



4th March 2016

Dear Councillor

Ref: DBC Proposed Cuts – Response from First Stop Darlington

Please find enclosed First Stop Darlington's official response to the proposed cuts that each of you have been asked to consider and are expected to vote upon in the very near future.

It is with a sad heart that we all enter the new financial year with such heavy and devastating decisions that will change the face of Darlington in a way that we would never have imagined.

This response is to highlight the concerns that we have for our client group, the community and any remaining staff that are left behind to try and manage what will be some very volatile situations and some deeply disturbing levels of deprivation that our most vulnerable people will experience.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our paper and I hope that we can work together to find solutions for our town.

Yours faithfully

Tracy Freeman
Chief Executive

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Response to Darlington Borough Council Proposed Funding Cuts to First stop Darlington

3rd March 2016

Introduction

I am writing this report as First Stop Darlington's (FSD) Chief Executive, on behalf of our clients, staff and trustees.

We acknowledge and recognise the difficult situation that any organisation can find themselves in when faced with budget cuts. We face this ourselves every year. We understand that it is a very complex piece of work to bring in a budget with £12m reductions in a Local Authority that has low reserves.

The aim of my report is to clarify for the Council the impacts that we know the proposed cuts to FSD's budget will have on some very vulnerable people, on other services that will have more calls upon them as a result of withdrawal of our support services, and on the people of Darlington generally. We have no evidence that the Council has considered how it will replace these services effectively. It is our clear and considered view that, so far, the Council has not considered issues that it should take account of before reaching a decision on FSD funding.

We have worked with the Council both effectively and in a spirit of partnership for many years but have had no opportunity, until now, to inform the Council's deliberations on these cuts. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this and other aspects of the proposals as a matter of urgency.

Background

First Stop Darlington has played a significant part in reducing homelessness, reducing rough sleeping, supporting those who are most vulnerable and with multiple complex needs. It has been first to stand up and fight for those less fortunate and has accepted and worked with everyone that comes through its doors. It does not ring the Housing Department stating that we can't work with people because they are too "high risk", too "high needs", it does not wash its hands of people. It has stayed the course, keeps a low profile and has supported and championed the housing department and supporting people team over the years.

The removal of funding in the next financial year and the following year will cause destabilisation of the charity that everyone relies upon to take care of the people they don't want to deal with, don't have the capacity, skills, knowledge, patience, understanding and non-stop energy to deal with. All agencies refer the people who are most complex to deal with to First Stop. The withdrawal of KPA funding and Grant Funding (in 2016) will cause an £85k loss and DAAT funding in 2017 brings the total to £110k.

These cuts have a deep impact in our ability to offer our core services. Currently there is no funding provider looking to support core activities, the very activity that keeps our doors open 6 days per week, services accessible without an appointment. This is how we are able to give immediate response to people in a crisis, those who for a range of reasons prefer not to present at "official" premises, those with little or no confidence who won't seek help in formal settings and those who are multi complex and are deemed high risk.

The charity have tried various ways to diversify funding, setting up Bike Stop, linking to local businesses and applying to as wide a funding audience as we can manage. However, the world of funding has changed so significantly and currently no funders want to fund core services. We have funding for some specialist work with small numbers of people but we see over 900 people a year, where will they go? As a charity we will fight tooth and nail to continue serving the people of Darlington but we are unable to give any assurances that we will still be here to fight beyond the next financial year and to achieve that will require significant redundancies from a team of 10.

How will very vulnerable people be affected, what is the Impact?

FSD has carried out 342 KPA assessments of people who chose not to present to DBC, 70 of whom are people with Multiple Complex Needs. To deal with these people requires specific skills and extensive time for them to be assessed thoroughly and with an understanding of how best to support them to improve their impact on the community. At First Stop we are able to provide an environment that supports the service user. The facilities available within the DBC are not set up to manage this side of the KPA service delivery and the DBC Housing Options

Team do not have the knowledge, skills and experience to address and cope with Multiple Complex Needs clients. This is the element of the service that is referred to FSD, just as we do not have the right skills, knowledge to deliver the service to families or to individuals with physical impairments. KPA works because we cover all the skills required across both teams.

These individuals will not thrive if these cuts are applied, the majority will not be able to manage their behaviour in the formal setting of the council. DBC staff will be at risk due to the lack of information and through not sharing/joint working, as will our staff too, without access to the database of information we have both supplied. A rise in drug and alcohol related deaths will begin to occur as we head into 2017-18.

FSD is quite simply half of the KPA service, indeed the cheaper half; the KPA works because we are different services. The KPA has been held up as an example of what Partnership Working should look like. It is through this work that together DBC Housing Options and First Stop have had a significant impact on homelessness in Darlington. Sharing the workload and skills that we each offer has seen a huge reduction in homelessness of those who would otherwise be rough sleeping.

What will be the impact on other services?

FSD's element of the KPA contract provides additional support to clients to ensure they are ready to enter into hostels, housing, other support services. FSD staff stabilise those who are chaotic, provide lifesaving services to many and work hard to ensure the other providers in the town feel supported and able to offer high risk clients a service. FSD provides all the pre-work with the most complex people, that helps make all the other support services have successful outcomes for their clients.

Statutory services will experience greater pressure on A & E, greater anti-social behaviour, increase in petty crime plus muggings and personal harm due to the complete isolation of complex people with no one supporting their increased mental health status. None of our current complex clients receive services from Darlington Mental Health Services as they deem them to be untreatable.

Will Darlington' population notice the withdrawal of services? Will they feel an Impact?

A rise in rough sleeping back to the pre-KPA levels of 8-10 people sleeping rough on any given night will occur. FSD provides the outreach element of the No Second Night Out (NSNO) Protocol that DBC is required to provide. This will no longer be carried out by FSD as we will not have the capacity to support the Housing Options Team. FSD's KPA Lead currently provides all the database access and statistics, plus substantial anecdotal evidence on behalf of DBC to the NE region NSNO Group.

Without First Stop remaining open, the 900+ clients that we support and look after each year will be out in the communities, there will be no activities going on that keep them inside FSD's building, there will be no one checking up on them and keeping their difficult and disruptive behaviour at a minimum. This will all be seen on the streets and in all the local communities in Darlington.

How will the Council address the issues that these budget cuts will highlight?

Removal of all support contracts and FSD funding to support the most vulnerable will cause devastating impacts on the residents of Darlington. There will be the following gaps in services:

- No outreach support in communities teaching people how to live within their means and complete their duties as tenants and neighbours
- Nowhere to occupy the most chaotic people through the day to prevent an increase in anti-social behaviour in the streets and park areas
- Significant homeless applications as people who need support lose their accommodation
- Significant withdrawal of landlords prepared to accept vulnerable people as the tenant will not have an agency supporting them to prevent tenancy breakdowns or to monitor and affect behaviour within their properties.
- Increase in shoplifting and muggings due to significant number of individuals who will lose their benefits and have nowhere to support them in their application. (FSD provided this service for 269 people so far this year)
- Identify safeguarding issues for children and vulnerable adults who are homeless or living within an unsuitable environment.

- Protect women who present to FSD in various states of harm sometimes while being chased by their partner/perpetrator.
- Provide a safe environment where those who are victimised due to their circumstances can come to terms with their childhood traumas and begin the slow journey out of chaos, deprivation and self-neglect/harm

Impact on FSD's financial position and staff

Through very prudent financial control we have maintained a healthy financial position. Like most charities we are finding it increasingly difficult to attract sufficient funds for our services and are budgeting for a substantial deficit for 2016/17. The withdrawal of around £110,000 of annual grant from the Council is a severe blow and we cannot survive at all in the medium to long term without it.

We are totally committed to the very vulnerable people we work with day-to-day and we are very concerned about the cumulative impact on our clients of all the Council's cuts. We will be asking trustees to approve a deficit budget for 2016/17, using a substantial part of our reserves to keep service going in the short term.

Staffing

Our average salary is £19,000 (all full time working and excluding volunteers); excluding our chief executive, who runs both First Stop and Bike Stop on a salary of £33,600. We suggest that this is well below the Council's equivalent grades. In addition, we do not have the pension scheme costs and benefits that LA employees enjoy.

Over the past 5 years our staff have received the following annual pay awards – note that they do not get annual increments: (1% in 2013 2% in 2015)

We are therefore very cost effective service providers.

The Council's Impact Report on the KPA service states that **no staff are at risk. We must highlight that the KPA grant to us funds 2.5 staff** that will be directly at risk if the withdrawal of the grant happens. **The loss of other grants equates to a further 2 posts.**

Our financial prudence over several years means that we have healthy reserves that sit between the recommended guidelines for charities, however they could be wiped out very quickly if these proposals go through in their present form.

Impact on Bike Stop Darlington

Bike Stop is an amazing Social Enterprise that is playing its part in the town's economy. Unfortunately the position that we are now in, means that it is at high risk of closure, with redundancies to commence in the first instance during March 16. If the charity remains at risk of closure due to lack of core funds then it will be forced to wind up Bike Stop to prolong the support we can give to homeless people in most need. This is not how Bike Stop's story was meant to be but we cannot run a Social Enterprise if the charity becomes at risk of closure.

Closing remarks

We have closely scrutinised the various Council papers on the proposed cuts that will impact on FSD's ability to provide its services to very vulnerable people. It is of significant concern to us that, so far as we can determine, the Council has not been presented with the cumulative impact of its various proposals on very vulnerable people.

We challenge the Impact Assessment that has been done in our absence and we request a full impact assessment to be carried out on the full KPA contract to find the best way to bring savings without putting people at risk of rough sleeping, the community at risk of increased anti-social behaviour, street begging etc. and staff put at risk through lack of knowledge of the individual who is presenting for help. We see both teams as being at significant risk in this way if First Stop is no longer part of the assessment process and as such will have no access to the KPA database.

All of our charities are important but First Stop has a special place. It stitches together the fabric at the most difficult end of our community - where people are struggling and hurting and often fighting to survive. It works with people who nobody else will deal with and sometimes have abandoned. Darlington is a better and more wholesome place because of the work of First Stop. Some other charities and organisations get more publicity than First Stop who work quietly and unseen and reach deep into our community. There is a reason why those who know designate First Stop as a rescue service - it is because it saves lives. The impact of the work of First Stop is profound and this needs to be truly understood before decisions to cut its local funding are made.