

“I think we ought not to acknowledge them [paupers] as that encourages them to write”: The administrative state, power and the Victorian pauper

The rise of the information state, bureaucratic revolution, and closer centralisation and co-ordination of government functions have been the subject of much historical debate.¹ The size and effectiveness of the central apparatus can be overplayed even by the early 1900s, yet it is clear that from the mid-nineteenth century the state reached deeper into the everyday lives of its citizens than it had ever done, or ever could have done, before.² The post-1834 New Poor Law has been seen as the normative example of such centralisation.³ It involved a breaching of the connection between local poverty and local relief at the parochial level established under the Old Poor Law of 1601. Parishes were formed into unions with elected guardians and paid officials, but at the heart of the New Poor Law stood a new Central Authority with its own administrative apparatus, including an inspectorate created to police localities.⁴ This Central Authority established rules for auditing, union borrowing, eligibility for relief, and the nature of institutional care, as well as wielding powers to control local appointments. Central power (exercised through mechanisms such as disallowing spending, circulation of orders, inspection, and correspondence), would over time flatten local variations in welfare practice that had, in the view of the architects of 1834, blighted the Old Poor Law.

Reflecting the general sense that power is always multi-focal, recent historians have suggested that the impact of 1834 on the everyday experiences of welfare was in fact limited. While the New Poor Law was an organic entity – in terms of organisational structure, changing guidance to localities over relief eligibility, susceptibility to the emerging logic of local democracy, and sensitivity to currents of public narrative about the “proper” treatment of the poor – two key regularities in terms of scope and focus are, however, observable. Thus, outdoor relief was not curtailed and workhouses, the totemic heart of the new system, rapidly came to be (and remained) filled with those like the old, sick, and children who were never meant to be the focus of harsher welfare rules.⁵ Equally, it has become clear that the

¹ For the causes and consequences of these processes see: W. Whyte, “‘The Too Clever by Half People’ and Parliament”, *Parliamentary History*, 13 (2018), 119-38, p. 121. In addition, see D. Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces, 1700-1870* (Basingstoke, 1997); P. Harling, *The Modern British State* (Cambridge, 2001); and E Higgs, *The Information State in England: The Central Collection of Information on Citizens since 1500* (Basingstoke, 2003).

² On central officials and policy formation, see L. Goldman, ‘Social Reform and the pressure of “progress” on Parliament, 1660-1914’, *Parliamentary History*, 13 (2018), 72-88, p. 77. More widely on the ambition and limits of the state, O. MacDonagh, *Early Victorian Government, 1830-1870* (London, 1977); O. MacDonagh, ‘The 19th century revolution in government: A reappraisal’, *Historical Journal*, 1 (1958), 52-67; and J. Guldi, *Roads to Power: Britain Invents the Infrastructure State* (London, 2012).

³ 4&5 Will 4 c76, *An Act for the Amendment and better Administration of the Laws relating to the Poor of England and Wales*, 13 August 1834.

⁴ From 1834-1847 the Central Authority was styled the Poor Law Commission (PLC), between 1848-August 1871 the Poor Law Board, and from 1871 to 1919 the Poor Law Department within the Local Government Board (LGB). For clarity we use “Central Authority” or “the Centre”.

⁵ Summarised by S. King, “Thinking and rethinking the New Poor Law”, *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), 104-18.

Central Authority lacked the number of inspectors (even after their numbers were augmented during the formation of the PLB), budget, and power to control localities as closely as the 1834 legislation envisaged, so that local practice remained variable.⁶ Research on these matters and more widely to build on understanding of the ways that the poor experienced the New Poor Law offered in foundational works such as that of Anne Crowther is ongoing.⁷

It is easy to understate against this backdrop the fundamental nature of the administrative and process changes required after 1834. The new structures were created from a blank canvas, as it were from the ground up, and the New Poor Law might be understood as a learning exercise in the extension of governmental function. The sheer enormity of the task of establishing the Central Authority and then keeping it running was certainly misunderstood at the time. Subsequently, surprisingly little work has been done on the processes that emerged from this endeavour for ensuring that the reach of the Centre was maximised, either in general or as the organisational form of the Centre changed over the nineteenth-century. Paul Carter and Natalie Whistance provide an overarching account of the “correspondence archive” to 1871. Subsequently, Carter and Steven King have undertaken an overview of the technicalities that governed the correspondence passing between individual unions and the Central Authority.⁸ Their focus was how the Centre developed a more complex/refined level of organisation over time, with particular emphasis on the subject indexes to correspondence. Notwithstanding this work, we have an imperfect understanding of what was actually “new” in the administration of the New Poor Law. In particular, the day-to-day work that took place at the Centre and how this impacted the way that paupers understood and navigated the new system is overlooked by many commentators.⁹

One notable function of the Central Authority has completely escaped sustained attention: correspondence with the poor themselves.¹⁰ Those who framed the 1834 Act had little appreciation of the sheer scale of correspondence between the poor (both those in receipt of relief and those on the margins of it), their advocates and parochial officials under the Old Poor Law. While the sending and survival of letters pre-1834 varies heavily between places and years, those who have used them display increasing confidence about their authenticity, representativeness

⁶ How variable is debatable. For contrasting perspectives: S. Shave, *Pauper Policies: poor law practice in England 1780-1850* (Manchester, 2017); S. King, ‘Rights, duties and practice in the transition between the Old and New Poor Laws 1820-1860s’, in P. Jones and S. King (eds), *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws, 1600-1900* (Newcastle, 2015), 263-91; K. Price, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: the crisis of care under the English poor law 1834-1900* (Basingstoke, 2015); and E. Hurren, *Protesting about Pauperism* (Woodbridge, 2007).

⁷ M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929: the history of an English social institution* (London, 1981); S. Williams, *Unmarried Motherhood in the Metropolis, 1700–1850: pregnancy, the poor law and provision* (Basingstoke, 2018).

⁸ P. Carter and N. Whistance, *Living the Poor Life: A Guide to the Poor Law Union Correspondence, c.1834 to 1871* (London, 2011); P. Carter and S. King, Keeping Track: Modern Methods: Administration and the Victorian Poor Law, *Archives*, XL (2014), 31-52.

⁹ A. Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law: the politics of inquiry, enactment, and implementation, 1832-1839* (London, 1978), focuses on the early PLC but only at the highest administrative level.

¹⁰ D. Englander, ‘From the Abyss: Pauper Petition and Correspondence in Victorian London’, *London Journal*, 25 (2000), 71-83, and D. Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the poor law, 1790-1870* (Farnham, 2010), pp. 157-187, both use pauper letters but not Central Authority responses.

and utility for understanding the “real” voices of claimants. Welfare in this system, we now understand, was genuinely negotiated and the poor themselves had a distinctive agency.¹¹ Perhaps the architects of 1834 hoped that a re-siting of the locus of administrative power from the parish to the union and Centre would dissuade the poor from continuing this practice, especially given national rules on eligibility and relief forms. Such hopes were, as this article shows, misplaced.¹² The poor continued to write to the local officials ultimately responsible for union policy, though few collections survive in local archives.¹³ They also, however, shifted their gaze and the Central Authority found itself having to establish systems to deal not only with correspondence from officials and guardians in unions (as they expected) but from the poor and their advocates (which they did not).

The nature, intent and impact of these systems and what they mean for our understanding of the effectiveness of the extension of the State infrastructure on the one hand and of how the poor navigated the New Poor Law on the other, is the focus of this article. In particular we ask three broad sets of questions. The first deal with issues of *process*: Were letters from the poor acknowledged as a regular part of the Central Authority’s work? What administrative mechanisms were employed by the Centre when dealing with such letters? How did these change over time and in response to exogenous factors such as postage and printing costs? Were pauper letters dealt with in the same manner as more “official” correspondence? And do we see any differences in attitude towards those who wrote from inside and outside the workhouse? The second set of questions focus on *administrative power*: What do responses and the process that generated them tell us about how the Central Authority viewed its own role and responsibilities towards the poor? What rhetoric did the Centre deploy in response to individual paupers? What do the rhetoric and administrative processes tell us about the developing role and power of the Central Authority in controlling the expectations of ordinary people and their communities? Finally, we ask what implications the operation of, or limitations on, administrative power have for our understanding of pauper agency and the wider sense of how the poor navigated the poor law across the period 1834 to 1871?¹⁴ After all, the Centre (see below) could not simply ignore the letters of the poor and there was a need to balance its responses between discouraging the pauper voice and managing the expectations of the poor on the one hand, but maintaining a reasonable level of inspection-led supervision of individual localities on the other. Anything that could be interpreted by the poor as a positive response may have encouraged them to pursue their cases. Being confronted with a wall of administrative non-interference might

¹¹ S. King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s-1830s* (London, 2019)

¹² They were also unrealistic, given the deeply ingrained practice of petitioning all arms of government. See C. Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain 1758-1834* (London, 1995).

¹³ We know from financial accounts (costs of postage and paper for instance), the fact that letters were sometimes replicated in newspapers, and from the self-referential nature of correspondence with the Centre, that poor claimants and their advocates continued to write at this local level. As under the Old Poor Law, however, survival of comprehensive local correspondence archives is patchy not least because of the space they required and their susceptibility to damp and re-use. Collections for places such as Towcester and Bolton thus survive by serendipity.

¹⁴ We finish in 1871 because at the inception of the LGB correspondence on a wide range of issues other than poor relief - including for instance sanitation – clogged up the central administrative arrangements.

have hampered a pauper's belief in their own power of agency, which under the Old Poor Law was sustained by innumerable small wins gained through extended correspondence with parochial officials.¹⁵ Ultimately, we will demonstrate a more confused and weaker Central Authority voice than those who framed the 1834 New Poor Law would have wished.

The Routine of Incoming Correspondence

Edward Higgs has called the 1834 Act a piece “of national legislation that sought to regulate society”.¹⁶ Historians have noted that this and other “projects of moral regulation”, as Felix Driver referred to them, were made possible by an increasing centralisation of information and surveillance of individual conduct.¹⁷ Indeed, David Eastwood noted of the 1830s that: “The capacity of central government to command, filter and deploy information constituted the kernel of a revolution in government.”¹⁸ This was not, however, just a revolution in *existing* central government. As already mentioned the New Poor Law was to require two new administrative units: The PLC at the centre and poor law unions in the localities. For information to be gathered and used successfully and for the new welfare system to work, effective communication between the two new levels of government would be crucial. It is thus unsurprising that the 1834 Act itself set out strict (if often overlooked) guidelines on the process of corresponding to be adopted by the Centre:

Commissioners shall make a Record of their Proceedings, in which shall be entered in Writing a Reference to *every Letter received*, from whence, its Date, the Date of its Reception, and the Subject to which it relates, and a Minute of *every Letter written* or Order given by the said Commissioners, whether in answer to such Letters received or otherwise, with the Date of the same and a Minute of the Opinion of each of the Members of the Board of Commissioners, in case they should finally differ in Opinion upon any Order to be given or other Proceeding of the Board...¹⁹

Clearly, then, tracking correspondence was seen as being vital from the very start. One aspect of this task was to ensure that the address of the PLC was well and consistently publicised, such that local officials but also advocates and paupers would all send correspondence to a single collection point. Another was keeping enough detail on individual letters to make sustained correspondence intelligible. In this sense, it is important to note that when called on to defend their working practices in the light of the Andover workhouse scandal, the Commissioners claimed they actually went beyond the requirements of the Act, stating that rather than simply keeping a *reference* to each letter sent or received they actually kept the original of every letter and a copy

¹⁵ King, *Writing the Lives*, 78-103.

¹⁶ Higgs. *op. cit.*, 65.

¹⁷ F. Driver. *Power and Pauperism: the workhouse system, 1834-1884* (Cambridge, 1993).

¹⁸ D. Eastwood. “Amplifying the Province of the Legislature”: the Flow of Information and the English State in the Early Nineteenth Century’, *Historical Research*, 62 (1989), 276-92, p. 278.

¹⁹ *An Act*. Section 4. Our italics.

of every official letter they wrote.²⁰ Such diligence produced the phenomenal archive on which this article rests.²¹

In turn, the (new) processes at work on each piece of correspondence in the (new) offices of the Centre can tell us much about the way in which the state sought to extend its reach, voice and control. Thus, as correspondence of all sorts entered the Central Authority from poor law unions the immediate concern of the administrative staff was to append a series of letters and numbers that made the document traceable.²² The date of receipt was stamped towards the top of the letter, or the first page only within multiple page letters/reports. In addition, written (usually) in the top third of the page would be a unique identifying number which was then underlined with a contracted year below it. Together the unique identifying number and the year made up the “paper number” of that piece of correspondence.²³ Where items comprised covering letters with several enclosures the clerks were to provide the unique identifying number on the covering letters and accompanying papers were marked with “enc” (for enclosure).²⁴ At the same time the name of the union along with the union number and poor law district number was entered, also across the top part of the letter/covering letter. Collectively these administrative actions provided each text with specific “identifiers” and such additions to the correspondence would be performed by the clerks on a daily basis. The incoming letter thus identified would be registered as part of the Central Authority’s official paperwork. In turn, a précis of the letter would then be entered into a central register along with the author’s name, date of writing and the identifiers added to the letter by the clerks as outlined above. Further annotations by the Central Authority’s staff show us the results of their internal conversations. Draft responses, usually based on these annotations, were then written up. To assist with the drafting process the Centre quickly devised partial pro-forma’s. On many occasions we can almost see the thought processes of the person compiling the draft as they cross through and substitute words, lines or paragraphs of text. These “~~clean~~” drafts then also acted as the “office copy” thus retaining as data the department’s response. When the text was complete it would be passed to another clerk to be copied out neatly and sent as the official response to the writer of the original incoming correspondence, a letter which also contained the address of the PLC thus ensuring its constant circulation.²⁵ In this way, the newly founded PLC sought to establish uniformity in practice and procedure that they no doubt hoped

²⁰ British Parliamentary Papers (BPP) *Copies of Letters from the Poor-law Commissioners to the Secretary of State, respecting the Transaction of the Business of the Commission, 1847*, 15.

²¹ The National Archives (TNA), MH12 LGB and predecessors: Correspondence with Poor Law Unions and Other Local Authorities, 1834-1900. Most post-1900 material was destroyed by bombing during World War II.

²² The number of unions fluctuated. Between 1835 and 1838 their numbers increased from 111 to 594. By the early 1850s there were 607 unions, increasing again by the early 1860s to 646: *Annual Reports of the PLC* (volumes 1-4) and *Annual Reports of the PLB* (volumes 4-5 and 13). Part of this increase reflected newly declared unions coming into being from non-unionised places, while others were original unions being divided.

²³ Paper numbers started at 1 in January each year. If a letter was numbered 1/53 this would identify it as the first to be received in 1853.

²⁴ Adherence to this convention was episodic.

²⁵ Final letters of response were not re-copied. Where such letters were sent to individual poor writers, the chances of survival are vanishing.

would underpin greater uniformity in the policies executed at local level.²⁶ Indeed, the localities were quickly drawn into this unifying process. The unique paper numbers assigned to incoming letters were used by the localities and quoted back to the Centre in their responses if they wanted to reference past correspondence. There is evidence, as we shall see later, that this formalised method of correspondence passed quickly into wider public knowledge.

From the early 1840s (and retrospectively for earlier material) incoming correspondence and associated draft responses were bound into large volumes. Binding was organised in union, year, and paper number order. This approach has had a marked impact on the surviving record, preventing the material from undergoing weeding by successive custodians and archivists.²⁷ In this way the Central Authority devised and maintained a huge archive of their data collection and decision-making processes.²⁸ Although the central register (see above) does not survive, the Centre was seemingly as good as its word and kept all the letters received and subjected them *all* to the same administrative practices of referencing and registering. This includes, of course, letters from poor people and their advocates, which start to appear in the central archives from the very beginning of the PLC in 1834 and are a continuing presence across all of the legislative, organisational and normative chronological divides conventionally employed as landmarks for the New Poor Law. How far writing to the Centre supplemented or supplanted local letter writing of the sort that we find under the Old Poor Law is unknowable given the denuded union archives in most county collections (see above, note 14), but we can be clear that the poor and their advocates did write to the Centre in large numbers.²⁹

One reason for this shift of focus was the speed with which the New Poor Law was implemented. In August 1835 the PLC submitted its initial annual report to Parliament. The Commission noted that at their very first meeting, parochial officials in London assumed they would relinquish their welfare responsibilities to others “who, it was conceived, were to be immediately appointed by us for the administration of relief throughout England and Wales”. Provincial reports similarly indicated deep confusion over the new Act. It was generally believed that “not only had the administration of relief been subjected to our general superintendence and control, but that the whole of the immediate and direct management had devolved upon us, and [the local officers], were no longer authorized to act in any case...” Poor preparation and communication had thus led to the danger of sudden hardship and exclusion for many poor people, and a sense that local communication was inadequate. An initial task of the Commission was to dispel these perceptions through verbal explanations to deputations and direct communication with parishes.³⁰ Yet such belated communication merely begot more questions. The Commissioners were:

²⁶ Driver. *op. cit.*, 47.

²⁷ By comparison, incoming correspondence to the Home Office (TNA HO45), Treasury (TNA T1) and Admiralty (TNA ADM1) was held loosely and all have undergone moderate-to-extensive weeding.

²⁸ There are 16,745 surviving correspondence volumes. See also P. Carter, and N. Whistance, ‘The Poor Law Commission: a New Digital Resource for Nineteenth-century Domestic Historians’, *History Workshop Journal*, 71 (2011), 29–48.

²⁹ Our wider AHRC project (AH/R002770/1) has found 14,000 letters or other forms of writing by the English and Welsh poor for the period 1834-1906.

³⁰ BPP *First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales*, 1835, 1-2.

... immediately led into a widely-extended correspondence, in answer to solicitations from all parts of the country for more detailed explanations of the law, and of its application to the peculiar cases of parishes, and even of individuals. Combined with these applications were others for instructions upon questions of administration. Applications of the nature of those which occasioned the circulars and correspondence adverted to, from magistrates, from parochial officers, from rate-payers, *as well as from paupers*, collectively or individually, have from that period continued to increase. They now form a considerable portion of the business of the department, and of the demands upon our attention³¹

A significant feature of the Commission's early years, then, was that they received correspondence not only from the expected interest groups but from the poor themselves. Moreover, because these texts immediately became part of the same administrative process as correspondence with union officers, it was clear from the very start of the New Poor Law not only that the poor had a right to approach the Centre but that the Centre had a *duty* to answer, just as they did everyone else. The poor and their advocates recognised this equality almost immediately: following the practice of local officials they used the same paper numbers (either copied into the text of their letters or written along the top) when they wished to refer to previous correspondence with the Centre. Through experience, letters back from the Centre and reading the same guidance as officials, the poor and their advocates could "learn" the processes of the New Poor Law system, much as had been the case pre-1834. It is to the scale, nature, content and impact of the resulting co-response that the rest of our article turns.

Writing and Responding

Our sample for this study is a set of pauper letters and their responses (1834-1871) from seven poor law unions across the English Midlands, as represented in figure one: Basford, Mansfield (both Nottinghamshire), Uppingham (Rutland), Bromsgrove, Kidderminster (both Worcestershire), Newcastle-under-Lyme, and Wolstanton and Burslem (both Staffordshire). Most post-1834 unions brought together both industrial/agricultural and urban/rural parishes, and our sample is no different. Uppingham was a largely agricultural and small market town union but also had domestic work on fancy hosiery put-out from manufacturers in Leicester, as well as quarrying and agricultural engineering workers. Mansfield, Kidderminster, and Wolstanton and Burslem were predominately urban-industrial centres for lace/hosiery, carpets and pottery respectively, but all had residual agricultural interests, including for instance market gardening (Kidderminster) and livestock fattening (Mansfield). Basford and Newcastle-under-Lyme unions encompassed a broader variety of workers across the industrial, agricultural, craft and service sectors. There are of course many ways to think about and try to categorise the representativeness or otherwise of these unions: proximity to transport infrastructure or water; scale of in- and out-migration; land quality; spatial concentration; industry type; or relative wealth.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5. Our italics.

Given that such variables might impact the incidence of different sorts of poverty causation, the resources available for welfare, the periodicity of local economic crises, and the susceptibility of local officials to follow national policy guidelines, they are clearly important for both the experiences of the poor and the likelihood that the poor and their advocates might write to the Centre in the first place. Crudely, the constellation of socio-economic and cultural forces in each union affected who wrote, about what, and with what tenacity.³²

[Figure one]

These are important issues, but also tangential ones for this article. In total, 83 bound volumes for these places were systematically surveyed, yielding 161 pauper letters.³³ Such letters are interesting in their own right: Men wrote the majority of letters (115; 71.4%) just as under the Old Poor Law.³⁴ This figure is rather higher than the proportion of men who were relief recipients and probably reflects that fact that men still tended to write for families and family members much as they had done pre-1834. Women wrote a fifth of letters (34; 21.1%), while a smaller set of texts (6; 3.7%) were signed by both husband and wife. In a further 6 cases (3.7%) the identity of the writer is unknown, either through illegibility or deliberate anonymity. Further analysis shows that most (131; 81.4%) poor correspondents were outdoor and that the vast majority of these (102; 77.9%) engaged with the Central Authority either after relief had been stopped or where it was denied. The number of those writing from the workhouse was much smaller but the vast majority of their letters (21; 84%) detailed complaints of ill-treatment, neglect or poor conditions within the workhouse itself. Letters received peaked in the early and mid-1840s, early 1850s and early 1860s (figure two), a periodicity which maps easily onto well-known organisational changes to the New Poor Law, or changes to central guidance on eligibility for relief. While the sample size is not out of line with those assembled for the pre-1834 period to look at pauper rhetoric or strategy, it clearly has limitations for these purposes. But this article is not primarily interested in the rhetorical characteristics of the letters, whether they were sent from “representative” communities, their number or particular motivation and form, or even their periodicity. Rather, we are interested in how letters were received, processed and replied to, and the systemic and systematic processes and beliefs that stood behind these questions. In this sense, only a detailed and focussed case study can drill down to issues that affected every pauper letter and every writer in the New Poor Law period. Only through this micro-analysis can we understand the role of the new Centre in the New Poor Law, and through this the sense that the poor may have had and developed about a system to which they were notionally subject.

[Figure two]

³² G. Boyer, *An Economic History of the English Poor Law, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1990), 193-264.

³³ We have collected more material for these unions. The sample excludes multiple signature petitions (except those of husband and wives together), “we the undersigned” styles of petition and a considerable array of other types of pauper signed/originated documents such as statements or depositions.

³⁴ King, *Writing the Lives*, 29.

Beginning this task it is important to acknowledge two foundational elements of the correspondence process. First, poor writers knew or could know (from word of mouth, printed guidance, experience, advocates and newspapers) that the law enshrined this right of correspondence. Indeed, their language was often very specific: William Bennett wrote in the winter of 1846-47 after being denied outrelief by the Kidderminster guardians. He would “Solicitt your Honers Most Gracaus favour for to *Intercede* for your humble Petitioner...”. When Anthony Hopkinson was refused relief in late 1852 he wrote to the PLB “humbly beg[ing] you will allow my case to come under your able consideration and *intercede* on my behalf...”. Francis Allen similarly wrote in 1853 after being refused outdoor relief. He asked for the Board’s help “...which I most fervently hope by your kind *intervention* will be allowed”.³⁵ Poor writers felt the Central Authority could, would and ought to intervene, a feeling that can be seen across the wider corpus of material to be found in MH12. Moreover, these writers knew it was one of the functions of the Centre to hold unions and their staff to account when they broke the law, their own rules, or acted unreasonably. Thus, in 1846 George Streets of the Basford Union complained he was turned out of the workhouse and later struck by the master on his return. In addition he claimed he was threatened with a gun by the relieving officer.³⁶ In 1848 John Cartwright, an inmate at the Wolstanton and Burslem workhouse, complained to the guardians about being threatened with violence by William Stubbs, the workhouse baker. When the guardians decided the case did not warrant investigation he wrote to the PLB asking them to institute an official investigation.³⁷ In 1852 Richard Blood, another inmate of the Basford workhouse, complained that the workhouse master refused to allow him the diet recommended by a doctor.³⁸ If these letters are relatively few in number, we should perhaps bear in mind that the actual and perceived obstacles standing in the way of institutional inmates who wanted to complain (where to find paper or the space to write; how to get a letter out of the workhouse; fear of retaliation) may make it surprising that there were any such letters at all. As with the outdoor poor, however, these texts assumed that the Centre would, could and ought to intervene.

A second foundational element of the process is that whether or not the Centre did intervene, there was an expectation of reply and in addition to the 161 pauper letters we also have Central Authority replies. Some 61.8% of women and 74.7% of men received individual responses.³⁹ There were clear distinctions, however, in the way the Centre responded to letters from the outdoor versus indoor poor, as table one suggests. Some 68.7% of male outdoor paupers received responses, but those writing from the workhouse in only 6.1% of cases. Female outdoor paupers received

³⁵ TNA, MH 12/14019/1, William Bennett to the PLC, 1 January 1847; MH 12/9241/250, Anthony Hopkinson to the PLB, 29 November 1852; MH 12/9242/39, Francis Allen to the PLB, 29 January 1853. Our italics.

³⁶ TNA, MH 12/9236/135, George Streets to the PLC, June 1846.

³⁷ TNA, MH 12/11198/83, John Cartwright to the PLB, 30 December 1848.

³⁸ TNA, MH 12/9241/127, Richard Blood to the PLB, 17 June 1852.

³⁹ These figures are not 100% because of anomalies. Three women sent their original letters to parish officers or guardians who then forwarded them to the Centre, so that the local authorities were sent the response. One woman was writing from outside of the workhouse but complained that her child had been abused when both were inmates. A widow with uncertain settlement had her case taken up directly by the Central Authority. Another woman (who wrote twice) gave her address as “Leicester” but her letters were bound in the Basford correspondence.

responses from the Central Authority in 58.8% of cases but workhouse inmates only in 2.9% of cases.⁴⁰ Letters from *both* males and females (exclusively husband and wife letters) were all from outside of the workhouse and all received responses. In short, the poor were far more likely to hear from the Central Authority directly if their letter was written from outside of the workhouse. The significance of this observation both for the nature and reach of administrative power and the scope for pauper agency becomes clear if we delve more deeply into the detailed content and process of these replies to (first) the outdoor and (second) indoor poor.

[Table one here]

The Nature and Meaning of Central Response

For the *outdoor poor*, the central response to letters changed significantly over time. It is in and through this unfolding story that we can locate both the extent and limitations of the administrative and strategic power wielded by the PLC and PLB. Thus, many of the earliest draft responses were written out in longhand. Even from 1836, however, we see the introduction of pro-forma elements, including spaces left next to pre-printed sub-headings where the clerks could write in the name of the union, parish and date. In addition, an opening first line of the draft response was also pre-printed. The first line initially read “The Poor Law Commission for England and Wales have to acknowledge the Receipt of your Letter of the....” after which the clerk would write in the specific response text. This early process was quickly changed in favour of a more extensive pro-forma, including spaces where the initials of those who drafted, copied, examined and dispatched the actual out-going letter were to be entered. In later versions, the PLC address was also added. These drafts, an example of which can be seen in figure three, were often referred to as an “Acknowledgement Form” and they remained the staple of the Centre throughout the period covered by this article because they could be used to answer any enquiry, be it from a pauper or local official.⁴¹ The speed with which the Centre changed from handwriting letters in full to pro-forma was doubtless partly necessitated by the sheer volume of all types of letters they received from the very beginning.⁴² Even this small number of pre-printed elements would have reduced the time required to generate responses. Furthermore, standardising the “look” of drafts with the Commissioner’s address and a stock opening phrase helped to unify the voice of the Centre. We can also already see here significant attention being paid to good record-keeping and questions of accessibility. The checklist of performed actions at the top of each response (figure three) shows a

⁴⁰ This does not mean that letters from the workhouse went unattended; merely that they became embroiled in a different process of reply as we see below.

⁴¹ The words “Acknowledgement Form” were sometimes printed. To distinguish clearly between these types of draft with only certain elements of text pre-printed, and other later versions of draft letter/forms, we will refer to this template as an acknowledgement form throughout the article.

⁴² Between 1836 and 1844 alone the number of letters received by the PLC increased by 60%. BPP *Copies of Letters from the Poor-law Commissioners*, 12. There seems to be no correlation between the adoption of pro-forma approaches and trends in printing costs as outlined by O. Frankel, *States of Inquiry: social investigations and print culture in nineteenth century Britain and the USA* (Baltimore, 2006), 46-54.

trail of accountability and demonstrates how many different hands each letter would pass through from its creation as a draft to its final postage back to the writer of the incoming letter and it's [the drafts] own formal registration internally.⁴³ Responding to incoming queries of all sorts was a lengthy, complex, and costly process.

[Figure three]

In the second half of 1842 we can trace a significant development in the wording used by the Centre when replying to questions posed by outdoor paupers.⁴⁴ Clerks still used the basic "Acknowledgement Form", but the handwritten text became more explicit in confirming the limit of the Centre's interventionist role. It usually expressly stated that the: "Commis [Commissioners] have no power to interfere in any individual case for the ppose [purpose] of ordering relief". However, to maintain their active supervisory role over localities, clerks also stated that a copy of the letter would be sent to the local board of guardians for their attention. These words were one part of a rapidly developing formulaic response to the claims of the outdoor poor even before the first decade of the New Poor Law had played out. By the mid-1840s the Central Authority's common annotation on their letters was the phrase "usual answer" and indeed the statement of the Commission that they could not interfere to order relief was certainly the standard response to writers seeking help with out-relief by this date. Turned on its head, however, the fact that letters could be marked internally with the "usual answer" confirms that pauper writing on such matters from across the country was significant enough to necessitate a normative textual response. Further it indicates a correspondence which had become routine and, perhaps, a little tiresome for the Commission.

[Figure four]

In this context, from around 1846 we see for the first time the Centre using an almost complete pro-forma for responding to questions of outdoor relief (figure four). The wording of these documents took the earlier handwritten text and formalized the Centre's response, acknowledging receipt of the letter from the poor person and stating that the Commissioners could not interfere. The pre-printed text also included, however, the following explanation for their inability to do so: "being expressly precluded from so doing by the 15th Section of the Poor Law Amendment Act." These response letters were one of the few occasions where the Centre could communicate directly with the outdoor poor and they wanted to ensure that the recipient and other readers understood the legislation dictating and limiting what could be done. Even so, and as with earlier correspondence, the Centre was unwilling to relinquish its supervisory role over unions and their actions or in-actions regarding relief. Thus, the pro-forma also included the statement that they had sent a copy of the pauper's letter to the relevant board and that: "...they do not doubt that the guardians will give such

⁴³ Other templates also exist, such as "Suggested Answer" forms which left spaces to write the subject of the letter, the original paper numbers, date sent (and returned) and observations. These begin in 1840 but seem only to have been used during 1840/1842 and even then not consistently.

⁴⁴ There are no obvious changes to the law of the poor law or central guidance on eligibility that might have prompted this development, suggesting that it was internally generated.

directions as the circumstances of the case seem to require". From this period, draft texts to the guardians asking for their observations on the pauper's letter were also largely pro-forma. Some requests for observations clearly went unanswered, but the frequency with which further correspondence was generated – if only and usually to dismiss the claims in the original pauper letter – is striking, and suggests some of the ways in which pauper agency (and a pauper's knowledge of that agency) could emerge.

The pro-forma underwent further refinement from 1855. Whereas previously the draft responses to the writer and the guardians were on two separate sheets of paper, at this date they were brought together in one single document (figure five). The text remained essentially the same, stating that the Centre was prohibited by law from interfering, but it no longer specified the exact section of the act involved. One reading of this omission is that by 1855 the law of the New Poor Law had passed into common understanding. Meanwhile, the sentence about the guardians giving such directions as the circumstances of the case seemed to require had been dropped in favour of a far less congenial: "The Board, however, will send a copy of your Letter to the Guardians of the [relevant] Union for their consideration". Nonetheless, the pro-forma as sent to the guardians followed prior iterations and still asked for observations.

[Figure five]

This introduction of an almost complete pro-forma and its further development into a document with two draft letters on one piece of paper is important for three reasons. Firstly, these forms reduced the time needed to generate responses. In a situation where an initial draft was constructed by one clerk before being sent on to another to produce a neat copy, forms such as this would have virtually cut out the first clerk altogether. Poor writers, in other words, were likely to see increasingly timely replies to their original letters. Even if such replies effectively said "No", the fact of their being received was itself a currency which may have sustained writing. Secondly, the declaration that the Centre was precluded by law from interfering represents an attempt to reinforce the notion that further correspondence on this matter would be futile. Pre-printing this specific text explicitly sought to close down any attempt at discussion or negotiation. The very real significance of this intent can be understood by reference back to the decades immediately before 1834, where the out-parish system functioned on the basis of a continual exchange and negotiation instigated by letters from poor writers.⁴⁵ Finally, the fact that a shift of this sort was even deemed necessary indicates that letters from the poor remained common and were administratively time-consuming some 20 years into the New Poor Law. More than this, it suggests that the letters of the outdoor poor and the issues that they raised were causing problems between the Centre and locality. We see some of this in the rhetoric employed by Edward Hill from the Kidderminster Union who wrote that he was 69 years old and a Greenwich pensioner but now too old and infirm to work. Hill wished for an outdoor allowance for his wife Ann to help maintain her (she had been ordered into the workhouse), stating that the couple "have been So Many Years toiling in this

⁴⁵ King, *Writing the Lives*, passim.

World together and Now for to Separate Us will Cause us both Great Grief".⁴⁶ Rhetorics of age, infirmity, service to the country and the duty of a man to his wife had considerable power in the locality and the story became widely known, as many equivalent cases did. Hill's letter was annotated "Usual Answer", and he received the standard response that the Board were precluded by law from interfering.⁴⁷

We thus see support in the archival record for Driver's view that the aim of the Central Authority was to "make the process of granting (or withholding) relief an administrative question, determined by fixed rules, rather than a personal one, influenced by 'partial' and capricious motives".⁴⁸ Indeed, these changes to process and the attempt to extend administrative power were distinctively Benthamite in the sense of a desire to "limit and define the [local] administrator's initiative, to fix responsibilities precisely, to lay down for administrators at all levels clear instructions and guiding lines which would issue from the legislature."⁴⁹ They were also part of a longer history of attempts to use administrative process as a means of exercising power in the relief relationship. Naomi Tadmor, for instance, reminds us that pro-forma settlement examinations pre-1834 were designed both to save administrative time (and thus money) and provide regularised text to aid the legal requirement of precise terminology in settlement and removal cases. The culture of forms, Tadmor argues, "grew massively to affect the government of the poor, and the ways in which authority was both exerted and experienced".⁵⁰

Yet, if the extension of administrative process and power can clearly be traced, the question inevitably becomes why the outdoor poor *continued* to write? In part this reflects some of the imperatives already outlined above: the fact of any reply encouraging present and future writers; ingrained knowledge of law and "proper" practice; and discussions in the public domain about scandals. More importantly, the continued flow of correspondence speaks to two core, and sometimes contradictory, functions of the Central Authority. As we have seen, it was prohibited from ordering out-relief, limiting its role in actively shifting the character and direction of local policy aside from broad levers such as being able to disallow expenditure. Draft letters to paupers thus expose one of the greatest weaknesses of the Central Authority. Its own voice on individual relief questions may have been highly uniform but it could never hope to achieve a fully unified system of relief across the country while the individual unions held ultimate decision-making power. But neither could the Central Authority allow union officers to withhold relief to those in genuine distress, so the Commissioners *were* sometimes compelled to raise issues of principle and practice regarding outdoor relief with localities. Clerks routinely forwarded the letters of poor writers to guardians and invited comment. While this can be viewed as a *mere* administrative formality, it reminded local officials that their practices had been noticed. Since many cases of alleged neglect and abuse also attracted letters to local newspapers and indeed editorials, it is appropriate to view letters from the Centre (both

⁴⁶ TNA. MH 12/14019/409, Edward Hill to the PLB, 18 July 1849.

⁴⁷ TNA. MH 12/14019/410, PLB to Edward Hill, 20 July 1849.

⁴⁸ Driver, *op cit.*, 34.

⁴⁹ J. Hume. 'Jeremy Bentham and the Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Government', *Historical Journal*, X (1967), 361-75, p. 365.

⁵⁰ N. Tadmor, 'The Settlement of the Poor and the Rise of the Form in England, c.1662-1780', *Past and Present*, 236 (2017), 43-97.

raising direct principles but also inviting comment) as part of the complex mechanisms by which welfare decisions in the maturing New Poor Law became part of public knowledge.

Meanwhile, the fact of the Centre referring cases (either actively or passively) to localities was regarded by some writers as an act of favourable interference. A representative example is the case of John Smedley, who on 14 June 1865 wrote from Bulwell (BASFORD UNION) to the PLB stating that he had lost an arm following a mining accident and could no longer provide for his family. When Smedley suffered his injury he was provided with a small amount of relief and he now complained that the allowance had been discontinued.⁵¹ The draft response to both Smedley and the BASFORD board was on the standard double-draft pro-forma, stating as always that the Centre could not interfere but would pass the letter on.⁵² A letter was then received on 25 July 1865 from Richard Spencer (Clerk to the BASFORD UNION) informing the PLB that the guardians had reinstated relief.⁵³ On the same day the PLB also received a letter from Smedley notifying them that he was in receipt of relief and directly thanking the PLB for the kindness they had done him.⁵⁴ There was no doubt in Smedley's mind that it was the "interference" of the Centre in his case that produced this result. Three years later when his relief was stopped Smedley, no doubt with his earlier success in mind, wrote again to the PB.⁵⁵ This time the clerk responded that Smedley was a habitual drunkard earning 6s per week and had two married sons at home. The guardians therefore felt that relief was unwarranted and the Centre wrote back to Smedley informing him that they had communicated with the guardians but "see no ground for any *further* interference on their part".⁵⁶ The wording of this letter is significant seemingly acknowledging that by its earlier actions the PLB felt it had already interfered, but also that had the response from the guardians been different they *would* have interfered further.

Thus, if the Centre hoped that by consistently stating their inability to intervene the outdoor poor would be discouraged from writing, they were mistaken. Indeed, the majority of letters in our sample date from *after* the creation of the standardised text for the draft responses. The outdoor poor kept writing because they could infer hope of action from the two forms of central-local interaction: direct intervention on points of principle, and the inviting of comment on pauper letters. How much that hope had to be realised in order to nourish further correspondence, either on the part of the original writer or by those in the wider community who faced similar decisions by local officials, is unclear. The fact that the letters of the outdoor poor kept arriving, however, suggests that, as under the Old Poor Law, the bar was a low one. It is not hard to imagine replies from the Centre, small (and sometimes significant) remedial actions by local officials and occasional larger enquiries by the Centre into relief practices, eliding together in the communities that generated the letters from outdoor paupers to create a sense that there was a purpose in writing. Indeed, and as King has argued for the Old Poor

⁵¹ TNA, MH 12/9250/197, John Smedley to the PLB, 14 June 1865.

⁵² TNA, MH 12/9250/198, Draft letter from the PLB, to John Smedley, 20 June 1865.

⁵³ TNA, MH 12/9250/230, Richard Spencer to the PLB, 25 July 1865.

⁵⁴ TNA, MH 12/9250/231, John Smedley to the PLB, 22 July 1865.

⁵⁵ TNA, MH 12/9252/444, John Smedley to the PLB, 9 June 1868.

⁵⁶ TNA, MH 12/9252/465, Richard Spencer to the PLB, 6 July 1868, and MH 12/9252/466, PLB to John Smedley, 9 July 1868. Our italics.

Law, the very fact that poor writers were in a process of co-correspondence in the first place would have sustained the letter writing culture and pauper agency that the Centre plainly wanted to suppress.

Switching our attention to the letters written by the *indoor poor*, we see these broad conundrums played out in even more depth and colour. Upon receipt of such letters, the Centre would respond using the standard pro-forma outlined above and undertake the same administrative steps to provide each letter with specific “identifiers”. There was, however, a major difference between the processes for dealing with indoor as opposed to outdoor writers: Whereas 80.8% of outdoor writers received a personal reply, only 32% of indoor pauper did. The normative process followed for letters from inmates was to pass a copy of the text straight on to the local guardians for their observations without first writing any sort of acknowledgement to the pauper. The guardians’ observations on the case dictated whether or not the individual received any sort of reply. Most cases resulted in notification by the local authorities direct rather than the Centre, which explains the figures above. Sharing of the investigatory burden was expedient given the limited financial and human resources of the Centre throughout its existence, but it also gave the local authorities the opportunity to refute the allegations or undermine the character of complainants. While writers could choose the rhetorical ground on which to present their case, they had no control over how local officials might construct them in any investigation or what extra information could be brought to bear in order to shift the interpretation of the allegations.

The narrative was taken away from them. For example Mary Potter, a Kidderminster pauper inmate, wrote to the PLB in May 1860 claiming she had been used (as a pauper servant) to wait on the master and his wife until she fell ill. Since then, Potter claimed she had been treated badly and not allowed a light at night. She had lit a fire but was told to put it out or be reported to the guardians. Potter further complained of being denied the rations prescribed by the medical officer and that she had been put in a room for “dirty cases”. She asked the PLB for their “immediate attention”.⁵⁷ A copy of her letter was forwarded to the guardians with a request for any observations the guardians “may desire to offer in reference to the Case”.⁵⁸ Henry Saunders, Clerk to the Kidderminster Union, subsequently forwarded a copy of a resolution along with several statements and a letter which were presented to the local board at their meeting. The enclosed letter was from Thomas Hill, workhouse master, who stated that Potter had been in his workhouse several times, under the name of Mary Goodridge. He referred to her as “... the most subtle and accomplished hypocrite I ever knew” and went on to describe Potter as a “... wicked and badly disposed person”. There was also a statement from the medical officer who claimed that some of Potter’s behaviour was so strange that he proposed her removal to the asylum. His impression was that she was “hypochondrical”. There were also a number of statements from workhouse staff and inmates doubting the veracity of Potter’s story.⁵⁹ The clerk’s letter was annotated by the PLB to be acknowledged and the guardians thanked “for this full and satisfactory explanation”. Potter never received a reply and

⁵⁷ TNA, MH 12/14022, folios 392-393, Mary Potter to the PLB, 7 May 1860.

⁵⁸ TNA, MH 12/14022, folio 394, PLB to Henry Saunders, 12 May 1860.

⁵⁹ TNA, MH 12/14022, folio 395-407, Henry Saunders to the PLB, 15 May 1860.

on the face of it we can see how two powerful administrative authorities could circumvent pauper agency by controlling the flow of the correspondence.

Potter may have been unaware of the letters that damned her character, but currents of gossip in the workhouse make it extremely unlikely that she was ignorant of the fact that her original letter had prompted a local enquiry. Witness statements were taken from staff and inmates, and such things never could remain secret amongst closed populations for long. Moreover, it is a short imaginative leap from this observation to the likelihood that Potter would have seen some changes in the tone and nature of her treatment occasioned by the fact of the enquiry, something that many other inmates complained of in the wider corpus of letters from which our sample is drawn. Whether or not the result was what Potter hoped, the local authorities *had* to reply (and at much greater length than had been the case with outdoor letter writers), and both she and other inmates would have been able to precisely trace the impact of an original complaint. We can see a further example in the case of John Cartwright, a Wolstanton and Burslem inmate who, as we mentioned earlier, complained that his accusation of verbal threats had been ignored. The clerk had written to the PLB stating that as no assault had been committed and “the language of Cartwright to a Paid Officer, (although a subordinate one) was insulting they did not deem it necessary further to notice the complaint”. Moreover, the baker William Stubbs, in his statement on the case called Cartwright a “Scoundrel”, and accused him of constantly “abusing some one in authority. In fact he is of thorough Chartist principles and a dangerous man”.⁶⁰ King has highlighted for the Old Poor Law the existence of a shared linguistic register between paupers and officials underpinning relief negotiations, but what we see here is a shared understanding of the language needed to undermine a pauper’s character.⁶¹ Local officials and union officers, even “subordinate” ones such as Stubbs, knew that the rhetoric of the threat of encouraging radicals and radicalism would provoke a strong shared understanding between the Centre and the locality. In such cases, as Philip Harling suggests, investigators might downplay inmate complaints in the “absence of corroborative evidence” and pay much more attention to the testimony of workhouse staff.⁶² Certainly, Cartwright received no reply. On the other hand (and reflecting the case of Potter) it is inconceivable given the clear feud between Cartwright and Stubbs, that the fact of the former’s letter necessitating a local enquiry remained secret. These cases, then, begin to suggest why workhouse inmates continued to write to the Centre even if the apparent lack of co-response might otherwise have deterred such letters.

A further aspect of the way in which inmate letters were treated, however, is even more important in this respect. Thus, assistant poor law commissioners (poor law inspectors from 1847 onwards) *did* sometimes directly act in response to pauper complaints. In April 1848, for instance, Thomas Hartley a Kidderminster inmate wrote to the PLB condemning conditions in the workhouse. He claimed that despite earlier local complaints the inmates’ stockings were not washed frequently, elderly men were denied tea and butter when entitled, and some elderly disabled men were being set to

⁶⁰ TNA, MH 12/11198/92, Joseph Lowndes to the PLB enclosing statement from William Stubbs, Baker.

⁶¹ King, *Writing the Lives*, Chapter 5.

⁶² P. Harling, ‘The Power of Persuasion: Central Authority, Local Bureaucracy and the New Poor Law’, *English Historical Review*, 107 (1992), 30-53, pp. 36-7.

hard labour. Hartley stated he had “enough to inform you Gentlemen that [the] place wants much investigation, I wish [an] inquiry before I procede farther.” His letter was annotated “Mr Graves” April 19 '48”. John Thomas Graves, being the Poor Law Inspector for the West Midlands District, subsequently received the letter for comment, and his reply was also annotated on Hartley’s original letter. Graves wrote on the 21 April 1848: “I will take an early opportunity of visiting Kidderminster, and will inquire whether there is any ground for complaint. There has been long much discontent in this W.H.”⁶³ If there had been disquiet at the Kidderminster workhouse for some time, it was only now that Graves decided to investigate, something that perhaps reflects the complexities of the Central Authority and its inspectorate trying to juggle limited resources and still maintain its supervisory role. Crudely, the Centre could not afford to lose many investigatory fights if it was to keep its credibility and so only acted once a threshold of poor administrative behaviour was reached. Hartley’s letter thus arrived at a very particular moment in central-local relations and appears to have been the catalyst for some soul-searching on the part of the Central Authority over their responsibilities to poor writers.

Immediately following the letter from Hartley in the archival record is a minute date stamped 22 April 1848 but which appears to be an internal note actually dated 17 April. It is headed “The President” and provides the opening quote from our title, stating that:

The number of Pauper Complaints just now is [considerable] most of them when Enquired into turn out to be groundless. I think we ought not to acknowledge them as that encourages them [the paupers] to write but should send the original to the Grs [guardians] with a request that they may be returned.⁶⁴

The note carried no signature or initial, so it is impossible to say for certain whose comments these were, but they clearly signal the frustrations of an already overstretched department. Just as with the outdoor poor, certain people in the Central Authority felt that acknowledging incoming letters from the poor in any way could give writers (and their communities) the impression of their complaint being favourably received. At another moment in poor law history, these views may have gained traction, but they were expressed soon after the report of the 1846 select committee on the Andover Union workhouse and the subsequent creation of the PLB. As part of the Andover investigation assistant commissioners Mr Parker and Mr Day had been censured for failure to confront persistent instances of poor workhouse administration.⁶⁵ In Parker’s favour it was noted that the size of his district, along with calls made upon his time by the PLC, “have rendered it almost impossible for him to pay visits to each of the Unions under his care, numerous or long enough for effective inspection of the Workhouse”.⁶⁶ In this context, letters from institutional inmates would

⁶³ TNA, MH 12/14019/195, Thomas Hartley to the PLB, 17 April 1848.

⁶⁴ TNA, MH 12/14019/195, Internal note (with Thomas Hartley’s letter) to The President of the PLB, 17 April 1848.

⁶⁵ BPP *Report from the Select Committee on Andover Union; together with the minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, 20 August 1846.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

have been useful for the Centre, highlighting potential problems which would otherwise be missed and providing important local intelligence for hard-to-reach localities.

John Graves would undoubtedly have been aware of the perils of ignoring repeated complaints should they later come to public light. His subsequent investigation of the Hartley case found that complaints regarding dirty stockings were justified. Graves also stated that as there had been much “discontent and murmuring” among the men interviewed, he would listen to any complaints after concluding the inspection. Cautioning the inmates against “frivolous fault-finding and a spirit of insubordination”, Graves recommended that in future they state any real grievance to the workhouse visitors. Part of their role was to hear and inquire into the complaints of the inmates and record the same in the “visitors book”. The books of the visiting committees were to have been checked by the inspectors/assistant poor law commissioners during their inspections and were part of attempts to enforce an administrative system unifying the pauper experience across England and Wales.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding these cautions, Graves also acknowledged in his report that guardians were sometimes:

unwilling to listen to any statement impugning the conduct of officers in whom, they have confidence, if the statement comes from a person for whose character and motives they have no respect. It is desirable however that complaints regularly made should not only be attended to, but that the complainant should be allowed to be heard in person, and that Guardians should be habituated to the observance of those forms which are calculated to prevent abuse.⁶⁸

He concluded the report on Kidderminster, observing that: “There is undoubtedly, among the men a disposition to find fault and discontent has probably been inflamed by one or two individuals, as Thomas Hartley and Samuel Williams, but I am not satisfied that all the complaints made are groundless.” Reports like this, as Harling observes, served “notice to guardians and union officers that a central agency was monitoring their activities and assessing them against a rigorous standard”.⁶⁹ More importantly, they obtained wide publicity inside the workhouse and in the local community and region, as well as sometimes in the national press. For those with “a disposition to find fault” such interventions and conclusions were a clear confirmation of the power of their own agency. Setting them alongside the “softer” local investigations of workhouse conditions seemingly prompted by Central invitations to review the complaints made in pauper letters, we gain a much clearer sense of the way in which the thresholds of “success” that encouraged paupers to keep writing were indeed low. Where that success accrued to those minded to “inflame the workhouse inmates”, the effect was likely to be particularly strong.

Certainly we see this in the case of Hartley. Even after the investigation he wrote four more letters complaining about the workhouse administration, eventually being labelled an “exceedingly troublesome person” by the union clerk.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the central administrative process was followed rigidly. Each of the letters was passed

⁶⁷ Our own research suggests central monitoring of these books was minimal.

⁶⁸ TNA, MH 12/14019/200 Report of John Thomas Graves to the PLB, 9 May 1848.

⁶⁹ Harling, ‘Power of Persuasion’, 31.

⁷⁰ TNA, MH 12/14019/199, Thomas Hartley to the PLB, 1 May 1848; MH 12/14023/215, Thomas Hartley to the PLB, 17 November 1863; MH 12/14023/229, Thomas Hartley to the PLB, 25 January 1864; MH 12/14023/277, Thomas Hartley to the PLB, 16 July 1864; MH 12/14023/219, Henry Saunders to the PLB, 26 November 1863.

to the guardians for consideration even though Hartley's last carried an annotation by Graves agreeing that the letter should be sent on but noting "the complaint comes from a person with whose wild opinions the P.L.B. as well as the Gns [guardians] are now familiar".⁷¹ The first of Hartley's letters after the investigation is particularly important. It made various complaints, including accusations of holding back foodstuffs from inmates and that the workhouse master had taunted Hartley about writing to the PLB previously. Graves in response to this letter asked if any charge of fraud had been made against the master and if the master had been investigated. Again he pressed the point that:

It will be useful to habituate the gns to investigate definite complaints in a regular manner. Though a pauper must in many cases have some courage to make and press a complaint against the Master of a W. H., I do not believe that the the Kidderminster Board of gns would willingly sanction tyranny or fraud.⁷²

Graves' suggestion that paupers required courage to complain about the workhouse was well-founded. Hartley felt the taunts of the workhouse master when he raised his complaints, and for those poor people and paupers who were willing to exercise epistolary agency the process was thus not without risk. This accounts for the anonymous letters within our sample. In 1862 an anonymous letter was sent to one of the guardians of the Mansfield Union outlining complaints against Miss Nicholson, the workhouse matron. The writer said they would not sign their name to the letters as they had "... seen enough of them poor women that did tell". The letter complained that the poor and hungry could be transported for stealing a loaf of bread, but Nicholson, "a lady thief is allowed to go free".⁷³ In 1870 an anonymous inmate of the Newcastle-under-Lyme workhouse wrote an account of beatings within the house and noted that "one of the boys here ran off last week to tell one of the guardians about the master treating him cruelly and got his hands cut to pieces with a cane when he got back". Punishments such as the petty removal of small personal items were visited on those that spoke up against the master "and a [many] more if they durst speak".⁷⁴ A third anonymous letter, this time from a Basford union inmate written in September 1862, complained that the workhouse mistress was always drunk and that the meat for the pauper meals stank. The author continued that if anything was said to the workhouse master he confined "... us in the dark hole 24 hours".⁷⁵ Unfortunately for these writers the Centre tended not to respond to any unsigned correspondence. Comments such as "The Board do not attach any importance to statements made in anonymous communications" are not uncommon.⁷⁶ Although the main motivation for writing anonymously was clearly self-protection the Centre perhaps saw something in the anonymous writing that was a reminder of threatening letters issued by rioters,

⁷¹ TNA, MH 12/14023/277, Draft letter from the PLB to Henry Saunders, 27 July 1864.

⁷² TNA, MH 12/14019/199, Thomas Hartley to the PLB, 1 May 1848.

⁷³ TNA, MH 12/9367/138, Anonymous to the PLB, 15 November 1862. This letter was enclosed with one from the guardians giving the resolutions of their meeting on the matter. The chairman, Herbert Greenhalgh claimed that an investigation could "implicate others", and "throw great odium upon the Guardians and the visiting Committee for not properly discharging their duty". Twelve other guardians repudiated this remark and urged a full investigation.

⁷⁴ TNA, MH 12/11368/316, Anonymous from Newcastle under Lyme Union to the PLB, 25 June 1870.

⁷⁵ TNA, MH 12/9248/169, Anonymous from Basford Poor Law Union to the PLB, 2 September 1862.

⁷⁶ TNA, MH 12/9248/170, Draft letter from the PLB to R Spencer, 6 September 1862.

radicals and occasionally union agitators.⁷⁷ Even so, it is clear that most letters by workhouse inmates ended up requiring some form of action at local level, much more perhaps than was the case with the outdoor poor. By and large, those who wrote had a clear sense of how they *should* have been treated in the workhouse and the fact of small local investigations in response to letters from the Centre, punctuated by larger enquiries in their own or other unions, would have nourished the letter writing process and the agency that those letters embodied. Notwithstanding concerted attempts to extend administrative process and power, and even background notions that the Centre should simply not reply to poor writers as we saw above, the indoor and outdoor poor continued to write throughout the New Poor Law period.

Conclusion

Letters from poor writers formed a regular component of the Central Authority's correspondence from its very inception and continued throughout our period even as the organisational infrastructure changed and laws and regulations shifted the nature and extent of entitlement. Such letters could easily form the basis for major studies of pauper agency, the ways that paupers experienced the workhouse, and the changing attitudes of guardians and staff towards the indoor and outdoor poor in unions of different types and locations. Indeed, we have touched upon some of these things here. Our purpose in this article, however, has been to use a smaller sample of these letters from the English midlands to analyse the nature, meaning and consequences of the central mechanisms newly established in 1834 to process and respond to such letters. These mechanisms – ones that applied to all pauper letters whenever and where they were written – had systemic and systematic consequences for the effective reach of central government, central-local welfare relations, and the ability of the poor to navigate and contest indoor and outdoor relief decisions.

At a basic administrative level the Centre dealt with pauper letters and "official correspondence" in the same manner, registering and binding them into the appropriate union volumes. In terms of process, most letters were forwarded to the relevant union with a majority of outdoor poor letter writers being notified individually by the Centre. Responses to indoor pauper writers were more likely to be left to local officials. The way in which the Centre responded individually to paupers and the rhetoric deployed by them was designed simultaneously to monitor the local authorities in regard to central rules and orders and manage the expectations of paupers about central interference. This duality created something of a difficulty for the Centre resulting in its having a more confused and weaker voice than they would have wanted. In this context, the development of formulaic (and largely legalistic) responses were meant to prevent or diminish further pauper correspondence on relief matters, both from individual paupers and more widely as the formulaic texts were received and absorbed into the local communities of the recipient. Pauper-officialdom discussion and negotiation of the sort that had flowered in the last decades of the Old Poor Law was (the Centre hoped) thus to be suppressed. However, the supervisory necessity of bringing cases to the local guardians' attention and the desire of the Central Authority to show paupers their case has been so passed along, inevitably bred pauper beliefs that appeals to the Centre *did* have an effect. In addition periodic

⁷⁷ Englander, 'From the Abyss', 79.

victories by writers over local guardians would have the effect of demonstrating their own agency and of encouraging further (and more) writing in the future. The fact that letters had to be answered is confirmed by rejection of the sentiment (elaborated in the letter to the President of the PLB reviewed above) that the Centre should stop responding, a rejection grounded at least in part in the strong resistance of some of the poor law inspectorate. In speaking against such notions the inspectorate body recognised both that courage would be required for a pauper to make a written and signed complaint against union officers, and that pauper letters often operated as a useful pipeline of unofficial information to be taken seriously to aid them in the supervision of union officers.

We can clearly see that pauper correspondence remained a problematic issue for the Central Authority throughout our period. They never resolved the challenge of letters from poor people and the price of demonstrating effective supervision of union officers was an invitation to paupers to write again and again and to see agency in that process of co-correspondence. And write they did. In this sense we see the weakness of both the Centre and localities under the New Poor Law; the processes, laws and rules that were new under the New Poor Law embodied and fostered the growth of the central state but those same processes created systemic vulnerabilities for the poor law system and systematically limited the freedom of action for Centre and locality in relation to the exercise of power over the poor.