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**An Exploration of the Impact of the Coalition
Government's Spending Review on the North East
Region and on Programmes Offered by the
Department of Social Sciences**



**University of
Sunderland**

University of Sunderland, Centre for Children, Young People and Families

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This study was set up with four aims:

- i. to explore the impact of the Coalition Government's Spending Review on the partner agencies of the Department of Social Sciences;
- ii. to explore how the above might impact on the Department's undergraduate provision, including student placements;
- iii. to provide recommendations about how the Department might adapt its curricula to meet the demands of the changing regional context and develop research collaborations with partner agencies;
- iv. to contribute to the broader debates about how the region is experiencing and responding to the Spending Review.

Methodology

A mixed methodology was adopted. A survey of the database of partner agencies with links to the Department's programme teams was carried out (N= 76 completed the survey, giving a 16% response rate) and follow up telephone interviews with fifteen volunteers from partner agencies were conducted. The study was conducted between March and May 2011. The survey went live in the last week of March and this may have impacted on the response rate since many agencies will have heard about their funding during this time.

Findings

A. Impact of the Cuts

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the survey and interviews in relation to whether and how the cuts were affecting partner agencies:

1. General Impacts

- The vast majority of survey respondents (99%) indicated that they were being or expected to be negatively affected by the spending cuts.
- The five areas identified as being most negatively affected by the spending cuts were: having funding reduced (71%); the ability to plan and budget effectively (51%); the number of staff being reduced (45%); and their ability to refer on to other agencies (30%). However, less than 10% of survey respondents feared that their agencies currently faced total or partial closure.
- Whilst all sectors indicated they were being affected, the voluntary sector was most likely to indicate this (79%) followed by the public sector (75%) and then the private sector (55%).
- All interview respondents knew of other agencies that had been closed or whose service had been substantially cut in the current round of cuts. Remaining agencies found themselves unable to provide the same level of support for smaller voluntary groups and/or were having to respond to those service users who had been using agencies and/or groups that no longer existed. In addition, the fact that the fourth concern of survey respondents was their ability to refer on to other agencies reflects their perception or knowledge that there are fewer agencies providing services for their service users.

2. Impact on Service Delivery

- The impact on services for young people seemed to be particularly stark with several respondents indicating that the cuts have resulted in a shift away from generic work with young people to more crisis intervention case work.
- Nearly half (46%) of survey respondents said that staffing had been directly affected by the cuts and 30% indicated that the numbers of staffing hours had been reduced. In interviews, respondents explained that fewer people had full-time contracts but they were still expected to cover the same workload.
- Cuts in staffing was identified as having had most impact on senior management and experienced staff and concerns were raised about the medium to long term impact of this experience and expertise drain on agencies across the region.

- The cuts in central and local government budgets meant that work related to raising funds takes up far more time of full-time, experienced staff who are then not available for direct work within the agency such as with service users.
- Cuts in administrative staff were also identified as it was said to have resulted in a greater reliance on volunteers, which in the long term was identified as raising concerns about adequate training, supervision and exploitation.
- Only 23% of the survey respondents thought that the quality of their service would be negatively impacted by the current cuts. In interviews it became clear that respondents were committed to ensuring that the quality of their service was maintained even when the quantity and scope of their service might be decreased.

3. Impact on Service Users

- Interview respondents raised the following concerns about the impacts of the cuts for their service users:
 - already vulnerable groups having their benefits and/or services reduced;
 - the mental health and well-being impacts on young people;
 - the desperation some families would experience as a result of having no service to go to;
 - the reduced potential of agencies to provide an adequate service for potential future service users;
 - the resulting tensions that were already being felt in some communities as different groups felt in competition with each other over increasingly scarce resources.

4. Managing uncertainties

- Several changes in funding regimes were noted by interview respondents: more focus on consortia, more difficulties in achieving matched funding; larger national charities bidding for work historically done by local authorities; closure of some funding streams; those agencies reliant on non grant aid funding were less able to secure funding for salaries. All of these impacted on the time taken in work related to fund-raising.
- Factors affecting success in funding included: being recognised as undertaking core business; larger agencies appeared better protected and better resourced to secure future funding and engage with new funding regimes; those with stronger funding strategy seemed more secure in the funding potential.

- Planning and budgeting for the future was the second most identified concern in the survey (51%) indicating how uncertainties about what is still to come, shape agencies' current experience.
- Low morale was in evidence as well as anger and protest and several respondents indicated their intention to protest about and resist the spending cuts.

B. Impact on Student Placements

- Student placements were universally valued by respondents to the study for three reasons: the importance of training up the next generation of workers: the opportunities for agencies to reflect and learn from students; the benefits to service users that arise from the fresh perspective students bring to their placements; and the empowerment that service users can experience when they pass on their knowledge and experience to students.
- The spending cuts mean that opportunities for student placements, especially those which do not carry a monetary value for the host agency, may be under threat.
- It is likely that as agencies are stretched in their resources, they will seek more able students who can be relied upon and who do not require such intensive mentoring: this has implications for weaker students.

C. Research Partnerships

- The majority of respondents were extremely positive about participating in research activities hosted by the Centre for Children, Young People and Families (CCYPF). Research seminars on young people, children and community development were the most often mentioned topics.
- The majority of respondents were also enthusiastic about research collaboration with CCYPF. Evaluative research was identified as being of particular value to them.
- Respondents were positive about the possibility of student placements/research that focus on conducting evaluative research identified as of use to the agency.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Implications of the Impact of the Government's Spending Review

- The CCYPF has a responsibility to document the changes occurring regionally to partner agencies and the implications for the University. A dissemination event

of the findings of this research will provide a platform for discussing the implications of the Spending Review in the region. It is recommended that this event take place before the end of 2011 and be the first in a series of events that pick up and explore specific issues identified by respondents such as using volunteers, evaluation and monitoring, and new funding regimes.

- In particular, any dissemination activity should highlight the plight of those social groups and organisations that appear particularly vulnerable, for example, those involved in youth work, smaller organisations across sectors and young people.
- This research should be seen as a baseline and repeated annually. In addition, future research should include the perspective of services users, particularly young people.

Implications for Student Placements

- The viability of placements for both funded and non-funded students should be monitored for several reasons:
 - the decreasing numbers of agencies able to take students;
 - the increasing numbers of smaller, voluntary agencies closing;
 - the increasing care agencies may take to choose more able students with resulting consequences for less able students.

Implications for Research Collaborations

- Opportunities for research collaborations with partner agencies should be explored and developed. A named person in the Department should be identified and work-loaded to develop this work.
- The Department of Social Sciences should consider developing short courses/modules on evidence gathering and evaluation skills; and the development of student research placements at third level;
- Third level research placements conducting research identified as useful to the agency should be seriously considered by the Department as an option to attract the students of tomorrow and educate/train highly skilled and competent practitioners and researchers of the future.
- Before research placements are developed, the Department should have a discussion about research ethics in relation to third level students.
- In the development of a research placement module the following should be considered:

- Work-loaded time for a colleague in the department to lead on this development who can then work in conjunction with the named person developing research collaborations.
- Consideration should be given to different options, for example, the design of a Departmental research placement module (using the Community and Youth Work Applied Practice module as a model), the re-design of existing third level dissertation modules to allow research placements or the development of a sandwich style programme with year-long placements.
- Second level research methods modules could be considered as the place where decisions about competence are made and students selected to undertake the research placement in their third level.
- CCYPF seminars should include topics suggested by those responding to the research.

The Database

Before the fieldwork could be undertaken an enormous amount of work had to be done compiling a departmental database of partner agencies, bringing together the information individual programmes kept in separate sources and updating as far as was possible the contact details. The completed database is a considerable resource for the Department and should be maintained:

- The database should be considered a 'live' document. In other words updating this should be considered an important, regular part of the role of a named administrator.
- The database should be linked to the electronic mailing lists for the CCYPF and Equalities and Social Justice (ESJ) seminar series.
- Named academic staff with responsibilities for placements should be asked to work with the administrative person to ensure that the database is kept as a 'live' document.