

22/06/2018

Introduction

Healthwatch Birmingham welcomes the opportunity to respond to Birmingham City Council's consultation on the 2017+ budget. As one of a national network of Local Healthwatch, Healthwatch Birmingham is mandated by Government through the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to give citizens and communities a stronger voice to influence and challenge how health and social care services are provided in their community.

At Healthwatch Birmingham we are passionate about putting patients, public, service users and carers (PPSuC) at the heart of service improvement in health and social care in the city of Birmingham. In line with our strategy, we are focused on helping drive continuous improvement in (PPI) and patient experience. We also seek to champion health and social care equity so that PPSuC consistently receive care which meets their individual and collective needs. We have therefore focused our comments on aspects of the consultation which are relevant to these issues.

Healthwatch Birmingham's comments on this budget are made cognizance of the immense financial pressures Councils are facing as central government continues to reduce funding. The provisional Local Government Finance Settlement indicates that central government aims to provide 30.6% (2.2 billion) less Revenue Support Grant to run local services in 2017/18 than last year and the funding gap will increase to 5.8 billion by 2020. In addition to this local Councils will receive £84 million less from government for public health in 2017/18 (LGA 2016).

Locally, this has seen Birmingham City Council needing to balance its books by delivering £250 million cuts by 2020. In the 2017/2018 budget the Council has to make cuts of up to £76 million. We appreciate that the Council has to redefine its priorities in response to these financial pressures and make difficult decisions regarding services in Birmingham. However, in drawing up these priorities, the voices of the public needs to be central to decision-making; the Council needs to consider both the short term and long term impact of planned cuts, and the inequalities decisions might cause.

The budget being proposed contains cuts to essential services that have a bearing on the health outcomes of Birmingham residents and has the potential to impact health services in the future.

Public Involvement and Timing of Consultation

Healthwatch Birmingham would like to commend the Council for offering varied ways for the public to express their views on the budget. The public can tell the Council their views



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by filling an online survey, email, post, and by attending a public meeting. We also note that the budget consultation document is available in easy read and large print with other formats available on request (i.e. through email).

However, we are concerned about the extent of, and the methods for consultation. Considering the scope and breadth of the cuts proposed in this budget, there are only two, one-hour, public meetings and in both cases people have to book on-line to reserve a place. Although people can respond through post, it appears they would have to read the proposals online in order to respond. There is no indication that hard copies have been made available to the public (i.e. at public libraries, GP surgeries and other community forums). It appears that a majority of the methods employed by the Council for involving the public are online, and this has the potential to exclude some groups from contributing to the consultation. In addition, the budget document and questionnaire is not offered in any other format or language. Considering the diversity of Birmingham city which has 42% of its residents coming from ethnic groups other than white and where 91 different languages are spoken (2011 Census), failing to offer the strategy in different languages (at least upon request) excludes some groups from contributing.

In addition, the territorial mapping of poverty in Birmingham shows differences in the level and pattern of deprivation. Consequently, the needs and priorities of people in Birmingham will be different. It is therefore important that when consulting, all people are given the same rights to contribute and have access to the means to enable them to contribute. This ensures that the needs of the community affected by the proposals are taken into consideration and resources are distributed fairly across the city. We believe that, the current process for involving the public has failed to address this, hence the needs of some groups will not be present in the final budget resulting in a budget that is not representative of all those that live in Birmingham. Healthwatch Birmingham would like to urge you to ensure that patient and public involvement is being used to prevent these budget proposals from causing avoidable social and health inequity.

Regarding the timing of the consultation, Healthwatch Birmingham does not believe that the time frame planned for the consultation gives the public adequate time to consider the proposals outlined and to respond before a final decision is made. We note that the consultation was launched on 8th of December, 2016 and is due to close on 18th January, 2017. Taking into consideration the busy Christmas period, we believe that the appropriate time has not been set aside to effectively involve the public and ensure that final decisions are informed by their views, needs and experiences. Healthwatch Birmingham would like to urge you to not only listen to people's views but also demonstrate how these views have affected the final budget. This will ensure that people feel part of the decision-making process not just rubber stamping decisions that have already been made.



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Section 1 of the budget consultation document gives an explanation of how information gathered from engagement on previous budgets has informed the development of the 2017+ budget. There is however, no indication of any engagement activities, with a specific focus on the 2017+ budget proposals, having taken place prior to launching the consultation. As a result, it is unclear the extent to which the views of the public and other stakeholders were taken into consideration in selecting areas to which funding should be cut and savings realised for the Council. Healthwatch Birmingham acknowledges the importance of continuous learning and thus the importance of incorporating views and experiences gathered during previous budgets. However, we believe that the context in which the current budget proposal is being made is markedly different to that of the past budgets (despite the fact that cuts have been ongoing). This has the potential to impact the views and experiences of the public. For instance, the introduction of Sustainable Transformation Plans (STPs) has introduced a new way of working for the NHS with emphasis on prevention and promotion of wellbeing. This makes the role of the voluntary sector essential as well as leisure centres, health and well-being centres, parks, museums etc as these have a positive impact on wellbeing.

Healthwatch Birmingham believes that the Council has missed the opportunity to take an integrated approach to this budget. Work on integrating health and social care under the STP programme has started in Birmingham and the Council has contributed to this agenda as you rightly point out in the consultation document. However, there is no evidence in this budget that this agenda has been considered especially as some of the cuts are to services essential to the success of the STPs. On the other hand, the Council has failed to identify in its plans, ways in which it can work with the NHS and other organisations that can lead to savings. We hope that the Councils continued involvement in the health and social care agenda will trickle down to future budgets so that plans lead to improved public services and consequently improved service user experience.

At Healthwatch Birmingham, we believe that good public involvement is one where the public are given sufficient information and justification for proposed changes. However, apart from the financial justification set out at the beginning of the document, the proposals are set out in such a way that no justification is given for choosing that particular area for cuts. Therefore, the proposals have not been justified, impact assessed, nor have they been linked to broader strategies or priorities and most importantly to partnership working. This defeats the Councils focus on a whole systems approach.

Healthwatch Birmingham would like to see an emphasis on using service user insight, experience and involvement to ensure that these proposals are shaped by the needs of relevant populations and communities.



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General Issues

This section raises questions for the council relating to those proposals that have a potential impact on health and wellbeing in Birmingham.

Museums and Heritage Services

The proposed cuts to Birmingham Museum Trust fee by £500,000 per annum from 1st April 2017 will require the Trust to change how it provides these services, either through a reduction in service, closure to some services, and increasing or introducing entry fees. There is wide ranging evidence of the positive impact arts and culture have on health and wellbeing. Arts and culture can play a major role in supporting independence, social integration, and in improving mental and physical health. People with stronger networks are healthier and happier therefore accessing arts and culture can help combat loneliness. The arts and culture are a preventative service for vulnerable people in Birmingham city. Healthwatch Birmingham would therefore like the Council to consider these benefits and ensure that these services remain accessible and affordable to prevent a future impact on services.

Parks and Nature Conservation

The Council plans to reduce the budget by 20% by reducing the amount of highway maintenance, park keepers service and ranger hubs; amount of grass cutting in parks and public spaces; reduce shrubs and flower places in parks and on highways and stop planters and baskets in centres and on highway. We believe that the health benefits of parks and open spaces are quite significant. Ensuring a healthy environment is essential to realising these benefits.

According to Kingsfund access to open spaces and leisure and recreational facilities has direct and indirect impacts on people's physical and mental health, enable people to build social capital and are critical to child development. Outdoor exercise delivers an estimated £2.2bn of health benefits to adults in England each year. Therefore, encouraging people to use parks has an instant health and monetary impact (White et al 2016). Parks need to be protected and managed for health promotion. Failure to ensure this has the potential to lead to increased future spending on health.

We ask the Council to examine its vision and priority in health "helping people to become healthier, especially relating to physical activity" to see whether the proposed plans help the Council to address this vision effectively.

Council tax



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The Council proposes a 1.99% increase in Council tax in 2017/18, and also take advantage of the government social care precept to increase Council tax by a further 2% in 2017/18. This will mean that the total rise in Council Tax in 2017/18 would be 3.99%.

Healthwatch Birmingham would like the Council to reflect on the impact this would have on the health and wellbeing of Birmingham residents, especially those from poorer and marginalised groups. It is also unclear whether any engagement has taken place on this proposal, nor have the benefits or negative impact of raising Council tax been analysed, considering the level of poverty in Birmingham (i.e. the potential impact on inequalities). We would like to urge the Council to engage with the public on this issue to determine the impact on the public/communities and this would ensure that their views and experiences are central to decision making.

Health and wellbeing

Healthwatch Birmingham notes with concern that cuts to health and wellbeing represents 42% of the proposed cuts in the budget. We therefore have the following questions:

- The Council plans to cut £5m this year under the proposals for supporting people which is set to rise to £10m by 2018/19. Considering the recent tragedies amongst the homeless in the city, Healthwatch Birmingham would like to know how the Council arrived at this option; whether the impact of these proposals have been assessed, and how this was done?
- There is no clear indication of how plans to transfer wellbeing centres to the framework contract look in practice and how these proposals will improve services for service users.
- Again, the enablement proposal is not clear of the specific actions that will be taken. These are statements that have no corresponding plans and we fail to see how they will be achieved.
- Under the better care at home proposal, we would like to know the extent to which these proposals have taken into consideration individualised needs as outlined in care plans. How does the Council intend to make sure that proposals do not offer blanket solutions for people with different needs?
- Under the public health proposals, what are the potential consequences of withdrawing this service from the community? Healthwatch Birmingham believes that if the agenda is one of integration and transformation, then these plans fail in achieving one of the Council's principle of promoting independence of service users, encouraging place-based care - thus reducing reliance on secondary care.

As noted by NHS England: The benefits of an integrated system are such that local government provides an increasingly personalised response that is geared towards delaying or avoiding the onset of more difficult and costly conditions. Where longer-term support is needed the service is focused on person-centred, consistent and co-ordinated care. For the latter the service helps alleviate demand pressures, allowing a focus on priority patients. The relationship is reciprocal, as NHS and clinical practice helps to delay the need for long-term care and support.



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- Healthwatch Birmingham looks forward to engaging with the Council on its consultation on the new approach to provision of day opportunities provided to older adults across Birmingham.
- On proposals to review contracts and purchasing of bed based services, we would like the Council to consider the quality of facilities and services, level of support service users need in comparison to services purchased, and Healthwatch Birmingham would like the opportunity to contribute to the review of the systems when specific proposals have been put in place.
- Better first time contact - To what extent has the Council ensured that proposed methods for accessing advice and guidance will make services accessible to all Birmingham residents.
- Carers Grant - How does the Council intend to capture the impact of the grant withdrawal on carers and the people they care for? Has the Council assessed the current impact of the grant on those that receive it and those that have not received the grant? (we believe that making this comparison will be a starting point for determining the impact before committing to these cuts). Healthwatch Birmingham would like the Council to note that carer's grants provide access to respite for those people they care for therefore a much needed break for the carers. This has a positive impact on carer's wellbeing which enables them to continue in their caring role.

Children

- What will be the effect of reducing the volume of contact sessions facilitated by agency staff on children's wellbeing and on the information collected for use during Family Court Proceedings? What measures will be put in place to assess how these changes may impact upon children and families?
- The proposals for residential closures implies that the Council has identified foster carers able to fill the gap that will be left by these closures. What assessment has the Council carried out to ensure that foster carers are available to take in children from closed homes? What alternative arrangements have been put in place?
- What will be the effect of reducing child protection staff? How will delayed specialist assessments impact on children and their families?
- On proposals to reduce post-16 support for education travel Healthwatch Birmingham would like to know whether there has been an assessment of the potential impact of these plans on educational attainment, inequality and participation in education for all regardless of background.

Conclusion

There is no clear evidence that the point below (as outlined in the budget document) is actually being carried out.

- Please note this is part of the corporate consultation and overall budget proposals. Consultation with specific groups of service users will take place where appropriate



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Healthwatch Birmingham (in partnership with NHS England West Midlands) has developed a Quality standard for using patient and public insight, experience and involvement to reduce health inequality and drive improvement. We believe that the basic approach of the Quality standard would be useful for the Council to use to identify, understand, and address the issues that are involved in the specific services especially under the Health and Wellbeing and Children sections. We welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you further.

Yours Sincerely,



Chipiliro Kalebe-Nyamongo

Policy Officer



Andy Cave

Chief Executive Officer



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