

Changing Supporting People funding in England: Results from a pilot exercise

Summary



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November 2008

Product Code: 08HCS05654

ISBN: 978 1 4098 0871 8

This document provides a summary of the findings of an independent report into changes to Supporting People funding in England. The Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York directed the research, had responsibility for designing the research instruments, undertook the analysis and produced the report. The views expressed in this summary are not necessarily those of Communities and Local Government or any other government department.

Introduction

The government is exploring the removal of ring fencing from the Supporting People grant because it is believed this will increase innovation, flexibility and success within the housing support sector. These changes are designed to be focused upon determining what local people need most, prioritising those needs and putting action in place to deliver results.

A pilot exercise in removing the ring fence from Supporting People funding was conducted in fifteen local authority areas during the financial year 2008/9. The fifteen 'Pathfinder' authorities were selected to ensure coverage of Government Office Regions and to reflect a wide range of administering authorities. The fifteen authorities were:

- London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Birmingham City Council
- Bournemouth Borough Council
- Dudley Metropolitan District Council
- Durham County Council
- Essex County Council
- Gloucestershire County Council
- Hampshire County Council
- Leicestershire County Council
- Liverpool City Council
- Norfolk County Council
- North Yorkshire County Council
- Rutland County Council
- Tameside Metropolitan District Council

About the research

The aim of the study was to gather information from the 'Pathfinder' Administering Authorities and a sample of their Supporting People service providers to explore the current and anticipated impacts of the removal of the ringfence on the future provision of housing related support to vulnerable groups. It was always recognised that the research was being carried out early in the process and it was not expected that dramatic changes would be found. The research employed two main methods:

- A telephone survey of Supporting People service providers, conducted by BMRB Social Research.
- A series of structured telephone interviews of Supporting People lead officers, chairs of Supporting People commissioning bodies and representatives of Local Strategic Partnerships, also conducted by BMRB Social Research.

The Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York directed the research, had responsibility for designing the research instruments, undertook the analysis and produced the report.

Key Points

- The removal of the ring fence was seen very positively by many service providers and by almost all the respondents working within the Pathfinder authorities. Respondents did not argue in favour of retaining the existing funding arrangements, instead they saw opportunities to enhance services through greater freedom of expenditure.
- Joint working and strategic planning with Supporting People commissioners within the Pathfinder authorities tended to be viewed positively by service providers.
- The changes that had resulted from the removal of ring fencing in the Pathfinder areas were restricted in scale. Contracts with many service providers were often lengthy (68% had contracts of more than 1 year), limiting the scope for altering commissioning and, in any case, commissioners were largely content with their existing balance of Housing Support services and did not want to radically alter the service mix in their areas.
- Some respondents had the view that not enough time had elapsed for the impacts of ring fence removal to be fully assessed.

- Most of the concerns about the removal of the ring fence centred on the risk of funding loss, a predictable conclusion, but one which appeared to be causing widespread worry. There were anxieties that funding would be redirected and that services for some client groups would lose a disproportionate amount of funding.
- The other concerns that were widely reported centred on the risk of a loss of the imperative, focus and direction for Supporting People. In particular there was a concern that the programme would be absorbed and then 'dissolved' within wider strategic planning and commissioning structures. These concerns were more often reported by respondents working for local authorities and Commissioning Bodies than by service providers.
- Service providers had mixed views on the future, seeing both opportunities in the greater flexibility offered by the removal of ring fencing, but often remaining concerned about possible reductions in funding.
- There were fewer concerns where information dissemination and communications were good between Commissioning Bodies, Supporting People teams and service providers.

Joint working

Most service providers took a positive view of Supporting People. A majority of the service providers reported that communications between themselves and Supporting People commissioners were good (66 per cent), that commissioners listened (58 per cent) and that they clearly understood the commissioning process (78 per cent). Most of the other service providers were neutral, rather than negative, about these aspects of partnership working. The majority also reported that they clearly understood the Supporting People strategy for their Pathfinder authority (81 per cent).

Limited impacts

There had been limited impacts from the removal of the ring fence for three main reasons. The first reason was that existing contracts with housing related support providers were quite long (68 per cent had contracts with a total length of more than one year). The second reason was that Commissioning Bodies did not take the view that there was a need to radically alter the existing provision of housing related support services in the fifteen Pathfinder areas, because the existing balance of services was viewed as largely correct. The third reason was that a one year pilot exercise was felt by representatives of some service providers and Commissioning Bodies to be too short a time in which to evaluate the impacts of ending ring fencing. It was thought that changes to commissioning would only happen slowly, as existing contracts came up for renewal.

A positive view of greater flexibility

The potential to take Supporting People in new directions, enhancing services and innovating, was central to many of the authorities opting to become Pathfinders.

The key attractions for local authorities were the potential to extend existing provision into new areas of activity. All of these new areas were closely associated with the underlying ethos of Supporting People. This often involved 'adding on' services to existing service provision. For example a service for homeless people might employ a mental health worker, or a service for vulnerable families might develop children's services.

The potential to move into new areas of activity that addressed both the core concerns of Supporting People and wider policy agendas such as tackling worklessness also attracted local authorities. An example would be the provision of Education, Employment and Training services to socially excluded groups, again by 'adding on' additional provision to existing Housing Support services.

Service providers were also quite likely to report seeing opportunities in the removal of ring fencing. Overall, 45 per cent of service providers, with awareness of the changes to ring fencing¹, reported that there was scope to develop their services. These service providers were most likely to report that more comprehensive, flexible and innovative services could be developed if ring fencing were ended.

Worries about the end of ring fencing

Service providers and commissioners were in favour of the greater flexibility that would result from Supporting People funding going into Area Based Grant. However, they were also likely to report concerns about the possible implications of the changes to ring fencing.

A considerable number of service providers, with awareness of the changes to ring fencing², were concerned that funding would be reduced (57 per cent). The most common concern within this group was that funding would be diverted away from housing related support and into other services (38 per cent).

Representatives of local authorities and Commissioning Bodies tended to share a concern that funding might be reduced and that this reduction would involve the diversion of funds into other areas. Some respondents reported a concern that this process might be quiet slow, with funding being reduced as individual contracts with service providers were not subject to renewal. This would mean there was no sudden, easily observable, shift in funding for housing related support.

1 Only 272 service providers were aware of the changes to ring fencing out of a total of 401 responding service providers, see the section on information and awareness below.

2 See preceding footnote.

Among respondents in local authorities and Commissioning Bodies, there was a concern that housing related support would lose the clearer strategic imperative and distinct political identity that was felt to have resulted from the Supporting People programme. This concern was less widespread among those service providers with awareness of the changes, 18 per cent of whom reported a concern that housing related support would be “less of a priority” once ring fencing ended.

Among respondents working for local authorities and Commissioning Bodies, there was a quite widespread concern that funding for services for ‘socially excluded’ client groups might be threatened when ring fencing was removed. These groups included homeless people, adult offenders, people with mental health problems and people with substance misuse problems. Services for groups like travellers were also thought to be at risk of being adversely affected.

By contrast, service providers tended not to be concerned that specific client groups would lose funding when ring fencing ceased. Only 3 per cent of service providers, with awareness of the changes to ring fencing³, reported a concern that some client groups might be more likely to lose funding than other client groups. Service providers were also very unlikely to report Commissioning Bodies were biased against specific client groups.

The research investigated whether there had been, or were expected to be, alterations to charging and local connection policies. However, alterations were very unusual and authorities did not appear to have plans to substantially alter existing arrangements.

The concerns outlined above were often theoretical in nature. The actual impacts of the changes to ring fencing were very small in scale in the Pathfinder areas. As noted, some respondents thought that not enough time had elapsed for the impacts of removing the ring fence to be fully apparent. It was very rare indeed for services to have lost funding or experienced any change in how they were expected to provide services at the time the fieldwork for this research was conducted.

Information and awareness

Service providers had a lower awareness of the removal of ring fencing from Supporting People funding than might have been expected in areas piloting a potentially major policy change (32 per cent reported being unaware of the changes).

The research was not explicitly designed to explore information dissemination to providers of housing related support, but the results suggested that processes may need to be improved. In particular, local authorities seemed to have quite a high reliance on the use of consultation groups or forums which only had a fairly low number of service providers as members.

³ See footnote 1.

Feelings about the future

Service providers were more likely to feel optimistic or very optimistic about the future (42 per cent) than to feel pessimistic or very pessimistic (25 per cent). However, many service providers reported that they were neutral on this point, not viewing the future positively or negatively (32 per cent).

There was an association between good communication between Commissioning Bodies and service providers and how optimistic service providers felt. Services that reported commissioners listened 'all or most of the time' were more likely to report feeling very or quite optimistic (52 per cent) than other service providers (30 per cent).

ISBN: 978 1 4098 0871 8

