

Evidence submitted by Changing Lives

March 2020

1 SUMMARY

1.1 Changing Lives welcomes the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee's inquiry into impact of COVID-19 on the charity sector.

1.2 Our key messages:

- The charity sector provides vital frontline services to some of the most vulnerable in our society. Our staff, all of whom are key workers, are making an essential contribution during this COVID-19 crisis, helping to relieve pressure on the NHS and other critical services.
- Like other charities across the sector, our staff have gone above and beyond to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the people we support. They are working innovatively and at a fast pace to develop new ways of delivering support and services to the people who need them most.
- We are deeply concerned about the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the financial health and sustainability of the voluntary sector. While we understand that the focus of debate has been on the vital role of fundraising as a source of income, there are also significant risks associated with other forms of charity funding, such as contracts to deliver commissioned services and charitable grants.
- For our residential services, a significant source of income is Housing Benefit – this is usually paid in arrears, and we are concerned that it will take longer to process claims during the current crisis and/or we will see a significant loss of income if we are required to keep rooms vacant to enable self-isolation within our properties. We are calling on Government to pay Housing Benefit as a block payment in advance to help reduce the risk for charities who provide residential accommodation.
- There is a lack of recognition within government decision-making that the voluntary sector is vital to the COVID-19 response effort, providing critical social care services in close partnership with the NHS, police and local authorities. We are worried that this lack of political attention means our staff are being placed at greater risk than other essential services where their work is more recognised.
- The implications of COVID-19 for the people we support cannot be overestimated. Many are vulnerable because they experience homelessness, have drug and alcohol dependencies, or have long-term health conditions or mental health issues that will make it more difficult withstand the effects of the virus. We are especially concerned for people who are not safe in their own homes, such as victims of domestic abuse, for people in prison, and for people who have lost access to support that is a lifeline, such as drop-in services and group-based therapeutic work.
- The challenge ahead is significant and this is a concerning time for us all. There is an urgent need for the Government to fully consider the long-term financial sustainability

of the voluntary sector, so that we can continue to deliver services during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

- It is only with this support and backing from Government that as a sector, we can continue to deliver vital frontline services that form part of the safety net that is helping some of the most vulnerable in our society cope with the effects of COVID-19.

2 ABOUT CHANGING LIVES

- 2.1 Changing Lives is a national charity helping people through their most challenging of circumstances, including homelessness, life-threatening addictions, domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, long-term unemployment and more.
- 2.2 We work with over 17,000 people each year across the North and the Midlands, many of whom are hidden in society but are at particular risk of harm from COVID-19 due to their existing vulnerabilities.
- 2.3 Our staff are key workers, delivering services in hostels and refuges, conducting rough sleeper and sex worker outreach, and offering Enhanced Through The Gate services for people being released from prison. They are playing an essential role in helping to keep people safe during this COVID-19 crisis, helping to relieve pressure on the NHS and other critical services.

3 HOW WE ARE HELPING PEOPLE THROUGH THE CURRENT CRISIS

- 3.1 Our immediate focus is to offer practical support to the people we work throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, while also ensuring a duty of care to our staff. Like other charities across the sector, our staff have gone above and beyond to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the people we support. They are working innovatively and at a fast pace to develop new ways of delivering support and services to the people who need them most.

Housing and homelessness

- 3.2 We provide housing and homelessness services across the North East and Yorkshire, including supported and specialist accommodation, and rough sleeper outreach.
- 3.3 Over the past weeks, our focus has been to ensure that everyone we support, including people who are rough sleeping, has a safe place to stay. We have been working closely with housing providers, local councils and others, taking on more properties where needed to accommodate people safely. Our outreach teams have been proactive in identifying and bringing in people who are not yet accommodated. In particular, we are focused on supporting women, who are often 'hidden homeless' and at significant risk of abuse and exploitation.
- 3.4 The support that people receive within our services is just as important as having a roof over their head, so as a charity we have been working to help people through periods of self-isolation, providing them with food and hygiene products, and supplying mobile phones so we can keep in contact with them. Our staff are working hard to help the people we work with to fully understand the implications of lockdown, and the requirements on them as individuals. Often, this means meeting with people daily to work through issues as they arise, working closely with the police and other agencies.
- 3.5 For people in our services who are experiencing active addiction, we are working closely with partners to ensure they have safe access to methadone, and liaising with Public Health England to address the significant health risks associated with alcohol addiction.

We are also preparing for an increase in new referrals, as people become unable to access substances they are already using.

Domestic abuse services

- 3.6 We provide support to people who are experiencing domestic abuse, including refuge, Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) and Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) services. We specialise in supporting women who have experienced domestic abuse who have multiple and complex needs, and can be considered too high risk for mainstream refuge. Separately, we also provide support to people who are perpetrators of domestic abuse through our housing and homelessness services.
- 3.7 Our priority is to ensure that existing refuge services remain open and equipped to meet an increase in demand. This has meant growing our residential provision quickly, fast-tracking the mobilisation of new services that were already in development. We have observed that requirements vary by local authority, and we have worked flexibly to ensure that we can meet their differing needs.
- 3.8 We are also working to ensure there is accommodation available for people who have been issued Domestic Violence Protection Notices (DVPNs), to ensure that it is possible for perpetrators to be removed from home environments where domestic abuse is occurring.

Criminal justice system

- 3.9 We provide specialist in-reach services to women in prisons across the North and Midlands. Our staff are key workers delivering Enhanced Through The Gate services, which is a Ministry of Justice priority for people with high-risk and complex needs. We are continuing to deliver these vital services, despite it posing significant challenges to our teams as a result of the risks of operating within a prison environment (see below).

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR US AS A CHARITY

- 4.1 Changing Lives is one of the largest charities operating across the north of England, with a turnover of £20m per year. The majority of our income comes through contracts to deliver commissioned services and grants from charitable organisations, including the DCMS Tampon Tax Fund. Only a small proportion of our income is achieved through fundraising.
- 4.2 We are deeply concerned about the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the financial health and sustainability of the voluntary sector. While we understand that the focus of debate has been on the vital role of fundraising as a source of income, there are also significant risks associated with other forms of charity funding, such as contracts to deliver commissioned services and charitable grants.
- 4.3 While in the short-term our funding is relatively stable, we are concerned that where we are unable to continue offering the same level of service, our contracts will be terminated. There has been a lack of reassurance from some of our commissioners, including central government, although we have had huge support from others.
- 4.4 We have asked for, and are keen to receive clarification on, the terms for delivery of Payment by Results or Payment by Delivery contracts, as these operate on tight margins and are most likely to be affected by changes to the ways that our services operate.
- 4.5 For our residential services, a significant source of income is Housing Benefit – this is usually paid in arrears, and we are concerned that it will take longer to process claims

during the current crisis and/or we will see a significant loss of income if we are required to keep rooms vacant to enable self-isolation within our properties. We are calling on Government to pay Housing Benefit as a block payment in advance to help reduce the risk for charities who provide residential accommodation.

- 4.6 We are also concerned that we, and other charities, are incurring significant additional costs within our services as a result of COVID-19. For example, we are having to employ more staff as our existing teams are unwell or self-isolating, meet additional cleaning costs and use our spaces and facilities in new ways.

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR STAFF

- 5.1 It feels currently that there is a lack of recognition within government decision-making that the voluntary sector is vital to the COVID-19 response effort, providing critical social care services in close partnership with the NHS and others.

- 5.2 We are worried that this lack of political attention means our staff are being placed at risk. For example, this includes:

- Lack of access to personal and protective equipment (PPE) across all of our services. While we appreciate it has been important to increase supply within the NHS, there is an urgent need for frontline workers within the voluntary sector to receive the same protection.
- Striking a very difficult balance between our duty of care to staff and our duty of care to the people we support, as we are working with people who can demonstrate some very challenging behaviours but who we want to support within our services as they have nowhere else to go.
- Managing the dangers associated with storing large amounts of methadone on site within our residential services, which poses a risk to the people we support who are vulnerable to diversion or coercion by others, requiring our staff to work in new ways to ensure their own safety, and the safety of the people living in our accommodation.
- Increased risk of perpetrators of domestic abuse attempting to access our refuge services, due to the psychological and mental health impacts of social distancing and self-isolation causing people to seek reunification with their partners.
- Particular concerns about conditions within prisons, with our staff being expected to deliver to contract despite it being impossible to observe social distancing and hygiene standards. For example, staff are expected to go through security measures that require them to come in close proximity with groups of prison staff. There has been a lack of clear guidance from Ministry of Justice or the HMPPS to help us with this.

6 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PEOPLE WE SUPPORT

- 6.1 The implications of COVID-19 for the people we support cannot be overestimated. Many are vulnerable because they have long-term health conditions or mental health issues that will make it more difficult to cope with, and more difficult to withstand the effects of, the virus. We are especially concerned for people who are not safe in their own homes, such as victims of domestic abuse, and for people who cannot observe social distancing and are therefore at considerable risk, for example those who are currently in prison.

- 6.2 We are deeply saddened that some of our services – such as our community hubs, drop-in centres, and group-based therapeutic services – have had to close temporarily so that we can ensure people’s immediate safety. These services are a lifeline to many of the

people we support and wherever possible, we are seeking to increase our support in other ways. However, we recognise that people may become more vulnerable as the result of a loss of support.

People who are experiencing domestic abuse

- 6.3 We fear that domestic abuse will increase as a result of household isolation, and that it will become ever more difficult for people experiencing abuse to access support. There is already evidence of this in other parts of the world. In China, domestic abuse is estimated to have tripled during the COVID-19 epidemic, which has been attributed to increased household tension as a result of self-isolation, financial pressures and fears about the virus. There are similar reports from elsewhere, including Italy and the USA.
- 6.4 Home is not a safe place for people experiencing domestic abuse, and based on the international picture we can expect to see an increased demand for refuge and other domestic abuse services in the weeks and months ahead.

People who are rough sleeping or experiencing homelessness

- 6.5 We welcome the Government's commitment to increase accommodation for people who are homeless, and to ensure that all people who are rough sleeping have a safe place to stay. This is critical as many people who are rough sleeping or experiencing homelessness have long-term health conditions that place them at high risk of COVID-19, but are not able to take many of the precautionary measures, such as social distancing or self-isolation if necessary, that can keep them safe.
- 6.6 While the Government's efforts have gone some way to helping to relieve the issue, there remains a lack of suitable accommodation people who are currently homeless, and this will be becoming an increasing challenge as time goes on – we need to help people to move on from emergency accommodation and into more sustainable living arrangements that are suitable for their needs. This will help to relieve pressure on the NHS by ensuring we can support people within their communities, and free up vital emergency accommodation for people who are newly referred into our services (for example, on discharge from hospital).
- 6.7 There is a very pressing concern around supporting people who are experiencing addiction. While there are some steps we can take to help manage methadone prescriptions, it is important to note that alcohol detox is extremely harmful. We worry also that the people we work with will be criminalised under the Coronavirus Bill for attempting to leave their homes to buy drugs, when in fact they need to be met with support while we work with our local police to ensure they understand the importance of social distancing.
- 6.8 We are also concerned that there is a lack of provision for women who are experiencing homelessness, many of whom are 'hidden homeless' due to fear of physical and sexual violence – meaning they are not known to statutory services. For example, we support many women who regularly exchange sex for food or a place to sleep. Frequently, they do this in preference to seeking out hostel accommodation, which is often mixed gender and can be perceived as dangerous. Our outreach teams continue to find women who are currently homeless, and we urgently need access to suitable accommodation options to ensure their safety.

People in the criminal justice system

6.9 We are deeply concerned about the safety of the women we support and that of our staff, given that the prison environment makes it impossible to observe hygiene standards and social distancing guidance. Many of the women we support in prison have pre-existing health conditions, which make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. We have joined other charities in calling for the immediate release of pregnant women, mothers and babies, and women on short-term sentences.

People experiencing exploitation or modern slavery

6.10 We support people who are victims of modern slavery, and/or sexual exploitation. We are concerned that with capacity of local authority safeguarding teams reduced, sexual abuse and criminal exploitation such as modern slavery may become more prevalent, as we know from our experience of delivering services that perpetrators are highly attuned to where there are gaps in systems of support.

Access to benefits

6.11 We welcome the Government's announcement that Universal Credit will increase by £1,000 a year for the next 12 months, in addition to planned annual increases. However, we are concerned that this will only apply to existing claimants – under current plans, new claimants will continue to have to wait at least five weeks for the first payment. For the people we support, this will cause untold financial hardship.

6.12 Advance payments are not desirable, as they can create a cycle of debt from which it is difficult to escape. Similarly, back payments arising from the five-week wait can be particularly problematic for people experiencing active addiction, and we often see an increase in substance misuse associated with payment of a backdated claim.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 The challenge ahead is significant and this is a concerning time for us all. As a charity, we will continue to act responsibly to ensure we can continue to provide vital support to people who need it most.

7.2 However, there is an urgent need for the Government to fully consider the long-term financial sustainability of the voluntary sector, so that we can continue to deliver services during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis. This must include consideration of commissioned services and charitable grants, as well as fundraising.

7.3 It is only with this support and backing from Government that as a sector, we can continue to deliver vital frontline services that form part of the safety net that is helping some of the most vulnerable in our society cope with the effects of COVID-19.