

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Local Government Finance and the 2019 Spending Review inquiry

British Association of Social Workers' Response

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the professional association for social work in the UK, with offices in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. With over 20,000 members, we exist to promote the best possible social work services for all people who may need them, while also securing the well-being of social workers working in all health and social care settings.

Social workers are key to the delivery of legislation that deals with the most vulnerable in our society for example, child and adult safeguarding, mental capacity, compulsory treatment of people with severe mental health issues, community care for the most frail and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children among other responsibilities. The application of Human Rights is thus central to the social work task. The vast majority of social workers are employed by, and deliver their services through, local government, which makes social workers eminently well placed to comment on the impact of Local Government Finance and the 2019 Spending Priority Review.

Under austerity a great deal of pressure has been placed on the financial sustainability of local services and despite an official move away from the austerity label the resulting service reductions continue to impact on children, families and vulnerable adults. Services have been affected in two ways; first by diminished local authority funding grants from central government, second by increasing demand as a result of reductions of welfare payments.

Local Authority funding has gone down by 60% on average across England¹. Children and adult social services have felt the impact of this pressure, raising thresholds for service eligibility in order to cope with demand. This is not a view unique to BASW it is shared by local authority organisations, many local authorities themselves and other stakeholders. Councils, such as Staffordshire, report having been forced into make decisions that put individuals at risk in order to make ends meet, in this case by ending Deprivation of Liberty Assessments for thousands of people not deemed high priority.

Another direct result of austerity measures in Local Authorities is increasing opacity in decision making, risking less accountability in service delivery. Social services, except for a handful of universal services many of which have already been shrunk down to signposting only, have always had an element of rationing; often described as thresholds, and the reason that this rationing works and conforms with human rights legislation is because of transparent thresholds and clear lines of accountability. Without transparency and accountability thresholds cannot be examined and cannot be proven to be fair². Austerity has undermined the public's trust in its own services.

¹ Local Government Association, Local Government Funding – Moving the Conversation On, June 2018

² For a more detailed discussion see Devaney J (2018) *The Trouble with Thresholds: Rationing as a rational choice in child and family social work*. Children and Family Social Work, December 2018.

The Government's policy over the last 10 years has been to reduce local authority funding whilst reducing the tax burden on the top 10 percent of earners³. They attempted to alter the basis of local authority funding by allowing councils to set higher business rates and council tax, this shift has created inequitable tax bases between local authorities.

As a result, preventive services have been reduced or shut down, increasing risk to vulnerable families which is then reflected in increasing numbers of children in care, letting down individuals and families at risk of homelessness, people with mental health concerns, children and adults with learning disabilities, at-risk youth and other vulnerable groups across the country.

Social work and social workers had developed a model of services which enabled some early intervention and prevention, though not perfect, it was a promising move in the right direction. In order to shift the onus of social services from crisis to prevention, local authorities needed increased resources in the short term, not fewer.

Social work services are dependent on social workers to deliver them. The effect of austerity is to make social work interventions less effective despite the heroic efforts of front-line staff. The evidence for this is set out below.

As the professional association for social workers in England, the British Association of Social Workers is concerned that the financial situations of most councils in England are increasingly unsustainable and that this has already affected their ability to deliver services. We hope that the Spending Review process will provide a meaningful opportunity to renew bonds of trust between Local and Central Government, between social workers and Local Authorities, between services users and social workers.

Funding Sustainability and Equity

Resource reductions have hit hardest in areas least able to cope. Ongoing research by the Nuffield Foundation⁴ has shown that "a child living in a more affluent locality was more likely to get help from social services than a similar child living in a less affluent locality". This cannot be an equitable or effective distribution of public funding.

In our recent submission to the Public Accounts Select Committee's Inquiry into the Funding of Children's Mental Health Services⁵ we highlighted that recently released one-off funding pots usually go to community mental health services which are likely to be short-term interventions over a number of weeks. A similar phenomenon occurs with the DfE Innovation Programme (IP) Fund. Distribution of this funding is very unevenly spread with just 11 local authorities receiving 50% of all IP funding and over 50% receiving no IP funding at all⁶.

³ Resolution Foundation, How to Spend It – Autumn Budget 2018 Response, 2018

⁴ Bywaters, P. et al., Identifying and Understanding Inequalities in Child Welfare Intervention Rates, Nuffield Foundation & Coventry University, 2018

⁵ British Association of Social Workers, Written Evidence to the Public Accounts Committee – Mental health services for children and young people inquiry, March 2019

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/public-accounts-committee/mental-health-services-for-children-and-young-people/written/97536.html>

⁶ P 94 (ADCS) ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Phase 6 – Main Report. Manchester: ADCS. Accessed 16 April, 2019

Workforce

Recent research conducted by BASW, the Social Worker's Union (SWU) and Bath Spa University⁷ found that under-funding is leading to greater stress among child and family social workers. From over 3,000 replies to the question "In one sentence, how would you make your job less stressful", lack of funding was clearly related to the four most frequently discussed issues:

- i. Workload: In terms of lack of staff and subsequently excessive caseloads.
- ii. Workload: In terms of too many administrative tasks, and not enough administrative support.
- iii. Resources: Lack of other non-statutory community resources to offer service users.
- iv. Managerial support: Due to the sheer workload of management, they are not able to offer sufficient support or effective reflective supervision.

As part of the solution to financial sustainability, improvements to workforce wellbeing are absolutely required. High vacancy rates, time off for stress and presenteeism due to workload pressures are not an effective use of public money, a strong and resilient social work workforce is a key part of sustainable funding for Local Authorities.

In a Local Authority in the Borders despite LA efforts to raise funding increases to 1% above the 3% local authority promise, they are experiencing a shortage in front-line social work staff, exacerbated by a ban on agency staff, which often cost more than a full-time social worker employed by the LA. Local authorities are exceeding their budgets in most cases and faced with substantial spending reductions with no ring fence for children's services budgets. Unfortunately, this is creating a local authority crisis point, causing unnecessary hardship to both employees and service-users alike.

Prevention and Relationships

Social workers play an integral part in the very fabric of our society, working with the most vulnerable, and yet austerity measures are continuing to limit the resources available to them. These resources not only include the number of social workers and support staff, but also the resources available to offer service users.

Local authority services from children, to adults, to housing need to shift funding models and emphasis towards prevention and relationships. All good social work is dependent on relationships – and the strength of social worker's relationships with service users determines the outcomes. But evidence from BASW's 80/20 Campaign⁸ research shows that relationship

https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_SAFEGUARDING_PRESSURES_PHASE_6_FINAL.pdf

⁷ Ravalier, J., UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing, Bath Spa & The Social Workers' Union, August 2018

<https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/Working%20Conditions%20%20Stress%20%282018%29%20pdf.pdf>

⁸ British Association of Social Workers, 80-20 Campaign, September 2018

<https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/FINAL%2080-20%20report.pdf>



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based social work is under serious threat from increasing demand coupled with increasingly limited resources.

One of the key recommendations from that research was that some funding go towards hiring administrative staff in social work teams. Most social workers agree that they currently do tasks that can be done by an administrator but administrative staff in Local Authorities has been cut back. Remaining administrative staff are stretched and social workers expected to do their own admin and of course paying social workers to undertake admin is more costly to the tax payer on a per hour basis than paying admin staff to undertake admin. Moreover, social workers do not have the time to do the relationship-based work that is central to their purpose and training.

Recommendations

BASW would like to see funding transparently equalised across Local Authorities according to need. The Nuffield research quoted earlier in this response points to worse outcomes for children in areas of higher deprivation. Instead of discrete funding pots allocated like grants to specific pilot projects in specific areas, funding needs to be appropriately allocated based on clear criteria across children and adults' services, as well as housing, public health and education, because each service is connected to, and impacts on, the others. It is important to pilot new approaches and we welcome progress but funding for pilot projects should be in addition to equitable and sufficient funding for children's services not a substitute for it.

Local Authorities cannot raise council tax and business rates in perpetuity. In April 2019 council tax went up by 4.5% on average⁹ and yet services continue to be cut or reduced. The Local Government Association (LGA) have emphasised that government grant funding is at an all-time low and yet demand has grown at an unprecedented rate. We support the LGA's call to increase central Government grants.

Services need to be clear about their decision making and threshold setting; there is a lack of transparency, and thus lack of accountability and too much 'discretion' concerning fundamental services which often impact directly on individual's human rights. A good example of this problem is in the tribunal process for access to services for children with disabilities which skews access to services so that families with the time, skills and financial resources to go through an appeal are more likely to get the help they want than families in equal need but without the same resources.

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⁹ Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government, National Statistics - Council Tax levels set by local authorities in England 2019 to 2020, March 2019