

Alex Attwood, MLA
Minister for Social Development
Department of Social Development
5th Floor, Lighthouse Building
1 Cromac Place, Gasworks Business Park
Ormeau Road
Belfast, BT7 2JB

24th August 2010

Dear Minister,

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to respond, on behalf of the Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers (CRISPP) to your letter of 10th August 2010 and outline our position in regard to sustaining voluntary and community services to vulnerable people.

CRISPP was formed in 2005 to represent all non-statutory providers of housing support services in Northern Ireland. It meets every two months to agree action on issues of general concern to the members, liaise with the Supporting People administrative authority (the NIHE) and discuss strategic issues twice a year with the multi-agency Supporting People Commissioning Body. CRISPP also conducts research, runs seminars and conferences to promote good practice and conducts lobbying activity when necessary.

This response reflects our awareness of the difficult task facing you in deciding which vulnerable groups (if any) should be protected and agreeing which models of service delivery are the most effective in terms of outcomes and cost. We strongly assert that this task should not be the responsibility of the DSD alone, as the needs of some of the most vulnerable are multi-faceted and require services that cross Departmental boundaries. It must be considered by the Stormont Executive as a whole.

Q1. What should be the priority areas within the DSD to best protect those in need, stress or disadvantage? What works best and what should be reviewed? CRISPP consider that decisions should be underpinned by the following principles. Priority should be given to services;

- a) For those who are multiply disadvantaged;

- b) For those who have difficulty accessing main-stream services. This could be either due to the complexity of their need or lack of specialist provision in public services;
- c) Which meet basic needs that are the right of every citizen e.g. health, welfare, housing, education, where access is restricted due to the factors highlighted in (b).

CRISPP stresses the need for the DSD, in line with its mission statement, to maintain investment in the Supporting People (SP) programme because this programme provides front-line services to over 22,000 individuals in every recognised vulnerable group. Furthermore, research conducted in England and Scotland by DCLG and the Scottish Parliament has illustrated that investment in housing support services is remarkably cost-effective: the cost to other public services (e.g. health and social care and probation) would be approximately four times higher, should SP funding be removed.

Providers reliant on SP have already had their funding frozen for three and a half years and CRISPP's soundings indicate that a year on year cut of 5% over the next four years would close a sizeable proportion of providers, or result in organisations reducing the number of users they work with or compromising the quality of service. In such a scenario, the cost to other Government departments, most importantly the DHSSPS and Justice, would be significant. Consideration should be given to the balance between prevention and crisis intervention. Often spending on prevention and early intervention can save considerable future expenditure.

Q2 What could, or should be done within the voluntary and community sector to work better to address overheads and deliver better benefits to the community? CRISPP believes that any analysis of provision and implementation of change should be predicated on what delivers targeted, appropriate and quality services. A comprehensive evaluation of service outcomes is necessary to form a baseline for future planning.

The Supporting People Commissioning Body should prepare a Strategy and Action plan which identifies need and the optimal number of services necessary to meet that need. Models of delivery should be agreed in conjunction with CRISPP and there should be investment to support appropriate collaboration and mergers between providers, where business cases demonstrate this should improve efficiency and/or service quality. Contracts should then be awarded accordingly. Alternatively, the Area Supporting People Partnerships could go to open tender to meet the service needs identified in the strategy of the Commissioning Body but decisions should be based on track record and performance as well as cost. An amalgam of these processes has been used successfully in the Republic of Ireland in regard to homelessness services.

During this process, steps should be taken to retain existing funding, so that vulnerable people are protected during the process of change. Any unintended negative consequences for other departmental budgets should be taken into consideration.

As a first step, providers should take serious consideration of reducing 'back room' expenditure by making savings through, for example, sharing administrative overheads, training, HR and fundraising. Attempts need to be made to reduce genuine duplication work should also be undertaken to harness the buying power of voluntary sector organisations to negotiate better prices in terms of utilities, insurance, communications and so on. The government (at UK and NI levels) should help by removing VAT from agency services provided by one voluntary organisation to another (e.g. book-keeping services) and examining what might be done to prevent the prohibitive cost of an organisation leaving its pension scheme derailing a sensible merger.

Q3. Do you have any wider comments about how the Executive should address the budgetary situation? While not expecting the voluntary and community sector to be completely exempt from cuts, the Stormont Executive need to recognise that investment in the sector forms only 1% of the overall NI budget. The amount saved is likely therefore to be negligible but have a disproportionate negative impact on the most vulnerable. Restoring lost services may be impossible within any reasonable timescale and meeting the need, or indeed increased need through public services more costly.

The voluntary and community sector employs a substantial number of people. A reduction in services and the ensuing redundancies will add to benefit expenditure, reduce spending the wider economy. The sector provides significant additionality in terms of service delivery through charitable funding, a large volunteer workforce and Social Economy Businesses many of whom re-invest their profits back in the charitable work of their parent organisations. Hard decisions need to be made in other more politically sensitive areas. Ideological stands may need to be compromised for example in the areas of water charges, selling of assets, privatisation etc. Investment in social housing would, as outlined in the research report by Mike Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey¹ would be a positive step.

In order to facilitate your consideration of the issues, CRISPP have deliberately presented general comments. Should you wish examples of any of the suggestions we have made in regard to models of service delivery or mechanisms whereby a comprehensive strategy for service delivery can be devised, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,



Ricky Rowledge and Christopher Williamson
Co – Chairpersons of CRISPP

¹ Smyth, M. & Bailey, M. (2009). Addressing the Economic Downturn: The case for increased investment in social housing. June 2009, University of Ulster.