

SUPPORTING PEOPLE - REPORT PUBLISHED

The Communities and Local Government Select Committee, a group of MPs which investigates the effectiveness of government policies relating to the work of many UNISON members, has published a report on its inquiry into Supporting People, the funding system for housing-related care.

UNISON submitted written and oral evidence to the inquiry, which was timed to follow the removal of the ring-fence around Supporting People funding, which meant that local authorities could add Supporting People funding to a more general pot and employ more flexibility in how the money is used.

The full report and accompanying press release are attached, along with UNISON's written submission. In general, the report is very sympathetic to a lot of what we have been saying about Supporting People and outsourcing of public services in general, but the recommendations are somewhat limited.

Among the report's key findings:

- * The ring-fence. The committee came down on the side of leaving the ring-fence off. "The flexibility provided by the removal of the ring fence is clearly well worth having. Fears about the potential for loss of funding must be countered by maintaining high levels of transparency, rigorous service delivery and strong monitoring frameworks so that the Supporting People programme continues to deliver vital services to some of the most vulnerable in our society."
- * Greater transparency. Central government should make it clear how much Supporting People money each local authority is getting, so local people can judge for themselves whether their authority is using it for what it should be using it for.
- * Differences in service delivery across the country. There is a wide variation in the standard of delivery across the country. The report links this to the system of competitive tendering often used to award contracts.
- * Administrative burdens. Further effort is required to reduce the burden imposed by the competitive tendering regime for Supporting People services on small third sector organisations like housing associations. Such organisations, which are experts in dealing with the needs of vulnerable people, must not be overlooked or squeezed out by tendering arrangements that focus on cost of service delivery at the expense of service quality.
- * Service-user involvement. Mechanisms to ensure service-user involvement could be better.

Parts of UNISON'S evidence that were picked up and seemed to influence the report were as follows:

- * Competitive tendering - awarding contracts based on which bidder can provide the service cheapest. This was a common theme across many organisations' submissions - we were clearly in step with what you might call the 'better' providers on this. There are knock-on effects for service quality.
- * Insecurity caused by short-term contracts. We made it clear that short-term contracts to the third sector cause uncertainty at work, poor terms and conditions, insecure employment and a poorer quality of service.

* Failure to use the 'added value' the third sector is supposed to offer. If the government wishes to use the third sector to deliver services, it should make sure it does so in a way which enables the sector to use its qualities, its experience, and its values. The competitive tendering system often causes organisations to opt for a low-cost approach at the expense of 'adding value'.

Despite agreeing with much of what UNISON had to say, the report disappointingly contains no direct mention of the workforce, and the only time the word "employment" is used is in the context of helping service users back into employment.

It will be important that in the next few months and beyond, we hold the government to account against the recommendations in this report. And at a local level, branches may find the report's findings very useful when engaging with local authorities and third sector employers about the dangers involved in competitive tendering, and the need to provide stable service provision focusing on high quality care.

Best wishes,

Mike Short
National Officer - Community & Voluntary Sector UNISON