



## **Unite's response to the Communities and Local Government Committee's call for Submissions on the Government's "Supporting People" programme, May 2009**

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This response is submitted by Unite the Union, the UK's largest trade union with 2 million members across the private and public sectors. The union's members work in a range of sectors including manufacturing, financial services, print, media, construction, local government, education, health and not for profit. Unite represents 60,000 employees in the Community, Youth Workers and Not for Profit, which includes Housing Associations and Social Care organisations.

### **1. Summary**

- 1.1 Unite the Union welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this debate and to provide additional oral evidence if necessary.
- 1.2 Whilst Unite believe in the programmes aim to "turn peoples lives around, allowing them to live independently and to contribute to society more widely" and support the "Governments work overall to tackle disadvantage and support the most vulnerable people in our society"<sup>1</sup>, our union does have concerns with the programme. These concerns, which are further outlined under suggested themes below, can be broken down into four main areas, being:
  - The removal of ring-fencing;
  - Inadequate short-term funding leading to job insecurity and potentially dangerous working conditions;
  - Poorer outcomes for service users; and
  - Administration funding.

### **2. Addressing the Four Key Themes – Independence and Opportunity: Our Strategy for Supporting People**

#### **2.1 Keeping people that need services at the heart of the programme.**

- 2.1.1 As a result of funding cuts Unite are hearing reports of vulnerable people who need the support of this programme, such as substance abusers and

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<sup>1</sup> *Independence and Opportunity: Our Strategy for Supporting People Executive Summary*

young people with learning disabilities, having to have the time that they spend in supported housing quartered to just 6 months before being placed in general housing, rather than receiving assistance based around their need. This can result in client frustration as they aren't getting the support they need for an appropriate length of time. Some of these tenants end up becoming street homeless, or placed in a more vulnerable situation than they had been. The pressure on the funding has also resulted in Housing Associations being forced to take on unsupported, higher risk people into their accommodation, for which they are ill-equipped, and staff often not trained. Sometime this can bring a risk to other tenants too, as well as creating health and safety implications for all concerned.

## **2.2 Enhancing partnership with the Third Sector.**

- 2.2.1 Inadequate, insecure, short-term funding is resulting in some providers substituting properly trained permanent labour with agency workers, resulting in both increased levels of stress for our members, whilst also, potentially compromising health and safety and standards of care.
- 2.2.2 Unite members are calling for funding streams to be five-to-ten years duration (OTS guidelines currently specify a minimum of three year funding contracts), with trigger processes which enable them to be extended. Funding also needs to be sustainable and take into account inflationary increases and expenditure relating to Full Cost Recovery – this means the 'on costs' such as heating and lighting expenses. Additionally, commissioning officers must be aware of the relevant pay grades and pension entitlements of staff concerned and that pay and pension rises are properly built into contracts. True quality comes at a necessary cost.
- 2.2.3 Whilst competitive tendering for Supporting People funding may sound good in theory, in practice it may result in private sector organisations winning contacts on a loss making basis to get their foot in the door for future profitable business, which can drive down staff terms and conditions, increase their work load and drive down standards in service delivery. Additionally organisations with good track records of delivery could be loosing out to such bidders, in turn potentially forcing them out of the sector.
- 2.2.4 Short term competitive contracts and other forms of funding have caused the Not for Profit sector to become very unstable as a result of the inequalities of competition for contacts between agencies, i.e. big competing with smaller niche organisations. Additionally, short term contracts have resulted in organisations being unable to strategically plan their services and campaigns because their funding cycle is three years or less, thus resulting in services, their users and employee's being put at risk

- 2.2.5 Current contracting arrangements lead to job insecurity, which in turn means that employees are in a constant cycle of looking for where their next job is coming from. This is not good for moral and denies employees access to decent pension arrangements and the mortgage market, with its increasingly strict lending criteria. Our societies most vulnerable are also learning that those on whom they depend, i.e. those working for a particular organisation, will often change. The employees will feel constantly insecure or even disappear, adding to the problems the vulnerable already face.
- 2.2.6 Unite is also hearing from our members that cuts mean that one worker rather than two, as had been the case in the past, are being sent into potentially dangerous situations, with reports from members of them facing incidences of violent acts.
- 2.2.7 The current situation where police should provide details to landlords about potentially dangerous tenants, which appears to not be working properly, is resulting in circumstances where housing workers are often unaware of vulnerable tenants, with reports of cases where members of staff have been threatened with knives.
- 2.2.8 Staff, and especially agency staff often are inadequately trained to undertake the work that is required of them. An incident was cited by a Unite representative that Housing Scheme Managers were replaced by a concierge service, which clearly did not bring any benefit to the tenant. Others have reported that they are having to work above their competency level, dealing with clients with complex needs.
- 2.2.9 Stress related illness is prevalent amongst staff working on Supporting People contracts due to the pressures that they are being put under to fulfil unrealistic contract requirements.
- 2.2.10 The above issues are likely to discourage, rather than enhance, partnership with the Third Sector

### **2.3 Delivering in the new local government landscape.**

- 2.3.1 The end of ring-fencing of Supporting People funding, with councils currently facing greater than normal financial pressures as a consequence of the recession, is likely to be a major disaster as it could result in a siphoning off of monies away from Supporting People to other social causes, putting extra strain on already stretched services.
- 2.3.2 Our members have indicated that, with Local Authorities being both the funding distributors and client referral agents, some service providers may find it hard to say no to some referrals as they do not want to jeopardise their potential to attract future funding. This may mean that they are taking

on clients who are high risk that they are ill-equipped and insufficiently resourced to handle.

## **2.4 Increasing efficiency and reducing bureaucracy.**

2.4.1 Another big criticism Unite have of Supporting People funding is the 50p in the £1 spend on administration. Additional tiers of bureaucracy should be removed from funding streams, leading to slimmed-down administration costs. The administration processes of the fund have been described as time consuming and not always associated with driving forward the objectives of the funding. Others have describe the process as a “tick-box” exercise detracting from the real work. When funders are having their margins cut in the competitive market, there is a real danger that whilst the boxes remain ticked, there will be no opportunity to bring additionality, which is of vital importance. This should be addressed.

## **3. Conclusion / Recommendations**

3.1 Finally, in line with the complex nature of Supporting People funding and the issues identified above, Unite believes that detrimental effects are being experienced by both staff delivering services and clients receiving less than optimal services. Unite feels that the removal of ring-fencing of Supporting People funding may be the main cause of this. However, without further monitoring, e.g. to determine how many well qualified and experienced organisations are no longer delivering Supporting People services, we are unable to fully quantify the effects of changes. Unite does, however, consider our members anecdotal experiences disturbing and believes further studies should be undertaken to quantify such potential changes, in addition to the above issues which should be addressed without delay.

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