

Draft Supporting People – housing-related support strategy

A consultation response from Cymorth Cymru

May 2009

Cymorth Cymru is the representative body for providers of housing-related support, homelessness and supported living services in Wales and as such has three overarching objectives:

- To improve the links between policy and practice by ensuring that those working in frontline service delivery understand and are influenced by the wider policy context, and those working in policy development understand and are influenced by the experiences and knowledge of those working on the ground.
- To ensure that the sector maximises its contribution to the lives of citizens and the communities in which they live, by helping to build and develop the sector's capacity and professionalism.
- To increase public understanding and support for the sector and the work it does in helping people build the lives they aspire to within the community.

1 Introduction

Cymorth Cymru welcomes the Welsh Assembly Government's draft Supporting People strategy and the commitment it represents to further developing Wales's

support for people needing help to find or maintain a home, and to build the lives they aspire to.

This response has been formulated in consultation with our membership through Open Forums and face-to-face meetings.

2 General comments

Cymorth members raised a number of broad concerns about the strategy in its current form, as well as suggestions as to how the document may be further developed.

- 2.1 It is felt that the strategy should present the Welsh Assembly Government's *vision* for the future of Supporting People (SP). The draft strategy describes very well the mechanisms and much of the purpose of the SP funding programme, though would benefit from the inclusion of clearer indications of any proposed changes to the *status quo* or direction of travel which might inform future activities.

Cymorth members would welcome a more detailed account of the Welsh Assembly Government's plans for Supporting People.

- 2.2 A concern expressed by a number of Cymorth members is that the draft strategy makes little reference to non-statutory homeless people, despite the critical importance of SP services to the support of this client group. For example, the section *Addressing Repeat Homelessness* considers only statutory homeless groups, to the exclusion of the 'single homeless'.

Although the document does not explicitly state that this signals a move away from the original Supporting People remit of working with all vulnerable people in Wales, if this were to be the case we would express acute concern.

A key feature of housing-related support in Wales is its contribution to addressing and preventing homelessness *throughout* the population, and this would be undermined by any move towards focusing solely on statutory responsibilities. As will be discussed below (4.3), we would welcome an amendment to the strategy expressing the Welsh Assembly Government's continued commitment to the Supporting People programme's support of *all* vulnerable people in Wales, including the single homeless.

- 2.3 The Supporting People programme must be clearly and practically linked to a number of other key strategy documents concerned with the welfare and opportunities of individuals and families in Wales, and with the

provision of support to meet these needs - particularly, for example, Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Strategies. These links do not appear to be present in the current document.

- 2.4 Although references are made to the draft Housing Strategy and draft Ten-year Homelessness Plan, it is felt that these three documents could be more closely integrated. The delivery of each of these agendas will necessitate closer working not only between local authorities and their various partners, but also internally, between individual local authority departments. Whilst acknowledging the effective communication and inter-departmental working which already takes place in some areas, we continue to have concerns that this is not yet universal.

We consider that prominent and clearly defined objectives which apply jointly, for example, to housing and social services departments, as well as to Third Sector partners, might both encourage and facilitate more effective joint working.

- 2.5 The draft strategy is in part structured around the four stated aims of Supporting People (1.4). However, discussion of the second aim, *Using the programme to address underlying needs of individuals, by providing the stability on which coordinated and successful interventions can be made* is omitted from the document.

- 2.6 The proposed handover of Supporting People Revenue Grant (SPRG) to local authority control is raised, and, although the draft strategy gives no firm indication as to whether or not this likely to take place, we would reiterate our position on this matter.

Cymorth firmly takes the view that the wholesale transfer of SPRG as a non-ring-fenced budget would be likely to generate real and unacceptable risks to some services, particularly those supporting 'unpopular groups' or people to whom the authority may not owe a statutory duty of support. We would strongly oppose this course of action.

If this concern is not fully shared by the Assembly and cannot be reflected in the strategy, we would urge that the document reiterate the earlier commitment to transfer SPRG only when all twenty-two local authorities have been judged able to take on this additional responsibility. Furthermore, in light of recent commissioning issues (of which the Assembly is aware) we believe that the 'preparedness' evaluations recently conducted will need to be repeated. The reason for this is that the authority involved in recent difficulties was among those previously judged to be ready to take on SPRG, though this is clearly not currently the case.

- 2.7 The document raises the important issue of the current, significant variations in the levels of (per capita) SP funding in different areas of the country, and alludes to a possible redistribution of funds based on the LE Wales distribution formula.

With regards to this, Cymorth would restate its position that the uneven distribution of SP funding must be addressed by the provision of additional resources to those authorities who currently receive the lower per capita funding and therefore have the lowest levels of provision, and that parity must be achieved by supporting all authorities to achieve adequate services – that is: existing services which continue to demonstrate effectiveness and strategic relevance must not be withdrawn or reduced as part of a redistribution process.

- 2.8 The document notes the role that housing-related support services can play in supporting service users in accessing training and education, though we would welcome a greater emphasis on the central role that SP services can play in engaging ‘hard-to-reach groups’ in the employment and training agenda. To this extent, the Supporting People programme should be seen as a key tool in Wales’s approach to reducing the numbers of people currently not in education, employment or training, and targeting support at those in greatest need.

We would repeat recent calls for the establishment of a dedicated funding stream to support training and education programmes in residential settings. This should build on the experiences and practices developed by the WAG-funded Tai, Dysgu a Gwaith pilots, supporting participants in developing the skills and confidence needed to build more independent and fulfilling lives.

- 2.9 With regards to service planning, we would draw attention to the apparent disconnection that exists between some WAG directives and intentions, and actions on the ground.

For example, the Supporting People programme nationally has seen an uplift of 2.75% this year, though it is not the case that this increase is universally being passed on to providers. We suggest that this is detrimental to service planning and delivery, and would argue that a mechanism must be put in place to ensure that local practice does not undermine national policy.

- 2.10 We agree that there is a need to see a greater emphasis on professional development for staff within the homelessness and Supporting People sectors. Cymorth has been working with members to this end for some time, and supports this important aspect of the draft strategy. There is considerable work being undertaken in the social care sector on workforce

development, and we would welcome the Housing Directorate working with Cymorth and local authorities to explore how we might ensure the continued professional development of our sector.

- 2.11 With regards to services working with people with drug- and/or alcohol-related problems, the draft strategy states “We want support workers to understand the issues around substance misuse to a level where they are able to address its causes and refer individuals to appropriate services such as detoxification and counselling”. We feel that this should be clarified. Some consider that the statement, as it stands, might imply that current SP services generally do not operate in this manner, though this would be misleading and fail to acknowledge the excellent practice that some organisations operate on a day-to-day basis.

It is also felt that the statement might imply that appropriate drugs services are universally available across Wales, which would be similarly incorrect. Supporting People services, particularly those working with homeless people, report that accessing substitute prescribing, detoxification and rehabilitation services, for example, remains far from straight-forward in many areas, and in some cases these options are simply not available, or involve considerable waiting times.

Whilst welcoming the commitment to support SP services in effectively engaging with people with drug/alcohol-related problems, we note that the emphasis in the draft strategy appears largely to be on supporting people in achieving *abstinence*. Although agreeing that this objective may be desirable in many cases, we would draw attention to the fact that many individuals accessing Supporting People services have profound and complex needs, and a proportion may not yet be in a position to consider abstinence as a realistic goal. In these cases, Supporting People services are in a position to provide crucial opportunities for service users to stabilise their use and to reduce the potential risks associated with it - with regards to project staff, other service users and the local community, as well as to themselves.

These points would appear to fall under the second aim of Supporting People, *Using the programme to address underlying needs of individuals, by providing the stability on which coordinated and successful interventions can be made* (see 2.5 above).

A number of Supporting People-funded services in Wales are doing excellent work in this field, developing new approaches to working with drug and alcohol users which are bringing significant benefits in terms of client engagement, health outcomes, community safety and addressing local homelessness. This work must be acknowledged and promoted by the strategy.

Cymorth fully supports this agenda, and has worked with its members and other partners to produce the WAG-funded good practice handbook *Working with drug users: guidance for accommodation providers and other support services* (2008), which has been widely disseminated across Wales.

Finally, on a point of detail, we would suggest that the term “habit” is not used with regards to drug dependency.

- 2.12 Regarding sheltered housing, there is currently an active debate taking place in England regarding whether the kind of assistance provided in sheltered housing is intensive enough to be considered ‘support’ in the sense envisaged by the Supporting People programme. Those involved in the early development of SP will remember that this was a contentious issue at the time.

Many of our members working in this area now feel strongly that the assistance provided in sheltered accommodation is more akin to *intensive housing management*, and should be funded in the same way as this – that is, in generic social housing. This would free up considerable funding for services that are more definitively housing-related support.

Cymorth is currently exploring this issue with its members, but in the meantime we recommend that the Assembly engages in this discussion and establishes a view informed by the debate currently taking place amongst providers.

- 2.13 Finally, Cymorth welcomes the proposal [to explore the potential benefits of developing a regional approach to funding some SP services.](#)

We agree that the development of some specialist services which may greatly benefit a proportion of service users may not be strategically supported at a local level, and we would support the proposal that [efficiencies which might be made by increased cross-boundary commissioning and service delivery](#) should be explored. We would caution against, however, the development of additional regional bureaucracy that would serve only to reduce further the levels of funding available to frontline services.

3 **Comments regarding the current economic climate**

Our consultation with members took place during the first quarter of 2009, and the current recession naturally informed many responses.

In light of the current economic climate, we believe that in the short- to medium-term there is a particular need to:

3.1 Prepare for an increase in demand for services

Cymorth is working with its membership and partners to monitor the impacts of the economic climate on homelessness in Wales. Preliminary findings suggest that presentations associated with unemployment and debt are already beginning to rise, and we anticipate similar rises in the prevalence of issues such as poor mental health, drug/alcohol problems, relationship breakdowns, etc. as a consequence of the recession. We expect these developments to impact on a range of housing-related support services.

3.2 Protect existing funding, and further increase investment where necessary

Investment in effective housing-related support services is associated with significant savings to other areas of public spending (see Cymorth Cymru publication *Bringing it home: delivering citizen centred services through housing-related support*, 2007) For example, Supporting People-funded services in Wales typically support other central strategies and initiatives such as those concerned with access to employment and training, criminal justice, community safety, housing, health and wellbeing, and the provision of supported living services for older people and those affected by disabilities or other needs. These are all areas likely to be adversely affected by the current recession, and the Supporting People programme is likely to play a central role in addressing this.

A further point, as noted, is that Cymorth has long taken the position that the administration of Supporting People Revenue Grant must remain with WAG, and the importance of this has never been greater. Services for groups such as the single homeless, people fleeing domestic violence, and those with drug/alcohol problems or other support needs, must be protected at all times, though particularly during periods of increasing financial pressures. Currently, as discussed, some of these groups are excluded from the strategy and thereby risk being excluded from SPRG services.

3.3 Supporting innovation

Continuous innovation has long been a central characteristic of housing-related support services in Wales, and has led to the development of many new and effective approaches to service provision.

However, the drive for further innovation must be balanced against the needs to support and continue established best practice. We have seen, for example, cases where the funding of innovation has taken place to the detriment of existing services with a proven track record, and, furthermore, it is not unusual for funding to be made available which then comes to an end after a pilot period, despite the proven success of a project.

The [Tai, Dysgu a Gwaith](#) programme is a good example. Three years' funding was made available for a pilot project providing education and training programmes for homeless people, and before the end of this period the model was carefully evaluated. However, despite proving its effectiveness and demonstrating impressive outcomes for participants, no continuation funding was made available. We supported the development of innovation then, but in cases like this there must also be a commitment to continuation funding to ensure that lessons taken from successful innovation are taken forward.

The current approach puts at risk the motivation of staff, the successes of clients and the development of the sector.

4 Specific comments

The consultation draft presents a number of specific questions:

4.1 Could we improve the effectiveness of services by using more innovative approaches? If so how?

In the current funding environment and in anticipation of increases in demand for services as the recession impacts on homelessness, employment, mental health, and other areas, there must be an emphasis on supporting practices which are proven to be effective. As noted above, we would welcome an approach to innovation which includes a commitment to continuation funding in cases where efficacy is clearly demonstrated and support for vulnerable people needs to be sustained.

4.2 Are there any groups that should be included and therefore eligible for Supporting People support?

Any attempt to define specific groups who are eligible for SP support risks the exclusion of vulnerable people who may not fall into them. Cymorth believes that support should be available to **all** individuals who require assistance with finding and/or maintaining accommodation, and to this extent does not believe that entitlement to support should be restricted to people who are members of pre-determined 'groups'.

As noted, the current account of recipients of Supporting People services appears overly focussed on individuals and families with a statutory entitlement to support, and does not make sufficient note of other vulnerable people, such as the single homeless. This needs to be addressed.

4.3 What more should we be doing to reduce repeat homelessness?

Following on from the point above, the draft strategy appears to understate the centrality of the Supporting People programme in addressing homelessness in general in Wales. Although SP has a clear and important function in reducing *repeat* homelessness, it is also critical to addressing the immediate impacts of homelessness across the country, and to homelessness prevention.

We would propose that the section *Addressing repeat homelessness* should be amended to read *Addressing homelessness and repeat homelessness*, and should be headed with a statement such as "The Welsh Assembly Government acknowledges that for many people, including the single homeless and those at risk of homelessness, Supporting People services offer the only recourse to support and accommodation available. The Assembly is committed to maintaining this important aspect of the Supporting People programme, and the role it plays in homelessness prevention and early intervention."

With regards to reducing repeat homelessness, Cymorth supports the principle that homelessness accommodation, including hostels, must provide opportunities beyond the simple provision of temporary housing, access to advice and healthcare, support with drug problems, and so on. The focus must also be on enabling people to identify and access permanent move-on accommodation, and to prepare for this transition in such a way as to optimise their chances of maintaining that accommodation and avoiding any repeat episodes of homelessness in the future.

Part of this process, Cymorth believes, involves supporting residents in addressing any education or training needs which may be undermining their confidence and/or restricting access to employment or other life chances. Housing-related support services provide a key setting and opportunity to engage with 'hard-to-reach groups', and to support the Assembly's wider employment and training agendas. The piloting of Tai, Dysgu a Gwaith by Cymorth members across Wales clearly demonstrated the advantages of providing high quality

support of this kind within accommodation settings, and we continue to call upon the Assembly to support the wider expansion of this and similar schemes.

4.4 How do we improve service planning and referral routes so that people can access timely support?

Some elements of service planning are currently being undermined by the lack of a mechanism to ensure that all WAG directives and intentions are properly translated into action on the ground.

For example, as discussed above, this year's 2.75% Supporting People uplift has not been passed on to all providers by all local authorities. Consequently, in those areas where the uplift has been withheld, SP providers are now considering how they might deliver agreed services at reduced costs. This is fundamentally undermining earlier service planning, is likely to impact on delivery, and, with some providers looking at how staffing costs may be reduced, pushes providers away from the professional development agenda the Assembly is endeavouring to promote.

Supporting People providers need to see a more directive approach taken by the Assembly in cases such as these.

Furthermore, we believe that these cases provide further evidence of the inconsistencies of approach to Supporting People that exist among Welsh local authorities, which, we feel, reinforces Cymorth's position that WAG must maintain the centralised administration of SPRG.

4.5 What more could we be doing to help professionals address this issue?

As noted, Cymorth wishes to see a greater emphasis on professional development for staff within the homelessness and Supporting People sectors.

We recognise and support the progress that has been made in this area in the social care sector over recent years, and would welcome the opportunity to work with the Welsh Assembly Government and local authorities to bring about similar developments in professional development in the housing-related support sector.

4.6 Does this approach to future procurement of services make sense?

The approach described for commissioning has merit. Cymorth has been working with the Assembly, local government and partners in the third and other sectors

to promote good practice in commissioning and procurement and challenge poor practice.

An additional factor is the current economic climate, which we believe is likely to impact on the relationships between some local authorities and service providers. We would hope that the drive to find efficiencies will encourage authorities to work positively with providers as they explore ways both to make savings and to maintain the quality of services; our concern is that some may pursue less collaborative approaches, intending to make savings in the short term though risking longer-term harm to the quality and availability of support to service users.

Cymorth endorses the principles of “Sustainable Procurement”, as promoted in the Assembly’s Value Wales programme, and we would like to see these extended to the development of commissioning practices with the same underpinning values. Both Cymorth and SPIN have undertaken work in this area which might usefully be endorsed by the strategy.

We would also advise that the work being done as a part of the “Fulfilled Lives, Supportive Communities” on commissioning and procurement informs how these processes are determined nationally in SP.

4.7 Which services do you think may benefit from regional commissioning and which do you think should be locally procured?

Cymorth welcomes the consideration of a regional approach to the commissioning and procurement of some services, and believes that it could lead to improvements in the availability of services for vulnerable people. However, we consider that:

- SPRG should remain with the Assembly
- Regional groups should be accountable to the Welsh Assembly Government
- Groups should be made up representatives from authorities, providers and service users
- Funding should be ring-fenced
- This approach should be limited to those service types which may particularly benefit from regional rather than local commissioning and procurement
- Funding for regional arrangements should not be taken from the SP budget as this would reduce funding available for services

We look forward to working with WAG and partners in considering how this agenda can be taken forward.

4.8 Is there an existing route or mechanism that will achieve continued local accountability? If not, what needs to be done to take this issue forward?

We need to see greater linkage between WAG strategies and directives and the experiences of individuals engaged with (or in need of) housing-related support. This applies to both the availability and nature of services, and is in part a question of monitoring. However, as discussed, there is also a need for firmer leadership from WAG.

Moves towards developing regional commissioning must consider the cost implications of any new bureaucracies which need to be established. If the administration of regional commissioning detracts from funding available to local frontline services, there must be a judgement as to whether it is working to provide or hinder the citizen-centred agenda.

4.9 How do we develop the Supporting People service capacity?

Aside from issues around improved financial resources and the relationship between WAG and local authorities, discussed above, we would raise the importance of effective links between Supporting People systems and those being developed by other public services. For example, the effective and efficient operation of homelessness services is likely to involve close working and partnership arrangements with health providers, housing, employment and benefits services, and a range of referral agencies, among others. These relationships must be embedded in all relevant strategies and protocols, such as Health, Social Care and Wellbeing strategies, and be subject to regular review.

As noted above, we do not consider that these links are adequately made in the current document.

4.10 What are the priorities for improving and professionalising the sector?

As above

5 Conclusion

Cymorth supports the development of the Supporting People strategy as the key driver to promote housing-related support, homelessness and supported living

services as central elements of social policy and service delivery in Wales. We consider the following key issues to be fundamental to its ability to achieve this goal:

- The strategy needs to put forward a clearer vision for the future of housing-related support. Where decisions haven't been made over key issues, such as handover of SPRG and the regionalisation agenda, it needs to make clear what factors and evidence will underpin those decisions when they are made
- The function of SP services in supporting *all* vulnerable people in Wales, regardless of current statutory entitlement, should be supported by the Supporting People strategy. The Welsh Assembly Government must be explicit in its understanding that the Supporting People programme will continue to provide key services for non-statutory groups such as the single homeless
- The strategy needs to lead the sector through the current economic crisis and promote the role that SP services have in addressing homelessness, unemployment, poverty, and health-related problems during this period
- The support for innovation needs to be backed up by a commitment to the continuation of funding for existing and new projects that are proven to be successful
- Commissioning and procurement processes are key to having either high quality, citizen-centred services, or poorer quality, less effective provision. If we are to have the best possible outcomes for service users, the Supporting People strategy needs to promote sustainable procurement and ethical commissioning

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