

Editorial

This first edition of Volume 33 of *Research, Policy and Planning* has been published rather later than scheduled, and for this the editorial team offer sincere apologies. The delay has been caused by an unexpected fall in the number of submissions made. We do not really know why, but hope it is a 'blip' rather than a permanent change. Wider changes to the UK social care infrastructure and continuing local authority austerity policies of this and previous governments have meant that many local authorities have had to continually restructure. One casualty of this process has been in-house research capacity: many local authority research posts, particularly in adult social care or children's services appear to have been deleted (see Woolham, Stevens and Rainey in this journal vol. 32(2), 2016-7). One effect of this may have been to reduce the number of colleagues who might otherwise have written and submitted articles to us. However, we hope you will find the articles in 33(1) informative, interesting and useful.

The first paper, by **Karl Mason** *et al.*, offers a clear and thoughtful analysis of findings from a series of 'community of practice' meetings that brought together academics, social work and housing practitioners to explore opportunities to provide better services for people described as experiencing 'multiple morbidities' – homelessness, mental and physical ill-health, and drug or alcohol misuse. The authors explore opportunities made available by changes to statutory duties under the Care Act 2014 to provide better services for this group, and the barriers and obstacles to be overcome in order to begin to do this. The paper provides some fascinating insights into the potential for mutual misunderstanding by housing and social work staff, considered within three contexts: legal criteria, homelessness boundaries, and local authority roles. Key issues for housing staff were 'legal literacy' (the ability to refer a homeless person for social care assessment that cued in to eligibility criteria), their perception that social workers often seemed to see homelessness as exclusively a housing problem, and that the gatekeeping role of the local authority created eligibility arrangements 'that required people to fit its requirements rather than the system being set up to meet individual needs'. By contrast, social workers expressed bafflement about the nature of the information provided by housing staff, and they struggled to relate the needs of homeless people to changes in eligibility for services (including assessments) brought about by the Care Act, whilst receiving more referrals for homeless people. A clear benefit of establishing a collaborative 'community of practice' was that the exchange of information that occurred enabled shared learning and development, which broke down barriers between housing and social work staff.

In the first part of the second paper, by **Colin Slasberg**, a detailed and powerful analysis of the failure of National Eligibility Criteria for adult social care is presented. The paper argues that eligibility criteria have always been a 'postcode lottery', and that even recent attempts to standardise the application of criteria have not eradicated inequity. This is because levels of spending on eligible needs are not uniform amongst a purposive sample of 30 adult social care departments surveyed via a Freedom of Information request. The consequences of this are explored for people in need of support and for care professionals. At the heart of the problem is that to manage demand, local authorities have been encouraged not to collect information about the real cost of meeting needs for wellbeing amongst their local population: instead, eligibility criteria are used to ensure 'eligible' needs are met, thereby obscuring underfunding through ignoring needs deemed not to meet the set thresholds. In the second part, the paper explores a potential alternative approach. Slasberg argues for a supply side strategy, rather than simply managing demand. In the NHS eligibility criteria are not applied in the same way as in social care: instead, there is a duty to treat clinically assessed need. Resource shortfalls are managed not by refusing to meet needs that fall below a given threshold, but by the application of waiting lists. The author describes how such an approach could work in adult social care, and suggests that it would acknowledge unmet need, enabling all needs that require public funding to be assessed and costed, regardless of the capacity of the local authority to afford to meet them. This, it is proposed, would thereby ensure greater transparency and fairness.

The third and final paper in this edition, by **Bob Hudson**, offers a passionate and eloquent commentary on the state of the English social care market. The paper considers four primary issues that account for the chronic instability of this market: funding, workforce, consumer and market 'fragilities'. Using a range of research studies and government statistics the paper argues that the continuing austerity policies of successive governments have exacerbated service pressures arising from the changing demography of the English population, causing inadequacy or even lack of safety in substantial numbers of services. Further, Hudson suggests that low pay and casualization have led to growing numbers of unfilled vacancies in the sector, which are likely to become more numerous post 'Brexit'. The paper also challenges received wisdom about the introduction of 'choice' and consumer control over care, and highlights more general market fragility, evidenced, for example, by 'provider failure' as small care provider organisations fail to survive. Hudson goes on to consider possible solutions to the continuing crisis in adult social care. Chief amongst these is better funding, but the paper also suggests changes to the purpose and character of the adult social care market.

Finally, the edition contains two excellent reviews. The two books considered by our reviewers represent very different aspects of social services. Andrea Morris salutes the professional testimony of Sharon Shoemith about her experience in the eye of the media and political storm surrounding the homicide of 'Baby P'; and in particular her judicious examination (for a PhD) of the wider context of responses to familial child homicide (*Learning from Baby P – The Politics of Blame, Fear and Denial*. Shoemith, S., JKP 2016, pp.272). Not every social worker or manager is chased across London by tabloid journalists, but some parallels might be experienced!

Mike Clark looks at a wide range of innovatory research methods in social work, or perhaps understood as innovatory for social work, described by the researchers concerned and edited for an explicitly didactic purpose (*Innovations in Social Work Research: Using Methods Creatively*. Hardwick, L., Smith, R. & Worsley A., JKP 2015, pp.376). As with Shoemith's book, we see vivid snapshots, and an encouragement to dig deeper for a fuller understanding of research and policy complexities.

John Woolham¹, Guy Daly² and Paul Dolan³

¹ *Senior Research Fellow*
Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London

² *Pro-Vice Chancellor (Executive Dean – Health and Life Sciences)*
Coventry University

³ *Reviews Editor*
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