



MAKING THE CUT

Interim report: July 2015

brap

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WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE'RE DOING

brap

brap is a Birmingham-based 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.birmingham](https://www.facebook.com/brap.birmingham)).

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

Making the Cut will run over a year and a half and during that time we'll send out a short online survey every 3 months and speak to people involved for a more in-depth discussion every 6 months.

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 via an email bulletin. 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

Surveys

So far participants have completed two online surveys (the first in October/November 2014, the second in February 2015). Results from the February survey are summarised below:

Since the last survey (in November) has there been a change in the level or range of services you are able to provide?

Yes, fewer services offered	44.4%
Yes, more services offered	33.3%
No change	22.2%
Don't know	0.0%
Prefer not to answer	0.0%

Key themes emerging from comments:

- Introduced new projects to meet new needs arising in community
- Still have services, but had to reduce out of hours cover
- Level of provision is the same, but had to introduce some new fees for services
- Services are the same, but capacity is reduced
- Cuts to funding has meant closure of some services, which now means there are no specialist services providing support for certain groups of vulnerable people in the city

Themes similar across both surveys:

- Spending cuts directly impacting on ability to provide services
- Increased diversity of services users and needs
- More and wider range of services needed

Other than changes to the level or range of services, has your organisation made changes in your work due to cuts in public funding since the last time we asked?

Yes	88.9%
No	11.1%
Don't know	0.0%
Prefer not to answer	0.0%

Key themes emerging from comments:

- Reducing administration and management
- Becoming more business oriented
- Spending more time on marketing to promote organisation and services

- Cuts to welfare support has directly affected service users and made service provision more difficult
- Had to change services in order to meet changing contract requirements
- Having to change services to try and make up for loss of others
- Changes to other services worked with/referred to require reviews of some aspects of work, e.g. data sharing, and consideration of how good relationships are maintained with new services
- Staff are leaving and therefore extra work is being shared out among remaining staff

Themes similar across both surveys:

- Increase in business or social enterprise style approach
- Fewer staff

Has there been a noticeable change in the demand for your service since the last time we asked?

Increase in demand	77.8%
No significant change	22.2%
Decrease in demand	0.0%
Don't know	0.0%
Prefer not to answer	0.0%

Key themes emerging from comments:

- Increase in referrals
- A higher proportion of service users are from Europe, but this is problematic now as there is no longer funding for a dedicated service for them
- High demand for advocacy support e.g. around benefits
- Increase in demand from new client groups e.g. victims of human trafficking, young people

Themes similar across both surveys:

- Increased demand for benefits advice
- Cuts elsewhere are creating increased demand on remaining services

(If there has been a change) Why do you think demand has increased or decreased?

Key themes emerging from comments:

- Due to closure of other organisations there has been an increase in service users from elsewhere
- Ongoing impact of welfare reform on individuals, e.g. increase in demand for benefits advice
- Increase in service users with additional and high needs

- More children and young people accessing services

What do you think needs to be done in Birmingham to improve support for vulnerable people?

Key themes emerging from comments:

- A more joined up approach between currently competing third sector organisations
- A higher priority and dedicated funding for the most disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised
- At the moment services are reacting to issues as they emerge rather than being able to focus on solution and prevention interventions
- More preventative measures/services are needed
- More advice and advocacy around benefits, finance and housing
- More intelligent commissioning - commissioners need to understand more about the work they fund and the relevant issues – also so that there's a more strategic overview to funding in Birmingham
- There is a risk that Birmingham City Council are protecting their own services and cutting funding to the more difficult or challenging services provided by third sector organisations

Any additional comments:

Key themes emerging from comments:

- It's become more difficult to access funding
- More information sharing about funding from commissioners to smaller third sector organisations is needed
- There is so much uncertainty about funding in the city, there doesn't appear to be a clear strategy and communication is unclear so it's more difficult to plan ahead
- Commissioners look only at funding in their area, when actually funding cuts in one area can impact on another area – there needs to be more of an overview to funding so the needs of vulnerable people in Birmingham can be met strategically as a whole
- Looking ahead it's difficult to see anything other than further cuts in government funding

Conversations

In these catch up conversations we gave participants an opportunity to expand on anything arising from the surveys or consider their own experiences in more depth.

Key themes emerging:

- Changes to the welfare system continue to cause problems

- Created additional pressures on individual households, which continues to drive up demand for services
- Move away from regional offices to be more centralised in the DWP means that it's harder to refer service users on to other agencies, also creating more demand
- New information is needed in order to give the correct advice to service users, if this isn't received in time people can fall through the gaps
- The things that are getting cut in 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
- The issue is not just that there is less funding, but also
 - The need to apply with partners
 - The increasing unwillingness to pay overheads
 - It means that organisations have got no additional funds to put into a project or investment, even if in the long-term that would save money
- The Council has difficulty creating real multi-agency working
 - In order for this to work the person leading the team would need to have the authority and resources to be able to tell the team to do something and then check if they are doing it
 - The Council have tried to do this but the leadership is too diffused and covers too large an area
 - Sometimes there can be mistrust when working with certain agencies or a sense of 'why would we need to speak to you [a voluntary organisation]?'
- Have had to reduce administration and management staff
 - Trustees are trying to fill gaps where they can, but can't completely
 - There's now more work for the remaining staff
 - It's causing additional stress and strain on staff, some organisations have been working with staff on their resilience to support them, but it is still a problem
- A few participants expressed concerns about the growing practice of introducing 'gagging clauses' into contracts with the third sector (i.e. clauses which stipulate that during the contract period you may not say certain things or do anything which would bring the funder into disrepute or else the funding will end and you may have to pay back anything received so far). Contractual obligations of this type can hinder providers' ability to have effective communication with commissioners about what they are seeing on the ground and barriers/opportunities for delivery.
- Using volunteers is often offered as a solution to staff cuts, but this is not always a realistic solution, as volunteers have to be trained and managed, which take staff time

Participants were also asked to expand on their answers to the question “What do you think needs to be done in Birmingham to improve support for vulnerable people?”

Key themes emerging:

- Buy more from social enterprise
- There’s not enough of a joined up approach across public authorities - commissioners and funders should
 - Work harder to think about how projects would support people across a number of issues
 - Spend money more carefully, focusing it on where it is really needed
 - Take a more long term view, invest in prevention rather than just reaction
- The problem is that there has been large scale change on all fronts, e.g. probation, health, mental health, drug and alcohol, housing, etc.
 - Services are in chaos at the moment – this is confusing and stressful for staff and service users
 - With all the cuts and changes people are worried about their jobs, which makes it harder to work together because people are worried about losing their work
- New Big Lottery funding is a good opportunity for some good partnership working in the city, hopefully this opportunity will be fully taken

Participants were also asked “Do you feel that the council seeks, respects and listens to your opinion as an expert in your area and a voice for your service users?”

Key themes emerging:

- The Council does consult but then you might not get any acknowledgement of your response and the original proposal happens anyway
- The right things are said when you speak to people but often then something else is done – there is a disconnect between what is said and done
- The Council do listen but it’s debateable if they then have the power to act on it – decisions being made are so big that even if they want to it could be difficult to take account of organisations’ views
- Amongst individual councillors there is a willingness/appetite for change but the current environment of cuts and other changes means that often that doesn’t prevail

WHAT IT MEANS

So far we've got feedback from Making the Cut participants about the impact of local public service re-design on organisations providing public services by asking them to complete two online surveys and also having a longer conversation about the project. Taking both surveys and the conversations together, it is clear that increasing demand for services is not slowing, nor is it clear if or when it will (if things continue as they are).

The three main themes that stand out from the responses discussed in this report are...

1. INCREASING AND CHANGING DEMAND

In the first report of Making the Cut we found an increase in demand, and this trend has continued. The impact of welfare changes on individuals continues to bite, driving up need for services, e.g. increased demand for benefits advice.

"Addressing the disproportionate impact of welfare reform, recession and public sector cuts on [our service users]...The persecution and blaming of the poor and those on benefits in the media is affecting not only the people who are poor and on benefits, but also permeating public attitudes and providers of services, resulting in a much harsher climate"

But, it's not just that there are more people using services (although this is clearly indicated). There also different groups with different needs that require support:

- New groups of people are requiring support. In part this is as a result of changes to welfare, for example European migrants are now only entitled to claim benefits for 3 months, after which time they're seeking support from voluntary organisations as the only place to turn to for help getting work, housing, or just basic necessities like food.

"Rescued victims of human trafficking from the EU are now losing their benefits after 3 months which means they are homeless, destitute and desperate for the type of support that we can offer"

- The needs of service users are increasingly complex, for example on-going changes to welfare means more people are accessing benefits advice. In addition, public authorities are centralising their provision (for example seen in the closure of local housing offices where people could have received support and advice on housing benefit) making it harder for organisations to refer service users on, meaning that organisations have to spend more time with each service user than they would have had to before.

"One of the things that's changed is that before you could say 'ok go to housing benefit and they'll sort it out for you' but now there are no housing benefit offices, so some of the infrastructure that we could previously have referred people on to or

signposted them to doesn't exist anymore... and that's when something that would have been one contact with someone mushrooms up into something else"

2. FUNDING AND COMMISSIONING

In the last Making the Cut report a number of participants talked about the need for more strategic commissioning and funding in some areas, this theme has emerged in this report too.

- Organisations commented that commissioning in Birmingham needs to be more joined up - changes to funding in one area can affect other areas, but this is not reflected in current approaches. The commissioning regime currently isn't nimble enough to pick up the cumulative impact of welfare cuts and changes in socio-economic position and inequality faced by residents.

"At the moment there remains a lot of uncertainty about third sector funding in the city. There doesn't seem to be a transparent strategy, organisations are being drip-fed information and it is almost impossible to plan services further than a few months in advance. In the last round of third sector funding in October 14, organisations weren't told they had funding until the new quarter had started - organisations therefore operate at risk in terms of employing staff, planning services, working in partnerships, etc. This has the effect of smaller grassroots groups dropping out of partnerships and larger groups having to rely on reserve funding to keep things going."

- 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.

"If there's an activity that doesn't meet a need that is evidenced then we have to stop providing it basically. Some activities you can carry on doing by linking them more with targets. It depends on the type of communities your working with as to what services used to be offered, but you need to do some of these 'softer' kind of activities to get people in"

- 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 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.

“We can add real value, we can provide a preventative resource but it requires investment and people are looking at their budgets and thinking ‘ahh, no, hold on, I wanted something that’s just instant’ because they haven’t got the level of investment required. Even though in the big picture it would save money, but it’s too often too short term. We’re also finding that a lot of the bids we are putting in now are short term, which won’t help to deliver on the big issues our service users are facing, short term funding fixes won’t cut it really. They should be taking a more long term view, I think that’s hard given the environment we’re in but that would be helpful”

3. CONSULTING

Most organisations do feel that the council asks for and respects their views, but also that there is often a difference between what is said and what is done.

- Participants recognised that this may be, in part, because the Council is influenced heavily by national decision-making in relation to public spending for instance.
- In addition some third sector organisations are concerned about contractual obligations which limit their ability to speak freely. This is a serious concern and public authorities in the city could be losing important ‘critical friends’ that could help them to ensure vulnerable and excluded groups are being catered for.

“The cause seems to be a combination of awful central government policy making combined with Birmingham City Council being borderline bankrupt and cutting everything in sight”

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 and public sector organisations or to over-worked public sector staff 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.

The cuts and changes in public services come with a cost, and at the moment voluntary and public sector organisations seem to be paying a sizeable chunk of that. Not just in terms of

the extra resources needed to continue to provide support for all who need it, but also in their efforts to speak for people who won't be heard speaking for themselves. Participants are seeing their workloads increase as more people need support, they have had to cut staff, they've got fewer opportunities to invest in organisational sustainability, and contractual relationships can make it harder for voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) to say what they need to about the situation. And of course, with fewer resources and increased demand, the increased pressures on staff time can mean VCOs find it harder to challenge this cycle of diminishing returns. Yet we ignore the work, expertise, local intelligence and advice of organisations like this, at our peril. Many VCOs have a unique insight on the cumulative impact of welfare regime and public service changes. Now, more than ever, public authorities should be finding ways to engage VCOs in discussion about how to ensure vulnerable and excluded groups aren't being left behind.

July 2015

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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