

Can public services ‘protect the vulnerable’ in the age of austerity?

Considering the evidence on street-cleaning services in the age of growth

A Whose Economy Seminar Paper

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Executive summary

This paper focuses on whether public service provision serves the needs of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK. It raises questions over whether the needs of more vulnerable groups can be addressed in the period of public spending constraint introduced by the Coalition Government in May 2010. To do this, it examines some of the evidence on whether the needs of disadvantaged neighbourhoods were met in the previous period, which was characterised by public spending growth and a policy framework which brought these needs to the fore.

The core of the paper summarises evidence from an in-depth study of the street-cleaning service in the UK. It reports on the gap in cleanliness between more and less disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It also provides new evidence of the range of neighbourhood characteristics which put some places at risk of poor cleanliness outcomes, calling into question explanations which highlight the behaviour and attitudes of residents.

Evidence is also presented which shows that resource allocation does not always follow risks and needs. Indeed, it shows that a superficial examination of resource allocation can suggest that disadvantaged neighbourhoods do indeed receive enhanced resources. However, more detailed forensic research can uncover the more subtle ways in which resource allocation can actually be skewed towards better-off, less needy areas.

The paper concludes by highlighting some of the challenges involved in redistributing public services towards needs, yet points to one model which can deliver appropriate service levels to disadvantaged communities whilst not antagonising defensive, better-off areas. It argues that, whilst the age of austerity presents significant challenges for those who wish to protect the most vulnerable, it may still be possible to find ways to deliver services which do not simply reinforce inequality.

Introduction

As the effects of the banking crisis and fiscal austerity begin to bite, the impact of the contraction of the welfare state and public services on the most vulnerable households and communities is of key concern. However, prior to austerity we had a period of sustained growth, not just in the economy, but in spending on public services. Not only was there more resource on the table in this period, but there was also a policy and practice agenda which suggested that poor neighbourhoods and households should get a bigger share of this resource. This 'mainstreaming' agenda gave an increased impetus to the potential role of public services in 'narrowing the gap' between more deprived and other neighbourhoods. Indeed, mainstream service provision was identified as the 'main weapon' in tackling disadvantage.¹ There were exhortations to develop new approaches to service delivery which were more sensitive to a diversity of needs, as well as encouragement to 'bend the spend' towards disadvantaged service users.

With the election of the Coalition Government in May 2010, the focus of the debate has changed. The emphasis is now on a reduced, residual role for the welfare state and on public services endeavouring to do 'more with less' resource. Arguably, there remains some encouragement that public services should aim to 'protect the vulnerable' from the worst impacts of public expenditure reductions. While a number of commentators question whether this is a feasible ambition,² only detailed research evidence in the years to come will be able to assess how disadvantaged groups have been served by public services in the era of public spending retrenchment.

Given this, it is perhaps important to consider how well public services actually served poor neighbourhoods in the period of spending growth. Did 'mainstreaming' work? Were better outcomes delivered for the most disadvantaged areas? The big picture is that the evidence is mixed. In terms of outcomes, there is certainly some evidence of improvements in some spheres, but the evidence varies on whether the gap in outcomes between poorer and better-off places actually narrowed.³ Indeed, most of the research evidence on the implementation of mainstreaming highlights the range of difficulties encountered in delivering greater redistribution, such as problems with budget disaggregation, as well as a lack of commitment to the idea.⁴ What emerges is a less-than-hopeful account of the potential of public services to make a real difference to improving the relative position of disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

This paper shares some detailed research evidence on the provision and impact of street-cleaning services in the UK during the period of public spending growth.⁵ It begins by discussing the nature of the gap in the cleanliness outcomes between poor and better-off neighbourhoods. It then goes on to explore what characteristics put neighbourhoods at risk of poor cleanliness outcomes and, in a

third section, considers whether service provision tackles these risk factors. In so doing, the paper shows that mainstream services can sometimes be part of the problem faced by people living in deprived neighbourhoods, with service provision not necessarily reflective of relative or diverse needs. However, it also points to some key ways in which the mainstreaming agenda can be made to work such that needs are met and relative outcomes are improved. Furthermore, the research suggests that improving the position of deprived neighbourhoods may be achievable within existing resources. There may therefore be some lessons from this research for public service providers grappling with how to protect the vulnerable in the current fiscal climate.

1. The ‘outcome gap’ between deprived and better-off neighbourhoods

The research project on which this paper is based synthesised English and Scottish evidence from the mid-2000s on cleanliness outcomes and neighbourhood characteristics. It also involved more in-depth analysis of three local authority case studies.

The study exposed a clear national ‘problem’ in terms of a gap in neighbourhood cleanliness between better-off and more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This pattern was evident in the self-reporting of litter and rubbish by neighbourhood residents in England and Scotland. It was also evident when cleanliness levels were assessed by independent surveyors as part of the *Local Environmental Survey of England*. Across the country, more affluent neighbourhoods tended to show a cleanliness level above the standard expected in national performance monitoring,⁶ while less affluent neighbourhoods tend to perform much worse. Indeed, some local authorities were achieving high average scores, but failing to maintain more deprived neighbourhoods to the desired standard.

There was some evidence of a national narrowing of the gap in the period 2004 until 2008, although significant variation between authorities remained. The three case studies exemplified the reality of an uneven picture. In two, there was clear evidence of a narrowing gap between cleanliness scores in disadvantaged and better-off areas. In the remaining case study, there was evidence of an improvement in overall outcomes, but the gap between poor and better-off areas had widened slightly.

The research considered whether the introduction of national performance monitoring and audit systems such as Best Value can influence outcomes. The systems certainly appeared to have helped raise overall standards, and there was some evidence that they had also helped to narrow the gap. Given that the Coalition Government has de-emphasised the importance of performance

monitoring in England, it will be interesting to observe whether such trends continue.

2. What puts places at risk of poor street cleanliness?

It is perhaps no surprise to discover that there is a gap in cleanliness between more and less disadvantaged neighbourhoods. There is a tendency to blame poor neighbourhood cleanliness on the behaviours and attitudes of neighbourhood residents. This research aimed to go beyond common understandings of this problem. In particular, it was interested to discover if residents (and indeed street-cleaning staff) face a 'level playing field' when it comes to keeping different kinds of neighbourhoods clean.

This research made an important contribution to explaining why there is a cleanliness gap. It went beyond analysing outcomes relating to deprivation, and explored the particular aspects of neighbourhoods which put them at risk of environmental problems. This was done at the national (England and Scotland) level and case study level.

The study found that there are a number of risk factors for poor street cleanliness. Crucially, whilst area deprivation (as measured by official indexes) is an important predictor of environmental problems, there are also a range of specific factors that contribute to poor cleanliness outcomes wherever they occur. Some of these are more prevalent in poor areas – such as low-income households, high child densities and disused buildings. Others are more evenly spread – young adult households, high housing densities, and homes with small or no gardens.

This evidence allows us to reflect on *what it is* about deprived neighbourhoods which makes them more likely to have environmental problems. Given that disadvantaged neighbourhoods tend to be more littered than others, it can be easy to suggest that poorer households care less about the upkeep of their environment than other kinds of households. But it is cause for reflection that – when we control for area deprivation – characteristics such as high housing or child density also predict poor cleanliness in more advantaged neighbourhoods. The patterns identified here suggest that there can be structural as well as behavioural causes to neighbourhood cleanliness problems – causes which are outwith the control of individual residents.

3. Does service provision reflect risk?

This is clearly a key, yet complex, question. While the limitations of the data available meant it was not able to assess expenditure relative to all of the risk factors identified, it did find that:

- There was evidence that resources were skewed towards deprived neighbourhoods, both within the case studies and at a national level. In one of the case studies, for example, the authority spent five times as much in streets in the most deprived decile compared to the least deprived decile.
- Resources also tended to be skewed towards areas with high density housing both at a national level and within the case studies.
- An assessment of expenditure relative to lower-income households was possible in relation to the three case studies. In only one was expenditure targeted towards streets with higher proportions of such households.

These patterns suggest that authorities were targeting needs and putting mainstreaming into practice. At this stage, the research seemed to suggest that there was little potential to use better, more targeted service provision to tackle the outcome gap. However, as part of the study, a more fine-grained analysis of the nature and purpose of resource allocation in the three case studies was conducted. This deeper analysis – which mapped particular aspects of service provision onto actual streets – produced a more surprising set of results.

In one case study, when routine, programmed expenditure on the core service was distinguished from responsive ('catch up') expenditure, it was apparent that *more affluent* streets tended to have a bigger share of programmed expenditure than less affluent streets. Thus, what had appeared as a progressive pattern of expenditure relative to deprivation related only to the provision of responsive services. Moreover, responsive services were more expensive, and it was this which gave the appearance of a skew in expenditure towards deprived streets. In the same case study, when the workloads of operational staff were examined, deprived streets tended to be serviced by staff with larger workloads (greater street length to service, as well as more households) than those operating in more affluent areas. At a very practical level, staff working in deprived places were doubly disadvantaged: they worked in locations with more risk factors contributing to environmental problems, yet also had more street length to cover.

Indeed, the allocation of staff workloads relative to area needs emerged as a key issue in the research. In a second case study, there was an attempt to engineer the relative workloads of street cleaners to take account of the diversity of needs across neighbourhoods. Staff operating in areas with higher levels of 'risk factors' associated with environmental problems had fewer dwellings or shorter street lengths to service. This authority had the most equal outcomes of the three case studies. Thus, very few locations were assessed as falling below the acceptable threshold for cleanliness and very few exceeded it.

Absolute levels of service appeared as important as relative resource allocation. The third case study had a high relative difference between areas (spending five times as much in its most deprived streets compared to the least), but the absolute level of routine, programmed services delivered to these areas was still below the level of service provided to similar streets in the other two case studies. In this case, acceptable outcomes were achieved via special initiatives and responsive top-up services. This appeared an expensive approach relative to the cost of providing a more appropriate level of routine, ordinary street cleaning.

The research suggested that there is a need for a broad understanding of the different aspects of targeting to be developed. Skewing resources towards more deprived areas is a start, but may not be enough. Effective targeting involves providing the right level and the right kind of services. This suggests that, by identifying inappropriate or inefficient forms of service, more equal outcomes could be achieved within existing budgets.

Conclusion

The insight offered here into the workings of the street-cleaning service in the UK suggests that we need to keep a close watch on how disadvantaged neighbourhoods fare as public services contract and service provision is pared back. Even in a period when there was relatively generous public spending, together with a policy environment where the needs of deprived neighbourhoods were to the fore, it was not clear that poorer neighbourhoods were always well served by public services. Inevitably, budget cuts will lead to services being pared back, and there will be winners and losers in the new period of fiscal austerity. It will be important not to underestimate the capacity of better-off households and neighbourhoods to defend the quality and level of public services they are used to receiving. It is notable that the case study authority in which staff workloads reflected needs, and – where there was a minimal outcome gap – took great pains to ensure that the distribution of resources towards needier areas was not apparent to the public. So, rather than have more frequent servicing in disadvantaged areas, staff working in such places had a hidden capacity to get the job done. ‘Protecting the vulnerable’ may require innovation and ingenuity as well as resources in the period to come.

Notes

- 1 Social Exclusion Unit, (2001) *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan*, London: Social Exclusion Unit.
- 2 For example, see Polly Toynbee: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/11/defence-brutal-cuts-attack-lies-blame>
- 3 CLG (2010) *Evaluation of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal Final Report*, London: Department for Communities and Local Government.
- 4 See Fyfe A. (2009) *Tackling multiple deprivation in communities: considering the evidence*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government Social Research.
- 5 See Hastings A., Bailey N. *et al.* (2009) *Street cleanliness between deprived and better-off neighbourhoods. A Clean Sweep?*, York: York publishing services. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/neighbourhood-street-cleanliness-full.pdf>
- 6 The Best Value indicator on environmental cleanliness was introduced in 2001. Among other things, it stipulates an acceptable standard for street cleanliness.

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