

Healthwatch Birmingham's response to Birmingham City Council's Consultation on the 2019+ budget

Healthwatch Birmingham welcomes the opportunity to respond to Birmingham City Council's consultation on the 2019+ budget. Healthwatch Birmingham is pleased to see that some of our comments from our response to the 2018+ budget have been taken on board. For instance:

- The Council has considered the timing of the consultation and we note that there has been an earlier start time of the consultation process. We believe that this gives the public more time to respond before the festive season and increases the chance for the Council to receive well considered feedback that can effectively inform the development of the proposed plans;
- The Council has provided adequate information to support the proposals being made in this budget. It is much more clearer the areas that are being earmarked for savings/cuts under each proposal, the reasons for this, and an explanation of what this means for the public and service users. The Council has also made it easier for people to access the documents by providing individual links to different areas being considered for savings/cuts and documents on cross-cutting issues and so on. This is welcome as it means people are well-informed about the plans and can therefore make well-informed decisions.
- There are clear examples in the budget document that consideration has been taken on the potential impact of the proposed savings/cuts. There is an indication in the budget documents of impact assessments carried out in the development of the proposals and plans for further consultations to help the Council identify specific groups that would be impacted by these plans.

Our key role is to make sure that patients, the public, service users, and carers (PPSuC) are at the heart of service improvement in health and social care in Birmingham. In line with our role, we have made our comments to ensure that the voice of the public is central to decision-making; that the Council considers both the short term and long term impact of planned cuts, and the inequalities decisions might cause. Healthwatch Birmingham understands the immense pressures the Council is under in relation to diminishing resources and increased demand for services. Hence, the difficult decisions the Council has to make in the distribution of these resources. We make our comments with these considerations in mind.

Public Involvement

We commend the Council for making changes to the timing of the consultation period for the 2019+ budget. Starting the engagement in November gives the public more time to reflect on the proposals before the holiday season. The information that the Council has presented to the public is an example of good practice in terms of ensuring that those being



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consulted have enough information to understand the proposals and give informed feedback. We also note that where possible the Council has indicated that an impact assessment has or will be carried out. It is clear in the documents that there has been a consideration of the potential impact on the citizens of Birmingham of these proposed cuts as well as identifying groups (according to the Equality Act) that would be most affected.

As we indicated in our comments to the 2018+ Budget, a good impact and equality assessment would help identify the needs of different groups including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Healthwatch Birmingham hopes to see a continued emphasis on using service user insight, experience and involvement to identify areas for cuts, identify groups that maybe affected by the proposals, understand how the proposals impact them and develop solutions. In addition, a continued demonstration that the views, needs and experiences of the public have been listened to and informed the final budget.

Methods for engaging the public

In our response to the 2018+ Budget, we expressed concern about the methods the Council used to engage with the public. We still believe that the methods are still inadequate for engaging with the diverse population of Birmingham. As in the 2018+ Budget consultation, there is only one, two-hour, public meeting and people have to book on-line to reserve a place. It also appears that the proposals are only available online and people have to respond through an online survey. We note that the Council is also running two 'Q & A' sessions, however these are also online. Unlike last year, the 2019+ Budget consultation document is not clear on whether people can also give their feedback through post and email. As we indicated in our response to the 2018+ Budget Consultation, an over-reliance on online methods for involving the public has the potential to exclude some groups from contributing to the consultation. Healthwatch Birmingham believes that online methods need to be complemented by other methods to ensure that the views of a diverse range of people are captured.

We note that the Council has indicated on the Budget 2019+ consultation webpage that 'Specific groups of service users will also be consulted where appropriate'. It would be useful to the public if there was an indication of which groups are being consulted and details of how they can get involved if they belong to any of the groups.

Healthwatch Birmingham's Views on the proposals

Healthwatch Birmingham is concerned that the trajectory of the Council's plans seem to be around:

- Increasing the amount that the public pays for various services through increased Council tax, introduction of charges for services etc; and
- Reducing the services that the citizens can access



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The proposed plans seem to be at odds with the Council's key priorities around skills development, reducing social isolation and loneliness; responding to challenges highlighted by regulators within children services among others.

Although we acknowledge that there is no long-term plan for the NHS and the promised Green Paper on social care has not yet been published, the Budget has not included any element of joint working with the NHS. For instance, ensuring that the services needed to reduce reliance on secondary care are made available.

Adult Social Care and Health

Equipment Loan Store

We note the Council's plans to use the capital resources budget to pay for larger items of equipment and assistive equipment. We also note the proposed budget reduction and it is not clear how this will not have an impact on service users. In Particular, those requiring minor adaptations as there is no indication of how this change will benefit them. Healthwatch Birmingham has heard from individuals who are already having considerable difficulties accessing support for minor adaptations as outlined below:

My husband has a rare genetic disorder and he has just had an operation for his hand as he was not been able to use the hand at all. He can't lift anything or put any pressure on his hands, therefore we need specialist equipment to allow him to be more independent in the house. We have asked the occupational therapy team to install special taps so he can get water by himself, but they have refused saying they have no funding to do that. We've had to go to charities to beg for them to help with equipment like hot water tap as he can't lift the kettle. My husband also suffers from poor mental health so all of this is adding to the stress. We have some equipment such as electric bath lift but would also need additional hand reel, but if they are not able to provide the service then it is not helpful.

Bharosa Health

Healthwatch Birmingham agrees with the Council that addressing domestic abuse is important, in particular developing solutions that address the impact on different groups. In January 2017, Healthwatch Birmingham responded to Birmingham City Council's consultation on the Domestic Violence Strategy. In our comments we asked the Council to carry out an equality assessment that identifies the needs of different groups as identified under the equality act and develop strategies that address these needs. We also asked the Council to ensure that there is emphasis on using service user insight, experience and involvement to drive service design and continuous improvement through the life of this strategy.



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We therefore, welcome the Council's plans to review this service so that it better aligns with the Domestic Violence Strategy and key Public Health outcomes. We would like to see the use of public and service user's experience and insights to inform the development of the options that will be under review. In addition, we ask the Council to carry out an equality and impact assessment of the options that will be consulted on to enable people to give informed feedback. We look forward to engaging with the Council during the review of this service, especially as it consults with service users and the public.

Public Health

We note the plans to decommission (1st July, 2019) the information and advice service the Council provides to people with HIV and TB. This service provides advice, information, housing support and support with testing. A new report (December 2018)¹ by Public Health England has found that prevention efforts (condom use, increasing HIV testing, availability of PrEP etc) have been key to the UK meeting its UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets. We believe that local authorities have commissioning responsibilities for HIV support services and this should complement the CCGs role. The National Aids Trust states that local authorities have a public health interest in people with HIV being supported in safer sex, healthcare engagement and adherence to medication in order to minimise the onward transmission of HIV in their area. Their social care duty, and especially its preventive focus, also means local authorities should consider a commissioning contribution to local HIV support services and their promotion of wellbeing².

We therefore welcome the Council's plans to hold formal discussions with CCGs and the Voluntary sector on how they can work together. As the National Aids Trust argues any transfer of commissioning responsibility for HIV support services from local authorities to CCGs must be properly agreed and managed to ensure no break or gap in service provision. At Healthwatch Birmingham, we believe that the decision to decommission this service should have taken place after having a discussion with NHS commissioners, providers and the voluntary sector.

Financial Assessment for care and support

Healthwatch Birmingham believes that a review of the financial assessment system is essential in order to create a fairer system of charging for those who access non-residential care. However, we believe that the council needs to consult with the public and those individuals that will be affected by these changes. We note for instance, that there is expected to be an increase in care contributions for some service users. This will require the council to understand the impact this will have on service users, especially their ability to contribute larger sums and the potential impact on their health and wellbeing should they not be able to make payments.

1

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/759408/HIV_annual_report_2018.pdf

2 Why we Need HIV Support Services:

https://www.nat.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/NAT_WHY%20WE%20NEED%20HIV%20SUPPORT%20SERVICES_2017_56%20pages_FINAL%20WEB_SINGLE%20PAGE...pdf



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We also note that there is going to be changes to the assessments in that disability-related benefits will be included in the assessments. This will mean the council will make decisions around what 'enough benefit' is and what constitutes necessary disability related expenditure. Consequently, the council will have to decide how much an individual can keep to meet needs not being met by the council. All these issues require engagement with service users and clear information and advice so that people are clear about the changes and how they will affect them. Over the year we have received feedback from service users around the issue of costs for care and support. This has included lack of clarity on their contributions, getting into debt to pay for care support for family members not eligible for support, assessments that provide inadequate support and poor information and advice.

I had a fall in the street back in February 2018, and 2 further falls at home since. I have not been visited by a social worker to assess my care needs, although carers were assigned to me whilst I was recovering from my fall. The Local Authority have now sent me a bill for £1800 for the care I have received, which I cannot afford. They are further charging me around £100 for further care. I would like to know my rights as the issue of fees has never been discussed with me by anybody from the council.

My son recently went through an assessment of his autism needs through the local authority. I am unhappy with the outcome, as I do not believe that the result of the assessment fairly reflects certain aspects of my son's requirements, particularly around his communication with others. My son is currently seeking to leave home and I believe the support he needs will not be appropriate. I would like a review of the assessment from the local authority. What is the process/

My mom returned to UK to find out she had been out of the country too long to receive most benefits, my sister had to remortgage her home and now a year later is still in debt.

I am concerned about the care of my elder brother. My brother has dementia, he contributes towards his costs and I have also been paying for part of his care. I would like to know how much of a contribution my brother is making towards his current care costs and I would like a review of his current care package. I need some information on how to do this.

PLACE

Healthwatch Birmingham is concerned about many of the proposed cuts under PLACE and the potential impact on Birmingham citizens. Over the past few years Birmingham City Council has had to make cuts to essential services that have a bearing on the health outcomes of Birmingham residents and have the potential to impact health services in the future. There have been cuts to services such as leisure centres, health and well-being centres, parks, museums and heritage services. These services play a major role in supporting independence, social integration, and in improving mental and physical health. Some of the cuts have been to services that are essential to the success of Sustainable Development Plans, in particular place-based care and reducing reliance on secondary care.



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These cuts affect a population that suffers from one of the highest levels of deprivation with 56.3% of the Birmingham population living in the 20% most deprived areas of Birmingham, 1 in 3 children live in poverty, 42% of its population is from a non-white ethnic background and these have an impact on their health and well-being. Overall, Birmingham is ranked 6th most deprived area in the UK. We believe that the cuts being proposed will impact negatively on the population.

Transfer management for community centres to third parties

The centres (usually used for health and wellbeing activities, family and welfare support, employment support, MPs surgeries etc) that the council is planning to handover to third sector or community groups, offer a much needed service to the most deprived in the community. Whilst community or third sector groups might continue to offer access to the same services, they do not have the duty to make these accessible at reasonable prices. Once these groups start charging market prices for these places, the most vulnerable in the community will not be able to access these. Will there be a requirement that community and third sector groups not only provide the same services but at the current prices offered by the Council?

School Crossing

We recognise that the Council has no statutory requirement to provide school crossings, however, we believe that it has the duty to ensure the safety of its children. The plans being planned will lead to an inequitable service that is not based on need or level of traffic risk (as the council has identified). Thus, the most deprived areas where parents are unable to contribute will have children at higher levels of traffic risk.

Cease commissioning of third sector partners to deliver independent advice (Legal entitlement and advice service budget)

We note that the Council acknowledges that the service is accessed by the most vulnerable people of Birmingham but no alternative similar service is offered. It is not clear what sort of service will be provided through the Council's website, contact centres and its neighbourhood advice service. We fail to see how any service provided by the Council will match that provided by CAB. CAB provides a person centred service that offers personalised support to people at their most vulnerable. It would be useful to the public if the Council indicated clearly the service that they will provide and whether this will be similar to what CAB provides.

Culture and Visitor Economy

We note the cuts in grants to arts and cultural organisation such as Symphony hall, town hall, royal ballet, black and minority ethnic arts development and neighbourhood programmes. As we have indicated in previous comments to Budget Consultations, Arts and culture play a major role in supporting independence, social integration, and in improving mental and physical health. The arts and culture are a preventative service for vulnerable people in Birmingham city. Healthwatch Birmingham would therefore like the Council to



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consider these benefits as it carries out an impact assessment and ensure that these services remain accessible and affordable to Birmingham residents.

Leisure client and projects

We welcome that the Council acknowledges the impact of cuts to the active wellbeing society on the most deprived communities. We hope that the council will take time to engage with these communities in the event that alternative sources of funding are not found.

Strategic Housing Functions

Integrate all funding streams into one directorate and managed through the housing service (HRA budget, BCC Homeless centres funding, Homeless Prevention Grant Funding and Discretionary Housing Payment). There is need for clarity on the impact of subsuming the other funding streams, especially on spend on these areas, for instance spending on homelessness.

Fees and Charges Review (Parks)

We note plans to increase charges or reduce the cost of maintenance for sports pitch hire; review car parking charges for Cannon Hill Park and implement car parking charges at Sutton Park, Lickey Hills, Rectory Park, Victoria Common, Edgbaston Reservoir; and discontinue non-commercial discounts for event hire at major parks to reflect more realistically the cost and value of these facilities.

The proposed plans are at odds with the Council's vision and priority in health 'helping people to become healthier, especially relating to physical activity'. There is clear evidence that access to open spaces has an impact on health and wellbeing, socialisation and loneliness. According to the Council's own statistics 39.2% (at least 1 in 4); of children 10-11 years old are obese and 26.8% live in the most deprived areas; 8.3% of Birmingham residents over 17 years suffer from diabetes which is higher than the national average of 6.3%; Birmingham is ranked 172 out of 2016 for access to sports and recreational activities; and the Council acknowledges that access to green spaces can reduce the risk of obesity by 40%.

We believe that the proposed cuts are short sighted and failure to ensure that these are accessible, especially to those most deprived will lead to increased future spending on health.

Birmingham Library Services

Although we welcome the broadening of choice to groups such as children, the elderly and those with a disability, we are concerned that services supporting economic mobility such as study, business and skills support will cease. The Birmingham Skills Investment Plan's aims include promoting access to learning for disadvantaged people and ensuring that adults and young people have the opportunities they need to succeed in tomorrow's labour market, especially for our disadvantaged communities³. We believe that libraries have a crucial role

³ <http://www.bhampolicycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Birmingham-Skills-Investment-Plan-web-1.pdf>



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to play in developing the skills necessary for growth in Birmingham. Therefore, ensuring that a service is still available to offer the skills support needed, especially to disadvantaged groups is crucial. Currently, Birmingham has a greater proportion (12.6%) of working age residents with no qualification compared to the UK (8%).

The Child Trust

The most recent (2018) Ofsted monitoring report has found that although there are improvements, the Council still has a lot of work to do to respond to the concerns raised by the report. We wonder whether this is the best time for a reduction in funding towards children's services. We note that there are no plans to reduce service levels to achieve this saving, however, it is important for the public and service users to understand what a change to how the Trust organises services and delivers alternatives to care looks like. We therefore look forward to engaging with the Trust as it draws up more detailed plans for how this contractual saving will be delivered. We also look forward to reading the equality assessment being planned once the Trust has firmer plans drawn and how it will and mitigated against any potential impact.

Operational Hub Programme Operational Premises (these include libraries, community centres, youth centres, adult education centres, leisure centres, community centres, day care centres, housing offices, children's centre etc)

We note that the Council plans to decommission poorly maintained and poorly sited single service premises which will lead to a reduction in the number of direct service outlets offered. The Council plans to open new 'hub building' to offer these services. As this is a significant change (i.e. change of location, change of service) we hope that the Council has plans to consult the public on services that will be earmarked for closure. We welcome that the Council plans to undertake a full equality impact assessment.

Channel shift call reduction with the implementation of the council's new online account (BRUM)

We have expressed concern in this response and previous documents about the over-reliance on online engagement. Whilst these are useful and preferred by some individuals, the Council should aim to ensure that all individuals are given equal opportunities to engage with the Council. This requires that the Council offers a range of methods for people to engage with the Council. The Council would benefit from having a clear communication and engagement strategy that guides how it communicates with different groups.

Yours Sincerely,



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