

Front-line workers in local government are no longer 'street level bureaucrats' but instead act as 'civic entrepreneurs' to make order out of chaos for their communities.

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In the 1970's academic Michael Lipsky coined the term 'street level bureaucracy' to describe how front-line workers in the public sector form a vital part of the policy-making community. [Catherine Durose](#) shows how contemporary notions of civic entrepreneurship have evolved in the UK, providing a source for innovation in local governance by tapping into the flexibility and relationship-building skills of local people.

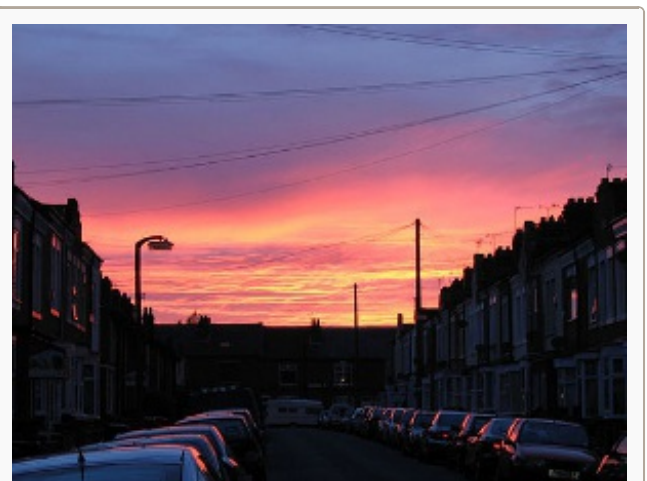


In early analyses of the policy process, front-line workers were seen as operating in a highly bureaucratic context where their potential contribution to policy making was derided as 'deviant' or 'subversive'. The seminal work of [Michael Lipsky](#) argued that policy making does not end in a piece of legislation or directive from central government, but rather that policy is made in busy, crowded job centres, libraries, schools and town halls and in the daily encounters between those on the front-line of public services with the general public. Lipsky painted a picture of work in the public sector as uncertain, pressurised and with severe resource constraints. The 'coping' techniques of front-line workers include routinising, modifying goals and rationing services. Front-line workers need to use their discretion and often make value judgements to deal with the complex human situations they are faced with everyday.

In the period since Lipsky's analysis in the late 1970s, the public sector has undergone substantive reform. The localist rhetoric employed by the early New Labour government – and continued now by the current Coalition government, for example in the Localism Bill's 'right to provide' – has sought to harness the local knowledge of those on the front-line of public services in order to transform the public sector. Yet these [reforms have often been contradictory](#), with measures aimed at empowering staff being tempered by centralist intervention and managerialism. As traditional structures become obsolete before new ways of doing things are fully established, the everyday experience for many at the front-line of public services is one of chaos. But there are also opportunities for innovation.

Our research looked to explore these important yet often missed dynamics of front-line work by working with a diverse array of front-line staff – ranging from community development workers to health improvement officers – based in the neighbourhood management structures set up in Salford. Neighbourhood management was part of a wider regeneration strategy for Salford, building on the sustained and intensive interventions of central government over the last two decades and providing means for engaging with local communities and developing capacity to better meet their needs.

Our research showed that for many people working at the peripheries of local governance, such as in neighbourhood management, the job is no longer, if it ever was, to simply follow procedure. Instead, front-line workers need to step outside the traditional boundaries of their practice and develop entrepreneurial strategies, experimenting in the new spaces and contingencies which public sector reform has opened. Front-line work at these peripheries is now less defined by rules and more by relationships with citizens, communities and colleagues, often negotiated through local knowledge or 'street smarts'. In dealing with the 'muddle and mess', front-line workers are now charged with reconciling the emergent demands of governance – notably those of the communities they work in – within the remnants of previous local government structures.



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Lipsky provided a justification for looking at the front-line of public services to understand how policy works, but practice has moved on from his 'street level bureaucracy'. The research identified a narrative of front-line work which can be described as '[civic entrepreneurship](#)'. The concept of civic entrepreneurship focuses on

the role that public sector staff can play in the wider revitalisation of the public sector, specifically in terms of interacting with service users and communities. Examples of civic entrepreneurship can be found at the boundaries of local governance where new spaces are opening up, for example in urban deprived neighbourhoods. The stories related by front-line workers in Salford's neighbourhood management structures about their everyday work show how front-line workers engaged with the community – especially so-called 'hard to reach' groups like new communities and young people– to build relationships, capacity and skills and to reconcile different agendas and priorities. Civic entrepreneurialism is part of a seemingly consensual vision of change in local government which is more flexible, cross-cutting and relies on participation from the community.

Despite ongoing localist rhetoric, since this research was conducted in the mid-New Labour period the world has changed and the contingency of 'civic entrepreneurialism' is clear. The holistic and sustained interventions from central government that contextualised 'civic entrepreneurialism' have now been severely curtailed. Fiscal and state retrenchment in the wake of the international debt crisis has severely impacted on local government, particularly for local authorities in deprived areas like Salford. Civic entrepreneurs with the experience and understanding to support voluntary and community groups are often funded through regeneration initiatives and may be particularly vulnerable to the cuts in public spending.

The 'Big Society' ideal pushed by the coalition government is presented as a means of catalysing civil society, as opposed to New Labour's 'big state.' But given the context of severe resource constraint, will front-line workers fall back on the discretionary techniques and coping mechanisms? Or will front-line workers continue to develop their civic entrepreneurialism role instead by brokering relationships and enabling action from communities?

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This post is based on a longer article, ['Re-visiting Lipsky: front-line work in UK local governance'](#) published in *Political Studies*.

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