

Stonewall Housing's response to the ODPM's Consultation on a Strategy for the Supporting People Programme (November 2005)

'Creating Sustainable Communities: Supporting Independence'

The Government is proposing changes to the Supporting People programme and carried out a consultation process with providers and Local Authorities between November 2005 and February 2006. This is Stonewall Housing's full response to their proposals.

This response is written in the form of answers to questions asked in the consultation document.

Stonewall Housing provides accommodation-based support to 41 young lesbians and gay men in 4 London Boroughs (Hackney, Haringey, Islington and Newham).

SUPPORTING PEOPLE IN ITS STRATEGIC CONTEXT

What more can Government and authorities do to ensure that Supporting People sits within an integrated approach to the strategic planning and commissioning of local services?

Our organisation was created, thanks to a grant from the Greater London Council in 1983, to meet a London-wide need for supported housing for young lesbians and gay men. Since the introduction of Supporting People we have had to focus our attention on the service we provide in the 4 London boroughs in which we have supported housing, while still receiving applicants from across London, the South East and nationally.

Each Supporting People service review in the 4 London Boroughs in which we work has identified ways in which we can be more integrated in the local area. We would like to see local authorities taking a wider view in how Supporting People can provide services required on a national and regional level.

How could we ensure appropriate and useful outcome measures for housing-related support at the national level? What more might authorities and providers do to set outcomes at a local level?

The report states that there has already been 'some progress' in ensuring that local targets are met. Local authorities and providers should be given the opportunity to progress further within the setting of contract monitoring rather than imposing some new national outcome measuring tool which may be attractive in being able to measure the success of different providers and authorities (would this be through league tables in the future?) but does not allow for local idiosyncrasies and individually set achievements.

How might Government encourage the provision of housing-related support and other preventative services within the broader local government performance framework? How might this be approached in a two-tier situation?

It is very encouraging that the strategy identifies the problem of those clients who move across authority boundaries. Some boroughs have supported our point that we need cross-authority funding due to the fact that the majority of our clients are

fleeing homophobic abuse where they live. However, some authorities have been less supportive, and are trying to enforce a quota for the number of referrals that we need to accept from their borough. The impact our service has on the London region, and even nationally can be clearly identified, but because the funding comes from 4 particular boroughs, they are apprehensive about continuing the funding without us restricting our service to their boroughs in particular.

It is difficult to see how Local Area Agreements will address this issue without offering some services regional contracts to meet the needs of clients who need to move to a new borough in order to prevent the cycle of abuse and homelessness.

What more might central and local government do to build upon, and transfer more widely, the steps already taken to create a user focus within Supporting People?

We agree that user-focus has been a success of the Supporting People programme and we are introducing systems to take this forward within our own organisation. There is no need for further disruption by introducing new strategies in this area, rather time during the contract monitoring to review progress in this area.

FOCUSING AND INTEGRATING SUPPORT

Does the model described in this document provide a helpful approach to providing a new focus for housing-related support? How could it be done better?

The third band (Socially Excluded) is much broader than the other two. Perhaps this band needs divided further - using the list of client groups as previously, or introducing a regional focus to reflect those groups who need to move between authorities (such as those fleeing Domestic Violence, including homophobic abuse).

What more can Government, authorities and providers do to focus services more effectively on individuals to create better choice and control? What are the obstacles to delivering that? Are there any obstacles specific to integrating care and support services? How might they be overcome?

Giving housing-related support contracts to the organisations already providing care to a person may make things easier to manage but it may blur the boundaries between care and support once more (one of the reasons for introducing Supporting People in the first place?) and it does not take into account the skills which can be offered by agencies whose intention is purely to provide support.

Also, other ways of giving choice to clients, other than simply Individual Budgets, should be considered, as a small change in the number of clients choosing to buy in or out of a small provider's service could have a huge impact on that service's capacity and future.

What more can be done to focus on support to enable people to stay in their own homes? What are the obstacles to delivering that, and how could they be overcome?

The Supporting People programme has been a success in clarifying the tasks required to support people in their own homes. As yet, it is too early to quantify how successful floating support has been in the long term. More time needs to be given to allow providers and authorities to develop links with other statutory and voluntary agencies to meet the wide spectrum of needs of those requiring support at home.

At the same time it should not be forgotten that some clients benefit from living in shared accommodation with the peer support it offers and the opportunity to learn basic living skills.

What more can be done to ensure that authorities make proper provision for socially excluded groups? How might this be incentivised, including through outcomes and through performance arrangements?

To keep the Supporting People grant ring-fenced would allow central government to impose incentives on regional and local authorities to provide services for those who are socially excluded - especially those who are locally less popular, such as lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people. These incentives would be more easily managed if there was a stronger regional focus in Supporting People, which would prevent some authorities from ignoring their 'core authority function'.

The incentives should be set to meet agreed local outcomes within a regional focus, under contract management rather than imposed national outcomes (as explained previously).

What more can be done to ensure that services for mobile groups are planned across local authority boundaries in terms both of housing-related support and more broadly? What are the obstacles to collaborative working, and how might they be overcome?

The introduction of a regional focus would ensure that our clients continued to get the support they need without restricting the service predominantly to 4 local authorities.

A problem would arise when clients require resettlement, which would be restricted to the borough where they are receiving accommodation-based support, since a local connection plays a part in their housing register application. Regionally funded schemes could offer move-on accommodation from a number of boroughs to reflect the need they meet in each borough.

What challenges and issues need to be tackled in addressing these issues in two-tier situations? How could this be done?

It is accepted that ownership of the programme may be lost if the Supporting People programme, or some of it, became more regionally focused, but if local authorities had to monitor certain Supporting People contracts at a local level under regional direction then they would continue to recognise the positive impact the services had regionally and locally. Again a ring-fenced grant would allow the Supporting People grant to be restricted for certain cross-authority services.

Move-on opportunities would have to be opened beyond the local authority where the scheme is based, since they meet the needs of clients from a number of boroughs.

FUNDING

What approach should we take to the future allocation of funding for housing-related support?

Small providers, such as ourselves, were looking forward to a period of stability following the reviews, but we now face further uncertainty. The extension of interim contracts, for a number of months in some boroughs does not generate the

same confidence in staff and service users that steady state contracts would have done.

As mentioned above, when the grants are offered in future, they should remain ring-fenced with more regional services being funded. As the report admits, local authorities are currently able to make additional investment to Supporting People from outside of the grant so there seems no need to drop the ring-fence, especially when some do not show corporate ownership of the programme.

To what extent should we carry out redistribution of funding between authorities, and over what period?

According to the figures given to us from one London Borough, it seems that 2 of the 4 boroughs in which we work would receive drastic cuts (over £6 million and over £9 million) and the other 2 would receive increases (over £4 million and £3 million) under the new Distribution Formula. This is alarming, with the prospect of grants for valuable and effective services being cut, if not this year then a few years down the line - even those services who are meeting a regional need which this strategy seeks to address.

If schemes, such as ours, who evidence a cross-authority focus, were funded regionally then perhaps the proposed changes to the calculation could be revisited without them and this may show a more equitable sharing of the finite sum of money.

How can we most effectively strike a balance between providing flexibility and ensuring ongoing investment in housing-related support, including for mobile vulnerable groups?

A ring-fenced grant would ensure that locally unpopular groups received the service needed, and the mobile vulnerable groups could be given regional grants, monitored by local authority representatives.

What more can authorities do to fund schemes which are regional priorities? How might Government approach funding schemes which meet national priorities?

Stonewall Housing meets local, regional and national priorities, as explained above, and at present we are being told by some local authorities that they would recommend cross-authority funding, and by others that we need to have more local focus, therefore limiting the access to those in need from other areas.

It is understood that if a local authority receives a grant then they should want it to evidence local results, therefore schemes such as Stonewall Housing which aims to support people who need to move across boundaries (in our case vulnerable young LGBT people fleeing homophobic abuse) then these should be regionally or nationally funded - with local contract monitoring if required - to ensure that some young LGBT people do not lose out on the service which would benefit them the most, simply because they live in a borough which does not fund Stonewall Housing.

A regional focus would allow the development of new services which met local and national needs - for example, the need to provide support services specifically to older LGBT people has been highlighted as a need by the Mayor of London, but it is difficult to encourage the development of such a service within current local authority restrictions.

How might we approach the introduction of incentives within a future Supporting People framework?

As the strategy states, it is clear that the Supporting People programme has given a clearer focus to housing-related support and perhaps what is needed at present is time to develop this success story with a few amendments (around regionally-funded services?). Incentives could then be discussed with each local authority in the 'context of local government performance'.

ADMINISTERING THE PROGRAMME

What framework should be in place for the future administration of Supporting People? Is a mandatory framework necessary and/or useful? If a specified framework is required, what changes might be made?

The Quality Assessment Framework has been a useful tool for providers and authorities, demonstrating positive results thus far (for instance encouraging the inclusion of service users in service management) and this could be used further in the Contract Monitoring as a replacement for Service Reviews. However, providers such as Stonewall Housing could be issued with regional contracts to alleviate the administrative burden of having to complete Quality Assessment Frameworks for each borough they work in.

What arrangements should be in place to ensure the effective engagement of district authorities within a two-tier structure? Should districts be given a more direct role in commissioning and managing housing-related support for vulnerable groups where they hold broader statutory and policy responsibilities?

As mentioned above, services which can evidence a cross-authority client base should be offered a regional grant, with a local dimension to its contract management to ensure local needs are met if necessary.

What approach should local authorities develop for future performance and contract management?

The strategy makes clear that some local authorities are working well within the current Supporting People programme, while others are working less well. Both should be given the opportunity to develop further within the flexibility of the current programme before initiating more restrictions or incentives.

Local authorities should be given an opportunity to work within the new contract management process, which has just replaced the service reviews.

What more is required for authorities to implement common administrative processes?

The procurement process seems too onerous for small providers and it is appreciated that the strategy stresses the need to make administrative processes simpler for smaller organisations, so that there is not a bias to larger organisations with central administrative support departments.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE

How could Directory be used to help people access a wider variety of public services in more integrated way? Which services might also be included - e.g. social services, health, education, transport, voluntary?

Stonewall Housing supports the widening of the Directory to include as many statutory and voluntary services as possible, to allow for easy access for providers and service users.

These may need to be arranged regionally to make it a little easier to manage.

How can Directory be used to help local authorities work collaboratively to support mobility across boundaries?

If the Directory was regional then it would reinforce to local authorities that services must meet the needs of clients outside of their own particular borough.

How can Government most effectively support and facilitate outcome tracking and reporting? Might this require some form of service user tracking system? If so, for which vulnerable groups?

SP Digital already gathers information on service users. Perhaps this could be expanded to include information, on a confidential basis.

A tracking system may not be simple to measure, as it may not consider the following:

some people may not want to disclose information

some information will only be kept for a limited number of years

as mentioned in the strategy, some people's needs may change during their life, which means they will require support again - but not because the last support provider failed to meet the needs they presented with previously.

Contract monitoring will give authorities the opportunity to measure the success of the providers in their area (locally and regionally) and from then it can be decided if local, regional or national measurements can be introduced.

What more might we do to facilitate exchange of information between Supporting People and other services?

As mentioned above, the Supporting People programme has shown good examples of different departments working together and further time should be given to encourage more authorities to develop these partnerships.

What additional e-based tools might be developed to assist Supporting People authorities and providers?

We look forward to the development of the Benchmarking Tool by SITRA, NHF and Housemark.

Bob Green
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