Re-interpreting front line work and accountability: from ‘street level bureaucrats’ to ‘civic entrepreneurs’

Introduction

The turn towards governance has wrought significant changes in the policy process and the public sector. Part of this change has been to give increased prominence to how policy and public services are delivered. Yet, much of the academic literature has focused on understanding delivery at an organisational level, neglecting those charged with the delivery of public policy and public services at the front line. This paper argues that in the move towards governance front line workers are assuming the role of ‘civic entrepreneurs’. The paper considers this shift in the characterisation of front line workers from ‘street level bureaucrats’ to ‘civic entrepreneurs’ and the implications this has for front line accountability.

Front line workers are understood as public sector staff that hold some responsibility for the delivery of policy and public services at the local level and engage with the public as part of their day-to-day work (Lipsky 1976, 1980). The existing literature concerning public policy implementation and the role of front line workers is dichotomised: ‘top down’ approaches describe the policy process as hierarchical and linear with clear separation between politicians as ‘decision makers' and bureaucrats as ‘deliverers'; this understanding was challenged by ‘bottom up’ approaches which acknowledged the influence of front line discretion in policy making and delivery. Lipsky’s work on ‘street level bureaucracy’ is central to the ‘bottom up’ approach and is the starting point for this paper (1971, 1976, 1980). Lipsky’s work introduced significant empirical and analytical nuance into the study of public policy through the use of the concept of ‘discretion’ which refers to the choice and judgement that front line workers were able to exercise in the policy making process. The concept of ‘discretion’ challenges the simplicity of earlier understandings of policy delivery (1980). As such, Lipsky also provides justification for a methodological focus on front line workers.

In the decades since Lipsky’s analysis, the policy process and public sector have undergone significant reform. New Labour came to power in the UK in 1997 in a
dynamic of change and have introduced substantial and wide ranging reforms to both the policy process and public sector. Yet, the defining characteristic of their reform agenda is its complexity. New Labour have articulated competing rhetoric about change which has charged front line workers with reconciling their own empowerment with an ongoing tendency towards centralisation. This is reflected in the specific areas considered here of local governance and neighbourhood based working. Such complexity, it can be argued, has produced an opportunity for innovation and the potential for re-vitalisation within the public sector (Stoker 2004a). This opportunity is a means of providing more locally located and appropriate working in the public sector.

Drawing on empirical work based in a contemporary local governance setting, this research sets out a new narrative of front line work; one that reflects the impact of the turn towards governance and the complexity this implies. Front line workers face an ‘action imperative’ (Hill and Hupe 2007) and draw increasingly on newly acknowledged resources based on what Yanow terms, ‘local knowledge’ (2004). ‘Local knowledge’ is based on the varied experiences of front line workers and allows them to negotiate and navigate their context, and underpins and informs the strategies they are able to enact in their everyday work. This resource is used to enact responses to the everyday situations that front line workers face. These responsive strategies evidence the entrepreneurial role that front line workers now undertake in the public sector. The nature of this entrepreneurialism reflects both the organisational and community facing roles of front line workers. Front line workers are able to act as ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ (Lowndes 2005) and identify and exploit ambiguities in their organisational context, adopting the strategies of ‘borrowing’, ‘sharing’ and ‘remembering’ as outlined by Lowndes (2005). Front line workers can also be seen to act as ‘civic entrepreneurs’. The term ‘civic entrepreneur’ was first used by DEMOS (1998) to suggest the role that public sector staff can play in the wider revitalisation of the public sector. This paper provides empirical and analytical substantiation of this concept. Civic entrepreneurs work within the communities they serve: to identify and engage with excluded groups to facilitate integration with mainstream service provision and the wider community; to build capacity and to link together the demands and priorities of government with organisational opportunities and community needs; by adopting the strategies of ‘reaching’, ‘enabling’ and ‘fixing’.
This differentiated, localised, community focused and entrepreneurial narrative of front line work is contextually and inherently different, certainly to ‘top down’ analyses of public policy, but also to Lipsky’s concept of the ‘street level bureaucrat’ (see for example Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Lipsky 1976, 1980). The contemporary front line worker is increasingly ‘rule saturated’ rather than ‘rule bound’ and more influenced in their work by their informal and local relationships (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). As such the extent of their ‘choice and judgement’ is far greater than the term ‘discretion’ allows. In this sense, the role of the front line workers can be understood as ‘beyond’ discretion.

This new narrative implies the re-constitution of several assumed facets of the public sector, not only discretion, but also professionalism and accountability. Professionalism has become diffused through the public sector in the turn to governance (Hill and Hupe 2007) and is also differently constituted, with the concept of ‘local knowledge’ an increasingly important premise of front line professionalism. The concept of accountability has been similarly re-configured and is seen as more differentiated and contextualised with Moore’s concept of ‘building legitimacy’ (1996) becoming increasingly resonant.

The paper will first explicate the work of Lipsky around the concept of ‘street level bureaucracy’ drawing out the dichotomies between ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ approaches to implementation and the associated assumptions about professionalism and accountability at the front line of public service delivery. The paper will then explore the challenge of governance to these perspectives before drawing on work conducted in a contemporary local governance setting to consider the strategies that front line workers employ in their everyday work. Front line workers use strategies which may be identified as those of ‘institutional’ and ‘civic’ entrepreneurs. The paper concludes with analysis of the impact of the shift from ‘street level bureaucrats’ to ‘civic entrepreneurs’ on local governance and the public sector more widely and on conceptions of professionalism and accountability.

**Lipsky, ‘street level bureaucrats’ and ‘discretion’**

As noted, the main dichotomy perceived in understandings of implementation is between ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ analyses. The former are associated particularly
with Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) who emphasise the normative importance of recognizing implementation as an inherently hierarchical process of delivery; and the latter, notably with the work of Lipsky (1971, 1976, 1980) who provides a critique of earlier analyses by emphasising that policy making does not simply end once a policy is set out, but is importantly influenced by the interpretation and discretion of ‘street level bureaucrats’. Acknowledging, as Mashaw notes, “policy implementation requires policy adaptation” (1983, 4). Further work on ‘street level bureaucrats’ - for example Prottas (1979) and Wetherly (1979) – has established the concept as an empirical and analytical mainstay in public policy. As noted by Hill and Hupe, ‘street level bureaucracy’ is a ‘common denominator’ for what has become a scholarly theme (2007, 279).

Lipsky’s work constitutes a significant step forward in developing a nuanced empirical understanding of the policy process and the discretionary role that front line workers occupy. However, a bureaucratic context is prominent in Lipsky’s work and in the decades since Lipsky’s analysis, extensive and substantial reforms have been made to the public sector and the policy process. In a broad sense, these reforms have been seen to constitute a shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ (Pierre and Peters 2000, Newman 2001, Bevir and Rhodes 2003b). Whilst, the institutional environment has not changed entirely and remnants of bureaucratic ways of working continue to be seen, the emergence of governance, as manifested in the reforms of New Labour, has led to a different context for street level actors. These changes suggest that Lipsky’s understanding of the policy process and the role of the ‘street level bureaucrat’ requires reconsideration under the new governance arrangements.

‘Top down’ models and their critics

The literature on public policy is substantial. However, the implementation of public policy and particularly the role of front line workers within this has been an area of notable neglect (Parsons 1995). As Van Meter and Van Horn note,

The implementation problem is assumed to be a series of mundane decisions and interactions unworthy of the attention of scholars seeking the heady stuff of politics. Implementation is deceptively simple: it does not appear to involve any great issues (1976, 445).
Indeed traditionally, scholars have tended to view the political system in a way which reinforces the demarcation between policy and administration (Weber 1947). The job of the administrator is to carry out policy formulated by decision makers (Parsons 1995, 462). The interplay and interaction between politicians and administrators has until comparatively recently been a neglected area of analysis and research. Hargrove has commented that this is a ‘missing link’ in the policy process (1975).

The top down model is predicated on the assumption that policy directives ought to be translated into programme activities with as little deviation as possible. As such policy makers make the only important decisions, organisation-level actors serve only to follow the ‘correct’ implementation or thwart it by making changes. Bureaucrats were understood as responsible for the efficient and politically neutral delivery of the public will as defined by elected officials, “as such discretion was not really an issue. Politicians made the decisions and bureaucrats carried them out” (Vinzant and Crothers 1996, 460). Although this separation has been widely criticised, the distinction has returned in different forms (Donnison 1977, Dunleavy 1981, Parsons 1995, Brehm and Gates 1997).

As noted the ‘top down’ approach has been widely criticised. Commentators have argued that this account simply does not describe how government works: overestimating the coherence of policy (Hill 2003, Matland 1995, Van Meter and Van Horn 1976); and assuming that the meanings and aims of policies are subject to shared understanding amongst policy authors, public sector managers and front line workers. However, front line workers are often involved in policy making beyond simply deciding whether to implement or comply with a policy or not and often have to make judgements about what the policy means in the first place, “this is not a trivial matter; policies rarely come with enumerated implications for implementers because policy makers seldom trouble with the minutiae of design” (Hill 2003, 267-8). It also assumes a great deal about goal definition, human interaction and behaviour, or more bluntly as Dunsire notes, “it excludes any consideration of how real people behave” (1990, 4). ‘Top down’ accounts underestimate the importance of negotiation with front line staff, service users and others in the establishment of the meaning of the policy and its implementation. The emphasis within ‘top down’ approaches on ‘delivery’ when applied to the local implementation of national policy is, according to 6 and Peck “profoundly misleading” (2006, 12). The term ‘delivery’ suggests that the role of front line workers in the public sector is to simply adopt policy that is put
forward by government and a failure to do so is attributed to a lack of skill or will on the part of the front line worker.

**Policy making and discretion**

Lipsky asserted that “policy making does not simply end once a policy is set out” (1980, x) noting that “…Each encounter [between a street level bureaucrat and a citizen] is a delivery of public policy” (1980, 3); and arguing further that “public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high ranking administrators, because in important ways it is actually made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers” (Lipsky 1980, xii).

The policy making roles of street level bureaucrats are, according to Lipsky, built upon three inter-related facets of their positions: relatively high degrees of discretion; but also, their relative autonomy from organisational authority; and the severe limitations on personnel and organisational resources (1976, 1980). Discretion has become an enduring concept of public administration and is here understood as the use of choice or judgement within particular bounds.

Lipsky's views the discretion of street level bureaucrats as necessary for several reasons. First, discretion is required to apply rules in specific cases because “street level bureaucrats often work in situations too complicated to reduce to programmatic formats” (Lipsky 1980, 15). Second, some situations require public employees to make judgements about people: “street level bureaucrats work in situations that often require responses to the human dimensions of situations” (Lipsky 1980, 15). Third, street level discretion “promotes workers' self regard and encourages clients to believe that workers hold the key to their well being” (Lipsky 1980, 15). Finally, some public employees must operate independent of direct supervision as they carry out their tasks (Lipsky 1980).

Lipsky explicates the nature of the discretion exercised by street level bureaucrats through the identification of a number of techniques or strategies. These include: “routinising, modifying goals, rationing their services, redefining or limiting the clientele to be served, asserting priorities and generally developing practices that permit them to process the work they are required to do in some way” (Lipsky 1976, 207). As Lipsky asserts, “the decisions of street level bureaucrats, the routines they
establish and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively become the public policies they carry out” (1980, xii). These techniques allow the provision of public services within the structures and demands of their organisations and service users; but also allow some influence for front line workers’ own personal values and professional norms.

Lipsky’s conception of the street level bureaucrat’s role in policy making is widely perceived as a radical departure from ‘top down’ analyses of policy making and marked an important step in recognising the complexity of the policy process and the decision and value based role that front line workers can play within it. In considering the discretion of street level bureaucrats as a form of policy making, Lipsky acknowledges that the content of policy and its impact on those affected can be substantially modified during the implementation stage. As such, the distinction between policy as political input and implementation as administrative outcome becomes blurred.

**Professionalism and accountability**

‘Top down approaches do not allow for front line professionals and the autonomy that implies. Front line professionalism, along with the undermining of elected politicians as sole policy makers, raises serious concerns about the viability of both hierarchical controls and traditional forms of accountability in the public sector.

**Professionalism**

Lipsky describes street level bureaucracies as strongly influenced by “occupational or professional” ideologies (1980, 147). Street level bureaucrats make claims of autonomy, even those outside the clearest professions: “street level bureaucrats expect to be treated as professionals in as much as they claim that they should be trusted by their managers to use discretion to tackle their work tasks in an adaptive way” (Hill and Hupe 2007, 282). DiMaggio and Powell see a profession as an occupation whose members have managed to define “the conditions and methods of their work” and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy (1983, 152). In addition, two further dimensions characterise the nature of professions, that is, the indeterminacy and the invisibility of the situations in which that expertise is used:
the combination of discretion, rule application and the principally undetermined character of what the professional will be confronted with, presupposes a degree of trust in his or her competence to produce desired responses, and to deal with situations that may be exceptional in a sensible and creative way. In this sense, many professionals are street level bureaucrats; at the same time, all street level bureaucrats are, at least in their own perception, professionals (Hill and Hupe 2007, 282)

The discretion of street level bureaucrats is “filled by rules professionals impose upon themselves” (Hill and Hupe 2007, 282). So, whilst street level bureaucrats may be policy makers, they use this freedom to make policy mainly to manage their work; Lipsky refers to these discretionary techniques as ‘coping strategies’ (1980).

**Accountability**

The ‘top down’ approach is premised on democratic accountability. This simplistic hierarchy of accountability neglects the discretionary role of front line workers. As Lipsky argues:

> The essence of street level bureaucracies is that they require people to make decisions about other people. Street level bureaucrats have discretion because the nature of service provision calls for human judgement that cannot be programmed and for which machines cannot substitute (Lipsky 1980, 161).

As this implies, street level bureaucrats, “define their work and to a large extent themselves in terms of relationships more than rules” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 20). These relationships are primarily with individual citizens and service users; Hasenfeld and Steinmetz (1981) see these relationships as exchanges, but not necessarily symmetrical ones as street level bureaucrats often have access and act as a gatekeeper to resources that service users require. Like Lipsky, Hasenfeld and Steinmetz emphasise the ways in which street level bureaucrats construct the behaviour of the citizens they are confronted with (1981). This activity has consequences that go beyond the behaviour of the individual street level bureaucrats themselves. Lipsky identifies their role as a political role, "street level bureaucrats are not only policy making actors in a policy process, but to a certain extent, they are policy formers rather than implementers” (Hill and Hupe 2007, 282). The political character of their role is further informed by their involvement in “the allocation of particular goods and services in the society” (Lipsky 1980, 84). As noted, street level bureaucrats are public officials and so should be held publicly accountable (Hill and
However, the use and extent of discretion implies that street level bureaucrats are often difficult to manage, particularly in a traditionally hierarchical and rule influenced way.

**The challenge of governance**

In the years since Lipsky’s analysis of the policy process, extensive and significant reforms have been introduced by successive administrations and a shift from government to governance has been identified by many commentators (Pierre and Peters 2000, Kooiman 2003). However, as noted, an understanding of what ‘governance’ means continues to avoid succinct definition (Bevir and Rhodes 2003a). Governance can be used as a ‘blanket term’ to represent a change in the nature or meaning of government (March and Olsen 1989). However, most of the governance literature tackles the changing role of the state after the varied public sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. Several authors identify the link with the concept of networks and ways of ‘steering’ that are other than hierarchical (John 2001, Rhodes 2003). Governance is seen to take place at different administrative layers and in various action situations (Hill and Hupe 2003, 2007). These shifts have re-constituted the governance arrangements in which front line workers operate.

The traditional understanding of ‘government’ in the UK focuses on the ‘Westminster’ model. This model refers to the “concepts, questions and historical story used to capture the allegedly essential features of British government” (Bevir and Rhodes 2003a, 6). The model emphasises a unitary centralised state characterised by “parliamentary sovereignty, strong Cabinet government, accountability through elections, majority party control of the executive” and so on (Gamble 1990, 407ks. In this period, the boundary between state and civil society change). There has been a series of discursive shifts from the hierarchies or bureaucracies of the post-war welfare state; through the marketisation reforms of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s; to the emphasis now given by the New Labour governments to networks (Etzioni 1961, Lindblom 1977, Clarence and Painter 1998, Thompson et al 1999, Hill and Hupe 2002). An emphasis on networks contrasts markedly with the Westminster model of British government which is no longer able to capture the recent changes in British government; as such, a governance framework is now employed to reflect these changes.
These shifts are reflective of the notion that “the classical hierarchical model of public administration does not work” (Hendriks and Topps 2005, 476). It is argued to be ineffective in addressing persistent problems, or so called ‘wicked issues’ and to suffer legitimacy problems (Munro 2007, 3) As a result, the process of governing is now carried out by numerous and various stakeholders operating in new public governance spaces (Hirst 2000, Rhodes 2000). This reduces government to “only one of many actors” (Rhodes 2000, 63). The argument that the governance perspective asserts for including these stakeholders is that they are seen to possess expert and/or ‘local knowledge’ (Yanow 2004) which improves the quality of decision making.

However, Bevir and Rhodes argue that this ‘governance’ narrative is ‘one-sided’ in seeking to counter a view of British government as a unitary state with a strong executive (2003a). This neglects that the executive can still act decisively and co-ordinate and implement policy at least some of the time. Newman has asserted that simple dualisms such as ‘from government to governance’ fail to reflect the complexity of the changes in governance structures both previous to and since the accession of New Labour (2001, 4). Newman comments that it is more interesting to examine “how different elements of new and old are packaged and repackaged as different models of governance are laid over on one another” (2001, 4-5). Indeed, while the role of networks in governance – at both a local and national level – can be seen to have markedly increased (Lowndes and Skelcher 1998, Sullivan and Skelcher 2002); both bureaucratic and market mechanisms continue to be key ways of delivering public services. This more interpretive perspective sees governance as contingent and contested and so variously constructed (Newman 2001, Bevir and Rhodes 2003a). As noted, New Labour’s explicit commitment to moving closer towards governance through networks and the development of a more inclusive policy process has been paralleled with an ongoing tendency towards centralisation, performance management and targeting (Hood 2006, 6 and Peck 2004).

New Labour has been explicit about its intention to move towards governance through networks and given emphasis to a revitalised public sector which is empowered, devolved, joined up, participative, outward looking and more able to respond to the increasing challenges and demands placed upon it (DETR 1998, Cabinet Office 1999). The latter White Paper commented that, “public servants are hardworking and dedicated and many are as innovative and entrepreneurial as anyone outside government” (1999, 11) and as such are seen to embody the reform
agenda: playing a central role in the policy process and contributing to formulating deliverable policies. As the White Paper highlights,

The public servants must be the agent of the changes identified… We will invest in public servants so that they have the skills and the opportunity to perform to the standards required… we will remove unnecessary bureaucracy which prevents public servants from experimenting, innovating and delivering a better product (Cabinet Office 1999, 55)

Since 1997, New Labour have introduced a bewildering array of policies and initiatives. Although they have attempted to present this as a coherent agenda, Newman (2001) has emphasised the complex and differentiated nature of New Labour’s governance arrangements and Stoker (2002) the ever changing and – arguably deliberately – disparate nature of New Labour’s reforms. New Labour’s reforms potentially present challenges to Lipsky’s analysis of the ‘street level bureaucrat’. In one sense, the challenge comes from the term ‘street level bureaucrat’ itself. Lipsky’s analysis was situated in a public sector characterised by discrete, hierarchical, bureaucratic silos. The public sector now, as noted, is characterised by its complexity and embodies both the turn to governance and the ongoing use of bureaucratic mechanisms of control. New Labour’s reforms have reconstituted the context in which street level bureaucrats operate. Front line workers are now charged with reconciling their own empowerment with an ongoing tendency towards centralisation and targets.

Reinterpreting front line work: towards ‘civic entrepreneurs’

In the shift to governance, the nature of street level bureaucracy has been altered in at least three important ways: firstly, by expanding the range of decisions public servants are called upon to make; second, by increasing in the complexity of decision making and; thirdly, heightening the importance of how discretionary choices are judged in a larger context: “Put simply, public servants are being asked to make more decisions, based on more factors, in more complicated situations” (Vinzant and Crothers 1996, 458). Key concepts that allow a re-interpretation of street level bureaucrats has come from the growing body of interpretive policy analysis.

‘Citizen agent’
Maynard-Moody and Musheno (1990, 2000, 2003) argue that the existing analysis of the role of the street level bureaucrat “is incomplete and distorts our understanding of governing on the front lines” (2003, 20). Maynard-Moody and Musheno have gone so far as to assert that it is perhaps appropriate to in some ways consider the ‘street level bureaucrat’ analysis as simply another version of the ‘top down’ approach (2003). Maynard Moody and Musheno articulate how front line workers in the public sector perceive their own roles in the policy making process: “as citizen agents who act in response to individuals and circumstances” (2000, 329). Citizen agents do not define themselves in terms of rules, but rather in terms of their relationships with clients, other street level workers- both within and across agencies- and their relationship with the ‘system’, which is seen to provide “only loose guidance and constraint” (2000, 353). These relationships are mediated through their pragmatism, local knowledge or ‘street smarts’ (Yanow 1996, 2003; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 354). Maynard-Moody and Musheno argue that empowering street level workers “takes advantage of their experiences and street wisdom” (Maynard Moody and Musheno 1990, 845). Maynard Moody and Musheno also argue that when public service organisations are “designed to engage, rather than mute street level worker perspectives on how policy should be implemented… [then] positive aspects of street level influence can be maximised and the negative aspects minimised” (1990, 833).

The simplistic synonymy between ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ approaches is misplaced and neglects the rich, highly interpretive and value based nature of Lipsky’s work and his subtle and nuanced analysis of street level bureaucracy. However, Lipsky does not challenge the normative appeal of the ‘top down’ approaches. It is this gap that interpretivists are perhaps attempting to fill. A similarly limited, yet aspirational, account of how front line work can take on new normative account was put forward, in an explicitly British context, in the work of the centre left think tank, DEMOS, who played a highly influential role in shaping the policy agenda of New Labour. A notable publication early in the New Labour administration concerned the concept of the ‘civic entrepreneur’. This publication was prefaced by a document published in 1997 concerning the concept of the ‘social entrepreneur’ defined by DEMOS as individuals who “deploy entrepreneurial skills for social ends” (Leadbeater 1997, 8). Social entrepreneurs identify underutilised resources within their communities and use them to satisfy unmet social needs. This concept was perceived to be pertinent to be re-situated in the public sector and thus re-labelled ‘civic entrepreneurs’. A ‘civic entrepreneur’ is defined as “someone who realises how
a public sector organisation needs to innovate to meet changing demands” (Leadbeater and Goss 1998, 10). DEMOS argued that, within the public sector and particularly at the front line, individuals are developing new services often by working holistically and interacting more with service users. This normative argument for street level bureaucrats to become more entrepreneurial and for such activity to be seen as legitimate is an interesting and attractive one in many respects. But it leaves unanswered several important issues: in particular the implications for accountability and the nature of professionalism that it would embrace.

‘Local knowledge’

‘Local knowledge’ is a further concept identified in interpretive policy analysis. The concept was initiated in the work of Geertz (1983) and has been recently revived in the work of Yanow (2004). Yanow defines ‘local knowledge’ as a “kind of non-verbal knowing that evolves from seeing, interacting with someone (or some place or something) over time” (Yanow 2004, 12). As implied, this ‘knowing’ is contextual and refers to a specific setting and reflects “very mundane yet expert understanding from lived experience” (Yanow 2004, 12). This paper asserts that front line workers’ ‘local knowledge’ informs how they interpret and deliver public policy; enables front line workers to negotiate and make sense of their own role and relationships within new governance arrangements. As Goss notes, a central dynamic of governance is how it is “being worked by the men and women within it” (2001, 201 original italics).

By drawing on ‘local knowledge’, front line workers are able to respond to the institutional ambiguities they face. This analysis aligns with Lowndes’ concept of the ‘institutional entrepreneur’ (2005). Lowndes’ work on local governance has sought to explore the “creative spaces [that] exist between the extremes of institutional stability and volatility” (2005, 291). These ‘creative spaces’ are occupied by ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ who exploit ambiguities in the ‘rules of the game’ in order to respond to changing environments and to protect (or further) their own interests (Lowndes 2005, 291). Ambiguities have emerged from the extensive and complex modernisation processes in local government. The varied complexity of change is seen to open ‘creative spaces’ and ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ compete to fill this new space, “… it is, after all grassroots actors who make and remake institutions on a daily basis” (Lowndes 2005, 291, 7-8).
As Goss (2001) highlights, one of the key changes in the turn to governance is the re-making of the relationship between citizens and the state. In the turn to governance, front line workers are no longer just organisational facing actors, they also importantly, work within the community and need to work in a way that is locally appropriate and responds to community issues and priorities. This focus not only allows the aims of policy reform to be imbued with local relevance and meaning but also adds a further dimension to the new narrative of front line work. This additional aspect also allows front line workers to be termed ‘civic entrepreneurs’. However, it is a concept largely without analytical and empirical purchase. This paper will provide a framework of strategies of civic entrepreneurs drawing on the stories articulated by front line workers in neighbourhood management. These twin concepts of ‘institutional’ and ‘civic’ entrepreneurship provide a new and resonant narrative of front line work in the contemporary public sector.

**Case study: Local governance and neighbourhood working**

Under Conservative governments in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, reform of local government meant that “local government lost an empire and emerged with no coherent role” (Stoker 2004a, 47). Under New Labour, local government has continued in a dynamic of reform; where reforms in service delivery are only part of a wider package of reforms which aim at ‘democratic renewal’. New Labour have marked themselves in contrast to their Conservative predecessors in their commitment to renew politics at the local level. Local government has become a key site for policy and action in the turn to governance through networks and has gained a key role in the development of multi-level partnership structures. Commitment to partnership is a key feature of New Labour’s rhetoric, “partnership is the new language of public governance” and does carry a clear commitment to the long term building of joint decision-making and implementation (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002, 1 and 5-7). A commitment to some level of community engagement is long standing in public policy and has been covered extensively in the academic literature (Taylor 2003). However, this has often been top down and not designed around the needs of communities (Lowndes et al 1998, Taylor 2003). Now more negotiated and shared forms of engagement are developing, though this is difficult, the community is now recognised as a key partner in local governance. In this context of policy reform and the emergence of local governance, the neighbourhood has become prominent as a site for both policy action and local governance.
Neighbourhood’ is a concept of long standing resonance in public policy, with policies dating back to the early 1970s. ‘Neighbourhood’ is differentiated from ‘community’ on the basis of a spatial aspect to its definition. Yet, the definition of a neighbourhood is also seen to rest on its social construction and as such it is a highly complex and differentiated concept. The ‘neighbourhood’ has become a central part of New Labour’s response to the key challenges it perceived itself to face in government of: how to move towards a more inclusive form of governance through networks; how to improve public services; and how to tackle social exclusion. These issues are seen to be most clearly manifested and open to response at the neighbourhood level. The neighbourhood is seen as an appropriate and effective level to engage local communities and key stakeholders in decision making and the level at which agencies and services should seek to ‘join up’ and work holistically. The turn to neighbourhood is underpinned by the rhetoric of ‘double devolution’ which refers to the decentralisation of policy and decision making together with service delivery from the centre to the local level and also from local government to a range of actors involved in local governance (Cabinet Office 1999).

Neighbourhood management in Salford

The turn towards ‘neighbourhood’ is further evidenced in the numerous and varied examples of neighbourhood based working (Power 2004). This research draws on the case study of the neighbourhood management system developed in Salford. Salford is a city in the North West of England adjunct to Manchester. Salford was significantly affected by the decline of heavy industry in the 1960s and 1970s and has since suffered from marked socio-economic deprivation and physical dereliction. Neighbourhood based working has a history in Salford; this commitment has been renewed partly in response to the prompt of the New Labour government and in conjunction with extensive and intensive area based interventions aimed at regenerating and reducing inequality in the city. Salford is in receipt of extensive area based intervention by central government (SEU 2001). This area based intervention prompted neighbourhood management to be implemented across the city and this is widely recognised to have contributed to the dynamic of change within both the authority and the wider area.

“Neighbourhood management is seen by Salford City Council and its partners as a means of engaging effectively with local communities, meeting the needs of communities and improving neighbourhoods and closing the gap between the best
and worst performing areas” (Meegan 2006, i). The Salford model has now been running in its current form for approximately three years and how been ‘rolled out’ city wide across eight service delivery areas termed ‘neighbourhoods’. These ‘neighbourhoods’ are combinations of two or three wards and range in population size from 14000 to 39000. Neighbourhood management currently costs the council approximately £1.5million annually. Each neighbourhood has a team of front line workers from a wide range of local authority directorates and public partner organisations with responsibility for service delivery and community engagement in that locality. Front line roles vary from community development to health improvement and street environment work. The time thus far has been used to develop and embed the new structures; train and develop the staff involved; and produce two rounds of Community Action Plans (devised by elected Community Committees in each neighbourhood) and develop project activity on the ground. In the evaluation for Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, Meegan acknowledged that the Salford model “already appears to demonstrating capacity for delivery and sustainable renewal” (2006, x).

Difficulties and ambiguities in front line work

Front line workers are now charged with responding to the inherent complexities of the contemporary public sector in the turn to governance. This complexity presents difficulties and dilemmas about front line workers’ everyday work. Front line workers in neighbourhood management in Salford have articulated numerous stories about these concerns.

Front line stories focus on main types of concerns: political; legitimacy; financial; organisational; and information. The table below draws on these stories to indicate a normative response to these concerns from ‘government’ and ‘governance’ framings and the practical difficulties the differences between these framings present in the everyday work of front line workers:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>'Government'</th>
<th>'Governance'</th>
<th>Everyday difficulties and dilemmas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political-legitimacy</td>
<td>Elected members are central to democratic accountability, representation and legitimacy</td>
<td>In the turn to participative governance, the community is important in political decision making and legitimacy</td>
<td>How to work with elected members who are often difficult to work with; not ‘representative of their community’; pre-occupied with party political concerns and lack key skills, notably in their new role as ‘community champions’ How to gain an understanding of community dynamics? How to engage ‘hard to reach’ parts of the community?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Derived hierarchically; often severe limitations and scarcity</td>
<td>Funding is available from many sources as a product of multi-level funding streams and initiatives</td>
<td>How to access, co-ordinate and evaluate short term, fragmented funding streams?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational</td>
<td>Separate bureaucratic silos</td>
<td>Multi-level/ sectoral partnerships</td>
<td>How to develop a shared agenda and priorities with organisations with different cultures, statutory responsibilities and government targets?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Clear guidance and ‘rules’ for work from government</td>
<td>Multiple agendas from different government agendas, partners and communities?</td>
<td>How to balance and manage demands and expectations from a range of important, yet potentially conflicting actors?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Front line workers are often left to reconcile the emergent demands of governance – notably those from the communities they work within- with the remnants of earlier structures of the public sector. The turn to governance has implied that front line workers should now be less influenced by the ‘rules’ of the public sector and guided more by the relationships they form within their organisation, across organisations in partnership and notably with the community. Indeed, the ‘rules’ of the public sector in its traditional form have been undermined; yet, they have not been clearly replaced. However, it is inherently difficult for policy makers at the centre to reconstitute everyday work the local or neighbourhood level. As such front line workers have to interpret policy guidance and make choices about how to implement and deliver policy in a locally appropriate way.

Re-interpreting front line work: developing a methodology

Interpretive approaches to research rely upon an epistemology that stresses the socially constructed nature of any claims to knowledge (Yanow 1996). These approaches have an extensive and rich multi-disciplinary grounding, but are relatively new in the field of public policy analysis (Richards and Smith 2004, Sullivan 2007). The interpretive turn within this discipline asserts policy analysis to be, “a process of inquiry that seeks to ask questions, rather than as a collection of tools and techniques designed to provide the right answer” (Dunn 1981, 3). ‘Decentring’ – drawing out the social construction of a practice through considering how individuals create and act on meanings – is an important tool of interpretivism.

Taking an ethnographic approach

An interpretive framework is useful in this research because of the emphasis and sensitivity it allows to how front line workers themselves understand and articulate their roles (Yanow 2006). Interpretive approaches allow for and reflect the complexity of governance, but also do not pre-empt or curtail the richness and contingency of findings.

This paper draws on ethnographic work within the neighbourhood management system in Salford. The criticism of ‘cultural parochialism’ (Munro 2007, 12) often raised about single site work becomes an advantage in the context of this specific research. This focused ethnographic approach seeks to reconstruct the meanings of
social actors by recovering other people’s stories (Geertz 1973). The ‘thick
description’ (Geertz 1973) obtained from this sort of research approach is able to
identify and explore important, yet often mundane, dynamics of front line work which
may be ignored or missed when using other research methodologies and also allows
the reader to experience the context of the research (Erlandson 1993).

Collecting data

The ethnographic work was in two stages, preliminary work over a three month
period in 2005 which involved informal meetings and attending events, together with
gathering data from a range of secondary sources. The main ethnographic work took
place over a six month period in 2006 everyday work stories were collected from
interviews with over 45 front line workers from varying positions within the
neighbourhood teams across Salford.

Front line workers were selected ‘contingently’ through existing contacts, for example
partner organisations; and also ‘serially’ through identification from preliminary
documentary based research (Erlandson 1993). This meant that the front line were
both internally and externally recognisable (Nepstad and Bob 2006); the identification
and sampling of front line workers within this research was based on ‘position’ and
‘reputation’ (Bonjean and Olsen 1964). Stories detailed front line workers’ specific
roles; their employment and background; the neighbourhood they worked in; the
neighbourhood management system; their perception of its impact; any difficulties
they perceived themselves to face in their job; the responses they provide to these
difficulties; any recent examples of projects or initiatives they have worked on; and
their perspectives on wider public sector reform. Maynard-Moody and Musheno
emphasise the importance of examining these contextual details, as it “allows the
researcher to anchor their interpretations in the storyteller’s interpretations” (2003,
19). Indeed, several front line workers shared different versions of the same stories
or were aware of particular stories. The substantive period of this research, taking
place over several months, also worked to provide a more engaged and deeper
understanding of the role of front line workers. Extensive notes and recordings were
taken throughout the period of research which were subsequently written out and
transcribed. Though time consuming, transcription can be seen as a useful part of
the research analysis, reflecting Wolcott’s comment that “writing is thinking” (1991,
21 original emphasis).
Stories and narratives

The research became in part a vast collection of everyday work stories from front line workers, reflecting that stories and narratives are “simply there, like life itself” (Bathes 1977). It was found that front line workers offered stories to answer questions, indicating that stories are, “a basic tool that individuals use to communicate and create understanding with other people and for themselves” (Feldman et al 2004). As Maynard-Moody and Musheno note, stories and narratives are tools that are “at once a microscope for examining minute details and a telescope for scanning the intellectual horizon for themes and patterns” (2006, 26). The terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ are often used interchangeably, but here they will differentiated: with ‘story’ being seen as ‘microscope’ and ‘narrative’ as the ‘horizon’, the aggregated broader level.

Story based analysis was also seen as providing an appropriate and effective means of obtaining a ‘de-centred’ account. As Bevir et al have noted, “a decentred approach should provide thick descriptions using the accounts or texts of participants”, in this case front line workers (2003, 63). This sort of description can be found through listening, transcribing, reading and re-reading stories that front line workers articulate. Thick description is required to acknowledge the “convoluted, intertwined and overlapping webs of meaning that are significant to the actors in the situation described” (Yanow 1996, 20).

Narratives are useful data because individuals often make sense of the world and their place in it through narrative form (Feldman et al 2004); “storytelling and understanding are functionally the same thing” (Schrank cited in Maynard Moody and Musheno 2003, 22). A story-based methodology also has several advantages for this research. Stories give prominence to human agency and the voice of individuals and reveal the “speaker’s sense of self, for it is the self that is located at the centre of the narrative” (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 325). As Maynard-Moody and Musheno note,

Stories give research a pungency and vitality absent from mainstream social science because they give such prominence to individual actions and motives and the human condition... Stories illustrate the consequences of following, bending or ignoring rules and practices. They bring institutions to life; they provide a glimpse of what it is like to [work there]... and frustrations of working in the process-bound bureaucracy are palpable (2003, 30).
The process of identifying story based narratives began in the transcription and writing up process, “the human mind finds patterns so quickly and easily that it needs no how-to advice... patterns just ‘happen’ almost too quickly” (Miles and Huberman 1994, 246). These patterns were used to consider how different actors interpreted these themes and where differences and dis-junctures occurred. The process of analysis is ongoing and iterative, moving between transcripts and initial analyses. Such ‘systematicity’ and the re-examination and questioning of research findings is seen as crucial to the analysis (Lynch 2006) and helps to maintain a ‘scientific attitude’ (Soss 2006, 101).

All transcripts and notes were read, re-read and coded according to a framework determined by the earlier academic literature review, documentary analysis and the key themes identified during the research. In addition, Erlandson (1993) identifies the processes of ‘peer de-briefing’ and ‘member checking’ to ensure that the stories offered by the researcher have both internal and external validity. Peer de-briefing takes place with fellow researchers whereby findings are discussed in academic communities. Member checking with interviewees helps to ensure that the researcher’s interpretation accurately reflects the meanings of stories communicated by interviewees. In reflecting on the member checking process, Maynard-Moody and Musheno observe, “perhaps the most humbling experience of all is telling someone in the field… of some hard earned insight and being met with a polite, ‘that’s obvious' stare” (2006, 318). These processes of clarification show a ‘methodological commitment to ‘get it right’ from the perspective of situated actors ‘lived experience’ (Schwartz Shea 2006, 105). Research findings were shared with colleagues, supervisors and at a number of academic conferences. This was supplemented by sharing findings with strategic level managers within neighbourhood management in Salford together with the front line workers involved in the research. In addition, interpretations made by the researcher were also correlated with those of other interviewees and wider documentary analysis to draw out themes, patterns and contradictions.

**Front line workers as ‘institutional’ and ‘civic entrepreneurs’**

The interpretive methodology developed in this research allowed the everyday work stories of front line workers in neighbourhood management in Salford to be drawn
out. As noted, front line workers face numerous complex dilemmas about their everyday work. However, they face an ‘action imperative’ (Hill and Hupe 2007) and have to respond to these difficulties. Within the stories of their everyday work, front line workers articulated various ‘strategies’ they employed to respond to and resolve these dilemmas. These strategies can be understood as those of ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ (Lowndes 2005):

Table 1: Front line workers as ‘institutional entrepreneurs’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Institutional entrepreneur’ strategy</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Sharing’</td>
<td>Learning through networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Swinton Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developing formal partnerships around tackling crime and disorder ‘Mainstreaming’ responsibility and performance management for crime and disorder; developing multi level partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Borrowing’</td>
<td>Transfer of resources from a partner or peer body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>‘Beatsweep’</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using strategies developed in other areas as the basis of informal partnerships Extending public sector partnerships on an informal and local basis; building awareness of local issues and responding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Remembering’</td>
<td>Using redundant institutional resources to meet new objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Swinton car project</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using cars removed from the local area to support a community project aimed at diverting young people from car related crime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Front line workers can however, also be seen to act as ‘civic entrepreneurs’ (Lowndes 2005, Leadbeater and Goss 1998). The latter concept also focuses on addressing issues around resource utilisation; but the vacuity of the work on the concept implies an opportunity to ‘fill’ it with some more empirically underpinned work on the roles actually undertaken by front line workers. The stories accessed in this research have highlighted a number of strategies used by front line workers that are appropriate to the term, ‘civic entrepreneur’.

The first of these strategies refers to ‘reaching’ excluded groups. Front line workers use their ‘local knowledge’ in order to identify groups which are outside of
mainstream service provision and the mainstream community. This is indicative of the outward looking focus of front line workers and involves front line workers acting as ‘gatekeepers’ to a range of public services and signposting excluded groups within the community to available resources. Front line workers also then work to attempt to integrate and foster cohesion between excluded groups, the wider community and service providers.

The second strategy concerns the ‘enabling’ role that front line workers take on within the community. Front line workers engage with groups within the community – notably those excluded, marginalised and inactive from the wider community and existing service provision. Then, enable them to engage in the wider community and to build skills both in a specific capacity and in a broader, transferable sense.

The third strategy refers to the ‘fixing’ role that front line workers assume. Front line workers again use their ‘local knowledge’ to reconcile existing rules, projects and funding; with opportunities, for example in funding or partnership; with the needs and priorities of the local communities. The table below refers to particular stories articulated by front line workers in neighbourhood management roles in Salford that exemplify these strategies:

Table 2: Front line workers as 'civic entrepreneurs'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Civic entrepreneur’ strategy</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Reaching’</td>
<td>Identifying marginalised and excluded groups and signposting them to community resources and service providers; seeking to integrate these groups with the wider community and service providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Enabling’</td>
<td>Engaging with groups excluded from the wider community or existing service provision; facilitating building of specific and transferable skills; building their capacity to engage in the wider community and interact with service providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Fixing’</td>
<td>Relating government objectives and ‘rules’; with organisational opportunities and priorities within the community in order to produce mutually beneficial outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beyond ‘street level bureaucrats’: re-constituting front line professionalism and accountability

The table below provides a useful thematic summary of the changes in the context and role of front line work in the public sector. The paper will now explore these changes and the implications for professionalism and accountability in more detail, explicating more fully the new narrative of front line work suggested:
Table 3: A summary of the thematic changes in the context and role of front line public sector workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Classic ‘top down’ bureaucrat</th>
<th>Lipsky’s ‘street level bureaucrat’</th>
<th>Governance ‘institutional’ and ‘civic’ entrepreneurs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics and administration</td>
<td>Separation: between politics and administration</td>
<td>Introduces an empirical challenge but maintains normative distinction between politics and administration</td>
<td>Fundamental challenge to normative distinction through turn to governance Complexity gives space for innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational mechanisms</td>
<td>Hierarchical, linear, bureaucratic silos</td>
<td>Retention of bureaucratic norms and context</td>
<td>Use of bureaucratic, market and network based mechanisms, notably partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules and relationships</td>
<td>‘Rule bound’: following directives set by policy makers</td>
<td>Rule influenced but also professional norms, personal values and exchange with community</td>
<td>‘Rule saturated’ more influenced by relationships in local governance, including with the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource dependencies</td>
<td>Resources derived hierarchically: political legitimacy, authority, finance, organisational and informational</td>
<td>Issues concerning scarcity of resources raised notably financial and organisational; need to develop ‘coping mechanisms’</td>
<td>Shifting resource dependencies under governance, increasingly horizontal not vertical; but retention of vertical structures; creates ambiguity Increasing importance of local knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front line work</td>
<td>Responsible for delivery of policy; checking and monitoring following of rules</td>
<td>Use of discretion, series of techniques: routinising, modifying goals, rationing services, limiting clientele</td>
<td>Institutional entrepreneurship: borrowing, sharing, remembering (organisational facing): Civic entrepreneurship: reaching, enabling, fixing (community facing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Accountability and professionalism

There has been a widening of the roles in the public sector that can lay claim to ‘professionalism’, notably at the front line of public services. This expansion further erodes attempts to control front line workers hierarchically. The shifting balance of influence on front line work from ‘rules’ to ‘relationships’ suggested by governance implies that accountability should be seen more a social relationship than a mechanism of control.

Re-constituting accountability

Accountability has traditionally been understood in ‘top down’ terms, stemming from the consensus about representative forms of democracy and government. ‘Top down’ approaches to implementation can be added as a component of a coherent and accepted, but fundamentally normative, view on politics and administration and their relations (Hill and Hupe 2007, 286). Lipsky highlighted that “the implementation of policy is really about street level workers with high service ideals exercising discretion under intolerable pressures” (1980, xii). This indicates that attempts to control street level bureaucrats hierarchically are not only difficult to achieve, but are also somewhat self defeating as these systems can erode motivation and commitment (Stone 1995, 6 and Peck 2006, 35). The turn to governance has further challenged the viability of ‘top down’ representative forms of accountability by undermining the vertical relationships of the policy process and the associated hierarchical chain of accountability and emphasising more horizontal relationships (Stoker 1998).

Mejier and Bovens (2005) have put forward an alternative perspective considering accountability from a wider and more horizontal perspective. This work makes a distinction between different types of potential accountability relationships and related sets of norms and expectations: ‘organisational accountability’; ‘professional accountability’; ‘political accountability’; ‘legal accountability’; and ‘administrative accountability’ (Mejier and Bovens 2005). This perspective sees accountability as a “social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his conduct to some significant other” (Bovens 1998, 172). Hill and Hupe assert, in line with Gregory (2003), that accountability should be understood as an empirical phenomenon, as distinguished from responsibility with its wider normative connotation (2007, 286). Given the horizontal and differentiated character of
governance, public accountability can now been seen as something exercised by various actors on different scales (Hill and Hupe 2007, 288).

Lettinga and Moulijn conclude that “it is very hard to control daily practices of front line professionals because of work conditions and professional willingness to conform” (2004, 12). The effectiveness of the standard reaction of introducing more hierarchical controls has been shown to be empirically problematic, this raises the question then of what alternative forms of accountability can be found and who can participate in them. Hill and Hupe (2002, 2007) put forward the notion of ‘nested’ accountability. This highlights the role of street level bureaucrats in governance as being practised in a variety of action situations and so they are accountable in various relations, ‘top down’, ‘bottom up’ and ‘sideways’; “in the multi dimensional micro network of relations, street level bureaucrats practice multiple accountability…” (2007, 291). The work of street level bureaucrats only:

… reinforced the overall point about the avoidance of simple formulae in relation to the accountability of street-level bureaucrats… the complexity of governance means that there are multiple accountabilities: issues of holding to account emerge in political-societal relations at various places. For some, this perhaps lessens the need to worry too much about “control deficits”. Street level bureaucrats are held accountable in different ways and to varying degrees, but certainly more ways than strictly from the political centre alone… However, analysing these accountabilities as practised at the street level, is open to empirical-comparative research. This latter may add a new chapter to the development of the theme of street level bureaucracy (Hill and Hupe 2007, 295-6)

The changing role of professionals in the public sector

Hill and Hupe’s analysis of the ‘professionalisation’ of street level bureaucrats forming a basis for a new accountability in the public sector retains Lipsky’s emphasis on the professionals and the influence of their norms on policy making (2007). In Lipsky’s analysis, ‘street level bureaucrats’ were all professionals: doctors, nurses, teachers, librarians, judges, lawyers and so on. Street level bureaucrats’ use of discretion was seen to stem importantly from their professional autonomy. Lipsky’s analysis was conducted at a time when the power of professionals was accepted in the public sector (Laffin 1986, Laffin and Entwistle 2000). More recently, commentators have argued that professionals, particularly those involved in service delivery, are losing their discretion and autonomy through the increasing diversity of demands placed on the public sector and the move to managerialism which implies that
professionals are increasingly having their work programmed by central government policy makers (Hoggett 1996; Clarke and Newman 1997; see also Exworthy and Halford 2002).

Yet, others have questioned the simplicity of this analysis (Laffin 1998). Post war policy making was characterised by tightly knit policy communities often dominated by professionally driven agendas (Richardson and Jordan 1979). However, since the 1980s, policy making structures have become more diffuse, resembling loosely organised networks (Rhodes 1997). Whilst acknowledging that professional associations have experienced difficulties in maintaining their influence in national policy making, Laffin and Entwistle (2000) - supported by the more recent work of Ackroyd et al (2007) - do not support a strong de-professionalisation thesis.

Yet, they argue that New Labour perceive professional definitions and boundaries as a barrier to their search for new solutions and more successful policy delivery (Laffin and Entwistle 2000, 218). New Labour may be seen to tackle this concern by increasing the complexity and thus space for developmental work and innovation in the public sector (Stoker 2004a) and through this have widened the number of roles within the public sector that can lay claim to professionalism, as noted earlier (Hill and Hupe 2007, 282; see also Etzioni 1969). So, to some extent, although professionalism is an important force in influencing the exercise of discretion, it is currently an incomplete model by which to explain discretion, accountability and responsiveness in the broader changing context of democratic governance and politics (Vinzant and Crothers 1996, 461).

**Conclusion: Front line work: beyond discretion, towards entrepreneurialism**

The specific reform agendas for the modernisation of local government and the turn to neighbourhoods are reflective of this complexity. Through exploring this complexity, it becomes clear that the centre simply cannot re-constitute the local and the shaping of local governance has to be conducted at the local level. This scope for decision making at the local level and the complex, and potentially contradictory, rationales for both modernisation and decentralisation again create space for innovation. The neighbourhood context is developmental with few pre-existing norms about working practices. In contrast to the classic bureaucracy of the ‘top down’ approach and of Lipsky’s analysis, front line workers are less shaped by rules and increasingly dependent on a different configuration of resources and relationships. This presents a fundamental challenge to the normative distinction between
politics and administration and demands a re-assessment of how to understand the policy process and the public sector more widely, and the role of front line workers within it.

Whilst front line workers have to continue to meet the demands of their ‘day job’, they are also now encouraged or left to take a more developed role in the policy process and in decision making about the public sector. This is informed by the increasing recognition that local service delivery and governance cannot be fully re-shaped from the centre. Rather, front line workers have to take more responsibility about how to implement and deliver policies that are locally appropriate, but also meet centrally set standards and priorities. In order to fulfil this role and respond to the ambiguities and dilemmas stemming from the complexity of the turn to governance, front line workers increasingly rely on the less acknowledged resource of ‘local knowledge’ (Yanow 2004).

In early analyses of the policy process, front line workers were seen to operate in a highly bureaucratic context where their potential contribution to decision making was derided as ‘deviant’ or ‘subversive’ to the normative view of policy making. Lipsky’s challenge to this analysis centres on the discretion of front line workers (1980). Discretion is understood as the use of choice or judgement within particular boundaries and as a response to the difficulties and dilemmas that front line workers face. Discretion is a term that retains the bureaucratic assumption that front line workers are ‘rule bound’ (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Lipsky asserted that this discretion is necessary for several reasons: street level bureaucrats work in complex situations that cannot be reduced to procedural guidance; some situations require front line workers to make decisions about people; sometimes street level bureaucrats work independently and with autonomy from their supervisors; and finally because discretion can be seen to provide street level bureaucrats with some authority over clients (Lipsky 1980). The autonomy and discretion exercised by street level bureaucrats, together with the severe limitations on both organisational resources and personnel, mean that street level bureaucrats become policy makers by default. Street level bureaucrats use their discretion to ‘make policy’ so as overcome the lack of resources. The discretion exercised and the ‘policy’ that bureaucrats made was seen to be in the form of particular techniques, including “routinising, modifying goals, rationing their services, re-defining or limiting the clientele to be served, asserting priorities and generally developing practices that permit them to process the work they are required to do in some way” (Lipsky 1976, 207). This sort of discretionary policy making can be seen to amount to little more than developing ‘coping mechanisms’ or a form of bureaucratic rationing. Front line workers are not radically re-interpreting the nature of the work they have to do; rather they are subsuming it into the
bureaucratic procedures that already exist. This assumes that the nature of front line work is somehow reducible to a series of repeatable adaptations.

Front line workers in the turn to governance are now faced with more complex demands and with only ambiguous resources from within the public sector to which to respond to them. Yet, front line workers do face an ‘action imperative’ (Hill and Hupe 2007) and complex dilemmas are ‘part of the job’ and need to be responded to. Front line workers use their local knowledge in order to develop responsive strategies. These strategies, as articulated by front line workers in the public sector, are summarised in the table below:

This summary of the strategies enacted by front line workers is framed by two concepts of the front line worker as ‘entrepreneur’. The institutional entrepreneur (Lowndes 2005) works to exploit ambiguities within an organisation by drawing on a range of strategies focusing on drawing in new resources from networks and personal experiences. The addition of the ‘civic’ aspect to understanding front line entrepreneurialism reflects the community focused objectives of front line work. The term ‘civic entrepreneur’ was coined in a DEMOS publication to refer to individuals in the public sector who recognise the need and potential source for innovation in the public sector which they can be found within the communities they serve (1998). This research has provided strong empirical and analytical substantiation to this concept.

The differentiated narrative of localised, community focused and entrepreneurial work at the front line is both contextually and inherently different, certainly to ‘top down’ analyses of public policy implementation and front line work, but also to Lipsky’s concept of the ‘street level bureaucrat’ (1980). Lipsky’s explication of front line discretion highlighted a number of techniques that front line workers used in their everyday work, including routinising, modifying, rationing services and limiting the clientele to which services were available (1976, 207). In the turn to governance, these ‘techniques’ have been broadened out to ‘strategies’ which are less about reducing front line work to procedural bureaucratic formats and more about being outward looking and entrepreneurial in front line work. This change is reflected in Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s comment that whilst front line workers are still ‘rule saturated’, they are no longer ‘rule bound’ (2003). Front line workers in the complex context of the turn to governance are asked to make more decisions in more complicated situations with a more outward looking perspective and as such their work is more appropriately characterised as ‘entrepreneurial’ than ‘discretionary’. These entrepreneurial
strategies are more appropriate and responsive to the aims and objectives of New Labour’s reform agenda.

The challenges presented to ‘top down’ perspectives on public policy implementation by Lipsky’s work and the move towards governance and the new narrative of front line work that implies, has significant consequences for the role of professionals and the conceptions of accountability in local governance. Academic work has begun to identify new conceptions of accountability, for example Moore’s notion of ‘building legitimacy’ (1996); and new strategies for ensuring responsibility at the front line of public services, for example Hill and Hupe’s work on ‘nested accountability’ (2007). It is also clear from the government’s direction of reform and the focus of front line workers themselves that that the community is a key dimension in any re-constituting of accountability. However, local governance is variously constructed and remnants of the public sector which may be seen to characterise it in its earlier stages remain, most prominently elected members. The demand for accountability to be reconstituted is clear and suggestions are being formed on how this may develop.

Front line workers have also implied their own strategies for how their everyday work in the turn to governance can be better facilitated but also the strategies that allow them space to be front line professionals who are also accountable in a form appropriate to governance. As neighbourhood working becomes more embedded, tensions and dilemmas that front line workers face will inevitably be diminished. There are key developments and interventions that can assist in this. Notably, in facilitating capacity building for elected members to take a more active role in scrutiny, but from the perspective of their new role as ‘community champions’; development of mechanisms to engage not only the ‘usual suspects’ but also hard to reach parts of the community in deliberation and decision making; develop more cohesive funding streams; and encouraging more inclusive partnership working to allow a more co-ordinated multi-agency and multi-level approach to shared concerns.
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