

Birmingham City Council
Business Plan and Budget 2013+ Consultation
Response from the Royal National Institute of Blind People
(RNIB) and Action for Blind People.

January 4th 2013.

1. About us

RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People) appreciate that under this time of austerity difficult decisions must be made. However, we are keen to ensure that blind and partially sighted (BPS) people are not adversely impacted upon.

RNIB is a membership organisation with over 10,000 members who are blind, partially sighted or the friends and family of people with sight loss. 80 per cent of our Trustees and Assembly Members are blind or partially sighted. We encourage members to be involved in our work and regularly consult with them on government policy and their ideas for change.

As a campaigning organisation of blind and partially sighted people, we fight for the rights of people with sight loss of all ages in each of the UK's countries.

RNIB has an office in Birmingham and we work at a local level across the West Midlands with blind and partially sighted people to influence and shape local decisions that impact on visually impaired people.

RNIB provides a strong national lead within visual impairment education, underpinning improvements in inclusive education through research, policy work, training and support for specialist professional networks.

Action for Blind People (AfBP) share the Birmingham office with RNIB and has a strong network of User Participation groups based across England which influence our regional and national service delivery.

AfBP works directly with people with visual impairment. In 2010 AfBP provided information and support to over 3500 children and

young people (CYP) with visual impairment and their families as well as providing a wide range of activities and clubs to support achievement through the development of self confidence and independence. AfBP services have been designed with the support of families and CYP to ensure we are providing services that are not already available to them.

2. Consultation response

RNIB and AfBP are responding to this consultation because of our presence in the West Midlands, representing blind and partially sighted people in Birmingham.

There are currently approximately 4406 people registered blind and 5195 registered partially sighted in Birmingham. However, taking in to account those with living with sight loss who are not registered, the number is likely to be actually considerably higher. There are approximately 61,610 people living in Birmingham who receive a disability benefit, 37,490 of these being of working age.

Our response to the consultation gives an overall view of our concerns based on the proposals stated. We have provided as much information as we can about our concerns regarding specific proposals, however due to the lack of detail presented about how exactly the proposed cuts will affect certain services, it is difficult to give a completely comprehensive response. We have included questions for the council within our response to try and gather more detail about the way in which the proposals are likely to affect blind and partially sighted people. Our overarching concern is that the independence and the quality of life blind and partially sighted people living in Birmingham does not suffer detrimentally due to city council budget cuts and that essential services are maintained.

We request that the council carry out an Equality Impact Assessment regarding cuts to any service that may have an impact on vulnerable people.

If future consultation is to be carried out regarding the council's budget and spending cuts, we make a plea that all consultations include people with a visual impairment, who are quite often excluded from consultations which are paper based and/or web

based and that enough time is given to take in to consideration the access needs of VI people.

Accessibility

Access to information is a significant problem for blind and partially sighted people. Obtaining information from Birmingham City Council in a format that they can read has historically been a problem for blind and partially sighted people, particularly from the Housing and Council Tax Benefit departments, as previously highlighted by both RNIB and AfBP on numerous occasions. Lack of accessible information not only compromises the independence of blind and partially sighted people, but can lead to very serious situations – in relation to the departments mentioned above; we have seen cases of serious rent arrears and threats of eviction and homelessness.

In October 2012 we were very pleased to have secured a commitment from the Deputy Leader of Birmingham City Council to have an effective system in place within the council for producing accessible information and we are very keen to ensure that this still goes ahead despite budget cuts.

We are conscious that there is an increasing shift towards access to services being solely through the internet. Whilst we understand the need for this, it is also imperative to take in to consideration those who do not have access to the internet for a number of reasons, one of these being inaccessibility of websites.

The Local Services Factsheet LS14 'Redesign of Customer Services' makes a specific reference to shifting the demand to alternative means of contacting the City Council, e.g. via the internet.

The Choice Based Letting (Birmingham Home Choice) system for accessing housing was introduced in 2010. Available properties are advertised on the internet, via the newsletter or via the TV (for Sky and Virgin and some free view users). We have previously raised this as an access issue as the newsletter is not accessible for blind and partially sighted people and most of our clients cannot afford or use a computer. Whilst we have been advised the local housing teams or local neighbourhood offices should assist clients

with these support needs one of the local teams have previously advised us they do not have the capacity to assist vast number of vulnerable clients that need assistance with bidding for housing. On other occasions blind and partially sighted clients have reported they do not receive the assistance they need when they visit local neighbourhood offices. Clients are told to ask friends and family for support and in fact on one occasion the local housing team called a client's relative to ask them to assist the client with bidding. This is not compliant with the Equality Act and gives no sense of privacy and support.

Corporate Resources

Fact Sheet CR1 - Reviewing the level of housing benefit payments to claimants in properties that are exempt from the Local Housing Allowance.

The current proposal is to cut the budget by nearly 15% in year one and by the same amount in year two. Whilst we accept that there may be some occasions where people are staying in accommodation where they do not access support, the reduction in the budget is quite substantial. **What checks will the council put in place and what procedure will be put in place to ensure that vulnerable people that require supported accommodation will continue to receive the support and care that they need? Will reducing the budget mean that some people that require services will not receive them because the budget has been set at a certain level?** We believe that the services available should be based on the individuals need alone.

Fact Sheet CR 2 – Benefit Advice Centre – service redesign.

The current proposal is to reduce the offerings for this team with the view to it eventually ceasing all together. The fact sheet states 'The services are being phased out linked to the Welfare Reform' The Government's prediction for Universal Credit is that many customers will be better off under this scheme and that responsibility for take up of its own benefits will rest with the Department for Work and Pensions'.

This is contradictory of the findings of the research carried out by the Hardest Hit Coalition last year. The Tipping Point report by the Hardest Hit Coalition details the human and economic costs of cutting disabled people's support and states '**450,000 disabled people could stand to lose out under Universal Credit. Many disabled people will get significant less help under the new system**'. The Tipping Point Executive Summary is attached. The full report can be found at <http://thehardesthit.wordpress.com/our-message/the-tipping-point/>.

More specific to the Birmingham area, written evidence presented as part of the scrutiny enquiry into the impact of Welfare Reform in Birmingham in September 2012 stated that Birmingham Advice Service were likely to be 'overwhelmed' following disability benefit reforms -

<http://birminghamagainstthecuts.wordpress.com/2012/09/19/birmingham-advice-services-will-be-overwhelmed-by-disability-benefit-cases-following-reforms/>.

In the wake of Welfare Reform demand for this service is likely to be significantly higher rather than lower as stated by the council. Many disabled people will lose money and be worse off under the new systems. Specialist advice will be needed to support people through the transition process, to ascertain what benefits they may be entitled to and potentially through the appeals and tribunal process.

The statement within factsheet CR2 – 'the responsibility for the take up of its (the Government) own benefits will rest with the Department for Work and Pensions' – is also a cause for concern. In our experience the DWP is very poor at producing information in accessible formats even though it is required to by law. This failure to produce accessibly information has in some cases led to VI people losing benefits because they have not received crucial information in a format they can read despite asking for it repeatedly. This again highlights the need for the council's local benefits advice service.

The current proposal is that Universal Credit applications will be completed online by the claimant. Again, this will prove inaccessible to some BPS people and those without access to the internet and will need support to complete applications.

Adults and Communities

It is imperative that access to specialist services for disabled and vulnerable people, such as rehabilitation services doesn't suffer under budget cuts. These are essential services for people who have acquired a disability later in life, including blind and partially sighted people.

Fact Sheet A&C13 – reduction in Supporting People budget.

This budget provides support to vulnerable people or people with disabilities. Again reducing this budget will have an impact on the support and care people receive to live independently within their homes. A reduction in the budget is likely to lead to a greater impact on other services and cost more in the longer term. For example, if people are unable to maintain their tenancy and become homeless the cost to the city is much greater.

Also this document makes reference to another consultation looking to cease funding the community care alarms. This needs to be looked at separately and it's a key service for many of our vulnerable clients and could (in worse case situations) place people at risk of harm or death.

Local Services

Fact Sheet LS19 - Private Sector Housing

The proposal to cut the Private Sector Housing costs by nearly 10% and the same amount in year two is a real concern. It is not clear from the consultation how the redesign will affect the service delivery but as the service provides advice and assistance to those in housing need and housing crisis we are concerned that the service will impact on the service delivery to our clients. For example, the visiting officers that visit homeless clients in their homes have had to reduce the extent of their service. We are very concerned about the impact that future cuts will have and how it

this affect the most vulnerable that cannot access services or even read their tenancy agreement due to their sight loss.

At present there is a massive housing shortage, there are not enough affordable homes and the impact of the recession is biting hard. Over 1.7 million households are currently waiting for social housing¹ and 1.4 children are living in bad housing.²

The impact of the Localism Act will mean that councils can discharge their homeless duty to people in the private sector housing. Also flexible tenancies have been introduced that will allow councils and housing associations to limit the length of a tenancy agreement. There is already a real lack of decent affordable private rented accommodation. 7.4 million homes in England fail to meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard.³ Many households have no choice but to live in poor conditions, which damage their health and often pose dangerous hazards. We anticipate that the effect of the Localism Act is that there will be a greater demand for services to combat these issues. Greater support will needed for those in housing need and crisis.

Children, Young People and Families

Fact Sheet CYPF 1 – Voluntary Sector Funding

The budget reduction proposed is a huge cause for concern and will have a detrimental effect on children, young people and families living in Birmingham and on the already financially stretched voluntary sector. Please could the council provide more detail on the removal and non- renewal of the funding as stated? It is also imperative that the council carry out comprehensive Equality Impact Assessments and accessible timely consultations in relation to this significant budget reduction.

¹ Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix Data 2010, Communities and Local Government, 2010.

² Against the Odds report, Shelter, London, 2006.

³ English House Condition Survey 2006 Headline Report, CLG, 2007.

Fact Sheet CYPF 4 – Home to School Transport

As this cut is may affect disabled and vulnerable children, including blind and partially sighted children, we ask that an Equality Impact Assessment is carried out to ascertain what affect it is likely to have. We also ask that the corporate consultation as mentioned on the factsheet will be accessible to all users and will not exclude those who are unable to access paper or web based consultations.

Fact Sheet CYPF 16 – Remodelling of Connexions Service.

As the Connexions service provides information and advice to young people who have a statement of special educational needs or are part of a vulnerable group, we ask that an Equality Impact Assessment be carried out regarding this cut. It is imperative that the remodelling of this service does not mean that young people with disabilities are affected detrimentally in relation to access to career advice and guidance. People with disabilities face a huge number of barriers to accessing employment so support and guidance earlier on in their lives is extremely important.

3. Summary

Whilst we appreciate that in the current economic climate Birmingham City Council has to make some difficult decisions as regards spending priorities. However, we would urge the council to remember that reducing services and support for vulnerable people will potentially cost the council considerably more in the long run.

It is also imperative that the council take assess and take in to account the cumulative effect of national benefit cuts and council budgets cuts on disabled people. Cuts to services that the council provides should not be viewed and assessed only in isolation, but also as part of a wider issue.

As stated at the beginning of this consultation response, we ask that an Equality Impact Assessment is carried out regarding all cuts to services that may affect vulnerable people living in Birmingham. We also ask that the council consider how they will

assess the impact of the cuts collectively as a whole and ensure that they mitigate the effect of budget cuts on vulnerable people as much as possible.

We also request that any future consultations take in to account the accessibility needs of blind and partially sighted people so that they are not excluded from contributing.

For more information please contact:

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