



MAKING THE CUT

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brap

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WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE'RE DOING

brap

brap is an equality and human rights charity that supports public, private and voluntary sector organisations to respond to the challenges associated with our society's increasing diversity. Though we work across the country, much of our focus is on supporting agencies in Birmingham to develop new, progressive approaches to promoting equality.

For more information go to www.brap.org.uk, follow us on Twitter ([@braphumanrights](https://twitter.com/braphumanrights)), add us on Facebook ([brap.human.rights](https://www.facebook.com/brap.human.rights)) or watch the videos on our YouTube channel ([BrapHumanRights](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBrapHumanRights)).

Making the Cut

Like many people, we're apprehensive about the long term impact of austerity measures on traditionally excluded groups. Although a number of studies have been conducted to consider the impact of public service spending cuts on individuals and services, we're concerned that some of the equality implications of this are not being picked up sufficiently. In a city like Birmingham that has historically faced systemic patterns of inequality in some key public services (e.g. housing, education and employment) and is also facing higher budgetary pressures than some other localities – issues of inequality associated with austerity measures are a central and mainstream concern.

This led us to establish a project where we would draw upon the views and experiences of a range of committed local organisations working with some of the most vulnerable people in the city. This 'Making the Cut' project, funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, is helping us to generate a better understanding of the impact of local public service re-design on front line services over time (an 18 month period). Throughout the project we'll be speaking to individuals working in organisations (mainly voluntary sector – but some public sector) providing public services, in order get a better sense of the effect that successive spending reviews in Birmingham are having on the people that they help in the community.

What do we want to know?

Broadly speaking we're focusing on:

- The key equality challenges for public services in the context of public service re-design/budget cuts
- Emerging or increasing patterns of inequality that need to be addressed in the city

- The key challenges organisations are facing in supporting beneficiaries going forward

Who are we speaking to?

We've got some fantastic local organisations (including voluntary sector and public sector) involved, working on a variety of issue and with a range of people across the city, including (but not limited to)...

- Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid
- Castle Vale Community Housing Association
- Jericho Foundation
- Kikit Pathways to Recovery
- SIFA Fireside
- St Pauls Community Development Trust

What happens next?

This project aims to highlight how current strategies are impacting on the most vulnerable, so we'll be keeping everyone involved in the project up to date with what we are finding from other agencies across the city. One of the benefits of this project is we'll be in a position to notice emerging patterns across the city. We'll report back on the issues and challenges organisations are facing and the concerns being raised, and this information will be shared with key stakeholders across the city. Results will also be reported back directly to policy makers within the council and other local commissioning agencies to help share 'on the ground'/qualitative information about where inequality gaps may be widening in the city.

WHAT PEOPLE SAID AND WHAT IT MEANS

Participants in the project had an initial introductory conversation with us, completed four online surveys (the first in October/November 2014, the second in February 2015, the third in September 2015, and the fourth in January 2016), and had two longer conversations about the project (this first in May 2015, and the second in January 2016). Taking all of this together there are five key themes emerging from responses:

1. MORE DEMAND AND LESS TO PROVIDE IT

In the first report of Making the Cut we found an increase in demand, and this trend has continued throughout the whole project.

- The impact of welfare changes on individuals continues to bite, driving up need for services, e.g. increased demand for benefits advice
- But, it's not just that there are more people using services (although this is clearly indicated). There are also different groups with different needs that require support
- And the needs of service users are increasingly complex meaning they require access to a wider range of support and will need that support for longer

2. CHANGING FUNDING PRACTICES

- The things that are getting cut as a result of reduced funding are the 'softer' activities that are harder to fund because they don't explicitly meet a need, but they are the activities that build trust between the service user and service provider, so they are important
- There is increasingly a move among commissioners towards funding consortia and partnerships, but
 - increased competition for reducing funding pots actually makes working in partnership quite difficult
 - smaller organisations are less likely to have the capacity or networks which would enable them to join consortia and bid for funding
- Funding is increasingly short term, which is presenting challenges to organisations' ability to provide the services people need:
 - It's harder to have a real impact on beneficiaries in the short time that projects now run for – particularly given the increasingly complex issues organisations are having to respond to
 - It's also difficult to have a lasting impact – funding for short-term projects is not enough to really deal with complex problems like poverty, homelessness, and inequality. More funding needs to be made available for the long-term

- Not only is funding short-term, but organisations are being informed about decisions later, meaning their ability to plan and prepare for projects is reduced because the time between being told you've got the funding and the end of the project is so short time they need to work at break neck speed just to get the work done
- Contracts are increasingly restrictive, for example funding is increasingly short term and there's less money available for overheads and staffing costs. Not only does this make it difficult for organisations to find additional funds to put into projects or investments which might help save money or improve services, but also it directly impacts on an organisations ability to take a long-term perspective
- Participants also noted that contracts are increasingly prescriptive, for example stating how long an organisation may spend working with service users, which is especially problematic given what has been said above about people presenting with more complex needs which necessitate working with people for longer periods of time

3. SMALL ORGANISATIONS ARE STRUGGLING THE MOST

Concerns about the future of small organisations, and the potential consequence of losing grass-roots activism, local community knowledge, and beneficiary involvement in services were raised frequently throughout the project.

- In particular, as discussed above, the move towards more partnerships presents problems for smaller organisations. They're less likely to have the structures, systems and policies in place which are increasingly required by funders. They may find it harder to adapt their services to meet changing strategic priorities of funders
- The tendency towards larger tenders made it more likely that larger organisations providing a broader range of services would win more contracts. Participants felt that this may mean that organisations more focused on one particular area would lose out, at the cost of valuable specialist knowledge, e.g. of a particular local area or service user group

4. THE FUTURE IS UNCERTAIN

- Participants felt that at present it's uncertain how the voluntary sector can continue to meet demand and bear the brunt of funding cuts.
- A number of concerns about the future were raised, most significantly participants felt that increasingly common funding practices, such as only funding consortia and short-term funding could turn out to be a false economy.
- Participants noted that commissioners and public authorities are more reactive than proactive, but a change in this perspective is needed in order to avoid more expensive and complex interventions being required further down the line.
- Many organisations feel that these approaches are simply putting off the problems until a later date, or worse, allowing issues to build until they reach crisis point at

some time in the future. As one participant said “I think the spending cuts have the potential to be catastrophic and cause longer term costs down the line”.

- But it's not all doom and gloom. Some survey participants spoke about getting new grant funding for their work, or the pressure to work better and faster leading to innovation or partnership working. The resilience of the voluntary and public sectors in the city continues to shine through, despite these pressures.

In summary...

Cuts to spending and changes to public service design are being made locally in Birmingham and nationally (for example cuts to welfare spending, closure of local housing advice offices, youth centres and so on), but the individuals affected by these changes have not just disappeared, they have gone elsewhere to receive the support they need. They have often turned to voluntary organisations or over-worked public sector staff, people that are already feeling the crunch and doing two jobs instead of one. These organisations and individuals are picking up the bill for public service re-design, but the funding environment has changed too - participants have told us that funding is increasingly short-term and there is less available for overheads and the 'softer' activities that help create a fuller, more holistic support service. So, organisations are having to do more with less, not just because of increasing demand for their services, but also because what funding is available does not reflect what organisations need to deliver the quality of service required. This picture can be seen in other parts of the country too. Our challenge, as a city, is identifying our own unique response to this.

When talking about the future, organisations' concerns for themselves and for their service users were about more cuts coming, be that to welfare or to services directly. As such much of what we talked about later in the project focused around the steps that are being and will be taken in order to try and respond to this. Many saw this as a threat; to vulnerable people in the city, for the continued existence of smaller organisations, and for the retention of specialist knowledge. But, there were some who saw it as an opportunity; to work more in partnership, or to try out new ways of working. One of the key things that participants said that they wanted to come from this project was to start a conversation about the current situation public and voluntary sector organisations find themselves in, the challenges they are facing, and the impact this has on their service users. It is hoped that through this project the threat of public service re-design could become an opportunity to open a dialogue about the state of support for vulnerable people in Birmingham, and what the Council, the voluntary sector, the NHS and the public sector, can do about it, together. Over the coming months brap will be supporting this call by bringing together key individuals and groups to initiate this dialogue in Birmingham.

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brap is transforming the way we think and do equality. We support organisations, communities, and cities with meaningful approaches to learning, change, research, and engagement. We are a partner and friend to anyone who believes in the rights and potential of all human beings.



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