

BRIEFING

November 2005

Creating sustainable communities – supporting independence

The ODPM has launched a strategy for consultation on the future development of the *Supporting People* (SP) Programme. The consultation will run until February 28. The final strategy will feed into the government's Comprehensive Spending Review - therefore, this is the chance for the sector 'to make the case' for SP financial future, so it is a vitally important consultation for all stakeholders.

The paper poses a host of consultation questions. This briefing merely outlines the major proposals and discussion points. Where SITRA feel there are broad policy issues raised by the ODPM we have added some commentary in boxes, but we have not sought to answer specific consultation points.

What does government want from a strategy?

The need for a strategy is justified on the grounds that SP is essential to the government's aim to tackle disadvantage, reduce social exclusion and create sustainable communities. There appears to be an explicit commitment to maintain and build on the successes of the programme.

However, the tone is at times lukewarm on the subject of local authority success in running the system. ODPM are also less obviously convinced of the problems in the system highlighted in the recent Audit Commission national report on SP - such as a lack of a firm financial horizon.

The need for efficiency and effectiveness for purchasers and providers is emphasised along with the need for responsive services that allow choice for users. The paper also stresses the need for authorities to clarify the role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS), and support their strategic role as providers of services.

SP is placed firmly within the context of the government's wider approach to public service reform, with a focus on services that are driven by what the service user wants. The aim is to develop a strategy with a continued focus on prevention; integration with other services; flexibility for local authorities; and recognition of the role of the VCS as key deliverers of support services.

Supporting People in its strategic context

SP is described as a cross cutting programme that supports a long list of key government objectives. ODPM view SP as making an important contribution to meeting these objectives but again stresses the need for partnership with others to achieve them.

There is very little recognition that housing related support is an important service in its own right. "Support" is seen as the handmaiden of other services and outcomes, something which can contribute to wider strategic objectives but has no explicitly recognised intrinsic value in itself. This is a perception which housing related support has always laboured under: Whitehall can understand the SP *programme*, but it does not seem to have complete confidence that the programme actually pays for a coherent and otherwise unachievable repertoire of useful services.

The ODPM sets out its expectations that local authorities should take an integrated strategic approach to the provision of local preventative support services focused on meeting need, and responding to the wishes of the service user. This requires a co-ordinated approach across agencies - and, crucially, across counties and districts. ODPM explicitly recognise the need for services for people from outside local authority boundaries. The knowledge of service providers is emphasised as an important resource.

It appears that the ODPM wants to see a return to the days where SP partnerships between commissioners and providers were not characterised with the problems now faced as a result of cuts in the overall budget.

Service user involvement is also something the ODPM would like to see developed, along with an expectation of a greater focus on outcomes. They are working towards a sharply increased focus on outcome measures within the framework of the programme. They see this as a possible way of ensuring that SP funds are spent on appropriate services whilst allowing local government greater flexibility. Local Area Agreements (LAAs) are promoted as a way of achieving the goal of an outcomes focus and the holy grail of better partnership working. The consultation is seeking views on how to improve integration, what local and national outcome measures might look like and how to improve a user focus within SP services.

Focusing and integrating support

ODPM carefully note the wide range of client groups served by the SP programme. Although it is recognised that services provided are very broadly similar across all client groups the ODPM introduces the idea that there may be different solutions for different groupings of clients in any future strategy. The three different types of need are identified as:

- People in need of care and support
- People living independently with support only and
- People experiencing or at risk of social exclusion

This is a helpful summary of the three broad areas funded by SP - but these 'super-client groups' clearly overlap, and the ODPM include a diagram to illustrate this. In particular, people with mental health problems might slot into any of them. So it should not automatically be assumed that this means splitting the programme into three, although convincing arguments will have to be made to ensure this that the logic of partial separation doesn't develop its own momentum.

People receiving care with support

It is predominantly people with learning or physical and sensory disabilities, together with some people with mental health needs, who fall into this category. The paper recognises that many people receive both care and support services and suggests that there are very few reasons why these two different sorts of service should be commissioned separately for this group.

However, ODPM recognise there are risks with this, particularly as there is no statutory duty to provide support services and funding may potentially be diverted towards those to whom authorities' have statutory duties. Individual budgets currently being piloted in the social care sector are seen as a potentially valuable model to extend the principle of user choice in SP services.

It is certainly possible to imagine some system whereby SP funding becomes an adjunct of care monies for this 'super client group'. The challenge is to ensure that it remains focused on preventative services - which might possibly be done by requiring x% of it to be spent on people assessed, via a common assessment process, as having relatively low level care needs.

People living independently with support

This category largely consists of older people who require support only in the form of warden services or community alarms. The paper suggests that there is less likely to be a clear strategic role elsewhere within a local authority for this grouping, so SP should retain the lead role. Individual budgets are suggested as a model for offering choice for service users, although it is also acknowledged that a system of purely individual funding would create difficulties in strategically commissioning or remodeling services. Floating support is seen as the default model for this client group and there is an assumption of an imbalance between accommodation based services, such as sheltered housing, and support only services. It is suggested that both models are needed but that regional and local housing strategies should not develop new sheltered and supported housing where floating support may be more appropriate.

While floating support is a hugely valuable service for many clients, it must be recognised that there will still be a need for supported and sheltered accommodation to meet the needs of a wide range of clients. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that for some clients tenancy failure can be the result of social isolation which can be better addressed in accommodation based schemes.

People experiencing or at risk of social exclusion

This grouping is largely made up of a range of client groups in short term need; the majority of clients who fall into this category have no statutory body charged with lead responsibility for them. The only coherent statutory framework to plan for their needs is currently set out in the SP grant conditions. It is recognised that a locally focused programme may not well serve those socially excluded people without strong local connections and/or with a relatively 'mobile' lifestyle.

The paper at this stage does not offer any definitive suggestions for dealing with these groups except to again stress the need for integration. Positive ideas appear to be limited to the idea that other departments within local authorities may have a strategic lead role for different aspects of SP commissioning. For example, drug action teams, children's trusts, or homelessness teams.

The problem with this sort of approach is the possibility of losing all of the benefits identified by the ODPM and the Audit Commission as arising from the bringing together of funding in SP. The advantages of having a joint commissioning body and SP team with a clear strategic lead for strategic planning and commissioning of housing related support services might well be lost.

The ODPM has been highly critical of restrictions on access to services for vulnerable clients in the past, and repeat that any approach built round such restrictions will not tackle social exclusion.

However, given their settled view that local authorities are the appropriate lead agency for SP, the ODPM can only suggest that councils should seek to work in partnership with each other to jointly commission cross authority services. For some vulnerable groups, such as women fleeing domestic violence, regional or sub-regional planning is suggested. No concrete mechanisms are proposed as a way of ensuring this happens and the issue remains that, for most of the so-called socially excluded, authorities have no statutory responsibilities towards them.

There will be a continuing need to offer stronger protection for services for these clients to ensure continued access to SP services. Realistic models and strong OPDM leadership may be required to achieve this.

Redistribution

A technical paper on the SP Distribution Formula is being published alongside the consultation document and consequently the beginning of any process of redistribution is now pushed back to 2007/8. It remains unclear how the previous promise for no redistribution to involve a loss of more than 5% or gain of more than 10% in either of the next two years will be dealt with in 2006/7.

Structure of funding

This is one of the *potentially* most radical sections of the consultation paper. If some of

the ideas floated in it came to *complete* fruition it might lead to the virtual end of SP as a unified area of social welfare activity.

There are definite signs in the text that ODPM wish to avoid any undue revolution - their stated purpose is to consider means of achieving more flexibility for local authorities, better ways of integrating housing related support and related services and to be able to demonstrate clearer outcomes. Similarly the recent Audit Commission report highlighted the need for stability in the programme.

ODPM are not supportive of SP continuing as a separate grant with its' own programme specific Grant Conditions. They feel it hinders local authority flexibility, suggesting that it has deterred investment in support services from other funding streams, and held back integration of care and support funding packages They discuss the possible continuation of SP as a separate but non-ringfenced grant, or of simply merging it into the general Rate Support Grant - but do not explicitly consider continuing with the current arrangements.

Instead, they show a great deal of enthusiasm for LAAs - a new way of allowing local authorities to pool different funding streams, subject to the agreement of common outcomes with Whitehall. SP is already one of the funding streams included in 5 pilot LAAs. Different outcomes under a LAA might be set around individual client groups or the wider groups discussed above. Authorities will be offered unspecified 'incentives' to achieve these outcomes - and also to work together more effectively on a cross authority basis.

The ODPM consultation shows no trace of the Audit Commission's caution about applying the as yet unevaluated methodology of LAAs to SP. Yet it should be acknowledged that the existing regime has not always protected users or providers from the actions of particular local authorities who choose to ignore Grant Conditions, and this is also recognised (and condemned) in the Audit Commission report.

Alongside these proposals, about new ways of harmonising Whitehall and local authority priorities, is a strong push towards integration of commissioning at a local level. The idea of social care commissioners taking the lead in commissioning housing related support for those who receive both care and support services is mentioned as a possible way forward. Similarly, the possibility of children's trusts commissioning housing related support for young people is floated. At one point, the ODPM even mention the idea of allowing (District level) housing authorities to take the leads in commissioning SP services for the homeless.

It is not clear how ODPM reconcile their clear distaste for the increasing use of local connection restriction on SP services with the idea of handing much of the money over to Districts, who are statutorily committed to rationing access to housing for homeless people by local connection criteria.

The possibility of individual budgets being used as the principal means of commissioning low level support is also discussed. In theory this would leave the service users, not the local authority, as the budget holder, and therefore main purchaser, yet the details of how this might work are very sketchy.

Possible different funding arrangements for different broad groups are discussed by the ODPM. So, for instance, they seem less keen on integrating support funding for the socially excluded into wider pots than they do funding for those who receive both care and support.

Despite all this radicalism, there is also a very welcome note of caution about the possible consequences of unraveling the tapestry of SP altogether and the risk of losing the advantages it has brought.

Although, politically, it is unlikely the move towards LAA's rather than Grant Conditions can be completely resisted, this consultation demonstrates a refreshing openness on the part of the ODPM in being willing to seek sector specific solutions which meet their main aims.

Probably the least developed part of the funding section of the paper relates to new investment. The ODPM say little more than local authorities should continue to control the revenue investment and should 'work with' Regional Housing Boards and the Housing Corporation to align new capital and revenue investments. They appear to believe that the existing structures of Cross Authority Groups and Regional Implementation Groups are a sufficient basis to allow this to happen for regionally focused services, despite the fact this has, as yet, not happened anywhere.

The Audit Commission's recent report highlighted this problem very robustly. Almost as a parenthesis, ODPM do formally recognise that a case remains for national funding of new national priorities, but the tone in which this point is conceded makes it sound as if it is an after-thought.

Administering the Programme

The ODPM note that in some areas, the SP Commissioning Body (CB) has been folded into the wider Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). They consider a wider application of such practices could well be better suited to a LAA driven regime, and might also reduce duplication. In any event, retaining separate CBs is only practicable if a separate grant regime continues to exist. But ODPM recognise that there are authorities where 'corporate ownership' of the programme is under-developed, and in such localities the CB provides an important focus which might not otherwise exist. This may be particularly the case in two tier areas, where the CB brings together District Housing authorities and County level Social Services authorities.

The statutory requirement for a programme of service reviews will cease next April. After that, arrangements for managing and monitoring contracts will be the responsibility of the particular local authority. ODPM has published an advice note, along side the strategy, which suggests how this might be done. They are keen to keep the QAF and are proposing a slimming down in the required PI returns - but emphasise it is for particular councils to take their own decisions on this front.

Nevertheless, the ODPM do wish to see a general reduction in bureaucracy, and call both for a greater awareness in the cost and time implications of the administrative process.

They also encourage regional groups of authorities to adopt common processes in order to minimise burdens on providers

The ODPM recognise that some authorities have inappropriately used tendering for procuring very low value SP services or have asked providers without skills in tendering to do so at quite short notice. They endorse the OGC/Home Office guidance on procurement *Think Smart, Think Voluntary Sector*, which offers guidance on how to most effectively procure from such organisations. They even go so far as to make the wider point that voluntary sector bodies are very heavily represented amongst existing SP providers, and that authorities working with them should apply best practice and follow the terms of their local Voluntary Sector Compact.

ODPM also recognise that procurement decisions are, in the end, for the particular local authority alone. So whether these warm words of comfort to those providers who have protested at existing procurement practices, and the uncertainty they bring, have any effect remains to be seen.

E-Supporting People

ODPM wish to build on what they perceive as the technological successes in developing the SP programme to date. Specifically, they believe the new Directory of Services has become an important tool for promoting choice. ODPM seek advice on how this advance might be integrated with a wider range of (non-SP) local services.

They also raise the possibility of the ODPM itself taking the lead in developing a national outcome tracking system, based on being able to identify individual outcomes for individual service users. The case for this in the homelessness sector - where it is not unknown for people to re-enter services after, say, the collapse of a resettlement tenancy - is seen as particularly strong. Whether any such system should be SP specific, or relate to a wider range of services is posed as a consultation question.

The paper concludes by asking if there are other e-support tools ODPM might usefully help develop, alongside the existing workbook and the recently launched SITRA/NHF/Housemark benchmarking tool.