

As the Infrastructure organisation supporting and advocating for the Third Sector in B&NES, 3SG is extremely concerned about the proposed savings to the budget for both Children's services and Adult Community contracts.

The details of the required savings provided by the Council has been limited and has left the sector feeling insecure and vulnerable with a lack of certainty around future provision. Third Sector organisations across B&NES support tens of thousands of the most vulnerable people and employ thousands of staff, many of whom are local citizens contributing to the local ecosystem. This is now at risk. It is a challenge for the sector to make any meaningful plans for 2024/25; organisations do not know whether they can continue to provide essential services and whether they are able to commit to employing or retaining staff.

The wider impact of these savings on sector partners such as primary care and mental health trusts cannot be overestimated; service providers who currently rely on an end to end care and support pathway in order to support people to stay healthy and well and live their best lives in their community. The core values of the Council and ICB, focusing on the wider determinants of health and early intervention prevention, will be significantly undermined by this proposal if we lose these vital services.

The Third Sector in B&NES employ skilled, dedicated individuals who provide essential cost effective community provision which support statutory services; without a strong Third Sector these systems will fall down; they are already under extreme pressure.

The Sector is continually asked, and has been asked, to do more for less for an unsustainable period of time. One of the challenges is the many years of zero or significantly below inflation contract uplifts, resulting in significant real term cuts in funding. This lack of inflationary uplift is not something our statutory partners will be able to sustain - if organisations are to keep up with the National Living Wage, for example, then that increase alone is around 40% since HCRG contracts began. With both the cost of living and need rising, it is essential that the Third Sector is invested in, and so easing pressure on local authorities, on primary care and emergency services. There is already a noticeable rise in homelessness in the city and recent incidents involving knife crime. Without youth services working with young people or organisations such as DHI or Julian House running full services - what does Bath & North East Somerset look like then?

We are fully aware of the financial challenges the Council face, however, we implore decision makers to provide more information on these proposals and to actively involve the Sector in such decisions. Third Sector partners need to be at the table, rather than have decisions made for them. The Sector knows its services and can work with Council colleagues to develop creative solutions which will ensure minimum disruption, remove service duplication, reduce the risk of job losses, and the potential loss of services, which will ultimately increase the Council and statutory sector's costs. Cutting discretionary spending will only generate long term cost.

The Third Sector stepped in to support the Council to deliver in ways that it could not during the pandemic. These cuts should not be the thanks that it gets. It is time to be brave and think creatively to ensure B&NES has a strong Third Sector for years to come. An article in the Guardian last week spoke about the risk of local authorities cutting the Third Sector. Perhaps the Council could be the one to break the mould - and ensure that it works with the Sector as equal partners to deliver the best for residents in B&NES. Because that, after all, is what we all want.