model of data analysis employed was aligned to Kempster and Parry's (2014) notion of 'Critical Realist Grounded Theory'. This resembled the 'constructivist' variant endorsed by Kathy Charmaz (2014), in that it holds that issues such as language, meaning and context are central to Grounded Theory Method (GTM), and that 'discovery' is an interactive process between researcher and participant.

Whilst the model maintains features of traditional GTM – including coding, theoretical sampling, and an iterative design – it is distinguished by its focus on retroductive (as opposed to inductive) processes (Kempster and Parry, 2014). In this way, it places an emphasis on generalisation and contextualisation, and thus provides a richer grounded theory, addressing the limitation of traditional models, which is the inability to enable future readers and researchers to apply and test generative mechanisms in their own social environments (Kempster and Parry, 2014). This latter point was considered particularly important in the context of 'reviewing' the 'progress' towards Munro's image of a 'child-centred' system.

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The research received ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University's Academic Ethics Committee in November 2014, and data collection took place over an 18-month period culminating in the summer of 2016.

3. Results: Evidence of Increasing Demand

A recurring theme in the social workers' accounts was that an unwillingness to employ discretion within the discretionary space could be cultivated by an inadequate or unsatisfactory knowledge of the child and/or their circumstances (Murphy, 2021). They identified the inability to spend satisfactory time with children as a major obstacle to obtaining this knowledge, reporting that the practice environment was one which frequently prohibited them from spending time with the child:

> For the majority of the working day, I'm sitting at my desk, dealing with paperwork . . . considering that I'm a child protection social worker, I don't spend much time visiting children (Social Worker 9, Questionnaire).

Indeed, the social workers in this study estimated that they spent less than 15% of their working week with children (which is less than general estimates of 20-25% provided elsewhere – e.g. Baginsky et al., 2010; White et al., 2010; Holmes and McDermid, 2013). The social workers identified two contributing factors to this. The first was an organisational emphasis on completing paperwork and of evidencing compliance with local processes and timescales in preparation for external inspection. The second, which is the focus of this paper, was that, over a period of time, an increasing demand had been placed on the CPT, meaning that individual social workers were working with increasingly higher numbers of children.

The social workers considered that the size of their allocated caseload (i.e. how many cases were assigned to them) served as an indicator of the 'demand' being placed on them as practitioners. Indeed, there was a general sentiment that, 'in recent times', caseloads had become 'too high', leaving the social workers with a sense of being 'overstretched' or else 'spread too thinly':

> The biggest problem I think is the size of caseloads on this team . . . they have been rising steadily for years . . . we are now spread so thinly that, outside of the minimum statutory tasks, we just don't have enough time to spend with children (Social Worker 1, Focus Group).

The Department for Education (DfE) (2017) estimated that, in England in 2016, the average statutory children's social worker caseload was 16 cases. In providing this estimate, the DfE failed to define what a 'case' constituted (e.g. a single child as opposed to a group of children belonging to the same family).

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However, the figure nevertheless contrasts with the average number of cases (defined as the number of children) held by the social workers of the CPT during this time[1]. Indeed, the data showed that whilst in May 2010 the average number of cases allocated to a CPT social worker was 22, by June 2016 (the point of ceasing data collection) the figure had risen to 34 – despite a 30% increase in the number of social workers employed on the CPT during the same time period. (Figures obtained from the CSD Finance Team showed that the CSD increased its spending on 'social work' – including child protection – by 567% from 2008-2009 [£0.96m] to 2015-2016 [£4.5m] whilst making substantial savings elsewhere – see below.)

Of course, there is a debate to be had about whether 34 cases is too much for a single social worker to effectively manage (it is noteworthy that the 2009 'Laming Review', commissioned after the death of Peter Connelly, recommended that those working in child protection should have no more than 13 cases allocated to them), but this is not the focus here. Instead, it is to illustrate the level of work that the CPT social workers were undertaking during the course of this research, and, further, to highlight the increase in the number of families requiring a service from them, over a relatively short period of time.

Indeed, supporting the social workers' assertion that the demand for their services had been increasing, the data highlighted that, despite only a nominal rise in the local child population between 2010 and 2016, the CPT had encountered:

- a 34% increase in child protection referrals;
- a 47% increase in the number of local children categorised as 'in need';
- a 67% increase in children subject to a child protection plan; and
- a 41% increase in the number of childcare proceedings.

Whilst similar trends have been reported nationally (e.g. Hood et al., 2016; DfE, 2016a; CAFCASS, 2016; Bywaters et al., 2018; Webb and Bywaters, 2018; Devaney, 2019), this data specifically supports the notion that the social workers of this study were working with more children and, by implication, that they had less time available for each.

The participants offered two explanations for this. The first, 'a continuing Baby P effect', is explored elsewhere; the second, and focus for discussion here, was the relative 'cost' associated with the national government's policy of 'austerity'.

[1]The author recognises that focussing on case number says nothing of the *complexity* of cases held, but the participants of this study explicitly cited number of cases as a measure of the 'demand' placed on the CPT, thereby explaining the choice of focus here.

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The 'cost of austerity'

The participants of this study repeatedly cited 'years of government cuts' and (what they saw as) 'the cost of austerity', as an explanation for the increasing demand being placed on the CPT. They theorised that as public spending had continued to be reduced (including welfare benefits) under the mantel of 'austerity', the services that had sustained families had increasingly been closed, which, in the social workers' opinion, had served to 'force more families into the child protection arena' (see also BASW, 2017; Bywaters et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2018; NCB, 2018; Devaney, 2019; Mason et al., 2020).

The documentary evidence appeared to support to this position. Indeed, the CSD's own records chronicled how, between 2010 and 2016, the CSD had closed its 'Family Support Team' (whose remit had been 'to support children at risk of entering the [public] care system'); its Youth Service; and its provision for asylum-seeking families. It had also reduced the number of local children's centres by 75%; its Youth Offending Team by 80%; and had temporarily disbanded its Children with Disabilities Team (this service was reintroduced – albeit at 40% its previous size – after a sustained protest by local families). These findings are consistent with larger studies across the UK, which have highlighted that 'Early Help' services have been a particular target for cuts, as local children's services departments reconcile increasing demand for child protection services with decreasing funding from national government (e.g. Webb and Bywaters, 2018; NCB, 2018).

What is more, under the auspices of a new 'Corporate Spending Strategy', launched to 'tackle the unprecedented pressures created by a reduction in [national] government funding' (Chief Executive – 'Public Consultation on Spending Cuts'), the CSD no longer commissioned support services from local private or charitable providers – including for issues such as homelessness, substance misuse and domestic violence (see also Webb and Bywaters, 2018).

As intimated here, these changes were understood to be a consequence of the local authority's efforts to save £65m between 2010 and 2016 (with a purported further £35m saving required by 2020) as it sought to adjust for a 53% reduction in funding received from national government. As one manager explained, such services were considered 'luxuries' and 'non-essential' in the context of needing to make 'immediate savings' and 'when compared to other areas of essential provision... including child protection' (Manager 1, Focus Group).

Whilst such sentiments were unlikely to be shared by the families that used these services, the local data did estimate that, by closing or 'downsizing' services in this way, it had saved the CSD close to £25m between 2010 and 2016 – which actually constituted 83% of its 2009-2010 *total* budget (excluding school spending).

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However, the CPT social workers felt that these changes were short-sighted, and the savings achieved only 'a short-term fix', effectively serving to 'move the problem elsewhere':

> You are just shifting the problem, because whereas you might save some money now, more families will inevitably end up needing more from you in the future, as their difficulties become more acute … for example, it is a lot less costly to support a child within the family home, than it is to fund an alternative placement for him due to familial breakdown (Social Worker 1, Questionnaire).

Intriguingly in the context of this last account, the local authority's 'looked after child' (LAC) population had increased by almost 50% between 2010 (with an average monthly number of 209 LAC) and 2016 (an average monthly number of 307 LAC). This is again consistent with larger studies across the UK (e.g. Morris et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2020), but it is particularly noteworthy given that it had contributed to a near 300% increase in costs incurred for private foster care and residential provision, as the local authority struggled to recruit enough local foster carers to meet the demand.

Whilst these figures might also be partly attributable to other factors (including a continuation of the 'Baby P effect' – Hood et al., 2016), the social workers believed that they were indicative of:

> the increasing levels of deprivation and need brought on by the continued cost of austerity … [as seen] in the closure of [local] services … meaning more families are being tipped over the edge (Social Worker 6, Questionnaire).

As one social worker argued, 'the formula [was] a simple one':

> Local authorities are being squeezed, they are responding by making savings and closing important services … and families are suffering as a result (Social Worker 2, Interview).

Again, the documentary data supported these assertions, highlighting an increase of instances of poverty (with an 18% increase in applications for free school meals; and a 112% increase in use of the local foodbank); unemployment (a 13% increase in applications for the 'Job Seekers Allowance' benefit); and homelessness (with the number of recorded 'rough sleepers' up 240%) amongst the local population between 2010 and 2016. Further, child protection records identified that there had been a 181% increase in children made subject to a child protection plan for instances of 'neglect' or 'emotional abuse' during this time, where it was also recorded that 'alcohol/substance misuse'; 'domestic violence' or 'familial breakdown' (including divorce, separation or imprisonment) had been a contributing factor.

In these terms, the data suggested increasing instances of difficulties amongst the local population, and could theoretically help to explain the

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aforementioned increase in demand being experienced by the CPT. Others (notably, Munby, 2016) have attested that the increase could also be explained by reducing thresholds or professionals becoming better at identifying need in the post 'Baby P' era. However, these accounts ostensibly fail to consider the impact of UK Government policy on these figures – with practitioners in this study asserting that 'thresholds are going up, not down' in response to an 'unprecedented demand' for services. This is again consistent with assertions emerging from larger studies across the UK (e.g. NCB, 2018). Indeed, there is now an extensive literature linking austerity with many of the measures of 'need' apparent here (e.g. Pemberton et al., 2016; Loopstra et al., 2015; 2016; IFSW, 2016; BASW, 2017; Bywaters et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2018; UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 2019; Webb and Bywaters, 2018; Devaney, 2019; Mason et al., 2020).

The point of emphasis is that the participants of this study believed there to be a direct link between the prolonged period of government cuts under the auspices of 'austerity' and the high level of demand being placed upon them as child protection practitioners. Further, that the reduction to other services, because of the decrease in both national and local funding, was increasing the number of families that needed the support of the CPT, leading to a sense of being 'overstretched' or else 'spread too thinly' – thus, limiting the time social workers felt they had to spend with individual children, and by extension, their willingness, in particular contexts, to employ their discretion:

> Before deciding whether I will use discretion I think about my knowledge of the child . . . and whether in that context I have enough, or the right type . . . to be willing to make a decision . . . but if I don't have enough time to spend with the child, then I might not be able to get the type of knowledge that I need about [them and] their circumstances, to be confident to use discretion when the opportunity arises (Social Worker 4, Questionnaire).

> Absolutely, if you can't spend time with children, then how can you be sure what decision or action is in their best interests? . . . better just to follow the procedures, than use discretion, in that scenario (Social Worker 5, Interview).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In analysing the impact of a demanding workload, previous literature has asserted that social workers are more likely to employ discretion so as to resolve the 'political' and 'human' tensions inherent within public service provision (e.g. Lipsky, 2010; Baldwin, 2000) – deciding on how best to use the limited time and resources available to them (Shaw and Clayden, 2009; Shaw et al., 2009; Wastell et al., 2010; Pithouse et al., 2011). The findings of this study do, to some extent, support this assertion (e.g. identifying increased discretionary space in the context of how to organise one's own time – with social workers 'choosing between

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the needs of different children'). However, a busy workload was also observed to contribute (along with the bureaucratic burden of inspection preparation) to a reduction in the willingness of the social workers to employ their discretion in particular contexts. This was because the social workers felt that they had not been afforded enough time to establish (what they considered to be) the 'required knowledge of the child, their needs and circumstances'.

As a rationale for their 'limited time', the social workers identified the UK Government's policy of 'austerity' as contributing to the increase in demand experienced by the CSD over a period of years. The statistical data supported this assertion, indicating, for example, significant increases in local child protection referrals; child protection plans; and the 'looked after child' population, since 2010, when the government's programme of 'austerity' was launched.

Concurrently, the data highlighted how, between 2010 and 2016 (the point of concluding the data collection), the CSD has experienced a 53% reduction in the funding received from the national government, explaining in part the decision to substantially cut spending on areas like: children's centres, the local youth service, and support services for homelessness, substance misuse and domestic violence. This mirrors the funding situation that the majority of local authorities have found their children's services in nationally, particularly in regions of high poverty (Webb and Bywaters, 2018). Despite purported short-term savings to the local authority, these 'cuts' had coincided with significant increases in measures for poverty; unemployment; and homelessness; and higher instances of neglect and emotional abuse amongst local families.

Thus, the theory put forth was that in cutting services in response to the reduction in funding, the CSD had simply 'shifted the problem', as more families were being 'tipped over the edge' and were requiring intervention from the CPT. The implication then was that, certainly in this local context, the national government's policy of austerity had not only led to more families entering the child protection system, but may have also indirectly inhibited the social worker's use of discretion in respect to those families. This is because, due to the sense of 'rising demand and decreasing resources' (Devaney, 2019: 459), and subsequently a growing number of children on their caseload, the social workers expressed 'less time to share with each child'. This illustrated the sense of being 'overstretched' and 'spread too thinly' – thereby echoing themes from larger UK studies, where practitioners have articulated a sense of 'sinking' and 'drowning' under ever increasing demand for their services in response to the UK Government's policy of 'austerity' (Morris et al., 2018: 368).

Indeed, these findings can be considered in the context of a growing evidence base linking austerity with increasing familial crisis and the requirement for intervention from public service providers (e.g. Pemberton et al., 2016; Loopstra et al., 2015; 2016; NCB, 2018; UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 2019; Webb and Bywaters, 2018; Mason et al., 2020).

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However, their particular significance lies in the limited consideration, within the wider literature, of the impact of policies like 'austerity' on England's statutory social worker's structural discretion – especially in the context of 'reviewing' any 'progress' towards Munro's (2011b) image of a 'child-centred' child protection system.

In respect to children's service provision, Munro (2011b: 76) had expressed concern that, in response to national government efforts to reduce public spending, the 'early evidence' was that 'support and preventative services [were] being the target for cuts' (similar findings were made in this study). Further, she associated these 'cuts' with a perhaps inevitable 'rise in referrals to Children's Social Care' (Munro, 2012: 7). However, Munro offered little forethought about the level of challenge that these cuts, and indeed a government policy of austerity, might present in achieving her recommendations for reform – especially in the context of how increasing demand for child protection services might impact upon social worker's time with children, and ultimately their use of discretion in respect to those children.

Concurrently, the focus of the adult service literature has, to a large extent, continued to be on: the continued relevance (or otherwise) of Lipsky's (2010) 'Street-Level Bureaucracy' theory (e.g. Scourfield, 2015; Hupe et al., 2015), the impact and encroachment of managerialism (Evans, 2010; 2016) and the influence of individual practice contexts (Ellis, 2011; 2014). Yet there has been an omission of any discussion pertaining to the impact of austerity on social worker discretion, despite this being perhaps the most apparent social policy of the era (Jones, 2018b; UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 2019).

Of course, the limited commentary could be explained by the lack of anticipation for the longevity of austerity as a UK Government policy. Indeed, it is noteworthy that several of the cited sources draw from research carried out prior to 2013, a time when austerity was still being constructed as a four-year policy initiative (Osborne, 2010; Devaney, 2019), rather than the lingering political strategy to dismantle the existing welfare state, and create a smaller one, that we now understand it to be (Jones, 2018a; 2018b). However, it is nevertheless noteworthy that commentators have not, since that time, sought to explicitly explore the impact of these factors in the context of social worker discretionary space and choice, despite the increasing recognition of how austerity is impacting upon social work services, practitioners and service users (e.g. Loopstra et al., 2015; 2016; Hood et al., 2016; Pemberton et al., 2016; Morris et al., 2018; NCB, 2018; UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 2019; Devaney, 2019; Mason et al., 2020).

The significance of this study is that it positions austerity and the 'chronic' longstanding underfunding of UK public service provision (Jones, 2018b), as a most pressing challenge to achieving the aspirations of the Munro Review of

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Child Protection; especially, in terms of increasing social workers' discretionary space to allow for bespoke decision-making and action-taking in the interests of the individual child. This is because, the study highlights that, if social workers are going to choose not to employ their discretion on the basis of a limited time with, and therefore knowledge of, the child, then the amount or type of discretionary space available becomes, to some extent, irrelevant.

Indeed, the study emphasises the importance of social workers having enough 'space' – not only in the sense of structural discretion, but in terms of visiting, building a relationship with, and gaining a knowledge of, a child – if they are going to engage in the type of discretionary behaviour advocated within the Munro Review. Concurrently, the findings add weight to the increasing focus on social justice, and calls for the English child protection system, and the wider public services that contribute to it, to be properly funded – as it is only in these terms that children are going to be adequately protected and have their individual needs met (Munro, 2009; 2011b).

Two points of reflection emerge here. First is the growing evidence that public money for child protection is increasingly being moved to the private sector and the argument as to whether such a model can offer effective protection to children, when it is effectively driven by market economics and efforts to achieve monetary profit (see Jones, 2018b). Second is that, despite the UK Government's announcement on 15th January 2021 that a new 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care'[2] would take place, it has, for several years, offered minimal commentary in regards to efforts to improve the English child protection system in line with the Munro Review recommendations for reform. (The author also notes a lack of commentary and subsequent follow-up enquiry on the issue of social worker structural discretion in the interests of the child.)

Indeed, we are living in a time where the landscape and rhetoric is dominated by notions of 'excess death'; 'personal safety' and 'risk reduction'. However, on this occasion, these terms are being used to describe the impact of the most gruelling global pandemic for 100 years – rather than an 'over-zealous' and risk-oriented (Featherstone et al., 2018: 9), or indeed, a 'failing' English child protection system (Cameron, 2008; Loughton, 2009; Parton, 2014; Warner, 2013). However, history suggests that there will again come a time, perhaps in the not too distant future, where some observed tragedy (as in the case of Peter Connelly, Victoria Climbié, Maria Colwell, et al.), will push the task of further improving the system in the interests of the individual child to the top of the political agenda. At that time – and perhaps in the context of the aforementioned 'Independent Review of Social Care' – we might expect (given the

[2]Concerns have been raised about the 'independence' of the review chair given that he runs an organisation that has received £72m funding from the Department for Education over the past five years (see Willow, 2021).

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precedent set by the Munro Review) additional discussions about the value of the discretionary space, and of social worker discretion.

It is within these discussions that the messages arising from this study become particularly important. Namely, that for the English child protection system to better cater for the needs of all the children who have cause to access it (as endorsed by Munro, 2011b), then there is a need to ensure that practitioner workloads are not to the extent that they feel that their knowledge of the child (and their circumstances) is impeded by an inability to spend the requisite time with the child. Indeed, the data suggests that, with a 'more manageable' workload, we can expect social workers to more consistently exercise their discretion in the interests of the individual child, thereby cultivating an increasingly 'flexible' and 'innovative' system – and reducing the propensity for tragedies to occur (Munro, 2011b). The wider messages assert that this can be better achieved by addressing the 'bureaucratic burden' of the child protection process (Munro, 2011b: 46). However, the evidence from this study also emphasises the importance of ensuring proper funding of local children's (and associated) services, so that social workers can be afforded caseloads that enable them to spend the 'required time' with, so as to gain a knowledge of, the child.

Echoing assertions that are now more than ten years old, the expectation is that this will enable a more 'child-centred' (Munro, 2011b: 1) and therefore 'effective' (p. 23) child protection system. Yet in drawing from the testimonies of this study, the current climate suggests that there may not only be 'more to do', but also, 'a long way to go'.

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