

SP 47

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb,
Llywodraeth Leol a Chymunedau
Priorities for the Equality,
Local Government and Communities Committee
Ymateb gan: Cymorth Cymru
Response from: Cymorth Cymru

Priorities for the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

Cymorth Cymru welcomes the chance to respond to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee regarding their forthcoming priorities. The committee oversees a broad variety of areas that are of great importance to our organisation and to our sector, some of which are outlined below.

Supporting People Programme protection and LHA cap issues

With the focus of Part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 changed to homelessness prevention, it is important that funding for the Supporting People budget is protected. The programme complements the Housing Act as it is primarily a preventative – preventing problems from occurring in the first place, or providing help as early as possible in order to reduce demand on other services such as health and social services.

The Supporting People programme in Wales has thrived in comparison to England. Although with England allocating money to initiatives such as the Housing transition fund in 2011, it is essential Wales continue to lead the fight in homelessness prevention, which means continuing to fund the programme for 2017/18.

Particularly with the threats of the LHA cap there is too much uncertainty to remove a programme that presents clear and measurable results. The LHA Cap could potentially affect more than 80% of the 35,000 Welsh supported housing units delivered by social landlords, impacting on many people who may be escaping domestic abuse, experiencing mental health problems or be at risk of homelessness.¹ It will be interesting to see the results of the Supported Accommodation research project to find out what effects the LHA cap will have.

We hope that the committee can consider the impacts of the Supporting People Programme, and help monitor work done to demonstrate the benefits to Wales of this programme. We also encourage the committee to take a keen interest in LHA cap developments as it will have a huge effect on the most vulnerable people across Wales.

¹ <http://www.whq.org.uk/2016/03/02/lha-cap-delayed-by-a-year-for-supported-housing/>

Joined-up approaches across housing

The housing sector has notoriously been seen as a ‘poor relation’ and suffers from a lack of a joined-up approach with other services and policy areas. In order to coordinate efforts to reduce poverty, tackle homelessness and ensure equitable access to services, it is essential that there is an alignment of: the Violence against Women Act, the Housing Act and the Social Services & Wellbeing Act. These acts all encourage local authorities to work in a preventative way, and we should ensure that local authorities are making the most of a joined-up approach.

Linked to this point is the need to shepherd through the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act in a focused and practical way. This Act could represent one of the first overarching ways of coordinating services. Traditionally, departments as varied as education and health, for example, have not worked together as well as they could. With the Future Generations, work streams could be aligned to objectives under that Act. This relies on the implementation of the Act being relentlessly practical, with indicators that are both broad and achievable. We would recommend that the committee considers how the Future Generations work is being taken forward and what, if any, impact it could have on service collaboration and joint working.

The housing support workforce

The success of these essential housing services is in their delivery, which is why finding appropriate ways to show recognition for the workforce should be a key priority for the committee. A valued workforce will have the motivation and time to deliver better services, maximising the likelihood of better services for people.

A great deal of attention is being given to the health & care workforce, which does currently keep the amount of support work given by the housing sector out of sight. The support work conducted within the housing sector is just as important to the wellbeing of the Welsh people as is the wider care and support workforce – and issues of staff retention, training and funding are as prevalent in the housing sector as they are in health & care.

Renting Homes Act – implementation

There are elements of the Renting Homes Act that we need to monitor in terms of the longer-term impact on people across Wales. Overall we are positive about how this Act will work in practice, but some of the potential negative impacts on equalities need to be considered. For example, the parts of the Act working against anti-social behaviour need to be monitored when the guidance is published. We remain convinced that there is a risk that those experiencing mental health problems may be disadvantaged by this, and would encourage the committee to focus on potential inequality issues in the Renting Homes Act guidance.

Housing Act transitional funding

The Housing Act is one of the success stories of the previous Assembly term, resulting in significant attention from England, as they consider adopting our preventative legislation. Impressively, Welsh Government statistics show that “during 2015-16, a total of 7,128 households were assessed as threatened with homelessness within 56 days and for 4,599 households (65 per cent) homelessness was successfully prevented for at least 6 months.”

A great deal of this success rests on the transitional funding given to local authorities by the Welsh Government. The funding has allowed for local authorities to implement a wide variety of preventative approaches, and is one of the reasons it has been such a success. This funding is tapering off as planned, but we would like the committee to consider the impact that this funding reduction might have on homelessness prevention.

In addition, as above, the impact of reducing Supporting People funding or the Homelessness Prevention Grant, could be considered by the Committee.

Commissioning

Commissioning and retendering have thrown up many obstacles in the last year for organisations providing services in the third sector, making good practice increasingly difficult. We wish to see a system that revolutionises the relationship between commissioner and provider that includes:

- A partnership approach, and not an “enforcement” approach – i.e, commissioners work with providers to establish a service that is affordable within current budgets, rather than being forced to commission services that are not sustainable, and then having to enforce strict terms when things go wrong;
- An honest approach that takes into account the costs of delivering services. The consultation document talks a great deal about what should be ended, what should be added, or what is best practice, but unfortunately does not talk a great deal about the funding for that. Naturally, none of our provider members would wish to use zero-hour contracts or to pay the minimum wage, but many are forced to do so by contracts.
- Clear guidance from Welsh Government that local authorities can be flexible in commissioning, and can take risks, enabling providers to seek innovative solutions that can ultimately save money.

We would ask the committee to look into new, less time consuming, more dynamic ways of commissioning to cut down the bureaucracy of the current commissioning system.

The voice of people being supported by services being heard

The positive experience and outcomes of people accessing support should be at the centre of every service. There needs to be a recognition that it is extremely difficult to gather this experience without resources. It should be a priority of the committee to look at savings and cuts to management budgets, to see how this is affecting the ability of services to actively engage with people using services.

Conclusion

This is a consultation response that has deliberately focused on the headline challenges facing the sector. Many of them are shared by other areas of Welsh Government, and so need a concerted effort from all departments to address them.

As we have said to other committees, Wales has the ability to move to a highly integrated nation. The recent Acts by Welsh Government give frameworks through which services can be better joined up. The opportunity will be lost, however, without clear direction on how to ensure the implementation of the various Acts *supports* integrated working. The Committee has a significant window of opportunity to inquire into the progress and to ensure these opportunities are not lost.

At Cymorth Cymru we are already working to raise awareness of these opportunities and would be happy to assist in any way we can.

ENDS