

Welsh Government Draft Budget Proposals 2016-17: consultation response from Cymorth Cymru

7/1/2016

Introduction

Cymorth Cymru is the umbrella body for organisations working with marginalised and excluded people in Wales.

Our **vision** is that all people in Wales have the right to live safely and independently, managing their own lives in their own homes

Our **mission** is to connect, strengthen and influence service providers, policy makers and partners to:

- Prevent homelessness
- Improve the quality of life and choices for the people our members support.

Our **objectives** are to:

1. Use evidence-based research to effectively influence policy formulation and implementation
2. Strengthen the capacity of member organizations to increase their impact by connecting them with wider issues and debates within the UK, Europe and elsewhere, convening events that contextualise and share learning
3. Provide high quality and tailored membership and consultancy services, identifying risks for the membership
4. Challenge public attitudes by campaigning with others on key issues that affect the people our members support.

Our main **policy areas** are

- Homelessness, housing related support
- Social value care provision
- Emerging themes from our two core areas
- Joining up across related policy areas

Our **120+ members** support people who are marginalised, isolated or experiencing housing crisis, including:

- people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness
- families fleeing domestic abuse
- people dealing with mental or physical health problems, or learning disabilities
- people with alcohol or substance misuse problems
- refugees and people seeking asylum
- care leavers and other vulnerable young people, and

- older people in need of support
- offenders and those at risk of offending.

This list is not exhaustive, and individuals may often face a range of challenges that make it difficult for them to find or maintain a stable home and take control of their lives.

Cymorth Cymru's members help people address these issues, supporting them to find and maintain safe accommodation, fulfil their personal potential and feel confident making choices about their future. Our members work across policy areas to assist marginalised and excluded people and to promote a shared understanding of the key role that housing plays in promoting well-being.

Response

In this submission of evidence, Cymorth Cymru is focusing on key areas that affect our members, namely housing-related support, homelessness and related areas.

1. What, in your opinion, has been the impact of the Welsh Government's 2015-16 budget?

Our main focus in 2015-16 has been on the challenges faced by provider organisations due to the reduction in local authority budgets, particularly the Supporting People Programme. A great deal of effort has been put in by provider organisations to make back office savings and restructure staff teams to provide quality services for less. Cymorth has been looking with providers at new ways we could work – some of them are worth exploring in detail, and others we fear could cause irreparable damage to the way in which services work.

Our view, as the year comes to a close, is that austerity has placed far greater burdens on the people our members support. Some services have closed and many of our members face very difficult choices. However, overall, the impact has been less than that in England. The decision, therefore, to protect the Supporting People Programme in 2016-17 has come at a welcome time.

In addition, the support allocated to the implementation of the Housing (Wales) Act has been welcome. Getting this preventative Act working right is one of the key priorities of the sector, and we are pleased that the Welsh Government has made allowances for that. We are concerned, as we will elaborate later, that this preventative agenda is threatened by the suggested reduction in the Homelessness Prevention Grant.

2. Looking at the draft budget allocations for 2016-17, do you have any concerns from a strategic, overarching perspective, or about any specific areas?

Supporting People Programme Grant

For the housing sector, the budget has largely been as positive as we could have hoped. As an organisation we welcome warmly and gratefully the announcement that the Supporting People Programme Grant has been protected in cash terms. This has been a key focus of

Cymorth Cymru's policy work for a considerable period of time now. The programme is an effective example of preventative working, and the budget protection recognises this.

A challenge for this programme has, traditionally, been demonstrating the impact of the investment. Although anecdotally we can see it has a huge benefit, and we can see case studies that outline the life-changing effects of the programme, it has been difficult to evidence on a Wales-wide basis.

Work this year undertaken by the Welsh Government, reporting to a Steering Group chaired by Cymorth Cymru, has examined a way in which existing data can be linked with a database in Swansea (SAIL) to demonstrate links between programmes and use of services. The feasibility study looking at whether SP data could be linked with routine NHS Wales data has demonstrated that this is an area worth exploring. The initial findings report can be accessed here [URL]. This is an area that will need to be expanded on fast over the initial months of the next Assembly term, to draw in more local authority data and also to draw in criminal justice, social services and other agency data to see the wide range of benefits given by the Supporting People Programme on a number of priority Welsh Government areas.

We now have the opportunity demonstrate unequivocally that the Programme makes a difference, supporting over 60,000 individuals in Wales in 2015/16, and need the resources to be put firmly behind the expansion of this cost-effective research study. We are grateful the Welsh Government has recognised the substantial leap forward made by this piece of ground-breaking research, the first to come out of the UK-wide Administrative Data Research Network.

We are hopeful that, in time, when the benefit of the Programme is even more widely evidenced, and its impact on multiple sectors better understood, the budget will be increased to its initial levels.

Additional funding for the NHS

We welcome the additional funding announced for the NHS. Cymorth has consistently argued for greater join-up between health and housing, and we believe this should be treated with the same priority as join-up between health and social care. Secure and stable housing has long been recognised as being linked to better health outcomes, and we need to ensure all services and structures are working as closely as they can to achieve better outcomes. Greater funding for the NHS will have a positive impact, but we would like to see a clearer commitment from health and housing leaders that they will work together more closely.

Social Housing Grant

Cymorth Cymru welcomes the decision to invest in additional housing.

Homelessness Prevention Grant reduction

We are highly concerned about the reduction in the Homelessness Grant. This Grant is a key part of homelessness prevention activity, and there is a risk that reducing the Grant will mean less preventative work can be undertaken.

We appreciate that budgets are tight, but are hopeful that the elements of this Grant which directly provide services or otherwise benefit those at risk of homelessness will be protected. In the long term, it may be worth looking at how the Prevention grant works alongside the Supporting People Programme, and to see if there are ways to align these areas of spending more closely. Until that is considered fully, however, we hope that this prevention fund will be protected as much as is possible.

Some of our members have been in touch with examples of what their services, funded by this Grant, provide.

One of our members responded to tell us, “We would argue that these services merit equal protection from funding cuts as the SP budget. In the case of our services invariably they deliver interventions to a far higher volume of service users and are effective at delivering flexible, time limited services promoting ease of access and a service at point of need. It is also clear that such services deliver a saving to Health, Social Care and Housing service budgets.”

This member told us about one of the people they had supported through a Prevention Grant project:

Mr D was referred to our housing support and advice project by the recovery unit, Neath Port Talbot Hospital in January 2015. He was suffering from depression and suicidal thoughts and had received intervention from the crisis team.

During our initial assessment we discovered that his mental health had deteriorated after the loss of a successful business and he had lost everything. He only ever left his house to purchase alcohol and therefore had no engagement with services at all. Mr D's home was going through repossession as he hadn't been able to afford to pay the mortgage for some time. He had been sleeping on the floor for over a year and he had no furniture at all. He hadn't opened any mail for several months.

Mr D's health and eyesight were deteriorating due to long term alcohol abuse and poor nutrition, he wasn't accessing health services, we identified that this was high priority and accompanied him to emergency eye / health appointments to gain appropriate treatment; this was on a weekly outpatients basis.

Our service supported him to apply to all the housing providers within the area and he was successfully re-housed in a warden controlled complex. We applied for grants for new furniture to set up his new home. Resettlement support provided to set up all utilities and sign post to relevant agencies for support.

We supported him to access welfare rights and attendance allowance was awarded.

We supported him to access health services which in turn led to a very wide range of support being put in place, to prevent isolation, provide assistance around the home, working with HMRC regarding his debts and pensions, referral to substance misuse agency, and more.

Mr D Now has support from WCGADA, RNIB and a social group. He has a cleaner and support weekly from the warden on the complex.

Initially our Housing support and advice provided crisis intervention, and we have now addressed all the main issues and have referred to our floating support scheme to make sure that everything that has been put in place is maintained.

Another of our members receives funding to run nine advice services, particularly Family Mediation Services. They commented to us that “they were all subject to the recent review of s180 funded services commissioned by WG and all came out being highly endorsed as fundamental to each LA’s homelessness prevention toolkit.”

Another member is anticipating cuts to services that are supported by this Grant, although they are not confirmed. One service in particular has been described as “more significant and if confirmed will require significant reductions in staffing and service delivery. It is particularly disappointing as the service has been operating at a deficit and is currently subsidised ... from the charity’s own resources.”

Given the timescale for evidence it has not been possible to provide an exhaustive list of what these services can offer to those who are most vulnerable. However, we are hopeful that the drop in funding to this grant can be clarified by the Finance Committee and restored so that services are protected.

Care and support challenges

Our members who provide care and support have expressed massive fears about the sustainability of the sector. There is a perfect storm approaching the care sector (including learning disability services, 24-hour services, and wider social care). The National Living Wage, while to be welcomed, will increase costs for providers at all levels, and currently local authorities do not have the flexibility to meet these costs. Unfortunately, other developments have made this even harder to meet. The recent decisions on travel time, sleep-ins, holiday entitlement and overtime – whilst all, individually, positive for the workforce – are creating a set of conditions that is guaranteed to lead to provider collapse: in some cases, as soon as April 2016.

We welcome the announcement of additional funding for social care, particularly through the Intermediate Care Fund, but the funding will not be anything close to enough to meet the needs of the sector.

We understand that budgets are stretched, but there needs to be clear will from the Welsh Government to meet this challenge. Both providers and local authorities are ready to look at new ways of working, but we need support – financial and leadership – from the Welsh Government.

Further questions: We have covered the elements of the additional questions within our questions above.

Conclusion

There is much to be welcomed in the latest Welsh Government budget. The reprieve for the Supporting People budget has been warmly received by support providers, and it is a testament to the personal support by the Minister, and strong cross-party consensus that it has been protected. Whilst there are still significant challenges for providers receiving Supporting People funding (it remains a real terms cut), this has given those working in the sector significant relief.

We remain concerned about the proposed cut to the Homelessness Prevention Grant, and welcome further clarity on the way this will be allocated.

Our main source of worry as an organisation is focused on the pressures caused by the National Living Wage and other contributory factors to a 'perfect storm' for providers of care. This affects all who provide care, including social care, learning disabilities, homelessness services, refuges, and others. This is an issue that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the budget, and are willing to respond with any further evidence needed.

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