

Budget Proposals 2016-17: Special Needs Advice and Counselling Support (SNACS)

Summary of Feedback Received and Key Findings

Why we consulted?

Over the last four years we have had to make savings of £23m because we've received less money from central government. We have done this by becoming more efficient at what we do, by reducing some of our administrative functions and increasing our income. Throughout this period we have done our best to protect front line services.

We now have to find another £20m over the next four years, with almost £11m to be found in 2016/17. Much of this will come from further efficiencies within the council, but £4.6m will have to come from services that will impact the public.

In order to inform the budget setting process for 2016/17 we published a list of those proposals which would likely have a direct impact on service users, and sought the views from those affected and interested:

- to understand the likely impact
- to identify any measures to reduce their impact
- to explore any possible alternatives

Approach

All the proposals were published on the council's website on 3 November 2015 with feedback requested by 14 December 2015. Respondents were directed to a [central index page](#), with a video message from the Chief Executive outlining the background to the exercise.

Information relating to this proposal was linked directly from this index page. This contained more detailed information on what was specifically proposed, information on what we thought the impact might be, as well as what else we had considered in developing and arriving at this proposal. Feedback was then invited through an online form, and through a dedicated email address. The SNACS Service was asked to contact service users to encourage them to respond to the consultation.

Each individual budget proposal was placed on our [Consultation Portal](#) which automatically notified those registered that an exercise had been launched. Members of the West Berkshire community panel (around 800 people) and local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations were also emailed directly, notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions.

Heads of Service made direct contact with those organisations affected by any of the budget proposals prior to them being made publically available.

A press release was issued on the same date, as well as publicised through Facebook and Twitter.

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Background

The council funds a counselling service specifically for the parents of children with disabilities. Looking after a disabled child can be physically and emotionally demanding and in some cases the emotional health of parents can suffer.

The service was set up in response to evidence that the incidence of depressive illnesses is greater amongst parents of disabled children, than in the general population. If parents are suffering from low mood / depression and are not receiving any support, there can be a knock on effect on the child's welfare. The service is managed on behalf of the council by a care agency called Call Us. There are no permanent employees in the service.

The service has a pool of counsellors with suitable qualifications and registration who also have some experience and knowledge of special educational needs and disability. Counsellors from the pool are allocated cases by the Coordinator in Call Us and are paid an hourly rate. Counselling is usually offered to parents on a time limited basis, although in some cases it can be more open ended.

It is proposed to cease funding this service, saving £10,000.

Summary of Key Points

There were 18 responses, including five from organisations and 13 from individuals.

The organisations which responded were:

- Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust
- Pangbourne Parish Council
- Tilehurst Parish Council
- Unison
- SNACS

Of the 13 individuals who responded, the majority were parents who had used the service.

The main emphasis of the responses was on the difficulties faced by parents of children with disabilities, the uniqueness of the SNACS service, lack of equivalent services and the risk to the emotional health of parents if the service is withdrawn, plus the knock on impact on children's wellbeing if parents are not coping.

1. Are you, or anyone you care for, a user of this service?

11 respondents identified themselves as service users.

2. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how this proposal might impact people?

The views of respondents about ways in which people would be impacted were as follows:

- Parents of children with disabilities face major challenges which are likely to affect their emotional health. Parents referred to experiencing feelings of grief, anger, disbelief and fear about their child's future. There is no equivalent service to SNACS which offers counselling specifically tailored to the needs of parents of

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children with disabilities. Parents will be unable to access suitable counselling support if this service is removed and therefore their emotional health and wellbeing will suffer. One parent described her experience of the service as “life changing”.

- There is likely to be more pressure on other services such as GPs, Children’s Social Care and adult mental health services, as parents seek help through other routes.
- If parents’ emotional needs are not met they will be less able to provide adequate care for their disabled child. This may result in increased pressure on services such as Children’s Social Care and CAMHS and may also result in more expensive provision needing to be made for the child.

3. Do you feel that this proposal will affect particular individuals more than others, and if so, how do you think we might help with this?

Respondents stated that parents of children with disabilities are the group directly affected but in addition, children with disabilities will be indirectly affected if their parents are not coping well and lack emotional support. Parents who do not have a good support system through family and friends were considered to be more adversely affected than those who do.

4. Do you have any suggestions as to how this service might be delivered in a different way? If so, please provide details.

Suggestions for delivering services in other ways included:

- Put more money in to Personal Budgets so parents can purchase their own counselling support
- Charge parents to access the service
- Deliver group sessions to reduce costs
- Give training to GPs

5. Is there any way that you, or your organisation, can contribute in helping to alleviate the impact of this proposal? If so, please provide details of how you can help.

One parent offered to provide some time for parent to parent support.

6. Any further comments?

Comments in this section included;

- References to the relatively small sum of money being saved (£10,000) in relation to the potential negative impact and likely pressure on other services and therefore cost
- A request for resources to be taken from less needy people
- Examples of the positive impact of the service, including a parent being able to return to work who had been off sick with stress

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Conclusion

This service has been highly valued by the parents who have accessed it. If it is no longer affordable by the Council, there may be an option for the service to set itself up as a charity and be sustainable through fund raising.

Please note: *In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.

All the responses have been provided verbatim as an appendix to this report. Whilst this summary seeks to distil the key, substantive points made, it should also be read in conjunction with the more detailed verbatim comments to ensure a full, rounded perspective of the views and comments are considered.

Jane Seymour
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